

Running Head: The Importance of Studying History

The Importance of Studying History

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It is important for military professionals to take time out of their busy schedules to study military history? Yes, it is very important for “all” military professionals to study military history at every opportunity available. “The problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience (or by your men’s experience), i.e., the hard way, by reading, you learn by other’s experiences.” (LTG James Mattis, VGT-50, H101 USASMA, putting personal experience into perspective). The following will shed some light into why I feel it is important to study history. It is very important to learn, not only from our mistakes, but from the mistakes of other countries. When applying this knowledge, we not only have a better understanding of our enemies but a better understanding of ourselves when certain situations arise. When we become better educated, we have a better chance of resolving a crisis before a conflict arises or defeating an enemy when necessary.

Leaders have constantly spent more time basking in peacetime pleasure and not focusing on our soldiers on realistic cross-training for various future wars. Based on all the wars that we have fought and /or have read about, should be enough to remind all leaders that having one sole focus in what type of war we train for will lead us down that treacherous unforgiving past in history.

One operation we can learn from, as noted by the author, is the Basilan Operation. “The Basilan Operation was the case of American troops applying lessons and techniques learned from their experience of occupation in the Philippines one hundred years before.” (*Imperial Grunts* by Robert Kaplan). In the words of the author, “The most crucial tactical lesson of the Philippine War is that the smaller the unit, and the farther forward it is deployed among the indigenous population, the more it can accomplish. This is a lesson that turns imperial overstretch on its head. Though one big deployment like that in Iraq can overstretch our

military, deployments in man dozens of countries involving relatively small numbers of highly trained people will not die.” (*Imperial Grunts* by Robert Kaplan).

As seen in experiencing the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, a solely conventional army focus was not the right way to approach either war. It took Generals like General Petraus and General O’Dierno to make the decision to approach things differently and put soldiers in populace areas throughout Iraq. Once a more unconventional approach was utilized, progress in fighting the insurgents happened.

There are very few leaders, I’ll say in the past twenty years, that have maintained a focus on military history and can quickly read into what we are presently facing with our current wars and how they can possibly play out by simply looking at how we fought the same forces a mere century ago in the same part of the world.

We need to compare how we and our Allies campaigned in World War One (WWI), and the actions we took following the war, in order to really get an in depth look at mistakes we do not want to make again when fighting these present day wars. There is a book entitled “A Peace to End All Peace” (The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East), authored by David Fromkin, that will shed some light on exactly how long this war has been going on and what it is really all about.

We can compare the Vietnam War and our enemy’s ability to blend in with the local populace unnoticed and be able to afflict much damage on our fathers and grandfathers. That was a very unconventional war and the best way to beat them was through unconventional means.

After a few years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, General Petraus and others developed a new plan of action and published the COIN manual, (COunter INsurgency) that

gave leaders one common approach in dealing with insurgents. General Petraus, a one-time professor of history at West Point, understood the need for our leaders to learn from history and the experience of others. It is my belief that the intent was to develop junior and senior leaders alike in the COIN process. His approach has been proven to be a success in Iraq.

Although the Vietnam War has not received as much favorable comments as World War II, leaders quickly realized that we are fighting a similar war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Reason being, the enemies ability to blend in with the local populace was a great asset to them and a liability to us. We are not fighting a conventional army but rather an unconventional force that needs to be dealt with in an unconventional manner. Special Operation soldiers are better suited for this fight due to their extensive training, than are conventional army soldiers.

### The Opposition

History does not always repeat itself regardless of similarities in previous wars. A small majority of leaders are privileged in the studies of historic wars and we can count on them to pull us through. My point in fact, we have focused on educating such a small population of very good leaders, but the force as a whole is clueless on how we should pursue in this present day war.

It is difficult to approach this with a counter argument due to the success we have seen through COIN. The only counter arguments we may hear of are coming from politicians who only wish to deal with the threat in a more peaceful manner.

Some will say that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are more complex and too difficult to win due to the fact that our form of democracy may not suit the East. Their fight for power amongst themselves has gone on for centuries. Whether it be religious or idea logic, our

involvement in our attempt to assist may not be enough. The people of those nations must govern themselves and form their own laws and constitutions.

### Conclusion

Lessons learned, as we see often brought out on the CALL (Center for Army Lessons Learned) website, has finally got it right. Not just the privileged few can analyze information and make smart decisions based on relevant facts. We will become more successful as a fighting force if we educate all soldiers and ensure we never come close to treating privates like uneducated conscripts.

We must continue to educate our leaders and all of our soldiers about the history of just not the American campaigns but that of other nations like Britain, France, and even Russia. When incorporating this wealth of knowledge, we can possibly save more lives during current conflicts by studying the mistakes made by other warriors. The use of the CALL website and the study of the COIN manual or the First One Hundred Days manual will not alone educate us. Reading publications such as Learning to Eat With a Knife, by John A. Nagl and A Peace to End All Peace, by David Fromkin, can assist leaders in approaching the current wars.

References

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