

A History Lesson for the Professors

What they can learn
from the best journalists.

Theodore Draper is a distinguished historian who has written many valuable things about international relations and nuclear policy. But he has let himself get carried away with a fuddy-duddy crusade that suggests he does not understand politics as well as he might have seemed to.

The object of Draper's displeasure is *Deadly Gambits**, Strobe Talbott's book about the making of nuclear-weapons policy during the Reagan administration. Draper does not object to the overall argument of the book, but he is sorely vexed by the way Talbott has gone about presenting it. In a long article in *The New York Times Book Review* and a later exchange of responses from Caspar Weinberger, Paul Nitze, and Talbott himself, Draper argued that the worst problem with the book was its unaccountability. Talbott presents long, minutely detailed accounts of who supposedly said what to whom, yet he never tells us how he knows. The result, according to Draper, is "novelistic journalistic history," a bastard form that "runs the risk of becoming unrecognizable as either journalism or history."

I will agree that Talbott could have saved himself a lot of trouble if he had been slightly less aloof about the substantiation for his book. He says in the prologue that the documents on which it is based are classified and the par-

ticipants will be "constrained from freely discussing their roles" for quite some time. "Therefore," he announces, "I cannot, here or in the pages that follow, acknowledge the sources that allowed me to keep a running account of the events as they unfolded." This is exactly the believe-it-or-else stance that made Talbott's employer, *Time* magazine, seem so graceless in its moment of victory over Ariel Sharon, and there is no reason Talbott should have been lured into it.

Did he have an alternative? Yes. He could have imitated the solution David McClintick devised for *Indecent Exposure*, the book about the Begelman scandals in Hollywood. McClintick was not dealing with classified documents, but he was making revelations that could affect big careers and million-dollar deals, and therefore his sources were at least as eager to camouflage themselves as Talbott's were. Like Talbott, McClintick did not name all the sources; also like Talbott, he presented unattributed, detailed, "novelistic" scenes, complete with vivid dialogue. But in an extended note on sources, McClintick revealed as much as he could about his procedures. He explained how he interviewed people, how he triangulated facts, what degree of confidence he required before he wrote. Of the "novelistic" scenes, he said:

"The author does not claim that the dialogue

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B Y J A M E S F A L L O W S

represents the exact words used by the characters at the time of the events described. He does assert, however, that the dialogue represents the best recollection of the most accurate interviewees, that it captures the essence and spirit of the conversations that are reconstructed, as well as the personalities and styles of the characters, and that it does so *more* accurately than paraphrase would. Human beings do not speak in paraphrase."

Such a note, perhaps reprinted verbatim from McClintick, would have served Talbott—and his readers—far better than his cursory disclaimer. But to say that Talbott could have explained his operating procedures more fully is not the same as saying what Draper did: that the entire exercise is illegitimate. In fact, the very qualities that Draper scorns in Talbott's book illustrate what makes *Deadly Gambits*—and the genre of "journalistic history" it exemplifies—so valuable.

One of Draper's objections was to the unseemliness of it all—the focus on lower-level figures, and the squabbling and cat-fighting in which these men are constantly engaged. "These participants are not shown engaging in high-minded discussion of the issues," Draper said, implying that this is somehow Talbott's fault. "They are portrayed as cutthroat rivals and shabby intriguers."

It is true that conventional historians pay less attention to squabbling underlings than Talbott does. The most dreadfully conventional history is written as if the underlings barely exist. Its focus is on the upper tier: Genghis Khan did this, Lord Palmerston did that. In some cases, this approach conceivably might produce an accurate rendering of historical reality. More often, I suspect, historians who rely on it reflect the limits of their imagination and of the available documentation, which naturally emphasizes the man at the top. If there is anything we have come to understand about contemporary history, it is that the people below the top often have more to do with the outcome of events than do their nominal superiors. In part, this is because they usually know more about the specific choices to be made; in part, because an assistant secretary can more easily devote his personal passion to one cause and see it through to completion than his distracted boss can. Recently we had a perfect reminder of why the titular leader is sometimes the worst guide to the events over which he presides. It came from Robert McNamara, who in his deposition for the Westmoreland-CBS trial said he could not imagine that any of his subordinates would have

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misled him about progress in Vietnam. All the other literature about the war, of course, testifies that deception was built in and endemic from the platoon level on up.

Whether or not concentrating on the middle ranks makes sense as a general proposition, it is indisputably the right focus for any discussion of defense policy in the Reagan administration. The two men at the top—Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger—are renowned for their distance from the details. Therefore, in making figures such as Richard Perle, Richard Burt, and Paul Nitze the centers of his narrative, Talbott came far closer to the truth than any historian 100 years from now would be able to, if the historian were to rely on Reagan's speeches and Weinberger's interviews.

What about the shabby intrigues and cutthroat rivalries that, according to Talbott, preoccupy this group? Draper seems to object to such an emphasis on grounds of its indecorousness; but anyone who has been in the government understands that personal and ideological rivalries (the distinction between the two often disappears) are what make life worth living for many public officials. Again, it is an especially appropriate emphasis in an analysis of the Reagan administration's nuclear policy, since there is so little supervision from above to restrain the genuine disagreements among those below.

In directing our attention to disagreements

among the assistant secretaries, then, Talbott has done exactly what he should in the service of historical truth. But Draper has a further objection to this presentation: how can the “novelistic” scenes on which it depends for its drama conceivably be true?

Draper can barely conceal his incredulity about the things Talbott presumes to know. “No document is safe from Mr. Talbott”—this apparently meant as criticism. “Mr. Talbott also knows just what was said in the most unlikely places. He takes us into the situation room in the White House. . . . Mr. Talbott is also privy to just what was said at the equally hush-hush National Security Council meetings.” How could Talbott possibly know what Paul Nitze and the Soviet negotiator, Yuli Kvitsinsky, said to each other during their “walk in the woods,” in a conversation Talbott purports to recreate at length? “Even if we assume that Paul Nitze was the source, could he have reproduced his conversations with Mr. Kvitsinsky so accurately? If Mr. Talbott’s informant did not have a listening device with him, he must have been endowed with total recall. It would be interesting to know whether this is one of Mr. Nitze’s little-known gifts.” Harumph!

Yes, Talbott helped bring this complaint upon himself by failing to provide a McClintick-style disclaimer about the difference between 100 percent, literal, word-for-word, tape-recorder accuracy and 90 percent fidelity to the essence of an event. I am sure that some of the words he places inside quotation marks were not, in fact, uttered in quite the way he asserts. But I also believe that the discrepancies are probably minor, because—contrary to Draper’s scoffing—it is entirely plausible that Talbott’s sources remembered the things he quotes.

Life consists of different kinds of moments, and during certain kinds nearly everyone is “endowed with total recall.” I can’t remember what I said an hour ago on the telephone. But I remember exactly what my wife and I said the first time we met, and what my roommates said and did on my first day in college, and what I said and how I felt when our first child was born. And I remember very, very well what occurred—the facial expressions, the pauses between words—during the few times I had a private conversation with a president of the United States.

Even if I’d had an exceptionally weak memory, I could fall back on the cottage industry of note-taking and information-passing that thrives throughout the government. As soon as anyone in an administration returns from a meeting with

people equal to or greater than himself in importance, his first mission is to brief his assistants on what was said—or at least note it down for himself. (No one has to bother with these briefings after a meeting with inferiors; it is their business to remember what you are saying, not vice versa.) The notes and briefings may diverge on some details, but not by much. In my experience, it was remarkable how closely the after-action accounts resembled each other.

The colonels-listen-to-generals principle provides a likely solution to a matter that Draper considers a mystery: Draper asked Caspar Weinberger for his response to some of Talbott’s allegations. Weinberger flatly denied making two comments Talbott attributed to him and called Talbott a liar. Talbott replied that he had rechecked with his sources and stood by the stories. To Draper, the argument is irresolvable. “The reader has no way of knowing how to find his way through this tangle of alleged errors and lies so long as he does not know who told Mr. Talbott all those unflattering things about Mr. Weinberger.” On the contrary, the sociology of government indicates that Talbott is probably correct. One of the remarks in question came at a National Security Council meeting and the other in “private” comments—which usually means musings either with friends at social gatherings or to the loyal subordinates who hang around in hope of hearing such confidences. At any meeting involving Weinberger, except a private one with the president, the other people would be listening to Weinberger more carefully than he would be listening to himself. Weinberger may be wholly sincere in his denial, but I would bet that Talbott is right.

Call me irresponsible

The illustrations Draper picks out as being especially unbelievable are fascinating, because every one of them fits into the category of episodes people *would* remember, precisely because they were dramatic. Paul Nitze has lived a long and event-filled life, but I would imagine that even for him the “walk in the woods” was one of those moments in which he was focusing on every word, absorbing every nuance. And, as he pointed out in a reply to Draper’s piece, “with respect to those occasions when we talked without translators, I would write down notes to aid my memory while riding back from the discussions in my car and then dictate as close to a verbatim memorandum of conversation as

possible." In his reply, Nitze forthrightly endorsed the accuracy of Talbott's account of the walk in the woods; since he is one of two people in the world with firsthand knowledge of the event (he and Kvistsinsky were not surrounded by eager aides listening even more closely than the principals) and has a reputation for probity, his testimony is not easily dismissed. If Talbott's handling of the "walk in the woods" is at all representative, it suggests that he has been as accurate as journalists can be. Indeed, it illustrates why his account may be *more* accurate, truer to the highest ambitions of the historian's craft, than later accounts prepared by historians who try to reconstruct the events from documents could be. Talbott underscored this point in his otherwise deferential reply to Draper:

"The journalistic observer is able to discern what people thought they were doing at the time they were doing it and thus to recognize revisionism and self-serving forgetfulness when, as they often do, they arise later. I've seen enough of the official record of what transpired in SALT II, I.N.F. and START to know that future historians—when they have access to the full record and are in the enviable position of being able to identify sources in footnotes—will still be in some danger of being misled on certain points precisely by that record."

Paul Nitze said, in his reply to Draper, that he was uninterested in questions of procedure; his only interest was in whether Talbott's account was "substantially correct." (Nitze implied that it was.) Draper is very concerned with procedure, and his ultimate challenge is that Talbott's whole idea of using unnamed sources and melding history with journalism is misconceived. His complaint is not that Talbott's attempt was imperfect but that he tried at all.

Unfortunately, the serious part of this complaint is mixed up with some haute-historian disdain for the grubby journalist. (Given current levels of pay and education for national journalists, this is an amusing notion in itself.) Draper cannot help whining about the unfairness of it all: why should Strobe know these things, when no one else, including the historian, does? "Why should the rest of us have to find out what our nonelected officials do and say on matters of incalculable moment and urgency through the medium of a single, nonelected journalist?" The book represents an "ominous collusion between anonymous officials and favored journalists." Well, by whom was Talbott "favored"? Through what agency was he singled out? By a selection

committee of administration officials? A peer review panel or tenure committee? Of course not. He was favored by his own efforts and reputation, which allowed him to persuade people who disagreed with him about policy to talk with him over the years. Why should we have to depend on a "single" journalist? Because he was the one who found out. (Draper makes it seem as if Talbott's discoveries should be held against him. Should we blame Seymour Hersh because we had to depend on a single, nonelected journalist to find out about the massacre at My Lai?) Draper has a legitimate complaint against the likes of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, who bulked out their profitable memoirs with secret documents after piously inveighing against national security leaks and forbidding historians to get into their files. But Draper's indignation sounds petulant, as if a tiny foot were being stamped up and down, when directed at Talbott.

Similarly, Draper is peeved that Tom Wicker should refer to the book as "authoritative"—"another wildly misused term for a book which never cites any 'authorities'" Come on, professor, have a heart! Wicker was obviously using the word to mean "having authority," rather than "citing authority." In one of my dictionaries (American Heritage), "having authority" is the second meaning of "authoritative," and in the other (Oxford English Dictionary) it's definition number one. You may disagree with Wicker about the book's merit, but why stoop to making silly debating points?

Debating points aside, should Talbott have written this book at all? To Draper the answer is obviously no, because of the blurring of genres and the unknowable sources. I think that if we want from journalism and history a better understanding of public affairs, the response to Talbott's effort has to be a hearty yes. There are certain kinds of events that "journalistic history" can depict more accurately than either "journalism" or "history," as narrowly conceived. Daily journalists must work so hard on the story immediately at hand that it is hard for them to step back and describe the big picture. More important, those who cover the government are dealing with sources whose personal and institutional welfare may be affected by the story that will appear the next day; it is hard for them to talk about the big picture. Historians, on the other hand, must often approach a subject after its juice has evaporated—when the human beings who participated are dead and all that's left is documents. The craft of history has been enrich-

ed by adoption of such "journalistic" techniques as oral histories; and journalism is similarly enriched when it attempts to move beyond the 5 W's and explain recent history, as Strobe Talbott has done. Our ultimate, historical understanding of nuclear policy will be surer, broader, *truer* because of Talbott's efforts. Should not historians be the first to recognize what "journalistic histories" can contribute?

Deadly Gambits is not, as Draper suggests, an utterly unaccountable exercise. Even though Talbott's sources are not available for inspection, one person has made himself accountable for their accuracy. That person is Strobe Talbott. At some point fairly soon, there will be a reality check on his account. His sources will leave the government and start making comments of their own. Other accounts will circulate. Books will be written. There will be denials and rebuttals. Regular historians will get into the act. Four or five years from now, it should be clear whether Talbott was basically telling the truth or not—just as it is now clear that Woodward and Bernstein were basically telling the truth in their unattributed, unaccountable, novelistic, journalistic classic, *All the President's Men*. Talbott runs the same risk of being unmasked that Jack Anderson exposed himself to when he reported before the 1980 election that President Carter was preparing for an invasion of Iran. As soon as the Carter administration was over, its officials made clear, in interviews and memoirs, that Anderson's report was utter fiction.

Part of the reason Talbott's book was called "authoritative" is that he is not a hit-and-run man but someone who has written for years in this field. More to the point, he obviously hopes that he will still have a career as a journalist four or five years from now, when the verdict on his book is in. He would have to be even more reckless than Draper suggests he is not to realize that. He would have to be stupidly short-sighted to risk his reputation on assertions that sooner or later can be shown to be untrue. The truth will not always out—Janet Cooke might never have been exposed had she not won a Pulitzer Prize—but when the people with the power to prove or rebut the story are so prominent, it's hard to sustain a fiction. Just ask Jack Anderson.

Perhaps Strobe Talbott is that reckless and short-sighted. If so, we will know, and he will pay the price. In that case, the indictment of *Deadly Gambits* should be that it failed in its attempt to explain contemporary history—not that it had the effrontery to try. ■

Neolib vs. Neocons



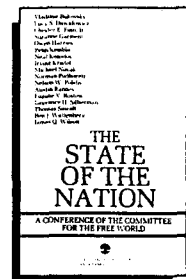
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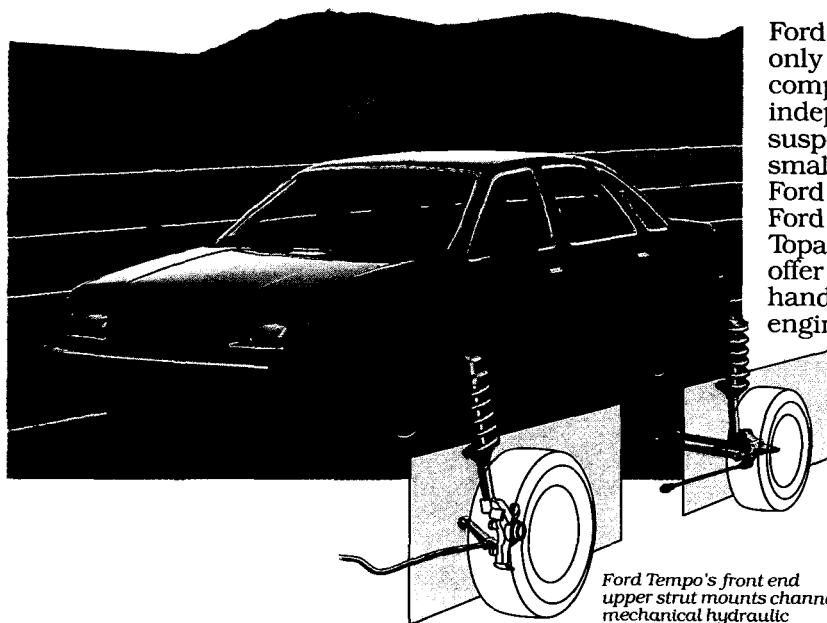
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Why Star Wars Is Not Like the Manhattan Project



I can't be sure, since it hasn't been leaked yet to *Aviation Week*, but I'm afraid our nation faces a major new military threat: the Analogy Gap. I stumbled across this alarming fact while listening to the debate on the Pentagon's "Star Wars" program. Two years have passed since Ronald Reagan proclaimed his dream of a missile defense that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete," and still no one has the faintest idea how to build it. You might think this would render the dream impotent. But no, the very absence of a plan seems to be the "Star Wars" advocates' greatest strength. It means they're not bogged down in petty details. They can consider the larger picture. They can ponder history.

When the critics harp about technical impossibilities, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pooh-poohs all doubts by saying that "there are a lot of things we couldn't do when we first started, including going to the moon." The young physicists working on "Star Wars" reply to skeptical colleagues by citing the atomic bomb. One of them wrote in a letter to the eminent physicist Hans Bethe, "You people who worked on the Manhattan Project had your chance. Let us have our chance, too." When Lt. General James A. Abrahamson was named director of the \$26 billion "Star Wars" program—

a.k.a. the Strategic Defense Initiative—he didn't waste any time at the press conference discussing how he actually expected to build an impermeable defense against 8,000 warheads. He simply pointed to the space shuttle and said, "We have a nation that can indeed produce miracles."

Now *there's* an impermeable defense. The critics have tried to counterattack—there's been some mumbling about the Maginot Line—but without much luck. Calling it the "Star Wars" program seemed like a clever enough analogy at first, something to link Ronald Reagan with another movie fantasy, but in retrospect it was probably a tactical error. The public, after all, puts a lot of faith in Luke Skywalker. (And he did acquire The Force without any cost overruns.) "Star Wars" just reinforces that successful, futuristic "High Frontier" image that's been so helpful to the advocates of space weapons. The critics need something less glamorous if they want to fight the Pentagon on its own rhetorical terms—and in the absence of any real plans, rhetoric seems almost the only way of debating the "Star Wars" defense. To restore some sane perspective to our military planning, I suggest we close the Analogy Gap. And I can't think of any better way to begin than with Freeman Dyson's new book, *Weapons and Hope*.^{*} "History never

John Tierney is a staff writer at *Science 85* magazine.

^{*}Harper & Row, \$17.95.

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