

The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army¹

Reviewed by Major Evan R. Seamone*

*A writer who is Jack of all themes will be master of none.*²

I. Introduction

In 2007, Pentagon correspondents David Cloud and Greg Jaffe were frustrated with the Army's inability to apply a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Iraq.³ At a time when a division commander in Baghdad ripped the Velcro stars from his uniform, threatening to resign in the face of Iraqi corruption, sectarian violence, and crippling Washington oversight,⁴ these journalists believed that the Army had taken on an impossible challenge.⁵ Drawing on their close relationships with flag officers,⁶ time as embedded reporters,⁷ and award-winning journalistic techniques,⁸ the authors set out to write *The Palace War*,⁹ a study of the Army's failure to absorb historical COIN lessons, despite the leadership of Generals David Petraeus, Peter Chiarelli, John Abizaid, and George Casey Jr.¹⁰ But *The Palace War* never came to be. Although Cloud and Jaffe had already begun their research, a few short weeks into the project, they realized that the Army had undergone a

"transform[ation]" that enabled Soldiers to meet the region's most daunting challenges.¹¹ *The Palace War* quickly morphed into *The Fourth Star*, a more optimistic account of how these four generals—in some cases—overcame a longstanding mindset that had denied the military's crucial role in post-conflict reconstruction.¹²

In twelve chapters consisting of nearly 300 pages and an epilogue, Cloud and Jaffe follow the four generals from their initial entry into the Army following Vietnam, through quite uncommon career pathways, to Operation Iraqi Freedom. In lieu of an introduction or preface—tools that normally orient the reader to a book's thesis and methodology¹³—the book uses vivid imagery and rich dialogue to set the stage. Rather than spoon-feeding the reader key points, Cloud and Jaffe signal important lessons with descriptive chapter titles.¹⁴ While the lack of a clear thesis at the outset of the book empowers readers to draw numerous lessons from the text, it does so at the risk of leading readers astray in the voluminous material. Although the book's vague title suggests the basic theme of top leaders' ability to influence the Army's future,¹⁵ Cloud and Jaffe provide little more interpretive guidance. The following sections will explore how, despite deep personal insights and useful lessons for judge advocates, Cloud and Jaffe's journalistic style obscures their intended message.

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Student, 59th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

¹ DAVID CLOUD & GREG JAFFE, *THE FOURTH STAR: FOUR GENERALS AND THE EPIC STRUGGLE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY* (2009).

² FRANCIS FLAHERTY, *THE ELEMENTS OF STORY: FIELD NOTES ON NONFICTION WRITING* 31 (2009).

³ Greg Jaffe, Book Lecture at the U.S. Army War College: The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army (Dec. 16, 2009), *available at* <http://www.youtube.com>.

⁴ CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 235 (describing how Major General J.D. Thurman, Commander of the Fourth Infantry Division (Mech.), declared, "Goddammit, I am going to just quit," as he waived his rank).

⁵ Jaffe, *supra* note 3.

⁶ *Id.* (describing the authors' personal knowledge and appreciation of the four spotlighted generals). David Cloud, for example, now works as a policy advisor to Ambassador Karl Eikenberry. Lieutenant Colonel Steve Leonard, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, MIL. REV., Jan. 1, 2010, at 123 (describing Cloud's current employment).

⁷ See, e.g., Transcript of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (Mar. 28, 2005) (No. 8193) (describing Jaffe's status as an embedded reporter in Iraq in 2005).

⁸ Leonard, *supra* note 6, at 123 (reviewing Jaffe's numerous awards, which include the Pulitzer Prize); Press Release, Crown Publishers, *The Fourth Star* by David Cloud and Greg Jaffe (Oct. 13, 2009) (on file with author) (describing David Cloud's award "for coverage of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks").

⁹ Matthew Thornton, *Deals*, PUBLISHERS WKLY., Oct. 15, 2007, at 8 (reporting on the authors' original book proposal).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Jaffe, *supra* note 3 ("The Army that we saw fighting in 2007 and 2008 was nothing like the Army that we remembered from 2003. . . ."); *id.* ("The frame we had chosen for this book was incomplete.").

¹² *Id.*

¹³ See, e.g., UNIV. CHICAGO PRESS, *THE CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR WRITERS, EDITORS, AND PUBLISHERS* § 1.40, at 23 (16th ed. 2010) (observing how the preface "includes reasons for undertaking the work" and the author's "method of research").

¹⁴ The title of chapter eleven, "What Would You Do, Lieutenant?," for example, denotes General Chiarelli's recollection of a training film that encourages leaders to fire mortars even when confronted with malfunctions, a vignette that resembles his dilemma of commanding at a time when military policies were failing in a similar way. CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 235–36.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Lieutenant General (Ret.) James M. Dubik, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, PARAMETERS, Apr. 1, 2010, at 120 (inferring the book's central theme from its two-part title). But see discussion *infra* accompanying notes 32–35.

II. Journalistic Conventions as Obstacles to a Central Thesis in *The Fourth Star*

While *The Fourth Star* has topped military reading lists,¹⁶ and comes highly recommended by legal scholars,¹⁷ including the Army's Judge Advocate General,¹⁸ it has also garnered criticism for valuing storytelling over scholarly rigor,¹⁹ trivializing important military doctrines,²⁰ narrowly focusing on the Army and only four leaders,²¹ and rehashing existing literary studies of the surge.²² These conflicting evaluations and interpretations are largely attributable to the book's writing genre. Rather than a scholarly or historical piece with conventions that demand "complete accuracy,"²³ this book represents creative nonfiction (CNF).²⁴ Much like the COIN doctrine explored by Cloud and Jaffe, their CNF style abides by unique and non-traditional reporting rules.

¹⁶ See, e.g., J. Ford Huffman, *The Best Military Books of the Decade*, ARMY TIMES, Jan. 18, 2010, at 4.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Bovarnick, *Read Any Good (Professional) Books Lately?: A Suggested Professional Reading Program for Judge Advocates*, 204 MIL. L. REV. 260, 308 app. B (2010) (providing the author's recommendation on *The Fourth Star*).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 303 app. A (reprinting Lieutenant General Dana Chipman's recommendation).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Lieutenant Colonel Scott Logel, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, 63 NAVAL WAR C. REV. 159, 160 (2010) (observing how "Cloud and Jaffe deliver a story that is engaging, although short on analysis . . .").

²⁰ Compare CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 66 (summarizing the "Powell Doctrine" as a "preference for short, fire-power-intensive battles"), with Dubik, *supra* note 15, at 120 (suggesting that the authors' characterization of this doctrine misrepresents a "rich" theory that combines principles that "should [still] guide a nation deciding to wage war, regardless of type").

²¹ See, e.g., Jack D. Kern, *On the Nightstand—"The Fourth Star" by David Cloud and Greg Jaffe*, REFLECTIONS FROM DR. JACK: COMBINED ARMS CTR. BLOG (Nov. 13, 2009, 8:14 AM), <http://usacac.army.mil/blog/> (follow 2009 archive) (suggesting greater coverage of Generals Jack Keane and Ray Odierno); Esoskin, *Eph Bookshelf#5: The Fourth Star*, EPHBLOG (Jun. 30, 2010, 10:27 AM), <http://www.ephblog.com> (criticizing Cloud and Jaffe for neglecting the experiences of the Marine Corps).

²² One West Point critic faults *The Fourth Star* for following the standard "narrative arc and thrust" of popular "hagiographies" of the surge and providing "[n]othing really new . . . at all." Colonel Gian P. Gentile, *The Army You Have*, SMALL WARS J. BLOG (Oct. 26, 2009, 7:13 AM), <http://smallwarjournal.com/blog/2009> (follow links). For existing books in the same genre, see generally LINDA ROBINSON, TELL ME HOW THIS ENDS: GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE SEARCH FOR A WAY OUT OF IRAQ (2008); BOB WOODWARD, THE WAR WITHIN: A SECRET WHITE HOUSE HISTORY 2006–2008 (2008); THOMAS E. RICKS, THE GAMBLE: GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ, 2006–2009 (2009); KIMBERLY KAGAN, THE SURGE: A MILITARY HISTORY (2009). To their credit, however, Cloud and Jaffe draw from some of these works to enhance their own accounts. CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 306, 308, 310–12 (citing Woodward in their references); *id.* at 311–12 (citing Robinson).

²³ RICHARD D. BANK, THE EVERYTHING GUIDE TO WRITING NONFICTION 210 (2010).

²⁴ *Id.* ("Creative nonfiction is writing nonfiction (true and accurate content) employing the creative techniques of fiction writing including the use of literary devices.").

Creative nonfiction is like traditional reporting in the way it uses "story rather than datum" as "the basic unit" of communication.²⁵ In CNF, however, writers bring a personal dimension to their subjects with rich descriptions, conveying main points through a character's life experiences and fusing different dialogues with minimal summaries.²⁶ Authors in this genre often "underwrite" their points, hoping that the complete story will convey the key idea at some epiphanic moment.²⁷ While CNF permits authors the "flexibility" to depart from standard requirements for accuracy,²⁸ it bears dangers that befall Cloud and Jaffe, such as meandering through dialogue²⁹ and distorting facts through "artistic license."³⁰

Cloud and Jaffe's biggest problem is a series of competing themes that distract readers from their own acknowledged central thesis. According to veteran *New York Times* editor Francis Flaherty's analogy of a book to a tree, while an author can explore secondary themes, all of these should appear to the reader as branches, distinguished from the trunk, or main theme.³¹ Upon completing *The Fourth Star*, even with an epilogue, readers are left to wonder about the nature and scope of the "epic struggle" referenced in the book's title. While some reviewers conclude that the "epic" struggle involves the delicate balance between conventional war-fighting and non-conventional COIN strategies,³² Jaffe, himself, rejects this interpretation.³³ For others, the book's "epic" struggle might

²⁵ Nicholas Lemann, *Weaving Story and Idea*, in TELLING TRUE STORIES: A NONFICTION WRITERS' GUIDE FROM THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY 112, 116 (Mark Kramer & Wendy Call eds., 2007).

²⁶ See, e.g., BANK, *supra* note 23, at 198–201 (reviewing the numerous conventions of CNF, including the central objective "Show, don't tell.").

²⁷ David Halberstam, *The Narrative Idea*, in TELLING TRUE STORIES: A NONFICTION WRITERS' GUIDE FROM THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY 10, 11 (Mark Kramer & Wendy Call eds., 2007). To Halberstam, "The book is the idea. Once you have the idea, it just flows out." *Id.* at 10. See also Leonard, *supra* note 6, at 123 (distinguishing *The Fourth Star* from "contemporary military biographies [that] can seem sterile or even distant").

²⁸ BANK, *supra* note 23, at 210.

²⁹ Lemann, *supra* note 25, at 112, 115–16 (describing the danger of merely "spin[ning] a dramatic yarn.").

³⁰ BANK, *supra* note 23, at 210.

³¹ FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 53. Moreover, a cluster of too many branches will tend to "muck up the impact of each." *Id.* at 32–33.

³² See, e.g., Dubik, *supra* note 15, at 120 (reaching this conclusion but finding that the book fails to answer the call of the question). The epilogue also references this question. CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 286 (addressing General Casey's dilemma of "locat[ing] the middle-point somewhere between counterinsurgency and conventional combat that would allow the military to react in whichever direction it had to in the future").

³³ Abu Muqawama, *Book Club: A Special Abu Muqawama Interview with Greg Jaffe*, ABU MUQAWAMA POST (Oct. 29, 2009, 5:59 PM), <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama/> 2009/10 (follow club listing) (citing Jaffe: "This whole conventional vs. irregular debate is stupid. War is war. And we waste far too much energy trying to categorize it. I think most lieutenants, captains and majors are beyond this false conventional vs. irregular frame that we try to impose over war.") (emphasis added).

concern the delicate balance between dissenting to prevailing policies and obeying orders of military (and civilian) superiors—especially when the policies are clearly failing.³⁴ Another possibility is the “epic” struggle to develop educated military leaders by balancing the proper mix of troop time in the field with time to obtain an advanced education.³⁵ While each tree branch is significant in its own right, Cloud and Jaffe’s failure to distinguish a trunk is the major drawback of *The Fourth Star*.

Despite varied interpretations, Jaffe cautions readers against the search for a “secret story of Iraq” in *The Fourth Star*,³⁶ instead highlighting a far simpler theme: Key events in the four generals’ prior experiences must have something to do with the way they waged war and eventually contributed to the Army’s doctrinal transformation.³⁷ The trouble with this explanation is that the “something” remains undefined. At a lecture, Cloud explained that he and Jaffe selected pivotal events to explain the generals’ choices based on guesswork, once referring to their theories as nothing more than “two-bit psychological analysis.”³⁸ Jaffe further confessed that the featured generals might not agree with his take on the formative events in each of their lives.³⁹ Ultimately, the cacophony of noise obscured the authors’ underlying message: unique educational experiences and

uncommon paths allowed senior military leaders to approach a similar conflict in different but meaningful ways, sometimes with resounding success. While the book could have readily utilized this theme as the “trunk” of the tree, the authors’ prose from the start veers off in multiple but confusing directions, making this message vague at best.

Even the most accommodating reader should be concerned with Jaffe’s further admission that, based on more recent events, he would have written chapters differently⁴⁰ and that the book, though published, still represents “a work-in-progress.”⁴¹ These comments suggest that he also succumbs to “presentism”—a limiting perspective in which current events shape the reporting of historical ones.⁴² Within *The Fourth Star*, presentism is most evident in the way the authors downplay the Army’s use of Delta Force, Ranger, and Special Forces teams to transcend the limitations of conventional war-fighting approaches.⁴³ Likewise, the authors, in their haste to convince readers that the Army ignored important Vietnam lessons, forget to explain the essence of those very lessons. The closest they come is a few lines of text discussing an American “advisory command” for South Vietnamese military units in the ninth chapter.⁴⁴

Despite an impenetrable theme, *The Fourth Star* succeeds in its diverse use of source materials—a hallmark of effective CNF.⁴⁵ Cloud and Jaffe accordingly build the book on a broad foundation that includes everything from detailed interviews with the four generals (and their families and neighbors) to quotes from the generals’ fitness reports,⁴⁶ professors’ scribbles on their term papers,⁴⁷ and even entries in the generals’ wartime journals.⁴⁸ At a time when sitting military commanders face significant consequences for sharing such raw materials and insights,⁴⁹ this book provides

³⁴ Readers encounter the issue in the Army’s hostile reception to Major Andy Krepinevich’s critical book about Vietnam, CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 62–64, and, decades later, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling’s critique of general officers’ leadership in the contemporary fight. *Id.* at 270–72, 294–95. The authors contrast these events with accounts of General Abizaid, who was criticized by his staff, *id.* at 136, and General Casey, who was criticized by Senator John McCain, for painting too optimistic a view of the Army’s capabilities when the officer should have acknowledged the drawbacks of existing plans. *Id.* at 253. *The Fourth Star*’s epilogue teases readers: “[Chiarelli] knew what kind of officers would be needed. He wanted an officer corps that argued, debated, and took intellectual risks.” *Id.* at 295.

³⁵ While the authors explore the benefits of advanced education for Generals Abizaid, Chiarelli, and Petraeus, in all three cases, the generals’ academic experiences exposed them to substantial risk. After completing a Ph.D. and teaching, Petraeus was forced to counter the perception that he had only book-knowledge of combat. *See, e.g., id.* at 93 (describing the disparaging name “Doc”). Chiarelli had been written-off by his branch manager for staying in an academic setting too long. *Id.* at 59. And, Abizaid’s decision to undertake graduate study in Jordan initially made him a pariah to even the State Department. *Id.* at 28. The epilogue highlights this struggle by criticizing the small number of officers accepted for overseas academic scholarships. *Id.* at 288.

³⁶ Greg Jaffe, Book Lecture at the Center for New American Security: Book Launch—The Fourth Star (Oct. 13, 2009), *available at* <http://www.youtube.com>.

³⁷ Jaffe, *supra* note 3 (“What allows some of them to lead change and drive change within this institution better than others? I think that’s the essence of our book.”).

³⁸ David Cloud, Book Lecture at the Center for New American Security: Book Launch—The Fourth Star (Oct. 13, 2009), *available at* <http://www.youtube.com>.

³⁹ “I think Casey’s experiences of . . . losing his dad . . . affected the way he fought in Iraq,” Jaffe revealed, further expressing, “in ways that I’m not sure I fully understand and I’m not sure he fully understands.” Jaffe, *supra* note 3.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Jill Lepore, *Writing About History*, in TELLING TRUE STORIES: A NONFICTION WRITERS’ GUIDE FROM THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY 86, 86 (Mark Kramer & Wendy Call eds., 2007).

⁴³ CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 22–24, 37, 90, & 186–87.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 183. This extremely brief reference apparently describes one of “the most relevant lessons when it came to rebuilding a foreign military.” *Id.* at 179.

⁴⁵ Halberstam, *supra* note 27, at 10, 12–13.

⁴⁶ *See, e.g.,* CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 298 (citing to General Abizaid’s evaluation).

⁴⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 61 (citing written comments from General Petraeus’s graduate school professor).

⁴⁸ *See, e.g., id.* at 169 (sharing General Casey’s reminder to himself about the importance of “attitude”).

⁴⁹ *See, e.g.,* Bill Gertz, *Inside the Ring*, WASH. TIMES, July 15, 2010, at 9 (describing effects of the resignations of General Stanley McChrystal and Admiral William J. Fallon based on media reports).

readers with a rare personal introduction.⁵⁰ As an added benefit, this uncommon perspective provides career advice for readers⁵¹ and professional reading recommendations,⁵² as if directly from the generals and their mentors.

While *The Fourth Star*'s varied sources give the book tremendous value, the authors largely mismanage source-attribution. Jaffe recalls that he and Cloud were completely overwhelmed with materials and had exceeded their allotted research time by three months.⁵³ Their citations reflect this problem; while the authors sometimes signal the origin of quotes with a section of endnotes that track specific references,⁵⁴ numerous quotations in the book remain unattributed, causing the reader to doubt whether dialogue—like Winn Casey's tearful ruminations over an argument between Major General George Casey Sr. and his son's college friends—was the product of a verbatim recollection or merely an example of the artistic license that pervades CNF.⁵⁵ Despite the doubts of at least one critic,⁵⁶ the authors' uncommon access to the generals' personal lives leaves little reason to doubt Cloud and Jaffe's journalistic integrity.

III. *The Fourth Star*'s Lessons for Judge Advocates and Concluding Remarks

Judge advocates will benefit from *The Fourth Star* because the many struggles facing the Army's top leaders unavoidably concern everyone in uniform. Interestingly, aside from references to two generals' early plans to pursue careers as lawyers,⁵⁷ Cloud and Jaffe wait until the book's

seventh chapter (April 2003) to portray a military lawyer.⁵⁸ Foregoing numerous opportunities to discuss judge advocates' military justice function,⁵⁹ the authors first depict the military attorney in their description of then-Major General Petraeus's efforts to commence elections and promote trade and economic development in Mosul, Iraq.⁶⁰ From these accounts, not only do readers learn that commanders require frequent and effective legal guidance to wage effective COIN operations, readers also learn that judge advocates must rise above their former role "playing second fiddle to swaggering combat officers" to develop innovative solutions from "heady" concepts.⁶¹

Through Colonel Richard Hatch's experiences, Cloud and Jaffe also relate the dangers inherent in the judge advocate's new role. If a staff judge advocate's job is merely to help commanders escape the constraints of civilian policies, judge advocates must be willing to accept the possibility that their commanders will be relieved for following legal advice.⁶² The firing of General Wesley Clark for countermanding his civilian bosses exists in *The Fourth Star* as a constant reminder of the inherent risks of side-stepping.⁶³

Concluding with Flaherty's arboreal analogy, Cloud and Jaffe prove that some trees can still be visually appealing despite a trunk obscured by stray and intertwined branches. Even with an ambiguous theme, multiple "epic" struggles, and unanswered questions, the book provides uncommon and unique insights into the Army's recent transformation. Hence, it is worthwhile to obtain and thoroughly read *The Fourth Star*.

⁵⁰ One reviewer suggests that Cloud and Jaffe not only "read [the generals'] e-mails" but also "their minds." J. Ford Huffman, *When 4-Stars Collide*, A.F. TIMES, Nov. 16, 2009 (praising the book's "provocative inside information").

⁵¹ Consider General Jack Galvin's career advice to General Petraeus: "Think beyond the foxhole, about history and strategy, about the relations between the military and their civilian bosses in Washington, about the next war . . ." CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 43.

⁵² See, e.g., *id.* at 94 (describing General Petraeus's experience with Lartéguy and Fall's books); *id.* at 168 (reviewing General Casey's experience with Nagl's book); *id.* at 178 (describing Petraeus's lessons from Lawrence's book). See generally JEAN LARTÉGUY, *THE CENTURIONS* (Xan Fielding trans., 1960); BERNARD B. FALL, *HELL IN A VERY SMALL PLACE: THE SIEGE OF DIEN BIEN PU* (2d ed. 2002); LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN A. NAGL, *LEARNING TO EAT SOUP WITH A KNIFE: COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM MALAYA AND VIETNAM* (2002); T.E. LAWRENCE, *SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM* (1922).

⁵³ Jaffe, *supra* note 3.

⁵⁴ CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 297–312 (providing a separate "notes" section).

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 6.

⁵⁶ Kern, *supra* note 21 (drawing attention to errors in people's ranks and names).

⁵⁷ CLOUD & JAFFE, *supra* note 1, at 5 (discussing General Casey's legal ambitions); *id.* at 15 (describing General Chiarelli's multiple attempts to gain admittance to law school).

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 118 (describing the 101st Airborne Division's Staff Judge Advocate, Colonel Richard Hatch).

⁵⁹ See, e.g., *id.* at 93 (describing the "zero-defect" Army); *id.* at 119 (describing the problem of drug-addicted Soldiers); *id.* at 236–37 (describing Colonel Michael Steele and the Hadiitha incident).

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 118–19, 130–31.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 119.

⁶² Notably, the innovative policies blessed-off by Colonel Hatch ran contrary to the positions of both the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Department of State. *Id.* at 130–33.

⁶³ *Id.* at 108.