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Introduction

Over the past several years, I have mulled over the possibility of compiling a collection of articles I have written. These pieces have conveyed my broader sense of history to those interested in the role that historical studies might play in molding our understanding of the uses of force in the past as well as in thinking about its use in the future. I have also used such articles and essays as a means of correcting the myths and historical inconsistencies that seem to proliferate in the current policy milieu, like toadstools in a damp and corrupt climate. My editor at Cambridge, Frank Smith, expressed surprising enthusiasm for such a collection when I raised the possibility. The result was that I had to rummage over a considerable period through disparate journals and unpublished essays locked away in my files and in the various disks and thumbdrives that form the chaos that is my working environment. In the process of assembling this collection, the reviewers of the initial manuscript helped me enormously in molding the final manuscript. Their apposite comments have guided me not only in the writing of this introduction but also in the formatting and ordering of the chapters in this book.

Some of these essays reflect my recent work, and some appeared almost 20 years ago. In the case of the latter, instead of attempting to rework the footnotes, I have appended a small bibliographical paragraph of more recent books and articles that have since appeared. These short references should provide sufficient guidance for interested readers as they follow the path of historical research and arguments over the course of the intervening years.

In the end, this collection represents an overview of themes that have informed the basis of my historical work and interests since I first began

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my graduate studies at Yale in fall 1969. At that time, I had just completed a tour as a maintenance officer in a C-130 wing in Southeast Asia. I had three specific reasons for returning to graduate school. Two of those, I hope, are common among those engaged in the academic profession of teaching history, namely, the desire to uncover the past and convey a love of history to others. Since my earliest days in school, I have found myself fascinated by the course of human events throughout the ages – the tableau, if you will, of human beings, great and small, as they contested for power and influence. An equally important motive has been my fascination with the similarities between the past and the present in terms of human behavior despite the vast changes in culture, politics, and technology. "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Thus, it was not hard to justify to myself at the age of 28, an age when most people of my age were already firmly set in their careers, the additional five or six years in graduate school studying history.

But my third reason for returning to school was, and remains, uncommon to most in the profession of academic history. My war in Southeast Asia was an easy one. I was rarely exposed to danger. Yet, to this day I am haunted by the smell of the dead wafting through the cargo bays of the C-130s carrying body bags from the battles in I Corps for their transhipment through Saigon back to their resting places in the United States. From my first days in graduate school, I had hoped to use my study of history as a tool to help future military leaders avoid the costly, palpable mistakes that their predecessors had made in waging that dismal conflict known to Americans as the Vietnam War.[1] In the aftermath of the failures in Iraq, during what too many military and political leaders termed the post-conflict phase, I fear that much of my work has gone for naught. Yet, I have always possessed a streak of optimism to accompany my darkest thoughts. Perhaps, as the then young marine lieutenant suggested at the end of the documentary, *No End in Sight*: America can do better. It has been the avowed purpose of much of my writing to help America's military and political leaders perform more competently in the future.

In the largest sense, this collection also represents that third thread in my historical research and writings, as well as my fascination with the history of human organizations and those who lead them. These chapters

[1] Only in the 1990s did we learn how incompetent and dishonest America's military leaders had been in providing support to Lyndon Johnson and Robert Strange McNamara in the making of the decision to intervene in the war against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in South Vietnam. In this regard, see especially H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty, Lyndon Johnson, Robert Strange McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York, 1996).

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rest on the proposition that war is neither a science nor a craft, but rather an incredibly complex endeavor which challenges men and women to the core of their souls. It is, to put it bluntly, not only the most physically demanding of all the professions, but also the most demanding intellectually and morally. It is a profession whose practitioners only occasionally exercise their main task – the conduct of war, a state that they can never really replicate in peacetime. The cost of slovenly thinking at every level of war can translate into the deaths of innumerable men and women, most of whom deserve better from their leaders. It also leads invariably to the massive waste of national treasure – to which, considering the current economic situation the United States faces, Americans need to pay closer attention.

At the highest level of strategy, human conflict demands a sophisticated understanding of the international environment and the balance of power, not to mention the nature of one's opponents: their history, their culture, their religion and ideology, and their *Weltanshauuungen*. Strategy also demands a realistic evaluation of means in relation to ends. The Prussian thinker Carl von Clausewitz noted in *On War* that "no one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without being clear in his mind what he achieves by that war and how he intends to conduct it."[2] And that of course is the conundrum because the conduct of strategy throughout history suggests the opposite: states and their leaders, military as well as political, have embarked on war with only the most superficial, sloppy analysis to undergird their thinking in the rush to war.[3]

It is not surprising then that throughout my career, I have found myself profoundly influenced by Clausewitz and our increasingly sophisticated understanding of the depth and complex directions of his thought.[4] Of all the activities in which mankind engages, it is the conduct of war that envelopes it with the greatest degree of uncertainty, ambiguity, and

[2] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 579.

[3] See Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge, 1992); and the opening chapter of Williamson Murray, Richard Sinnreich, and Jim Lacey, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge, 2011).

[4] In this regard, I have been heavily influenced by four specific works: The translation of *On War* by Michael Howard and Peter Paret that Princeton University Press published in the mid-1970s has had an enormous impact on my thinking as has Peter Paret's brilliant intellectual study of intellectual history *Clausewitz and the State* (Princeton, NJ, 1978). Two shorter works have also influenced me profoundly: Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington, DC, 1996) and Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 3, Winter 1992–1993.

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friction. Murphy's Law rules: "If something can go wrong, it will." The enemy's intentions and purposes will always remain an uncertain entity. As the aphorism popular among many of today's troops captures it, "the enemy always gets a vote." Unintended consequences and unforeseen second- and third-order effects bedevil the most logical and carefully thought-through approaches to war. In hard, cold fact, mankind has 5,000 years of recorded history that underlines that reality.[5]

Yet, in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, many in the American military, particularly the navy and air force, but even some in the army, succumbed to the belief that America's overwhelming technological superiority and the sheer crunching power of the computers possessed by the U.S. military could and would remove friction from what was termed the "battle space" – at least, for the military forces of the United States. In other words U.S. forces would be able to achieve what the Pentagon termed "battle space dominance" over America's "battlefield opponents." As Admiral Bill Owens, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued: the U.S. military would be able to see and understand everything that was happening in an area 200 miles by 200 miles and do so in real time.[6] Throughout the 1990s, analysts at think tanks wrote papers about rapid decisive operations and the new American way of war that supposedly had broken with the paradigms of the past and thus made the study of past conflicts irrelevant. In fact, information represents only disparate, chaotic fragments of reality. It is only as valuable as the ability to filter and analyze it into a relatively clear depiction of what appears to be happening.

For a few short weeks in March and April 2003 the onrush of the 3rd Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division seemingly confirmed that vision, at least to outside observers. For those on the inside of conventional military operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom, however, matters looked considerably different. The new age of computers and rapid communications provided commanders and their staffs with a deluge of information, but little of that information was translatable into knowledge of what was actually happening in the battle space. Moreover, the frictions and misunderstandings of soldiers and marines operating under the intense pressure of combat continued to cloud the

[5] I am indebted to General James Mattis, a friend and critic of much of my work, for this.
[6] See William A. Owens, with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York, 2001). Such views were widespread throughout the services throughout the 1990s and informed the views of civilians like Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz.

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picture. The chief of intelligence of the Combined Forces Land Component Command put it best in commenting to a CNN interviewer: "We're drowning in information!"

In effect, the technologies that were adopted to remove the frictions of war were creating an array of new and more complex frictions. Quite simply, information is not, and never has been, the same as knowledge. It is not surprising then that the two outstanding division commanders who led American forces into Iraq, Major General James Mattis, commander of the 1st Marine Division, and Major General Buford Blount, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, spent most of their time with front-line units rather than back in their tactical headquarters. They did so because only at the front lines could they gain a sense of what was really happening – what the Germans term *Fingerspitzengefühl* (the feeling at the end of one's fingers). In the real world, the icons on the screens of computers can never depict reality; in effect, they represent only the pale, shimmering visage of events transpiring in a milieu of fear and uncertainty.

For the fortunes of America's post-conflict efforts, it was precisely the knowledge of the complex, fragmented nature of Iraqi culture, history, religion, and politics that was needed at the highest levels. Nevertheless, too many senior officers and civilian policy makers were sadly deficient in such understanding, as the United States stumbled into the post-conflict stage after the collapse of Saddam's evil regime. Of course, they might have read the memoirs of Lieutenant General Aylmer Haldane, who commanded the British forces that put down the rebellion of the tribes in the Mesopotamian River Valley in 1920. He noted in a comment that fit all too many generals and civilians in summer 2003, who led the effort in the first year of occupying Iraq. "I regret that on my arrival in Mesopotamia I was too much preoccupied with military matters and too little informed regarding the political problems."[7] American political and military leaders might even have studied the experiences of U.S. commanders and their forces in fighting the vicious insurgency that U.S. forces had encountered in South Vietnam in the 1960s. There is, however, little evidence that most of those responsible for addressing the growing insurgency in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 had the background to understand the events that were swirling around them in the Mesopotamian River Valley. Instead, like the Germans in the 1920s and 1930s, they had trained themselves and their subordinates to become superb tacticians – and, at the

[7] Lieutenant General Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia 1920* (London, 1922).

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highest levels, "masters of the operational art." Thus, without reference to the historical past, they managed to repeat nearly every mistake that America's generals had made in the Vietnam War, not to mention the British difficulties in crushing the insurgency of the Arab tribes in 1920.

A number of themes in the following chapters address the issues involved in the conduct of strategy and military operations, the most important being that we *can* learn from the past. Inherent in the lessons of the past is the reality that military institutions rarely get the next war right. It is not that they focus on the last war and therefore get the next one wrong, as so many historians have suggested. Rather, it is the fact that they fail even to study the last war honestly and thoroughly. Few military institutions manage to achieve that level of competence. Instead most militaries study their profession narrowly, if at all. Then, when they face combat and the fact that war is an uncertain, high-risk endeavor, they are not prepared for reality. In peacetime, most military leaders privilege certainties and low-risk behavior, instead of preparing themselves widely and deeply by studying the history of their profession. The nature of peacetime discipline and culture more often than not results in the development of tunnel vision, usually focused on the tactical realm.

The conduct of two world wars by the German military illustrates the dangers of such a narrow focus. All too competent at the tactical and operational levels, the German military displayed an almost contemptuous disregard for the strategic issues involved in the conduct of war. As a result, during the Second World War, they managed to repeat every major strategic mistake that they had made in the Great War. The irony, given the attention that Americans showered on the German way of war in the 1980s, is the fact that it is the strategic level of war that matters most in the conduct of peace and war. If a nation's and its military's approach is largely effective in evaluating the context and realities of a potential conflict, then military organizations can adjust their tactical and operational approaches. If the strategy is fundamentally flawed, then no matter of tactical and operational virtuosity can repair the damage of strategic mistakes.

Nevertheless, if Americans have not always focused overly on tactics, they have often attempted to reduce the business of war to a search for simple, clear, engineering solutions – in other words, for "silver bullets." Their love affair with technology – and emphasis on a clear, mechanistic set of principles for the conduct of war[8] – underlines an effort to boil

[8] In this regard, see particularly the "Weinberger doctrine" of the 1980s.

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the extraordinarily difficult down to easy-to-read briefing charts that eliminate the complex. In other words, they have too often sought to simplify and build clear but irrelevant models in the face of what will always be a nightmarish world of complexity and difficulty. In the end, military organizations tend to be unreflective and intellectually indifferent to what really matters. Their preparations for war have often turned to the simplicity of drills and training rather than to rigorous, honest study, much less than critical self-examination.

These then are the basic themes that connect the chapters in this book. The first group of chapters represents a general analysis of history and its relation to the future, accompanied by probings of historically based theory and its importance to the profession. The second examines specific historical case studies in the conduct of strategy, operations, and war.[9] The introductory chapter grapples with the largest theme in this volume: why a knowledge of, not just an acquaintance with, history represents *the* essential component in thinking about the future, even though it offers no certain path in a universe dominated by uncertainty and ambiguity. And this is because nothing else offers an understanding of the present, from which the future springs.

The following two chapters then address what might best be termed the backbone of any historical analysis of war: the fact that the great Athenian historian of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, and the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, the first who wrote nearly 2,500 years ago and the second nearly two centuries ago, managed to write the most serious and valuable examinations of human conflict of all the immense writings on the subject. The fact that no modern writers have managed to rise to their level of sophistication and understanding of the place of war in human affairs is indeed a sad commentary on the intellectual depth of the present age. The third chapter, written in the mid-1990s, addresses the fact that the emerging leadership of America's military appeared to be engaged in a massive effort to dismiss the past as irrelevant to understanding the future and to replace it with a technological view of the world that removed friction, ambiguity, and uncertainty from the military equation. That approach would reap bitter dividends in Afghanistan after 2001 and in Iraq after 2003.

[9] In 2005 Colonel Richard Hart Sinnreich, U.S. Army (ret.) and I edited a volume of essays that examined the crucial role that history should play in the education and preparation of officers throughout their careers. See Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue, The Importance of History to the Military profession* (Cambridge, 2005).

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The fourth chapter was written in the late 1990s at a conference for the Office of Force Transformation to discuss whether the "principles of war" should be rewritten in a more modern form to take into account the escalating technological changes that had taken, and were taking, place in the modern world. That peculiar, and particularly American, effort to reduce war to a simple matter of principles that one can learn by rote and then regurgitate at appropriate moments in the conduct of war has misled generations of officers in peace as well as in war. In fact, neither the old, nor a new set of principles of war can offer the student of war much because they reflect a linear approach to war that stands in direct contradistinction to the reality of war. War is inevitably a non-linear phenomenon. In effect, the principles of war attempt to reduce human conflict to simple aphorisms, while eliminating its inherent, chaotic nature.

As the second part of this collection addresses the direct use of history to understand the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of military institutions and historical case studies, the next three chapters form the bridge between these sections. The fifth chapter examines the issues involved in understanding the culture and subcultures of military institutions. That issue has only begun to inform my work, as well as that of other historians.[10] Yet, military culture presents a crucial key to understanding why some military institutions have successfully adapted to the complex and difficult problems they invariably face in war, whereas others fail to do so at considerable cost to their nations and especially to those at the sharp end.

The sixth and seventh chapters attempt to use history to examine particular current problems. Perhaps the most daunting problem that statesmen and military leaders face is that of developing and then following coherent strategic responses to the international and military environments. In fact, there was no such concept as "strategic planning," at least as we conceive of it, before the eighteenth century.[11] That is the subject

[10] In this respect, see the outstanding work by Isabel V. Hull: *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2006).

[11] This is not to say that major powers and their leaders have not developed a finely tuned sense of grand strategy throughout history. Despite the bizarre views of many ancient historians who argue that no one in the ancient world understood grand strategy, because they had no words in Greek or Latin that described such a concept, the evidence is clear that the ancients like the moderns understood grand strategy. Among other pieces of evidence see the brilliant speech of King Archidamnus before the Spartan assembly as to why Sparta should not risk war at that time against the Athenians in Book 1 of Thucydides. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Rex Warner (London, 1954), pp. 82–86.

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of the sixth chapter: namely, how strategic planning, or lack thereof, has played an increasingly important role in the success of major powers in peace as well as in war. Such planning must provide the crucial support structure for both grand strategy and the operational strategies that must emerge from the larger picture of political aims and economic realities. As Allan Millett and I pointed out in an article summing up the "military effectiveness" project that we had directed for Andrew Marshall and the Office of Net Assessment: only a coherent, historically based strategy can open up a successful path to the future through the shoals of the present.[12]

The seventh chapter is both historical and analytic in nature: the contribution that red teaming (the portrayal of potential enemies and the potential options that are open to them) has made to military organizations in preparing for war through exercises and war gaming. It is a tale that more often than not involves failure, even when the red team portrays the enemy in a realistic fashion. Such failures reflect the general unwillingness of military and political leaders throughout history to see their comfortable assumptions and cherished beliefs about the "other" challenged. Yet, in thinking about successful military and strategic approaches throughout the past several centuries, it is clear that red teaming has at times contributed significantly to thinking through the problems that nations and their military confront in addressing an opponent who possesses a significantly different culture and assessment of the potential arena of conflict.

The first of the specific case studies that follow examines the historical problems of the nearly one century of peace between 1815 and 1914. In the hundred years before Napoleon's rise to power, there had been a series of great world wars that began with the war of Spanish succession at the start of the eighteenth century and ended with the massive struggle that lasted from 1792 and 1815 in the wars between Revolutionary France and the *ancien regimes* of the remainder of Europe. But that series of seemingly unending wars turned over the course of most of the period that followed into the 99-year peace, finally broken in 1914 with the onset of the 40-year period of the great world wars. How to explain that peaceful century, especially after the pattern of world wars involving all the great European powers in the eighteenth century?

[12] See Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, "The Lessons of War," *The National Interest*, Winter 1988/1989. The three volumes of that project – *Military Effectiveness, World War I; Military Effectiveness, The Interwar Period;* and *Military Effectiveness, World War II* – were reissued in paperback by Cambridge University Press in August 2010.

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That anomaly would appear to have been the result of the brilliant diplomatic and strategic maneuvering of Otto von Bismarck, the "Iron Chancellor" of Prusso-Germany. Ironically, Bismarck's methods, as well as his success, in turn may well have made a more terrible European conflict inevitable. By finessing the strategic situation in Central Europe, he prevented a great war over the unification of Germany, while waging limited wars against the Danes, the Austrians, and then the French. However, in 1875, when he threatened to launch the new German state against a France that had recovered all too quickly in his eyes from the catastrophe of the Franco-Prussian War, he confronted an enormously altered European situation from that of 1870–1871, one in which Germany confronted the possibility of waging war against a European-wide coalition of the great powers. Bismarck backed down, realizing that the possibility of a major war was something Germany *must* avoid. But his successors proved incapable of understanding his methods or the dangers that he had foreseen so clearly in the crisis of 1875. Their willful disdain for anything other than "military necessity" ensured that Bismarck's success in creating a unified German state then created the strategic disaster of the two great world wars – wars that came close to destroying Western civilization.

It was the failure of strategy that is the focus of the next chapter on German military effectiveness over most of the first half of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, when I began emphasizing the use of history as a tool for understanding the effectiveness of military institutions, many of those engaged in similar efforts (including myself) found themselves intrigued by the German military and its performance on the battlefield.[13] It was only at the mid-point in the decade that I focused on the enormous gaps, particularly at the strategic level, but also at the operational level, in the German military performance in two world wars.[14] It was at that point that I recognized how flawed, disastrously so, was the German approach to war, an approach deeply influenced by the military culture as well as

[13] One of my earliest articles was on the coherent and effective preparation of the Wehrmacht, based on a thorough lesson-learned process that included the entire army and tied in closely with the training program, for the 1940 campaign in the west against the forces of the Western Powers: See "The German Response to Victory in Poland: A Case Study in Professionalism," *Armed Forces and Society*, Winter 1981.

[14] The gaps in strategic thinking are obvious in that the Germans managed to repeat the same strategic mistakes in the Second World War that they had made in the First World War. Given the focus of most historians on the sharp end at the operational level, the gross mistakes the Germans made in intelligence assessment and in logistics have only begun to emerge in the historical literature in the last several decades.

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