

The Historical Mind and Military Strategy

by Eliot A. Cohen

Eliot Cohen is Robert E. Osgood Professor and Director of the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, the Johns Hopkins University. His books include *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (Free Press, 2002). This article is based on a lecture he gave on March 1, 2005, as part of FPRI's Thornton D. Hooper Lecture Series on American Strategy.

As important as the study of history for military strategists is the acquisition of the historical mind—that is, a way of thinking that uses history as a mode of inquiry. From practical cases to inspiration, history can help with U.S. military decision-making. The historical mind will detect differences as much as similarities between cases, avoiding false analogies, and look for the key questions to be asking. It will look for continuity but also for more important discontinuities; it will look for linkages between data points, but not be too quick to attribute causation. It is a well-traveled mind that appreciates the variability of people and places, conditions and problems; it avoids over-reliance on “lessons learned.” For that reason, the historical education of civilian and military strategists is more, not less, important in an age of rapid change.

Carl von Clausewitz, no mean historian himself, warned the readers of *On War* that while “historical examples clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences [and] particularly the art of war . . . [they] are seldom used to good effect.”¹ The Prussian soldier and theorist knew that strategists were more likely to misuse history than to ignore it altogether. For that reason, no less important than the study of history by the would-be strategist or student of strategy is the acquisition of *the historical mind*—that is, a way of thinking shaped by one’s reading of history and by using history as a mode of inquiry and a framework for thinking about problems. Military professionals and historians alike reaffirm the value of history-as-written for the practitioner or student of war; regarding history as a mode of thought, however, they have less to say, and yet it is ultimately far more important.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 170 and *passim*.

The Uses of History

All professions make some use of the past. In making diagnoses, physicians need to take thorough personal histories of their patients. The engineer surveying a bridge that has begun showing cracks inquires who built it, when, with what materials, on what plan, and when the crack emerged. The case law on which our legal system relies is nothing but applied history. This is what Ernest May and the late Richard Neustadt called “issue-history”—history as applied to particular events or problems.² In his 1931 address, *Everyman His Own Historian*, historian Carl Becker wrote of this:

Normally the memory of Mr. Everyman, when he awakens in the morning, reaches out into the country of the past and of distant places and instantaneously recreates his little world of endeavor, pulls together as it were things said and done in his yesterdays, and coordinates them with his present perceptions and with things to be said and done in his tomorrows. Without this historical knowledge, this memory of things said and done, his today would be aimless and his tomorrow without significance.³

The military turns to its history in much broader ways than this. Indeed, no other profession believes more strongly that the study of its past—going back not merely decades but centuries, or even millennia—has something to offer its practitioners in the present.

Most professions make use of microhistory in the form of case studies, and the military does, too. Be it a cadet thinking through a tactical problem or a lieutenant colonel on a staff ride to a Civil War or World War II battlefield, military personnel treat the history of warfare as an inexhaustible storehouse of relevant cases. Through it, they explore the central task of military leaders: making decisions under stress. The American military’s reverence for history goes well beyond its use in the classroom. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, General George S. Patton was surely the most frustrated soldier in the U.S. Army. Deprived of active command in the invasion, he did something frustrated middle-aged men often do. He wrote a long letter filled with good advice to his son, a future general himself and then a cadet at West Point. “To be a successful soldier you must study history,” the senior Patton began.⁴

The utilitarian approach to military history sometimes blends the practical with the nostalgic, even romantic, side. The U.S. Army’s Ranger School is one example. The Ranger School is an arduous two months plus of exceptionally grueling training for select soldiers, including most infantry

² Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

³ Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” Annual Address of the President of the American Historical Association, delivered in Minneapolis, Dec. 29, 1931, at www.historians.org.

⁴ Martin Blumenson, ed., *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 463.

officers. Ranger students learn the lineage of the Ranger regiment going back to Rogers' Rangers in the French and Indian War, including a boiled-down set of Rogers' Rules for patrolling—condensed from a historical novel, to be sure, but accurate enough.⁵ At one stroke, today's Ranger School instills in students pride in their lineage and teaches some eternal verities of the art of small-unit tactics.

History in this sense—history as inspiration—can shape military decisions. When the British evacuated Crete at the end of May 1941, in several days the Royal Navy lost three cruisers. Six destroyers sank, and three battleships, an aircraft carrier, six cruisers, and seven destroyers were damaged. When confronting the decision whether or not to press on with one more evening's withdrawals, the British commander, Admiral Cunningham, noted that the Navy had always had a tradition of getting the Army out of a tight spot: "It takes the Navy three years to build a new ship; it will take three hundred years to build a new tradition. The evacuation will continue."⁶

The American armed forces tend to believe, or at least pay tribute to, a historical education as something innately valuable. Units and schools go on staff rides—extended battlefield visits in which participants analyze tactics and decision-making in exacting detail. The bookstores at military academies are chock full of narrative histories, and the certain way for a soldier to display erudition is to refer to a bygone battle. Historical literacy provides as well a set of symbols and metaphors. When General Norman Schwarzkopf briefed a preliminary plan for evicting Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990, he was outraged when General Colin Powell informed him that he had been criticized for being timid. "Somebody even said, 'Schwarzkopf is just another McClellan,'"⁷ Powell told him. Both generals immediately grasped—and were infuriated by—the allusion to the Union's cautious General George McClellan, whose reluctance to attack the enemy led to his being dismissed twice from high commands.

Nonetheless, both civilian and military strategists often disparage or shrug off the relevance of history. In Washington, leaders often say "I'm going to leave that one for the historians" or "That's history" in order to dismiss its importance. Although historical allusions abound in the capital, serious historical knowledge often does not. For every general who is well-read in history, there is at least one who will tell a war college class, "It's only a lot of reading."⁸

One might indeed reasonably suppose that ours is not an age in which historical learning will prove all that useful. So much in the world of the early twenty-first century, after all, has no historical precedent. For the first time

⁵ Kenneth Roberts, *Northwest Passage* (New York: Doubleday, 1936), pp. 104–106. Roberts abstracted Rogers Rules (delivered in the novel by a properly peppery sergeant to two recruits) from the longer manual that Rogers published in his journals in 1769.

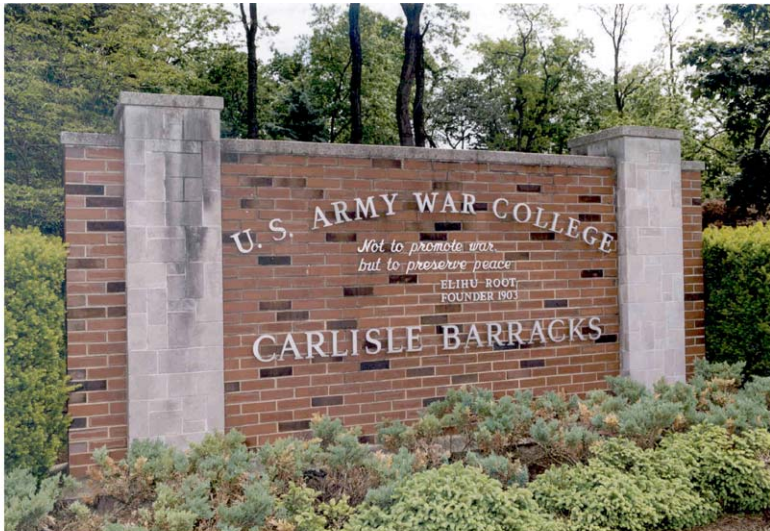
⁶ Anthony Beevor, *Crete* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), p. 217.

⁷ H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take A Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1992), p. 361.

⁸ This happened to the author once, when being introduced by a two-star general to an elite group of Army colonels selected for advanced study in lieu of war college duty.

since the fall of Rome, one country, the United States, wields as much military power as all of the other nations combined and dominates all technologies and modes of warfare. New forms of violence have emerged, including the threat of catastrophic terrorism using nuclear or biological weapons. Moreover, the environment in which states and organized groups conduct war has changed, with the intricate coupling of societies and economies we call globalization, along with the quantum increases in the amount of information available around the world and the speed with which individuals can access it. Even popular attitudes toward war itself are in some cases very different from what they were even fifty years ago.

Why, then, should anyone—and particularly people burdened with responsibilities such as cabinet secretaries, deputy secretaries, under secretaries, generals, lieutenant generals, and the rest—care about the historical mind? “We cannot escape history,” as Abraham Lincoln once said. Political and military institutions can no more escape the molding hand of history than an individual can escape the influences of memory. Much of policymaking consists of wrestling with history. When, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Pentagon began moving troops from overseas bases back home, closing some installations and expanding others, it was doing nothing but wrestling with the Cold War, in the form of barracks, airfields, and depots. When it reorganized theater and national commands, it was, at long last, coming to terms with the theater-command concept developed by Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall in 1943.



The entrance to the U.S. Army War College barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, quotes from the address its founder, Elihu Root, gave at the laying of the cornerstone for the college in 1903: “Not to promote war, but to preserve peace by intelligent and adequate preparation to repel aggression, this institution is founded.”

History shapes our debates and decisions. At times it does so very directly, as when one former government official remarked to me *à propos* of the American involvement in Iraq, “Americans just can’t do nation-building. History proves it.” History, or what we conceive history to be, shapes our expectations and our fears. Just as the debacle of Munich shaped American policy decisions in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s, the experience of Vietnam itself has exercised a powerful influence over policymaking ever since the 1970s. History colors nations’ understanding not only of who they are and who their enemies are, but also of what they can and cannot do.

Analogies

The strategic mind encounters the historical mind first when it engages in the use of analogies. Analogies are, of course, unavoidable. The strategic mind turns to them for illumination of current predicaments. But the historical mind views them with grave suspicion because it is exceptionally sensitive to context; it looks for uniqueness much more than commonality. And it flinches—appropriately—when someone says “this is like that,” because usually “this” is actually nothing like “that.”

Two recent examples highlight the prevalence and the perils of strategic reasoning by analogy. First, since fall 2003, supporters of the Bush administration have been circulating an article by John Dos Passos, “Americans are Losing the Victory in Europe,” published in *Life* magazine in January 1946, as the Allied powers were solidifying the occupation of Germany. “Never has American prestige in Europe been lower,” he wrote. “People never tire of telling you of the ignorance and rowdyism of American troops, and of our misunderstanding of European conditions. . . . They tell us that our mechanical denazification policy in Germany is producing results opposite to those we planned”⁹—sentiments that, *mutatis mutandis*, are expressed about Iraq today. The point of circulating and quoting the piece, of course, is to suggest how foolish it is to judge the Iraq War a failure based on the visible chaos in Baghdad. Dos Passos had judged the American occupation of Germany too soon and with too little perspective. Just as the occupation of Germany eventually proved itself a great success, so too may the American involvement in Iraq sixty years later.

Critics of the Bush administration have similarly turned to history in their arguments against the war. They began earlier this year to circulate a *New York Times* article from September 1967 by Peter Grose, “U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote.” Grose reported that the voter turnout in Vietnam had been 83 percent, and that “United States officials were surprised and heartened today at

⁹John Dos Passos, “Americans Are Losing the Victory in Europe,” *Life*, Jan. 7, 1946.

the size of the turnout in South Vietnam's presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting. . . . The turnout of 83 percent was a welcome surprise. The turnout in the 1964 United States Presidential election was 62 percent."¹⁰ Of course, no self-determined unification occurred. The point of circulating the article was to remind us that the Vietnamese election had in fact done very little for U.S. prospects for success in Indochina. Likewise, the Iraqi election on January 30, 2005, despite dramatic scenes of citizens braving the threats of suicide bombers to go to the polls, did not necessarily augur success.

Both analogies—single-point comparisons made in the spirit of debate rather than historical-mindedness—were off the mark. As to the first, Germany in 1946 was an unhappy place, but no violent insurgency directed against the Americans and their allies ensued from this unhappiness. Ex-Nazis were on the run and isolated, not operating out of nearby countries. They formed no uneasy alliance with religious fanatics eager to kill American GIs. The German population under Western occupation also knew that east of the line that divided their country loomed a far more menacing occupier. Because the Germans had earlier experienced the devastation of their cities by the same Americans who now occupied their country, they knew that Americans, if pushed beyond a certain limit, could inflict great devastation upon those who opposed them. Moreover, the occupation authorities in West Germany probably made their share of missteps, as the occupiers in Iraq have. But postwar Germany is not Iraq today, nor is the world the same. In 1946, the occupiers had considerably wider margin for error than their counterparts in Iraq enjoy today.

In the second analogy, Vietnam in 1967 was a country run by a corrupt government that *won* the questionable election it ran; by contrast, Iraq held a relatively clean, American-supervised election, in which the American-backed government *lost*. The communist insurgency in South Vietnam no doubt challenged the Americans and their allies. A far greater threat, however, lay in the iron determination of the North Vietnamese government to unify the country on its own terms (with the aid of great-power patrons) and in its ability to flood the country with tens or even hundreds of thousands of well-armed, well-trained, and disciplined soldiers, as well as with Vietcong guerrillas.

These two flawed analogies run afoul of the historical mind, which has been trained to detect differences as much as similarities between cases. Using analogies of this type in an attempt to predict the future is pointless, because the analogies miss the essential elements of context and detail that make up a complex political-military situation.¹¹

¹⁰ Peter Grose, "U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote," *New York Times*, Sept. 4, 1967.

¹¹ On this see Isaiah Berlin's "The Sense of Reality" and "Political Judgment" in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), pp. 1–76.

The historical mind does not tell the strategist to abjure the use of analogies altogether. They have their use; in particular, when used not for purposes of prediction, but as ways of exploring a problem. Does the Vietnam analogy have anything to be said for it with respect to Iraq? Certainly. Consider Robert Komer's memoir, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam."¹² Komer, who directed the U.S. government's Civil Operations Rural Development Support program in Vietnam, reflected on the ways in which bureaucracies resort to standard institutional repertoires even when inappropriate, remain wedded to technological preferences that may have little bearing on the problems they confront, and conduct relations with a weaker allied government without regard to the long-term consequences. Since one of the protagonists in Iraq is the same as in Vietnam—the United States—one may turn to his work for answers to questions not about the enemy in Iraq, but about ourselves.

Studying the experience of Germany in 1946–48 also forces interesting questions. Most historians agree that the personalities of leading figures in the occupation—officers such as General Lucius Clay, who orchestrated the Berlin airlift in 1948–49, and civilians like John J. McCloy, assistant secretary of war during World War II and U.S. high commissioner for Germany from 1949–52—made a huge difference. One might reasonably ask whether their equivalents in the Iraq War—Generals Tommy Franks and Ricardo Sanchez, for example, or Coalition Provisional Authority director Paul Bremer—worked together as effectively. In Germany, on the whole, civilian and military authorities worked in reasonable harmony. One wonders, then, why the Authority drew such a sharp line between the responsibilities of civilians and the responsibilities of soldiers in Iraq after the liberation. The Authority also could have learned something on the issue of how far to go in rehabilitating members of a totalitarian state apparatus, which had been encountered in Germany; or considered how American planning for postwar Iraq matched up with the Joint Chiefs of Staff directive for the occupation of Germany, JCS 1067 which, in April 1945, envisioned a far broader role for the military in Germany than today's Joint Chiefs of Staff seem to have expected in Iraq sixty years later.¹³

Going beyond Iraq to the global war on terror (which is called by that name even though it is really a war against Islamic extremism), the historical mind might offer an analogy to the decades-long struggle with communism, not to make predictions about its outcome, or to duplicate the modes used for waging it, but to elicit questions. Is there, for example, a contemporary equivalent to NSC-68, the blueprint for the Cold War implemented after the outbreak of the Korean conflict? Is there anything like the famous Solarium

¹²R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, R-967-ARPA (Santa Monica: RAND, August 1972).

¹³See Earl Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany, 1944–1946* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1975), at www.army.mil.

exercises of the Eisenhower administration that shaped America's strategy by convening high-level groups to explore systematically multiple courses of action, and then brief the results to the president? If this war does not lend itself to such strategy-making exercises, why not? The Cold War analogy may, again, pose questions about the course of the contest, without prejudging the conclusions: will the appeal of radical Islam gradually die out as communism did?

The Doctrine of Historical Permanence

The strategic mind makes another use of history that is even more worrisome to the historical mind when it proclaims the doctrine of historical permanence—the belief that “some things just don't change.” In this respect, American strategists sometimes seem to believe in what their old enemies the Soviets called “permanent operating factors”—the enduring verities, the kind of thing that the government official who told me “Americans can't do nation-building” was falling back on—which, as a historical statement, makes about as much sense as saying “Americans can't take casualties.” The historical mind has little use for such blanket appeals to historical certainties. It looks for continuity but even more so discontinuity; it believes in evolution and change; it is in many ways the *enemy* of myths of stability, not its proponent.

The doctrine of permanence crops up often in strategic affairs. In fall 2001, numerous commentators made dire predictions about the prospects for success of any operations in Afghanistan. They reflected soberly on the annihilation of a British expedition under Lord Elphinstone in 1837, and more recently on the sorry experiences of the Soviets in the 1980s. The conclusion was simple: invasions into Afghanistan are doomed to fail. In fact, however, the American attack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was a different war, waged against different enemies, alongside different friends, and with radically different technology than even the Soviets had had a decade or two before. Not surprisingly, these different conditions produced a different outcome.

Something similar happened when American forces intervened in Bosnia in 1995. At the time, strong arguments were made either against intervening or, among those who favored intervention, that a vast force would be needed because the United States would be up against the same people who had pinned down more German divisions than the Allies did in Italy. The Serbs were assumed to be the same kind of fighters, with the same kind of effectiveness, as their predecessors who had accomplished that remarkable feat. Prior to the intervention, the Pentagon estimated that hundreds of thousands of soldiers would be needed to fight against such a foe.

However, a 1995 study of the resources the Germans had put into fighting the Yugoslavian Partisans in World War II concluded that the Yugoslav military performance did not have to be as strong as was thought in order to

counter the Germans. Most of the German divisions in Yugoslavia were severely under strength, with as little as one-third the normal complement of men and equipment—they were the equivalent of brigades or regiments, in other words, even though the general staffs' situation maps showed divisional flags. Only one or two could be considered first-line units. The rest were, by the German evaluation system, second- or third-line units, composed of older or disabled men, and in many cases, not of Germans at all but of demoralized auxiliaries from the Third Reich. The Partisans, moreover, often concluded local truces with the Germans in order to better wage war against their rivals, the Chetniks. Most important, throughout the war the Germans held on to what they most wanted—the large cities, the bauxite and tungsten mines, and the railroads. The history, in short, was very different from what the doctrine of permanence suggested, which points to one of the chief weaknesses of those who promote it—a marked reluctance to dig enough into the past to establish whether the stories they have recounted are, in fact, so. Yet even if the Yugoslav resistance to the Nazis had been as described, there was no particular reason to believe that the Serbs were exactly the same people they had been fifty years ago. Moreover, in 1995 they had no allies capable of rendering real support, and they faced a local enemy—the Croatian government and members of its ethnic group in Bosnia—that was considerably more effective than the Chetniks. The Americans and their NATO allies had tools—from intelligence-gathering to precision bombardment—that the Germans did not. Moreover, they were not waging a war of massacre and rapine that motivated the local population to resist. In short, the 1945 and 1995 situations are as different as can be.

The Well-Traveled Mind

“History is a foreign country,” the saying goes, and the historical mind is a well-traveled mind that knows something of the variability of people and places, conditions and problems. It is a supple mind, as well—ready to learn how to think like the opposition. For that reason, the historical education of civilian and military strategists is, paradoxically, more important, not less, in an age of rapid change.

While serving as a new military intelligence officer in training at the Army's Intelligence School at Fort Huachuca, Arizona in the early 1980s, I learned a great deal about the organization and tactics of the Soviet Motorized Rifle Division. It now seems a recondite subject; then, however, it was a staple of the intelligence officer's work. More importantly, the basic skills learned in templating a formation of this kind, predicting its basic dispositions and tactical patterns, did not vary much from what my predecessors had learned twenty years before. Today, such topics seem quaint. Although the United States may confront opponents whose behavior can be analyzed and systematically

described, the days when a second lieutenant could hope to master his discipline through such formulaic knowledge is long gone. This points to the value of military history for the formation of today's strategists. To study military and strategic history in depth is to acquire vicarious experience of the variability of warfare, to acquire a certain kind of flexibility that neither military doctrine nor any individual's military experience can supply.¹⁴

The historical mind may find parallels here and there, but more importantly it has been trained to ask good questions: "How did this come about? What's behind the numbers? What really matters about this society?"—and to answer them in a disciplined way. It has been trained as well to know that one's own ways of doing business—from how one searches houses to what the job of a brigade commander is—are shaped by a history that may be a hindrance rather than a help. It is less inclined to take anything for granted. Small wonder that some of America's most agile and successful commanders have been those best schooled, like Lt. Gen. David Petraeus. Petraeus, who earned a Ph.D. in economics from Princeton University, commanded the 101st Airborne Division in the invasion and initial occupation of Iraq and subsequently assumed control of the training of Iraqi forces there.

The tendency of individuals as well as institutions is often to default to the stories they know, to comfortable and familiar narratives. Here the historical mind cries out for some variety. One need not, for example, stop studying the Civil War, which so absorbs the attention of many military officers—but perhaps it is time to set aside one more book on Lee's epic maneuver at Chancellorsville. Something on Mosby's rangers' operations in Northern Virginia, or Union responses to the partisan raids of Bedford Forrest—that may be another story. And while one need not turn away from the vast and occasionally brilliant literature on World War II, perhaps what we really need now are studies of U.S. relations with its coalition partners.

The strategic mind should not set aside the Vietnam experience—although in some respects American strategists have suppressed their memory of that war to a remarkable degree—but they would definitely do well to avoid those accounts that treat that war as a kind of morality play in which the gods of war punished the United States for failing to make it fit a conventional matrix. It would, in fact, be well worth the while of American military thinkers to spend some time looking at how the military adapted, or failed to adapt, to a strange kind of conflict. Its adaptation to Afghanistan or Iraq will be different, but the fact of adaptation itself remains. American military leaders tend to think about American wars and American commanders, but they would benefit even more from intense looks at, say, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Lebanese civil war, and the extended Algerian conflict.

¹⁴ On reading military history in depth and in context, see "The Use and Abuse of Military History," in Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

The Historical Narrative

In the wake of the 9/11 Commission hearings, one heard over and over again that the intelligence community failed to “connect the dots” and link discrete pieces of data into a coherent whole. This phrase can also be used to describe a phenomenon whereby history is viewed as a limited set of knowable facts, and causation as a matter of puzzling out the line that links them.

The historical mind, however, sees that half of what were thought to be dots are, in fact, merely smudges; that if one looks closely, there are ten times as many dots as was thought; and that it’s difficult to figure out where the lines go. The historical mind realizes that basic narratives, the kind on which strategists rely, can be surprisingly shaky. One need go no further than page 34 of the *9/11 Commission Report* (2004), which report demolishes the core official narrative of what happened on 9/11, for an example of this. The report shows how testimony given by senior military leaders eighteen months after 9/11 got many basic facts wrong—such as whether and when the air defense system learned of the hijacking of United Flight 93. That incorrect official account might have stood for a long time had the commission not reviewed this.

If strategists don’t even know what happened, they cannot be sure what succeeded and what went wrong; they cannot reinforce success or remedy failures. There is, then, a desperate need for reliable histories as raw material for decision-making as well as for the use of military educational institutions. Such narratives, however, are few and far between. The writing of official military accounts often rests with service historians—yet events require description from interservice, or even interagency, points of view. When the system does produce such accounts, they are often swathed in unnecessary secrecy, either because of the desire to avoid embarrassing revelations, or simply because not enough officers are available to read and declassify such documents.

Narrative history has been further marginalized by increased reliance on “lessons learned” as a quasi-historical genre. “Lessons learned” have always existed—indeed, military organizations still learn lessons in much the same way that they always have, through the informal sharing of experience and observations among warriors. But to an increasing degree in recent years, “lessons learned” has come to replace history. There are institutions (CALL, the Center for Army Lessons Learned) and databases (JULLS, or Joint Universal Lessons Learned System), special studies, and bureaucratic requirements, all seemingly designed to capture and make use of the immediate past. And yet, despite the vast resources thrown at a problem, and the integrity of the men and women who work on it, those systems not only fail to produce the insights of the historical mind and the historical narrative, they actually work against it, because of faults in the very genre.

“Lessons learned” do not deal with individuals, but rather with practices and procedures; by their nature they treat military individuals as interchangeable parts in a large, complicated system. The historical mind, however, knows that the most important determinants of outcomes in war are often the strengths and weaknesses of individual commanders and their decisions. “Lessons learned” exist in a bureaucratic setting in which unpleasant comparisons are avoided and institutional equities protected. That is the reason, for example, why one will not find a meticulous comparison of U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps counterinsurgency practices in the western parts of Iraq—even though the co-location of those units, and the similarity of their tasks, makes for a natural controlled experiment.

At a deeper level, “lessons learned” presume some degree of certainty: events understood, processes known, and well-defined actions to be taken. They preclude discussion or debate and do not seek to yield multiple interpretations or to stimulate further research. Yet sometimes the open-ended problem is the most central one, and to skirt problems that lack an obvious solution is to miss those that are most important. For this reason, “lessons learned” have a short half-life. They are very different from history, which is, after all, a story—and all of us like stories.

Furthermore, the format of most “lessons learned” reinforces their abstraction from context, particularly when it comes to the study of decision-making in war. Far too much contemporary military analysis relies on PowerPoint briefing slides, which a Harvard Business School study found to be a medium conducive to “generic, superficial, simplistic thinking.” As Edward Tufte, professor emeritus of political science, computer science, and statistics at Yale University, puts it, “bullet outlines can make us stupid.”¹⁵

“Lessons learned” may be inevitable and sometimes useful, but they cannot substitute for what is needed in military classrooms. And it is the rise of “lessons learned” that helps explain why, for example, if one wanted a reliable official history of the successful U.S. counterinsurgency in El Salvador, one would have nowhere to turn. And why four years after fighting a war in Afghanistan with important successes and also some important failures, reasonably balanced narratives are only just emerging.¹⁶

Quite apart from bureaucratic limitations and obstacles, the rise of new media of communications and shifts in our own attitudes on the documenting of history have contributed to this state of affairs. There are wonderful military historians in the civilian and military worlds, and wonderful military history

¹⁵ Edward R. Tufte, “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint” (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Sean Naylor, *Not A Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005); Sean Maloney, *Enduring The Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Potomac, 2005); Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005).

being written—David Hackett Fischer’s marvelous *Washington’s Crossing* (2004) being just one recent example. But in government and military circles, the historical mind as applied to strategic problems is in deep trouble. Our official military history programs shy away from studies of the recent past, leaving that to journalists and memoir-writers. Our professional military education system, which played such a vital role in the military’s recovery from Vietnam, is being weakened by Pentagon neglect, and worse, by the pernicious belief that “distance learning” can substitute for the sustained, collaborative examination of the past that is the academic seminar at its best. We have created personnel systems which, because they cannot grapple with the importance of humanistic education, will prevent soldier-scholars in the mold of General Jack Galvin, former Supreme Allied Commander–Europe, from rising to the top.

And we are on the verge of producing a generation of officers as devoid of historical-mindedness as many of the civilians with whom they will work. One senior military official recently said of a proposal to cut back on military education in wartime, “the experiences they [officers] are getting today are better than anything they will get in a classroom”—about as profound a misunderstanding of what happens in classrooms as one can have.¹⁷ If this process continues, we will have at the top of our armed forces men and women who perhaps can win America’s battles, but will not know how to understand America’s wars.

One final point: the historical mind brings to bear not only knowledge but a scale of values. What those values were can be seen in the tale of the writing of the official histories of the Second World War. In 1947 the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, set the tone with a directive that read, in part:

The Army possesses no inherent right to conceal the history of its affairs behind a cloak of secrecy, nor is such conduct conducive to a sound and healthy approach to the day-to-day performance of its duties. . . . Consistent with existing binding agreements with other agencies, and Governments, the maximum downgrading of all information on military subjects will be accomplished, except only when to do so would *in fact* endanger the security of the Nation. . . . The foregoing directive will be interpreted in the most liberal sense with no reservations as to whether or not the evidence of history places the Army in a favorable light.¹⁸

Eisenhower was not a uniquely enlightened officer. Two years before, in 1945, *Infantry Journal* asked the chief of the Army’s historical program, Dr. Kent

¹⁷ Pamela Hess, “Military Education Sought to be Cut in ‘Stress Periods,’ ” *Washington Times*, Feb. 23, 2005.

¹⁸ Memorandum for the Directors of Army General Staff Divisions; the Chiefs of Army Special Staff Divisions re “Policy Concerning Release of Information From Historical Documents of The Army - With Special Preference to the Events of World War II,” Nov. 27, 1947, at <http://www.army.mil>. Emphasis in the original.

Roberts Greenfield—chairman of the history department at Johns Hopkins University—to publish some of his studies. Greenfield records that:

I took the matter to General Devers, who was at the time Commanding General of the Army Ground Forces. I explained to him that our studies, then classified “Secret,” had been written for internal use and that we had called the shots as we saw them. His answer was: ‘How is the Army going to progress unless its mistakes are seen and studied?’ I warned him that living—and quite powerful—officers might have their feelings hurt. ‘Well,’ he shot back, ‘isn’t that the kind of wound a soldier has to take?’ I would not mention this incident if we had not found it typical of the Army high command.¹⁹

The commissioning and writing of an honest operational narrative requires moral courage on the part of the soldiers—and civilians—at the top of the hierarchy. The generation of Devers and Marshall and Eisenhower—operating, admittedly, in a considerably more benign media and political environment—understood just how important it was to permit as full and accurate a history to be written as they could.

“A widespread and sleepless conspiracy exists against history,” historian Allan Nevins wrote, in 1938, of the desire of public men and women to shape the past to benefit their own reputations. It is truer now than when he wrote it, and perhaps more effective as well.²⁰ And that sad observation leads to a final plea for the historical mind. It has one supreme virtue: commitment to “just the facts.”

The demands of security and of warfare sometimes require that some facts be suppressed for a time—even, in exceptional circumstances, misrepresented. But there is a price to be paid for this. Ultimately, piecing together the truest history we can is one of the most powerful weapons in our arsenal.



¹⁹ Kent Roberts Greenfield, *The Historian and the Army* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1954), p. 8.

²⁰ Allan Nevins, “Pilate on Evidence,” in *The Gateway to History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962 [1938]), p. 189.