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The Relevance of Military History to Current Times

SGM Chris T. Kaukali (#684)

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM (R) Osvarido Vazquez

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Abstract

The study of military history is always relevant to current times. The phrase, “history always repeats itself,” has described many instances where society had not learned from past mistakes. This paper will focus on several instances in United States military history, where the study of the past made an impact on the decisions and approaches made many years later.

The Relevance of Military History to Current Times

The one thing about history is that once an event occurs, no one can change it. That event is history. Humans and society make mistakes. It is inevitable. We must, however, learn from our past mistakes, document them, and not repeat them. Often, we do not realize the monetary and human cost we pay for learning. When dealing with military conflicts, the prices of both can be substantial. This essay will highlight events in our military history and how lessons learned affected the way out military approaches current events.

Humanitarian Efforts

The end of the Civil War brought about a new and wide scale need for humanitarian aid. This was, perhaps, the first experience the Department of War had in dealing with this type of effort. Upon Congress passing the Confiscation Act of 1862, many former “slaves sought refuge in Union camps, and Federal commanders were confused over their obligations to the refugees” (Civilwarhome.com, 2002, ¶ 1). The webpage, civilwarhome.com described the situation facing the Union Army,

“Homeless, with few possessions, blacks fleeing to Union lines for protection found themselves as dependent on the Federal government for their existence as they had been on their masters. But Washington issued no concrete policy concerning their welfare, and field commanders saddled with caring for the refugees resorted to various means of providing them with food, shelter, and clothing” (2002, ¶ 3).

This was growing to become an even larger problem when the Confederate Army surrendered, leaving millions of former slaves homeless and a shattered southern half of the United States, many without homes, food, and infrastructure. In March 1865, the “Freedmen’s Bureau,” officially the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, was formed primarily for assisting former slaves with basic subsistence, establishing schools, education, and medical services. This effort fell on the shoulders of the

Department of War, where the military became responsible for administering the policies. Although the Freedmen's Bureau existed officially for only a year, it would take up until 1877 for the Army to complete post-war reconstruction in the south (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2005, pp. 304-307).

The U.S. Government and the Army learned that humanitarian aid and reconstruction is just as important as winning a conflict. The role and responsibilities of the Freedmen's Bureau was revolutionary for the time, and their accomplishments were significant. It took many years to complete reconstruction after the Civil War, much longer than expected. The Army had also learned to conduct policing actions and civil affairs operations during this period. This was all new territory for the military, as it saw its role grow from fighting and winning wars to what is now referred to as "Military Operation Other Than War" or MOOTW.

History has shown the military is vital in rebuilding cities and countries. The end of World War II required the role of the military to occupy and assist with the rebuilding of whole nations like Germany and Japan. In recent history, we can look to Bosnia, East Timor, and Somalia as examples of where the U.S. military has provided humanitarian and civil affairs assistance. Most relevant today is the war in Iraq. People need to understand that rebuilding a nation requires time. The United States took over 11 years to help ourselves recover from war. Currently, the United States is trying to rebuild a country and fight a war at the same time. It may take even longer than 11 years it took to rebuild the United States after the Civil War, given the current situation we face. The role of the Army as more than a fighting force has been proven, and thanks to lessons learned through history and experience, has evolved to what it is now, a multi-functional force capable of fighting and winning wars and a provider of humanitarian assistance, security, and nation-building.

The Indian Wars

The time between 1865 and 1890, the Army was involved in what is referred to as the Indian Wars. The Indian Wars consisted of many battles between the United States Army and various American Indian nations and tribes. As the United States began its expansion westward,

encroachment on Indian lands by settlers, prospectors, railroads, and businesspersons caused Indians to retaliate. The Americans, on the other hand, acting in the interests of the citizens (not taking into consideration the Native Americans' needs, culture, and lifestyle) forcibly made Indian tribes agree to relocate to reservations. As early as the mid-1850s, the United States and the American Indians struggled with armed conflicts. Most of the conflicts were over land, reservations, and what the Indians could or could not do. There was no formal policy, nor was there a clear, concise, or consistent vision of what the goal was.

Several key issues are relevant to this period. The post-Civil War Army was reduced to half its strength starting from 57,000 in 1867 to 26,000 in 1876, its final strength (U.S Army Center of Military History, 2005, p. 323). Frontier life was also very harsh, and the Army was spread thin, staffing hundreds of small forts across the West "with little more than a company of cavalry or infantry on each post" (U.S Army Center of Military History, 2005, p. 322). With the outbreak of the Civil War, many of the Regular Army Soldiers in the west were replaced by volunteers. In addition, "the Army's challenge in the West was one of environmental as well as adversary...sparsely settled,...[with] great distances and extreme variations in climate and geography accentuated manpower limitations, logistical and communication problems, and the difficulties of movements" (U.S Army Center of Military History, 2005, p. 326). They also faced the problem of inexperienced officers, who were lost during the Civil War. The tactics used by the Plains Indians also varied from the forested Indians of the East. The United States did effectively use Native American Indians as paid scouts and interpreters, a somewhat controversial tactic at the time. Another overlooked issue, one that could have resulted in peaceful negotiations, is the lack of cultural awareness. The Americans believed that all Indians, regardless of tribe, were the same. They therefore relocated tribes, some of who were unfriendly

towards each other, together on the same reservation. The Army also underestimated the Indians will, assuming they would comply to demands peacefully simply by a show of force. This gave the Army a false sense of security and overconfidence. Unfortunately, this scenario is repeated time and time again in our history.

Today, the United States finds itself in a similar situation with the war in Iraq. A closer look to compare the similarities with the Indian Wars and how the Army has learned lessons from history are compared here. Before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the military sent and trained the best units to engage in battle. Once the Iraqi military was defeated, a different style of warfare emerged. The United States military began preparing Soldiers for this unique type of urban warfare with hidden enemy prior to sending other units into theater. Cultural awareness classes were implemented into training in order to better prepare Soldiers to the unique culture. Weather and environmental training also came into the training program. New Warrior Tasks were developed to properly train Soldiers for a specialized war. The best equipment is now being fielded to counteract enemy tactics, and technology has defeated the problem of communications, transportation, logistics, and mitigating weather. The military still employs “locals” to assist in learning from and fighting the enemy. The Army has now learned “never to underestimate the enemy.”

Counterpoint

The two examples used show how the United States military adapted to lesson learned. However, many critics still believe that “history is doomed to repeat itself.” In many instances, it has. Studying history is just that, studying history. We cannot predict the outcome of an event. However, we possess the ability to influence an outcome. Each event and each situation

is unique. There are unique circumstances, people, technology, and tactics involved in any military scenario, so history in and of itself does not influence the present.

Conclusion

The study of military history is important to understand where our military has come from and how it has evolved over the years. People are prone to making mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes. The question is whether we learn from them. That is the difference. Mistakes during combat can cost lives. Understanding why people made certain decisions and under what circumstances the decisions were made, is helpful in our understanding of history. We cannot recreate a situation completely. No conflict is exactly the same. Having an understanding of how others handled similar situations will ultimately benefit Soldiers today.

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