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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS WALT GRAGG, AUTHOR OF "THE CHOSEN ONE"

📅 DECEMBER 19, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [🗨️ LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thank you for doing this interview during the holiday season, Walt. Your second novel, *The Chosen One*, a military thriller, was recently released to much acclaim. Congratulations. Did you expect any Rushdie-style pushback against your depiction of fundamentalist Islam and the prophetic cleric Muhammad Mourad?

WG: I certainly hope not. The book is not intended to be anti-Islamic. Quite the opposite. I am simply trying to present the story as it might occur, without being judgmental. The actual question the book tries to focus upon is how we become who we become. And where that leads us.

What I like to do in creating a story is to take historical events, move them forward and ask "what if a similar thing was to happen now?" In the case of *The Chosen One*, I had started to explore the many "end of days" prophecies and the power they hold over millions and millions around the globe. So many religions have them, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, the Mayans and their calendar, and well beyond. Such predictions appear to go back thousands and thousands of years. And no matter the religion, there are those whose core beliefs and life's actions revolve about the final times doctrines they are taught.

I could have just as easily used Revelations or the Rapture for the basis of the book, but in researching the various religions, the one with the most recent history of actively pursuing an actual end of days turned out to be Islam. What the basic premise of this prophecy says is that for the end to arrive the Mahdi (the guided or chosen one) has to appear. Once he does, he will conquer the world, uniting it under Islam's banner and leading the planet through a relatively short, but wonderful period as the end nears. Throughout history many have attempted to claim the Mahdi title. One of the most significant occurred in 1885. A Mahdi arose in Sudan. He raised a fanatical army that slaughtered the British forces they faced. I simply took that event, and the stark actions of the 1885 Mahdi's followers, and moved them forward to present day. In doing so, I tried to present Muhammad Mourad and how he viewed his role in as much depth as possible. I've attempted to make him one of the most interesting, three-dimensional antagonists readers will ever experience. And while the book has only been out a few weeks, the initial responses we are receiving indicate we succeeded.

AM: Does someone need to read *The Red Line*, your first novel, before reading *The Chosen One*?

WG: Not at all. The books are unrelated – different location, different scenario, completely different characters and storyline. Start with whichever you prefer. If you enjoy that one, consider reading the other.



Walt Gragg

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AM: To write a novel like *The Chosen One*, and *The Red Line* for that matter, you need a working knowledge of geography, history, and the military. You served in the military, but how'd you learn the geography and history?

WG: As I mentioned previously, I like history. I wish I knew far more about it than I do. You can't realize where we are going if you have no concept of where we've been. I spent twenty years with the Army. Such a period typically involves lots of assignments in varied places around the world. An understanding of geography naturally develops along with that.

AM: Did you have to update your military knowledge? I'm guessing a lot has changed since you served. For one thing, the Cold War has been over for some time. The enemy you portray in the book is quite different.

WG: A great deal has changed, especially in the technology of the battlefield. That however, can be overcome with research and talking with those who are serving or recently served. And in many ways, soldiers are still soldiers. I find them fascinating. The technology matters far less than the person behind the weapon. For that reason, I try to focus on developing great characters and making them someone you'll enjoy reading about rather than providing detail after detail, page after page, about every button and switch on the latest weapons system. I'm not writing an Army technical manual like some writers like to do. Admittedly, some of the hardcore techno-thriller lovers don't like that. But I'm trying to write books that are devoured by as wide an audience as possible, not just those who are interested solely on tactics and technology. Because of it, I've had many people who typically wouldn't be interested in military thrillers tell me they enjoyed both books a great deal.



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AM: There's something cinematic about the way you situate readers from scene to scene. For instance, at the beginning of a chapter, you might provide the date, time, location, and military unit—details like that.

WG: I'm not a fan of overly detailed description as it has a tendency to bog the reader down and when your intent is to write rapidly paced, action-packed thrillers it just gets in the way. My books are intended to move fast, fast, fast. My goal is to give the reader enough description to allow their imagination to become immersed in a scene. I try to create highly cinematic visualizations that make them feel they're actually there on the ground with those involved. Not sure exactly how that happens, but it seems to work. I cannot tell you how many people, men and women alike, have related that at times they had to momentarily stop reading *The Red Line* and shake themselves back to reality because they actually

found themselves shivering in the snow with the outmanned American soldiers as the Russian tanks approached.

AM: You were once a lawyer. Lord help me, I was too. I still am, I suppose, although I'm now mostly on the education side. Why is it that so many lawyers turn to fiction writing?

WG: Not exactly sure, but there are certainly a large number of writers with legal backgrounds. While structuring legal arguments is quite different than writing highly creative fiction, the skills used to develop those legal abilities can be quite helpful in putting together a novel. And let's face it, legal briefs are often little more than fiction.

In my case, the story for *The Red Line* found me during my time in the Army. Which is apparently not that unusual. Some writers are born to write. They're compelled to do so. I wasn't one of them. Still many tell me that they begin writing because a particular story found them, rather than them finding it.

AM: Have you been to Cairo?

WG: Even though *The Chosen One's* primary scenes take place there, I haven't. There is so much written about Egypt. And you can find a new, interesting, insightful program about it nearly every day on television. It was one of the few places I felt comfortable writing about without actually visiting. Even so, I did a great deal of research along the way, making sure things like what the city of Cairo looks like, and verifying things like the book's description of the passages inside the Great Pyramid were reasonably accurate.

AM: What inspired you to start writing novels?

WG: While I'd carried the idea for *The Red Line* around with me for a number of years, as I touched on earlier I never really envisioned myself becoming a writer. In some ways, even after two novels and a third under contract, I still don't. After spending many years with the Army, becoming a lawyer was a second career. To be honest, even though I was fairly good at it I didn't like the lawyer stuff much. I confessed to my wife after a particularly frustrating day that I wished I'd chosen something besides law. When she asked me what I wanted to do about it, the idea of writing *The Red Line* suddenly reappeared. So, while I continued working, I began spending every spare movement learning how to put a novel together and make the words leap off the page. So here we are.

AM: Thank you, Walt, for the interview. I hope you have a great holiday season.

WG: Enjoyed doing it. Hope you and your readers have a wonderful Christmas. And a fantastic 2020.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

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