

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: Welcome to *Uncommon Knowledge*. I'm Peter Robinson. The Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Victor Davis Hanson, is a classicist and military historian. Dr. Hanson is the author of more than a dozen and a half books. His most recent volumes, *Makers of Ancient Strategy: From the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome*, which Dr. Hanson edited, and *The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern*, a volume of Dr. Hanson's own essays and the subject of our discussion today. Victor, for a man who has studied several thousand years of military history, a contemporary question: we'll come back to this, but in brief, is Barack Obama proving a worse or a better commander-in-chief than you had expected?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I think worse.

Peter Robinson: Worse?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Oh you surprise me. We will come back to that.

Victor Davis

Hanson: We'll come back.

Peter Robinson: All right.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Worse, some good things, some bad things, overall disappointing.

Peter Robinson: All right, segment one, war and this republic, two quotations: first, Victor Davis Hanson in *The Father of Us All*, "War seems to be inseparable from the human condition." Second quotation, political scientist John Mueller, "War is merely an idea, an institution like dueling or slavery that has been grafted onto human existence. Unlike breathing, eating, or sex, war is not something that is somehow required by the human condition." How is the layman to choose on the evidence between Victor Davis Hanson and John Mueller?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Well I think I was empirical and the latter quote was theoretical, evangelical even. He wants something to be true. I don't care whether it's – I mean I wish it were not true to tell you the truth but I just look at primitive man, what anthropology

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

and archeology tell us about pre-civilized, pre-modern man and then I count up the number of wars and then I count up the enlightened republics in our memory, Athens, the Parthenon, Socrates made war 3 out of every 4 years, so did in the 5th century. Sixteenth century Venice, same thing, United States since Vietnam, Vietnam was going to usher in a period of peace, Cold War was going to be over. That was going to issue in a period of peace. More people have died since World War II worldwide, over 50 million, than during World War II. So it's a pretty brutal, depressing, Hobbesian world that we're looking at. We don't want it to be true but there is a happy note. We know how to mitigate the effects of war by deterrents, balance of power, military preparedness, etc.

Peter Robinson: You bring me to another one of your basic themes in this book, *From the Father of Us All*. Again, I'm quoting you: "Americans tend to lack a basic understanding of military matters." Why?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I think we're optimistic, especially in America, and the promise of the Enlightenment was with just enough money, with just enough education we can remake the nature of man so that he acts in a logical –

Peter Robinson: Well that's not the Founding Fathers. Where does that come from?

Victor Davis

Hanson: It comes probably from Rousseau, Kant, the French and British Enlightenment, Scottish Enlightenment, the idea that man is perfectible with enough education, reflection, money, and –

Peter Robinson: So there's an element of that, that is present at the founding?

Victor Davis

Hanson: There is. The Puritanical element within the United States, that we are going to come to this country, make a city on a hill, and make a new American man. So we were very much hopeful that America would be the exception to this brutal bloody history in Europe. It hasn't been, unfortunately.

Peter Robinson: And so I just want to pursue that a little bit because you are not arguing that it is modern affluence that has cosseted a couple of generations of Americans and insulated them from the nasty reality of war. You're arguing that there's a philosophical strand of perfection ability that's present at the founding and runs all the way through our history.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: All the way through American history, all the way through Western civilization, through the Renaissance, all the way back to Greece and Rome, a utopian strain that, because after all, war is legalized murder, doesn't make sense. It's antithetical to civilized, polite, educated, affluent people and there's always been a strain there that thought they could adjudicate world tension through precursors of laws, Hellenic protocols, pan-Mediterranean ideas, the League of Nations, etc.

Peter Robinson: Kellogg-Briand Pact.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: You've got two themes in this book, in *The Father of Us All*, that are, at least as I read them, in tension. The importance of military education, you lament its decline. We'll come to that – the importance of military education and the unpredictable, the essential fundamental unpredictability of warfare.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: So the question, the obvious question, is what's the point? What difference does it make if Americans are ignorant of military history when military history can't really tell us in detail how to invade Iraq or what we should do in Afghanistan?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Military history can tell us within parameters. Let me give you one example.

Peter Robinson: Sure.

Victor Davis

Hanson: This country literally tore itself apart over legitimate questions of why we didn't have up-armored Humvees or sufficient body armor

Peter Robinson: In Iraq?

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Or why we didn't – and military history would have said in a consensual society we need to adjudicate, argue, refine those questions. But it would also say to the American people, hold on. There has not been a war that America has fought when there were not gigantic lapses of organization, strategy, tactics. Think for – I'll just give you one example.

Peter Robinson: Sure.

Victor Davis

Hanson: We invade Normandy. We plan on everything. We take a year. It's successful, less than 3,500 are killed. We know the grains of sand. We know the current of the water and what happens? All these great luminaries who fought in World War I, knew Normandy and France from previous experience, Bradley, Eisenhower, Marshall, a lot of them had been in France, not all of them, but they land and what happens? They get in five miles from Omaha Beach and somebody radios back to Eisenhower there's something called the bocage, the hedgerows.

Peter Robinson: The hedgerows.

Victor Davis

Hanson: And then suddenly 80,000 Americans are killed or wounded from June 6 to the end of July. Nobody planned on it. Nobody thought about it. Just imagine. It makes Iraq look like child's play and yet that generation understood things like that happen in war and victory goes to those not who make mistakes but those who make the fewest mistakes and press on and learn from their lapses.

Peter Robinson: All right, segment two, the American way of war.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: You mention a number of factors that make the American way of war distinctive. Let's consider a couple of the factors you put forward. All of these I'm quoting from *The Father of Us All*: "Americans are united by shared ideas and commitments such as the ideals of equal opportunity and individual merit. Our military functions as a reflection of our national meritocracy." Explain what you mean by that.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Well take for example we always say that drafts and mobilizations and conscript armies are the ideal and they are in a sense because they get people from different backgrounds and put them all together. But North Korea has a draft. Iran has a draft but they don't serve the same social need or civic need that ours does. In other words, we have a professional military of volunteers now who have more rights and responsibilities because they are Americans and the Military Code of Justice reflects in a military sense the Constitution to a North Korean or an Iranian conscript. So the ideas of America are transmogrified into our military. So each soldier understands that he is an individual and a citizen. Each Iranian, each North Korean is not a citizen. They may be a draftee but they are a coerced subject with no rights and no rights of legal protection under the law. So that makes a difference for a soldier who's fighting because he understands that he's fighting for a system that empowers the individual, will empower his children, will empower his friends, and he's not subject to the capriciousness of a tyrant or a dictator or a thug as is true in North Korea in the long run

Peter Robinson: You made the point earlier that victory goes not to those who make no mistakes, everybody makes mistakes in war, but to those who make the fewest. But you also argue elsewhere in the book victory also goes to those who can adapt to the mistakes.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Absolutely.

Peter Robinson: And there's the individualism, the adaptability of the individual American soldier is important, right?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, I'll go back to that first example about the bocage.

Peter Robinson: Right, the hedgerows in Normandy.

Victor Davis

Hanson: So they go in there and all of their grandees and all of the chief organizers did not anticipate that the bocage and the Shermans were not up to the Panzer Mark III and the Panthers. And they were exposed when they went up over the hills. And what happens? The individual says, we can weld spikes, rhinos, onto the tank, we can blast through the hedgerow and then that filters through to the sergeants, to the majors. And then people argue about it and then that bottom up, top down filtration of knowledge is absolutely impossible in an authoritarian dictatorial system that's reflected in the

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

martinets in the military and our system has always allowed that osmosis of ideas. It happens throughout Western civilization. It's there with the Greeks. Greek soldiers will say or a Spartan, we have a testimony where a Spartan hoplite will say, wait a minute, we should not be drifting to the right. Let's stop and his commander will make ad hoc decisions. So that reflects the society in which people participate.

Peter Robinson: Another aspect of the American way of way, I'm quoting again from *The Father of Us All*, "The frontier experience on such a vast continent made Americans conquer time and space." What has that got to do with our way of war?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Well, if you look at World War I or World War II, there was an impatience. In World War I, within 11 months we put a million soldiers into France and Belgium without losing one. And the whole purpose was to restrain Pershing because he wanted to get there, find the enemy, defeat them, and get home; a very restless and consensual society who's used to going on to the next thing. The problem with Iraq was in part –

Peter Robinson: Was Pershing making a political calculation, that is to say an American general even then said what generals say today which is in American you have to win fast, the public won't stand for a long –

Victor Davis

Hanson: Win fast and he wanted to go to Berlin which would have been the right thing to do after the war. Patton is the –

Peter Robinson: Second World War now.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yeah, he's emblematic of the American experience. get in tanks, forget the flanks, push, push, push, and so Americans in this vast continent of great distances were very attuned very early to machines, the transcontinental railroad, the telegraph, young kids grew up fixing Model As, fixing Model Ts, shooting their own guns on the frontier. That restless can-do, the individual wants to move, move, move made the American military a very mobile, highly impatient, very adept at transportation logistics, and it was not well-suited for something like the Somme or Verdun or 6 or 7 years in Iraq or Vietnam.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: Guns, widespread gun ownership in the United States, I'm quoting you, "has meant that a large segment of American youth does not grow up afraid of or are inexperienced with firearms."

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, I think that helps a great deal. If you have a society in which firearms are either rare or they're outlawed or the gun owners are viewed under suspicion, it's very hard to take somebody at 18 or 19 and give him a gun and say, go do it, and I talked to a lot of people in the military. I don't think I've met very many American soldiers who had not shot some type of rifle or shotgun or pistol before they got into the military and they feel very comfortable with it and they talk about guns and so it's a gun owning society. It still is.

Peter Robinson: Right. Now the emphasis on a broad democratic military, the limitation of the draft means we've now had several generations of Americans who've had – who've simply skipped military service. Military action of mass and materiel and impatience, well but in Afghanistan we're relying on small units of special ops. A gun culture, does that still apply when we've got unmanned drones firing from 30,000 feet, when somebody pushes a button in Kansas or Florida? So in other words are we moving – is what we know, what you describe as the American way of war, are we at an end? Are we finding our way into some new way of war?

Victor Davis

Hanson: No, I don't think so. The Romans had a phrase called *mutatis mutandis*. Everything's the same if you make the necessary corrections for time and space. So we don't have as many gun owners obviously in an urbanized society but we have this weird video gun culture. So the people who are directing Predators are the people who are doing this with their hands and they're used to it as somebody who's not – I guess not hostile to the notion of playing a very violent video game. That element within our collective experience translates into a very adept console shooter, if I can use the term, and we look at Afghanistan. I now that we're doing counterinsurgency. We're trying to win hearts and minds. But if you look at the American material effort, the sheer pallets of food, the enormous expense in Predators, we are trying to use technology, capital, expertise to win that war as we usually do. We're not trying to win that war by saying – maybe we should, we're going to get 5,000 Afghan speakers, we're going to send them out and over 20 years by osmosis they're going to make a kinder and gentler Afghanistan.

Peter Robinson: So you don't see –

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: We're restless in other words.

Peter Robinson: I'm thinking back to 2003, even 2002 when we're preparing to go into Iraq and Shinseki, the Army chief of staff, said, we need 200, 300 – I can't remember the name but he was clearly on the side – it sounded almost like World War II. We need hundreds of thousands. We need mass and Donald Rumsfeld said, no, we need a small rapid force.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: You don't see that as Rumsfeld on a kind of innovative edge away from the traditional?

Victor Davis

Hanson: No, he was but they had one thing in common. What drove Donald Rumsfeld was on to the next objective. We went into Afghanistan and now we're going to go into Iraq and then we'll do whatever we have to after that and what drove Shinseki was, yes, okay but we're going to go in there and crush the enemy with American firepower. Neither one of them, if you had asked them, General Shinseki was not saying we need – maybe post facto people said he was – but he was not saying we need 300,000 so we can stay there for 10 years.

Peter Robinson: No, no that's right.

Victor Davis

Hanson: And same thing with Donald Rumsfeld, so they shared the same idea. One had a different view, a different tactic than the other but the idea was they were going to use American technology, expertise, firepower to defeat the enemy in a very as brief a time. Shinseki just thought you could do it with manpower. Rumsfeld thought you could do it with technology. By the way, talking about military error, look how a knowledge of military history would have taught us something. Hitler, people say why did Hitler go into Russia. Hitler went into Russia because he looked back at World War I. the German army had knocked the soviets out in 2½ years, the Tsar and then the Communists, 2½ years. But they never knocked the French out and the Allies, the British, for 4 years. so they go into 1930, six weeks they knock out the French and the British and Hitler's thinking, oh my god, the nightmare of World War I is over. There's a formula. Four years to two in World War I will mean six weeks to three weeks in World War II because the Eastern front is always the easiest. That's why he thought he could get away

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

with three weeks. He didn't know how to winter it. Think of us. We go into Afghanistan seven weeks and we have the Loya Jirga and a constitutional system up in six months. Americans are thinking, wow, we beat Saddam before. It's a literate society that has ports. It's got visible airspace. It's got all the advantages. They take out Saddam in what, in half the time they took out –

Peter Robinson: Three weeks.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Exactly, and they're thinking, okay, six months led to a consensual society in Afghanistan. Three months in Iraq and they didn't plan sufficiently and it shows you that a lot of people make these false analogies and they don't take that each situation is different. A knowledge of military history might have said to them, be careful, Hitler made the same analogy about the relative difficulty between the East and West fronts and he learned the wrong lessons from World War I.

Peter Robinson: Segment three, to use a title of one of your essays here, *Your Defeat, My Victory. The Father of Us All*, "Preoccupied with the daily news from Baghdad," this is during the war in Iraq, "we seem to think that our generation was unique in experiencing the heartbreak of an error plagued war." Tell me what you mean by that. You've touched on it.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, we've talked – think of all the things – for everything that we said went wrong in Iraq, too few troops, insufficient body armor, Humvees not properly armored, miscalculation of sectarian violence, etc., I could give you a parallel from Korea. I mean, whoever let Douglas MacArthur be ensconced in Tokyo as he crossed the 38th parallel after that brilliant victory at Inchon and the peninsula widened in Korea, the weather got worse, the numbers per square mile lessened of American troops, and suddenly 400,000 Chinese came across the border.

Peter Robinson: Well what was the failure? MacArthur should have known he shouldn't have pushed that far north? What was the failure?

Victor Davis

Hanson: He had no intelligence at all that was reliable about Communistic intentions. He had no intelligence about the terrain. He had no intelligence about the weather and he had absolutely mystified the entire Joint Chiefs because of his brilliant prior success and all of those things –

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: So he was operating on his own in isolation from his command in Washington.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Exactly and they said, we don't dare question Doug MacArthur because we were wrong at Inchon and he was right, and the people would say, look, you only have 170,000 U.N. troops. This is a recipe for disaster. My point, I could do this ad nauseam, but all of those things –

Peter Robinson: Not ad nauseam but just one second.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yeah, but all those things happened in Iraq and the difference between that generation and ours is people said it's not lost, send Matthew Ridgeway over. Matthew Ridgeway gets over there and it is lost. Everything's bad and he said, you know what, I do not want to hear anybody talk about defeat. We're going to win. Three months later, they retake Seoul and they're across the 38th parallel.

Peter Robinson: And the difference was because not only the commanders had been through World War II, but the public remembered. You had an educated public. They knew what to expect from war. Is that correct?

Victor Davis

Hanson: They had an education. They also had a tragic sense. These were people who had come out of the Depression. Some of them when they ate meat they knew it came from a cow and it was a bloody mess to get them that. They knew when they flushed a toilet it went somewhere. They knew all of these terrible things about life, that it was nasty, brutish, solitary, and short sometimes. They didn't have 500 channels. They did not have cell phones. So they factored in –

Peter Robinson: They certainly turned on Truman

Victor Davis

Hanson: They did, absolutely.

Peter Robinson: His approval ratings

Victor Davis

Hanson: They did. He left with lower poll ratings –

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: Lower than Bush.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Than Bush, of course he rebounded in a way that I think Bush's will too. But nevertheless, the generation was much more tolerant of human error and it's true of civilization in general. The more affluent and leisure the civilization is, the harder it is for them to make sacrifices. Sometimes that can be good because they have a tolerance. They have greater intolerance for military stupidity. But think about Iraq just for a second. I know it's controversial but we have just seen the vice president of the United States say that Iraq "will be one," might be or should be or would be one of our administrations "greatest achievements," and we have a resident who said and ran on a platform when he announced his candidacy in fall 2007 that he wanted all combat brigades out in March, not 2009, 2008. So now you have a president and a vice president that have absolutely not tampered with the Bush-Petraeus plan for Iraq. They keep talking about withdrawals, withdrawals but they haven't and now they're not only not tampering with it but they're claiming it as one of their greatest achievements. That's very American.

Peter Robinson: You talked about the impatience with military stupidity. We have Truman cans MacArthur, Ridgeway goes over, he's a dynamic young figure, and then Eisenhower is elected president. Eisenhower knew a thing or two about command. He actually goes to Korea himself, sizes up the situation. In other words you get the feeling that the commanders-in-chief are right on top of the commanders in the field and you can, I can see from your eyes you know where this is going. So the question here is after those three weeks, the lightning strike into Baghdad and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, things go sideways in Iraq for not months by years and don't you have to admit that George W. Bush just doesn't push the commanders in the field hard enough and fast enough? It's, what was it, after 3½ years that he gets to Petraeus and the surge.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Lincoln is going through command – I'm trying to use military history against you Victor here.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Lincoln goes through commander after commander after commander.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Eleven.

Peter Robinson: And Bush defers to the commanders in the field.

Victor Davis

Hanson: He does, but remember that 2003 he's dealing with people who did the impossible. Everybody was – Wesley Clark suggested 5,000 people might be lost taking Baghdad. We're at 50,000-60,000 lost we were told. So this thing happens and what happens, the architect of this brilliant three week victory, Tommy Franks, looks around and says, hey, by summer there's an insurgency. He quits. It would be like Patton quitting when he got to the Rhine River and so then –

Peter Robinson: Why did he do that?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I think he saw that this three week brilliant victory –

Peter Robinson: Was sliding sideways?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Was starting to develop into a messy occupation and he wanted to see –

Peter Robinson: Shouldn't the commander-in-chief or the secretary of defense have called him in and said, no, you're going nowhere. You're right there for another year.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Absolutely. He should have done one of two things. He should have said, General Franks, you were the architect of this victory. You're still a young man. We have to ensure this victory and if you don't want to do it, we're going to fire you before you retire. He should have done that and that would have sent a message that this is not just a shoot 'em up, go in and go on to the next country but you have to stay there and a lot of people died because we were not ready for that occupation, politically, militarily. There were a lot of other mistakes.

Peter Robinson: But to an earlier point, you're defending – all right, so Franks – the treatment of Franks, letting Franks slip out so easily was a mistake.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: But then the period of Casey and Abizaid in command in Iraq and Bush lets them and the whole thing seems to slip sideways.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Is that an error or was there no one to whom to turn left.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Bush, when he looked at the antiwar opposition, the antiwar opposition was basically we had no business in the Middle East. It's a foreign strange place. You're in there for oil. We don't want to be an ugly American, etc. So Bush was operating on how do I satisfy that opposition and that fed into the Casey-Abizaid narrative of what, a lighter imprint, just go in there and get out and withdraw, withdraw. He thought that he might pacify opposition by saying, okay we're going to have a light imprint. But the problem, what he didn't understand is that most people before they have any ideology, they have one directive. They want to win. You get the most left-wing person and he will identify with a military victory.

Peter Robinson: Segment four, ain't gonna study war no more. I'm quoting from one of the first essays in here: "My advisor," you write when you were looking around at Stanford as a graduate student for somebody to advise you on a paper on Ancient Greece, "my advisor was skeptical," of your project. "He knew better than I the prevailing attitudes in the scholarship of the times." What was it that you wanted to do that prompted such skepticism?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I had a very narrow education. I was a philologist where we had to study Latin and Greek manuscripts basically. The program that I was in, it was in philology. So I wanted to study war, how I didn't think people in the Peloponnesian War or any war really achieved much by the standard tactic of ravaging the countryside to force the enemy to fight them. So I mentioned this to my –

Peter Robinson: Because you knew as a farmer from the Central Valley how hard it is to ravage them.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: I did, yeah. You'd see Thucydides or Herodotus or Xenophon, the ancient historians would say they cut down the trees and burn the grain and everybody was writing, okay, the enemy was devastated economically and I just said, no, they weren't because that's very hard to do, light green grain or cut down a 12-foot in diameter olive tree. But they were prompts or instigations to get the enemy army to come out. So that was the emphasis. But my advisor, this was in the post-Vietnam period, was saying, you know what, military history, look at the jobs. There are no jobs in military history. Do you really want to stigmatized instead of a philologist that studies Aristophanes or Thucydides some right-wing nut that studies war?

Peter Robinson: Why? Why did the academy turn against the study of war?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I don't know. I think a lot of it had to do with Vietnam in particular in the '70s and '80s. That's when you really saw the decline in academic programs but there was a larger junction of social science. Social science that taught us that man is – the nature of man is perfectible and it's changing, that you with certain techniques, certain educational ideologies you could change the way people are, his hard wiring, his brain chemistry would change in such a way you'd be peaceful. So as military history declined we had something called peace and conflict resolution studies, to such a degree that I think we have about 30 programs in military history and about –

Peter Robinson: In the country?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes and about 20 – excuse me, 200 peace and conflict resolution programs and yet we know that the United Nations or the League of Nations has ever stopped any war.

Peter Robinson: Victor, you note – I'm sorry, go ahead.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Maybe the as a prominent conservative that was on the barricades during the Cold War, you know that today Taiwan does not exist because of the UN. South Korea does not exist because of the UN. They exist because of US military deterrents. That's clear to everybody and the idea that the United Nations would save Taiwan in extremis is lunacy.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: Yeah, and you also make this really provocative point in *The Father of Us All*: “The universities’ aversion to the study of war is out of step with popular culture, which displays extraordinary enthusiasm for many things military,” as witnessed the bestsellers by Stephen Ambrose, David McCullough’s book on Truman which deals a great deal with his conduct of the final stages of the Second World War. Your books, which so beautifully –

Victor Davis

Hanson: Peter, if we walked right over to the Stanford bookstore or the Stanford catalog and looked at it, we would see gender studies, gender studies, gender studies, anything with studies, leisure studies, gender studies, race studies, environmental studies, and keep that in mind. Now if we walk right down University Avenue to Borders Books –

Peter Robinson: A commercial enterprise that actually has to please the public.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, a commercial enterprise, you will see something that says military history and you can’t even get near it –

Peter Robinson: Shelf after shelf.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Shelf after shelf, you’ll see the studies that nobody – it’s very tiny because people whether we like it or not are naturally attracted to these awful incidents where people are willing to wage their life for a principle, good or bad. So military history is in the dark hearts of us all and so what’s happened is when the universities shunned that as an academic discipline –

Peter Robinson: Hang on, aren’t you making a terrible concession when you say that it’s in the dark hearts of us all? Aren’t you already condoning the point to those who wish military history didn’t exist? But you argue here that military history, military education properly understood is not merely a necessary evil. We need to know this in order to make war less worse. You argue it can be ennobling.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes because, look, the person who studies cancer, the oncologist, is not a bad person.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Victor Davis

Hanson: He understands cancer and tumors because he wants to find out how to stop them. But the oncologist does not think that one day he's going to wake up and there's going to be no cancer. He understands there are always going to be cancers, at least for our lifetime, and he's going to try to thwart them. The directive of the military historian is not that you like war. It's organized murder. What you like about the field is to study it and to tell people that as awful as it is and it's with us in the beginning, it may be with us in the end, there are protocols in the paths that allow us to get through it and mitigate its effects. If you have a strong deterrent and you can suggest to a rogue nation, an outlaw nation, a bellicose nation, I wouldn't do that if I were you because the consequences are going to be so terrible you would not like that. If you can send that message then you don't end up with a Philip of Macedon or you don't end up with a Hitler. As you remember the Reagan administration you realize that Jimmy Carter's approach simply didn't work.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Victor Davis

Hanson: It doesn't work.

Peter Robinson: A quotation and then a couple facts, the quotation from *The Father of Us All*: "Most notable Greek writers, thinkers, and statesmen from Aeschylus to Pericles to Xenophon had served in the phalanx or the trireme at sea and such experiences permeated their work." That's the quotation. Now two facts, here's one. In the United States today, those who enlist in the military come disproportionately from the poor and those who become officers come disproportionately from the Midwest and above all from the South.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Now here's the question. Whereas the leading figures of Greece all understood the military from firsthand experience, American elites, Northeast, Coastal California, can lead their entire lives without brushing up against military culture, let alone military experience.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: Is this something new in American military history and is this healthy? Is it sustainable?

Victor Davis

Hanson: We've had people who have not had a lot of military – Abraham Lincoln was in the Black Hawk War for a few weeks. FDR was secretary of the Navy. So we've had people but what the difference is that this is the first time that we've had commanders in chiefs either have not had military experience or they haven't had anything comparable. What I mean anything comparable, anything from the underbelly of American life, anybody who's had to take apart an engine, anybody who's had to build a house. So there are approximate experiences, not the same but there's a tragic sort of notion that you're in a dead end job, you have to work with muscular strength, there's no good and bad choices, bad and worse choices. All of that tragic view is necessary to understand what war is but yeah, I'm afraid that in a very sophisticated technological society we are certifying excellence and this is a larger topic, expertise based on basically an Ivy League credential which is not commiserate with real experience in the real world. It doesn't tell us really what somebody in Fallujah is really thinking about. What saves the United States when it goes to war is that we have a subset of the population for a variety of reasons enlisted in officer corps that are 19th century in mentality. They live according to the protocols of the 19th century. What do I mean? They're more likely to believe in a transcendent religion. They're more likely to believe in nationalism. They're more likely to believe in a tragic view that you can be good without having to be perfect. So they don't become depressed or inordinately give up because of an error. They are more likely to have had experience with muscular matters and so military really hasn't changed since the 19th century. The people who are ordering it and organizing it and auditing it have changed greatly. But so far it's sort of like it's stuck in amber and they've been a great salvation to the United States.

Peter Robinson: Segment five, man of war, you. Victor, for whom are you named?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I'm named for Victor Hanson. He was a son of a Swedish immigrant and he was an orphan. His mother died in childbirth. His father left him somewhere, so my father raised my father's family and they joined the Marine Corps together, my father for a variety of long stories transferred to B-29s and he joined the 6th Marine Division. He was killed in Okinawa on the last day of Sugar Loaf Hill campaign, 29th Marine Regiment, 6th Marine Division, had about 90 percent casualties.

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Peter Robinson: You write in *The Father of Us All* that you grew up “around veterans of both world wars who talked constantly about battle.” Your dad who lost this almost brother of his.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, they talked about Victor Hanson who was killed in Okinawa. He flew 40 missions.

Peter Robinson: Your dad?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, over Tokyo in a B-29, had to land emergency two or three times in Iwo Jima. My grandfather, Frank Hanson, was gassed at the Battle of Belleau Wood. My first cousin, Holt, was killed at Normandy Beach, Hold Cather. So I heard all of that. They didn't talk about it a lot but they had a certain tragic view that pretty much when you went to war you didn't have any good choices and they expected the worst to take place. And it also was permeated with this agricultural. We grew up on a farm so just as you lost a crop one day before you were supposed to pick because of an inopportune hailstorm or you had all your raisins ready to dry and a storm came up from Mexico and ruined them, that was the same type of things that we were told happened in war. And the result was a pretty bleak Scandinavian view that life is, as I said earlier, nasty, brutish, and short.

Peter Robinson: And you – so you grew up on a farm but you had an academic – clearly you were a bright kid and you got good –

Victor Davis

Hanson: Debatable.

Peter Robinson: Well, all right, you ended up at Stanford as a very young man and not everybody from the Central Valley did. Was it growing up with these men in the background of your life that interested you in military?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I think also I had to work very hard on a ranch and it was very isolated and I wanted to get away and I had wonderful parents because although they'd lived on a farm and the worked, my grandparents worked, my mother had gone to Stanford Law School when nobody did as a female in the 1940s. My father had enlisted out of University of the Pacific and they stressed education. So when I got 18 I thought, you know what, I've got to get off a tractor and get as far away from this as possible. But

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

then when I was 26 I had a PhD and I went back on the farm. So I was the laughingstock of the whole neighborhood out there pruning with a PhD and everybody thought that was hilarious.

Peter Robinson: I happen to know you still go back to the farm to do pruning yourself. From *The Father of Us All*, “What bothers us about war is it’s not just their occasionally horrifically lethality. It’s that people like ourselves choose to wage them.” Explain what you mean by that, particularly now that we know that your dad was bombing Tokyo.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yes, well I mean I can remember being in high school and having an advanced placement class on Hiroshima. I didn’t really know anything about my dad and he came to address our class about bombing Tokyo and I was horrified because e I did some research and the March 11 fire raids did much more damage than Hiroshima.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Victor Davis

Hanson: So I tried to tell him, I said, gosh, you’re a war criminal, and he laughed and said, no we stopped the Imperial Japanese Army. They were killing 20,000 Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos a day and there was no other way. We’re not supermen. How would you stop them? I remember he said to me, exact words, “Victor, how would you stop them? Tell them to stop?” We had a B-29, it would get 16 hours and he said it was like flying at night from Fresno to Utah.

Peter Robinson: Where’d they take off?

Victor Davis

Hanson: Took off on Tenya and they flew 1,600 miles in a rickety plane that was experimental. He has 16 planes. Fourteen never made it through the war. Two crews survived. They brought in 8 crews. Al of them either got shot down or lost and his attitude was I’m not a god. I’m just a human and we were better than the alternative. So what he taught me was that United States never has any claims that it’s perfect. It’s just better than the alternative and if you don’t believe it’s better than the alternative there’s no reason for it to continue really and that idea, that agricultural military idea that humans are not perfect and they make mistakes but the idea of being enduring and adjudicating them and judging them and correcting them and having some tolerance for human frailty is very important not only in war but also in farming and human experience. This

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

utopianism has been fatal to our society. It's a new barbarism where we insist on perfectionism or we're no good.

Peter Robinson: Barack Obama speaking in Oslo giving his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, "sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by the examples of," and he mentions Gandhi and Martin Luther King, "alone, I face the world as it is. Make no mistake. Evil does exist in the world." This brings us back to the question with which we started. Evaluate Barack Obama so far as commander-in-chief. He sounds as though he has the tragic understanding, doesn't he?

Victor Davis

Hanson: He does but you have to make on qualification. What Barack Obama says unfortunately is not a guide to what he does. I mean he said that he was not taking campaign funds. He did. Shut down Guantanamo within a year, try KSM, and all that stuff, tribunals bad, Predators –

Peter Robinson: Just words.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Yeah, just look what he's done and I think what we're seeing as a commander-in-chief unfortunately is a reset of the reset diplomacy. He came in and said whatever Bush did I'm not going to do and now whatever I said I was going to do, he's reset everything. Hillary said – Hillary Clinton yesterday said, oh there was kind of a coup in Iran. We didn't know the Revolutionary Guard really ran things. So that Iranian thing is sort of off the table. The Russian deal where we sort of said to the Czechs and Poles no missile defense because they're going to help us, that's off the table. The Chavez outreach, he's going to be a stabilizing picture if we can get Bush out of the picture and use our charm on him. That's out now. Chavez is more – the Chinese said that the relationships and trouble and it's our fault because basically we thought we can keep borrowing a trillion dollars from them and then hector them about human rights in Tibet, sort of like you going to your banker –

Peter Robinson: You're wrong. He's been a better commander-in-chief than people like you and me had any reason to expect or than we did expect and here's why, because now the American people and in particular the Democratic party have had this experience of watching someone who clearly intended to do everything as differently from George W. Bush as he could in effect ratifying one aspect of American military reality after another. We're now going to try KSM in a military tribunal, not up in New York. We're still at war in Afghanistan. He increased the number of troops and so now the war on

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

terror has become bipartisan in a way that it couldn't have been if a Republican had succeeded Bush. So am I making this up? All this is true, right?

Victor Davis

Hanson: This is all true.

Peter Robinson: It's good news, right?

Victor Davis

Hanson: It is in a way but it's why Woodrow Wilson could do what he did in World War I, FDR could do what he did and Truman did what he did, LBJ and JFK could do what they do because the idea is that a Democrat is a man of peace. He's a utopian. He doesn't like war. He goes to it reluctantly. A Republican is a blood thirsty warrior type person who likes war and so anytime we have a democratic president, the left-wing is really to forgive him in a much greater degree than he is a Republican. You're right. Obama's been a great gift not only to the Republicans but to George Bush because singlehandedly he showed the world, he said to the world, your anti-Americanism, your George Bush hatred, your writ that Bush shredded the Constitution, it had nothing to do with reality. It was just piggybacking on the American left's critique of a sitting Republican president for partisan purposes. You know why? Because look, we're doing everything that he did in Iraq, everything in Afghanistan, tribunals, renditions, intercepts, Patriot Act, etc., Predators, and you people, where are the marches in Europe right now about Predators? They don't exist. Where is some Hollywood celebrity giving a speech at the Oscars about rendition? Where's the movie *Rendition*? Where's the movie *Redacted*, *Valley of Elah*? Where's all these Hollywood anti-Iraq movies? They don't exist.

Peter Robinson: Last couple of questions. Michael Labight, if I'm pronouncing his name correctly, submitted a question for you on Facebook. By the way, we announced couple days ago that we would be doing this show together, dozens of questions that mostly young people want to put to you. We only have time for one here. So Michael Labight says, what's changed in American war making doctrine that has somehow permitted us to go from the doctrine of overwhelming force, Sherman, MacArthur, to this notion of social work under general McChrystal. Now I'm not sure that you're going to let the questioner get away with calling General McChrystal's approach social work but that's the question.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Two things, one was the advent in the 1940s of nuclear weapons which meant that the traditional Western way of war of using overwhelming force until

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

the enemy submits was problematic if you're engaged in a nuclear exchange. That was number one and number two is with a greater, more educated, more affluent, and more interconnected world populations you had a lot of people who believed in the ultimate promise of the Enlightenment. That war was a thing of our Neanderthal past, it was a mistake, an accident, and we could educate people to a certain degree and that such a utopian idea as the problem of the American military is not just they can't lose soldiers. That's understandable.

Peter Robinson: You're not going to let the questioner get away with saying McChrystal is just engaged in social work. You have a higher regard for McChrystal.

Victor Davis

Hanson: No, I do. General McChrystal has a pretty formidable reputation in Iraq. He's a man that knows war first hand. He's trying to win hearts and minds in a very sophisticated manner. I'm just saying that it's very hard for us. You can't have a soldier in today's society, in the West. Imagine if General McChrystal as General Patton said that and lined up the whole American military and said we're going to cut the guts out of those people. We're going to slime them, we're going to go through them like blank through a goose. Society is post-modern. It's not up to that absolutism and so it makes it very hard to fight a war because what's war? It's based on an absolute reality. You have to kill the enemy before he kills you and you have to kill enough of the enemy so that he agrees to your political agenda and that's Neanderthal. And yet we have a pre-modern problem with a post-modern approach to it and it's very difficult. I have nothing but sympathy of General McChrystal. You have to be a PhD and a killer at the same time.

Peter Robinson: Final question, from *The Father of Us All*: "Military history has a moral purpose. If we know nothing of Shiloh, Belleau Wood, Tarawa, and Chosen, then these sacrifices no longer serve as reminders that thousands endured pain and hardship for our rights and that the departed expected future generations links in this great chain of obligation to do the same for those not yet born." Victor, in this country today are we reaching the end of that great chain of obligation?

Victor Davis

Hanson: I'm worried. I'm worried because there's a lot of reasons to study military history. We could go on and on but one reason that's never mentioned is you have a moral obligation to acknowledge the ultimate sacrifice of thousands of Americans in their youth. When you go to Walmart today and we see all that plethora of goods and that instant credit, we have to understand that there's somebody we don't even know, don't even care about who died in a place like Okinawa or who died at Shiloh, who died at Valley Forge for that opportunity. I was on the American Commission for Battle

Victor Davis Hanson
This is an unedited transcript of the interview.

Monuments Overseas and just to walk through a place like Ham or Normandy or the Argon and see all those white crosses, nobody knows their names, nobody knows what 8th Air Force means anymore, nobody knows what 101st means and yet those people gave their all for us and yet we have turned American history into melodrama. Americans were genocidal. Americans had slavery. We never are compared to the alternative that we were far better than worse. That we were good and a certain number of people sacrificed for us and we have to appreciate them rather than damn their memory. I'm very worried about it. military history and acknowledgement of the collective sacrifice of American young people in the past should be the ultimate topic in our high schools and schools. Every class, every school should have some acquaintance, some mention of places like Tarawa or placed like Guadalcanal or places like Belleau Wood.

Peter Robinson: Victor Davis Hanson, author of *The Father of Us All*, thank you very much.

Victor Davis

Hanson: Thank you.

Peter Robinson: I'm Peter Robinson for *Uncommon Knowledge* and the Hoover Institution. Thanks for joining us.