

COMMENTARY

THE U.S. ARMY AND CONTEMPORARY MILITARY HISTORY

By GREGORY FONTENOT

Several excellent review essays in the Winter 2006 issue of *Army History* written by historians at the U.S. Army Center of Military History establish the basis for a first-class discussion or debate on the value and utility of contemporary military history. W. Shane Story, “Transformation or Troop Strength? Early Accounts of the Invasion of Iraq”; Richard W. Stewart, “‘Instant’ History and History: A Hierarchy of Needs”; and Jeffrey J. Clarke, “The Care and Feeding of Contemporary History” all examine and comment on contemporary accounts in ways that may prove stimulating and useful for those of us who identify ourselves as “5 X-Rays.” As a co-author of one of the “officially sanctioned studies” that Stewart, who is now the Center’s chief historian, considered in his review essay, it is with some trepidation that I offer these few thoughts on the role of military history generally and “instant” history specifically.¹ Although, I agree with many of the chief historian’s assessments, I would argue that his vision for official history may not encompass all that it might or should. Nor do I believe that he fully appreciates the value of “instant” history and the role that

the Center of Military History could and should play in the production of what I prefer to call “contemporary” history.

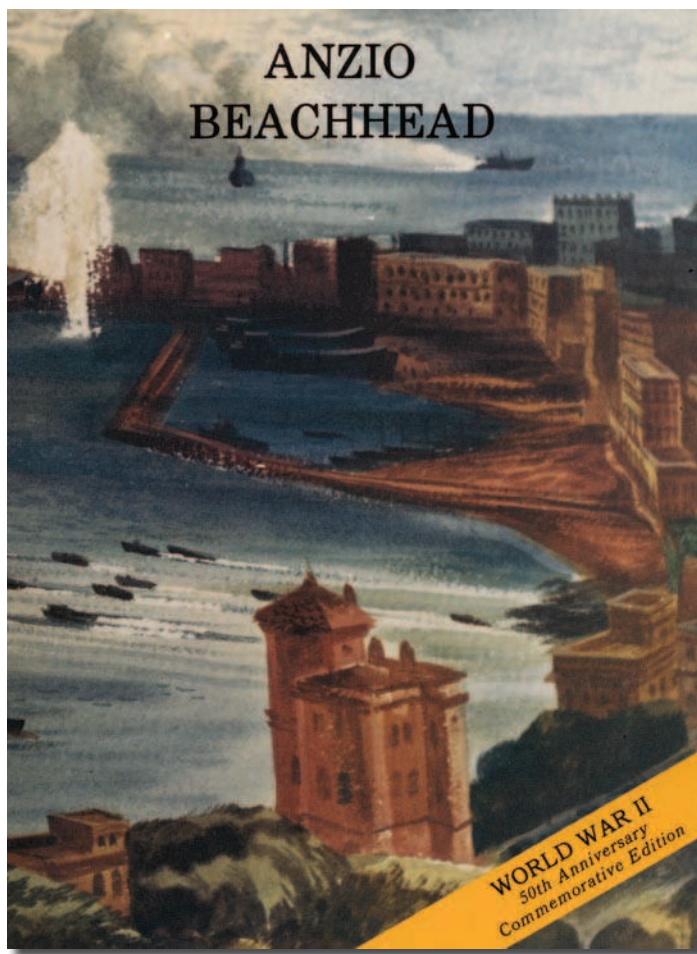
A central contention of Stewart’s definition of official history, at least

adds that, in part, this is so because of security classification and sloppy records gathering. He believes that it takes “about a generation before the sources . . . are ripe.”³ To continue the chief historian’s food channel metaphor, no history will be written at the Center before its time, and it will not be time anytime soon.

Stewart’s definition reflects contemporary historical theory and the present culture of historians, yet as he himself observes it was not always so. After all, Thucydides, to whom Stewart refers in his article, wrote contemporary history. The Center did, too, when it was founded, and it could do so now. When writing official history, or indeed any contemporary history, it is essential to ask, for what purpose is it written? Is official Army history about the record, or is it about serving the need of the Army to garner insight from its own experiences?

In my view, the Center and Army historians generally should seek to enable the Army to learn from its experiences. Thus, the Center should move aggressively to produce contemporary history and

should revise the view that one can only write official history after the dust has settled and a generation has elapsed, permitting the scholars to ruminate adequately. If the Center waits



Reprint of the account of the Anzio campaign issued by the War Department’s Historical Division in 1948, four years after the event

in the U.S. Army, is that it must be written well after the fact. I base this assessment on his assertion that official history requires time to “marinate until it is ready.”² He

for just the right time to produce official history, it risks being irrelevant to the institution that it serves. In my view, at least part of the problem is the culture at the Center. Perhaps that can be understood best by examining Stewart's contention that producing "the official history" must be "time consuming." The process, he says, is "slow" and "ponderous," and he implies that it was ever thus.⁴ He does admit, in an endnote, that the Center published many of the Army Green Books, as the volumes in the Center of Military History's series *The United States Army in World War II* have become known, in less than a generation but adds that "neither the resources nor the records are available" to do as much today.⁵

This contention is only partly accurate and presumes that access to every classified record is required or that declassification instructions are inadequate to get at the heart of matters. None of this explains or accounts for the Center's reluctance to complete books expeditiously or even within a generation of events when surely the marinade will have broken down the "meat" adequately so that it will be ripe enough even in Washington, D.C. The Center's lack of enthusiasm for contemporary history suggests that the leadership at the Center considers that its task is to provide the final word or record. Still, even by the standard the chief historian offers on when official history might be written, things take a long time indeed at the Center.

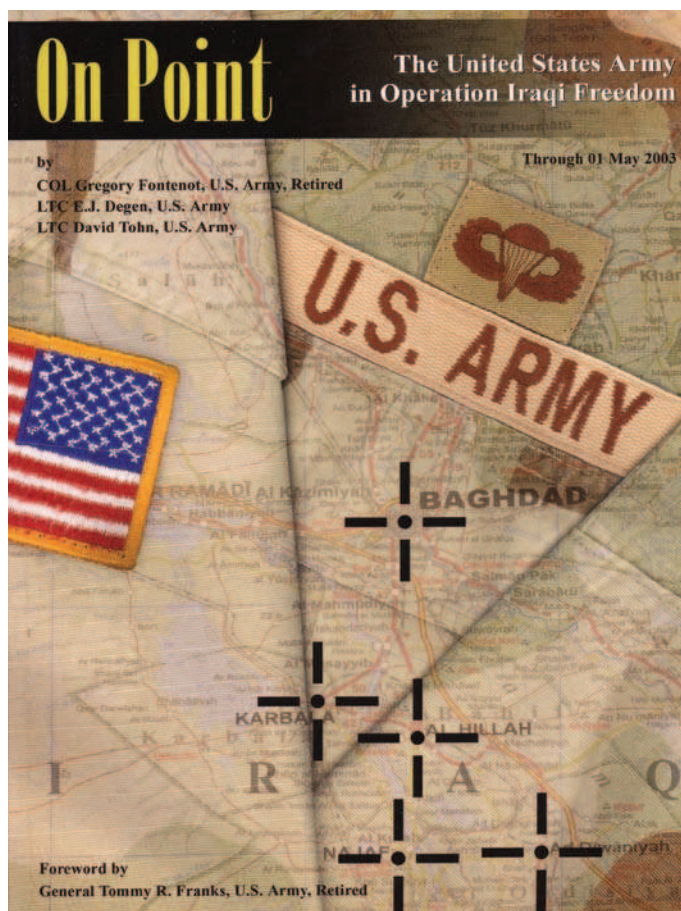
Permit an example. In 2002 I led Operations Group F, Battle Command Training Program. The Army established Operations Group F to facilitate and lead seminars on combat operations in urban settings for all of the divisions bound for Iraq.

In preparing for this very intense effort, I looked for historical accounts of combat operations in cities that might inform how we thought about the problem. I thought of Hue where marines and soldiers both fought, but in 2002 the Center had yet to publish the official history of Tet 1968. It has now been nearly forty years since Tet, and there is still no volume

today do not seem to believe there is much use for history, judging by how reluctant they are to attempt to produce it the way Thucydides did. Antulio J. Echevarria II, a brilliant Army historian, finds little practical utility in history for several very good reasons. First, he argues, history is not objective—authors have views and facts may be in dispute indefinitely. Additionally, "history is not inherently self-corrective."⁶ Echevarria argues that those who read military history expecting to understand something about the nature of combat by experiencing it vicariously are misled. What then is the use of history? It should serve as "a way to develop higher-level critical thinking skills."⁷ In many ways, Echevarria has it just right. History tells us comparatively little, but if we read it and think about it, as he suggests, we may learn from our analysis.

The Army needs the opportunity to read contemporarily written official history for exactly that purpose. Otherwise, if Echevarria is right, soldiers may as well read management books that reflect current trends rather than military history about events that seem distant. The Army does not need a Center of Military History that exists to produce seminal works in history—academics are willing to do that for us in about the time it takes the Center, or

rather sooner since there are some unofficial histories of Tet out there now. Our military practitioners want and need a more responsive Center and, I believe, on the basis of recent evidence (*On Point* and successor efforts), that the Army will invest in such a Center.⁸ Finally, why should the Center of Military History largely concede the field of contemporary history to popular historians or to



The history of the U.S. Army's actions in the 2003 invasion of Iraq written by Colonel Fontenot and two serving lieutenant colonels and printed by the Combat Studies Institute Press in 2004

published. Even now Tet continues to marinate.

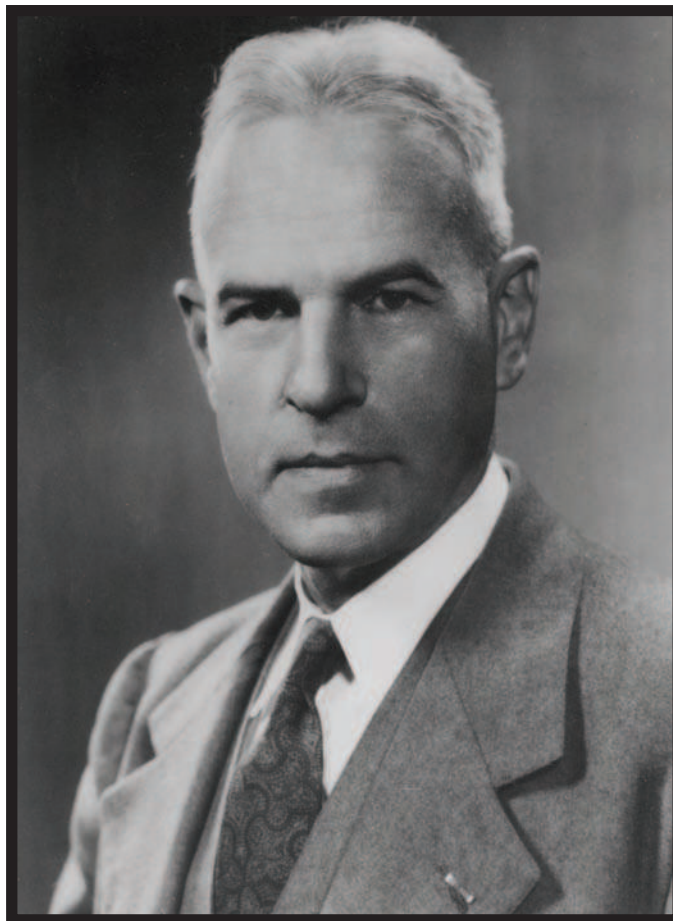
The culture of the Center surely is part of the problem. I believe that we should debate the purpose for which the Center exists. What is the purpose of official history? Is it for the satisfaction of historians, or is there some possibility that the Army expects or believes that there is utility or use for history? Army historians

historians who, while they may work for the Army, are not at the Center?

The reasons for attempting to write history now and not, as Stewart puts it, when “events are ripe” are at the heart of the debate we should undertake.⁹ Why is the Center writing history in the first place when others will happily do it at no cost and will take no longer than the Center requires now? The second part of the question is, for whom is the Center writing? Interestingly, that is largely up to the Center because its leadership is able to influence what Army regulations require of the organization. So the question is whether official history is written for historians or for the Army. If for the former, let them undertake the effort themselves; if for the latter, then we need to work much harder to deliver history in a timely manner—that is, we should write for the generation in the field and expect the generation to come to revise or build on that effort. Thus, the question we must ask is, what constitutes official history and for what purpose is it written? Frankly, no matter what the chief historian argues, if a document is officially sanctioned, he will be hard pressed to claim it is “unofficial” merely because it was written soon after the fact and not at the Center.

But if the Center of Military History returns to its roots and elects to assume the task of writing history contemporaneously, then the Center’s historians must appreciate and more important understand the risks and dangers of doing exactly what I urge. There is no better way to consider these risks, as well as the potential rewards, than by considering the efforts of two of the men who played important roles in producing the original culture at the Center—Hugh

M. Cole and Kent Roberts Greenfield. Commissioned in 1942, Cole served with the Army Specialized Training Program, an education effort for selected soldiers, and subsequently as the historian of the Third Army. In 1946, he joined the War Department’s Historical Division, as the Center of Military History was then designated, as a civilian historian. In one way or another, Cole served the Army until



Kent Roberts Greenfield

1977. Greenfield served as the chief historian from 1946 until he retired in 1958. As a commissioned officer, Greenfield also served as the historian for Army Ground Forces from 1942 until he assumed his post as chief historian.¹⁰

Both men thought deeply about the challenge of writing contemporary history because their charter and their inclination required them to do so. Cole reviewed the risks cogently in a 1948 article based on a paper he had

read at a meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1947.¹¹ Greenfield aired his views in the 1953 Brown and Haley Lectures at the College of Puget Sound that were published as *The Historian and the Army*.¹²

In describing the project that he led, publishing the official history of the Army in World War II, Greenfield observed that “historians are still timid about undertaking projects that look toward the synthesis of information on major subjects in contemporary history.”¹³ Greenfield directly confronted several of the problems to which Stewart alludes. Many of the records the Center needed remained classified when Greenfield set about organizing the effort to write what he believed was contemporary history. To meet this challenge, Greenfield chose historians who had clearances and therefore access to records as required. Clearing their accounts for publication was then, as it is now, a discrete matter. Thus classification, according to Greenfield, did not prove insurmountable then, nor will it now. According to Greenfield, the problem of declassifying original records in the uncertain times after the Korean War began “was a poser,” but clearing histories for publication proved to be “a much simpler matter.”¹⁴

Greenfield also dealt with complaints by senior officers who felt that their efforts did not receive adequate credit or found that historians had the effrontery to criticize them. In this matter, he had the support of the chief of staff of the Army and other senior officers. But, Greenfield does not dwell on the difficulties; instead he makes the most compelling case of all for doing history soon after the event. As he

puts it, “One reason alone seems to me, as a historian, conclusive for taking the offensive in this field: if we do not do so at once, and on a grand scale, we will lose irretrievably much of the vital evidence needed to answer questions that the future will raise.” In Greenfield’s mind, waiting for events to marinate was the wrong thing to do. Despite having 17,120 tons of records, Greenfield believed that much had been lost because of gaps in documentation that could only be bridged by the “interrogation of surviving participants.” Oral history and combat interviews proved essential to the Green Books and are even more important now since so much of the written record is ephemeral or even unreliable.¹⁵

Greenfield met the challenge he set in the early days of the Historical Division. By the time he retired in 1958, Greenfield and his team had published thirty-eight of the Green Books, eleven more were in publication, and four in final editing. This is an impressive achievement by any stretch and not one stemming only from abundant resources, but also from Greenfield’s conviction that to wait would risk the venture rather than ensure success. Greenfield literally led the effort as co-author of *The Organization of Ground Combat Troops*, published in 1947.¹⁶

Cole, who wrote both *The Lorraine Campaign*, published in 1950, and *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, published in 1965, understood the risks associated with writing contemporary history and articulated them very clearly in his 1947 paper.¹⁷ He reported that the Army had asked its Historical Division to complete the first thirty-three volumes of its official history of the U.S. Army in World War II within five years despite the fact that the majority of the fifteen war histories begun in the previous

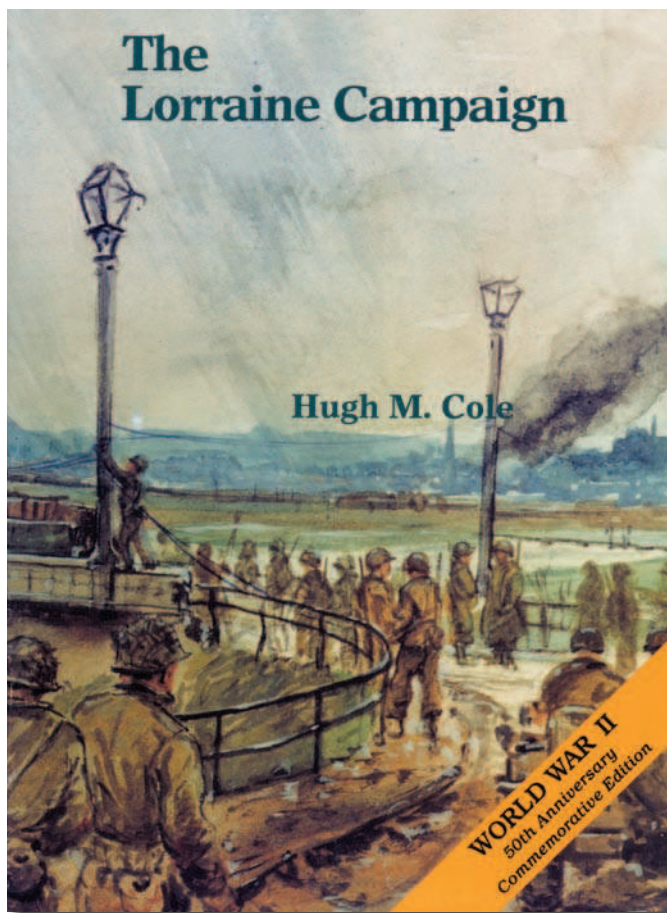
eighty years were still incomplete. Cole observed that many of the historians involved with these initial volumes had hoped to complete their work “while the generation which had fought the war still was alive,” while those recruited from the ranks of the military “expected to complete their studies in sufficient time to permit the derivation of military lessons.” Thus,

the military or political hierarchy.” (2) “The physical and time-consuming difficulties inherent in collecting and screening great masses of military documents.” (3) “The impact of a succeeding war in such a manner as to destroy historical interest in an earlier war,” and (4) “The lack of information from enemy sources, preventing the publication of a sustained, integrated,

and coherent military history, complete with the story of ‘the other side of the hill.’”¹⁹

I can recall exactly how I felt when I read these words for the first time while working to complete *On Point*. Hugh Cole had confronted the same problems in 1946 that E. J. Degen, David Tohn, and I faced in 2003. The concerns that Cole expressed mirrored our own almost exactly. I would add only one more challenge to his list. Almost from the beginning, we feared that we would make an honest mistake that would make us look dishonest. Moving digits and writing in electrons, and doing so rapidly, can result in a number of errors ranging from quotation marks being left behind when a document is moved and “pasted” or an error in documentation that cannot be found on review but will surely emerge later.

The problem of intervention from the top is often alluded to today, but it was no less a problem in 1946 when Greenfield and his team undertook what became arguably the most rapidly produced and certainly among the best official histories ever. Cole mentioned the direct intervention of Otto von Bismarck in the efforts of the German General Staff’s official historians. Bismarck advised the historians that they could tell the truth, “but not all of the truth,” and to add insult



Hugh Cole’s history of the operations of the U.S. Third Army in eastern France between 1 September and 18 December 1944, a book that was originally issued by the Office of the Chief of Military History in a green cloth cover in 1950

even Cole recognized that there had already developed a tension about the purpose for which military history might be written and, in consequence, competing visions about how quickly the work should progress.¹⁸

According to Cole, four major obstacles lay before those who attempt to write contemporary military history. These obstacles are: (1) “The personal and unsympathetic intervention of men at the very top of

to injury he delayed publication for twenty years.²⁰ Greenfield also commented on intervention from the top, but he enjoyed good support from the Army's senior officers, as we did in writing *On Point*. He reported, "We have had some angry generals on our hands, but have never altered a statement that the historian could document unless the aggrieved party has presented new and reliable evidence to support his criticism."²¹

Cole's second dilemma—that of having a mass of records and data to assimilate and use to form judgments—was an enormous challenge in 1946. The Center received 34 tons of records from Europe alone in the first eight months after V-E Day.²² The scale of the current problem does not compare with that confronted by the authors of the Green Books, but it remains prodigious. One problem today is that much of the record is available only in electronic form. PowerPoint briefings are literally ephemeral, particularly if notes pages are not included. Charts rarely speak for themselves, and some briefings are enormous, yet contain little detail to link thoughts. For example, the air campaign briefing for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM contained more than 600 PowerPoint charts. If there were notes pages, we never found them.

The impact of a succeeding war on interest in an ongoing official history loomed large for the Historical Division almost at the outset. In 1948 Cole observed that "the military historian . . . must be fully aware that an atomic war might relegate the history of World War II to the field of military antiquities, leaving it hardly more important than the study of uniform buttons or ornamental sword hilts." Still he wrote, as did his colleagues, and

not even the Korean War two years later caused them to abandon their efforts. The problem of subsequent conflict seeming to make studying the previous war superfluous remains with us today. This fact is a compelling argument for getting to work immediately. According to Cole, official histories have tended to be overshadowed by subsequent events more often than not and almost always because they took too long to be written.²³

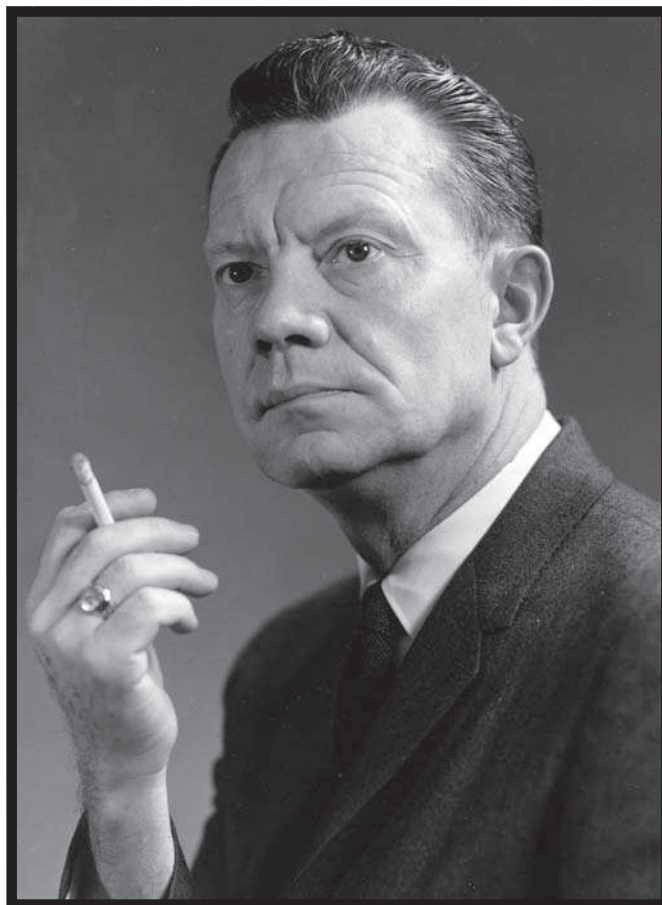
Lack of access to documents describing what the other side intended and how it perceived matters is the final challenge Cole cited to writing contemporary military history. Although the official historians in Cole's day had tons of German material, gaps remained, notably in the records of German divisions and regiments. These gaps were "irritating—but hardly of vital concern." What the shortage of

German materials meant is that the official history of the U.S. Army in World War II is unreliable below the corps echelon for the German side. Cole understood that it was unlikely historians would ever fill the gap in the enemy's records. As he put it, "We can say that such future finds *are* possible, but rather unlikely."²⁴

In the case of researching the major combat operations phase of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, there were two sources for enemy information—interviews our team did at Camp Bucca and the work Kevin Woods and the Joint Advanced Warfighting Program undertook. By no means have we had access to the detail and depth of data that our predecessors in the Historical Division enjoyed, but we had enough to begin to develop an understanding, and even if we could not cite that data directly in 2003, we could and did take note of the things that we knew. The gap that remains

is both broader and deeper than the one Cole and his colleagues confronted in the late 1940s. We know very little of what the Iraqi leadership below corps level knew or believed and even less of what the various militias and foreign fighters hoped to accomplish.

So with all of these challenges, why bother writing contemporary military history? Why put the Center of Military History and working Army historians in the field into the difficult position of coping with a mass of material that is often difficult to account for, is mostly classified, and in some instances is of ambiguous value? More important, these historians will also have to deal with slings and arrows from the field and even from the ranks of their colleagues. Many of the criticisms will have merit due to the difficulty of accessing the



Hugh M. Cole

records of the other side. When, for example, will Osama bin Laden's historical section make its archives available? Does he have archives and in what form are they?

One criticism made of *On Point* and, for that matter, of the Green Books, is that their accounts are insufficiently critical of the performance of the Army. Perhaps that is so, but on balance the performance of the Army in major combat operations in Iraq in 2003 was not so very different than that of the Army Martin Blumenson studied during and after World War II. In 1963 he observed that "if some critics are disappointed because the military services have not been rebuked and scolded to a greater extent, they overlook the fact that the military did a more than creditable job."²⁵

Obviously, if we write officially sanctioned contemporary military history, we will be criticized, and rightly so, for not having the context, or what Cole termed "perspective," just right.²⁶ Cole's answer to that criticism is as good as any: "We believe that the dust churned up by Patton's tanks does less to distort perspective than the dust raised by the archivist as he thumbs through records a half century old."²⁷ Cole also understood the other chief reason for writing history, especially military history, as soon as possible after the event. He quoted a reviewer of a volume of the official British history of World War I that was finally published in 1947: "It is difficult to see what purpose is served by the publication of this history at this time. . . . Nobody would read it for pleasure and nobody study it to learn the military art. It will go on the shelf of the military library and there remain, consulted occasionally . . . by one silver-haired veteran to refute another."²⁸ Surely we can aspire to be more responsive to the Army while remaining alert to reasonable criticism and understanding the limitations of what we attempt.

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NOTES

1. The essays appeared in *Army History*, Winter 2006, pp. 20–29, 30–34, and 35–37, respectively; quoted phrase, p. 30. The Army employs the phrase "5 X-Ray" to designate officers with special preparation and skills in the field of history.

2. Richard W. Stewart, "Instant History and History: A Hierarchy of Needs," *Army History* Winter 2006, p. 31.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid, p. 34.

6. Antulio J. Echevarria II, "The Trouble with History," *Parameters* 35 (Summer 2005): 83.

7. Ibid., p. 86.

8. Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Washington, D.C., 2004); William G. Robertson, ed., *In Contact! Case Studies from the Long War, Vol. 1* (Fort Leavenworth, Kan., 2006); Steven E. Clay, *Iroquois Warriors in Iraq* (Fort Leavenworth, Kan., 2007). The Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth anticipates releasing books in 2008 on the U.S. Army in Iraq from May 2003 to January 2005 and on the service of the U.S. Army in Afghanistan in the four years beginning with its intervention there in October 2001.

9. Stewart, "Instant History and History," p. 31.

10. Obituary, "Hugh M. Cole, Military Historian," *Washington Post*, 23 June 2005; Bell Irvin Wiley, "Kent Roberts Greenfield: An Appreciation," *Military Affairs* 22 (Winter 1958–1959): 177–78; Jaques Cattell, ed., *Directory of American Scholars: A Biographical Directory*, 2d ed. (Lancaster, Pa., 1951), p. 355.

11. Hugh M. Cole, "Writing Contemporary Military History," *Military Affairs* 12 (Fall 1948): 162–67.

12. Kent Roberts Greenfield, *The Historian and the Army* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1954).

13. Ibid., p. 5.

14. Ibid., p. 4. My own experience in overseeing the declassification of the pre-publication typescript of *On Point* did not prove simple, but Lt. Col. E. J. Degen got it done by tracking down everyone who could object and explaining to them how we had complied with the declassification instructions. When necessary, we were able to track down in open sources some information that proponents alleged remained classified. Even so, after *On Point* appeared, two staff officers at the U.S. Central Command cried foul until we produced the Defense Department clearance record.

15. Greenfield, *The Historian and the Army*, pp. 5–6.

16. Kent Roberts Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, *The Organization of Ground Combat Troops*, United States Army in World War II (Washington, D.C., 1947).

17. Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign*, United States Army in World War II (Washington, D.C., 1950); Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, United States Army in World War II (Washington, D.C., 1965).

18. Cole, "Writing Contemporary Military History," pp. 162–63, quotes, p. 163. I am indebted to my colleague Kevin Woods for drawing my attention to this wonderful article in the fall of 2003, when I, like Hugh Cole before me, was attempting to navigate the rocks and shoals of writing contemporary military history.

19. Ibid., p. 163, italics removed.

20. Ibid.

21. Greenfield, *The Historian and the Army*, p. 9.

22. Cole, "Writing Contemporary Military History," p. 164.

23. Ibid., p. 165.

24. Ibid., pp. 165–66, quotes, p. 166, italics in original.

25. Martin Blumenson, "Can Official History Be Honest History?" *Military Affairs* 26 (Winter 1962–1963): 160.

26. Cole, "Writing Contemporary Military History," p. 167.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.