

Boy on the Bridge: The Story of John Shalikashvili's American Success
by Andrew Marble

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The first-ever biography of a remarkably unconventional “riches to rags and then back to riches” American success story: how a European prince-turned-stateless-penniless-WWII refugee became the highest-ranking officer in the world’s most powerful military primarily by developing an unusual personal philosophy toward human interaction.

How did John Shalikashvili do it? How did a penniless, stateless European WWII refugee become the 13th chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (1993-97), America’s top general and principal military advisor to the president, secretary of defense, and National Security Council?

Boy on the Bridge, the first-ever biography of his largely unknown riches-to-rags-back-to-riches success story, answers this question primarily through lively and nuanced character study. It sets the foundation by first bringing to life how the Poland-born Shalikashvili (1936-2011) actually descended from aristocratic European bloodlines that served with distinction in both battle and government for centuries. It recounts in gripping detail how, during World War II, after barely surviving the Warsaw Uprising, his family fled to Germany to live off the charity of relatives. And then how sheer luck brought them to Peoria, Illinois, where he was drafted in the Army.

The heart of the biography then lies in illuminating the myriad ways these European roots—Shalikashvili’s jaw-dropping royal background, unusual familial influences, and tumultuous war-torn childhood—instilled in him not just the abilities, but especially the motivation, to both capitalize on the golden opportunities and overcome the punishing obstacles America had in store.

Critically, his Old and New World experiences would combine to eventually create a leadership style quite unconventional for a military man and national security policymaker—one based on expertise, humility, straightforwardness, empathy, and collaboration. It’s a softer approach to human interaction that, as captured in vivid anecdotes, surprisingly made him increasingly good at resolving and especially preventing destructive conflict, thereby moving him steadily up the ranks.

A master of this leadership style by the time he reached general officer, Shalikashvili played a central role in safely guiding the US, Europe, and beyond through the chaos of the immediate post-Cold War world. As a three star, for instance, he successfully led the largest multinational humanitarian

operation to date in the successful rescue of 500,000 Kurdish refugees following the first Gulf War. While representing Joint Chiefs chairman Gen. Colin Powell, he helped secure “loose nukes” in the former Soviet republics. And as a four star serving first as NATO’s top military leader and then as the Joint Chiefs chairman himself, Shalikashvili joined forces with fellow immigrant Madeleine Albright on the Clinton administration’s Partnership for Peace initiative and NATO enlargement program of the 1990s.

Such an unusual man deserves an unusual biography. Written in an engaging narrative-non-fiction style that keeps names, dates, and jargon to a minimum, *The Boy on the Bridge* seeks first and foremost to “show” who he was, not “tell.” And given Shalikashvili was notoriously tight-lipped about himself, it thus relies heavily on others to do the showing—including four key relatives in the Old World and his high school girlfriend in the New. By portraying the beliefs and actions of his parents, grandmother, and great aunt under the stress of wartime, for instance, readers themselves will make vivid connections about how genes, upbringing, and childhood experiences influenced his rise up the ranks. The structure of the book is also atypical, relying heavily on flashbacks and jumpforwards to make important causal connections. Exposition, including the Prologue and Epilogue, supplements this largely character-driven biography.

The multiple story lines that appear at different places throughout the book—from Old World people, places, and events to New World opportunities and challenges—are then drawn inexorably together at book’s end. There, through a series of unexpected revelations that emerge around Shalikashvili’s confirmation hearing for the post, readers will discover the deepest motivators, both benevolent and malevolent, that spurred John Shalikashvili’s underdog American success: becoming the first immigrant, first draftee, and first Officer Candidate School graduate to serve as chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Andrew Marble, Phd, is a writer and editor who has worked in the fields of Chinese politics, Taiwan studies, US policy to Asia, and international food policy.

Boy on the Bridge is partially funded by a George Marshall Foundation Baruch Fellowship and was undertaken with Shalikashvili family support. It draws from travel to 30 cities, 12 states, 3 countries, and 2 continents; over 100 linear feet of restricted archival material split between two coasts; and over 300 interviews with Shalikashvili, relatives, classmates, and bosses, subordinates, and colleagues, ranging from fellow privates in the 1950s to Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, and Bill Perry who worked with him in the 1990s. In both 2014 and 2016 the author was one of three finalists for the Biographer International Organization's Hazel Rowley Prize for best proposal for a first biography.

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Early Praise for *Boy on the Bridge*:

“General John Shalikashvili was the American dream in living form. In telling his story for the first time, Andrew Marble masterfully weaves together how a man whose family fled war-torn Europe helped shape American foreign policy for decades and lived out the values of conscience and country. This isn’t just a must read for military buffs, it’s a source of inspiration for every American and anyone who aspires to be one.”—*Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry*

“If you understand the life of General John Shalikashvili, you will better appreciate what is great about America. By holding up an insightful mirror to this former WWII refugee’s little-known but captivating immigrant success story, biographer Andrew Marble has allowed the bright side of our country to now shine even more widely.”—*Former member of the U.S. House of Representatives Lee H. Hamilton*

"Boy on the Bridge, a lively and masterful character study of my former boss and hero CJCS Gen. John Shalikashvili, offers up a thought-provoking picture of how nature and nurture combined in dramatic ways to create that rarity: a leader and human being who was both genuinely selfless and supremely effective." —*Col. (ret) Joseph Collins, PhD, former CJCS Speechwriter and National Defense University professor*

"Andrew Marble's historical tour de force of a penniless European refugee who became the highest-ranking general officer in the US military is far more than a biography of one man. Rather, it's the story of a family of strong-willed people steeped in aristocratic traditions working to survive, as a unit, during one of the most turbulent times in world history.

A story of good fortune, of misfortune, of human flaws, of opportunities taken as well as missed, and how all those factors combined to influence the development of one little boy and the extraordinary man he would become." - *Col. (Ret.) Jon C. Schreyach, Former DivArty Operations Officer and Commander 6th Bn/14th FA, 1st Armored Division*

“It was so wonderful to see the General ‘Shali’ I worked for come alive in these pages! What a great American he was, and what a fine telling of his American story this book is. Read it for inspiration, and remember that when we talk about immigrants, we are talking about the John Shalikashvilis of this world.”—*Dr. Kori Schake, Deputy Director-General, International Institute for Strategic Studies*

“This is an astonishingly readable biography of one of the most remarkable leaders in American military history. If you don’t know of John Shalikashvili’s story, Andrew Marble’s saga of an immigrant boy who, in the 1990s became the highest-ranking leader at the Pentagon, will astonish and inspire.”—*Claudia Dreifus, Columbia University/New York Times*

“Using evocative storytelling, *Boy on the Bridge* offers us a long-overdue look at my long-time friend, fellow immigrant, and inspirational American soldier-statesman, John Shalikashvili. Shali’s dramatic Old World roots helped him forge a post-Cold War environment in which European and Central Asian regions, long embroiled in conflict, achieved stability and eventual peace. He was a master in determining what needs to be done and what is doable.”—*Nicholas Krawciw, Major General, US Army, Ret.*