Why it is important to study Military History

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Introduction

It is important for military professionals to study military history in order to improve core skills in analysis, problem-solving, and motivation. An understanding of military history better prepares practitioners to comprehend the strategic scope of military situations, discover the relevant tactical solutions, and inspire soldiers into taking the proper actions at the proper time. Over-reliance on military history can condition the professional to lapse into past errors, or cause the professional to ignore the ways in which technology has rendered that history irrelevant. History cannot be credibly ignored by any military professional who wishes to have a firm foundation for his or her leadership skills.

Why Military History Matters

Military analysis, or what Duggan (2005) calls “coup d’oeil” (p. 1), exists on at least two levels: the expert and the inexperienced. Expert military analysts

> study a situation (step A), and the problem and solution come to them at the same time (step B). They think through the implications to arrive at a course of action (step C), and then commit to it, or reject it if they think it will not work (step D). In all

> four steps, they look for patterns of similarity and difference with other situations they have lived or learned about. (p. 9)

"Situations . . . learned about" thus provide the bedrock for expert analysts, and this can only be a reference to military history. The same logic applies to inexperienced analysts, except with a vengeance, since they have fewer 'situations lived' to guide them through the decision-making process. According to this theory, even intuition depends on experience for success; there is no such thing as a pure military genius who, without any context, learning, or experience, can arrive on the scene and arrive at an intuitive analysis of a situation.

Here is a specific example of how knowledge of military history informs analysis, by way of Baylis and Segal (1981). Military analysts in the Soviet Union, in poring over the strategic options available to them in a war with the West, decided to embrace "Principles of deterrence through denial (including civil defence) rather than deterrence through punishment" (p. 41). This was based on a deep understanding of Russian military history, in which civil defense combined with environmental obstacles have always played more of a decisive role than head-on engagement. By embracing this philosophy, the Russian state spent less than it might have on the arms race, thus prolonging the survival of the Soviet state.

Even on the battlefield, the professional's problem-solving approach can be informed by military history. Take a tank battle. A commander familiar with the history of tank battles will know that, if his or her tank's main armament is in the hull, the 'hull down' position is inferior for a battle (Jarymowycz 2001, p. 85). This information might be described as technical in nature, but in practice its utility derives from observations of hundreds of individual tank battles over the past century.

Another application for military history in the professional's career comes in the form of motivation. Here is a classic example in the form of an excerpt from General George S. Patton's speech to the Third Army, as quoted in Safire (2004), "You are not all going to die. Only 2 percent of you right here today would be killed in a major battle . . ." (p. 552). The speech from which this phrase is excerpted is famous for Patton's blood-and-guts phrases; however, in retrospect this statistic is a gem of motivation. It calms down Patton's audience right at the beginning of his address, shutting down fears and rumors that the entire Third Army stands to be decimated. It establishes what businesses today call 'buy in' for Patton's later demands for bravery and character. After all, if one has a 98 percent chance for survival, the business of soldiering becomes a lot easier! Trust Patton to balance his

motivational speech with this statistic. It was the right thing to say, and it illustrates how knowing military history can aid a commanded in motivating his or her subordinates.

We continue to pay the price for strategic thinking that is devoid of the insights that only military history can give. S.L.A. Marshall (2000), writing over half a century ago, pointed out that a growing American military obsession with machine over man put American soldiers in the European theater in needlessly grave peril, as America had to go to war without an infantry reserve, asking:

> How real was this crisis? It was so very real that in the middle of the Ardennes fighting in late December, 1944, the governing condition that made certain of the commanders . . . hesitate and argue for postponement of the counteroffensive was the nonavailability of American riflemen re-enforcements. (p. 17)

S.L.A. Marshall is a living argument in favor to teaching military history to every military professional. Had his insights been followed six years ago, there would have been no Iraqi counterinsurgency. Marshall, by the way, was the one who discovered that only 25 percent of combat soldiers discharged their rifles in World War Two; the U.S. military establishment took heed of this finding, and changed its training methods to guarantee a much higher discharge rate. The improved training

resulted in far more effective American soldiers, providing one more argument for applying historical insight to current problems of military practice.

Counter-Arguments and Responses

Two counter-arguments demonstrate that knowledge of military history is not always a must for the professional. For example, in the year 1206, a rising Mongol military commander by the name of Genghis Khan began a series of campaigns against China. Had Genghis Khan been a student of military history, he would have known that no settled Chinese state had ever fallen to a barbarian force. Ruled by this precedent, he would probably have consolidated his power within Mongolia and been content to be a local ruler. However, Genghis Khan's complete ignorance of military history was also a great strength, as it made him at once unpredictable and fearless; while the Chinese, too aware of, and reliant on, their successful past at defending against the barbarians on their borders, fell prey to complacency. Within seventy years, Genghis Khan's grandson Kublai would be Emperor of all China.

To offer a more current example, the institutional U.S. understanding of military history is that it has been rendered largely obsolete by advances in technology. As Corum and Howard (2007) put it, "At the center of modern U.S. military culture lies a belief . . . that technology is a central factor in

warfare and that the country with the best technology is bound to win" (p. 117). The rule of the practitioner, then, is not to store up an irrelevant knowledge of ancient warfare but to better understand modern technological warfare.

However, both of these counter-arguments ultimately fail. The case of Genghis Khan is an outlier; objectively, it is far more likely that ignorance of the enemy would result in defeat than victory. In fact, the Mongol ignorance of military history eventually came back to bite them, when the Mongol rulers of China failed to realize that the Chinese would mount a popular rebellion rather than live under foreign rule; accordingly, they were forced out of China in the mid-14th century. Even granted that Genghis Khan appears to have had a freakish level of strategic insight into large-scale war given his background as a sheep-stealer, this insight was not sufficient to preserve his conquests for more than a few generations.

In terms of war and technology, the examples of Vietnam in the past century and Iraq in this century should conclusively prove that technology is only one factor that determines success in warfare. Clearly, the study of past precedent in military history still has much to teach us about warfare! Following Marshall, for example, we should certainly have inserted more troops and troop reserves into Iraq, as senior military historians indeed insisted we do.

Conclusion

In the U.S. military context, the past decade should be seen as the revenge of military history. Everyone from the former President and Secretary of Defense to a number of operational commanders on the ground were convinced that the lessons of engagement from as recent a conflict as the Gulf War could be safely ignored in Iraq. However, the Iraq War brought back memories of far earlier conflicts, such as the Burmese War, in which the British executed a successful counterinsurgency, the Boer War, and Vietnam. Even the 'fog of war,' that time-honored notion, came to apply to a conflict that was supposed to be clean and unambiguous.

The bottom line is that military history remains relevant, perhaps more so than ever now that the global tempo of small wars and counter-insurgencies has picked up. As Murray and Sinnreich (2006) argue, military history addresses "the basic need to understand one's opponents, and to work out how best to outmaneuver them mentally" (p. 31); this basic need will never be made redundant by technology (at least if we are fighting conventional wars, not wars of extermination), which is why we continue to read Sun Tzu and other strategic classics with great profit. Accordingly, military professionals should be conversant in this discipline, as knowledge of it will help them on the battlefield and in their careers.

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