

Running Head: MILITARY HISTORY

Military History

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### Abstract

Learning from our past has become routine in today's military. The creation of the Center for Lessons Learned dedicates many resources to the cataloging of our successes and failures. These lessons can be used as references for what to do and what not to do. So our current regime acknowledges the value of history – both old and recent. This is the attitude that we all must take. We must value history and find ways to incorporate it in our training. Military history is important to the growth and development of our leaders; therefore, we can not afford to ignore the past.

## Military History

It is extremely important to study the pros and cons of American military history to obtain a rational understanding why the leaders of the past made the decisions they did and if they were right, how can we expound upon them to save lives in the future. Second if the decision was bad how not to make the same mistake twice.

As leader in the most powerful Army in the world we have a responsibility to understand and use the lessons of past battles to shape the battlefield of today. The battlefield of today is ever changing bringing to the forefront different and unique challenges that require quick and immediate decisions in order to save Soldiers lives. Kiyoko Takeda once said “Recognizing what we have done in the past is recognition of ourselves. By conducting a dialogue with our past, we are searching how to go forward”.

By researching and analyzing specific battles we can troubleshoot modern day scenarios and bypass the route of trial and error. Look at General George C. Patton one of our military’s greatest leaders, but yet he studied history and the past battles of his most challenging adversary General Rommel, one of Germany’s most brilliant tacticians. Through diligent research and study, General Patton was able to understand his opponent and counter his moves, thus saving Soldiers lives.

World War II provides us with a vast number of lessons that can be applied to today’s modern way of fighting. Take for instance the attack on Pearl Harbor one of America’s deadliest days of battle. Through pride and a series of communication breakdowns we fell victim to a surprise attack, which almost cost us our freedom and way of life. The lesson learned here was to never underestimate the intentions of an adversary no matter what the circumstances and never put all your ships in one port so tightly moored. During the same time period and taking

advantage of the crippling victory at Pearl Harbor Japan slingshot their forces to the Philippine islands catching the ill prepared American air force all on the ground. This attack destroyed America capability of defending the Philippine island and General Douglas Macarthur was directed by the president of the United States to retreat to Australia. As Macarthur retreated he left Major General Wainwright in command of the combined forces.

After several days of fierce fighting Major General Wainwright was forced to surrender with hopes they would be fairly treated as POWs. They could not have been more wrong. The Japanese captured the 12,000 Americans and 66,000 Filipinos forcing them to march hundreds of miles in some of the worst conditions known to man. Thousand of prisoners were killed out of sheer hatred and many more died due to the conditions they were forced to live in, making the Bataan Death March a lesson America will never forget. It's hard to see battles such as these useless and incapable of providing lessons to future leaders, yet some do. For me they are a valuable source of information on how we can better employ our fighting forces.

Officer and NCOs can look at the battle of Bataan not as a defeat, but as a victory for the future Soldier. Each Soldier that dies leaves a trail of mistakes of teaching points that prompts leaders of the future to think beyond the situation they are planning for. This method of thinking outside the box helps ensure all scenarios are rehearsed and prepared for. If George Washington knew what George Patton did in World War II the outcome of Revolutionary War may have been different.

Yet another memorable battle worthy of study is the battle of Wake Island. Here a small marine force repelled a vastly superior force with only a few shore guns and three Hellcat fighters. The Japanese forces with their marine lading crafts and patrol boats pounded the island relentlessly. The first attack was repelled on December 11<sup>th</sup> only to return with two carries in

support on December 23<sup>rd</sup>. During the second attack the Japanese were definitely better prepared and seized the island later that week. The Americans captured were immediately put to work on fortifying the island and then were shipped to Japan and Korea where they stayed in POW camps for the remainder of the war. The small contingent of American workers left on the island was later executed by the Japanese in fear of being tried for war crimes. Each of these battles during World War II gives an American leader countless scenarios and documented experiences to use in future battles.

Lessons learned from the Wake Island encounter prompted the war department to ensure adequate troop to adversary numbers were calculated before leaders committed or engaged in conflicts. The idea of allowing small numbers of defensive forces to fight in the hopes that they could hold out are gone. In today's modern war fighting strategy three to one ratios are programmed into battle plans. This type of planning enables America's fighting forces to maintain the upper hand.

Most leaders of today don't study battles of the past looking for fast ways to win wars, nor do they look at fighting as a cookie cutter format, where you can pull plans off the shelf and apply it to a fight today and then let the soldiers handle the rest. Fighting war is not like a game of checkers, but more like a game of chess. Games of the past can give clues on what to expect from opponents. Each clue gives the leader an idea on what to look for as the battle develops. If we were to look at the battle of Little Bighorn as a source of strategic value and not change with the times we might not be the nation we are today. Instead we took the battle of Little Bighorn apart and extracted points of learning not just from the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, but from the Indians.

A good point to remember about the study of history and war is to look at the reason why people are fighting to begin with. If we can understand our enemies we may be able to put an

end to the battle quicker. This can best be summed up in a statement from the American Historical Association: “In the first place, history offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. Understanding the operations of people and societies is difficult, though a number of disciplines make the attempt. An exclusive reliance on current data would needlessly handicap our efforts. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace—unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? Some social scientists attempt to formulate laws or theories about human behavior. But even these recourses depend on historical information, except for in limited, often artificial cases in which experiments can be devised to determine how people act. Major aspects of a society's operation, like mass elections, missionary activities, or military alliances, cannot be set up as precise experiments. Consequently, history must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behaves as it does in societal settings. This, fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history: it offers the only extensive evidential base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives” (Stearns, 1998).

In the book *Past and Prologue* history essays are viewed a must, “All of the essays support the conclusion that the study of history is useful, indeed necessary, to the military professional. They are united in opposition to the school of thought that took hold around the time of the first Gulf War, which argued that accelerating technological change has “transformed the very nature of war.” Advocates of that school contended that emerging technologies and

“information dominance” would eliminate “friction” and the “fog of war,” providing the commander and his subordinates near-perfect “situational awareness,” thereby promising “the capacity to use military force without the same risks as before.” For instance, a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William Owens, on more than one occasion made the extraordinary claim that “technology could enable U.S. military forces in the future to lift the ‘fog of war,’” and that “battlefield dominant awareness — the ability to see and understand everything on the battlefield — might be possible” (Owens, 2006).

Fighting a war is one thing but understanding human nature is another. The key to winning on any battlefield is to know your adversaries inside and out. This is probably the one true key to why we need to look to the past for the answers of the future. I can honestly say that history provide me with an unending source of learned lessons. Each lesson capable of saving lives. I know we can use history as the end all, save all to war and I surly know its not going to change people and there views. People are going to continue to fight for what they believe is right and what is in the best interest of there courtiers. But what I am sure of is that history stimulates the mind into developing good solid battle plans capable of winning wars.

## References

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