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Studying Military History: A Necessity or a Detractor?

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Outline: Studying Military History: A Necessity or a Detractor?

I. Introduction:

1. Military History: Is it important for military professionals to take time out of the busy schedules to study it.
2. Thesis: Even with the advance of equipment, the nature of war still remains the same and leaders can gain valuable insights from past conflicts.

II. Reasons that Support the Thesis:

- A. The overwhelming might of the United States vast military arsenal potentially could annihilate any small country but would seriously hurt the local population and create a backlash from other countries against the US. Explain US policy
- B. Leaders can pull lessons from the Vietnam War, The Philippines insurrection, and The Revolutionary War that parallel conflicts today.
 1. Learning from the failures during the Vietnam War. Actions and pacification successes/ failures under Ngo Dinh Diem. Pacification successes and failures 1965 to 1973 (US pulls out). South fails to provide protection for its civilians, the North prevails.
 2. The Philippine revolutionaries resist the US occupation. Policy of Attraction for pacification. Policy of Chastisement for pacification. The activities that finally brought and end to the conflict.
 3. Lessons from the revolutionary war. Similarities of the US forces in Iraq to British forces in America. The battles the British won and decimated the Continental Army. General Green turns the population against the British to win the war.

III. Counter Arguments and Responses.

A. No two conflicts are quite the same. People are evolving all the time, improving fighting techniques and weapons. Time is better spent training to fight in today's modern battlefield than looking back at wars fought with antiquated equipment and outdated tactics.

B. Abu Ghraib demonstrates similarities to today's fighting. By studying the past, military leaders learn from the experience of others.

IV. **Conclusion:** The similarities of past conflicts to events of today show the wisdom of studying history. There are lessons on how to properly provide for the civilians in occupied territories, for their security and basic needs. There are lessons in dealing with insurgents to keep them from gaining support from the population in materials, information, and personnel; prolonging or changing the outcome of the war. Military leaders can gain valuable experience by studying our past conflicts.

Abstract

The author looks at whether it is important for military professionals to study military history. By reviewing three different U. S. conflicts through information gained from books, the author highlights failures by American forces to quickly gain control of civilian populations and the resulting consequences. Relating this to a recent situation in Iraq, it is demonstrated that studying history is important to win today's wars.

Studying Military History: A Necessity or a Detractor?

With modern equipment being so far advanced from weapons made over two hundred years ago, is it important or even necessary for Soldiers to study military history as they train for today's battlefield? Weapons improve, tactics change, and the enemy is in a different part of the world with different climates and landscapes so why spend valuable time studying the past when the equipment is far superior and makes previous tactics obsolete? Only by studying history can we prevent our forces from ultimately losing the war and losing a country to the enemy even as the American forces and the forces of our allies annihilate the military opposition. Looking at some of our own experiences ranging from Vietnam, back to the turn of the century with the Philippines, and reaching further back to the Revolutionary war, we can see that the stronger forces don't always win and it is through the actions of the aggressor how long and costly a war will be.

The overwhelming military firepower of the United States could annihilate any small country but would seriously hurt the local population and create a backlash from other countries. As the United States forces gain ground, they need to successfully plan targets and engage them in a way that is justified and limits the effects on the civilians; also safeguarding the people from hostile actions by either side. Failing to protect the civilians can turn their support against the U. S. Forces, causing the local population to side with and help the insurgents by providing supplies, quarters, and additional personnel to oppose the U. S. forces.

This is evident when examining The Vietnam War where more than three million Americans served from 1954 to 1975 and over fifty-eight thousand lost their lives. After the war, General William C. Westmoreland gives one reason for the loss, "A lesson to be learned is that young men should never be sent into battle unless the country is going to support them"

(Karnow, S. 1997). Because the military forces were never fully brought to bear and employed effectively against the North Vietnamese Army, the conflict endured too long. As the U. S. Soldiers fought in the forested mountains against the guerrilla tactics used by the Vietcong, losses continued to escalate. The South Vietnamese civilians were relocated into hamlets to provide for their protection and to pacify them but the protection was often denied. (Stewart, R. W. 2005a). As U. S. troops were replaced on the line; the quality of the leaders, both NCOs and Officers, suffered. Moral declined and discipline sagged and there was rampant drug abuse and racial tension. U. S. Soldiers committed atrocities against the civilian population with little repercussions and as the war continued, civilians and combatants blurred with more civilians being targeted and killed. This, along with the actions by Vietnamese country's unpopular leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, caused the local people to side with the opposition, inflating the ranks of the Vietcong Army from five thousand troops in 1959 to over one-hundred-thousand by 1964; demonstrating that fighting against the military opposition can create new opposition, prolonging the engagement. During the later years, 1968 to 1975, the civilian population turned more and more anti-American (Stewart, R. W. 2005b). The U. S. had to pull out of South Vietnam and the country succumbed to North Vietnam. Looking at another country demonstrates again how the cost escalates with the behavior of the troops.

Prior to the Vietnam War, in 1898 the United States gained the Philippine islands from Spain after the Spanish-American War; control of the Philippine people came later though. *American Military History I* (Stewart, R. W. 2005a) describes this occupation. A Filipino revolutionary leader named Aguinaldo wanted immediate independence but the United States refused to acknowledge his rule. Aguinaldo and his Revolutionaries revolted and practiced guerrilla warfare against the United States Forces. The United States held the main city of

Manila but throughout the rural forested areas the revolutionaries were strong and harassed both the United States forces and the Philippine people. Some U. S. Soldiers behaved poorly in the eyes of the Philippines, foraging and taking from the local people, drinking excessively and practicing other disorderly conducts including some atrocities. This behavior, no matter how slight, increased the tension between the Philippines and the US Soldiers. Aguinaldo's Revolutionaries committed more atrocities but since the U. S. failed to protect the civilians, out of fear, the people had to side with and support the revolutionaries. The U. S. Army punished the local people suspected of helping Aguinaldo by burning crops and villages; by seizing property; and by destroying towns. Combatants and civilians were arrested, detained, and executed. When Aguinaldo was finally captured in 1901, the opposition declined and the Philippines people accepted the United States offer for peace (Tope, L. R. R (2002). Lasting for three years, the war cost \$400 million, ending with over 7,000 United States Soldiers dead. The poor behavior of the U. S. Soldiers contributed to the high cost but this engagement was still a victory for the superior forces; unlike the next example.

Looking further back to the war that won us our independence, the British had the superior forces with better weapons. *American Military History I* (Stewart, R. W. 2005a) describes the outset of hostilities, pitting the British against Washington's Continental Army. The first four months of fighting gave the British numerous victories and reduced Washington's forces from 20,000 to 3,500 troops. The British tried to win over the people of the Northern colonies but when Washington used his forces to attack and defeat British outposts, the British pulled their forces back to protect them, thereby exposing the colonists loyal to British rule to reprisals by the patriot militias. Support for the British waned in the north and eventually they pulled their forces out and shifted to the southern colonies in hopes of finding and securing a

stable platform to continue the fight. The British Armada attacked and defeated Charleston, South Carolina, decimating the southern army. North and South Carolina and Georgia quickly came under limited control of the British. In December of 1780, General Washington sent General Nathaniel Greene to take over operations in the south. After surveying the carnage of the southern states, witnessing the desolation and hearing the tales of bloodshed and deliberate murder, General Greene started insurgent operations to gain the support of the people against the British forces. *The American Revolution* (Stiles, T. J. 1999) describes General Greene's campaign as "... not a fight to the death, not a contest of honor, but a gritty, realistic effort to wear the enemy down." Leading the British on a chase through the south and further from their supplies, he forced the Brits to plunder in order to supply their own soldiers. The Brits were very arrogant while dealing with the locals and during the chase, committed many atrocities. The insurgent forces with General Greene continued to gain support of the locals, including the South's backwoods people who used guerilla warfare to effectively harass the British at every opportunity. While every major engagement fought between the British forces and Green's Forces was a victory for the Brits with the Americans fleeing the battlefield; afterward, General Greene would reorganize the army and continue harassing the Brits. The British were worn out from chasing the southern army in a land that was turning more hostile to the British. They went to Yorktown for reinforcements and resupply but the expected help failed to reach the city. General Washington, with help from the French, led the Continental Army against Lord Cornwallis and the British forces, forcing the surrender. The British lost popular support and lost the war.

It can be argued that these historical events have no bearing on what is happening today; that no two conflicts are quite the same; also, that weapons are continuously improving, and as

the United States continues to send Soldiers into countries, using these superior weapons systems to engage targets from a longer distances with pinpoint accuracy and destruction, these systems require new tactics to effectively engage the enemy. Solders must train longer to learn the highly specialized tasks necessary to operate and sustain the new equipment; the needed time wasted by looking back at prior wars fought with antiquated equipment and outdated tactics. But the acts committed to detainees at Abu Ghraib by American Soldiers that angered the Arab world demonstrates how quickly popular support can change. The situation could have quickly turned disastrous, costing many American lives, without the quick actions against the offenders. Teaching Solders lessons learned from past conflicts might have prevented this.

Studying history shows that the superior forces armed with better equipment are not assured victory; that the stronger forces will lose by ignoring the lessons learned from prior engagements. In order to win, today's military professionals need to study the historical battles to prevent Soldiers from making mistakes and prolonging or losing the war.

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