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DUE DATE: _____

DEMOCRACY at WAR—The Ambrose Thesis

Introduction: The popular historian, Stephen Ambrose, has famously posited that the democratic culture of the United States had a profound impact on the way the US fought the second world war and that ultimately the democratic culture of the US allowed the American soldiers to “outfight” their German and Japanese opponents. We are going to explore this thesis in class by reading some Ambrose quotes and viewing parts of *Band of Brothers* and *Saving Private Ryan*. *Band of Brothers* is an HBO miniseries based on a Stephen Ambrose book by the same name. *Saving Private Ryan* was inspired by the work of Stephen Ambrose and Ambrose was a consultant on the film.

Stephen Ambrose on Democracy at War

From November 1998 interview in *The Atlantic*

(1) “... In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries you have these great nation states hurling their young men at one another. The victory was really going to rest on who could do the best job of bringing up their kids to become efficient and effective soldiers... and thank God it’s been the armies of democracy that have emerged from this as the triumphant armies...”

(2) “On the home front we had free labor, which always out-produces slave labor—and the Nazis were relying on slave labor. Hitler’s technicians got stuck in ruts. They were ahead of the world in 1937, but in 1944 they were still building 1930s models. Most of all, we were helped by the fact that in the Army our soldiers accepted responsibility and seized the initiative, which are things that the children of democracy are very good at, and the children of totalitarians aren’t. Hitler thought that his kids, brought up in the Hitler Youth, would always outfight kids brought up in the Boy Scouts, because his kids would unquestionably obey, and because they were fanatics. The problem with that was that ultimately the orders could only come from Hitler, so it was difficult to impossible for Germans to ever take initiative. They would always be waiting for orders. They were paralyzed on D-Day. At a time when they had the means and the wherewithal to drive the British back in to the sea, and the tank commanders were ready to go do it, they had to wait to get the okay from Hitler, who was a thousand kilometers away. It was just madness to run an army like that. You see the same thing on a smaller scale throughout the whole war. The Germans made great troops until the lieutenant got killed.”

From *Citizen Soldiers* (Simon & Schuster, 1997)

(3) “The Wehrmacht [German Army] in Normandy in June of 1944 was an international army. It had troops from every corner of the vast Soviet empire—Mongolians, Cossacks, Georgians, Muslims, Chinese—plus men from the Soviet Union’s neighboring countries, men who had been conscripted into the Red [Soviet] Army, then captured by the Germans in 1941 or 1942. There were some Koreans, captured by the Red Army in the 1939 war with Japan. In Normandy in June 1944, the 29th [American] Division captured enemy troops of so many different nationalities that one GI blurted to his company commander, ‘Captain, just who the hell *are* we fighting, anyway?’ Ethnic Germans also surrendered. Even veterans of the Eastern [Soviet] Front. Corp. Friedrich Bertenrath of the 2nd Panzer [German] Division explained, ‘In Russia, I could imagine nothing but fighting to the last man. We knew that going into a prison camp in Russia meant you were dead. In Normandy, one always had in the back of his mind, ‘Well, if everything goes to hell, the Americans are human enough that the prospect of becoming their prisoner was attractive to some extent.’” (33)

(4) “For all their shortcomings, the Shermans [American tanks] were a triumph of American mass-production techniques. First of all, they were wonderfully reliable, in sharp contrast to the Panther and Tigers [tanks of the Germans]. In addition, GIs were far more experienced in the working of the internal combustion engine than were their opposite numbers. The Americans were also infinitely better at recovering damaged tanks and patching them up to go back into action; the Germans had nothing like the American maintenance battalions. Indeed, no army in the world had such a capability. Within two days of being put out of action by German shells, about half of the damaged Shermans had been repaired by maintenance battalions and were back on the line. Kids who had been working at gas stations and body shops two years earlier had brought their mechanical skills to Normandy, where they repaired engines...Nearly all this work was done as if the crews were back in the States, rebuilding damaged cars and trucks—that is, the men on the shop floor made their own decisions, got out their tools, and got after the job. One of their officers, Capt. Belton Cooper, commented, ‘I began to realize something about the American Army I had never thought possible before. Although it is highly regimented and bureaucratic under garrison conditions, when the Army gets in the field, it relaxes and the individual initiative comes forward and does what has to be done. This type of flexibility was one of the great strengths of the American Army in World War II.’” (64-5)

(5) “...Over four decades of interviewing former GIs, I’ve been struck by how often they tell stories about duds, generally about shells falling near their foxholes and failing to explode. Lt. George Wilson said that after one shelling near St.-Lô, ‘I counted eight duds sticking in the ground within thirty yards of my foxhole.’ There are no statistics available on this phenomenon, nor is there any evidence on why, but I’ve never heard a German talk about American duds. The shells fired by the GIs were made by free American labor; the shells fired by the Wehrmacht were made by slave labor from Poland, France, and throughout the German empire. And at least some of the slaves must have mastered the art of turning out shells that passed examination but were nevertheless sabotaged effectively.” (65-6)

(6) “There was nothing the Americans could do about the weather, but they could go after their problems in getting tanks into the hedgerow fighting. In doing so, they showed their mechanical ability and talents, and their ingenuity and resourcefulness. Rommel was impressed by the effort and results, saying that he thought the Americans, ‘showed themselves to be very advanced in the tactical handling of their forces’ and that they ‘profited much more than the British from their experiences.’ Experiments involved welding pipes or steel teeth onto the front of the Sherman tank. Lt. Charles Green, a tanker in the 29th Division, devised a bumper that was made from salvaged railroad tracks that Rommel had used as beach obstacles. It was incredibly strong and permitted the Shermans to bull their way through the thickest hedgerows. In the 2nd Armored Division Sgt. Curtis Culin, a cab driver from Chicago, designed and supervised the construction of a hedgerow-cutting device made from scrap iron pulled from a German roadblock. The blades gave the tank a resemblance to rhinoceros, so Shermans equipped with Culin’s invention were known as rhino tanks... These improvements, and others, have prompted Michael Douber to write in his prize-winning *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe*, ‘In its search for solutions to difficulties of hedgerow combat, the American army encouraged the free flow of ideas and the entrepreneurial spirit. Coming from a wide variety of sources, ideas generally flowed upward from the men actually engaged in battle.’” (66-7)

Prompts to respond to on a separate sheet of paper.

- (1) According to Ambrose, what advantages does democracy provide to war making?
- (2) For quotes 3-6, explain how democracy is at work. (I want you to enumerate and explain the ways expressed in each quote.)
- (3) Do you find Ambrose’s thesis convincing? Explain.