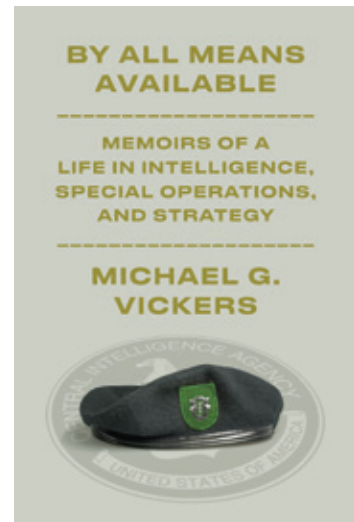


# By All Means Available: Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy

By Michael G. Vickers  
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Reviewed by Sandor Fabian and Kevin Stringer



In the 2007 movie “Charlie Wilson’s War” Michael G. Vickers is depicted as CIA’s in-house weapons expert and a master chess player. Although he stated multiple times that in real life he does not play chess, his more than four decades of service in U.S. special operations, intelligence, and the Department of Defense demonstrated his genius at “playing the strategy game” against multiple adversaries across time and space. In his recently published memoir *By All Means Available: Memoirs of a Life in Intelligence, Special Operations, and Strategy*, Vickers masterfully assesses the most important intelligence and special operations missions over recent decades including his own roles and impacts.

Beyond Vickers’ impressive career as a special operator, a CIA clandestine operator, an academic, and a high-ranking policymaker (including President George W. Bush’s Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities and President Barack Obama’s Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence)

and the timeliness of his topic, what also makes his book an intriguing subject for review is the early praise it has received from many key figures across the defense enterprise. For example, Robert M. Gates, former Director of Central Intelligence and Secretary of Defense, said: “Vickers saw it all, experienced it all. Readers of his memoir are in for a rare treat and a gripping story.” General Jim Mattis, U.S. Marines (Retired) and 26th Secretary of Defense, stated that Vickers’s “unique eyewitness insights reveal the passion and wisdom that gained him trust across all ranks and throughout Washington.” And General Stanley McChrystal, U.S. Army (Retired), Former Commander of U.S. and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, described the book as a “monumental memoir and thoughtful account of a uniquely tumultuous period in history. In a compelling narrative, Mike Vickers shares his front-row seat to the complex wars of our age.” Such praise sets the bar very high for this book and motivated us to give it a particularly meticulous and critical read.

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To describe the purpose of his memoir and set the direction of the book, Vickers lists three reasons why he crafted this book in his prologue. All three reasons carry the common theme of duty. First, Vickers suggests that he had a duty to history since he played a central role in “world-changing” events. Second, he argues that crafting this memoir was also his duty to the American people to inform them about the critically important work our intelligence professionals, special operators, and defense and national security strategists have done and are doing today. Finally, Vickers states that it was also his duty to current and future special operators, intelligence professionals, and national security strategists to pass on to them what he learned over his decades long career.

To meet his purposes and present an engaging argument Vickers builds a simple but effective structure. He organizes the book into five parts (preparation, war with the Red Army, war with al-Qaeda, fighting on multiple fronts, and reflections); the first half follows a chronological path while the second half follows a thematic path.

In the first four parts of the memoir Vickers specifically focuses on his service spanning more than four decades. He dedicates just the right amount of attention to his personal career and spends more time on expanded discussion of events. He starts his journey down memory lane by describing early memories from his years with U.S. Special Forces (SF) starting in December 1973 when he reported to the Special Forces Qualification Course. After graduation from the course, he rose quite quickly through the enlisted ranks and was selected for Officer Candidate School (OCS). Vickers graduated from OCS in 1978 as an infantry officer, then in 1980 from SF Officers Course as the distinguished honor graduate. After his graduation he was deployed to Latin America several times where he commanded a classified counterterrorism unit.

Seeking more individual autonomy and responsibility and believing that the CIA was the best suited for fighting and winning the Cold War, Vickers decided to switch his career to CIA clandestine service in 1982. During his 3-year tenure with CIA Vickers served as the CIA’s program officer and chief strategist for the Afghanistan Covert Action Program to force the Soviet army out of the country. Vickers provides substantial details about the program he led in Afghanistan, including the background on the decision he made to transform the program. In the chapters about the program Vickers presents a frank discussion about what went right and a bit surprisingly, what could have been done better. An especially interesting part of the book is his assessment of how the United States made a significant error when it assumed that Afghanistan lost strategic significance after the Soviet Army was repelled and defeated.

Next, Vickers devotes two chapters to an outstanding overview of the planning, preparation, and execution of Operation Neptune’s Spear (the operation to capture or kill Osama bin Laden). Serving as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities during most of the planning phase and then as Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence during the preparation and execution phases, he has exceptional details on the various aspects of this mission and adds immensely to a reader’s understanding of this operation. His discussion includes details about the numerous cabinet meetings conducted throughout the different phases, the assessment of bin Laden’s conjectured location, details of the raid planning and preparation, and the ultimate decision to execute the mission.

The analysis of *Operation Neptune’s Spear* concludes the chronological part of the memoir, and Vickers shifts to a thematic approach in part four. He provides his personal high-ranking government official perspectives on topics like

counter-proliferation and counter-narco-insurgency; U.S. activities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya (calling this part the “Battle for the Middle East”); and crisis and change in the defense intelligence community. And this is where (quite surprisingly) the memoir nature of the book pretty much ends. Vickers departs from focusing on his career and the events of the past and offers an analysis of the present and future U.S. national security challenges in a chapter entitled “Winning the New Cold War.” In this chapter Vickers specifically points to China and Russia as the primary adversaries of the United States in the New Cold War. Standing on realist theoretical grounds, Vickers argues that this conflict was generated by significant changes in the global balance of power, the West’s failure to fully integrate China and Russia into the U.S.-led rules-based international order, and China’s and Russia’s perception that the United States is a declining power. He shares his blueprint for a successful grand strategy with the readers and argues that it is based on five essential elements: the United States must restore national unity and resilience to the levels of the Cold War, position itself to prevail in the competition for technological and economic supremacy, execute and win intelligence and covert action wars, improve regional and global deterrence (if needed, defeat aggression), and transform the U.S. institutions and the alliance frameworks to meet the requirements of the New Cold War. Vickers posits the intriguing concept of escalation dominance throughout the book as the cornerstone of any successful strategy. Policymakers and military leaders would do well to examine the examples he offers of when the United States achieved it and when it did not.

The final part of the book focuses on emphasizing the lessons Vickers learned (and relearned) during his service in intelligence and covert action, special operations, and strategy. This part very effectively brings together the key points of the memoir

and delivers more supporting analysis to emphasize their importance. Arguably the most interesting part of this section is the two sub-chapters in which Vickers warns the readers to remember that success is never final and offers his list of ten strategic leadership principles. Although some of Vickers’ principles might not relate to everyone, as a group they add value to the content of the book.

Vickers’ memoir has many strengths that make it a must-have for many readers’ bookshelves. First, his personal involvement in shaping critical world events and his willingness to discuss it in great detail are quite remarkable. His candid analysis of what worked and what did not is very refreshing, especially because his points do not come with any sense of bias. He does not shy away from critiquing himself. Second, Vickers’ account is written in an engaging, conversational tone, making the reader feel like he is sitting next to the author and listening to his stories. Such tone makes the book easily readable for many readers. Third, the book is written in a way that carries significant value for special operators, intelligence professionals, and senior government officials, while it is also an interesting and informative volume for general readers who want to gain better understanding of world-changing events and how the world of today came to be. The final strength of the memoir worth mentioning is the nearly fifty pages long superb, annotated notes section adding extra details and helping to better understand Vickers’ key concepts. It adds a lot of value to the experience if readers indeed refer to these notes when prompted in the main text.

No book is without any weakness and Vickers’ book is not an exception. Three areas stand out for constructive critique. First, memoirs are by nature self-congratulatory, yet Vickers would have strengthened his manuscript by greater reflection on the second and third order effects of his Afghanistan operations against the Soviet Union. The blow-back in regards to al-Qaeda and Pakistan is huge,

as documented in books like *Ghost Wars* by Steve Coll. Second, the analysis of the present and future U.S. national security challenges section feels quite detached from the previous parts of the memoir and creates an odd shift for the reader. Third, the author makes superficial evaluations of both Trump and Biden policy decisions, but the reader is not clear on why the actions receive a negative assessment. For example, Vickers criticizes Trump's decision to redeploy operators out of Somalia, labeling it unwise, but his substantiation is missing.

Overall, Vickers offers a masterful and engaging account of his remarkable career in *By*

*All Means Available*. He delivered on all three of the objectives he described in the prologue. This account is much more than a traditional memoir. While it carries the usual characteristics of a memoir by re-living the past, it also offers a critical analysis of the present, and provides a blueprint for achieving success in the future. This book is a mandatory read for those who are in the business of special operations, intelligence, and strategy development. The movie "Charlie Wilson's War" is no longer the primary reference for understanding this patriot and his remarkable career. *By All Means Available* is.