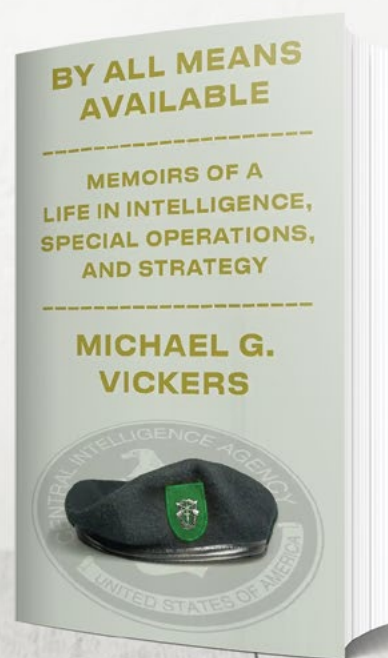


By All Means Available

Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy

Michael G. Vickers, Alfred A. Knopf,
New York, 2023, 565 pages



Lt. Col. Rick Baillergeon, U.S. Army, Retired

American psychologist and author Barry Schwartz once stated, “The higher your expectations, the greater your disappointment.”¹ As I have gotten older (perhaps, a little wiser), I have heeded those words somewhat and learned to temper my expectations a bit. This is especially true when it comes to books. Over the years, I have clearly had my share of disappointments when books did not measure up to my high hopes. Consequently, I was extremely careful in not placing the bar too high when I began to read Michael Vickers’s memoir *By All Means Available: Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy*.

Why the high initial expectations? For me, and others (as I would surmise), it was the potential of Vickers to provide the “rest of the story” from events occurring in his long and storied career. It was a career highlighted by several high-profile positions within the Department of Defense. I would like to provide a summary of this career. I will focus on the three principal organizations he served with: U.S. Army Special Forces, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the aforementioned Department of Defense.

Vickers enlisted in the Army under the Special Forces (SF) option in June 1973. Roughly a year later, he graduated from the Special Forces Qualification

Course. He rose through the enlisted ranks in the SF community and was selected to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS) in 1978. In December 1978, he graduated from OCS as an infantry officer. Because of his prior enlisted SF time, he received a direct assignment to an SF group in Panama. In 1980, he graduated from the SF Officers Course as the distinguished honor graduate. Following graduation, he commanded a classified counterterrorism unit and deployed to Latin America several times.²

In December 1982, Vickers decided to leave the Army and formally applied to the CIA’s Career Training Program. He was accepted some months later. Within his memoir, Vickers provides three reasons why serving in the CIA’s clandestine service enticed him. Firstly, he was attracted to the individual autonomy and responsibility the CIA provided its officers. Secondly, he believed that the CIA was the key element in fighting the Cold War. Lastly, he felt he would be afforded much more responsibility at an earlier age in the CIA versus the Army.³

Vickers’s tenure in the CIA was not long, but it was surely memorable. Upon graduation from the organization’s training program, he found himself as the CIA point man in the invasion of Grenada. Following this,

he was selected to serve on a Special Counterterrorism Task Force in response to the Beirut bombings. These two key assignments set the stage for Vickers's selection as the CIA's program officer and chief strategist for the Afghanistan Covert Action Program to force the Soviet army out of the country. It was a role that Vickers cherished, and his performance was lauded by senior officials. It was the CIA's largest and most successful covert action program, and his exploits were chronicled in both the film and *New York Times* bestseller *Charlie Wilson's War*.⁴

Despite his success in these three assignments, Vickers was told his career path would now move in a direction that did not appeal to him. Consequently, after three years in the CIA, Vickers decided to leave to pursue academic and outside interests. Vickers reflected on his CIA experience in his memoir:

I'd had the adventure of a lifetime for three years. I regularly interacted with the top levels of the CIA and the chiefs and other top officials of several foreign liaison services around the world. I loved what I had done, and I loved CIA, but, perversely, it seemed that I had risen too fast and, more to the point, too unconventionally. It was my first career setback, and it was an odd win: I was being penalized for too much success. I had joined CIA not to begin a new career but to accelerate an existing one. I had succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, but it was clear there were still limits.⁵

For essentially the next twenty years, his focus was on his academic pursuits and then his venture into the "outside" world. This venture included obtaining an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and a PhD from Johns Hopkins University, and serving as the senior vice president for strategic studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. It was in this role that Vickers cultivated relationships with senior governmental leaders and, at times, provided President George W. Bush and his cabinet with advice on the Iraq War. It was a position that undoubtedly set the conditions for his return to government service.

In 2007, Vickers, on the recommendation of Bush, became the first and only assistant secretary of defense for special operations, low-intensity conflict and

interdependent capabilities (ASD SO/LIC&IC).⁶ Vickers served in this role for four years (President Barack Obama asked him to stay in this position in his administration), and it presented him numerous opportunities to excel. He describes some of these opportunities in the following passage: "During my four years as an assistant secretary of defense, I spent most of my time on operations, mainly on the war with al-Qa'ida and the war in Afghanistan, but also on the war in Iraq, on counter-proliferation operations to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, on the counterinsurgency war in Colombia, and on counter-narcotics operations in Mexico."⁷

In 2010, Obama nominated him to serve as the under secretary of defense for intelligence, and he was confirmed in March 2011. In this role, he exercised authority, direction, and control over the defense intelligence enterprise for the secretary of defense, overseeing the National Security Agency; the Defense Intelligence Agency; the National Reconnaissance Office; the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency; and the intelligence components of the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and the combatant commands.⁸ During his four years as the under secretary, many key events appeared on his radar. These included the Bin Laden Operation, the continuing al-Qaida fight, the Edward Snowden leaks, renewed power competition with China and Russia, and the beginnings of Russia's covert and overt war in Ukraine.

It is obvious that Vickers has much to address and to offer in a memoir. Before I discuss how Vickers achieves this, I would like to provide you with his purpose in crafting his memoirs. Personally, I always find it interesting when an author offers this to his readers. Additionally, it is usually a good indication on the direction of the memoir.

Vickers lists three main reasons. First, he believes he had a *duty* to history. In particular, he feels that sharing his experience in events such as the "secret war" in defeating the Soviet army in Afghanistan and the war with al-Qaida (among many others) was important. Second, he considers writing his memoirs as

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a *duty* to the American people. He states, “As a former national security and intelligence official, I feel a great responsibility to tell my fellow Americans what I can about the critically important work our intelligence professionals, special operators, and defense and national security strategists have done and are doing today.”⁹ Finally, he believes it is his *duty* to future special operators, intelligence professionals, and national security strategists. Vickers affirms, “I feel an obligation to our country’s future operators and strategists to pass on what I have learned.”¹⁰

To accomplish the above and to effectively detail a career spanning over four decades, a sound organization is imperative. I believe Vickers has accomplished this by not getting “fancy” with his organization and sticking to the basics. He states,

The book is organized into five parts, following a chronological path for the first half, and a thematic one in the second. During the first decade of my career, I was an operator and operational strategist in the Special Forces and CIA. During the subsequent two and a half decades, I was a defense and national security strategist, a national security policy maker, and a senior intelligence official. The book follows this progression.¹¹

Within *By All Means Available*, Vickers utilizes the preponderance of the first four sections of the memoir to focus specifically on his service. It is a comprehensive look that encompasses his reporting to the Special Forces Qualification Course in December 1973 to his retirement from the Department of Defense over forty years later. Within this discussion, Vickers displays a knack for dedicating just the right amount of attention to the events in his career. Consequently, readers will find expanded discussion on the events that they will undoubtedly have the most interest in. I would like to address some of these below.

Vickers devotes most of the memoir’s attention to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. During Vickers’s three years in the CIA, he was incredibly engaged in the area. As addressed earlier, he was selected as the CIA’s program officer and chief strategist for the Afghanistan Covert Action Program to force the Soviet army out of the country. In this role, no one was more involved in these actions than Vickers.

Within the memoir, Vickers discusses how he was selected for the position and the decisions he then made to transform the program. He goes into significant detail (more than I anticipated) on the program. The most beneficial portion of his discussion is a subchapter titled, “What We Won, Why We Won, What We Missed.” He provides significant analysis and is frank on his thoughts on what went right and what could have been improved. He concludes this discussion with these thoughts: “What did we get wrong after the Soviets withdrew and the war finally ended? The most important thing was our error in believing that Afghanistan had lost its strategic significance after the Red Army had been forced to withdraw and the Soviet Empire had collapsed.”¹²

Although the above is outstanding, I believe the highlight of these four sections is Vickers’s treatment of Operation Neptune’s Spear (the operation to capture or kill Osama bin Laden). During this period, he served as the ASD SO/LIC&IC during much of the planning and as under secretary of defense for intelligence for much of the preparation and the execution. Vickers devotes two chapters to the operation and his significant role in it.

In these chapters, Vickers provides readers with exceptional detail on various aspects of the planning, preparation, and execution of the raid. This includes discussion on “finish” options, assessing the probabilities of bin Laden’s location, the ultimate decision to execute, and specifics on the numerous meetings conducted during all phases of the operation. Vickers’s discussion will add immensely to a reader’s understanding of the operation.

As Vickers indicated in his prologue, the memoir shifts from a chronological approach to a thematic approach in the book’s fourth section. In this section, he focuses on “themes” tied to his service. Consequently, readers will find subsections keyed to counterproliferation (e.g., Iran and North Korea), counter narco-insurgency (e.g., Colombia and Mexico), and the battle for the Middle East (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya). Additionally, he addresses topics such as the Snowden leaks and turmoil in the defense intelligence agencies. In each of these, he provides his perspective as a high-ranking government official who was clearly in the “room” for all these events.

The final chapter of section, “Winning the New Cold War,” initiates a shift in the memoir. It is a swing

that somewhat surprised me. Instead of focusing on the author's career and the past, Vickers addresses the present and the future and the challenges America faces and will face. He starts this discussion by addressing China and Russia and makes the following assertion: "The New Cold War has three main causes: a failure to fully integrate China and Russia into the American-led international order, significant changes in the balance of power, and China's and Russia's perception that America is in terminal decline."¹³

Within this chapter, Vickers provides readers with superb analysis. Unlike many who simply point out problems, Vickers offers solutions and courses of action. He organizes these into a grand strategy that he shares with readers. In his introduction to this grand strategy, he states,

America will need an effective grand strategy if it is to prevail in the New Cold War. We haven't had a truly successful one since the end of the first Cold War. In the pages that follow, I offer what I believe is just such a strategy. A successful grand strategy, in my mind, must contain five essential elements: rebuilding our national ambition, unity, and resilience; posturing ourselves to prevail in the race for economic and technological supremacy; winning the intelligence and covert action wars; strengthening regional and global deterrence and, if required, defeating aggression; and transforming our alliances and national security institutions for our new era of great power competition.¹⁴

Vickers utilizes his final section to key on his lessons learned and relearned in the practice of intelligence, special operations, and strategy. As is the case with the entire memoir, it is filled with superb analysis and numerous "takeaways." The highlight is his concluding subchapter on strategic leadership. In it, he offers his ten core principles focused on leadership and career development. Although some may not relate to everyone, as a group they are added value to all.

There are many strengths exhibited or utilized within the memoir that clearly enhance the experience for the reader. First, this is an incredibly readable volume. Vickers writes in a highly conversant style. You would expect this conversational tone in a memoir, but I have found that is many times not the case. This is one of

those select books in which you feel you are sitting with the author listening as he speaks to you.

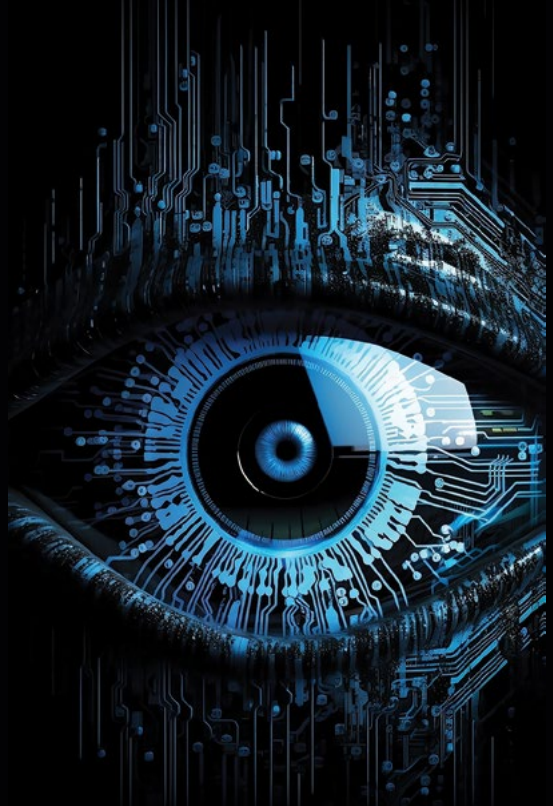
Tied to the above is Vickers's candidness displayed throughout the memoir. He does not shy from critique (positive and negative) of others and himself. If he feels a poor decision was made, he lets it be known. Conversely, he is quick to praise when he believes it is warranted. Readers will find his openness refreshing, and it does not come with any sense of bias.

The final strength of the volume is the superb notes section Vickers has crafted for the memoir. He added nearly fifty pages of annotated notes, and they are a tremendous resource to the reader. These notes, at times, provide added detail, assist in understanding key points and concepts, or "tell the rest of the story." Future readers must ensure they refer to the notes section when prompted. Don't wait until you complete the book, as all of us have done in the past, to delve into the notes section.

Early in Vickers's memoir, he addresses the personal objectives he had in crafting his memoir. Among these, he states,

I hope the general reader will gain significant insight into the secret worlds of intelligence, special operations, and strategy, and come away with a better understanding of the importance of individuals in driving world-changing events and how the world of today came to be. I hope readers who are very familiar with or even participated in the events described in this book will learn something new about how these operations were actually conducted and what strengths and weaknesses of the various alternatives available to us were.¹⁵

There is no question Vickers has delivered on these and all his objectives in *By All Means Available*. This is memoir that will appeal and benefit a very diverse group or readers. This is much more than a traditional memoir. It is a volume that relives the past, analyses the present, and provides prudent strategy for the future. After reading *By All Means Available*, I am no longer lowering my expectations on books. Exit Charles Schwartz and enter Charles Kettering. As Kettering stated, "High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation."¹⁶ ■



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Military Review calls for short works of fiction for inclusion in the Army University Press Future Warfare Writing Program (FWWP). The purpose of this program is to solicit serious contemplation of possible future scenarios through the medium of fiction in order to anticipate future security requirements. As a result, well-written works of fiction in short-story format with new and fresh insights into the character of possible future martial conflicts and domestic unrest are of special interest. Detailed guidance related to the character of such fiction together with submission guidelines can be found at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program-Submission-Guidelines/>. To read previously published FWWP submissions, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program/>.



Notes

1. Barry Schwartz is a renowned psychologist who dedicates much of his work to addressing the link between psychology and economics. He possesses a significant body of publishing work which includes numerous articles, editorials, and books. His best-known volume is *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004).
2. "Distinguished Member of the Special Forces Regiment: Honorable Michael G. Vickers, Inducted 2010," U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, accessed 14 September 2023, https://www.swcs.mil/Portals/111/sf_vickers.pdf.
3. Michael G. Vickers, *By All Means Available: Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 52–53.
4. "Mike Vickers," National Security Institute, accessed 14 September 2023, <https://nationalsecurity.gmu.edu/mike-vickers/>.
5. Vickers, *By All Means Available*, 191.
6. This position was originally created in 1987 by Congress as the assistant secretary of defense for special operations, low-intensity conflict (ASD SO/LIC). However, senior officials wanted to expand the position and added the interdependent capabilities (ASD SO/LIC&IC).
7. Vickers, *By All Means Available*, 225.
8. *Ibid.*, 390.
9. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
10. *Ibid.*, 7.
11. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
12. *Ibid.*, 189.
13. *Ibid.*, 417.
14. *Ibid.*, 418.
15. *Ibid.*, 8.
16. Charles Kettering (1876–1952) was a prolific American inventor and a highly regarded engineer and businessman. As an inventor, he was the holder of 186 patents and was instrumental in the development of the electrical starting motor and leaded gasoline. As a businessman and engineer, he was the founder of Delco and the head of research at General Motors for nearly thirty years.