

The Importance of History in Military Education.

An essay by Dr. Ian Crouch, author of,

“A Pyrrhic Victory.” Volume I, “The Shaping of Destiny.”

Volume II, “Destiny Unfolds.”

In this essay, I will consider the critical importance of the study of political and military history in military education, and the surprising lack of such knowledge in contemporary settings.

This surprising lack of such study was noted by General Fuller in his academic military career that followed the First World War. This motivated him to write his extraordinary work, “The Decisive Battles of the Western World.” Each of these major battles was given its descriptive chapter and was also accompanied by a companion chapter describing the political, social and strategic context in which the battle was fought.

Despite such treatments, there remains a lack of such study still, by the people, who as General Fuller says, should take the greatest interest in it.

Two personal encounters will illustrate the point.

Some time after the main military phase of the Second Iraq War, a senior American general made a statement at a Press Conference. In it, he acknowledged that his country and their allies had not given sufficient thought and resources to the phase of the campaign that followed the initial victory over the forces of Saddam Hussein - winning the respect of the populace, restoring the country to proper function, and making sure that the terrible price paid by them and their opponents was justified in the new Iraq that they had created.

This was tragically disappointing, as a small amount of reading would have made them realize the same mistake was made after the end of the First World War. After the Armistice on 11th November 1918, the wartime blockade of Germany continued until after the Versailles conference in June 1919. A combination of continued starvation, humiliation and the economic ruin of the war reparations made a proud country desperate, which later chose to adopt desperate solutions, leading to the continued catastrophes that categorised the 20th Century .

The second example occurred some years ago, when I was a guest at a dinner to celebrate the 50th Birthday of a dear friend who was one of the most senior and capable men in the Medical Corps of the Australian Army.

I sat next to a young lieutenant in the Australian Army. I thought myself fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from an expert, and discuss aspects of military strategy and perspective, and how it related to lessons learned from the past. Early in the discussion, we touched on the tragic nature of modern war, where the war itself seems to become the issue in question, rather than the political issues that the war presumably is to resolve. I mentioned the same problem of uncontrolled war that devastated Europe in the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648), where huge marauding armies almost turned Germany into a wasteland. The savagery of the uncontrolled warfare in this conflict led to the limitation of the violence of war in Europe for two centuries.

He asked me if that was the war fought in Europe in 1870, confusing it with the Franco-Prussian War.

The conversation became rather disappointing from then on.

A lay person would naturally expect that an educated officer in any army would have given some thought to the role of an army in its country and the world and learn from the well described successes and failures that abound in history.

Such people, one would think, could offer an insightful comment on a variety of important precedents, such as,

What made Alexander the Great invincible?

The genius of Hannibal and the double envelopment of the Romans, which led to the virtual annihilation of two double consular armies at Cannae.

What made Napoleon admire Frederick the Great of Prussia as much as Caesar?

The genius of Frederick also being found in two great Southern commanders in the American Civil War, Robert E. Lee, and Nathan Bedford - Forrest.

How Napoleon misunderstood the Russian mind and its capacity for suffering, leading to the failure of the invasion of Russia by the Grande Armee, when even Metternich thought it would succeed.

How the tactics of the Allied campaign of the Battle of Amiens in the First World War produced the devastating victory that eluded the Germans in Ludendorff's "Michael" offensive.

How some gambles risk such ruin that they should not be considered, such as the attack by the Japanese on the American fleet at Pearl Harbour. Where one cannot imagine that a tactical victory will lead to a strategic one against a powerful and outraged foe.

How conquering nations have earned the esteem and loyalty of their new subjects, such as the Romans in Gaul, and when a powerful foreign country may earn the friendship and loyalty of neighbouring countries, taking the example of Napoleonic France and Bavaria.

Great men have written their military and political treatises for many centuries. The lessons of the past can aid our current decision making. The list is long and distinguished. Some early works have been lost but have none the less exerted their influence.

A list of such writers would include,

Pyrrhus of Epirus - His writings are lost, but greatly influenced Hannibal, and were still extant in the time of Plutarch.
Hannibal considered Pyrrhus to be the finest commander of an army the world had seen, after Alexander himself.

Ptolemy I of Egypt - His history of Alexander has been lost, but it formed the basis of Arrian's "Anabasis."

Caesar

Vegetius

The Byzantine Emperor Maurice (Strategicon)

The Byzantine Emperor Leo VI (Tactica)

Sun Tzu

Niccolo Machiavelli

Carl Von Clausewitz

Heinz Guderian

Erwin Rommel

General J.F.C. Fuller

Winston Churchill.

The final point to make is that the age of some of these sources does not decrease their value. The tactical genius evident in these works remains valid when one adapts the principles of tactical theory to changes in weaponry. Strategic and political aspects of these works would require minimal adaptation to suit a modern age.

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