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Introduction

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If recent events are any guide, an unacknowledged conviction of too many of those responsible for national security decisions, civilian and military, is that history has little to offer today's defense policy maker. Beset by accelerating change, current senior leaders seem to have neither the time nor the inclination to look to the past for help. Events crowd one another too rapidly. Technology matures too quickly. Crises succeed each other too abruptly. Coping with a demanding present and confronting an ominous future, few current civilian and military leaders seem willing to indulge in systematic reflection about the past.

Too harsh a judgment? How else to explain political and military assumptions preceding the 2003 invasion of Iraq that largely ignored the history of the region, planning that discounted postconflict challenges that had arisen even in the much less complicated overthrow of Manuel Noriega's corrupt Panamanian regime a mere thirteen years earlier, and the slowness only thirty years after Vietnam to recognize and deal with the insurgency that followed the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime?[1] Overconfident in their ability to control the future, those responsible for planning the invasion chose deliberately or by oversight to ignore history. The future, unfortunately, turned out to look all too much like the past. As Yogi Berra might have put it, Iraq was déjà vu all over again. That, too, is a dismally familiar historical phenomenon.[2]

[1] In fairness, some notables warned of these difficulties. Former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and retired regional combatant commanders Anthony Zinni, Wesley Clark, and John Shalikashvili come to mind, as does then Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, the only active duty senior officer willing publicly to dispute the administration's optimistic estimates. For their trouble, they were ignored or vilified.

[2] For the checkered performance of political and military leaders and their bureaucracies in the making of strategy through the ages, see Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, 1996).

Indeed, political and military leaders' tendency to discount history is neither novel nor peculiarly American. Throughout history, leaders and institutions have repeatedly manifested an almost willful ignorance of the past.[3] One of the great myths of the twentieth century is that armies study only their last war and thus do poorly in the next. That, for example, is the conventional explanation for the Franco-British allies' military defeat of 1940. According to the argument, French and British armed forces based their force development throughout the interwar period on their experiences of the First World War, whereas the Germans, unfettered by their defeat in 1918, searched for new methods to prevent a repetition of the deadlock that had frozen the Western Front for four years.[4]

Nothing could be further from the truth. It was rather the Germans who systematically and with brutal honesty reviewed the tactical failures of the First World War,[5] and then exploited that knowledge to create the military juggernaut that won such decisive battles in the early years of World War II. The British blandly ignored the lessons of the First World War until 1932 and thereafter applied them indifferently, while the French deliberately reinterpreted their own experiences in the last years of the war to satisfy preconceived political and military preferences.[6]

Some 2,400 years ago, perhaps the greatest of all military historians, Thucydides, declared that he had written his history of the Peloponnesian War to inform "those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past, and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."[7]

The trajectory of human history over the centuries since he wrote his masterpiece has more than confirmed his prognosis. Notwithstanding, successors of the Hellenic soldiers and politicians about whom he wrote have repeatedly chosen to believe that they are different and that the lessons of the past are

[3] Many of history's most successful soldiers were students of military history and not a few wrote it themselves, including Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Ulysses Grant, and William Slim. The reverse correlation between historical ignorance and military incompetence is likewise too consistent to dismiss as accidental.

[4] Defeat certainly can be a more effective engine of change than victory. Our own military's response to defeat in Vietnam is a case in point. But the records of the French and Italian militaries in the twentieth century, among others, suggest that even defeat doesn't guarantee sensible military transformation. For a detailed treatment, see Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, 3 vols. (London, 1988).

[5] Though not, unfortunately, its strategic lessons. See, e.g., Holger H. Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War," *International Security*, Fall 1987.

[6] Three useful treatments are James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS, 1992); Harold R. Winton, *To Change an Army: General Sir John Burnett-Stuart and British Armored Doctrine, 1927–1938* (Lawrence, KS, 1988); and Robert Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919–1939* (Hamden, CT, 1986).

[7] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London, 1954), p. 48.

irrelevant to their unique circumstances.[8] Why this is so remains one of the mysteries of the human experience. Perhaps the most compelling explanation is simply generational transition, the conviction of each new crop of leaders assuming power that they are different from their predecessors and immune from their errors. To paraphrase an old saying, what is new is not necessarily interesting and what is interesting is not necessarily new. Yet, political and military leaders seem driven to repeat the blunders of their predecessors. It is the very repetitive quality of many of military history's worst disasters that can make reading it so depressing.

Thus, in 1940 and 1941, not a single senior German military leader expressed the slightest qualm with Hitler's plans for Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Even Franz Halder, chief of the general staff and the most analytical among its number, saw no reason to reflect on the unhappy results of earlier such invasions, whether Charles XII's or Napoleon's. Only as winter's darkness descended on the battle lines in front of Leningrad, Moscow, and Rostov in December 1941 did some senior German officers belatedly began to consult Caulaincourt's sobering memoirs of Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign.[9]

All in all, considering that war is the most demanding and consequential of human endeavors, it is astonishing how cursorily it tends to be studied by its practitioners. It is even more surprising given that most military organizations spend the majority of their time at peace, which one might suppose offered leisure if not incentive to study the past. Instead, modern militaries are consumed with the recruitment and training of generations of young men, the management of large military bureaucracies, and the routine administrative burdens of command. In the day-to-day business of peacetime soldiering, systematic study of the past all too easily becomes a luxury that busy commanders and their subordinates cannot afford.

That is the more true because the serious study of history is difficult. It is no simple matter to extract what is relevant and important from the wealth of recorded military experience. Often, what appears relevant is trivial and what appears significant is not easily transferable. Nor does history furnish straightforward and comfortable answers to contemporary questions.

Beyond the desire of each generation to chart its own course and the competition of peacetime routine, one should also note the natural human distaste for upsetting evidence, especially when it challenges cherished

[8] Herodotus's earlier history of the great war between the Persians and the Greeks underlines that little in the behavior of the latter had changed fifty years later when Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War.

[9] For the best account of the 1941 German campaign against the Soviet Union, see Horst Boog, Jurgen Förster, Joachim Hoffman, Ernst Klink, Rolf-Dieter Müller, and Gerd R. Ueberschär, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1983).

convictions. Not all leaders find intellectual debate congenial, and even fewer relish challenges to their own ideas and assumptions.[10] Immersion in history inevitably invites both. History raises more questions than it answers. It suggests unpleasant possibilities. It demolishes preferred theories. It often forces leaders to recognize unpalatable truths. Yet, it also suggests possible paths to the future, no matter how uncomfortable. Perhaps most important, it compels them to think dispassionately about potential opponents – their nature, worldview, aims, and options.

It is this understanding of the "other" – the adversary – that has repeatedly proved most difficult for civilian and military leaders to acquire, an understanding that history suggests is crucial to success in war. Thus, the failure of European rulers in the early nineteenth century to recognize the magnitude of the sociological changes wrought by the French Revolution and of their commanders to understand the military implications of Napoleon's expropriation of it goes far to explain the terrible series of defeats suffered by France's enemies between 1792 and 1811. As Carl von Clausewitz commented:

> Not until statesmen had at last perceived the nature of the forces that had emerged in France, and had grasped that new conditions now obtained in Europe, could they foresee the broad effect all this would have on war. . . . In short, we can say that twenty years of Revolutionary triumph were mainly due to the mistaken policies of France's enemies.[11]

Still another of the obstacles to acquiring and using historical knowledge littering the policy landscape is the bureaucratic nature of modern governments. Bureaucracies often conserve the past but rarely examine it critically. Such examination would challenge the routines that smooth the bureaucratic process. We already noted the impact of peacetime routine on the willingness and ability of military organizations to study history seriously. That routine is even more pronounced in the civilian bureaucracies that drive modern governments.[12] It is easy for bureaucrats to become imprisoned by it. The past then becomes a nuisance, and its qualifiers and warnings merely a threat to their projects. For too many, potential adversaries are merely a convenient justification for funding, not real people we might actually have to fight one day. Their history, when cited at all, serves only as a source of aphorisms,

[10] Considerable evidence confirms that the rejection, if not outright suppression, of competing views has preceded more than one of history's most egregious military blunders. For example, see Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, NJ, 1984).

[11] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. & trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. 609.

[12] One might recall that the report of the 9/11 Commission commented that a principal reason for the failure to anticipate the September 11 catastrophe was a uniform lack of imagination in the intelligence bureaucracy, this despite ample prior evidence of al Qaeda's general intentions, if not their specific plans.

not a means of deciphering the complex interrelationships that are likely to affect their future behavior.[13]

Finally, of course, bureaucracies, military and otherwise, are hostage to the political sensitivities and prejudices of those they serve. History has a bad habit of upsetting both. During the last few decades, American defense policy making especially has been afflicted by politically appealing but historically unsupported assumptions about the nature of war and the sacrifices, material and moral, required to prosecute it. As they percolate through the organizational apparatus, such assumptions gain acceptance despite lack of evidence. The result, only too visible in today's defense establishment, is an endless effort to find easily marketed and preferably inexpensive solutions to the most complex and difficult of national enterprises.

In such a climate, history at best is an inconvenience and at worst an outright embarrassment. A contemporary historian captured the problem all too succinctly in relation to the challenge of designing strategy in the twenty-first century:

> In this bewildering world, the search for predictive theories to guide strategy has been no more successful than the search for such theories in other areas of human existence. Patterns do emerge from the past, and their study permits educated guesses about the range of potential outcomes. But the future is not an object of knowledge; no increase in processing power will make the owl of history a daytime bird. Similar causes do not always produce similar effects, and causes interact in ways unforeseeable even by the historical sophisticated. Worse still, individuals – with their ambitions, vanities, and quirks – make strategy. Machiavelli's Prince is sometimes a better guide than Clausewitz to the personal and institutional vendettas that intertwine unpredictably around the simplest strategic decisions.[14]

One of the great ironies in today's America is that its civilian policy makers will for the most part be even more ignorant of the past than the military officers who serve them. The latter at least are compelled by the professional military education system to confront history at various points in their careers, however infrequently. Their political masters are under no such compulsion. Perhaps this is inevitable. Political leaders invariably reflect the prejudices and attitudes of the citizens they defend, and Americans are by birthright prone to dismiss history as a brake on their ambitions. Even in the military,

[13] A classic example was the inability of advocates of German appeasement in the late 1930s to recognize how extraordinarily different the norms and aims of Nazi Germany were from their own. For the need to understand other cultures in planning and conducting war in the twenty-first century, see Major General (Retired) Robert H. Scales, Jr., "Culture-Centric Warfare," *Naval Institute Proceedings*, October 2004.

[14] Macgregor Knox, "Continuity and Revolution in Strategy," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds. *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 645.

there will always be some who from loyalty or discretion accept without challenge the cavalier assumptions of political leaders unwilling to consult the past and unable to hear its echoes.

At present, moreover, even in the military, what too often takes the place of serious historical analysis is an intense but historically undisciplined theorizing. Indeed, the surfeit of "transformational" concepts currently besieging senior civilian and military leaders is incredible. Some seek to demolish the institutional traditions believed to prevent the separate military services from harmonizing their activities and resources effectively; others seek to expand the scope of civilian influence on historically military concerns; whereas still others seek the technological means of eliminating the inherent ambiguity and friction of war.[15]

Forward thinking is necessary. But what characterizes too much of it today is an almost complete disconnection from the past, surprising as that may seem in a military with an almost uniformly successful tradition. Part of the explanation lies in the dominance for almost a half-century in American policy-making circles, military as well as civilian, of political science and management theories exhibiting an almost theological aversion to history as a source of insight and evidence. But the broader explanation is simply that military organizations and their leaders are too consumed by immediate pressures to examine the past in a serious and critical way. New concepts are both less onerous to justify and easier to market to a defense industry hungry for new business and to politicians seeking less materially and politically expensive solutions to war's complexities.

Many have warned of the risks associated with such ahistorical theorizing. Attacking military theoreticians of his own time, Clausewitz was especially blunt. His comments on the writings of some of his colleagues in the nineteenth century might just as cogently be applied to many of today's conceptual efforts:

> It is only analytically that these attempts at theory can be called advances in the realm of truth; synthetically, in the rules and regulations they offer, they are absolutely useless. They aim at fixed value; but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities. They direct the inquiry exclusively toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.[16]

[15] Examples unfortunately are legion, but for one representative concept, the reader might examine Joint Vision 2010, an extraordinary collection of historically unsupported dicta produced in the early 1990s, which set the tone for many of the concepts that followed over the next decade and a half. The contrast with earlier military concepts could not be more apparent. For notable examples, consult the 1982 and 1986 editions of the Army's Field Manual 100-5, "Operations," and the Marine Corps' 1989 FMFM 1 "Warfighting" and its 1997 successor MCDP 1, each of which relied heavily on historical analysis.

[16] Clausewitz, p. 136.

Conceptualization and experimentation certainly have their uses. But only history records the reactions of real people to real events in the context of the real pressures that policy making and war making inevitably impose. Again, Clausewitz:

> [Theory] is an analytic investigation leading to close acquaintance with the subject; applied to experience – in our case to military history – it leads to thorough familiarity with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill, the more effective it will prove in areas where the nature of the case admits no arbiter but talent. It will, in fact, become an active ingredient of talent.[17]

The central purpose of this book is to illustrate the qualities that make the study of history so important to military leaders, and at the same time, consider what makes it so difficult and challenging for those who choose to engage in it. Not long after the seizure of Baghdad in April 2003, a Marine Corps instructor at the National War College wrote to his former boss, then Major General James Mattis, commanding the 1st Marine Division during the invasion, asking how Mattis would reply to officers who discount history as having little relevance or utility to their military careers. Mattis wrote back:

> Ultimately a real understanding of history means that we face nothing new under the sun. For all the "Fourth Generation of War" intellectuals running around today saying that the nature of war has fundamentally changed, the tactics are wholly new, etc., I must respectfully say: "Not really." Alex the Great would not be in the least perplexed by the enemy that we face right now in Iraq, and our leaders going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, vice just reading) the men who have gone before us. We have been fighting on this planet for 5000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. "Winging it" and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of competence in our profession.[18]

No one who knows James Mattis well would ever mistake him for an ivory tower intellectual. On the contrary, he is the epitome of a combat commander, a leader who consistently leads from the front. But like so many successful military commanders before him, from Alex the Great to George Patton, Mattis also is a committed student of war. For Mattis, as for his celebrated predecessors, to be a student of war is first to be a student of military history.

This book reflects the same conviction. The authors of its various essays believe the study of military history plays an essential role in the educational development of future military and civilian leaders. In addressing what

[17] Ibid, p. 141.
[18] Unpublished e-mail, quoted by permission of the author.

America's war colleges should teach their students, Admiral Stansfield Turner, former president of the Naval War College and the author of its widely praised educational reforms of the early 1970s, noted:

> War colleges are places to educate the senior officer corps in the larger military and strategic issues that confront America in the late twentieth century. They should educate these officers by a demanding intellectual curriculum to think in wider terms than their busy operational careers have thus far demanded. Above all the war colleges should broaden the intellectual and military horizons of the officers who attend, so that they have a conception of the larger strategic and operational issues that confront our military and our nation.[19]

Without attention to history, there can be no such professional broadening of officers beyond the immediate scope of their duties. Apart from the conduct of war itself, the only comprehensive evidence of the demands it places on those who fight it and their leaders is the evidence of history. Written from a number of different perspectives, the essays in this volume illuminate the extraordinary richness of that evidence, as well as the extent to which its study can inform military innovation in peacetime and adaptation in war. Some focus on war's enduring features and challenges, whereas others suggest the insights furnished by particular historical cases. Still others examine the sometimes troublesome relationship between those who make military history and those who record it.

All are products of an extraordinarily pleasant and productive Anglo-American scholarly collaboration during the summer and fall of 2003. Each was originally written and presented at "Past Futures," a conference on military history at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, sponsored by the British Army's Directorate of Ground Development and Doctrine, the British counterpart of the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command. Subsequently, all but Sir Michael Howard's were presented at a follow-on conference at Marine Corps University, Quantico, sponsored by the Marine Corps University Foundation. The authors reflect a broad diversity of backgrounds and interests – British and American, civilian and military, scholars and practitioners. Whatever their professional credentials and orientation, all share the conviction that studying military history is a crucial prerequisite to understanding the nature and future of war.

It is certainly not the only prerequisite. Other ingredients, from familiarity with emerging technologies to awareness of cultural differences to actual battlefield experience, contribute to that understanding. But the authors in this volume uniformly believe these other ingredients are ultimately sterile unless grounded in a careful and thorough examination of the past.

[19] Quoted in Williamson Murray, "Grading the War Colleges," *The National Interest*, Winter 1986/1987, p. 13.

Their essays reflect that view. Sir Michael Howard's generous permission to use his keynote address to the first Past Futures conference as the introductory essay is a special gift. Perhaps the most distinguished military historian writing today, Sir Michael has been a mentor and model for every other contributor in the book. His essay eloquently reminds us that, whatever its many other contributions may be, military history and war studies are in the final analysis about war, and that, although much modern historiography rightly and usefully examines war in its broadest context, the study of war finally is about fighting. Classic military history – the study of military operations and campaigns – thus remains a *sine qua non* of the study of war.

We have divided the remaining essays into two groups. Those in Part I examine various aspects of the relationship between history and the military profession. To a considerable extent, they seek to elucidate how one might think about the possible and potential uses of history within the framework of professional military education and the careers of officers. The essays in Part II examine specific historical cases that illuminate recurring military problems. For convenience, we have grouped the essays in this section chronologically.

Lieutenant General John Kiszely, British Army, begins the first section by reminding us that using military history superficially can be more dangerous than ignoring it altogether. In particular, he urges that its study be imbedded in a broader and deeper commitment to professional self-education, a commitment that requires deliberate encouragement by military institutions. His chapter is followed by that of Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper, USMC retired, whose autobiographical essay describes how a lifelong progressive engagement with military history, largely self-driven and managed, helped shape a distinguished military career in peace and war.

In the third essay, Colonel Richard Sinnreich, U.S. Army retired, traces the evolution of historical study in America's formal military education, a relationship marked by episodic advances and retreats driven by both scholarly and military fashion. The final essay in this section, by Williamson Murray, professor of military history emeritus at The Ohio State University, underlines that, too often, soldiers' engagement with military history is distorted by an unhappy congruence between historians' need to simplify a phenomenon suffused with ambiguity and uncertainty and soldiers' yearning for didactic guidance.

Indeed, Murray argues, for history to be of any use, its very complexities demand skeptical inquiry rather than reliance on a smattering of inevitably oversimplified historical anecdotes. As General Mattis suggests, therefore, military history, not to mention history in general, is of little value unless it is studied, not merely read.

The essays in Part II address more directly recurring military phenomena and the ability of history to illuminate them. The first two examine the

writings of two seminal thinkers about war and the human condition. Paul Rahe, professor of history at the University of Tulsa, examines Thucydides. His essay demonstrates that studying war in its wider social context is far from a modern preoccupation, in the process reaffirming the contemporary relevance of the first, and in many ways still most important, military historian to the study of war and its impact on civil society. Professor Colin Gray of the University of Reading offers a spirited defense of Clausewitz. His essay is a refreshing and much-needed antidote to those British and American academics who over the past several decades have spilled much ink arguing the irrelevance of the Prussian theorist to the conditions of the modern world (in a few cases, apparently, without having bothered to read him).[20]

The third essay, by John Gooch, Professor of History at Leeds University, examines what history has to say about strategy. Both Thucydides and Clausewitz would approve of Professor Gooch's careful distinction between history as a source of not always reliable maxims and as a means of diagnosing and understanding recurring patterns of strategic behavior, a distinction too rarely acknowledged by strategic practitioners.

The next three essays in Part II apply the lens of historical analysis to the very contemporary problem of how military institutions cope – or fail to cope – with major technological changes. Andrew Gordon, lecturer at Britain's Joint Services Staff College, describes the impact on the Royal Navy of a prolonged period without major maritime warfare, during which the technology of war at sea underwent rapid and massive changes, while it managed to forget almost entirely the principles on which its great victories in the early nineteenth century had rested. Major General Jonathan Bailey, chief of the British Army's Directorate of Ground Development and Doctrine, examines the failure of Western armies to learn from the experiences of the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, in every way the harbinger of the nightmarish Great War that followed barely a decade later and came close to destroying Europe. Paul Harris, lecturer of War Studies at the Royal Military College, offers a thoughtful rebuttal of the conventional view that early British defeats in the Second World War reflected professional military myopia, instead locating many of the prewar British Army's difficulties in broader political, economic, and intellectual obstacles that began by hindering innovation before the war and ended by retarding adaptation to its actual conditions.

The last two essays examine military challenges that transcend particular historical eras, having arisen repeatedly over the course of the centuries

[20] In Britain, there is a long tradition of criticizing Clausewitz, beginning with B. H. Liddell Hart. Americans' rejection of Clausewitz's work is more recent, and reflects both emotional distaste for Clausewitz's merciless realism and insistence on the power of modern information systems to dissipate the fog and friction of war. For the latter view, see Admiral Bill Owens with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York, 2000).