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History Studied for Future Military Success

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Abstract

Studying military history is both necessary and critical to successful accomplishment of future military engagements. Comparisons of military events in history such as Task Force Smith and the 507th Maintenance Company, Counterinsurgency in the Philippines and Iraq, and Reconstruction in both the Civil War and Iraq demonstrates how history has a tendency of repeating itself. History helps us understand how the society we live in came to be. Additionally, it is critically important to arm our Soldiers with a better understanding of the past and develop leaders who understand war.

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History Studied for Future Military Success

The study of military history is both necessary and critical to successful accomplishment of future military engagements. Throughout history, numerous battles and military campaigns closely resemble each other. Research into past success and failure of each individual situation could potentially eliminate the same negative outcome or produce the same desired results. Some argue the enemies tactics, techniques, and procedures change with each conflict as they gain insight into our strategies, therefore the study of previous battles and history is pointless. I will support my point of view by comparing previous military engagements to recent conflicts, identifying the correlation between the two. General Omar N. Bradley once stated, "I learned that good judgment comes from experiences and that experiences grow out of mistakes." Learning from previous military experiences and understanding how the past may affect the future will better prepare our Soldiers for the challenges that lie ahead.

Task Force Smith vs. 507th Maintenance Company

Task Force Smith and the 507th Maintenance Company were two units conducting wartime operations over 50 years apart, yet the similarities between the two are unmistakable. Both units were ill equipped and unprepared for the conditions awaiting their Soldiers.

Task Force Smith

Task Force Smith was the first United States involvement in the Korean Peninsula. Comprised of 406 Soldiers from the 24th Infantry Division and 108 Soldiers from the 52nd Field Artillery Battalion, Task Force Smith departed Japan for Pusan to stop the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Task Force Smith arrived to a hero's welcome and moved north undermanned, but convinced the North Koreans would halt their advances in the face of the invincible United States Army. Only five years after the end of World War II, less than one-

sixth of Task Force Smith had combat experience. A lack of training, discipline, and enough Soldiers within the ranks resulted in 180 American casualties. Several decades later, on a much smaller scale, the 507th Maintenance Company duplicated this tragic event on many levels as they entered Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom I (OIF I).

507th Maintenance Company

A study of military history empowers leaders with the ability to make informed decisions and apply lessons learned when developing current operational strategy. Undermanned, the 507th Maintenance Company from Fort Bliss Texas did not apply this principal when the unit departed Kuwait for Iraq at the onset of OIF I. A wrong turn as their convoy approached the southern city of Nasiriyah, Iraq turned fatal when they drove into the middle of an ambush resulting in the deaths of 11 Soldiers and six prisoners of war. The circumstances between Task Force Smith and the 507th Maintenance Company are extremely similar. Both units underestimated the enemy's capabilities and tactics, lacked training and discipline within the ranks at all levels, failed to equip Soldiers with adequate amounts of ammunition to defend themselves, and carelessly placed the lives of American Soldiers in harms way without quality leadership. A failed operation on both accounts unfortunately supports my point of view: a leader's ability or inability to learn from history becomes a force multiplier during combat and counterinsurgency efforts.

U.S. Counterinsurgency in Iraq: Lessons from the Philippine War

The extremely successful counterinsurgency campaign conducted by American forces during the Philippine war should serve as a manuscript for success in Iraq. Like Iraq, our Soldiers during the Philippine war faced a vicious, unpredictable, and brutal enemy. Leaders quickly learned it was easier in certain areas to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Measured to Iraq, an obvious example is the ease in which Soldiers assisted Kurdistan compared to the still volatile situation among the Sunni Triangle area. In the Philippines, once American Soldiers pacified a friendly town or region they leveraged the local population and institutions against the insurgents. Trained and empowered to defend themselves, the resurgent communities enabled Soldiers to focus their attention on hot areas, gradually increasing the pressure and eventually cornering the enemy. Both situations are similar to this point with one potentially different outcome. During the Philippine war, American leaders fully understood the importance of finishing the job and remained until the mission was truly complete. I believe this is where we should take a page from history concerning our involvement in Iraq. We need to weigh vigorously the worldwide ramifications of leaving an unfinished work prematurely before a successful reconstruction of Iraq.

Reconstruction: The American Civil War and Iraq

With Richmond defeated and Ulysses S. Grant accepting Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, President Abraham Lincoln declared the Civil War over and called for reconstruction. President George W. Bush on 1 May 2003, ironically while standing aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, announced major combat operations in Iraq complete and called for reconstruction of Iraq. What prevailed after both proclamations was far from a definitive end to war. John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln three days after his speech and southerners continued to gather, secretly planning and mounting attacks to protect their way of life and concept of racial order. Like distraught southerners, insurgents and radical terrorists in Iraq refuse to lay down their arms and continue to kill American Soldiers. Despite the challenges and terrible violence in the aftermath of both Presidential events, persistence from resilient American forces produced successful results. The glaring difference is time allotted for

perceived mission accomplishment. Reconstruction when referring to the Civil War laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Almost one-hundred years after President Lincoln's announcement, we as Americans continued to fight the same battle of racially driven ignorance. Like the struggles within our own borders, Iraqi citizens can eventually overcome the current unrest and turmoil, but success requires persistence, time and an understanding of history.

Importance of Studying History

A famous Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana stated, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." It is of vital importance we teach and provide our Soldiers and young noncommissioned officers an understanding of how the society we live in came to be. Demonstrated in the previously mentioned examples, history has an uncanny way of repeating itself. It is critically important to arm our Soldiers with a better understanding of the past and develop leaders who understand war. Studying and analyzing similarities between historical events enables military professionals to counter-attack an undesirable result or choose a proven path of success. In essence, history provides our service members with a complete and thorough after-action-review (AAR), identifying what happened, what went right, and what went wrong. History, when used as an AAR for lessons learned, provides a necessary tool needed to help shape the future of our military.

Conclusion

As previously stated, I firmly believe studying military history is both necessary and critical to successful accomplishment of future military engagements. Military professionals must study, learn, and educate the future leaders of our Army on the history of our past. History provides a road map to the future by understanding where we have been. Comparing military

events in history such as Task Force Smith and the 507th Maintenance Company, counterinsurgency in the Philippines and Iraq, and reconstruction in both the Civil War and Iraq demonstrates how history has a tendency of repeating itself. Applying lessons learned from history into our military strategic planning enables leaders to game plan for possible enemy tactics and prepare our Soldiers for the challenges that may lie ahead. The future will ultimately write its own course, but an understanding of history enables military professionals to help plot the path in which it takes.

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