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Sergeant York: An American Hero

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Preface

In the last days of America's first war in Europe, Corporal Alvin C. York came marching out of the Argonne Forest with 132 German prisoners and a tale of individual daring unsurpassed in the nation's military annals. One of the least likely heroes in our history, York was initially a conscientious objector who was drafted only after his pleas for a deferment on religious grounds were rejected. However, his army superiors persuaded him that America was fighting God's battle in World War I, an argument that transformed the pacifist from the Tennessee mountains into a veritable soldier of the Lord. During the final Allied offensive of the war, York singlehandedly outshot an entire German machine gun battalion, killing twenty-five men in the process. His explanation that God had been with him during the fight meshed neatly with the popular attitude that American involvement in the war truly was a holy crusade, and he returned to the United States in the spring of 1919 amid a tumultuous public welcome and a flood of business offers from people eager to capitalize on the soldier's reputation. In spite of these lucrative opportunities, York decided to return to his native hamlet, where he spent the rest of his life working to bring schools and other public services to his mountain neighbors.

York's value as a symbol went far beyond his contribution as a citizen or soldier. He came to prominence at a time when the United States was reeling from the impact of the Industrial Revolution, a profound social and economic force that had changed a nation of agricultural villages into a great world

power. In such uncertain times, York's pioneer-like skill with a rifle, homespun manner, and fundamentalist piety endeared him to millions of Americans as a kind of "contemporary ancestor" fresh from the backwoods of Appalachia. As such, he seemed to affirm that the traditional virtues of agrarian America still had meaning in the new era. Furthermore, York's victory over what was then the most deadly emblem of the machine age, the machine gun, represented for many the final supremacy of man over the instruments of destruction he had created. Thus, both York's personality and his achievement were balm for the anxieties that gripped American society in the troubled months after the Armistice.

York kept his hold on the affection of the American people for nearly half a century because he represented not what Americans were but what they wanted to think they were. He lived in one of the most rural parts of the country at a time when a majority of Americans lived in cities; he rejected riches at a time when the tenor of the nation was crassly commercial; he was pious at a time when secularism was on the rise. Consequently, for millions of Americans, York was the incarnation of their romanticized understanding of the nation's past when men and women supposedly lived plainer, sterner, and more virtuous lives. Ironically, while York endured as a symbol of an older America, he spent most of his adult life working to bring roads, schools, and industrial development to the mountains, the kinds of changes that were destroying the society he had come to represent.

Also, York caught within himself certain basic contradictions in the American character, most notably an ambiguous attitude toward violence. Although Americans insist they are a peace-loving people, violence has played a major role in shaping their history, and violent men from Jesse James to Theodore Roosevelt are heroic figures to many. The First World War highlighted these divergent feelings because, while the United States entered the conflict reluctantly, the nation fought with xenophobic zeal once Congress had declared war. As a conscientious objector turned successful soldier, York was a perfect reflection of America's reluctant but forceful

involvement in European affairs. York resolved the conflict between his religious principles and his military commitment by deciding that to fight in a noble cause was to do the Lord's work, and his achievement on the battlefield apparently confirmed that America was indeed supporting a just cause in the remote and little-understood struggle in Europe.

I have had two objectives in mind in preparing this study. First of all, I have tried to penetrate the myth surrounding York to establish the facts of his life. What follows then is in part a biography that attempts to analyze the man and his achievements. Secondly, I am interested in the hero-making process itself; specifically, how heroes are chosen, the characteristics heroes exhibit, and the role institutions play in publicizing them. Closely related to this, of course, is the question of how heroes in turn manipulate the process that created them. In the case of Sergeant York, the press, Hollywood, and the army created a popular legend around York that presented him as the embodiment of certain values, but York in turn used the legend to advance his program of progress for his native Appalachian mountains once he had returned to civilian life. Although the wide acclaim he received greatly affected his life, his tenacious commitment to simple concerns enabled him to translate personal glory into a life of community service. Consequently, he claimed a special place in the hearts of his countrymen as a man whose life demonstrated the continuing vitality of the simple virtues of the common man.

Any attempt to study the life of Alvin York is plagued by some special problems. For one thing, York did very little of his own writing. Poorly educated and rather indifferent to popular acclaim, he was content to let friends express his point of view in prose more polished than his own. Three of the major sources for York's life—his "autobiography," his lectures, and his correspondence—are all products of other hands even though his name is affixed to each of them. Two men in particular served as York's scribes. Professional writer Thomas Skeyhill collaborated with the sergeant to produce York's autobiography in 1928, but York's personal secretary,

Arthur S. Bushing, played an even larger role in this regard. Throughout most of York's public life, Bushing prepared virtually all York's correspondence, and he probably wrote his lectures and speeches as well. Ironically, Skeyhill and Bushing tended to express York in very different ways. Skeyhill sought to convey the flavor of Appalachian speech by presenting the autobiography in dialect, while Bushing salted his work with words and phrases that were probably unfamiliar to York. Despite the disparity of style, however, they both worked so closely with York that it is still reasonable to assume they were accurately voicing York's sentiments.

Secondly, because York was asked to discuss the famous firefight literally until the end of his days, the evidence pertaining to the incident stretches over some forty years. For my purposes, however, I have concentrated on accounts prepared within a decade of the actual event. Apparently the story he gave orally to the army and the brief description he jotted in his personal diary are the only statements completely in York's own words. Both are very sketchy, but fortunately a *Saturday Evening Post* article done by George Pattullo in early 1919 provides added detail by quoting York extensively. In the mid-1920s, York cooperated with Bushing and Skeyhill in setting down fuller and clearer versions which are still in accord with the earlier documents. One of these became his standard platform lecture, a copy of which is held by the Tennessee State Library and Archives, and the other appears in the autobiography. Because no important discrepancies exist among these narratives, I have used them interchangeably in compiling my own summary of the incident.

I have incurred a good many debts since beginning this study several years ago. My colleague Joseph M. Boggs sparked my interest in Sergeant York and greatly influenced my understanding of his place in American life. Charles Bussey and Lowell Harrison also offered helpful suggestions, as did the anonymous scholars who reviewed the manuscript for the University Press of Kentucky. Brenda Kepley of the National Archives guided me to some rare and important York material

not previously used by scholars. The staff of the Tennessee State Library and Archives led me through its unprocessed holdings on the York Institute. Nashville *Banner* reporter William Hance arranged for me to see the paper's clippings on York. Several members of the York family generously shared their memories with me, particularly Betsy and Howard Lowrey, Alvin York's daughter and son-in-law, who provided valuable assistance in numerous ways. I deeply appreciate their support. Grants from the Western Kentucky University Faculty Research Committee helped to defray the expenses I incurred. The *Southern Quarterly* permitted me to reprint portions of chapter 6, which appeared in the spring/summer, 1981 issue of that journal.

Not all the help I received was necessarily of a professional nature. Harper Katherine Lee arrived in this world just in time to supervise the final draft in her own enchanting way. My wife, Laura, deserves special mention. A direct and sensible woman, she skillfully coped with my irregular hours, preoccupied manner, and occasional absences over the lifetime of this project. I am grateful for the extra responsibilities she assumed so I would be able to write.