

Military education and the study of War

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The education of officers has attracted considerable attention in recent times, especially as Western armies have moved inexorably towards the all-volunteer military as the basis of their organisations. American failure in Vietnam placed renewed emphasis on notions of military professionalism, and at the same time drew attention to the decline in the serious study of war within the US armed forces. As part of this renewed attention to war and its nature, the forces directed their gaze once again to history, and to military history in particular. The argument advanced was that the US Army's higher schooling system had turned away from the study of history in the course of the 1950s, such that in the 1960s the Army had consequently paid the price for 'the neglect of the lessons of the past'. The Army's Ad Hoc Committee on the Need for the Study of Military History found in 1971 that less attention was paid to military history in the service schools than at any time since before the Second World War. The introduction of a 'progressive co-ordinated history program' at all levels of the Army educational system which it recommended was designed to return the Army to its 'traditional reliance upon the experience of history' while restoring the spirit of professionalism and sense of mission which Vietnam had eroded so badly.

A concern with the proper way to prepare officers for their responsibilities is not a recent phenomenon, although ideas about professionalism unrelated to social class and requiring the mastery of a specified body of knowledge are mostly the result of modern technology. With some notable exceptions among the Romans and Byzantines, the writing, dissemination and organised study of military-theoretical and military-historical texts is a product of the 18th century, with its Enlightenment emphasis upon the organised study of all fields of endeavour and of every kind of phenomena. Military academies, attendance at which became a requirement for commissioning in the 19th century, have their foundations likewise in the 18th century although the educations imparted there were often haphazard at best – which helps to explain the Duke of Wellington's observation that all military education was nonsense.

Formal training in the art of war for those destined for higher command and staff functions paralleled the development of higher staff organisations in Europe – especially Prussia-Germany – while in the Anglo-Saxon militaries – the United States and Britain especially – the reform of organisations and institutions which followed unimpressive military performances against Spain or the Boer Republics brought with it reform in the training and education of the middle and upper ranks. While in retrospect the lonely struggle of British military intellectuals like G.F.R. Henderson at Camberley to persuade the British Army to take the study of war seriously bore fruit

between 1914-18, it was equally true, in the words of a former Commandant and subsequent Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, that in the 19th century institutions like Camberley were noted principally for the sense of 'mutual agreement and excellent comradeship' which they imparted. In the United States, the Old Army of the Progressive Era understood that good looks, a private income and access to a decent tailor were no longer sufficient attributes of military leadership: 'To be a good general now requires not only talent', wrote one such, 'but special training', while another observed in 1909 that

"The high (and ever-essential) attributes of physical and moral courage, coolness, power of quick and correct thought and action, patriotism and zeal, no longer suffice to make the perfect military leader, but must be supplemented by careful training in the many branches of human knowledge which are not used in every feature of the profession of arms. The army officer of the present day should differ as much from his predecessor of fifty years ago as a locomotive differs from a stage-coach, or a magazine rifle from a flint-lock musket."

Matthew Forney Steele, author of the first serious military text produced specifically for use in an American military context – *American Campaigns* (1909) – and convinced by Prussian performance in 1870-71 of the virtue of sustained peacetime training, concluded that 'skillful and efficient men in the military profession, like the skillful and efficient man in any other profession, must know the theory and practice of his profession'.

Belief in the importance of formal education for military professionals was not, then, a new idea in the 1970s, however much the officers concerned may have demonstrated another trait of military organisations the world over – the capacity to reinvent the wheel. What is of use to us here is to see where the Americans felt they lost their way, and why.

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the potential for nuclear warfare which that act ushered in changed everything – and precisely nothing. In 1946 the distinguished American social scientist Bernard Brodie wrote that the invention of the atomic bomb rendered all military history effectively worthless (more recently I have heard a former deputy Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff make a similarly extravagant claim on behalf of the so-called new Revolution in Military Affairs). Brodie was too honest a thinker, and too good an historian, to maintain that line for very long, but a spirit of technological determinism pervaded the US military throughout the 1950s and 1960s as it did the wider American society. Under Eisenhower traditional force structures and thinking about strategy gave way to the 'New Look', which might be characterised as 'nukes with everything' – to be modern was to be nuclear capable, and to be nuclear capable helped to maintain each service's share of the Defence budget, or in the Army's case at least staved off the worst depredations of the other two services.

Over the top of this sort of thinking was added the malign influence of Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defence between 1961-68. McNamara was brought from the Ford Motor Company by Kennedy to help rationalise the defence budgetary processes, a task in which he had considerable success through the use of various systems analysis principles whose application to business he and others had pioneered at Ford after the Second World War. In the history of the Ford Corporation McNamara is often credited with overseeing the development of the Mustang,

arguably the most successful vehicle that company ever manufactured; it is worth remembering, therefore, that Ford also produced the Edsel in his time. The critical problem was that McNamara and some of the so-called 'whiz kids' he appointed to important civilian positions around him believed that quantification (in its most sophisticated forms, naturally) held the key to success in war. Any historian who has worked in the military staff papers analysing operational problems in Vietnam will have wondered at the ten pages of objective common sense which laid out the problem and discussed solutions to it, followed by up to fifty pages of mathematical modeling used to 'validate' the solutions proffered.

Bernard Brodie identified the shortcomings of such an approach lucidly. Systems analysis, he wrote,

"is devoted primarily to the comparison of systems intended to accomplish the same or similar missions. It is good for comparing two kinds of bombers or two kinds of missiles. It is not as good at comparing missiles with bombers. It is of no use for telling us whether the mission intended for either the bomber or missile is worth the effort being put into it or worth doing at all. The question of ends is usually a much more important question than that of optimum means, and the systems analyst is not only without special equipment for handling the latter but may even be negatively equipped, that is, he may have a trained incapacity for giving due weight to political or social imponderables."

A shortcoming, he warns, that may affect the military officer too (a point to which we shall return). The problem of inappropriate application of intellectual methods is equally well demonstrated in the following story. A seminar convened by RAND early in the 1960s heard a number of papers on refinements in quantitative analysis of the kind that would become so familiar in official Washington during the Vietnam War. At its conclusion, an eager young participant leapt to his feet and declared that the implications of the methodology were so profound that it should not be wasted on such minor applications as seeking to regulate the flow of traffic over the George Washington Bridge, but should immediately be applied to the complex foreign policy issues then facing the new Kennedy administration. The chairman, a senior official at RAND, responded kindly that indeed, quantitative analysis was best applied to regulating the traffic over the George Washington Bridge, but we must conclude that Robert McNamara wasn't in the audience that day.

It is a commonplace observation that after the defeat in Vietnam the Americans effectively rebuilt their military, a step that coincided with, indeed was in part necessitated by, the shift from conscription to the all-volunteer military. The most important elements of this rebuilding were a renewed and intensified emphasis upon professionalism, and a return to fundamentals in military education. The two, obviously, are closely linked. The bridge, as it were, was fashioned from the study of military history. No longer distracted by social science modelling or courses in business administration, the Americans sought to reground the education of their officers in the history of their profession and its principal activity, war. (It is worth noting in passing that in 1971, when the curriculum at the Command and Staff College at Leavenworth was revised along these lines, none of the instructors had graduate degrees in history, a situation that had been substantially modified by the end of that decade. It may also be worth noting, in passing again, that General

Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam between 1964-68, had attended the Harvard Business School in the 1950s.)

A former Chief of the General Staff in Australia, a trained and published military historian as well as career regular officer, has argued that officers need three qualities: physical courage, moral courage (a rarer commodity than the first) and a well-honed intellect, and that the further up the chain he or she rises the more important the third factor becomes. This reflects the demands made on them in peacetime, and even more so in war. As a retired Marine Corps officer, Major General J. Michael Myatt, has observed recently, 'first and foremost we must recognize that warfare is an intellectual endeavour because combat is between thinking adversaries, each trying to gain an advantage over the other'. Added to this, armed forces need to cultivate a collective and institutional memory, one of the major failings identified in the US services during the Vietnam War (and, one might add, in the State Department as well). The balance of relations between 'warriors' and 'managers' within a national military is always a difficult one, but few can doubt that in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s it had become seriously unbalanced.

I believe there are several propositions that are essential in linking the education of officers with the serious study of war and the military. The first is that military education must be firmly grounded in the humanities, because war is a human activity. The experience of a former student of mine helps underpin this: as a young captain he went to Cambodia in 1992-93 as ADC to the UN force commander, Major General Sanderson. Previously, during the fourth year of his degree (he majored in English and History), he wrote his thesis on political imagery in Jacobean writing for the stage. A fairly arcane topic, and I have no doubt that at the time the career management officers in Army Office must have rolled their eyes at it. As ADC to the senior UN commander he frequently interacted with the Cambodian political and social elite, assessing their views and passing on comments to his superior. In Cambodia, recent history and political culture dictate that much is left unsaid, alluded to indirectly, or discussed when not specifically mentioned. Much the same could be said of public discourse at the Jacobean court, with its intrigues, religious suspicions and accusation of treason all part of the politics of the day. His immersion in one form of indirect political commentary in the 17th century in fact proved excellent preparation for dealing with another, real-world circumstance.

Chief among the humanities in the preparation of officers is history and, because of the subject matter, largely though not exclusively military history. The US Army's own instructions on this state that a soldier will improve his understanding of war through study of 'the historical record of change in military methods'. Military history, accordingly, 'is nothing more or less than the records of trial and error on which today's principles and methods are based'. While I would want to argue for a broader definition and understanding of military history and its purposes, this does at least acknowledge the need that soldiers often express for immediate utility – for relevance. The 19th century British military critic, Spenser Wilkinson, put it slightly more broadly when he noted, in that famous book *The Brain of an Army* (1913) that military history was 'the most effective means of teaching war during peace' (and in this he reflected that other seminal critic and commentator, Major General J.F. Maurice, who wrote that 'there does not exist, and never has existed . . . an "art of war" which was something other than the methodic study of military history').

Make no mistake, history is not a 'magic bullet', it provides no automatic understanding of complex situations in either the past or the present, much less the future. This is often maddening for soldiers and politicians alike, who believe that if historians have a use at all it is precisely in order to provide some guide to future action. As Michael Howard has wittily observed, instead of a clear and unambiguous way forward, in seeking the guidance of historians the soldier finds instead

“workmen busily engaged in tearing up what he had regarded as a perfectly decent highway; doing their best to discourage him from proceeding along it at all; and warning him, if he does, that the surface is temporary, that they have no idea when it will be completed, nor where it leads, and that he proceeds at his own risk.”

History rarely provides 'school solutions' of the kind with which soldiers are often most comfortable. But former students of mine who have returned recently from service with INTERFET in East Timor have told me that the courses they took in Australian military history or the history of insurgency in post-war Southeast Asia were of great general benefit to them in understanding what they encountered there, even though none of them had studied the history of East Timor specifically.

It is the capacity to deal with specific circumstances through relating them to a general framework previously acquired which is the most important skill we can impart to the future leaders of our armed forces. The corporate world knows that it is relatively straightforward to impart specific knowledge and skills through intensive short-course training methods, especially when these are keyed to the tasks for which they will be needed. It is very much harder to teach people to think, much less to think creatively. That capacity to think, to sift and weigh evidence and form conclusions is probably the single greatest benefit of the humane and liberal education which is the best grounding for the serious study of war. It can never begin too early. And it never stops.

Spenser Wilkinson noted one of the ironies of military education. 'The intellectual advancement of officers of every army', he wrote

“is confronted by a peculiar difficulty. The foundations of all military institutions are authority and obedience – principles which appear to be directly opposed to the free movement of intelligence. Every army is constantly in danger of decay from mental stagnation. Free criticism is liable to undermine discipline, and the habit of unconditional obedience too often destroys the independence of judgement without which moral and intellectual progress is impossible.”

The key, he believed, was to organise the armed forces in such a way that they became 'an institution for the advancement of learning'. The Australian Army currently talks about the need to 'fight smart' in order to maximise qualitative advantages in the face of quantitative disadvantages. As the world becomes more complex in the aftermath of the Cold War's end, and with war unlikely to disappear as a means of regulating relations between nation states and sub-national groupings, the rigorous and continuing study of war remains the basis of the professional education of our officer corps. We must provide them with the means, the opportunity, and the encouragement to do so.