

REBALANCING OPERATIONAL HISTORY



Jim Malachowski

History teaches that meaningful reform is born not merely from operational necessity but through rigorous reflection on past failures and successes. Few legislative acts have reshaped American military thinking as profoundly as the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. By dismantling interservice rivalries, it ushered in an era of unified planning and joint decision making, fundamentally enhancing combat effectiveness.¹

Today, defense leaders strive to modernize command structures, and Army leadership is advancing continuous transformation to ensure that the Army's combat-ready formations remain capable of providing the nation's land-power force within a unified joint force. Yet, historians contend with a critical second-order effect of Goldwater-Nichols: the fragmentation of war records and classification authority across the joint staff and individual services. Consequently, no singular, cohesive account exists that fully captures the scope of America's campaigns or the multifaceted nature of modern warfare. This fractured documentation undermines institutional memory and deprives military leaders of a consolidated source of strategic insight. While some advocate for comprehensive reform—a Goldwater-Nichols for history programs—such an approach risks homogenizing service histories, diminishing distinct service cultures, and placing undue burdens on warfighters to interpret official history when they should be focusing on the mission at hand. One solution is to centralize war records and delegate a degree of declassification authority to service history programs.

Historical functions are integral to command operations, supporting decision making and institutional memory. According to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, each service component is responsible for recording the history of operations within its respective combatant command.² However, only a fraction of Army service component commands and units possess viable history programs. To accomplish its mission, the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) must provide essential historical support alongside its traditional role of writing and publishing the Army's official history. To do this, it needs source data and war records.

Under the Federal Records Act of 1950, as amended, the military is required to retain and preserve records of wartime actions. However, records management remains an administrative

control function of individual services. A 2012 ProPublica exposé revealed years of lost war records, raising concerns about the military's failure to preserve operational field documentation.³ This reporting drew congressional scrutiny and led the secretary and chief of staff of the Army to order commanders to forward war and contingency operations records to CMH.⁴ They also designated CMH as the Army's official repository for war records and tasked the Center with assessing the completeness of historical documentation—reinforcing the paradigm that historical activities follow administrative lines of authority.

For strategic planners and policymakers, a complete historical record is more than a simple archive; it is a repository of lessons learned, doctrinal evolution, and operational insights forged under duress. For the public, the Army secretary prioritized reconnecting citizens with their Army, fostering national pride by highlighting the Army's history. CMH plays a vital role in writing and disseminating official Army history, but its ability to do so hinges on having the records and a timely method for declassification review.

Despite this necessity, the Army does not control when wartime records are declassified. Under Goldwater-Nichols, the Army serves as a force provider rather than an operational warfighting command. Declassification authority remains with the original classification authority within combatant commands, and these officials determine the classification duration necessary for safeguarding national security.⁵ These same officials oversee declassification determinations for information generated under combatant command authority.

This bureaucratic divide creates a persistent catch-22. CMH is tasked with stewarding Army war records, yet it lacks the authority to review them for declassification. Meanwhile, combatant commands lack the personnel to process the overwhelming backlog of classified documents. Campaign monographs tell both the story of the Army at war and of the combatant command executing its mission. Without timely declassification, the story will languish untold, lessons will be lost, and the military will miss the opportunity to foster public connection.

Fortunately, historical precedent offers a solution. Declassification efforts—some led by CMH—following the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, and peacekeeping efforts in

Kosovo in the 1990s enabled streamlined reviews for publication without undermining national security. Although the scale of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) presents greater complexity, these models provide a roadmap. CMH has the official archive of GWOT records. Delegating CMH specified authority to review and declassify Army war records would bridge the gap, restoring balance between immediate operational needs and the long-term imperative to provide accessible military history for decision makers, historians, and the American public.



Notes

1. George Greanias, “Goldwater Ripples: How Defense Reform Made the Fighting Force More Diplomatic,” *War on the Rocks*, 5 Sep 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/goldwater-ripples-how-defense-reform-made-the-fighting-force-more-diplomatic>.
2. Chairman Joint Chs Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 5320.01D, 27 Apr 2023, Guidance for the Joint History Program, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%205320.01D.pdf>.
3. ProPublica, “Lost to History: Missing War Records Complicate Benefit Claims by Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans,” 9 Nov 2012, <https://www.propublica.org/article/lost-to-history-missing-war-records-complicate-benefit-claims-by-veterans>.
4. Memo, Dept. Army, 1 Jul 2013, sub: Collection of U.S. Army Records From Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn, CMH Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC.
5. “Original Classification,” Code of Federal Regulations, 22 C.F.R. § 9.4. (2024).

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“This We’ll Defend.” The rattlesnake, which predates the eagle as a national symbol, had appeared on regimental colors, local flags, and even currency, often bearing slogans such as “don’t tread on me,” “peaceful unless provoked,” and “no one will provoke me with impunity.” The seal contains several other powerful symbols, rooted deeply in the nation’s origins, which held profound meaning for the country’s first soldiers. The Phrygian cap, worn by “foreigners” in ancient Greece and freed slaves in ancient Rome, symbolized liberty and a link to ancient republics, which resonated deeply with American revolutionaries who saw their struggle as a defense of natural rights. The cuirass, the panoply of arms, the cannon and cannon balls at the ready, the mortar and bombs also at the ready, the spontoon, drum, sword, and the musket with fixed bayonet represent the nation’s aggregate might in repose—ready for war, but not actively waging war—beneath the symbol of the rattlesnake. Elements of the original War Office seal eventually were used in the seal of the Department of the Army, formed out of the War Department by the National Security Act of 1947.

As we celebrate the U.S. Army’s 250th birthday and commemorate the American Revolution, it is worthwhile to reconsider the “This” that our Army defends. “This” is our republican system of government, springing from the will of a free people. “This” is civilian control of our military, in the service of defending that system and our rights. “This” is our pride in our revolutionary origins and our military members who serve as free citizens in our total force: the Regular Army, National Guard, and Reserves. “This” is our steadfast loyalty and support of our allies and partners, many of whom have shed their own blood and spent their own treasure to support us time and again. As we consider the Army’s seal, let us acknowledge and celebrate our origin story and all of these ideals.

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Notes

1. Ltr, Massachusetts Provincial Congress to Continental Congress, 16 May 1775, *The American Founding: Journals of the Continental Congress*, <https://americanfounding.org/entries/second-continental-congress-june-2-1775/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ltr, Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage to George Washington, 13 Aug 1775, National Archives Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0203>.
5. Ltr, Washington to Gage, 19 Aug 1775, National Archives Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0227>.