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## Globetrotters with guns

Reviewed by Julie Foster  
Sunday, October 23, 2005

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### Imperial Grunts

#### The American Military

#### IMAGES



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on the Ground

By Robert D. Kaplan

RANDOM HOUSE; 421 PAGES; \$27.95

For two years, Robert Kaplan, a correspondent for Atlantic Monthly and author of 10 books, traveled to remote and dangerous spots with U.S. Special Forces and Marines. "Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground" is the superbly written and provocative result.

Kaplan states that "traveling with the military, and particularly with Special Forces, had brought me to the last unspoiled places on earth, the places still too unstable to be touched by tourism."

His journey takes him to Yemen, Colombia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and Iraq. He also makes stops at Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune.

In Colombia, Kaplan is "introduced to the tactics that the U.S. would employ to manage an unruly world." He spends time with soldiers he describes as being "well-spoken men with tattoos, guns, and serious reading materials all over their hootch."

He listens to Pat Gleason at Fort Bragg, who "like many noncommissioned sergeants and warrant officers I would meet in the course of my travels, was quietly amazing."

Gleason, who with his laptop ran what Kaplan calls a small travel agency, was responsible for moving equipment and soldiers between the eastern United States, Puerto Rico and Colombia. He also speaks fluent Spanish, has served all over the Americas, has an encyclopedic knowledge regarding political attitudes in rural Bolivia and the mores of the Chilean military, and jumps out of airplanes at night at 25,000 feet, opening his parachute at 3,500 feet.

In the Philippines he learned that "the primary focus of Special Forces was not commando raids but the instruction of indigenous armies."

Because Kaplan took the time to listen to these men and their stories, readers get more than the official military line generally dished out to the media. No matter what his subject, Kaplan includes extensive local history, geography, culture and descriptions of exotic landscapes. He invariably mentions additional books to seek out and tantalizing subjects for further investigation.

Part of Kaplan's technique is to home in on a subject, not skipping the important subtleties necessary to gain a solid grasp of his story. He clarifies the distinction

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between Islamic conservatism and radicalism, explains what is the most important difference between the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia, and describes the role of Islam in the Philippines. Ultimately, he offers the reader an enlightened way to understand what is happening in the world.

"I was not chasing news, but trying to understand the mechanics of America's security commitments worldwide, on the ground, piece by piece," he writes.

One early stop was Mongolia, next-door neighbor to China and home of the 13th century warrior Genghis Khan, hairy Bactrian camels, the Gobi desert and where an unpleasant reality became apparent. "Americans were uncomfortable with the idea of empire, even as the responsibility was thrust upon them in places like this."

"Imperial Grunts" is the first of two books Kaplan plans to write about his travels with the military. This one evolved from a series of articles commissioned by Kaplan's editor, Cullen Murphy at the Atlantic Monthly, and journalist Michael Kelly, who was killed in 2003 in Baghdad while embedded with the Third Infantry.

Less than a quarter of this material has been excerpted in Atlantic Monthly, and no more than half of any chapter was ever used in articles. These stories are too good to pass up because a portion may have been read previously.

Upon finishing "Imperial Grunts," readers may experience the kind of cognitive dissonance Kaplan did in 2004.

Upon entering his hotel lobby in Dubai, after being in battle at Fallujah, Iraq, with the Marines, Kaplan saw newspaper headlines regarding the conflict that snared him between two worlds.

"I felt like a person at the center of a scandal that everyone was reading about, in which even the most accurate, balanced accounts were unconnected to what I had actually experienced and the marines I had experienced it all with. I felt deeply alienated."

*Julie Foster is a Sacramento writer.*

*This article appeared on page M - 4 of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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