

Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a framework to aid uniformed strategic leaders in reflecting on the last decade of conflict. This framework takes into account emerging historiography, time-tested military theory, and a holistic understanding of military history to help prepare officers to offer strategic advice in the future.

As the black flags of the Islamic State appear in more and more places in Iraq, a new generation of officers will likely reflect on what has and has not been accomplished, and what is and is not possible through the force of arms. Conclusions about the recent era of conflict will affect US officers as they ascend to higher ranks and provide the best military advice they can to the nation's civilian leadership. These future senior leaders should not allow emotion to affect their introspection.¹ Future senior leaders must place their past service in a context that takes into account emerging historiography, time-tested military theory, and a holistic understanding of military history, as this foundation will allow them to provide better strategic advice.

This article explores emerging historiography before revisiting just a few of the military theorists who continue to transcend time. It will then offer a brief overview of American military history by examining the popular outliers in the conscience of military professionals before turning to what the US military has done more often. Penultimately, it offers recommendations for how senior military leaders should approach historiography as they consider the future, and how a grounding in theory benefits them in the politically dominated realm of strategy. Last, this article suggests how to use historical context when providing advice and “speaking truth to power,” even when the message is not popular. As it has in the past, the US military will have to execute campaigns that lack strategic clarity or coherent policy objectives. Some campaigns will be, in the words of Andrew Bacevich, “fool’s errands.”² However, armed with an inclusive view of the past, not just the highlight reel, future strategic leaders may be better able to fulfill their roles.

Historiography

Historiography matters because it shapes approaches used at professional military education (PME) institutions. Iconography and personal views present intellectual minefields students and faculty must navigate with civility even when dealing with interpretations of the increasingly

1 The author uses the terms senior leader, general, and strategist interchangeably throughout.

2 Andrew Bacevich has used this term in many of his pieces, most recently in Andrew Bacevich, “Even If We Defeat the Islamic State, We’ll Still Lose the Bigger War,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2014.

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distant American Civil War. At one time, a walk through the halls of the US Army War College could have caused one to wonder who won the war, or how the profession has chosen to remember its past. Military professionals might have to work harder to distill the lessons of emerging narratives seeking to explain the less than decisive outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan, events in which many of them participated.³ Easily digested Manichean explanations for enormously complicated issues deserve attention only in helping to define the extreme boundaries of the entire field.⁴ How the profession remembers the last decade of conflict will likely influence the way it approaches the use of force in the future.⁵ Remembering the past can be painful and complicated, as the Civil War illustrates, thus reminding the profession of the care it should take in capturing and interpreting various perspectives of recent events.

Anti-COIN

Gian Gentile and Douglas Porch each used historical analysis of a variety of campaigns to reach the same conclusion: counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine rarely works, especially in the context of carrying out tasks related to nation-building for a third party. To their credit, both authors offered these perspectives before the recent emergence of ISIL. Although there seems to be little stomach for another COIN campaign, Gentile, to be certain, offers his critique for the good of the profession. His overarching fear stems from the belief the nation might try a similar venture again should it follow Field Marshal Montgomery's dictum that armed with a good plan (as prescribed by doctrine) and the right general, anything is possible.⁶ Gentile and Porch need not worry as current fiscal constraints have senior Army leaders more worried about the institution's ability to carry out the full scope of its Title 10 responsibilities, at least about taking on another open-ended task in Iraq or Afghanistan.⁷

Initial General Officer Introspection

In a recent article intended to generate dialogue and discussion, Lieutenant General Bolger (retired), takes his share of the credit for what he saw as the failure of American generalship during the last decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reminiscent of Harry Summers' poignant recollection of his conversation with a North Vietnamese counterpart, Bolger attests to the tactical proficiency of the United States

3 In few instances do the Air Force and the Navy have such a distinct advantage over the Army with respect to their corporate memory as when it comes to Civil War iconography and historiography.

4 For a chapter-length address of historiography on the broader topic of the American way of war, or lack thereof, see Antulio J. Echevarria, II, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

5 Ibid., 5. Echevarria is referencing the belief held by historian Russell Weigley when he prepared his seminal work, *The American Way of War*, the thesis of which Echevarria sets out to disprove, but on this particular issue agrees with Weigley.

6 Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn, America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 6; Douglass Porch, *Counterinsurgency, Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xi-xii. Porch states clearly his intent to attack the emerging hagiography of David Petraeus while at the same time trying to head off efforts in the vein of Lewis Sorely's "better war" thesis about Vietnam before they manifest themselves into a "stab-in-the-back" explanation for US failure in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the Field Marshal Montgomery quip, Greg Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

7 Cheryl Pellerin, "Service Chiefs Detail 2014 Sequestration Effects," *DoD News, US Department of Defense*, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120825>.

Army. Ultimately, this did not matter because of a failure at the operational and strategic levels of war. His Army was one built and trained for short, sharp, decisive wars, and not well suited for being “backed into” generational exercises in nation building.⁸ Bolger is disappointed in his and his peers’ willingness to accept a strategy of attrition rather than tell the truth as he sees it now. When the tools (means) did not match the task at hand (ends), they pursued a victory that always seemed to be just around the corner and, but for an additional bit of time, would be theirs.

The objectives given the Army were beyond the resources allocated to the task and military leaders met the nation’s strategic overreach with passive approval. The result has been “unlimited irregular conflicts with limited forces.” Not unlike Gentile and Porch, Bolger concludes there is little hope COIN will work unless the host nation wants it to work—a condition beyond the control of the United States and its generals. Bolger’s prescription, that the Army should return to what it does best—short, sharp wars against defined opponents—comes with its own challenges.⁹ The Army does not pick its wars, the nation’s civilian leaders do.

Pro-COIN

Peter Mansoor’s memoir of his service with David Petraeus provides readers chapter titles such as “A War Almost Lost,” as if the United States, because of the “Surge,” had attained its stated objectives using COIN doctrine. Petraeus’ “surge of ideas” thesis hardly acknowledges the foundational work underpinning his campaign, not to mention the decidedly different political context in which he waged it.¹⁰ Within Bolger’s construct, Petraeus is no hero since his successful surge of ideas did not deliver victory.¹¹ Petraeus was the ultimate “just a little more time” general, but even a little more time was not enough for the Iraqis to establish a representative government capable of standing on its own beyond the redeployment of US forces. By attempting to set the record straight when the easy to digest surge-narrative was beginning to come under attack, the author illustrated the challenge of writing about events even as they continue to unfold in the media.¹²

In 2014, it became clear even Petraeus, armed with the COIN manual, could not save Iraq from itself. To wit, Colin Gray has concluded the conduct of COIN, in the modern era, “reveals a history of

8 Daniel Bolger, “How We Lost In Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Harpers* (September 2014): 63-65; Daniel Bolger, “The Truth About the Wars,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/opinion/the-truth-about-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan.html>.

9 Daniel Bolger, “A 3-Star General Explains ‘Why We Lost’ in Iraq, Afghanistan,” *National Public Radio*, November 9, 2014, transcript, <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/09/361746282/a-3-star-general-explains-why-we-lost-in-iraq-afghanistan>.

10 Peter Mansoor, *Surge, My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2013), x. For example, Petraeus suggests it was his team that solved issues related to detainees as if none of his predecessors had addressed critical issues related to this topic. See Lieutenant General John D. Gardner (Ret) interviewed by Colonel Matthew D. Morton, Operation Iraqi Freedom Study Group, Carlisle Barracks, PA, January 2, 2014, held at the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, for a detailed explanation of the reforms that took place throughout 2005 and 2006, two years in advance of Petraeus’ arrival as the Multi-National Force Iraq commander.

11 David Petraeus, foreword to *Surge*, x; Bolger, “The Truth About the Wars,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2014. Bolger is even more critical of Petraeus in his book, comparing him to General Douglas MacArthur and his overweening ambition.

12 Mansoor, *Surge*, xxvi.

persistent, or at least repeated political unwillingness to respect empirical knowledge of the past.¹³ Simply put, COIN just does not work when the real tool or mechanism to achieve America's ends depends largely on indigenous forces.¹⁴ With regard to historiography, *Surge*, is an excellent example of assigning agency for ephemeral success too soon. Although there is much for readers to learn from Mansoor's account, it does not offer an example of a path to victory. It does provide valuable insight to one phase of a war that has yet to achieve its intended objectives.

The Limits of American Power

In response to the recent era of conflict, Andrew Bacevich espouses the limits of American power.¹⁵ With the *bona fides* of a soldier and a scholar, his work merits the attention of military professionals lest they too see all the world's problems as ones military power alone can solve. In his review of Bolger's book, Bacevich generally agrees with the author. Nevertheless, Bacevich notes Bolger's failure to address more comprehensively the responsibility of senior officers when providing political leaders their military advice.¹⁶ In his mind, those senior leaders should heed the warning in the most recent edition of Reinhold Niebuhr's classic, *The Irony of American History*. Bacevich introduces the work with four truths worth considering: (a) the sin of American exceptionalism, (b) indecipherability of history, (c) false allure of simple solutions, and (d) the imperative of appreciating the limits of power.¹⁷ The nation has stumbled over these issues during the last ten years, and Bacevich reminds readers that stability, rather than remaking the world in the image of the United States, best serves the nation.¹⁸ Niebuhr, speaking enduring truth from the past, reminds all Americans, "the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity."¹⁹ Therein lies the rub for generals who must maintain paradise at home while acting abroad. Fortunately, for them, a dead Prussian soldier, who happened to be a bit of an intellectual, still offers sage advice on how to connect domestic and foreign interests.

13 Colin Gray, *Defense Planning for National Defense: Navigation Aids for the Mystery Tour* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2014), 44. For another criticism of a recent offering by one of COIN's biggest proponents, John A. Nagl, see Dexter Filkins' review of his latest offering, John A. Nagl, *Knife Fights, A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* (New York: Penguin, 2014), in which Filkins also concludes COIN, at least as practiced by Americans, does not work. Dexter Filkins, review of *Knife Fights, A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*, John Nagl, *New York Times*, November 13, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/books/review/knife-fights-by-john-a-nagl.html?_r=0.

14 Lewis Sorely's, *Better War* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999) suggests that General Abrams could have achieved victory in Vietnam if given more time to develop the South Vietnamese security forces.

15 Recent books by Andrew Bacevich include: *The New American Militarism How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2008); *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt, 2010).

16 Andrew Bacevich, review of *Why We Lost, A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*, by Daniel Bolger, *New York Times*, November 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/books/review/daniel-bolgers-why-we-lost.html>.

17 Andrew Bacevich, introduction to Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), x.

18 *Ibid.*, xvii.

19 Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 7.

Enduring Theorists through a Contemporary Lens

The stalwart military theorists of professional military education—Clausewitz and Sun Tzu—continue to be relevant even when examined through the lens of recent events. Future strategists should not discount them in the mistaken belief the true nature of war has changed. Just as historiography offers a lens to review historic events, some theorists continue to offer enduring advice with which to consider conflict. In his recent work, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan*, author Antulio Echevarria argues there is no single American way of war. Unsurprisingly given his reputation as a scholar of Carl von Clausewitz, he concludes, “the American way of war was, and still is, thoroughly political.”²⁰ He reaches this conclusion in the same manner Clausewitz used to draw his own conclusions about the nature of war, through the lens of historical analysis. Clausewitz offers the familiar:

No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in the mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective. This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.²¹

Echevarria’s conclusion applies to all wars, not just the big ones with clearly defined objectives. Senior military leaders will continue to bear the responsibility for helping civilian decision makers understand what will be required to “achieve” their ends through war. They should remember civilians take the decision to go to war in a unique domestic political condition ever subject to change. As Clausewitz cautions, “certainly the exhaustion or, to be accurate, the fatigue of the stronger has often brought about peace. The reason can be found in the half-hearted manner in which wars are usually waged.”²² This is particularly important in the context of Echevarria’s other conclusion that the United States, in the past, sought minimalist solutions and resisted the expenditure of too many resources.²³ Future generals should try to avoid the risk of imbalance between ends and means no matter how good they think they are at designing ways to balance the equation.

Sun Tzu through the Lens of Bolger and Tuchman

Bolger suggests the military has struggled to identify the real enemy of the nation’s stated objectives. Renowned author and historian Barbara Tuchman observed the US Army’s predilections contribute to its inability to know its enemy. In doing so, both authors allude to Sun Tzu’s dictum to know oneself and know the enemy to avoid defeat. At the beginning of an inflection point as the Army emerged from Vietnam, Tuchman spoke to the US Army War College in 1972. She addressed a blind spot in the American approach to war; it was the same one Bolger

20 Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, 2.

21 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 579.

22 *Ibid.*, 613.

23 Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, 135.

addressed forty years later. One passage bears full citation given its timeless advice and recognition of American military habits.

In the arrogance of our size, wealth and superior technology, we tend to overlook the need to examine what may be different sources of strength in others....we now need another voice of wisdom to tell us, "Technology is not enough." War is not one big engineering project. There are people on the other side—with strengths and will that we never bother to measure... we have been drawn into a greater, and certainly more ruinous, belligerent action than we intended [Vietnam]. To fight without understanding the opponent ultimately serves neither the repute of the military nor the repute of the nation.²⁴

Bolger seized on the fact that recently the military has struggled to identify the real enemy of the nation's stated objectives. Simply, those who shoot at American soldiers—the Taliban, Sunni insurgents in Iraq, or the Mahdi Army—do not necessarily represent the enemy the United States went to war to fight. They are enemies the United States created along the way.²⁵ A technological overmatch of opponents has not always allowed the United States to discern its enemy well, especially when the enemy chooses not to fight in a manner that serves the strengths of the US military. Echevarria also points out that the United States' historic reliance on technology allowed it to offset numeric advantages as policy makers pursued strategies underwritten by just enough, but not too much, means. While this worked historically, the proliferation of modern small arms has changed the equation particularly at the tactical level—the enemy now bears RPGs, not spears and crude firearms.²⁶

A Holistic Approach to History

The study of history provides future generals means to learn vicariously from the mistakes of others. Because history is replete with wars fought with remarkable tactical and operational acumen, but which did not achieve strategic victory, future generals should open their apertures. The sweep of American military history is much broader than its most well know wars—the American Civil War and World War II—which dominate the canon of professional military education for good reasons. Future strategic leaders ought not to forget history records victory in the strategic column and does not award style points for tactical and operational acumen. Were one to score Nazi performance during each discrete year of WWII, most would accord Hitler's generals victories in 1939, 1940, and probably a draw in 1941. Nevertheless, for all their battlefield success, they ultimately failed in the realms that matter, strategy and achieving national objectives. One could say the same thing about the United States in Vietnam.²⁷ To be certain, "the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final," and "the defeated state"

24 Barbara W. Tuchman, "Generalship," *Parameters* 11, no. 2 (1972): 2-11.

25 Bolger, "A 3-Star General Explains 'Why We Lost' in Iraq, Afghanistan."

26 Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, 167-168, 170, and conversation with LTC Matt Hardman (Hardman served as an airborne-infantry company commander in Afghanistan in 2003 and Iraq in 2004 and again in Afghanistan as a BDE Chief-of Current Operations in 2010-2011 and BDE XO in 2013. He currently commands an Airborne-Infantry Battalion). Hardman contends that in his experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, squad versus squad fights are evenly matched until the US force can employ its enablers. Gone are the days that a single Marine battalion was adequate to maintain control or defend US interests in a Latin American country.

27 Gray, *Defense Planning for National Defense*, 14; Robert Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 226, 246, 254, 264.

may only consider it “a transitory evil” until it can remedy the outcome at a later date; however Americans expect their generals to provide the nation more than ephemeral ends.²⁸ Fortunately, the United States has a rich and varied military history, including many dark chapters that hardly qualify as the stuff of American exceptionalism, upon which to reflect as they contemplate future challenges.

Big and Exceptional—Outliers

The American Civil War and World War II are the outliers in American military history with respect to the objectives sought and the resources the nation was willing to expend to achieve them. The sweep of American military history is much broader than these arguably best known and often studied wars. Between 1861 and 1865, the United States fought its bloodiest war. The existential threat of Confederate rebellion resulted in the deaths of 360,000 Union soldiers. In defense of the institution of chattel slavery, the Confederacy was willing to sacrifice 260,000 soldiers. In total, preserving the Union and freeing four million African-Americans cost the nation 620,000 soldiers drawn from a population of 30 million.²⁹ A proportional cost today would amount to no less than seven million dead Americans.³⁰ Full mobilization of the Union effort took years. Once mobilized, generals such as Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman translated the might of the nation into victory, but victory at great cost. One will not find even a hint of this kind of mobilization and expected sacrifice discussed in any of the nation’s guiding strategic documents today.

The Second World War continues to provide a nearly bottomless pit of issues for study ranging from tactical to strategic in nature, hence its utility in the canon of professional military education. In the modern era, it represents the closest approximation of Clausewitz’s concept of absolute war. The final *Götterdämmerung* inflicted by “Little Boy” and “Fatman” meant it would be the last global war on such a scale short of Armageddon.³¹ Nazi Germany had more than territorial ambitions as it sought to remove entire races of people from the face of the earth while losing four million of its own citizens. Its ally, Imperial Japan, lost two million people subjugating and defending the “Co-prosperity Sphere” it created. The Soviet Union lost more than twenty-five million soldiers and civilians resisting Hitler’s quest for *Lebensraum*. While the world collectively suffered an estimated 60 million deaths directly attributable to the conflict, the United States lost only 300,000 service members and suffered almost no losses at home.³² Nevertheless, the United States placed millions of citizens in uniform, fed and equipped its allies, and willingly suffered a degree of disruption in the lives of its 132.2 million citizens. A similar military effort today would require 18.5 million

28 Clausewitz, *On War*, 80.

29 Bureau of the Census Library, *1860 Compiled for the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

30 “The Civil War By the Numbers,” PBS, *American Experience*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/death-numbers/>.

31 Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 920.

32 Ibid., 44, 894, 898-899 for war aims, *Lebensraum*, and total casualties; John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 7-8.

soldiers to fill the Army's ranks alone, not to mention what it would do to the paychecks of the wealthiest Americans should they be asked make a sacrifice on a par with their forebears to support such a force.³³ Again, today's guiding strategy documents do not allude to anything similar with regard to force structure or fiscal requirements to field such a force.

Since gaining independence, the United States used force 280 times between 1789 and 2009.³⁴ In these instances, the nation only fought two wars to decisive outcomes, the two already mentioned, in which entire systems of government ceased to exist and unconditional surrender was the objective. George Patton, Jr. was correct, "Americans love to fight," but they have only gotten the satisfaction of decisive victory two times.³⁵

Beyond the Outliers

In contrast to the "big ones," where everything was at stake and the nation responded accordingly, the American Army played a variety of roles in a wide range of military dramas. The Army, cast as an unrelenting underdog, against all reason defeated a global hegemon not once, but twice in less than fifty years. It served as the tool of manifest destiny by defeating Mexico and taking large swaths of territory by force and occupation until a fig leaf of postwar negotiation clarified what the feat of arms already accomplished. The Army in support of the Navy, served as a tool in the hands of American imperialists determined to seize colonies—better the United States grab the Philippines from Spain lest the Germans get there first. In short, the Army did many things that looked nothing like short, or sharp, or even decisive. As always, the military responded to orders and with the exception of five instances, it did so without so much as a declaration of war.³⁶

Vietnam

It is easy to forget the war in Vietnam was a limited war—despite the commitment of more than 500,000 troops and enough jet-era bombing to make the war in the air over Europe and Japan look amateurish in comparison. The main theater was in fact Western Europe where the threat of Soviet invasion remained constant. Recently, some pundits used the American experience in Vietnam as an analogy to the long slog in Iraq and morass that the United States once again found itself

33 See "Federal Individual Income Tax Rates History, Inflation Adjusted (Real 2012 Dollars) Using Average Annual CPI During Tax Year, Income Years 1913-2013," *Tax Foundation*, http://taxfoundation.org/sites/taxfoundation.org/files/docs/fed_individual_rate_history_adjusted.pdf to gain some sense the disparity in tax rates between the recent decade of conflict and WWII, especially for the wealthiest Americans; "Profile America Facts for Features," *United States Census Bureau*, http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-fise01.html; Kent Roberts Greenfield, *The Organization of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1947). The US population was approximately 132 million in 1940 and by 1945, more than 8 million citizens wore the uniform of the Army. Including all services, the nation put 12 million citizens in uniform. Americans paid for roughly half of World War II with tax revenue and financed the other half through the sale of bonds, something not seen during the last decade of conflict. I.C. B. Dear, ed., *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 923.

34 Richard F. Grimmer, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2010* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, March 10, 2011).

35 Martin Blumenson, ed., *The Patton Papers, 1940-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 429, 457.

36 Barbara S. Torreon, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2010* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, September 15, 2014).

unable to escape. Others did their utmost to disassociate the recent era of conflict with the last war America lost.³⁷

However, in other respects, Vietnam provides an excellent example for considering the American approach to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. It continues to offer something for students inclined to study what is more likely than the exceptional conflicts discussed above. In Vietnam, the Army moved faster and generated more firepower than any time in its history. Every tactical movement was in effect a movement without a rear area during which the enemy might attack from any direction. Urban battles in Hue and Saigon afforded the rare opportunity to concentrate military efforts against what was normally an elusive foe who sought to avoid such battles since they led to disproportionate casualties. Despite the ability to mass effects in time and space, strategic victory remained as elusive in Vietnam as it did in Iraq. Despite the narrative suggesting the Army turned its back on Vietnam and never looked back, the reality was it learned quite a bit, just not the answer the Army was looking for in 2003, as it received the task to fight insurgencies in Asia in support of questionable governments.³⁸

Vietnam as a Bridge

Historical research always bears the imprint of current events even if historians and uniformed strategists attempt not to look backward to events, but rather to see them from the perspective of the participants marching forward in time. To that end, Greg Daddis asked and answered an important question: is it possible to have a comprehensive strategy and still lose a war? In his largely successful effort to rehabilitate General William Westmoreland, he concludes, yes, it is.³⁹ In arriving at this explanation, Daddis offers a number of observations relevant today, especially while reflecting on recent events. Westmoreland struggled to communicate the complexity of the situation in Vietnam. He realized military power and its application was but one facet of a problem requiring equal, if not more, attention on social and political ills in South Vietnam.⁴⁰ There were no shortages of “can do” generals in Vietnam. General Paul Harkins promised in 1963 Saigon could lead its own war effort and that the United States would be starting to depart by 1965.⁴¹ Perhaps most importantly, the United States did a lot in Vietnam: it created an army, it did nation-building, and it fought homegrown insurgents from South Vietnam and conventional units from the north. Even so, the Army was unable to do all three tasks simultaneously to the levels demanded to achieve the nation’s overall objectives.⁴² Perhaps Bolger’s current frustration stems from the fact he knew all of this having taught history at West Point, but failed to see the parallels until the United

37 Robert Dallek, “Iraq Isn’t Like Vietnam—Except When It Is,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2007; Ronald Bruce St. John, “Parallels Between Iraq War and Vietnam War Are Piling Up” *The Progress Report*, April 28, 2004, <http://www.progress.org/tpr/parallels-between-iraq-war-and-vietnam-war-are-piling-up/>; Heather Marie Stur, “Stop Comparing Iraq to the Vietnam War” *The National Interest*, July 1, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/stop-comparing-iraq-the-vietnam-war-10788>.

38 Citino, *Operational Warfare*, 226, 237, 246, 254, 264.

39 Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, xx, 14.

40 *Ibid.*, 90-91.

41 *Ibid.*, 163.

42 *Ibid.*, 169.

States was already “backed in” to objectives beyond the grasp of the Army.

Conclusions on the Use of History

If there is but one lesson for future strategists to take away from their study of military history it is this: there are almost no instances of the United States successfully waging a war, signing a peace treaty, and immediately redeploying. There has usually been a gap between the attainment of an end by military means and the ultimate political outcome in the form of a peace treaty. An American way of battle dependent on technology and shock and awe cannot bridge the intervening gap.⁴³ Soldiers conduct occupations. Even the American Civil War and World War II, with their decisive conclusions, demanded occupations to translate military victory into enduring end states.

Recommendations

Senior leaders and future strategists are entitled to their opinions and interpretations of the past, but their professional obligations demand they form them in a critical context. Rather than drinking their own intellectual “bathwater”—doctrine, white papers, professional military education curriculum, and professional journal articles—future senior leaders should look beyond this elixir as they attempt to reflect on what has occurred, how it is likely to be remembered, and how it might affect their approach to war. A narrow interpretation runs the risk of acting like self-imposed blinders in the search for the best advice in situations that do not lend themselves to a narrow base of understanding. In addition, as Daddis has shown with his recent work on Westmoreland and Vietnam, soldiers can continue to learn new things when considering a war gone awry. The glancing overview of emerging historiography is but the bow-wave of a larger body of evidence and interpretation to follow. Enduring theory should help underpin much of it as it travels its path into the American military conscience as part of a larger tapestry of corporate memory.

The Recent and Not So Recent Past

In Desert Storm, Colin Powell and his generation got the war they wanted, but the next generation of strategic leaders stung by the outcome of recent events may not be so lucky. Future strategists may lead the military anywhere along the spectrum of conflict, so it remains in their best interests to think hard about current scholarship emerging from the last decade of conflict. Gian Gentile’s concern the nation might be tempted to wage another counterinsurgency beyond the borders of the United States seems unlikely now. However, even Powell could not avoid it, albeit while fulfilling a very different role. Part and parcel of the emerging scholarship on the recent decade of conflict are the vicissitudes of political priorities, which speak to enduring nature of war and the utility of those who well captured it in theory.

43 Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, 175.

Political Context

Generals should never forget strategy will always be a slave to what is politically possible.⁴⁴ What general would not want to refight the Civil War or World War II? Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt stand out as great American strategists and more importantly, great political leaders who were able to convince the American people to go “all in.” As Bolger and Bacevich both describe in their own ways, American generals cannot expect their civilian leaders to be good strategists.⁴⁵ Modern generals should rise to the task of fulfilling their professional obligations—rendering professional military advice—in all circumstances. Doing so will at times require them to assume the role of mentor, even within the context of their subordinated role as prescribed by the American construct of civil-military relations, but ever cognizant of the political conditions that directly affect their masters.

Moral Courage

Strategic thought demands the long view, not the best immediate work-around for the challenge at hand. Few generals became generals because they told their senior raters on a recurring basis that what their boss asked them to do was a bad idea. Generals get to be generals because they consistently demonstrated superior tactical competence, regardless of their discipline. In essence, they achieved missions in a fashion deemed superior to their peers. Getting the job done “now,” whatever that job might be, runs the risk of influencing a general’s temporal horizon. Clausewitz was not writing about tactics, he was writing about war with a big “W.” Understanding a broader sweep of history will help strategists adjust their temporal horizons.

Armed with a longer view, they should also be willing to share that experience in the role of a teacher. It surprised a senior general with years of experience in the Middle East that he had to spend so much time educating leaders, about “what was going on in one of the most complex battle spaces on earth.”⁴⁶ Domestic political acumen does not necessarily equip senior civilian leaders with an adequate foundation for making strategic choices that rely heavily on military resources. As senior strategists, generals should embrace their role in the education process.

Uniformed strategists, with tact, ought to find their voices when their political masters are treading on the thin ice of exceedingly poor historical analogy as it relates to war. In some cases, they may have to help guide the conversation and process back to the path of strategy. It is particularly important that senior officers understand the history of their own profession, in a national context, if for no other reason than a little history can be a dangerous thing. Bush policy makers had it in their mind that invading Iraq was going to be like liberating France in

44 Gray, *Defense Planning for National Defense*, 49-50.

45 Although Bolger and Bacevich each say this in their own way, a conversation about the recent war in Iraq with Dr. Lance Betros, Provost, US Army War College, on the same topic inspired this part of the paper.

46 Senior Officer Exit Interview, non-attribution, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 20-21.

World War II.⁴⁷ It was lost on them that unlike France, Iraq had no Free Iraqi Army in being, battle hardened and ready, or a legitimate government in exile with a string of battlefield successes to its credit, rather than a collection of expatriates and little else. Civilian policy makers are not required to study history, but Army officers are, and what they study shapes their outlook and understanding of war. Unfortunately, the senior officer who recounted these observations could not, or chose not to, find his voice and dispel his civilian masters of their misconceived assumption based on a wrongheaded interpretation of historical events.⁴⁸ What flowed from these assumptions has been nothing less than tragic.

Speaking Truth to Power

Senior leaders should draw on what they have learned through experience, professional military education, and the self-directed study of history when the time comes to find their voice. History also offers senior leaders examples of their peers having the moral courage to speak truth to power. As Barbara Tuchman pointed out after Vietnam, the West Point motto of “Duty, Honor, Country,” that is, to follow orders unflinchingly, may no longer be the best policy lest the nation “undercut [its] own claim at Nuremberg and Tokyo,” when Nazis and Imperial Japanese went to the gallows using the same excuse.⁴⁹ Recent history offers the example of General Eric Shinseki. Looking back a little further provides the example of General Matthew Ridgway. Shinseki gave Congress his best military advice. It just so happened that his best advice was not consistent with the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s view of the world and the coming war with Iraq.⁵⁰ Rumsfeld’s efforts to discredit Shinseki have only enhanced his example of a serving officer rendering his duty regardless of the consequences. As Army Chief of Staff, General Ridgway paid an even stiffer price when he did the same thing. Ridgway’s sin was to speak out against the belief air power alone could play a decisive role in Vietnam in 1954, based on his interpretation of what it had accomplished in Korea. This advice put him at odds with the Eisenhower administration’s desire to test its “New Look” policy in a proposed attempt to save the French at Dien Bien Phu. Ridgway kept the United States out of Vietnam as the French lost, but he lost his job in 1955 in a forced early retirement.⁵¹ History suggests the advice rendered by both generals was probably correct. The occupation of Iraq required more troops than suggested by planners in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The introduction of air power in South Vietnam led to the commitment of ground forces.

Conclusion

Modern strategists would be wise to remember the observation of Colin Gray when he wrote, “It is no disgrace to fail in an attempt to

⁴⁷ Ibid.; Similar accounts can be found in Gordon Rudd, *Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner and the ORHA Story* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, Press, 2011), 28, 382-383.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Tuchman, “Generalship.”

⁵⁰ Rudd, *Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner and the ORHA Story*, 140-141.

⁵¹ Conrad Crane, “Killing the Vulture: The Impact of the Korean Airpower Experience on American Involvement in Indochina in 1954” unpublished manuscript, copy in possession of author used with Dr. Crane’s permission.

achieve the difficult and demanding, but persistence in an effort to do the impossible is an affront to the Gods of strategy.”⁵² Doing more of the same in the same places, after a decade and billions of dollars, is unlikely to bring about a different result, nor will doing the same in new places with the same characteristics have much hope of achieving national objectives. High-minded notions of American exceptionalism should come with the same warning as “hope;” neither is a method.⁵³ There was nothing exceptional about imposing dictatorships in South and Central America in the service of domestic political agendas any more than the hubris of toppling the regime in Iraq with an underlying assumption that it could be made right quickly and on the cheap.

How then to do it better? Emerging historiography, and to a lesser extent hagiography, will shape the way the Army as an institution remembers the recent era of conflict. It will influence future uniformed strategists who have never been to Iraq or Afghanistan although their service will carry baggage from those conflicts for years to come. Simple “surge” narratives have proven too good to be true, but at least some senior leaders have started the process of deep introspection, such as Bolger, and doing so have reminded the profession of the relevance of theorists such as Clausewitz and Sun Tzu as enduring touchstones for the profession of arms, particularly at the highest levels of service. The use of military forces in operations short of war will continue to demonstrate the nation’s values as it attempts to avert larger conflicts.⁵⁴

Fortunately, American military history provides a rich tapestry of conflict for consideration. Senior officers should approach this study in the context of understanding that the two most significant monuments of American martial pride are outliers. It seems unlikely that the United States will unleash the powers to terrorize entire civilian populations, conduct ethnic cleansing, or make the heavy hand of war touch the lives of men, women, and children in the nations that are the object of its military attention.

Therefore, as ever, it will remain the burden of the senior uniformed strategist to convey the art of the possible and the associated risk inherent in every variation of the use of force to achieve national policy objectives. This will never be easy, but studying the recent past as institutional memories form in the manner prescribed in this paper is far less expensive than the cost of blood and treasure already expended. The avoidance of a single “fool’s errand” would be something indeed.

52 Gray, *Defense Planning for National Defense*, 44.

53 Taken from the eponymous title of Gordon Sullivan’s, *Hope is Not a Method* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

54 Louis Caldera and Antulio J. Echevarria, “The US Army is the Nation’s Premier Global Engagement and Operation-Other-Than-War Force,” *Armed Forces Journal International* (March 2001): 32-34.

