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Importance of Studying Military History

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### **Abstract**

Leaders at all levels, NCOs and officers alike, must study military history to ensure that they don't make the same mistakes that others made in the past. Leaders who study military history are more likely to understand the dangers of reducing forces, limiting training and failing to get the equipment that their Soldiers need. Throughout the Army's history, these three factors have cost Soldiers' lives and have nearly resulted in defeat. As leaders we must face these issues and do what we can to avoid or compensate for them.

The United States has a long history of rewarding itself with a “peace dividend” after every major conflict, dating back to the Revolutionary War and continuing through the Cold War.

As leaders, it is critical that we understand that this process has been happening since the nation’s birth and will more than likely continue after the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan finish. Studying military history will hopefully give us the foresight to mitigate the impacts upon the Army as a whole, our individual units and our Soldiers.

Drawing down forces creates one of the most dramatic impacts to the Army. The government has reduced the number of Soldiers in uniform after nearly every conflict the Army has fought. While the government has many reasons for cutting the size of the force, each time it happens the Army is set up for failure when the next conflict arises.

After the Revolutionary War, the small cadre of regular Army forces was reduced. At the time, the thinking was that the nation could rely on mobilizing state militias in times of crisis and save the money that a standing Army would cost.

The War of 1812 showed the folly of this line of thinking when the British captured Washington, D.C. because the local militias were not able to mobilize fast enough. Eventually, the government expanded the Army, mobilized the militias and the British were defeated. However, the initial humiliation and danger of having the nation’s capital captured should have been enough of a wakeup call to the country about the importance of keeping the Army strong. It was not. Once again, the government reduced the size of the Army.

The Civil War again saw the nation scrambling to rebuild its forces as the confederate states dominated the initial battles. State militias again proved to be the deciding factor in

preventing defeat, but the time it took to mobilize them and get them to the fight allowed the confederates to win numerous battles and nearly succeed in winning the war.

With the nation tired of war, the militias were demobilized and the Army reduced again. The government did not seem to think about the idea of a large Army to act as a deterrent against war.

This pattern of scrambling to build the Army, fighting and then cutting the Army continued through the Spanish American War, World War I, and all the way up to World War II.

Prior to World War I, the Army consisted of fewer than 130,000 active duty Soldiers and only about 80,000 reservists. By the end of the war, more than 2 million American Soldiers were in Europe. However, as had happened repeatedly throughout the nation's history, the Army was cut again. In fact, the U.S. Army was actually smaller during the 1920's and 30's than the German army, even though the Germans were constrained by the Treaty of Versailles (Shurtleff, 1998).

As World War II loomed, few if any units in the Army had their full complement of Soldiers. Many companies were little more than reinforced platoons and battalions were more like companies. Men flocked to the Army after Pearl Harbor, but it still took more than a year before forces were available to start fighting the Germans.

Obviously, the Army got itself straightened out and by the end of World War II in 1945, nearly eight million Soldiers were in uniform. Once again, however, the nation decided it did not need a large Army and by the start of the Korean War in 1950, less than 600,000 Soldiers remained on active-duty.

Task Force Smith, the first real combat force sent to Korea, came from the occupation forces in Japan. The divisions stationed in Japan were all at little more than half of their wartime

strength and were extremely short of infantry and field artillery Soldiers. The lack of a large standing army forced delays in getting enough Soldiers into the fight and resulted in U.S. forces nearly being driven out of the country. Eventually the manpower shortage was overcome, but the lesson still wasn't learned.

Once again, the Army shrank after Korea. It was expanded again during Vietnam, reduced afterward, expanded at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s and then cut back again after Desert Storm.

Today the Army leadership is pushing to expand the size of the Army again to face the challenges of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and other worldwide commitments. While it looks like they will succeed, it is up to future leaders to ensure that the contraction cycle does not leave us once again struggling to meet the needs of the nation down the road. This seems like a lesson that we just cannot learn.

Training and equipping the force is also another area that history shows us has been a weakness as Soldiers marched into every conflict. By studying the history of past wars, leaders know that they have to conduct realistic training. However, a lack of equipment can make this a challenge. Several instances of Soldiers going to war unprepared in just the past century drive this point home.

When the US joined the fight in World War I it sent the American Expeditionary Force to Europe completely unprepared. Isolationism was so strong prior to 1917, that Congress had actually passed laws forbidding the military to prepare for war. American units lacked machine guns and even rifles. Many units had never trained together because of lack of equipment and some newly recruited Soldiers had never fired a rifle prior to arriving in France (Shurtleff, 1998).

The British and French Soldiers who had already been fighting for several years by the time the US troops arrived were shocked by the lack of training the US units had. In fact, US Soldiers weren't committed to combat for more than six months after their arrival so that British and French Soldiers could train them in the basics of trench warfare.

Many of the officers that served in the war had actually attended what was known as the Plattsburg Movement. This was a series of what amounted to "camps" run jointly by private citizens, such as former president Theodore Roosevelt, and the military. College students and businessmen paid their own expenses to attend and get rudimentary military instruction (Stewart, 2005).

After the war ended in 1918, America dropped back into its familiar isolationist mode. Funding for the military dried up and little was done to modernize the force.

When Europe erupted into war again in 1939, the Army was far behind the Germans in terms of equipment and training.

The first battle against Nazi forces at Kasserine Pass in North Africa proved just how unprepared the Army was. Over the course of several weeks, German forces decimated US troops in a series of engagements, continuously forcing them to retreat in disarray.

American Soldiers found themselves in outdated tanks that couldn't penetrate the armor of the German panzers. Additionally, the US units couldn't function as a combined arms force because they had never trained together prior to arriving in theater.

The bazooka made its first appearance at Kasserine, but few if any of the Soldiers had ever seen one before and didn't know how to operate it. The officers and NCOs were trying to train themselves how to use the new weapons, but the Germans attacked before they could start a real training program (Stewart, 2005).

Another glaring problem today's leaders can learn from Kasserine is training as a joint force. During the battle, the lack of training between Army and Army Air Force became deadly. American aircraft repeatedly attacked friendly units and Army anti-aircraft batteries shot down numerous allied aircraft. The problem got so bad that General Dwight Eisenhower, the allied commander, forbid aircraft to fly over the battlefield.

By the end of the war, Army units had learned their lessons. Training was much improved and equipment flowed. The Army would relive the same mistakes just five years later though in Korea.

The initial units deployed to Korea in 1950 were from the Far Eastern Command and had been performing occupational duties in Japan since the end of World War II in 1945. This role drastically reduced the amount of training they could conduct.

Additionally, the majority of weapons and equipment these units had was outdated WWII stocks. One of the most glaring example was the anti-tank rockets. Units were still using the 2.36 inch rockets, which they knew couldn't penetrate the armor of the Soviet-supplied tanks, but the improved 3.5 inch rockets weren't available in theater (Stewart, 2005).

The lack of equipment and training culminated in the disaster that was Task Force Smith. Charged with delaying the North Koreans push south, the task force's units were overrun almost every time they had contact.

Follow on units fared little better and within a month the US was confined to defending a small portion at the southeastern corner of the peninsula. It wasn't until several months later when large influxes of American and allied units and supplies finally arrived that the North Koreans were pushed back.

By studying history, leaders can get a real grasp about the importance of making sure their Soldiers have the right equipment and the training to use it. Throwing untrained men into combat with outdated or unfamiliar weapons has always been a recipe for disaster.

### **Conclusion**

The historian George Santayana said, “Those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it.” Leaders who fail to study history are dooming their Soldiers. We must do everything in our power to ensure the Army’s success.

While we can’t necessarily control things like the size of the Army or the procurement of weapons systems, we can make a difference.

Leaders can convince the best Soldiers to reenlist. We can use the supply system to ensure we get the most up-to-date equipment available. Finally, we can make sure that we train in the most realistic fashion possible.

Additionally, by sharing our history with our Soldiers we can ensure that they understand why discipline and training are important for their survival. We also set our Soldiers up to be the next generation of leaders by introducing them to our history.

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