

“Instant” History and History: A Hierarchy of Needs

By Richard W. Stewart

“History is not what happens; history is what historians say happened.”

Anonymous

Robert H. Scates Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, United States Army, 1993, 434 pp.

Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, United States Army, 2004, 542 pp.; Naval Institute Press, 2005, 539 pp., \$34.95.

Charles Briscoe, Richard L. Kiper, James A. Schroder, and Kalev I. Sepp, *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*, Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003, 399 pp.

As a practicing military historian, I am often engaged in pondering (and defending) how the profession of official historian fits into the wider historical profession and to what degree the official historian's product is “real” history as opposed to “court” history. However, that is not what this short article is about. Others have dealt with this topic in the past, and only the ignorant or obtuse would somehow insist that those working for the military as historians produce only “good-news” court histories, especially of events in the recent memories of senior leaders. However, the confusion is made somewhat worse by initial studies of military operations that appear to be official histories but are not. That is not to say that these studies do not have their place; they do serve a valuable purpose as long as one also understands their limitations. As examples, I would like to share with you my thoughts on three works covering recent conflicts that, though not official histories, are officially sanctioned studies of an operation and are often confused with official histories. These works are Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scates Jr., Director, DESERT STORM Study Project, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, United States Army, 1993); Gregory Fontenot, Lt. Col. E. J. Degen, and Lt. Col. David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, United States Army, 2004); and Charles Briscoe, Richard L. Kiper, James A. Schroder, and Kalev I. Sepp, *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations Forces*

military operations. The sources, despite the flood of electronic data, are simply not collected and preserved as thoroughly as in the past.

Restrained by this hit-or-miss collection process, writers about current operations must, of necessity, create layers of history. There is a specific hierarchy of official historical products relating to these operations: the initial after-action report, a summary of what a unit reports that it just did; an initial chronicle of the events, including some measure of analysis; and finally the official history that seeks to create a reasonably definitive version of the events that will stand the test of time. All three types of report have their value and each one tends to build on the other.

The first official account produced after a military event, operation, or war, is the unit after-action report. It is produced rapidly, based heavily on memory and some unit journals and messages, and it tries to capture what occurred using the narrow focus of a single unit. Analysis is limited, and there is little cognizance of what happened to other units, even those nearby, let alone at the operational or strategic levels. The after-action report is written quickly, generally by the participants and often within weeks or at most months of the event and often captures facts from such sources as journals, messages, situation reports, radio traffic, and now e-mail “chat” rooms and instant messages that may fail to reach official records repositories. After-action reports are often reasonably accurate as far as they go and, if done carefully, are invaluable and irreplaceable resources for future writers prepared, future historians would have excellent guides, chronologies, and summaries of events from which to work. Those that are hurriedly and haphazardly prepared or, worse, are just briefing charts with a few bullets and an attempt to jot down a few “lessons learned” are highly suspect and of little value.

The second type of account is a subtler and more complete form of report but cannot yet be judged to be “history.” It is the contemporary study or report. Contemporary studies attempt to look at a wide variety of secondary sources, often making heavy use of journalists’ accounts in particular; to consult some primary sources, including oral history interviews; and to offer some analysis. These reports try to provide a theater-wide or conflict-wide perspective far beyond that of the after-action report. Often this type of account is written by a participant in or veteran of the event or else someone able to talk to enough participants to gain, vicariously, a sense of what happened. It relies heavily on oral history interviews. However, the urge of the author of this type of report is still to generate a quick study filled with instant analysis and, given today’s problems with classification, often without being able to look at most of the official documents.¹ The study tends

to focus on dramatic events or personalities and can lapse into a paean on how successful the Army has been. It is no coincidence that instant accounts from official or semi-official Army writers or teams of writers of Operations DESERT SHIELD, DESERT STORM, ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan, and IRAQI FREEDOM abound, but no such official impetus created a releasable product on the failed mission to Somalia.² Nevertheless, such instant accounts can satiate the appetite for a time and give the official history—slow, ponderous, and yet more complete—time to mature until it is ready.

Producing the third and final category of written report on a military event, the official history, is necessarily the most time consuming. The audience for an official history cannot be in a hurry. Given today’s highly classified environment, it now takes about a generation before the sources and the events are ripe for the creation of this type of volume.³ After about a generation a number of events have occurred which make the preparation of the definitive volumes of official history possible. The documents, if not all unclassified, are at least generally collected into repositories and available for thorough examination and selective declassification. The other products—after-action reports, contemporary studies, journalists’ accounts, and memoirs—are also more readily available to examine and compare in an attempt to discern what is fact from what is opinion. And, not least important from an official history perspective, those major participants in a military event or war—the senior generals—have retired and are no longer directly in the chain of command, where they might seek to influence a process that has such a direct bearing upon their eventual reputation—although this has been less of a problem than laymen or non-official historians seem to believe. The result is a definitive account of an operation, heavy on analysis and rich in detail, which will stand the test of time. Varying interpretations of events will, of course, continue to be published—even official histories are not the “last word.” But their use of primary sources is so thorough and their examinations of all available evidence so detailed, that while their interpretations can be disputed, the general outline of facts they present should remain secure. Official histories at their best—the multivolume official series, the U.S. Army in World War II, known as the Green Books, fits this category—are generally the starting point for all future histories and interpretations. Their greatest weaknesses are their tendency toward dryness—detailed, objective studies of military operations, including sections on logistics, supply, training, plans, and troop movements are often deadly dull—and the length of time needed to produce them. When a book is published twenty years after an event, however stirring the action or the prose, some of the essential currency has worn off.

Having discussed these three levels of products and postulated their general content and the time frame for

in *Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003).

The problem of writing studies about on-going or recently completed military operations is hardly a new one, yet the practice is not always crowned with success. Observers or participants are often so close to the event that it is hard for even the most careful writer to see the true context of contemporaneous events or to attain a level of objectivity that later historians can, neither overly praising nor criticizing the participants or decisions. All historians of contemporaneous events, however, have a role model or patron saint in Thucydides, a stronger claimant to the title “Father of History” than that fabulist Herodotus. Thucydides was a contemporary of the events he reported in his timeless work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, participated in many of the events he discussed, and had his own axes to grind for and against many individuals in that war. Nevertheless, he clearly attempted to leave all of that in the background and tried his best to restrict his account to the facts as objectively as he could, facts often confirmed from other sources. Most other chroniclers of the time did not even attempt such a feat. Thucydides shows us that excellent histories of contemporary events can be written and written well.

Before reviewing each of the listed books in turn, perhaps a moment to discuss the theory of the creation of historical works is in order. In many ways historical theory (what is history) drives historical methodology (how do we create history), which in turn creates history (what we think happened and why). So historical theory is important. And military history, while it has its own peculiarities and problems, is a subset of history in general. In understanding the creation of military histories we can gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the various levels of historical products that can and should be produced after military operations.

Essentially the creation of military history is a very sloppy process with many, many chances to get it wrong in the short run and, at best, less wrong, in the long run. To understand how sloppy the process is should give all historians and readers of history a more critical eye for all historical products, especially the “instant” histories now much in vogue. So much of the quality of the final historical product depends on the almost haphazard collection and preservation of the records of military operations. The fact that this collection and preservation has grown much more haphazard of late is a matter of much distress to all military historians. The U.S. Army records management program remains broken and no one seems to have the interest, resources, or enthusiasm to fix it. The increasingly problematic collection of documents makes contemporary history more challenging to write about than events further in the past. Many military historians would prefer to write about the Civil War, World War II, or even Vietnam than attempt to write with any measure of certainty on current

their production, how do the three studies listed above fit into this context? That each book falls into the middle category, the contemporary report, should be readily apparent to even a casual reader. Thus they are not official history, even though each book was supported officially. Let us take them in turn.

Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War was prepared by a team of Army officers and other assigned personnel under a serving Army brigadier general, Robert H. Seales Jr. It begins with a stirring tale of the Battle of 73 Easting on 26 February 1991 and then flashes back to the immediate post-Vietnam period to show how far the Army had come since those days. Only after completing a lengthy section on "Forging a New Army" do the authors proceed to chronicle the rapid buildup in Saudi Arabia during Operation DESERT SHIELD, the elaborate and evolving process of generating plans as the mission changed from defense by one U.S. corps to an offensive by two U.S. corps as part of a wider coalition, and ultimately the combat of DESERT STORM. The study ends with a short section on the rebuilding of Kuwait and the redeployment of the Army in mid-1991, along with a discussion of some of the lessons learned. The book's theme is a relentlessly upbeat story of the rebirth of the Army after Vietnam for which Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM constituted the final proof of success.

Certain Victory was produced quickly after the war primarily from documents and after-action reports gathered from throughout the Army with the full official support of the Army hierarchy. It was published in 1993, less than two years after the events of the Gulf War, and is loaded with maps and firsthand stories. It is a "good news" account that does not attempt to be the final word on the Gulf War. In fact, General Gordon R. Sullivan, chief of staff of the Army, wrote in the book's Foreword: "We leave it to scholars with broader perspectives to write the definitive history of the entire period." As such, *Certain Victory* is a worthwhile book that tells a number of great stories of the war, while attempting to place the conflict in the wider context of the previous two decades. The director of the project, his team, and the entire Army hierarchy were so proud of their role in the war, and even prouder of the renaissance of the Army in the twenty years after the Vietnam War, that they could not resist the temptation to preen a little. This is not entirely bad given the audience and the reason behind the report, but the unwary reader needs to know this up front. Yet the book is well written and engaging, with lots of maps and a good story to tell. As long it does not try to pass itself off as the "official history" of the war, it is a very useful work that serves the type of interim purpose for which such reports are designed. If one is looking for hard-hitting, exhaustive, critical analyses of decisions, events, and personalities, however, one needs to look elsewhere.⁴

Certain Victory was apparently the model for the instant history of the Second Gulf War, *On Point: The United States*

Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom. This volume was prepared very quickly after the end of major ground operations and had a cut-off date for the events covered of 1 May 2003. It begins with a discussion of campaign "firsts" and a list of themes from the operation, more as an executive summary of what the authors believe was learned from the operation rather than a true introduction. It then summarizes the situation in the Middle East in the 1990s to set the stage for discussions of the technological advances of the period, the growth of the military infrastructure in Kuwait, and the generation of plans to attack Iraq, starting with the establishment of Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) headquarters in November 2001. The majority of the book is a detailed, blow-by-blow account of the actual attack into Iraq and up to Baghdad in three weeks.

On Point, like *Certain Victory*, was prepared by a team of Army officers, headed in this case by a retired officer, Col. Gregory Fontenot, and the book was published within a year of the events covered. It is based heavily on oral history interviews and unit after-action reports and seeks to "tell the Army story" with numerous highlighted sections on specific acts of sacrifice or heroism on the part of Army leaders and soldiers. It deals with some controversies—it does not hide the appallingly near-run nature of the logistics system nor the chaos caused to the plan by the Defense Department's decision to scrap the time-phased force deployment list (TPFDL) and turn to a politically driven request-for-forces process—but on the whole, like *Certain Victory*, it is essentially a good-news story. It wants to put the Army, its soldiers and leaders both, in the most favorable light, and it must be read with that in mind. On a lesser note, it is also hard for a non-military person to read. It is shot through with acronyms, describes complex military movements that need more careful explanation, and has a few too many (one is too many) instances of repeating cute nicknames for some senior Army leaders. (Does anyone really care that a senior officer goes by the nickname of "Spider," "Rock," or "Binky?") *On Point* is, in essence, just a more detailed and comprehensive after-action report, rather than a history.

On the positive side, *On Point* is, again like *Certain Victory*, a very useful contemporary study of a recently completed military operation, and thus it serves a valuable purpose. It does not pretend to be official history. It is a solid attempt to impose order on a complex operation and tell the story of how the Army's leaders and soldiers accomplished their missions. It is a dense narrative, written primarily for a professional military audience, with more than a few redundancies, chronological problems, and omissions. It is a very good first cut of the story, however, that will serve the Army well until the official histories are produced. It has brought the official historians the time they need to tell the story in all of its well-written, detailed, and comprehensive glory.

Finally, we come to our last instant history, one that is both excellent and troubling. The book is entitled *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*.

It was primarily written by a civilian Army historian, Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, and three contractors, Dr. Richard L. Kiper, Dr. Kalev I. Sepp, and Mr. James A. Schroder, all former special operations soldiers. It was published about two years after the events it covers, which occurred from September 2001 to May 2002, and tells the story of U.S. Army special operations forces—special forces, rangers, special operations aviation, psychological operations, and civil affairs—during early operations in Afghanistan. It is most detailed when telling the story of Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)-NORTH (Task Force DAGGER) but is light on information about JSOTF-SOUTH (Task Force K-BAK, a joint and combined task force). It also excludes the stories of other joint special operations in the region, mostly because of security considerations. But it does not purport to be inclusive; it is the Army special operations forces' story. The wonder is that the U.S. Army Special Operations Command history office managed to publish what it did, and the office should be congratulated for the effort.

There are some problems with the book, however. It is, like *Certain Victory* and *On Point*, determined to focus relentlessly on good-news stories and vignettes. The special forces operators want to talk about what a great job they are doing, and this book fills that purpose. This is fine, but the reader needs to be aware that this is happening. Next, one of the most annoying and troubling aspects is the use throughout the book of pseudonyms for all personnel involved except the most public, such as the JSOTF-NORTH commander, Col. John Mulholland; his deputy, Air Force Col. Mark Kisner; and the follow-on commander Col. Mark Phelan. The historian in me is troubled by this since what purports to be history where "the stories are true, only the names have been changed to protect the innocent" may work on TV with *Doggett* but, I wonder, does this approach work for historians? And yet, without the use of such pseudonyms, this book would certainly not have been published in such a quick time frame and perhaps not at all.⁵ The historian cringes, but the civil servant understands and finally must approve such a subterfuge.

There are other small problems with *Weapon of Choice*. I have to fault the lack of an index. This alone makes the work much less usable by any audience. Speed of production is important, but this is an unnecessary and unhelpful shortcut. It is even harder to understand the lack of an index in this day and age since so many automated programs now exist that could with ease generate a simple name list—or, in this case, a pseudonym list, perhaps matched with a unit—and a crude topic index. And how can we explain the indiscriminate use of black tape over the eyes of all special operations personnel in the photographs, even civil affairs soldiers, who are not really super-secret warriors, and even in those photos that have already been published, unmasked, by *Special Warfare* magazine? This is an annoying affectation that should have been used selectively and with more discretion.

These are mere quibbles, however, given the amount of

detail the authors of *Weapon of Choice* have obtained from their unprecedented access to the members of a portion of the special operations community. The vignettes tell some great stories, and if the analysis is a little weak, it is apparent that the book has captured and preserved enough facts to enable analysts and historians to refine the interpretation at some future date. As the Introduction states, "This historical project is not intended to be the definitive study of the war in Afghanistan. It is a 'snapshot' of the war." Indeed it is a very detailed snapshot that tells great stories and serves the special operations community and the Army well as an initial account. It is a valuable "mark on the wall" for all future historians of these stirring events.⁶

As I have stated, I believe that all three of the studies reviewed above fall into the middle category of contemporary, "officially sponsored" studies or reports and that they serve the valuable purpose of being "place holders" for later, more definitive official histories. Their tendency toward good-news stories is understandable, but all readers need to be aware of this and not use these books uncritically. On the whole, however, even though they were produced quickly, while public and Army interest was still focused on the events at hand, they tell the Army story in sufficient detail and with enough overall fidelity that they ought to be read, yet with the constant awareness that they are not the final word. Still, being the final word is not their purpose. Their *raison d'être* is to serve as an interim product. And in each instance listed above, these books fulfill that purpose admirably.

Speaking in the shadow of Thucydides, a chronicler of contemporaneous events, I can sympathize with the authors of all of these studies. Objectivity is hard to achieve when one is so close to or actually involved in the events one is writing about. However, we can learn from Thucydides, whose work has stood the test of time to become the epitome of the type of history toward which historians of contemporaneous events should aspire. Objectivity, however difficult to attain, must always be the goal of historians, and this is especially problematical when one tries to write about events so soon after they occur or as members of an organization involved in the events. Certainly historians must try to capture events and write about them as objectively as possible as they occur, leaving the more definitive version to future historians. The Army and the American public deserve no less.

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