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Book Review: One Soldier's Story: A Memoir

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One Soldier's Story: A Memoir. By Bob Dole. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005. xii + 287 pp. Photographs. \$25.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Bob Dole's story is a familiar one, by dint of his long political career and three attempts to win the presidency. The Depression-era Kansas boy grows up in the Heartland and heads to the state university to pursue sports, academics, and ultimately a medical career. Drafted into the army, he's grievously wounded in the waning days of World War Two. After a remarkable and agonizing recovery, he enters politics and climbs the ladder to lead the Senate and come within a hairbreadth of the Oval Office.

One might think there is little left to learn in the Bob Dole saga. But, as Dole contemporary Richard M. Nixon might have said, "That would be wrong." Although he has been perhaps the ultimate "public man," Dole has rarely talked about one crucial period in his life—the post-war rehabilitation that imbued him with a work ethic, a sense of direction, and an ambition that pushed him to the highest levels of American politics. Although Dole did emphasize his war experience and subsequent recovery in his 1996 presidential campaign, it was within an electoral context and hardly the place for systematic reflection.

In *One Soldier's Story*, with a pitch-perfect voice, Dole tells a compelling tale of recovery and rebirth. The Robert Dole who entered the military, fresh from his soda jerk and athletic days on the Kansas Plains, became a new and profoundly different person as he emerged from more than three years of rehabilitation after absorbing his life-threatening April

1945 wounds. One simultaneously hears the reminiscences of the elder statesman and the immediate reflections of the high school boy, the young soldier, and the recovering man who grows increasingly aware of how his life has permanently changed.

Even though this book is not ostensibly about Dole's political career, it adds many insights to the why and how of his life in politics. Most notable, perhaps, is that his penchant for service changes from the private sphere of medicine to the public sphere of elected official and legislator. Likewise, Dole's reflections illustrate his complex thinking about the role of government. Although he retains his traditional Midwestern desire for limited government, he understands the importance of government intervention in a host of ways—from agricultural subsidies to veterans hospitals. Indeed, from 1943 through 1996 Bob Dole continuously received assistance or a salary from one level of government or another.

In the end, there are probably three audiences for this book: Kansans who look with great favor on their favorite son; those who seek to understand what makes an enigmatic politician tick; and those whose own situations, such as soldiers wounded in Iraq, encourage them to identify with and draw strength from Dole's singular experience. Although I fall into the first two categories, I can only imagine the impact that *One Soldier's Story* might have on someone in the third.

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