

Why Military History?

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Published online: 30 April 2008
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“Military history,” continued the speaker, since it deals with war, is unpopular, and probably more so today than at any other time. Yet I believe it is very important that the true facts, the causes and consequences that make our military history, should be matters of common knowledge. War is a deadly disease which today affects hundreds of millions....It exists: therefore there must be a reason for its existence. We should do everything in our power to isolate the diseases, protect ourselves against it, and to discover the specific that will destroy it.

So said General George Marshall to the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, in late December 1939—two years before the American entry into the Second World War, and two years, really, before the broader American public had any clear sense of who George Marshall *was*. He had become chief of staff—head—of the Army four months earlier; but only three years before that he had been a colonel advising a National Guard division in Chicago. He had been selected on the advice of President Roosevelt’s closest counselor, Harry Hopkins, and at his appointment was the most junior of brigadiers (one-star)

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among those “seriously considered” for the post. He was known to the political and military cognoscenti as a thoughtful public man, however, and the AHA—then concerned with the *usefulness* of history as a means of public education, as a rich source of intellectual nourishment for citizens—had asked him to provide the convention’s main address.

It is inconceivable that, in 2008, the chief of staff of the Army be asked to speak to the AHA, and to speak specifically on military history. The reasons are obvious and numerous. Together they are no more compelling than arguments, if anyone were to make them, against studying the causes and symptoms, and course, of pancreatic cancer. In the American academy, however, few academic disciplines occupy a lower caste than military history. Few candidates for doctoral degrees in military history present themselves, fewer military historians are hired, much less given tenure. And few are the course options in military history provided undergraduates, history majors or not. It is important to remember that the able undergraduate student is almost certainly not going to become an academic historian and a professor: but the interest in disciplines like military history that are kindled and cultivated in undergraduates are not uncommonly those that serve as sustaining fuel for enthusiastic intellectual interest in them much later on. And thoughtful citizens need to know about war and its history. You may not be interested in war, said Trotsky, but war is interested in you.

Public and popular interest in military history is as strong now as it has been at any time since World War II. A casual visitor, idling an hour in Borders or Barnes & Noble, notices immediately the large clusters of readers standing before the history shelves, especially those marked The Civil War and World War II. Biographies; campaign accounts; narrative histories of these wars; books on military leadership, on the origins of wars; soldiers’ diaries and journals; specialized studies—these are produced in a steady stream. Many find wide audiences. Many are beautifully written, and diligently researched. Not a few are formidable *tours d’horizon*, surveys of war like John Keegan’s *Second World War*, or Max Boot’s or Ian Kershaw’s or Niall Ferguson’s. They are written for intellectual lay audiences, not for professional scholars—and writer-historians like Keegan have no formal connection with a university. Like Victor Davis Hanson and David McCullough and their predecessors, Elizabeth Longford, Barbara Tuchman, Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, and Douglas Southall Freeman, they write to be read: and by men and women who will learn *to a purpose* from what they

have read—for no form of history offers lessons, examples, guidance more chastening and illuminating than military history.

If war and violence are the blight man was born for (to remember a poet), the more he knows it; how it begins; the sources of its sustenance; its horrors and depredations and costs; the heroism it sometimes engenders and the courage, moral and physical, that nobly subserves the needs of causes just and honorable; and the means by which nations still labor to resolve issues that cause war before they occur—the more he learns of such things, provided his learning is lifelong, the better for our country. Most singular is military history's continuing provision of a chastening lesson: that ignorance of other cultures and countries with whom our own may find itself at war is profoundly dangerous.

“You have not yet begun to consider what sorts of people are these Athenians whom you may have to fight,” wrote the greatest of military (and political) historians, Thucydides. He was describing—recreating, really—a speech made by some ambassador from Corinth to the assembly at Sparta: the Spartans being bent on war. Americans by temperament and history tend not to be serious students of their prospective, and actual, enemies. We tend to discount the role of chance, the vagaries of happenstance, when we decide on war. The serious student of military history—“serious” meaning the aggressive, thoughtful, pondering reader—goes some way towards immunizing himself against the disease. During the Vietnam period Arthur Schlesinger wrote an essay he called “Inscrutable History” in which he discounted direct historical analogy as a source of reliable counsel (“Munich” then being invoked as a reason for going to Vietnam). But a lifetime's avocational interest in history, particularly in the history of wars and military history, might confer something like a medical doctor's *diagnostic ability*, the predisposition and training to form judgments—quietly, dispassionately, and with due allowance for the vagaries of chance.

The decline of military history in universities reflects an indulged hatred of war and armies (now identified, as they should not be, with “conservatism”—another slipshod judgment), and of military people as not clever or, if clever, perverse in the vocation to which they devote their intellectual talents. It reflects the wide cultural chasm between academia and the American military, a chasm never deeper or wider than now, in the thirty-fifth year of the all-volunteer military. What this means, of course, is that no professor under the age of fifty-five, roughly, has ever worn the uniform of his or her

country, unless as a volunteer—and few academics have volunteered. For older members of this cohort, those now in their sixties, Vietnam was the war for which their age and health and intelligence made them eligible. They missed the war, before 1972, by means of academic deferments.

The decline also represents the retirement of a generation of scholars of the humane letters, historians among them, who had served in the Second World War. Its members began leaving the academy in the late 1980s; very few remain today. An infantryman who waded ashore at Normandy, age twenty in 1944, is now eighty-three. His experience in the war was, of course, profoundly transformative; and so was the opportunity President Roosevelt and a grateful country provided him as partial recompense: the GI Bill. He was most unlikely to have been attracted to the military career, but he was to retain, if not exactly an affection for (as he called it) “the service,” then at least gratitude that he had served and survived, and both sympathy for and an understanding of what soldiers are called upon to do. He understood that war is hateful, but that only the dead have seen its end, and that only the steady efforts of educated men and women to eliminate its causes or ameliorate its consequences can provide reasonable hope for a future in which the United States can remain safe, and free.

He was likely to be tolerant of political opinions of all stripes. This did not mean he endorsed them, but he did not discredit the motives of those who disagreed with his own views, or impugn their patriotism. The army that beat Hitler was, after all, an army of draftees, of Depression adolescents grown barely to maturity. The majority were probably what in today’s political lexicon would be called liberal Democrats. When the All Volunteer Army was established (1 January 1973), the veteran of the Second World War was likely to fret that it would attract only the politically retrograde and the deracinated: soldiers not unlike those depicted in movies like *From Here to Eternity*, men who liked fighting and whose units would tempt American presidents to go quickly to war—no draftee parents to complain or worry.

From this cohort came many thousands of college teachers (it is interesting that books of the post-war era tended to call such men and women college teachers, not faculty members). Many were exemplars of a campus professorial hybrid now extinct: *conservative* on matters of pedagogy and curriculum and student behavior—but *liberal* in politics. You must study history, mathematics, French, physics, English (as a freshman). I will vote for

Adlai Stevenson, the closed shop, and progressive taxation. These leaders saw no disjunction or irony in the different ways in which they viewed their academic responsibilities and their political opinions and convictions. The study of war, the study and profession of military history, research, and writing were legitimate, important concentrations within the historical ambit.

The politicization of the campus has provided a rich legacy of damage, and the military establishment (strongly, obviously linked in the academician's mind with the study of military history) has been a direct casualty. ROTC, thrown off campuses among the most admired in the country, continues to produce able young officers for the services, but undergraduates of many elite schools are denied the opportunity to earn military commissions in this way. Ironically, many of these institutions were once among the principal sources of young wartime military leadership. And military history has always been a staple of the ROTC curriculum.

Military history is often the locus of strong narrative writing. By its nature it exalts individual achievement by commanders: heroic achievement, of course, and failure. But in a flattened egalitarian age, the word "general" sits oddly on the academic sensibility: for the general has attained his or her eminence and fame (or infamy) in doing things distasteful, perhaps ignoble actions that liberal education has always hoped to make unnecessary in the lives of citizens. The general has made his or her way forward as much by "character" as by intellect, and by elements of character that academics and intellectuals are reluctant to extol. Many are not verbally facile, and virtually all embrace a view of human nature more bleak than that of those who profess an academic discipline in a university. Finally, the tendency to conflate *opinions* about current wars with *judgments* about earlier wars (America's war in Vietnam is immoral, therefore I cannot see the value in a disinterested effort to learn more about America's military role in the First World War) is difficult, it seems, to overcome.

But to infer the nation's chances of going to war during the lifetime of students now in college—men and women born between 1985 and 1990, young citizens who will live into the 2070s—from the American experience of the last sixty-five years is to understand that our likelihood of not "going to war" is remote. The history of war, military history, military history at its interstices with *haut politique*, with breathlessly constant media "coverage," and with the prosecution of armed conflict no longer the province of

sovereign states—such subjects demand the university’s unembarrassed attention. Ideally, its mission remains close to Matthew Arnold’s noble declaration: to propagate the best that has been said and thought in the world. It disserves that mission when it ignores what human beings and nations organize themselves to do to each other when serving their darker, as well as their best, and noblest, instincts.