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Learn From History: Ignore It At Your Peril

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### Abstract

Military professionals must dedicate time in their schedule to study military history. A study of past similar events will not give the Soldier a “turn-key” solution to a current operation; however, it can give the Soldier a “sector of fire” in which to focus their efforts. These past encounters can certainly aid in avoiding serious mistakes, paid in blood and sweat by others, without suffering the same toll or missing an opportunity that might not otherwise be identified. This paper will compare the American Civil War to the American involvement in World War I. The examples to be used will illustrate the folly of ignoring lessons learned from previous conflict and will support the view that the study of history is important and will positively impact the challenges of the U.S. military that lie ahead, if properly put into perspective.

### Learn From History: Ignore It At Your Peril

The American Civil War was, singularly, the bloodiest war that this country has ever fought. At least 618,000 Americans died in the four years of fighting the Civil War, and some experts say the toll reached 700,000. The number that is most often quoted is 620,000. At any rate, these casualties exceed the nation's loss in all its other wars, from the Revolution through Vietnam (Davis, 1996, p. 215). The battles were terribly bloody; the Battle of Gettysburg alone creating 51,112 casualties (Davis, 1996, p. 216). World War I was not nearly as bloody to the Americans as was the Civil War. A total of American casualties was 364,800 (Simkin) for the 18 month duration of the American involvement. Although the total casualties are fewer during World War I, the annual butcher's bill was significantly higher due to the shorter duration of American involvement.

### Napoleonic Tactics Of The American Civil War

The tactics for war fighting prior to the American Civil War were based on Napoleonic formations and movements. These formations and movements allowed for a rapid deployment and envelopment of the opposing force. The massed formations were necessary at the time due to difficult communications and inaccurate smooth bore muskets of the time (Snell). The military leaders on both sides, however, all shared the same basic military training as well as the basic concept of how an army should be built and how a war should be fought. The military training as well as tactics of the civil war was geared towards emulating the grand armies created by Napoleon (Luvaas, 1959, p. 15). There was little in the way of change to the tactics used to engage the enemy during the Civil War, despite a tremendous advancement of the armaments, specifically rifling being introduced to the individual soldier's muskets.

*Weapons of the American Civil War*

The most prevalent infantry rifle of the period was the .58 caliber Springfield Rifle. The .58 caliber rifle musket made a dramatic change in the common soldier's marksmanship. The predecessor U.S. musket was the .69 caliber smoothbore modeled from the French muskets provided during the American Revolutionary War. The .69 caliber smoothbore had a maximum effective range of about 100 yards, or less. With the adoption of the .58 caliber rifle musket, the effective range increased to 300 yards, or more. Up to 600 yards to hit either the man or the horse he was riding, but the effective range in the Civil War was against a whole firing line packed shoulder to shoulder since they still marched up in mass as they would have for the .69 caliber smoothbore (Hackman).

Artillery fire during the American Civil War created fewer casualties than musket fire; however, their importance in depleting the enemy ranks and morale can not be understated as illustrated by a young confederate soldier in the following description of the carnage of a single solid shot from Union cannon.

As we returned a Yankee battery of eight guns had full play on us in the field, and our line became a little confused; we halted, every man instantly turned and faced the battery. As we did so, I heard a thud on my right, as if one had been struck with a heavy fist. Looking around I saw a man at my side standing erect, with his head off, a stream of blood spurting a foot or more from his neck. As I turned farther around, I saw three others lying on the ground, all killed by this cannon shot. The man standing was a captain in the 42nd Va. Regt., and his brains and blood bespattered the face and clothing of one of my company, who was standing in the rear (Worsham).

### Napoleonic Tactics Of World War I

At the outset of World War One, warfare still retained the traditional and familiar unit formations and battlefield tactics of the Napoleonic wars of the early part of the 19th century (Smyth & Smith). Although the tactics had changed little since prior to the American Civil War, the machines of war had been dramatically improved in their efficiency. These formations and tactics had been fatally made obsolete by the range and firepower of the new weapons created by the rapid explosion in technology which was still not fully understood by the protagonists (Smyth & Smith).

### Weapons Of World War I

The new weapons brought to bear included such radical new designs as tanks, machine guns, poison gas, barbed wire, hand grenades, flame throwers, and aircraft. The British found to their repeated cost the futility of massed infantry attacks against well-entrenched defensive positions protected by machine gun cover.

The first day of the Somme Offensive amply illustrated this, although the lesson appeared to be lost to the British high command. On the opening day of the offensive the British suffered a record number of single day casualties, 60,000, the great majority lost under withering machine gun fire (First World War, 2003).

### Conclusion

As shown earlier in this essay, the leaders of the American Civil War had studied in depth the Napoleonic tactics from fifty years earlier. The majority of the generals were graduates of West Point, where Napoleonic tactics were not only taught, but the aspiring leaders attended extracurricular study groups and formed their bias at an early stage in their career, which never

changed, even in the face of the previously stated improvements in weapon range and volumes of fire. World War I was initially conducted using the same Napoleonic tenets of mass and consolidated formations, with little in the way of thinking “outside the box”. In both wars, casualties mounted quickly and terribly with the leadership unable or unwilling to make significant changes to the tried and true method of bludgeoning the enemy with a big stick while he beats you with his.

Tactics never kept pace with the developments in Weaponry. The inability of military commanders to appreciate the impact on war of the major technological advances from 1815-1918 directly contributed to the wanton deaths of millions of brave soldiers (Smyth & Smith).

It must be noted that General Pershing in the American Expeditionary Force was able to utilize the shock value of armor to finally break the defensive lines of the enemy and capitalize on the breakthrough. This new technology, which was first scoffed at, was able to alter the course of the war only because key leaders saw it’s potential and were able to see beyond the standard tactics of the day and create new ones.

No past historical event can be placed into any other setting, as described by the proverb of a butterfly flapping its wings in China can change the weather across the globe. Every event in time must stand on its own merits, with a myriad of supporting events that must fall perfectly in place for the main event to gain the required results. Even if all the physical elements of a previous event align perfectly with a current event, the non-physical elements will not. The soldiers of today have different societal norms than World War II soldiers; the politics of today around the globe have little resemblance to global politics even a decade ago, creating an environment completely different than an event that may, on the surface, seem equivalent.

The study of history is only an aid in the decision making process and does not provide the complete answer. The study of an historical event, if taken in the proper context, is a valuable tool and can give an insight into what may be expected to occur if a particular course of action is chosen.

The study of history is more than an interesting diversion in the career of a soldier, it gives the decision maker an extra tool in the decision making process. The comparison of similar events past and present can never give the decision maker the complete answer but will present a “cardinal direction” in which to form courses of action.

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