

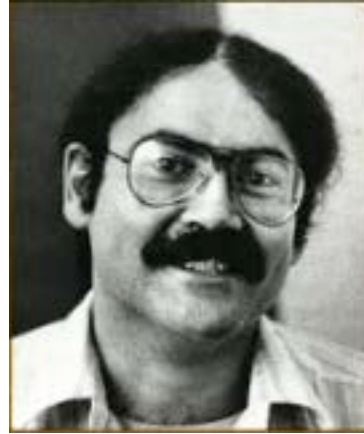
# John Prados

I met John Prados at SPI 50 years ago, as he sat waiting for a meeting with Redmond Simonsen, who had been working on the cover for the “Year of the Rat” issue of S&T. This issue featured a Vietnam War game, and an article by the designer who sat waiting. He struck me as calm, detached, an island unto himself. His confidence was about to be tested, with Redmond on the warpath, but John held his own and his article was not edited. (Redmond, the Air Force vet, felt it necessary to publish a disclaimer.) By this time John had experienced running a game company, the short-lived Morningside Game Project, and “Year of the Rat” was his first design published outside of that project.

Redmond always argued strongly for his beliefs, but not *too* disparagingly, and he respected a sparring partner who stood his ground. Prados was one such, very good at marshalling an argument. So, even though Redmond probably suspected that Prados had strong left-leaning tendencies, he never called him a “comsymp” (for communist sympathizer, an epithet he reserved for those who he didn’t bother debating). Their fateful meeting regarding Prados’s article on “Year of the Rat” actually started a period of collaboration that led to the publication of the game “Spies.” There is a story about Redmond urging Prados to find and develop new fields for exploration and discovery. The result was one of John’s Power Politics designs, where the wargame aspect takes a back seat. Here is how John tells it.

*Spies: The Games of Espionage in Europe, 1933-1939.*

Redmond Simonsen of SPI asked me to do this game. He had tired of “vanilla” combat games and wanted something different. Looking at the innovations of weapons, communications technology and so forth that proved crucial in World War II, the idea of a competition for “secrets” suggested itself right away. Secrets were distributed on the board, which represented cities in Europe where one might reasonably expect to uncover them, connected by means of a route-path network. Players moved agents to capture secrets and police forces to defend them. A set of “tiles” replicated events, influenced “capture” and could disrupt the opponent’s play. *Spies* was actually designed using cards. Simonsen, pleading high production cost, made the decision to go with tiles rather than cards. While others have laid claim to the innovation of



the card-driven game, there is a fair argument to be made that *Spies* was the forerunner, perhaps even the first card-driven design. Some of these principles were used again in *Cold War*. When TSR Hobbies took over SPI, *Spies* was

among the games they were most interested in. (Game Designers Guild Select Award Winner.)

Prados lived at 105<sup>th</sup> and Riverside and then moved to 98<sup>th</sup> in the same building with the Sullivanians.



J.A. Nelson in the Fedora, at Prados’ penthouse on 98<sup>th</sup> St.

John really thought deeply about the player experience, and he came up with the term “player overhead” to describe the effort it took the player to execute a given task. If the player is referencing three or four different rules and several different charts just to perform one action, that is high overhead. For example, it is clear that in war anything could happen at any time, yet in the SOP we group like activities into their own phases. That reduces the player overhead and makes the game playable. What Prados and I and many others were doing in the 1970’s was foundational work, creating basic terms and processes, ground-work for the future of the game. Since that time, progress in wargame design is incremental and laborious, because the basic elements are already there and they work. They are hard to avoid. John specialized in “power politics’ designs such as

“Bodyguard Overlord” for which I designed the graphics.

John re-designed one of his Morningside designs for OSG: *Panzerkrieg*, in 1978 (originally *von Manstein's Battles*).

I used to take Foster's Lager in the oversize blue can over to John's penthouse on 98<sup>th</sup> St. I got many good ideas from hanging out with John. It was his suggestion that I start Napoleonic Tours in 1990. The hobby was in the doldrums, but this was a way to stir things up. John never got to go on those treks. He was always busy with the National Security Archives, writing articles, design-ing, and teaching classes in International Relations at NYU.

We stayed in touch after we both moved to Maryland. I was a visitor many times at Dupont Circle, Takoma Park and Silver Spring.

John's designs were well-researched and extensively-playtested. He was careful in organizing the sequence of play and liked to include “reaction phases” for armored reserves. He designed all kinds of wargames, from the Warsaw Ghetto to the reduction of Berlin.

As author, John specialized in books on the CIA, the Cold War, Vietnam and the Pacific War. I created the sketch maps for many of his books. Prados was on a first-name basis with the archivists at the presidential Libraries (Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, etc.). At one point John lived across the street from a Kinko's copy center... To write one 500 page book Prados probably assembled 5,000 to 10,000 pages of documents, all on paper stacked around the office. That was his raw material.

I learned many things from John, even about food. In those days Szechuan restaurants were just becoming popular, and on that stretch of Broadway above 96th there were a number of them on the second floor. We preferred the "Hunan Balcony" on 97th (which Nelson, who also lived in the neighborhood, in typical style dubbed the "Human Baloney.") John talked me into trying Eggplant with Garlic Sauce and Cold Noodles with sesame sauce. John said, "Come on Kev, you gotta try these," and I became an instant convert.

The last time I saw John we remembered the “Castle World” his girls had out on the back porch on Spruce, a place where creativity ruled. All three of them played the game and let their imaginations run wild, like a role-playing world the girls got to construct. Both of John's kids

have imaginative careers (including Set Designer in London and "Virtual Nomad").

John had a big imagination. He could track and describe the movements of hundreds of ships and aircraft, filter thousands of pages of documents and radio logs to build a compelling narrative (Combined Fleet Decoded). When it comes to firing the imagination of the player, his games are among the best. The main reason people play wargames is that palace of the imagination.

The enemy artillery seems to have found the range. “Strike the Tents.”

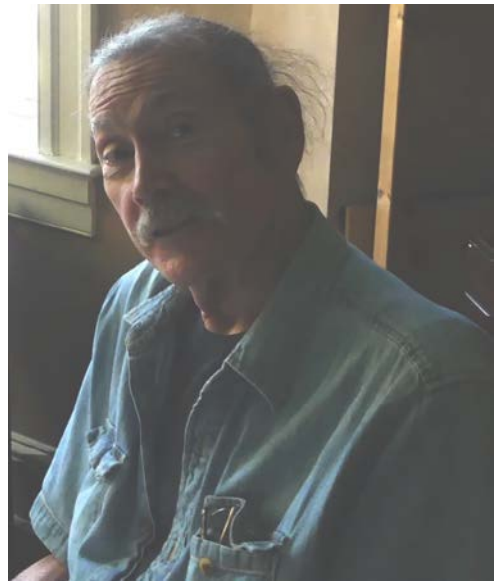
—Kevin Zucker

### John Prados, author

I have read about half of the 18 books listed. My favorite is "Islands of Destiny," (which I read twice) that covers the Solomons campaign in WWII. Reading Prados convinced me that the Japanese had a fatal disadvantage, that could never be overcome, because they weren't aware of it. Their codes had been broken and all their plans and fleet movements were known in advance. In "Combined Fleet Decoded," Prados writes that Rear Admiral Hasegawa Kiichi came as close as anyone to realizing that the IJN's communications had been compromised, but he was killed in action on 29 March 1944, before he could make the case to his superiors. It was too late anyhow.

- [\*The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength\*](#). New York: [Dial Press](#) (1982).
- [\*The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture: The U.S. Bombing Mission in Indochina, 1954\*](#). New York: [Dial Press](#) (1983).
- [\*Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf\*](#). New York: [William Morrow](#) (1986). [ISBN 978-0688053840](#). [OCLC 1020700001](#).
- [\*Pentagon Games: Wargames and the American Military\*](#). New York: [Harper & Row](#) (1997).
- [\*Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Bush to Truman\*](#). New York: [Morrow](#) (1991). [ISBN 978-0688073978](#). [OCLC 1020691200](#).
- [\*Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh\*](#), with Ray W. Stubbe. Boston: [HoughtonMifflin](#) (1991). [ISBN 0395550033](#). [OCLC 24068862](#).

- [\*Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II.\*](#) New York: [Random House](#) (1995). [ISBN 0679437010](#). [OCLC 30544409](#).
- [\*The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War.\*](#) New York: [Wiley](#) (1999). [ISBN 0471254657](#). [OCLC 38199521](#).
- [\*The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President\*](#) (as Editor). New York: [The New Press](#) with [W. W. Norton](#). [ISBN 1565848527](#). [OCLC 1195475771](#).
- [\*Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby.\*](#) New York: [Oxford University Press](#) (2003). [ISBN 0195128478](#). [OCLC 49493468](#).
- [\*Inside the Pentagon Papers\*](#), with Margaret Pratt. Lawrence, Kan.: [University Press of Kansas](#) (2004). [ISBN 0700613250](#). [OCLC 54279988](#).
- [\*Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War.\*](#) New York: [The New Press](#) (2004). [ISBN 978-1565849020](#). [OCLC 54775830](#).
- [\*Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA.\*](#) Chicago: [Ivan R. Dee](#) (2006). [ISBN 1566635748](#). [OCLC 64591926](#).
- [\*Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975.\*](#) [University Press of Kansas](#). [ISBN 978-0700616343](#). [OCLC 276995742](#).
- [\*Normandy Crucible: The Decisive Battle That Shaped World War II in Europe.\*](#) New York: [NAL Caliber](#) (2011). [ISBN 978-0451233837](#). [OCLC 679930937](#).
- [\*In Country: Remembering the Vietnam War.\*](#) Lanham, MD: [Ivan R. Dee](#) (2011). [ISBN 978-1566638685](#). [OCLC 681502179](#).
- [\*Storm Over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy.\*](#) New York: [NAL Caliber](#) (2016).
- [\*The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness.\*](#) [The New Press](#) (2017). [ISBN 978-1620970881](#). [OCLC 974700011](#).



## Games Designed by John Prados



### [\*\*The Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee's Campaigns, 1861-1863 \(1996\)\*\*](#)



### [\*\*The Battle for Cassino: Assaulting the Gustav Line, 1944 \(1978\)\*\*](#)



---

[Beyond Leipzig: Conflict of Nations \(2013\)](#)

---

- 



---

[Beyond Waterloo \(2012\)](#)

[Bodyguard Overlord \(1994\)](#)

---

- 

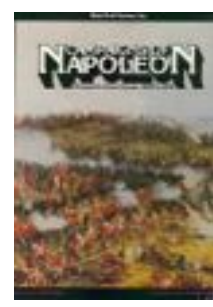


---

[Bradley's D-Day \(2011\)](#)

---

- 



---

[Campaigns of Napoleon \(1980\)](#)

---

- 



---

[The Campaigns of Robert E. Lee \(1988\)](#)

---

- 



---

[Cold War \(1984\)](#)

---

-



---

[Crisis: Sinai 1973 \(1995\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[Four Roads to Paris \(2017\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[Fortress Berlin \(2004\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[The Great War 1914-1918 \(1976\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[Four Roads to Moscow \(2011\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[Kanev: Parachutes Across the Dnepr, September 23-26, 1943 \(1981\)](#)

---

•

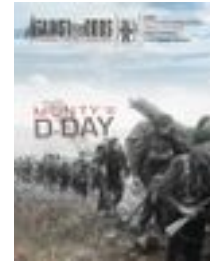
---



---

[Khe Sanh, 1968 \(2002\)](#)

---



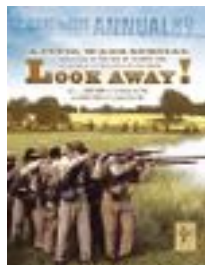
---

[Monty's D-Day \(2021\)](#)

---

[On to Berlin \(2004\)](#)

---



---

[Look Away! \(2007\)](#)

---

•

---

[Panzerkrieg: Designer Signature Edition](#)

---

•

---



---

[Panzerkrieg: von Manstein & HeeresGruppe Süd \(1978\)](#)

---

•

---



---

[Monty's D-Day \(1985\)](#)

---



---

[Pearl Harbor: The War Against Japan, 1941-1945 \(1977\)](#)

---

Pentagon Games (1987)

---

- 



Rise and Decline of the Third Reich (1974)

---

- 
- 



Salerno: Operation Avalanche (1977)

---

- 
- 



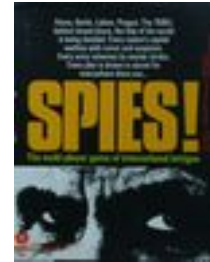
The Seeds of Disaster (2015)

---

Set Europe Ablaze: The Resistance War 1939-1945 (2015)

---

- 
- 



Spies! (1981)

---



Third Reich/Great Pacific War Player's Guide (2004)

---

Tide of Iron: Designer Series Vol. 1 (2008)

---

- 
-



---

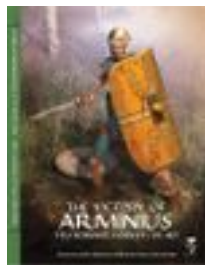
**Toppling the Reich: The Battles for the Westwall (2006)**

---

**Vicksburg: the War for the West (1975)**

---

•



---

**The Victory of Arminius: Teutoburg Forest, IX AD (2015)**

---

**Von Manstein: Battles for the Ukraine 1941-1944 (1975)**

---

•



---

**Warsaw Rising: Revolt of the Polish Underground, 1944 (1986)**

---

•



---

**Wellington In the Peninsula (1975)**

---

•



---

**Year of the Rat: Vietnam, 1972 (1972)**