Fighting the Cold War: A Soldier’s Memoir

By John R. Galvin
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Reviewed by Joseph J. Collins

As the Cold War fades from memory, it is essential that we study its course and absorb its lessons. In that spirit, General John “Jack” Galvin, USA (Ret.), who commanded U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), wrote a memoir, published several months before his death in September 2015, that is both an important lesson in history and a tutorial in strategic leadership. Written by a general who was also a prize-winning author and scholar, it is a delight to read. The real Galvin—son of Boston, family man, soldier-scholar, mensch—comes through on every page.

Galvin, who came from a working-class family in Boston, joined the Massachusetts Army National Guard in 1947 and was pushed by his superiors to apply to West Point. He graduated in 1954 with a bachelor of science degree, as well as a fondness for history and literature and a taste for adventure. Not one to follow the crowd, Galvin spent his early assignments in Puerto Rico and teaching at Colombia’s Lancero School, a Ranger school–type course. Duty in the 101st Airborne Division and the Armor Officer Advanced Course subsequently followed, as did graduate school at Columbia University and a teaching tour at West Point.

Galvin later did two tough combat tours in Vietnam. Remarkably, in his first tour, he was relieved of his duties in combat as a brigade operations officer. Although the relief came at the behest of two powerful figures, Galvin was able to fight his way back and later commanded a battalion in the storied 1st Cavalry Division. Galvin does not mention in the book that he was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry. Most of his other high honors also go unmentioned.

Brigade-level command in Europe and command of a mechanized infantry division followed. In the latter assignment, General Galvin latched on to then-Captain David Petraeus, who appears time and again in the narrative as both a Galvin mentee and an intellectual alter ego. Galvin’s closest comrades are a key part of the book, and each of them, like Petraeus, is described in careful detail by the author.

Galvin’s senior assignments came as the four-star combatant commander in USSOUTHCOM and later as the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. His professional contacts in Germany, Latin America, and Spain also grew in rank, and they became a great network. His contacts, education, and empathy made him the ideal general for maneuvering on the political-military terrain. Whether it was Russian generals, German statesmen, Margaret Thatcher, or characters such as Panama’s Manuel Noriega, Galvin reveals the people and personalities behind the policy. For example, in detailing his first meeting with Ronald Reagan:

Tall and wide-shouldered, he seemed to take pains not to be overwhelming; he had the gift of being both impressive and unassuming. His hearty handshake and down-home smile made you feel good, and his corny jokes conveyed an assurance that he liked you right away and was truly happy to be talking to you at that moment. His easy cured your unease; his ordinariness allowed you room to be your ordinary self, too (p. 296, emphasis in the original).

Nearly one-fourth of Galvin’s memoir covers the end of the Cold War during the Reagan years. He artfully showed how the general-statesman navigated political-military issues, lined up the allies, openly consorted with ambassadors, and coordinated with multiple bosses, all while simultaneously developing new warfighting concepts and arms-control proposals. The Cold War was followed not by peace but by the First Gulf War. Again, Galvin’s persona and skills shine through as he opened the military coffers of USEUCOM to support General Norman Schwarzkopf’s juggernaut, all with the expert help of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations that turned Europe into U.S. Central Command’s rear area. USEUCOM’s trained and ready forces played a starring role in the desert war.

After the Gulf War ended, Saddam Hussein began attacking the Kurds. In the spring of 1991, USEUCOM under Galvin came to their rescue and, with the aid of Turkey and many nongovernmental organizations, launched a military rescue mission into northern Iraq. USEUCOM’s rescue of the Kurds was a brilliantly executed pick-up game, led by a then-obscure Army Lieutenant General John Shalikashvili. Later, with General Colin Powell’s blessing, Shalikashvili became Galvin’s successor as NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

Galvin ended his career by spending nearly a decade in academia, teaching and mentoring at West Point, The Ohio State University, and Tufts University’s Fletcher School, where he became the dean. Galvin’s military career and educational pursuits are testament to his call for us “to see the workings of our daily lives on a larger scale than our backyards. . . . Our survival in the long run will depend on our recognition of this simple but
powerful understanding: that we need a
global perspective” (p. 491).

What accounts for Galvin’s success
as a strategic leader? Having known him
for some years, I am tempted to say that
his most astounding trait was that he
was a wonderful, thoughtful man, but
there must be more. First, Galvin had
that global perspective that he preached
about. He saw local culture and individu-
als as very important. He found time to
learn German and Spanish well, but with
a hint of a Boston accent.

Second, he was a consummate mili-
tary professional. He could talk tactics
with the captains and discuss arms-
control proposals with the experts and
the eggheads. The details of operational
art and the peculiarities of low-intensity
conflict were subjects that he mastered.
He knew when to stay at a high altitude
and when to dive into the details, many
of which were recorded on his omnipres-
ent note cards.

Third, like the American eagle, Galvin
did not flock. He was his own man. He
understood and wrote about the require-
ments for low-intensity conflict when
few in the Army cared about it. Galvin
also wrote three books: two on the
Revolutionary War and one on modern
airmobile operations. Most generals do
not have time to do this kind of in-depth
intellectual work, but he did. Galvin
studied the past for clues to the future,
but he could also spot trends that were
new factors for analysis. NATO was for-
tunate to have his leadership during the
Mikhail Gorbachev years. Steeped in the
Cold War for 40 years, Galvin also knew
that change was a constant, even with the
Soviet Union. Finally, Galvin saw his mis-
take of scribing memoirs. He previously pub-
lished From the Shadows: The Ultimate
Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and
How They Won the Cold War (Simon
and Schuster, 2007), recounting his
years from 1969 to 1991 in the Central
Intelligence Agency (CIA) and on the
National Security Council (NSC). While
the chronological approach to storytelling
is similar to that found in Shadows,
Duty sustains an intense and passionate
narrative unrivaled in Gates’s 1996 work.
Duty is a conspicuously rich tome.

It came as little surprise that political
passions were aroused by Duty’s early-
2014 publication. With President Barack
Obama still in office, Gates’s comen-
tary on the inner workings of security
decisionmaking in the final 2 years of
the George H. Bush Presidency and the
first 2½ years of the Obama administra-
tion was bound to generate a noisy and
partisan clash. Even before Duty hit
stores, some labeled it as harsh and highly
critical of President Obama and claimed
that it painted an antagonistic portrait of
a sitting President while failing to note
that Gates mainly chided White House
counselors while applauding Obama’s
decisionmaking style. A Republican for-
er defense policy advisor and university
scholar wrote that it was less Gates’s criti-
cisms that were wrong than his timing.

The politically inspired reviews of
Duty focused on the superficial and
missed the substance. This included the
deeply etched lessons of executive-level
strategic leadership when engaged in a
complex and costly undertaking such as
counterinsurgency and counterterrorism
operations in two disparate countries with
a domestic political dynamic that is any-
thing but collaborative. As the lead agent
for the conduct of that undertaking,
Gates’s assessments tell us a great deal
about how difficult an endeavor war is in
general and how demanding counterin-
surgency operations are in particular.

From the beginning of Duty, Gates
reminds his reader that he was happily re-
tired from government and ensconced as
the president of Texas A&M University
before coming to the Pentagon. He
had declined an administration feeler
about a return to Washington in 2005
to become the first Director of National
Intelligence. He had grudgingly accepted
a temporary appointment to serve on the
Iraq Study Group (ISG) and was often
surprised and irritated by what he saw

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