

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Speech to the Third Army

GEORGE S. PATTON JR.

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This selection, taken from The Unknown Patton, a biography by Charles M. Province, deals with the memorable speech by General George Patton (1885–1945) to the Third Army on June 5, 1944, the eve of the Allied invasion of Europe. The first part presents the background, the second the speech itself (as compiled by Province, drawing on many sources and presented as a third-person narrative). Famous for his rapport with his men, Patton was a charismatic leader and an inspirational speaker. According to Province, an Army veteran and the founder and president of the George S. Patton Jr. Historical Society, “Patton always knew exactly what he wanted to say to his soldiers and he never needed notes. . . . Instead of [using] empty, generalized rhetoric of no substance . . . Patton spoke to his men in simple, down to earth language that they understood. He told them truthful lessons he had learned that would keep them alive.” He also had “a unique ability regarding profanity”: when he wanted his men to remember something important, he gave it to them “double dirty.” As Patton explained: “It may not sound nice to some bunch of little old ladies at an afternoon tea party, but it helps my soldiers to remember. You can’t run an army without profanity; and it has to be eloquent profanity.”

The tone, manner, and content of Patton’s speech are very different from that of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Unlike Chamberlain, who addresses battle-weary veterans, Patton addresses men who are poised for their first battle; like Chamberlain, he knows that many of them will die in the ensuing combat. How does Patton seek to encourage the men? To what does he appeal? And how does he succeed? Imagining yourself in the audience, what would have been your reaction?

Somewhere in England
June 5th, 1944

The big camp buzzed with a tension. For hundreds of eager rookies, newly arrived from the states, it was a great day in their lives. This day marked their first taste of the “real thing.” Now they were not merely puppets in brown uniforms. They were not going through the motions of soldiering with three thousand miles of ocean between them and English soil. They were actually in the heart of England itself. They were waiting for the arrival of that legendary figure, Lieutenant General George S. Patton Jr.—old “Blood and Guts” himself, about whom many a colorful chapter would be written for the schoolboys

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of tomorrow. Patton of the brisk, purposeful stride. Patton of the harsh, compelling voice, the lurid vocabulary, the grim and indomitable spirit that carried him and his Army to glory in Africa and Sicily. They called him “America’s Fightingest General.” He was no desk commando. He was the man who was sent for when the going got rough and a fighter was needed. He was the most hated and feared American of all on the part of the German Army.

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Patton was coming and the stage was being set. He would address a move which might have a far reaching effect on the global war that, at the moment, was a TOP-SECRET in the files in Washington, D.C.

The men saw the camp turn out “en masse” for the first time and in full uniform, too. Today their marching was not lackadaisical. It was serious and the men felt the difference. From the lieutenants in charge of the companies on down in rank they felt the difference.

In long columns they marched down the hill from the barracks. They counted cadence while marching. They turned off to the left, up the rise and so on down into the roped off field where the General was to speak. Gold braid and stripes were everywhere. Soon, company by company, the hillside was a solid mass of brown. It was a beautiful fresh English morning. The tall trees lined the road and swayed gently in the breeze. Across the field, a British farmer calmly tilled his soil. High upon a nearby hill a group of British soldiers huddled together, waiting for the coming of the General. Military Police were everywhere wearing their white leggings, belts, and helmets. They were brisk and grim. The twittering of the birds in the trees could be heard above the dull murmur of the crowd and soft, white clouds floated lazily overhead as the men settled themselves and lit cigarettes.

On the special platform near the speakers stand, Colonels and Majors were a dime a dozen. Behind the platform stood General Patton’s “Guard of Honor”; all specially chosen men. At their right was a band playing rousing marches while the crowd waited and on the platform a nervous sergeant repeatedly tested the loudspeaker. The moment grew near and the necks began to crane to view the tiny winding road that led to Stourport-on-Severn. A captain stepped to the microphone. “When the General arrives,” he said sonorously, “the band will play the Generals March and you will all stand at attention.”

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By now the rumor had gotten around that Lieutenant General Simpson, Commanding General of the Fourth Army, was to be with General Patton. The men stirred expectantly. Two of the big boys in one day!

At last, the long black car, shining resplendently in the bright sun, roared up the road, preceded by a jeep full of Military Police. A dead hush fell over the hillside. There he was! Impeccably dressed. With knee high, brown, gleaming boots, shiny helmet, and his Colt .45 Peacemaker swinging in its holster on his right side.

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Patton strode down the incline and then straight to the stiff backed “Guard of Honor.” He looked them up and down. He peered intently into their faces and surveyed their backs. He moved through the ranks of the statuesque band like an avenging wraith and, apparently satisfied, mounted the platform with Lieutenant General Simpson and Major General Cook, the Corps Commander, at his side.

Major General Cook then introduced Lieutenant General Simpson, whose Army was still in America, preparing for their part in the war.

“We are here,” said General Simpson, “to listen to the words of a great man. A man who will lead you all into whatever you may face with heroism, ability, and foresight. A man who has proven himself amid shot and shell. My greatest hope is that some day soon, I will have my own Army fighting with his, side by side.”

General Patton arose and strode swiftly to the microphone. The men snapped to their feet and stood silently. Patton surveyed the sea of brown with a grim look. “Be seated,” he said. The words were not a request, but a command. The General’s voice rose high and clear.

“Men, this stuff that some sources sling around about America wanting out of this war, not wanting to fight, is a crock of bullshit. Americans love to fight, traditionally. All real Americans love the sting and clash of battle. You are here today for three reasons. First, because you are here to defend your homes and your loved ones. Second, you are here for your own self respect, because you would not want to be anywhere else. Third, you are here because you are real men and all real men like to fight. When you, here, everyone of you, were kids, you all admired the champion marble player, the fastest runner, the toughest boxer, the big league ball players, and the All-American football players. Americans love a winner. Americans will not tolerate a loser. Americans despise

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cowards. Americans play to win all of the time. I wouldn't a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war; for the very idea of losing is hateful to an American."

The General paused and looked over the crowd. "You are not all going to die," he said slowly. "Only two percent of you right here today would die in a major battle. Death must not be feared. Death, in time, comes to all men. Yes, every man is scared in his first battle. If he says he's not, he's a liar. Some men are cowards but they fight the same as the brave men or they get the hell slammed out of them watching men fight who are just as scared as they are. The real hero is the man who fights even though he is scared. Some men get over their fright in a minute under fire. For some, it takes an hour. For some, it takes days. But a real man will never let his fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country, and his innate manhood. Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best and it removes all that is base. Americans pride themselves on being He Men and they ARE He Men. Remember that the enemy is just as frightened as you are, and probably more so. They are not supermen."

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"All through your Army careers, you men have bitched about what you call 'chicken shit drilling.' That, like everything else in this Army, has a definite purpose. That purpose is alertness. Alertness must be bred into every soldier. I don't give a fuck for a man who's not always on his toes. You men are veterans or you wouldn't be here. You are ready for what's to come. A man must be alert at all times if he expects to stay alive. If you're not alert, sometime, a German son-of-an-asshole-bitch is going to sneak up behind you and beat you to death with a sockful of shit!" The men roared in agreement.

Patton's grim expression did not change. "There are four hundred neatly marked graves somewhere in Sicily," he roared into the microphone, "all because one man went to sleep on the job." He paused and the men grew silent. "But they are German graves, because we caught the bastard asleep before they did." The General clutched the microphone tightly, his jaw out-thrust, and he continued, "An Army is a team. It lives, sleeps, eats, and fights as a team. This individual heroic stuff is pure horse shit. The bilious bastards who write that kind of stuff for the *Saturday Evening Post* don't know any more about real fighting under fire than they know about fucking!"

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The men slapped their legs and rolled in glee. This was Patton as the men had imagined him to be, and in rare form, too. He hadn't let them down. He was all that he was cracked up to be, and more. He had IT!

"We have the finest food, the finest equipment, the best spirit, and the best men in the world," Patton bellowed. He lowered his head and shook it pensively. Suddenly he snapped erect, faced the men belligerently and thundered, "Why, by God, I actually pity those poor sons-of-bitches we're going up against. By God, I do." The men clapped and howled delightedly. There would be many a barracks tale about the "Old Man's" choice phrases. They would become part and parcel of Third Army's history and they would become the bible of their slang.

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"My men don't surrender," Patton continued, "I don't want to hear of any soldier under my command being captured unless he has been hit. Even if you are hit, you can still fight back. That's not just bullshit either. The kind of man that I want in my command is just like the lieutenant in Libya, who, with a Luger against his chest, jerked off his helmet, swept the gun aside with one hand, and busted the hell out of the Kraut with his helmet. Then he jumped on the gun and went out and killed another German before they knew what the hell was coming off. And, all of that time, this man had a bullet through a lung. There was a real man!"

Patton stopped and the crowd waited. He continued more quietly, "All of the real heroes are not storybook combat fighters, either. Every single man in this Army plays a vital role. Don't ever let up. Don't ever think that your job is unimportant. Every man has a job to do and he must do it. Every man is a vital link in the great chain. What if every truck driver suddenly decided that he didn't like the whine of those shells overhead, turned yellow, and jumped headlong into a ditch? The cowardly bastard could say, 'Hell, they won't miss me, just one man in thousands.' But, what if every man thought that way? Where in the hell would we be now? What would our country, our loved ones, our homes, even the world, be like? No, Goddamnit, Americans don't think like that. Every man does his job. Every man serves the whole. Every department, every unit, is important in the vast scheme of this war. The ordnance men are needed to supply the guns and machinery of war to keep us rolling. The Quartermaster is needed to bring up food and clothes because where we are going there isn't a hell of a lot to steal. Every last man on K.P. has a job to do, even the one who heats our water to keep us from getting the 'G.I. Shits.'"

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Patton paused, took a deep breath, and continued, “Each man must not think only of himself, but also of his buddy fighting beside him. We don’t want yellow cowards in this Army. They should be killed off like rats. If not, they will go home after this war and breed more cowards. The brave men will breed more brave men. Kill off the Goddamned cowards and we will have a nation of brave men. One of the bravest men that I ever saw was a fellow on top of a telegraph pole in the midst of a furious fire fight in Tunisia. I stopped and asked what the hell he was doing up there at a time like that. He answered, ‘Fixing the wire, Sir.’ I asked, ‘Isn’t that a little unhealthy right about now?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Sir, but the Goddamned wire has to be fixed.’ I asked, ‘Don’t those planes strafing the road bother you?’ And he answered, ‘No, Sir, but you sure as hell do!’ Now, there was a real man. A real soldier. There was a man who devoted all he had to his duty, no matter how seemingly insignificant his duty might appear at the time, no matter how great the odds. And you should have seen those trucks on the road to Tunisia. Those drivers were magnificent. All day and all night they rolled over those son-of-a-bitching roads, never stopping, never faltering from their course, with shells bursting all around them all of the time. We got through on good old American guts. Many of those men drove for over forty consecutive hours. These men weren’t combat men, but they were soldiers with a job to do. They did it, and in one hell of a way they did it. They were part of a team. Without team effort, without them, the fight would have been lost. All of the links in the chain pulled together and the chain became unbreakable.”

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The General paused and stared challengingly over the silent ocean of men. One could have heard a pin drop anywhere on that vast hillside. The only sound was the stirring of the breeze in the leaves of the bordering trees and the busy chirping of the birds in the branches of the trees at the General’s left.

“Don’t forget,” Patton barked, “you men don’t know that I’m here. No mention of that fact is to be made in any letters. The world is not supposed to know what the hell happened to me. I’m not supposed to be commanding this Army. I’m not even supposed to be here in England. Let the first bastards to find out be the Goddamned Germans. Some day I want to see them raise up on their piss-soaked hind legs and howl, ‘Jesus Christ, it’s the Goddamned Third Army again and that son-of-a-fucking-bitch Patton.’”

“We want to get the hell over there,” Patton continued, “the quicker we clean up this Goddamned mess, the quicker we can take a little jaunt against the purple pissing Japs and clean out their nest, too. Before the Goddamned Marines get all of the credit.”

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The men roared approval and cheered delightedly. This statement had real significance behind it. Much more than met the eye and the men instinctively sensed the fact. They knew that they themselves were going to play a very great part in the making of world history. They were being told as much right now. Deep sincerity and seriousness lay behind the General's colorful words. The men knew and understood it. They loved the way he put it, too, as only he could.

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Patton continued quietly, "Sure, we want to go home. We want this war over with. The quickest way to get it over with is to go get the bastards who started it. The quicker they are whipped, the quicker we can go home. The shortest way home is through Berlin and Tokyo. And when we get to Berlin," he yelled, "I am personally going to shoot that paper hanging son-of-a-bitch Hitler. Just like I'd shoot a snake!"

"When a man is lying in a shell hole, if he just stays there all day, a German will get to him eventually. The hell with that idea. The hell with taking it. My men don't dig foxholes. I don't want them to. Foxholes only slow up an offensive. Keep moving. And don't give the enemy time to dig one either. We'll win this war, but we'll win it only by fighting and by showing the Germans that we've got more guts than they have; or ever will have. We're not going to just shoot the sons-of-bitches, we're going to rip out their living Goddamned guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We're going to murder those lousy Hun cocksuckers by the bushel-fucking-basket. War is a bloody, killing business. You've got to spill their blood, or they will spill yours. Rip them up the belly. Shoot them in the guts. When shells are hitting all around you and you wipe the dirt off your face and realize that instead of dirt it's the blood and guts of what once was your best friend beside you, you'll know what to do!"

"I don't want to get any messages saying, 'I am holding my position.' We are not holding a Goddamned thing. Let the Germans do that. We are advancing constantly and we are not interested in holding onto anything, except the enemy's balls. We are going to twist his balls and kick the living shit out of him all of the time. Our basic plan of operation is to advance and to keep on advancing regardless of whether we have to go over, under, or through the enemy. We are going to go through him like crap through a goose; like shit through a tin horn!"

"From time to time there will be some complaints that we are pushing our people too hard. I don't give a good Goddamn about such complaints. I believe in the old and sound rule that an ounce of sweat will save a gallon of blood. The harder WE push, the more

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Germans we will kill. The more Germans we kill, the fewer of our men will be killed. Pushing means fewer casualties. I want you all to remember that.”

The General paused. His eagle-like eyes swept over the hillside. He said with pride, “There is one great thing that you men will all be able to say after this war is over and you are home once again. You may be thankful that twenty years from now when you are sitting by the fireplace with your grandson on your knee and he asks you what you did in the great World War II, you WON’T have to cough, shift him to the other knee and say, ‘Well, your Granddaddy shoveled shit in Louisiana.’ No, Sir, you can look him straight in the eye and say, ‘Son, your Granddaddy rode with the Great Third Army and a Son-of-a-Goddamned-Bitch named Georgie Patton!’”

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