

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING PAST MILITARY CONFLICTS

The Importance of Studying Past Military Conflicts

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Outline

Abstract

Part I – Introduction

Part II – Body

Supportive Examples

A. Philippines and Cuba 1898 – 1902

B. The Mexican War of 1846 – 1847

C. World War I 1917 – 1918

Part III – Conclusion

References

Abstract

Past and Present conflicts have an underlying similarity that when studied, can mean the difference between failure and success on the battlefields of the future. It is imperative for military professionals to take time out of their busy schedule to study past military campaigns to learn from them and apply their lessons to present and future conflicts.

PART I - Introduction

The Importance of Studying Past Military Conflicts

Military conflicts are unavoidable and have been a part of history for thousands of years. In each war, many lessons are learned. Lessons in terrain, climate, diseases, equipment, and enemy tactics have been experienced by past Armies and continue to influence the doctrine of today. As military professionals, learning from past history is the key to avoiding some of the blunders on yesteryear and in turn, gain ground on today's battlefield.

Learning from past experiences cannot be over emphasized, yet the importance is further proven by events such as the ones that occurred in the plains of Little Bighorn or the mountainous region of Osan where the now infamous Task Force SMITH would, in similar fashion to Lt. Col. George A. Custer, underestimate the enemy and suffer a heavy defeat. This same tragic fate was to haunt military leaders during the raid in Somalia in which tragically, the enemy was underestimated and another chapter added to the history books.

Military strategies used in today's battlefields are the result of many years of experience dating back to the early campaigns from Alexander the Great to Napoleon in France. How wars are fought have evolved through the years as battles are waged in new terrains and new climatic conditions; and as equipment continues to evolve at such an alarming pace, in most instances, by the time a Soldier is proficient the equipment has become obsolete. Today's battlefields are a testament to what the future holds for modern warfare in tactics and doctrine.

As conflicts will undoubtedly occur in the future, success will rely heavily on the applicability of lessons learned from the past. Through the application of history lessons learned at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, this essay will convey the importance of studying military history as a professional development tool for present and future battles.

PART II

Supporting Example I – The Philippines and Cuba 1898 – 1902

The mighty military of the United States has not reached the status of the best in the world by accomplishing successes in every conflict and war it has found itself in. There have been many lessons learned from failures when the Armed Forces were still a young Army, Navy, and Marine force. What has set America's military apart from others is its ability to adjust to an ever changing environment as most of its battles have been fought in foreign soil against a large array of adversaries.

An example of this adaptability was recorded during the Philippines campaign in 1899. During this era, the U.S. was transitioning from an Army of liberation to what many Filipinos considered, an army of occupation. The leader of the Liberation Army, Emilio Aguinaldo, had suffered many losses when confronting the far superior and better equipped force of the United States. After a three-pronged attack by Maj. Gen. Elwell S. Otis destroyed most of Aguinaldo's forces, a change in tactics ensued. As cited in the American Military History Vol. I:

The operation succeeded in destroying part of Aguinaldo's army and dispersing the remainder, but it did not end the war. Aguinaldo escaped into the mountains of northern Luzon, and in November 1899 he ordered the remnants of his army to shift from conventional to guerrilla warfare. (2005, p. 356)

During this crucial time in history, of note is the recognition that when a force on force is mismatched in the arena, new tactics must be developed that exploit the advantages and disadvantages of each. The factors that played a decisive role were the numerous rice paddies, mountains, and jungles to which Aguinaldo's forces knew too well. They were acclimatized to the jungle heat and were familiar with the population; all factors the American forces lacked.

American forces today are in the midst of an eerie similar situation in Iraq. What began as a conventional force on force engagement became a cat and mouse chase; one that has lasted now for five years. The Iraqi military found itself overpowered, under-equipped, and over-run by the highly trained, superior-equipped, and better organized American forces. As if reading a chapter from the Philippines insurgency book, the Iraqi forces quickly dispersed and vanished amongst the population and environment they knew too well.

The Iraq experience brought forth yet a different type of warfare in which the U.S. military had to adapt to and overcome; terrorism. Guerrilla warfare as experienced in the Philippines and Vietnam had turned a new leaf in Iraq; the use of terrorism to discredit the occupying forces became the new norm as new methods of attack began to appear such as improvised explosive devices or hit and run mortar attacks.

Lessons learned have not come only from ground combat operations; there are lessons to be learned in other areas such as logistic operations in war or in preparation for war. During the buildup of forces in preparation for actions against the Spanish in Cuba, the U.S. military was lacking proper logistical administration.

The decision to mobilize large volunteer forces compounded the problems of equipping, training, and supplying the Army. In the spring and summer of 1898, thousands of enthusiastic but inexperienced volunteers poured into newly established camps. A taste of military life soon curbed the enthusiasm of most of them, for in the camps they found chronic shortages of the most essential equipment. Even such basic items as underwear, socks, and shoes were lacking. A steady diet of badly prepared food, unbelievably poor sanitary conditions, and inadequate medical facilities complemented the equipment shortages. (2005, p. 345)

It took roughly a month to mobilize, load, and transport the V Corps to Cuba from the inadequate port of Tampa. Besides the fact that there was only one pier from which to load ships and a single-track railroad connecting it to mainline routes from the north, “Many factors contributed to the slow pace of preparation. There was no overall plan and no special staff to direct the organization of the expeditionary force” (2005, p. 348).

Sustainment operations had plagued the U.S. military throughout its history up until Operations Desert Shield/Storm in 1990-1991. Vast improvements in organization and duties and responsibilities, along with the establishment of a unified command structure has led to superior mobilization and sustainment capabilities never before experienced in combat. All as a result of lessons learned from past experiences that helped shape today’s combat support, combat service support, and civilian logistic counterparts that move the forces with unmatched precision.

Supportive Example II – The Mexican War 1846 – 1847

The urban environment found today in Iraq is not by far the first time the U.S. military has had to adapt to this style of warfare. Although the Army adjusted well to this type of fighting in European towns during World War II, its inception goes further back to the battle of Monterrey during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1847. As the U.S. forces were advancing on Mexican territory, they encountered a well-fortified city being defended by more than 7,000 Mexican troops.

By the third day both attacks were driving into the city proper, the men battering down doors of the stone and adobe houses with planks, tossing lighted shells through apertures, and advancing from house to house rather than from street to street – tactics that were to be used a century later by American troops in Italian and German towns. (2005, p. 181)

Urban warfare has come a long way from the days of Monterrey. As history has proven time and time again, there is always some good to be gotten from bad. In the search for the elusive enemy in the streets and neighborhoods of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, the American Soldier, no longer just the infantrymen, have adopted new techniques in conducting urban warfare with huge success.

In similar fashion to Cavalrymen adjusting to urban warfare, so has the American fighting force adjusted from a conventional force on force to an asymmetric guerrilla type war that knows no boundaries or adversaries. This new enemy has adopted from the pages of history as well; in identical ways to the Filipinos a century ago, this new adversary blends in and fights from within the populace.

Although some guerrillas wore uniforms, many did not; and even those who freely did changed into civilian clothes and hid their weapons to disguise their true identity from American patrols. This “chameleon act,” whereby the guerrillas transformed themselves into obsequious “amigos” in the blink of an eye, made them difficult to counter, especially given the Army’s lack of familiarity with Filipino language and customs. (2005, p.357)

This ring true in both Iraq and Afghanistan; both speak two different types of the Arabic language and both possess two cultures that seem centuries behind to what the American Soldier is accustomed to. These barriers are slowly being overcome as hints of trust begin to appear in the large Muslim populations of Iraq and Afghanistan as the U.S. government struggles to rebuild these nations from the ground up. Much like Gen. Otis and Gen. MacArthur in the Philippines, success has come not from bullets, but from aid packages to build schools, roads, and to stimulate their economies.

Supportive Example III – World War I 1917 – 1918

Modern warfare was a recipient of a huge facelift during the Great War of 1917-1918. It was during fighting in the French countryside that the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) began to shift from the linear battle lines of the Civil War and prior wars, to the organized and very capable fighting force known today. The stale “trench fighting” of the French and British forces was replaced by an aggressive offensive style of fighting that became the model to follow in World War II and beyond. As depicted in American Military History Vol. II:

Like the AEF the American armies of 1944 were built around divisions grouped in corps and supported by corps and army troops. A harbinger of the future, the American army of World War I was more similar to those that followed than those that came before. The U. S. Army was seemingly ready to assume its place in the world as one of the great armies of a great power. (2004, p.50)

In the continuum of evolution, the Army of today is transforming to meet the challenges of today’s battlegrounds and foes. As history has shown, for an Army to succeed, it must be flexible enough to adapt to the ever changing environment. This is the basis for the creation of fast, maneuverable, Brigade Combat Team units. In the same tradition of our forefathers who set out to build the mightiest military in the world, so have our leaders of today embraced this concept as they opt to guide it into the 21st Century.

PART III - Conclusion

It is of utmost importance to learn of past battles and experiences; for only in this manner might future blunders be avoided. Only through personal growth and professional education will the military professional be able to lead the magnificent fighting force that is today’s Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard of the United States of America.

References

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