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THE FUTURE-WAR LITERATURE OF THE REAGAN ERA

Winning World War III in Fiction

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes

Starting in the late 1970s and continuing on until the early 1990s, a number of American, British, and Canadian writers produced a series of novels—twenty-one in total—about a fictional World War III set in the context of the Cold War. Some of these authors—Sir John Hackett, Tom Clancy, Larry Bond, Clive Cussler—are well-known; others are less so. Their books depict a direct military confrontation between the United States and the former Soviet Union or its proxies, and they were immensely popular at the time—many of them were best sellers. These books were profoundly influential because they focused attention on specific issues and forced discussion among those in power.

There is nothing new about future-war literature or the academic study of it. Most of the latter comes from scholars working in college and university literature departments.¹ Scholars from many fields have examined the military and spy fiction of the 1980s in articles and book-length studies. James William Gibson argued that these works were an effort to redeem the U.S. experience in Vietnam.² Historian Walter L. Hixson focused on the writings of novelist Tom Clancy.³ Jeffrey H. Michaels and Adam R. Seipp, in two separate works, studied General Sir John Hackett and his novel *The Third World War: A Future History*.⁴ Chris Hables Gray studied the role of future-war scenarios

in science-fiction literature of the 1980s, arguing that the authors were “pro-war.”⁵ Richard J. Norton, a professor at the Naval War College, examined the accuracy of predictions appearing in speculative fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶

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This article is different in that it makes distinctions in the genre that these earlier scholars did not address, and it examines not just one author but the entire future-war field of literature of the late Cold War period. Military fiction exploded in popularity in the late Cold War period in a way that had not been the case in the years immediately prior. Contemporary military topics were the subject of both films and novels, but this article concentrates only on the books. At the time and in the years since, these novels have been described as “techno-thrillers.” That label, however, is too broad.

THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF MILITARY FICTION

There were several different genres of military fiction during the later years of the Cold War. The first genre was historical novels set in previous wars. The second type was the *techno-thriller*. These books usually dealt with contemporary military topics and featured the workings of military weapon systems. Novelist Tom Clancy, at least in the context of military fiction, was the pioneer of this genre. A third category, which was quite popular in the era of President Ronald W. Reagan, was speculative fiction about a potential World War III. This type of fiction depicted military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union or its proxies in the context of the Cold War. Some of these books were techno-thrillers; others were not. This genre produced titles in the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s. The best-known works in this field were Hackett's *Third World War*, Clancy and Bond's *Red Storm Rising*, Harold Coyle's *Team Yankee: A Novel of World War III*, Bond's *Red Phoenix*, and Ralph Peters's *Red Army*. Some of the authors were making deliberate efforts to influence current events, while some simply were performing exercises in storytelling.

At the time of their publication, these novels were recognized as important contributions to literary, military, and political discussions. Much of the contemporary analysis assumed this literature was a tool for shaping public attitudes. “[N]o book simply entertains, and this use of technology, of the machine as an actor, carries with it enough baggage to turn good reads into troubling books,” stated Thomas Levenson, a producer for Boston public television station WGBH, in an essay in the book section of the *Boston Globe*. He compared these novels with pornography and said that they sanitized war. “What makes this kind of writing dangerous is its myth of containable violence, of limits that can be maintained under rational control.”⁷ Many people then and since have recognized the influence of this military-fiction literature of the 1980s. In recognition of this fact, the editors at *Newsweek* magazine commissioned a feature story on Tom Clancy. The historian Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army officer, was critical of trends in popular culture glorifying the military, and he saw Clancy as playing a large role in this development. In a review of Bacevich's book *The New American*

Militarism, the historian David Fitzpatrick noted: “Clancy’s popularity speaks volumes regarding his influence.”⁸ These assessments, however, failed to notice the subcategories in the military fiction of the era, lumping them together as techno-thrillers.

Assessing public moods is a difficult thing, and there is a great deal of scholarly literature on this topic from a number of fields. To put it simply: There are many reasons why people buy and read books, but reader-response theory contends that there are ways to document the reading experience.⁹

Sir John Hackett

In the late 1970s, when Hackett was assembling a team to write a novel about fighting a World War III in the near future, he was explicit about his motivation. In a letter he sent to one of the individuals he was trying to recruit to the project, he explained: “The purpose of this book is, from the publishers’ point of view, to offer something interesting, saleable and topical. From mine it is to offer an awful warning of what could happen if we do not do enough in time about a deteriorating situation.”¹⁰

Hackett’s name is the only one on the cover, and he was the only one who promoted the book, but his collaborators are acknowledged inside the book. During his book tour, he was honest about wanting to influence defense policy: “My intention was to light a firecracker under the backsides of Britain and West Germany.” Despite the attention he received, evidence suggests that he failed to achieve his intended goals. In the United Kingdom, appropriations for the British army actually declined after the book appeared in print. In Germany, the book was criticized as people began to realize that World War III could be fought on German soil and that German citizens would be among the civilian casualties.¹¹

Many of the authors in this genre influenced U.S. political leaders and military leaders of strategy, operations, training, and education. This argument runs counter to the idea that the Pentagon was supporting these authors with the intention of shaping public opinion in certain directions.¹² In reality, these writers forced individuals to ask questions and contemplate scenarios that otherwise might not have been considered. Many of these novels were reviewed in professional military publications and in journals aimed more at practitioners than academics. One review highlighted part of the reason these authors were getting attention: they were “much more fun to read” than briefing papers and official reports.¹³

There were other reasons. In 1990, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick P. Stein Jr., who was on the faculty at the Army War College, recommended that officers include fiction on their professional reading lists. “The good novelist has several advantages over the historian,” Stein observed. They were not bound to evidence;

they had the freedom to invent within reason. “He seeks out the essential truths rather than the literal ones.” Among the World War III novels, he recommended the works of Clancy, Hackett, Coyle, and James McDonough.¹⁴

This view was not an isolated one. In 1987, the Army War College placed Clancy and Bond’s *Red Storm Rising* on its Contemporary Military Reading List. In 1991, when the Navy released its first Chief of Naval Operations Reading List, *Red Storm Rising* was included on it as well.¹⁵

These books had influence of one sort or another at every level of national security. At the political and policy levels, Prime Minister James Callaghan of the United Kingdom sent President James E. “Jimmy” Carter Jr. a copy of Hackett’s novel as a gift through his son-in-law, Peter Jay, the British ambassador to the United States.¹⁶ Interest in the book was bipartisan. Ronald Reagan told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1983 that he was reading Hackett’s book. He stayed true to Hackett’s views in 1986 during a dispute with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher over nuclear deterrence. Thatcher favored such a strategy, since conventional military resources were inadequate—a position that Hackett had hoped to discourage with his novel. Reagan, in response, recommended that the prime minister read *Red Storm Rising*, which was similar in its broad conclusions. According to the British record, Reagan explained: “It gave an excellent picture of the Soviet Union’s intentions and strategy.”¹⁷ Thatcher did not understand this recommendation, and her staff had to explain it to her later.¹⁸

The novel also had an impact in other political centers. Hackett’s book drew editorial commentary on opinion pages in both magazines and newspapers.¹⁹ Members of Congress also took notice. Congressman Newton L. “Newt” Gingrich of Georgia wrote to Hackett asking whether it was possible to see the earlier ending of his manuscript; the general—wary of being drawn into U.S. domestic politics—declined.²⁰ Senators and the staff of Senate committees bought and read copies of the book.²¹

In less than a year after the book’s initial publication, Hackett started to have a tangible impact in Washington. In November 1979, the *Washington Star* newspaper ran a series by defense correspondent John Fialka on the poor state of readiness in the Army. Fialka quoted Hackett’s book in one of his articles. At two different hearings in 1979, members of Congress asked witnesses about the book. Paul Trible, a congressman from Virginia, asked Vice Admiral William J. Crowe Jr. whether the Navy could resupply forces in Europe as Hackett depicted. Crowe avoided giving a direct answer, saying he had not read the book yet. (He, however, owned a copy.) During his long response, though, he slowly and reluctantly admitted indirectly that the task was beyond the current capacity of the Navy. A week later at another hearing, Senator John Warner of Virginia, a former Secretary of the Navy, asked Norman Polmar, a writer and former Defense Department official, what he thought of the book. Polmar replied that while the

book was “excellent,” Hackett made overly optimistic assumptions. A month later, General Frederick Kroesen, commander in chief of the Army in Europe, also told Congress that the Army could not defend Europe successfully in Hackett’s scenario. In another hearing, General David Jones, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, told Congress that these assessments were correct.²²

Members of both houses of Congress responded to Hackett’s book. In 1979, G. William Whitehurst, a representative from Virginia, was part of the U.S. delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) North Atlantic Assembly. He told the assembly to listen to Hackett’s warnings. “They could begin by arresting the deterioration of NATO forces,” he told the gathering. “They should let General Hackett’s book remain a work of fiction, and should avoid tempting fate.” The minutes of this meeting state that applause greeted these remarks. In 1980, Senator Robert J. Dole of Kansas read a section of Hackett’s novel about chemical warfare into the *Congressional Record*. “Most public attention has been focused on the potential for nuclear warfare,” he observed. “Yet, chemical/biological weapons are as horrible and even more contemptible than nuclear weapons.” He acknowledged that Hackett’s book was “fictional,” but he called on the executive branch to make defense against these weapons a “major priority.”²³

In 1985—the year in which Hackett set his fictional World War III—there was a renewed interest in the general’s novel. Since war had not come, British journalists suggested that there had not been much substance to his book after all. That argument was superficial, and it was not what Hackett had been trying to address; the real issue was readiness.²⁴ Congress asked whether NATO was ready for combat operations against the countries in the Warsaw Pact. In hearings at the end of the year, Major General Robert F. Molinelli told the Senate Subcommittee on Preparedness that the Army still lacked the supplies to defend Europe in the scenario that Hackett had envisioned.²⁵

Tom Clancy and Larry Bond

Clancy and Bond also had an impact at the policy level. In 1986, Gingrich was taking part in a House of Representatives debate on appropriations for military research and development. Gingrich remarked, “I just want to use the new novel by Tom Clancy, *Red Storm Rising*, to make the point that I think the opposition to an antisatellite technology may well be the most irrational position on the left this week.” He even read a section into the *Congressional Record*. “Clancy’s book is probably the best single illustration of how a major conflict would work in the real world.”²⁶

Gingrich invited Clancy and Bond to lunch at the Capitol with other members of Congress. During the meal, the two authors talked about defense policy issues with the congressmen. Bond was surprised to see Richard B. “Dick” Cheney, a representative from Wyoming, taking notes as they talked about the Soviet navy.²⁷

The view that this book was important was a bipartisan one. “*Red Storm Rising* is entertaining. But it also has an important message for national policy makers,” stated Walter B. Jones, a Democratic member of the House of Representatives and the chair of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. “I commend it to Members for their reading during our break between sessions.” Clancy, he said, was making the argument that the United States needed a strong merchant marine, using a “compelling story line that probably has more impact than all the charts and graphs we could put together.”²⁸

Not everyone bought into Clancy’s scenario. Congressman James A. Courter of New Jersey, a member of the Armed Services Committee, was skeptical of Clancy’s assessment of NATO operations. He nonetheless thought the novel was a serious enough work to write an article rejecting its argument. “Clancy’s book has a happy ending,” he noted. “[I]n the event of a real attack, will life imitate art?” He worried that the complex weapon systems that NATO intended to use were too expensive for the Western democracies to buy in the numbers needed and too complex to withstand the demands of combat. “These and other similar challenges are enough to convince most analysts that the NATO air superiority featured so prominently in *Red Storm Rising* truly belongs in the realm of fiction.”²⁹ Toward the very end of the Cold War, a subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee commissioned an advisory group that reported that U.S. industry was in no position to win an actual shooting war: “Fanciful war scenarios like the one described in Tom Clancy’s novel *Red Storm Rising* predicate American victory on wartime resupply efforts which cannot be accomplished because the equipment and materials do not exist and cannot be produced in time.”³⁰

The most visible moment of influence in the political realm came on 22 September 1987. The entire Senate debated for four hours about cutting the funding for Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), better known as “Star Wars.” In the debate that followed, Warner opposed the cuts and invoked Clancy’s *Red Storm Rising*. “This Senator believes the author painted a scenario that is too real to ignore.” In response to Warner’s questioning, Senator John F. Kerry of Massachusetts said reading *Red Storm Rising* “convinced” him that the militarization of space was a bad idea. Senator J. Danforth “Dan” Quayle of Indiana responded to Kerry: “I guess I just had a much different conclusion than my distinguished colleague.” Quayle declared that space was the future for the United States and that Clancy had figured it out. “[I]t was only through the Asat [antisatellite] capability in that novel, that the United States was able to turn a very difficult situation around.” He was fully aware that the novel was fiction, but that it did something other than just entertain: “We all have good pastime reading, and ‘Red Storm Rising’ is certainly a good place to begin this discussion.”³¹ The Senate

voted 50–50 on the SDI funding, and Vice President George H. W. Bush cast the tie-breaking ballot in favor of it.³²

News coverage the next day did not mention any of this exchange, but Quayle's incisive observation, "What we are doing here is digging a grave for SDI," appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*.³³

Senators continued to cite Clancy and Bond's book. During a Senate hearing in 1988, Senator Phil Gramm of Texas remarked: "I had hoped after 'Red Storm Rising' was written that people would read that book and decide that we needed that missile [defense]. But it did not happen."³⁴ Clancy was astonished that he was receiving this type of attention. "Congress can't tell the difference between a novel and an intelligence briefing," he remarked at a book signing.³⁵

Clancy and Bond's book had helped shape the views of four U.S. senators. This influence, though, eventually was distorted. In 1988, when Quayle became the Republican nominee for vice president, many cited this incident as an example of him being an intellectual lightweight, because he used fiction rather than nonfiction in a policy debate. Quayle did himself no favors during the campaign. He threw away a prepared speech to show his independence from campaign officials and made a series of impromptu remarks about national security. He cited Tom Clancy in an address that was rambling and unfocused. This incident led to much ridicule and underscored his reputation as a man of no real substance.³⁶

The historian John Lewis Gaddis worried about the influence of these novelists. He wanted historians and political scientists to work closer together to produce material that policy makers would read. He complained that policy makers were "frittering away what little free time they have reading Tom Clancy novels instead of our own scholarly books and articles."³⁷

STRATEGIC-LEVEL INFLUENCE

At the strategic level, this literature had an impact on the Navy. A briefing that two analysts at the CNA—a think tank in Washington, DC—prepared in 2009 argues that Hackett's first novel, his follow-up effort (*The Third World War: The Untold Story*), and Clancy and Bond's *Red Storm Rising* were three of the twelve key books that shaped the *Maritime Strategy* of the Navy in the 1980s.³⁸ Naval historian John B. Hattendorf reached similar conclusions in his monograph on the development of the strategy.³⁹

Contemporary documents support Hattendorf's conclusions. In 1980, the CNA had circulated a study that explored the vulnerability of NATO's northern flank. "General Sir John Hackett et al. have given us a very useful vehicle for this," the study notes. "*The Third World War* is, of course, a work of fiction. But it is fiction of a special kind: extrapolation from fact." The study's author then explored

the feasibility of the eight campaigns depicted in the novel, realizing full well that actual developments might turn out differently. “On the whole, however, the conflict scenario presented in the book is credible.”⁴⁰

The study found that Hackett’s basic conclusions were sound. The NATO advantage in the air and on the sea would be crucial in stopping a ground invasion. “The ‘bottom line’ in all this can be stated quite succinctly. What happens at sea will be determined by, and may in turn determine, what happens on land.” An important part of the plan would be moving reserve ground formations from the United States and Canada into the theater. The Soviets might be able to take key islands in the North Atlantic and the North Sea, but they would have little strength left to exploit the advantage these positions gave them. “The better able NATO becomes to defend itself on the land, the better able it must become to defend itself at sea. This is nowhere more true than in, on, and over northern waters. While NATO can win there and still lose the war, it can’t lose there and win the war.”⁴¹

Not everyone agreed with Hackett. Given the general’s concern about ground operations, an article in *Military Review*, a publication of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, explored the ramifications of his ground-combat scenario. The historian John M. Lane noted a contradiction in the novel. The general and his coauthors had local units involved in “home defense,” which posed a problem for Hackett’s prediction of a rapid war. “If his analysis is correct, light infantry such as the militia will be involved in World War III. It will not be limited to a contest between elite formations and ultrasophisticated push-button weapons.” The use of this type of unstructured military forces would extend the course of the conflict. In that situation, Lane said, the lessons of Vietnam and Afghanistan would come into play.⁴² Citing Hackett, the political scientist John J. Mearsheimer published an influential article in *International Security*. The article’s title made Mearsheimer’s argument clear: “Why the Soviets Can’t Win Quickly in Central Europe.”⁴³

Red Storm Rising saw similar scrutiny. Jeffrey Record, a defense intellectual who had a column on military affairs that appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*, wrote an article assessing the real-world implications of the novel. He found the origins of the conflict questionable. He also believed that the actual conduct of the war as Clancy and Bond depicted it was unlikely: “*Red Storm Rising* is a somewhat gentlemanly conflict in which both sides seem less concerned about winning than about limiting the war’s intensity and scope.” The war remained a European crisis and never expanded to other parts of the globe. He also added that the United States simply lacked the sealift capability to get troops and equipment to Europe as quickly as Clancy and Bond suggested was possible. He further noted that in the book the Western alliance never seemed to run out of ammunition.

Record, however, was willing to give the authors their due. He observed that the two authors understood the operational implications of current weapons technology and that they had a “solid” understanding of the diplomatic dynamics of likely NATO actions.⁴⁴

Leaders within the United States Army, however, were divided on the importance of *Red Storm Rising*. A U.S. Army War College paper titled “*Red Storm Rising*—a Primer for a Future Conventional War in Central Europe” came to a conclusion quite different from that of Record. The novel “is replete with insightful, identifiable circumstances in a not unimaginable conflict for which we have spent our careers in preparation.” Examining only the land war depicted in the novel, the study stated that Clancy and Bond had provided a warning of possible things to come. “Is RSR [*Red Storm Rising*] a harbinger of a future war in Central Europe? It could very well be. If, in some future war, the Soviets were to launch an attack against the West, the most critical factor in determining their success would be their ability to achieve strategic surprise. Absent this, they would not be able to fully exploit their offensive doctrine. Their firepower and formations would falter just as Clancy’s Soviets in *Red Storm Rising*.”⁴⁵

In contrast, a year later, Michael J. Bradley argued in a U.S. Army Command and General Staff College study that *Red Storm Rising* was nothing but sound and fury. “Was it [the first operation described in the novel] linked to and integrated with the other functions of campaign design and did the firepower expended make sufficient contribution to the overall combat power effect?”⁴⁶ Since Bradley believed the answer was no, stronger theater-level coordination was required. “We need operational FSCoord [fire support coordinator] thinking to break the logjam. To get it we need joint doctrine and schooling.”⁴⁷

The influence of *Red Storm Rising* even reached into homeland-defense efforts. After reading the novel, Captain Val Flake, a reserve officer in the Air Force, developed a field-training exercise to test how food-distribution networks and health services would function under stress following a nuclear attack. Governors Booth Gardner of Washington and Neil Goldschmidt of Oregon garnered national media attention when they refused to cooperate with the Federal Emergency Management Agency in this exercise, instead using it as an opportunity to score political points against the Reagan administration’s foreign policy and its dependence on nuclear weapons. “This is a very innocuous exercise that we planned,” William Mayer, the northwest regional director of the agency, argued in his response.⁴⁸

OPERATIONAL- AND TACTICAL-LEVEL IMPACT

At the operational and tactical levels, these books influenced the training and education of the military. Both Clancy and Bond’s *Red Storm Rising* and Bond’s

Red Phoenix became the foundation for computer simulations. The development company MicroProse adapted *Red Storm Rising* into a computer game, released in 1989. “The game is as realistic as you’re going to get outside of a classified environment,” Clancy boasted. “The games place the player in the same position as the author. You live the story, just as I live the story when I write it.”⁴⁹ Fifteen years later, the U.S. Marine Corps contracted with the computer game firm Destineer to turn *Red Phoenix* into a computer game, designed to teach small-unit leaders cognitive lessons such as command, control, and communication.⁵⁰

Clancy was invited to give talks to various military-training programs, and it is easy to see why he was a popular choice. Videos from this period show a lean individual who spoke with confidence, a strong voice, and an engaging sense of humor.⁵¹ The faculty teaching the Naval War College’s operations course used Clancy’s *Hunt for Red October* as an assigned reading exercise.⁵² David G. Clark, a captain in the Navy and an instructor at the College, explained that not every detail in the book was correct, but on the whole “it was the most readable and accurate piece available on one facet of contemporary naval operations outside wartime.” Clark noted that Clancy and Bond had produced a similarly important book in *Red Storm Rising*. He easily could see it providing the setting for teaching and discussion sessions—“again, not for its precise depiction of future history, but because this new novel” was “so thoroughly researched and authentic that it provides a plausible overview of warfare in the Atlantic and NATO, available nowhere else.”⁵³ A colleague of his, Orville E. Hay, director of the Global War Game and Advanced Concepts Department at the College, had similar views. During testimony to a Senate committee, he was asked whether *Red Storm Rising* was required reading for his staff. “No, but it is an interesting book,” he replied. “There are some elements of it that I find intriguing in terms of what we are doing here. But I would say the book overall has been super because it is getting people to think about the dynamics that we are trying to portray.”⁵⁴

These books also became part of the professional-development plans of many officers. Several pieces in the *Marine Corps Gazette* discussed Clancy and Bond’s book in three issues during the second half of 1986. John E. Greenwood, the editor of the magazine, stated that *Red Storm Rising* had “redeeming professional value.” The ultimate mission of every Western military at the time was to fight the Soviet Union. “Could things really happen as he projects? The answer is almost anybody’s guess, but what is certain is that he makes you think,” Greenwood wrote. “He, and . . . others like him, provide a great service by challenging us to rethink our perceptions of future warfare—a most worthwhile endeavor.”⁵⁵ The reviewer of the book in the *Marine Corps Gazette* observed, “[T]his is an important book. It simplifies national and defense strategies by incorporating them into a fast-moving, easy to read story with something for everyone.”⁵⁶

This type of commentary really mattered to Clancy. “When the [military] people you write about think you’re doing a good job, then you ARE doing a good job,” he observed.⁵⁷

These books also had an impact at the personal level on military training and education in the late Cold War period. Ted Kluz, a professor at the U.S. Air War College, recommended that national-security professionals read Coyle’s second novel, *Bright Star*: “Military men and women will read this novel carefully. There is enough reality to chill them completely. Political men and women will not need to read this because they will not heed it nor will they learn from it.”⁵⁸

Many junior personnel were heeding these recommendations. One section of Hackett’s book is about a defensive stand that the 11th U.S. Armored Cavalry Regiment takes in Germany to hold back advancing Soviets. “The book has become virtually required reading in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment,” a correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1982. “It is referred to repeatedly in response to questions about the unit’s activities. Yet its grim scenario has apparently not affected morale.” Roger Cirillo, a young officer in the regiment, recalled that Hackett’s book was “much read” in his unit, and “its lessons were not lost on us.”⁵⁹

The men of this regiment were hardly alone. Many soldiers turned to this book to get ideas of what they should expect to face in combat. A reporter from *Time* magazine found soldiers in a New York National Guard unit reading Hackett and passing around copies to others while they conducted a training simulation at Fort Drum to protect the Rhineland-like terrain of upstate New York from a Soviet invasion.⁶⁰

This use of fiction continued for several years. “Everyone reads Clancy’s books in the barracks, just about,” a Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) midshipman at the Virginia Military Institute explained to a newspaper reporter in 1989. There was a reason why junior-level personnel were turning to fiction: “It deals with stuff cadets want to do when they graduate.” Larry Bond heard that many Army officers stationed in Korea began reading *Red Phoenix* for much the same reasons. In 1990, Major Donald A. Carter, an instructor at the U.S. Army Field Artillery School, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, observed, “I have been surprised at the high percentage of junior officers who already express an interest in reading military history.” In informal polls, he found that 60 to 70 percent of his students said studying history was an important part of their professional development. Carter was surprised with this finding, since the Army was using weapons that were far more complex than what had been used in the past. “The most popular reading material, by a wide margin, is the Tom Clancy–Harold Coyle range of contemporary fiction. While these authors are not examples of traditional military history, they do serve to pique interest in other related fields.”⁶¹

Clancy himself assumed that he was having some influence. “Clancy’s Law of Intelligence,” he told Navy ROTC students at Villanova University, states, “It’s not how smart you are, it’s whether people listen to you.” Clancy believed that the Soviets could not ignore the possibility that his novels were technically accurate. “There’s no way they’ll believe I’m some insurance puke who got lucky.” Clancy explained that he used only public information to write his books, and that he had put isolated bits of information together to create a new assessment. Sometimes he was right, and sometimes he was wrong; neither he nor the Soviets knew which was which. “If nothing else, I know I’ll keep the bastards awake at night,” he quipped, drawing appreciative laughter from the midshipmen.⁶²

THE LAST YEARS OF WORLD WAR III

In 1989, Ralph Peters’s book *Red Army* was published. An active-duty Army captain, Peters wanted to help prepare the service for war in Europe, which he explained in an article published in *Military Review* about future wars. “We must dare to imagine,” he declared. The Army had to focus on tactical incisiveness, which entailed mastering the weapon systems and doctrines currently available. Soldiers also had to integrate all the various combat arms at the operational level in the service of a coherent strategy. The Army also had to have the right technology and units trained properly for the fight they were facing; heavy tanks or troops trained to operate in mountain and cold-weather environments would not do well in a jungle. Whatever force was sent to fight, it had to be logistically sustainable.⁶³ *Red Army* was fiction, but it was the manifestation of these real concerns. “I wanted to keep a staff duty officer up at 2 A.M. I wanted a book someone could throw in a backpack when they’re in the field.”⁶⁴

In this effort, he was successful. In a 1997 review essay in *Armor* magazine of several Ralph Peters books, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Bolger called Peters “the most gifted American military writer of them all.” Given the knowledge of the audience of the magazine, Bolger used military jargon in his review: “He’s enough to restore your faith in the S2.” Echoing critics of the late 1980s, Bolger observed that in *Red Army*, “Peters turns the genre on its head and gives us a very honest, exciting and (dare I say?) sympathetic portrayal of our Soviet enemies.”⁶⁵

Bolger, who holds a PhD in history from the University of Chicago, believed Peters’s strength was his real-world experience: “Peters clearly understands the art of soldiering, and that shines through on every page.” That, according to Bolger, was not the case with others. “At bottom, brother Clancy remains a ‘wannabe,’ an overweight former insurance salesman who pals around with high-ranking officers and has an inordinate interest in firearms and modern weaponry.” That approach could take him only so far. “You can’t learn only by watching, folks.” Bolger’s point was that what mattered were the people and how they were trained.

“The hardware is there, but in a Peters book, the tanks and guns remain tools, not stars. His wars, like real wars, are fought and won by men.” Young officers and soldiers should read *Red Army* to get a feel for the Army’s recent past and its confrontation with the Soviets. They “are the guys we beat.”⁶⁶

If nothing else, many of these novels became easy ways to explain complex concepts to nonspecialist audiences. In the 1980s, the idea of using space as a venue for military power was controversial, and much of the debate was about the strategic level. Lieutenant Colonel James R. McNeece wrote a letter to the editor of *Marine Corps Gazette*: “I noted the Marine Corps has interest in the outer space missions of ‘Force Enhancement’ and ‘Space Control.’ Mr. Clancy shows why.” He had an engaging story, and “throughout the book [*Red Storm Rising*], he makes clear the importance of satellite communications.” McNeece drew readers’ attention to page 219 of the novel, a point in the story at which a Soviet satellite spots U.S. ships and informs Moscow, allowing Soviet planes to locate and sink USS *Saipan*, which had an entire amphibious unit of two thousand Marines on board.⁶⁷ In 1987, Brigadier General Richard L. Phillips, another Marine, wrote an article promoting the importance of the space domain to military efforts and invoked Clancy: “The growing impact of space on areas of warfare is real. Today, this is highlighted by Tom Clancy in his current best-selling novel, *Red Storm Rising*.”⁶⁸

The effort to employ Clancy’s sudden clout to win arguments even happened at the political level. Charles Wick, the director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), decided to use Clancy to sell the programs of his agency. He reached out to the novelist, inviting him to visit the USIA’s WorldNet satellite television network. This facility was a public-information operation designed to spread U.S. viewpoints on a global basis at a time just before the advent of commercial satellite networks. Clancy was impressed. He later wrote to Wick, telling him: “I think WorldNet has the potential to become the most powerful, most useful, most cost-effective tool of American diplomacy.” It had “the potential to remake the world.” That was the kind of endorsement that Wick could not buy, and in a clever bureaucratic move, he forwarded Clancy’s letter to President Reagan.⁶⁹

In 1989, Lieutenant Commander Mary T. Hall, a Judge Advocate General’s Corps officer, published an article on deception in naval warfare in the *Naval War College Review*. The main point of her article was to explain when a deception on the high seas was legally permissible. She began and ended the article with references to a ruse scene in *Red Storm Rising* in which a Soviet ship passes itself off as a U.S. vessel.⁷⁰

Despite the impact of these books, they were a product of their era and by most pop-culture standards should have been reduced to historical-curiosity status if not for a resurrection of interest in the ideas of these authors in the 2010s. National-security and foreign-policy specialists began concentrating on the return

to traditional state rivalries, and many once again found value in these novels. In 2014, the staff of the website War on the Rocks put together a reading list of national-security novels. *Red Storm Rising* ended up on the list, offered by two contributors.⁷¹

Clancy and Bond's book also was quite useful for ideas and guidance in how to deal with antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) weapon systems. Yao Ming Tiah, a civilian working for the government of Singapore, wrote a master's thesis in operational research at the Naval Postgraduate School on the subject of how a small navy could defeat a larger navy. According to his footnotes, he took his ideas on electronic countermeasures straight out of *Red Storm Rising*.⁷²

An Air Force officer, Major Matthew J. Wemyss, found in another study that these new problems were recycled issues from a previous era. He examined the A2/AD efforts of China and Russia. Both had developed their air- and seapower to keep the United States from sending resources to its continental allies. "Even novels in the 1980s such as Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* focused on this Atlantic Ocean battle and the impossibility of the situation," Wemyss stated.⁷³

Red Storm Rising also was deemed relevant to naval logistics three decades after publication. Commander Michael Moore, a naval supply officer, observed the following in his Joint Forces Staff College thesis.

In order to sustain combat at sea, there must be sufficient stocks of VLS [vertical launch system] weapons. The problem is that no nation has fought a prolonged naval war using missile munitions against massed attacks so there is no historical data to use for extrapolation of likely expenditures. Tom Clancy and Larry Bond obliquely address the subject in their novel, *Red Storm Rising*. During a fictional Soviet Union attack on a carrier strike group, the escort ships expend their entire stock of surface to air missiles.

Moore argued that this scenario, while fictional, had important lessons for the sea service. "The Navy must develop a holistic approach to sea basing, supporting afloat forces as well as expeditionary forces. A modern sea basing capability must include rearmament, repair, and replenishment capabilities, like those used by the Navy in the Western Pacific during World War II."⁷⁴

In 2021, the blog of the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command published a post from Ian Sullivan, the assistant intelligence officer for future conflicts at the command, about the possibility of a war with the People's Republic of China over Taiwan. He had wargamed this scenario and decided to craft a narrative to explain the results. "Narrative writing is . . . powerful, and by spinning it around the bones of a game, I hope to help imagine what a fight could be." He was taking his idea from fiction. "Tom Clancy and Larry Bond used this method in their novel *Red Storm Rising*, where they crafted a narrative around the results of a series of scenarios they played of the wargame *Harpoon*." Sullivan, though, was taking more inspiration from a different novel. "My effort here, however,

is intended to be more in the spirit of Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War: August 1985*, originally published in 1978, and intended to help NATO leaders imagine what a fight with the Warsaw Pact could look like.⁷⁵

In the scenario that Sullivan developed, the Army wins all its battles against the People's Liberation Army—and the United States still loses the war, because none of these engagements altered the strategic balance. To avoid this situation, it was imperative that the Army consider how it might lose a conflict with China and respond with creative thinking. He ended his post by quoting Hackett: “We who have put this book together know very well that the only forecast that can be made with any confidence of the course and outcome of another world war, should there be one, is that nothing will happen exactly as we have shown here. There is the possibility, however, that it could.”⁷⁶

As this article comes to an end, a few comments are in order. During the Reagan era, hypothetical fiction about a possible World War III was popular among the book-buying public. Some novels achieved much commercial success; others did not. Most novelists were trying to write engaging stories, make money, earn recognition and fame, and accomplish all the other things that motivate people to write books. A few, though, were intentional about trying to influence national-security matters. None of these authors fundamentally altered events on their own. The ones who did have an impact often did so by shining light on certain topics, forcing discussions about issues, and giving ideas to those in power. Some of these books have endured and had influence years after the Cold War. These reactions often put these authors close to the center of debates—which is a pretty rare place for anyone to be.

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