

BOOKS

'Being ready is not what matters. What matters is winning after you get there.' —Brute Krulak

An All-Time Great Marine

Brute:
The Life of Victor Krulak
 By Robert Coram
 Little, Brown, 374 pages, \$27.99

BY MAX BOOT

AFTER IT EMERGED in the 1990s that Madeleine Albright, Wesley Clark and Christopher Hitchens—notable *goyim* all—had discovered the existence of Jewish ancestors, I formulated Boot's Law of Genealogy: Everyone is Jewish; some people just don't know it yet. Further confirmation, if any were needed, comes courtesy of this new biography of Lt. Gen. Victor "Brute" Krulak, who died last year at 95.

Before reading "Brute," I had no idea that the famous Marine was a hebe like me. Krulak was born in Denver in 1913. His father, Morris (originally Moschku), had emigrated from Russia in 1890. His mother, Bessie Zalinsky, had arrived two years earlier. Yet by the time Krulak entered the Naval Academy in 1930, he was telling everyone, Robert Coram reports, "that his great-grandfather had served in the Confederate army, that his grandfather had moved from Louisiana to Colorado to homestead 640 acres, and that his father had been born in the Colorado capital." He claimed to be an Episcopalian, associating himself with the most socially prestigious religious denomination. His children were raised as Episcopalsians; two even became ministers. (Another son, Charles, became Marine Commandant in the 1990s.)

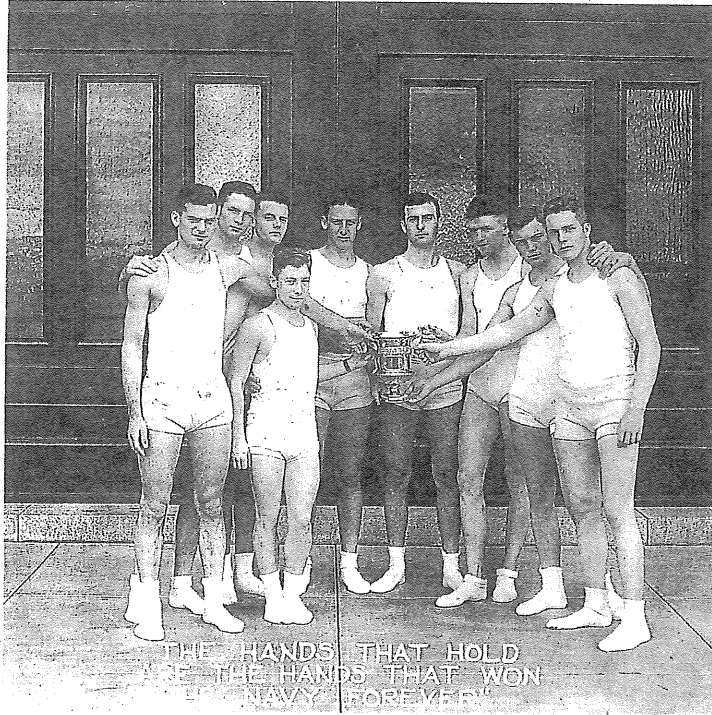
Krulak was so determined to put his past behind him that when he married the daughter of a Navy officer from "an old, genteel East Coast family," he did not invite a single one of his relatives to the wedding, for fear that his Jewishness would be discovered. Nor did he tell anyone that he had been married once before. At 16, he had eloped with his girlfriend. The marriage was annulled after just nine days but, if discovered, it would have kept Krulak from entering the Academy, which barred students who had ever been married.

Krulak figured, no doubt rightly, that in the starchy, snobbish officer corps of his day, a Jew with a failed marriage would not have gotten far. There was nothing he could do to hide his other handicap—his tiny size. When he entered the Academy he was 5'4" and 116 pounds. On his first day, Mr. Coram writes, "a towering midshipman looked down at him, smirked and said: 'Well, Brute.'" Thus was born the nickname that Krulak loved.

He was so small that he did not meet the Marine Corps' minimum size requirements. To get his commission, he made use of high-level connections. At Annapolis he had cultivated Holland Smith, who would go on to become a famous World War II general nicknamed "Howlin' Mad." Smith and future commandant Lemuel Shepherd would turbo-charge Krulak's ascent.

Brute rewarded their trust by becoming one "squared-away" Marine. You do not have to be convinced by Mr. Coram's overblown claim that Krulak was "the most important officer in the history of the United States Marine Corps" to recognize his signal contributions.

In 1937, while stationed in Shanghai, Krulak observed Japan's use of landing craft with "large, flat bows" that opened on a beach, "allowing the boats to disgorge vehicles and personnel on dry land." At the time the U.S. had



HONOR, COURAGE, COMMITMENT The 1933 Naval Academy rowing team tower over their coxswain, Brute Krulak.

nothing comparable. Krulak was a prime mover in getting the Marine Corps to adopt similar boats made by an obscure shipyard (Higgins Industries of New Orleans). The Higgins boat would make possible all of the American amphibious assaults of World War II, from Normandy to Iwo Jima.

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Having a major role in the development of the landing craft would, by itself, have been enough to secure Krulak's place as a military innovator. But he further burnished his reputation when, immediately after World War II, he pushed the Marine Corps to adopt helicopters ahead of the other services. He realized their potential not only to evacuate wounded and move supplies but also to outflank the enemy in battle. Krulak, still only a colonel, also played a key behind-the-scenes role in rallying Congress to defeat President Truman's efforts to severely trim the Marine Corps' size and mission. This led to Truman's famous complaint that the Marine Corps has a "propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's."

Krulak's combat exploits, while distinguished, were far too brief to put him in the company of Medal of Honor winners such as Lewis "Chesty" Puller or Dan Daly. He commanded a battalion

sent in 1943 to raid the Pacific island of Choiseul to distract the Japanese from the invasion of Bougainville. He won the Navy Cross, his service's second-highest decoration, but the raid was a minor affair that lasted just seven days. It is remembered primarily because one of the PT boats that evacuated Krulak's men was commanded by a young officer named John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy became a senator, Krulak claimed to have gotten chummy with him during the war. This was just another of Krulak's tall tales; the two never met in the Pacific. (The Marine contingent that Kennedy evacuated was led by Krulak's second-in-command.)

It would be easy to condemn Krulak for his dissembling were it not for the fact that he wound up sacrificing his career by telling a painful truth. In the 1960s he was commander of Fleet Marine Force-Pacific, which oversaw the Marines fighting in Vietnam. The most successful Marine program, known as the Combined Action Platoons (CAP), sent squads to protect villages alongside South Vietnamese militia. This was a more effective counterinsurgency approach than the big-unit sweeps favored by Gen. William Westmoreland. After initially claiming that conventional tactics were a big success (a part of his history that Mr. Coram glosses over), Krulak became an ardent convert to counterinsurgency and a big booster of CAP.

In 1967 he told President Johnson that if the U.S. approach did not change, "he would lose the war and . . . the next election." It wasn't what LBJ wanted to hear, and it probably cost Krulak a chance to get four stars and become commandant. He was forced to retire the next year. He could take solace,

however, in having displayed more moral courage than his seniors who went along with the administration's failed strategy.

Mr. Coram, a reporter turned biographer, does a good job of telling Krulak's story in clear, simple prose. His account is marred only by relentless Marine boosterism. The Battle of Belleau Wood was a notable Marine victory in World War I, but contra Coram, it does not belong alongside Cannae, Gaugamela and Agincourt—three of the most significant battles in history. Mr. Coram also claims that the roots of the new counterinsurgency doctrine produced by Gen. David Petraeus "could be found in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War." The Marine experience was significant, but other wars where the Marines didn't fight (e.g., Algeria and Malaya) were more influential—as was Gen. Petraeus's own experience in Iraq.

These are the sort of exaggerations you expect of a retired gunny. Mr. Coram, however, isn't a "devil dog" himself. He writes that he was often asked by Marines: "How can you write about the Marine Corps when you were not a Marine?" His answer, apparently, is to adopt a Mariner-than-thou tone. That annoying tic aside, he has produced a valuable work that significantly revises our understanding of—but does not diminish our respect for—one of the all-time great Marines.

Mr. Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, won the Marine Corp Heritage Foundation's General Wallace M. Greene Jr. Award for "The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power" (2002).