



THE VALUE OF WRITTEN THOUGHT: STEPHEN VOGEL (ON WRITING)

By Stephen Vogel and Michael Neiberg October 20, 2020
<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/on-writing/vogel-neiberg/>

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Michael Neiberg: I'm **Michael Neiberg**, Chair of War Studies at the U.S. Army War College here in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm here today with my friend **Steve Vogel**, former reporter for the Washington Post, who covered Military and Veterans Affairs. He was overseas for the fall of the Berlin Wall, and he's been all over the world covering war and conflict. Steve is also the author of three books; "The Pentagon: A History", "Through the Perilous Fight," about the battle in the Chesapeake Bay and the burning of the White House, and most recently, "Betrayal in Berlin," a wonderful spy story about an incident that happened in that city during the Cold War. Steve, welcome to the podcast.

Steve Vogel: Great to be with you, Mike.

MN: Steve, you and I first met when I think "The Pentagon" had just come out or was about to come out, and we met on the Department of the Army's Historical Advisory Committee in a Pentagon conference room and I remember you telling me about that book coming out, and I think you and I had a conversation, I want to say over lunch about the very two different kinds of writing styles that you were dealing with: one as a journalist and one as an historian. Do you see those as two different ways of trying to write? Or do you see them as kind of synergistic in building upon one another?

SV: Yeah, actually I see a lot of similarities. There're certain things of course, the immediate pressure of getting a deadline story out versus taking the long view, taking more time to really fully develop a story, but I think fundamentally they are very much alike. In fact, I've tried to use some of my journalism techniques to put those to use in the books I've written, just in terms of having a story that kind of flows that keeps the reader engaged. That's basically what journalism is in a way, trying to keep readers hooked on a story and you kind of lead them on and they kind of want to know where they're going, but they want some surprises and adventures along the way.

MN: Yeah, I guess that's the difference, right? I mean at least to me, trained as an academic historian, we're supposed to not treat our writing as a whodunit. We're supposed to kind of give the argument upfront, give the argument again, and reinforce the argument at the end. We're not really trained to write in quite the same way. So, what I think I'm hearing you say is you don't necessarily see attention in those things you're trying to tell a narrative story in the same way in long form that you would in short form?

SV: Yeah. In a way I'm trying to tell these stories in a chronological fashion too. I'm trying not to just be sitting 50 years on and sort of being the voice of God and telling what happened in the past. I'm trying to put the reader there at the moment, understand what the characters that I'm writing about, what they know, what their problems are, what challenges they're facing, kind of put the reader in the shoes of the people I'm writing about. And again, that's something that I think a lot of good journalism does.

MN: One thing we don't do as historians, of course, at least normally, some do, is to interview the people that we're writing about. So, you have the opportunity when you're doing journalism of course, you talk to people who are involved in these stories, but when you're writing something like the 1812 campaign, that's not possible. So, do you find that to be a little difficult in trying to get in the minds of people that you can't talk to?

SV: In a way I was fearing that might be the case, but the thing is that so many people from that era wrote such beautiful letters. It's one of the real gems, one of the real pleasures of writing about a period, say 200 years ago is how much better the written form was than today. I sort of pity in a way the historians that are going to be trying to piece together history based on text messages...

MN: PowerPoint...

SV: ...or Twitter feeds or something like that. Because people like Francis Scott Key or the British Admiral who attacked Washington, George Coburn, they had a wonderful way of words. They would sit down and just write these long letters with brilliant asides and witty comments about the people that they were encountering and in a way, you feel like you're interviewing these people, or at least you're having a conversation with them, particularly if you could find a series of letters that go back and forth, you can sort of get a flow of actual conversation rather than just dry words from memorandum or something like that. You can actually have these characters speak again in the words that they were actually using at the time.

MN: The frustration for me is I hear somebody or read something where someone will say, well I wish I had more time to tell you about X and I'm thinking no, no that's what I want to hear. You can't talk to the person and say tell me more about that or ask a question that they're not addressing. So, sometimes the frustration is that the sources aren't telling you the information

that you actually want, and sometimes it's not telling you the information in the format that you want.

SV: Yeah. In doing interviews for the Berlin book, I remember one of the Army Corps of Engineers' officers I spoke with was... I reached him three or four times over the telephone, was trying to set up an in-person interview and he was about 88 years old at the time and he had great stories to tell, but he was always so busy with what he was doing at the moment that he said, well, you know, let's talk soon. I'm busy right now. I'm working on a family history project. And about the 4th time, I said, I'm going to keep you on the phone, I just kept on asking him questions about, well tell me a little bit about this first and you kind of get a conversation going and I hate to say it, particularly when you're dealing with people who are in their late 80s or 90s, you don't know when you're going to get another chance to speak with them. That's always my first priority in working on a book of fairly recent history is to get to the people involved as soon as possible, because you never know what the what might happen down the road.

MN: So, what's your academic background? Were you a history major or journalism major as an undergrad?

SV: I was actually a political science major at the College of William and Mary. What they called a Government Department, but I took a lot of History at William and Mary and I also took a lot of English courses. And then as a graduate student, I was at studying international relations at Johns Hopkins, SAIS, the School Advanced International Studies. So, where I studied with Eliot Cohen in his Strategic Studies program, which really focuses a lot on military history. So, I did have a lot of exposure from that standpoint, but I'm not a formally trained historian such as yourself.

MN: Or a formally trained journalist or did that come at some point as well?

SV: With journalism I kind of come from the old school where back when I first started working at a newspaper in the early 80s, a lot of editors still preferred their reporters to get their training, their journalism training in the field versus in a school. The first newspaper I worked for, it was in Alexandria, Virginia, and it was a little weekly that covered everything from all the City Council and the police and courts to what was going on with the the Alexandria Minor League Baseball team, The Dukes, that they used to have. And so, as a journalist you get to do a little bit of everything. I felt at times I was doing everything but sweeping up the floors at night because you're working, you're taking photos, you're helping with the layout of the stories, and you really learn the business. And I had a great editor, Jim Cole Smith, who worked for the AP over in Tokyo and had lots of experience and for me that was, I think, a better way to learn journalism than going to journalism school where, to my way of thinking, I would rather have had the time

to study history and political science because those are often things that I write about than learning the craft of journalism in school. I felt it was better for me to actually learn by doing.

MN: And this is the kind of newspaper that unfortunately, we just don't have that many of anymore, right? That industry has changed so much.

SV: Yeah, it's horrible.

MN: So, obviously you didn't go overseas covering a war for a newspaper in Alexandria, so what was the first overseas assignment that you had? Was it Berlin?

SV: Well, basically what happened was I was working as a local journalist in Northern Virginia, really enjoyed it, but I did want to go overseas and you're right, the Alexandria Journal that I was working for didn't have need of coverage from Germany or anywhere else.

MN: Probably didn't have a Sarajevo Bureau at that newspaper, right?

SV: Yeah, exactly, but what happened was the Journal was actually owned by the Army Times publishing company. So, the Army Times folks were right upstairs from us based in Northern Virginia and I knew the editor of Army Times, Tom Donnelly, and I said, hey, if I went over to Germany, would you be interested in some freelance stories? And he was like, yes.

MN: And this was what year?

SV: This was 1989. This was the summer basically of '89, so about three or four months before the wall came down, but you know things were percolating a little bit.

MN: Good timing.

SV: Yeah, I wish I could say I really knew what was going to happen. But the truth is, a friend of mine wanted to go to Oktoberfest and I said, oh well, I'll go with you, we'll go to Oktoberfest. I'm going to stick around and try my luck at freelancing. So, I mean that's basically the good timing I had.

MN: Now, we're going to work on that story because of your knowledge of history, you knew something was going to happen, so you wanted to get there. So, you had been to Berlin before, right? If I remember, you had been there with your father, is that right?

SV: Yeah, so my dad was based in Berlin as an undercover officer with the CIA, something I knew nothing about, but of course would eventually learn many years later. But we were there. He was stationed there starting in '57. I was born in 1960 and the Wall went up while we were

there, which is a pretty exciting time, needless to say. And I'd gone back to Berlin as a German language student after finishing high school where I studied German. Three or four classmates and our German teacher went on a long bike trip mostly through Germany, so we had plenty of chances to use our German staying in youth hostels. And we went to Berlin at that time, and through Checkpoint Charlie and that was of course very dramatic and exciting about 1978, very much the height of the Cold War. And so, coming back again in '89 as a journalist, I certainly felt a connection to the city having been there when the wall went up to be lucky enough to be there when it came down. It was pretty cool.

MN: Yeah, that's pretty remarkable actually to be there when it went up and when it came down.

SV: Right, yeah.

MN: So, did you think that experience being in Germany, did that help to sharpen your interest in history and the way that big stories kind of have a background to them?

SV: Yeah, certainly having that life experience in Berlin and my dad was also stationed in Mexico and Islamabad, Pakistan and Argentina. So, having that experience as a kid, living in these exotic places and being somewhat connected to big events that were happening around the globe, certainly fostered a curiosity and an interest in learning more about some of these places where we lived and being aware of some of the history that I might not have had that experience if I had been growing up in the states.

MN: Yeah, because I think it's one of those things. I think too many historians, we write sometimes about the past without necessarily connecting it to the future and too many journalists write about the present without understanding the past that created what they are writing about. You have the background to do both which is important. And the Berlin book is a pretty good example of that and understanding how the time period you are writing about, this espionage story that you tell, how that came to be in the first place and why it matters.

SV: Yeah. Learning the backstory, as we sometimes call it, is really, I think, critical for telling the story smartly or in a way that you can really explain better to your readers why certain things are happening or why they matter. And what the story is on some of the characters you are trying to introduce to the readers. You don't just throw, for example, the CIA Berlin-based Chief who is a prime character in the Berlin book, Phil Harvey. You don't just want to throw him out there because he is kind of an interesting character who throws martinis down and carries about six or eight guns on his person as he is going. Virtually anywhere he is going, he is loaded with ammunition and weaponry. You kind of want to tell where these people came from. That's even more so of George Blake, the British spy who ends up betraying the tunnel. He has a pretty

fascinating backstory. So yeah. I think that is an important part of what I try to do as a journalist and a writer of nonfiction history.

MN: Two of the books you have done have been very modern. The Pentagon, a building that you worked in a lot, that you must have been thinking about the history of that building every day. Then Berlin, where you have this very close history to that city. Then you write this book on 1812 which I know some of the events took place very close to where you live. It's a very different time period. How hard was it for you to get your head into the early 19th century? We historians typically don't jump out of time periods all that often. If we do, it's usually a challenge for us because specialists in that time period, sometimes push back on us a little bit. Did you feel that you had a little more freedom to do that than maybe I would have?

SV: I guess it's a certain ignorance and arrogance that a journalist has to think that, oh, I'll just parachute into this place in time and see what I can find out. To me, first of all, the specialists, the historians that I encountered on the 1812 story were just uniformly gracious and helpful and it's a fairly small fraternity, compared to the Civil War or a time period like that. So, the people I encountered, everybody from Don Hickey who is sort of the Dean of 1812 history, to some of the specialists in the Chesapeake Theater that I was writing about, people like Ralph Eshelman, they were just wonderful hosts. I would go tours with Ralph. We would go by boat and land to all these sites. They really embraced me and they kind of welcomed in a sense having a fresh eye and someone who was enthusiastic about the story. That's the other thing that you have to have. To me, it's not so important whether that's your specialty.

MN: Absolutely.

SV: It's more important that you really feel enthusiastic about the story. And to me, the entire story of the Chesapeake Campaign and the War of 1812 was just amazing and one that's pretty much overlooked in American history by a lot of folks.

MN: This might happen to you all the time. People come to me and they say I have an idea to write a book on X, I say to them, are you ready to live with X for the five, seven, eight, ten years of your life, because that's what it very well could be. It's very difficult to close the door on a project like that.

SV: Yeah, it's completely true. And I have withdrawal all the time with the 1814 stuff these days. In fact, some of the folks that I met are disappointed, mad at me that I moved 150 years to the future, to the Cold War. I am still in touch with them and I don't feel like I'm closing the door on that forever because I still have that bug.

MN: Sure.

SV: There are still so many great stories to go back to there. So, I've kept all my notes and materials and books are overflowing in my office as we speak.

MN: I think we all have that problem. The other thing that you and I have in common... when I first met you, I was working yet at the Army War College but we both have that historical mind and we work every day with the DOD and we work every day with looking at the way that military professionals deal with problems that we've looked at in the past. So, I guess I'm curious too whether your face as a historian and your face as a journalist, whether each of those helps you understand the other a little bit better. Because I think that working at the War College has helped me to understand the way that organizations like the Army solve problems today, it helps be better understand how they solved them in the past. Has that been true for you too?

SV: Yeah. I think having both of those hats really helps you view the other. Sometimes I read stories in the newspaper or elsewhere in the media that I can see really leave out important historic context and I can completely understand the frustration of someone who is a specialist in that field, who sees all the mischaracterizations or misunderstandings that are perpetuated in a lot of media accounts that repeat the same mistakes over and over. It's very frustrating. But on the other hand, I can also understand where the journalist is coming from where they sometimes get hammered by a historian for not including all the context or everything and the journalist has, oftentimes, a set amount of space.

MN: A couple hundred words.

SV: Right, or just the need to keep the story moving and not lose the reader with too much detail. And I'm someone who is constantly fighting that battle because as a newspaper reporter at The Post, I was always trying to cram more stuff in, and the editors were saying, wait, this story is too long, we have to cut this. It's a constant battle where you want to keep the story concise and clean, but you want it to be as accurate as possible. It's a constant battle.

MN: So, we are running out of time already which is unfortunate, but I want to ask you a couple of questions. I want to ask you, what your experience working in archives is like. For most professional historians like myself, that's a formal training process we go through to try to figure out how to do that. And I'm guessing you didn't have a master's or PhD level history class in how to deal with archives. So, what was that like? Especially for the 1812 book to step into something that must have been unfamiliar to you? Am I right?

SV: Not completely because at William & Mary I had some great history professors that made us really work through the archives. I took a course on the invasion of North America basically looking at the colonization from the perspective of Native Americans. And my professor just had

us go way back into the William & Mary amazing library to find the primary records of the interactions from three or four hundred years ago. And so, at SAIS, the strategic studies program, Dr. Cohen was a real stickler for archival research.

MN: Yes, he is.

SV: So, I feel like I learned a lot from both of those programs. And then as a journalist, I was always applying that. Even as a reporter in Alexandria, I was always going to some of the local history archives in Alexandria and elsewhere and looking, working with local historians to find some of the archival material. So, I think part of it came naturally to me anyway but also, I was lucky to have teachers at all levels who emphasized that.

MN: I had that experience in Ann Arbor too working as an undergraduate. We got to work with 19th century documents and I was amazed that they would let an undergraduate pull out these Civil War letters from Michigan soldiers and let us flip through them. I was stunned and am still stunned at what they let researchers just swipe off the streets and look at at places like the National Archives.

SV: I was amazed by that too and for the 1814 Campaign, you are handling letters that Francis Scott Key or other figures wrote personally. You really feel nervous actually, touching them.

MN: French military archives have these beautiful, hand-drawn full color Napoleonic maps that they will just let people take out and look at. I am still astonished. I understand it is a little harder to see them now than when I saw them maybe 20 years ago.

SV: Right.

MN: I want to ask you a few more quick questions because we are running out of time. Are you working on or thinking about a book next? Or are you not at that stage just yet?

SV: I'm thinking about a book about the Korean War. I haven't decided yet. But one of the stories I covered as a reporter involved the U.S. Army experience at Chosin Reservoir and I covered during the 50th anniversary of the Korean War back in 2000, I met a lot of those guys. They were finally awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for their heroism. Because they were kind of overlooked, or even worse, the marines everyone knows the great marine story at Chosin Reservoir, but the Army had a different experience there. But I think there was a lot of heroism and real bravery there. I have always been fascinated by that story and have thought about going back to look at that in more detail.

MN: Well, good. That will bring you to Carlisle because some sources must be up here.

SV: Definitely. They definitely are.

MN: I want to wrap up. Would you please tell our listeners where you are actually sitting right now and tell us a little bit about your workspace because you graciously invited me to come down there and I have been green with envy ever since.

SV: Yeah, it's a old log cabin. I live in the tiny town of Barnesville, Maryland which is in upper Montgomery County. There is an area known as the agricultural reserve and it's kind of a real mix of old homes and newer homes. But the home where we live is about 200 years old and there is a log cabin in the back that's been restored and I, of course, immediately claimed it as my office. It's kind of quirky. It's got a wood stove, so I keep from freezing to death in the winter. There're all types of critters, various bugs that sometimes crawl in. But it's wonderful because I've got kids back in the house. Especially in past years there could be a lot of drama and rage going on back in the house, but out here, I've got my own world and I never get tired of sitting out here, these hand-hewn timbers, strange oddities about this cabin I find help me work.

MN: Well, except for the bugs, it is an absolute writers' paradise to be back there. So, I am envious of you. It must be just a perfect place to sit down and think. Well Steve, I am really grateful for you taking the time. I know how busy you are, and I know how many directions you are being pulled, but it was great having you here and I hope you do work on the Chosin Reservoir book and I hope it brings you to Carlisle very often.

SV: Yeah, I would love to do that. It would be great to see you again soon.

MN: Great talking to you, Steve. Thanks a lot.

SV: Yeah, that was fun, really enjoyed it.