

Disrupting Time: Industrial Combat, Espionage and the Downfall of a Great American Company

By Aaron Stark
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Reviewed By James Sprague

When one thinks of watchmaking, the words “combat” and “espionage” certainly aren’t the first ones which come to mind.

Those words, however, play a central role in the true historical story *Disrupting Time: Industrial Combat, Espionage and the Downfall of a Great American Company*, written and independently published by author Aaron Stark, a former assistant professor of economics at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Stark, who holds an MBA from Harvard Business School in finance and business strategy, previously co-authored the *Harvard Business School Strategy Case Study Stealing Time: America’s Disruption of the Swiss Watch Industry*, which examined the crisis the Swiss watch industry in the 1870s was facing due to the increase of high-quality and affordable American timepieces. In this newest book by Stark, he expands upon that situation by focusing on the year 1876 and the Centennial Exhibition at the World’s Fair in Philadelphia.

That setting became the backdrop for legendary horologists Jacques David and Theodore Gribi being tasked by the Society of Jura Industries—a Swiss trade association—to conduct industrial espionage to learn the secrets of America’s technology section, more specifically the American watch industry, after the duo witnessed the Waltham Watch Company’s assembly line exhibit on display at the 1876 World’s Fair.

The book, clocking in at a brisk, yet informative 247 pages, does a fine job of examining both the Swiss and American watch industries between 1857 and 1900, and the strategies, competitions, espionage, and decisions which would impact the world’s watch market at the beginning of the 20th century.

The journey of David and Gribi to covertly learn of the Waltham—and American in general—industrial

and technological capabilities, is a well-researched and compelling read from the author, who weaves in the viewpoints of such horological giants as Royal Robbins, Ambrose Webster, David and Gribi, and Edouard Favre-Perret into the story as well.

It is certainly a fascinating look at Victorian-era watchmaking, intertwined with a suspenseful and attention-grabbing story of industrial espionage that many in the watch world didn’t know of until 1992, when the 130-page report David and Gribi were commissioned to write and present, after their spying, to the Society of Jura Industries was released to the public.

The story also leaves the reader wondering what could have occurred had David and Gribi not been successful in their venture, and what the trajectories of not only the Waltham Watch Company

but the Swiss and American watch industries would have been as well.

Expertly and thoroughly researched over the past several years—including some of that research being aided by AWCI—*Disrupting Time* captures an important period in the profession of watchmaking, while offering a riveting a story from that period.

Disrupting Time is available through Amazon, <https://a.co/d/7D7W00X>, in hardcover (ISBN: 9798367320862) at \$23.99 and in paperback at \$17.99 US.



Theodore Gribi

