

The Importance of Military History for Military Professionals

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As military professionals, we live very hectic lives. While we maintain our civilian roles in society and experience the daily struggles of family and work, we also face the unparalleled challenges that accompany expectations of us as military professionals serving our country. Accepting the responsibility of serving our country requires preparation not only in skills, but in overall understanding of our military and its history. This is why it is important for military professionals to take interest and time out of their busy schedules to study military history.

Learning about military history will help military professionals grow personally and professionally. Learning is overall beneficial to everyone. It expands our knowledge base and opens our minds to different perspectives. From the military professional aspect, it will build confidence that will be necessary as we move into decision making roles. As we become more familiar with past situations and how our military became involved, we will have a better understanding of why we are dealing with some of the issues we face today.

We need to focus our interest on operational military history, which covers the study of war itself, and the tactics or strategies used in certain conflicts. It is unfortunate that interest into our operational military history appears to be decreasing with very little support from educational institutions. Institutions such as Harvard and Yale have very few military history courses. Some institutions are denying tenure to faculty members who taught operational military history courses without considering replacements. Operational military history courses are being replaced with the study of “war and society”. The study of “war and society” is valuable, as it focuses on the affects of war on our society, but can’t take the place of operational military history (Kagan, 2006). Some combat experience can be of benefit in this process; however, it could be dangerous without having the necessary guidance and mentorship that is

obtained through the study of military history, because the person may relying only on his or her own personal experience and not consider the different factors.

As military professionals, our careers are driven by our growth and how we impart our knowledge and skills with others. This is unlike most other organizations that are more focused on individual growth and progression. Our military can only succeed when we learn and grow as an entire organization, which depends on our overall education and training.

The struggle of improving our professional military education has been a challenge for many generations. However, back in the 1920's and 1930's the concept was accepted and enforced in most service academies, staff schools, and war colleges. Generals George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower, Admirals Chester W. Nimitz and several other World War II leaders participated in courses during this time that mainly taught military history. They later commented on how their historically grounded education was critical to them as leaders (Riper, 2006). Eisenhower described his time at the Army's Command and General Staff School, from which he graduated first in the class of 1926, as "a watershed in my life" (Eisenhower, 1967)

Military history can prepare us in confronting new issues. In order to understand how our military can best handle current issues and situations around the world, we need to be familiar with how these issues and situations started. Understanding how they started and what was done in the past will assist in analyzing failures and successes in dealing with similar situations or situations that led to those issues which confront us, today. One of the greatest military historians, Thucydides, stated that he had written his history of the Peloponnesian War to inform "those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past, and which will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future" (Thucydides, 1954).

Military history will not provide us the exact solutions or courses of action that should be taken. However, it will provide us perspective on the issues, so that we can better assess the situations and strategize on the possibilities.

Military history can illuminate what courses of action could have been done differently, in order to better protect the lives of our Soldiers. Again, unlike most other organizations, our Soldiers are often in situations where their lives are at risk. Not only their mission accomplishment, but their chances of survival mainly rely on the guidance and training they have received from their leadership. As military professionals our decisions and actions ultimately affect Soldiers' lives. This fact is clearly evident in military operations, where the lives of Soldiers and civilians, friendly and enemy depend on practically every decision (Kagan, 2006).

Learning from our military history will help us reflect on tactics used during prior conflicts. Reflection will enable us to project the magnitude of casualties and how to best minimize, if not eliminate, the possibilities. According to Murray and Sinnreich (2006) "time for reflection, study and thought is essential if insights are to be gained and valid conclusions drawn". Another author stated, "The knowledge needed by a senior commander is distinguished by the fact that it can only be attained by a special talent, through the medium of reflection, study, and thought" (Clausewitz, 1976).

Some may argue that because our times have changed so much, history can do very little to help us in dealing with current issues. They may believe that the training and equipment that is used in today's military is significantly more advanced than what was used during prior conflicts; and that nothing that was learned in history could help us in our training or with our equipment, today. They claim that the nature of warfare has been fundamentally changed by the

pace and scale of technological development that the history is nothing more than a record of useless and random ideas (Murray & Sinnreich 2006).

These opposing arguments come from individuals that would want to find specific and direct solutions to current issues from our history. Instead, our history should be used as a guide for problem solving that offers ideas that can be elaborated upon and that can offer additional concepts to consider.

Military history is very important to our military professionals. Most of the issues that exist throughout the world, which may ultimately require our military involvement, stem from historical events. How can we expect to solve these issues without having the necessary background that would allow us to understand them? Through military history, our leaders can refer to past successes and failures, as they plan future missions. We should use military history when creating new theories, as we compare our past to the present and attempt to project the future. It is not likely that events will recur, but one can derive insights from understanding how they affected strategic circumstances and were used to determine strategic outcomes in the past (Murray & Sinnreich, 2006). Understanding that our times have changed, we can still learn from similar situations while incorporating new ideas and tactics.

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