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Is it Important to Study Military History? If so, why? If not, why not?

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Abstract

Is it important for military professionals to study military history? Military history must be studied in order to better prepare for future conflicts. Military history is a continuum of events that connect past, present, and future. This paper will illustrate continuity by exploring the interconnectedness of the 1947 conflict in Greece, to the Korean Conflict, and how the two led to U.S. military action in the Vietnam War. Academic scholars A.J. Toynbee, D. Boorstin and G.W. Hegel, are cited as experts who understand the importance of studying history. General Chiarelli's thesis will also demonstrate how the importance of experience, preparation and response, have allowed the U.S. military to remain battle focused.

Is it important to study military history?

Yes, it is imperative for military professionals to study history. This study is time well spent because it is not just about what happened; military history provides commanders with a deeper look into what caused an event to occur, and address the consequences. It provides the commander with the necessary experience in responding to the majority of eventualities.

Military history is much more than a cache of event sequences. History provides a detailed look at previous conflicts in order to improve future decision making processes. Military strategies are carefully devised based on hypothetical conflicts, as well as previous tactics and venues. Regardless of where battles are fought, leaders begin their preparation at the same point; with in-depth examinations of the past. These examinations provide different avenues of approach to conflict resolution.

History is a continuous chain of events connecting previous, current, and future conflicts. It provides the commander with a philosophy on war and highlights the political influence. One such example was the relationship between the Greece conflict in 1947, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The United States maintained a passive aggressive presence in Asia and the Korean Peninsula after WWII. The United States intervened when North Korea provoked Seoul. President Truman saw this as an opportunity to strike back at communism, a battle he was losing at home and abroad. This was not the first time the United States was “forced” to defend another country from communist rule. This continued to the Vietnam era.

In 1947 when the British pulled all support to Greece, the United States was asked to assist (§ 1). In the Truman Doctrine, President Truman addressed Congress for support. He advised that the United States needed to support free nations and help fight against “outside pressures” (§ 3). The Soviet Union and communism were the one referred as “outside pressures”.

That same type of pressure would later be evident on the Korean peninsula in 1950.

Since Truman pledged to defend South Korea, he also vowed to support French troops in Indochina. Vietnam was a part of Indochina and under French rule after WWII. France and subsequently the United States were forced to put up a strong defense, when parts of Vietnam began shifting toward communist rule. The United States, enthralled with containing communism, sent a record number of troops to Vietnam, which continued through 1975 (§ 1).

These three major conflicts in world history, Greece 1947, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War helped to shape United States military involvement and foreign policy for half a century. These crises may be studied independently, but in actuality, they are a continuous chain of events in history influenced by politics. Though each outcome was different, the catalysts, enemies, and allies were the same. The strategies may be refined from one conflict to the next to increase the probability of success and decrease the margin for error. Historical events should be studied for the very reason of continuity.

George Santayana expressed the belief that if we choose not to learn from history then we will certainly repeat it (1863-1952, § 1). This has been proven time and time again. He is just one of many scholars who have voiced such opinions on the need to study history in order to make sense of the present. Those who refuse to study the success or failure of others are potentially setting themselves up for failure. The study of history adds a dimension of understanding to such fields as politics, medicine, economics, culture, civilization, and business. Scholars in each of these fields have repeatedly used history to create theories and solve conflicts. These world-renowned thinkers support my thesis.

Philosophical great and economist Arnold J. Toynbee stated, “History not used is nothing” (§ 1). This statement indicates that it would be a great tragedy to ignore history.

German philosopher and inventor Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said, “What experience and history teaches us is that people and governments have never learned anything from history, unless acted on principles deduced from it” (§ 1). And American writer, professor and librarian Daniel J. Boorstin believed that the American past is more than a precursor, rather the template for our political system.

Military experts also agree with academic scholars that the study of history is necessary. One such expert is United States Army Lieutenant General Peter W. Chiarelli. In his 2007 thesis, he emphasizes the influence that publicity has on tomorrow’s battlefields. According to this military expert, the Vietnam experience left a lasting impression on the future. People believed the government was fighting an unpopular war. The public were all weighing in on the United States progress with every news brief and special report. Chiarelli believed that the media exploitation during Vietnam aided in the outcome of the conflict. It is his belief that commanders must control the media in order to win (Chiarelli, p. 10). If so, the outcome of the Vietnam War was determined before the start.

Chiarelli, who acquired over three decades of military service, identifies the need for a connection between the military and other branches of the government for example; the State Department, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Justice. These agencies would bring viable support to the rebuilding process. The State Department would bring diplomacy and assistance to the new government. The Department of Agriculture would help farmers produce new cash crops, while the Department of Justice would provide assistance with security and legal issues. The military would be over burdened if this were left solely in their hands.

Chiarelli also raises the question of whether the U.S. military can maintain a war for an

extended time frame. The mistakes and misconceptions of America's role in the Vietnam War was a common point of reference, which calls for the reassessment of military operations. The U.S. entered the Vietnam War without the support of the American public, hence did not commit the full expanse of its national power. Once we were committed, no one anticipated how long the war would continue or how many lives it would cost. Commanders realized the importance of U.S. Military Reservist by the end of the war. The military eventually modified operations to ensure that future battles would rely heavily on Reservists. Chiarelli strongly believes that leaders should take that knowledge learned from the Vietnam era and reassess future conflicts.

In order to remain battle focused it is necessary to understand history. Chiarelli points out the need for uniformed forces to accept the fact that their role continuously changes. Uniformed forces should be prepared for non-kinetic battles. In his 2005 thesis, He goes into more detail saying that the U.S. found greater success when focused on the basic needs of the Iraqi people as opposed to strictly centering on combat operations. In fact, combat operations were but one of the five arms employed in Task Force Baghdad's campaign (Chiarelli, p. 14). The others focused on the people and their needs. All are important to rebuilding Iraq and making it a functional democracy. Understanding the history of the people and their needs, allows our forces to remain effective.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the importance of studying history, there are still some who will negate this fact. Some say that the more time spent on the study of military history equals less time spent to resource and prepare for current conflicts. Study is preparation. Commander who do not take historical battles into account during preparation, run the risk of repeating previous failures. Perhaps the greatest example of this started with Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812. In 1941, approximately 29 years later, Hitler also failed to invade

Russia. Hitler failed to consider Napoleon's prior issues with resupplies, terrain, weather, and Russia's will to fight. Commanders should use military history to improve their decision making skills and adapt specific tactics to the current conflict.

Another argument is that history provides a false sense of security in that past conflicts are rarely the same. If the U.S. approached Operation Enduring Freedom with the mindset of Operation Desert Storm, many would have expected a ground war to be completed in less than two months simply because it took place with the same enemy. Though these two Iraqi wars were staunchly different, commanders were able to pull tactics from the 1991 conflict and add to their arsenal during this continued five year battle. Immeasurable research has been completed to show similarities in conflicts, or, allow for the use of similar courses of action in different conflicts. Indeed, the more commanders study history, the less likely they will be to mistake non comparable for similar situations.

The strongest opposition to the study of history would probably be those that would say time could be better spent on more practical training. Yet again, how would one know if training is practical or even how to prepare for battle, if there were no historical events to compare against? The experience gained through continuous study of the success or failure of past conflicts, provides more time for practical training. Taking the time to correct and not repeat mistakes have proven to be beneficial in battle preparation.

Historical studies are valuable tools for military commanders. Military history provides commanders with necessary experience at the expense of other leaders. History supplies a template from previous situations, which commanders can edit and adjust to fit the current conflict. It also provides theoretical and practical knowledge, which enhances the probability of a positive outcome for future conflicts. In today's rapidly evolving wars and national conflicts

commanders need all the guidance they can get to gain the upper hand. Commanders who overlook vital historical information run the risk of determining the outcome of significant events from the very start. History serves not just as a reminder, but a prelude to the future and must continue to be studied by military professionals.

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