

Military History: Is It Still Practicable?

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There was a day, before the advent of the A-bomb and its more destructive offspring, before smart bombs and nerve gas, before computer technology and war games, when professional soldiers regarded reading history as a useful pastime. Many who have scaled the peaks of the military profession have testified to the utility of studying military history.

Most of these, however, seem to be commanding voices out of the past. MacArthur, steeped in family tradition and familiar with many of the 4000 volumes inherited from his father, was never at a loss for a historical example to underscore his point of view; Krueger, as a young officer, translated books and articles from the German military literature; Eisenhower spent countless hours listening to the erudite Fox Conner on what could be learned from military history; Marshall and his contemporaries at the Army Staff College at Leavenworth reconstructed Civil War campaigns from the after-action reports; Patton took the time in 1943 to read a book on the Norman conquest of Sicily nearly nine centuries earlier and to ponder “the many points in common with our operations”; and Eichelberger summoned from memory a passage he had read ten years before in Grant’s *Memoirs* (which ought to be required reading for all officers) and thereby stiffened his resolve to press home the attack at Buna. These Army commanders were all remarkably well versed in history.

So were many of their civilian superiors. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was an avid reader of naval history, and Harry Truman frequently acknowledged the pertinent lessons that he had gleaned from a lifetime of exposure to history:

Reading history, to me, was far more than a romantic adventure. It was solid instruction and wise teaching which I somehow felt that I . . . needed. . . . It seemed to me that if I could understand the true facts about the . . . development of the

United States Government and could know the details of the lives of . . . its political leaders, I would be getting for myself a valuable . . . education. . . . I know of no surer way to get a solid foundation in political science and public administration than to study the histories of past administrations of the world's most successful system of government.

Because the military is a "practical" profession geared much of the time to problem-solving, soldiers—like engineers and scientists—tend to be pragmatic about what is meant by the word "practicable." History is "practicable" if it yields lessons, especially exemplary lessons in tactics and strategy that can be directly applied to some current situation. History is "useful" in illustrating points of doctrine, in instilling in the young officer the proper military values or an appreciation for our military heritage. The "practical" man often scans the past for some magical formula that may ensure success in war, like Field Marshall von Schlieffen's theory of envelopment, or Captain B. H. Liddell Hart's strategy of indirect approach.

Such assumptions inevitably determine the way military history is taught. Because an important duty of the officer in peacetime is to teach, and because in the Army *teaching* usually involves *explaining*, it is often assumed that history, to be taught, must be explained. The emphasis therefore is on organizing and presenting information in a lucid, often lavishly illustrated lecture, in which tidy answers outrank nagging questions in the minds of everyone involved. The inference on the part of most students, if not the instructor, is that a person who remembers the lecture will somehow have learned history. It's a mistaken assumption we all make.

It is also true that no other field of history is under as much pressure as military history to provide "practical" answers to some current problem. If military history cannot provide such answers, why study it? The specialist in Renaissance diplomacy is rarely solicited for his views on foreign policy but, rather, is left alone to concentrate his thoughts on the cold war with the Turks in the 15th century. Nor is the scholar who has spent a lifetime studying the ramifications of the French Revolution apt to be consulted when news breaks of still another palace coup in some Latin-American banana republic. But let a historian or journalist prowl around in some remote corner in the field of military history and often he will be expected, even tempted, to function as a current-affairs military analyst.

Perhaps we think this way because, as a society, we are largely ignorant about both the facts and the nature of history. In high school, European History no longer is required, having been replaced by something called

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“Western Civilization.” We know astonishingly little about the history of other societies, and most of us, unfortunately, care even less. Students voting with their feet in colleges and universities across the nation have caused enrollments in history courses to plummet as they turn to “more practical” subjects such as economics, psychology, biology, engineering, and business administration. In the Army’s schools, history has become a casualty of the Vietnam War; clearly the emphasis now is upon training. Even at the Military Academy, the required course in the military art was severely curtailed several years ago and only recently has been restored to its logical place in the curriculum. For that matter, how many officers who have invested off-duty hours to work toward an advanced degree have taken it in history? In the officer corps of today, the subject is rarely considered “practicable.”

More to the point, is the Army as an institution as historical-minded as it was in the past? For without even a rudimentary understanding of history and its processes, there is no way that the past can be made to offer object lessons for the future. Professor Pieter Geyl, a distinguished Dutch historian, reminds us that it is useless to talk about “the lessons of history” when the historian “is after all only a man sitting at his desk.” The lessons that we would learn are his—the fruits of *his* labors, the creation of *his* imagination, perhaps the idea that *he* is to sell to the reader. For, as a German general asserted a hundred years ago, “it is well known that military history, when superficially studied, will furnish arguments in support of any theory or opinion.”

Common Fallacies

Perhaps the most frequent error in the abuse of history is to take historical examples out of context. Once removed from its historical context, which is always unique, a battle or a campaign ceases to offer meaningful lessons from history. According to Napoleon, “old Frederick laughed in his sleeve at the parades of Potsdam when he perceived young officers, French, English, and Austrian so infatuated with the manoeuvre of the oblique order, which (in itself) was fit for nothing but to gain a few adjutant-majors a reputation.” Napoleon appreciated that the secret of Frederick’s successes was not the oblique order, but Frederick. “Genius acts through inspiration,” Napoleon concluded. “What is good in one case is bad in another.”

One of Frederick’s own soldiers demonstrated that in another environment even Frederick’s maneuvers might fail. When Baron von Steuben, who had served in the Prussian army throughout the Seven Years’ War, was trying to make soldiers out of Washington’s shivering, half-starved volunteers at Valley Forge, he knew better than to waste precious time teaching those complex maneuvers he had mastered under Frederick. Instead he selected only those that were essential to meet the unique conditions that prevailed in America, where volunteers had only a few months instead of years to master the intricacies of Frederick’s drill, and where officers had to learn to lead by

example instead of relying upon the severity of the Prussian system. Soldiers, Frederick repeatedly had warned, “can be held in check only through fear” and should therefore be made to “fear their officers more than all the dangers to which they are exposed. . . . Good will can never induce the common soldier to stand up to such dangers; he will only do so through fear.” Whatever may have motivated Washington’s amateur soldiers at Valley Forge, most certainly it was not fear.

If there is a lesson here for us, it is simply that solutions to problems are not to be viewed as interchangeable parts. Even the Germans in World War II apparently failed to heed this lesson in drawing conclusions from their own war experiences. In addition to displaying a tendency to generalize from personal or limited experience, they often indiscriminately applied the experiences of one situation to entirely different circumstances. Thus the German Supreme Command “applied the experiences acquired on the Western Front in 1940, unchanged, to the war against Russia” despite the “greater tenacity” of the Russian soldier, his “insensibility against threatening the flanks,” the scarcity of roads, and the vast space involved “giving . . . the opponent the possibility of avoiding decision.” In the words of one German general, not only did this misapplication of experience influence the operational plan against Russia, it also “contributed to the final disappointment.”

It is also a distortion to compress the past into distinctive patterns, for it is as true of history as it is of nature that “each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.” History responds generously to the adage “seek and ye shall find.” At the turn of the century the Chief of the German General Staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, was faced with the need to plan for a war on two fronts. His solution was to point toward a quick victory on one front in order to avoid ultimate defeat on both, and his inspiration for the battle of annihilation essential to a quick victory came, at least in part, from reading the first volume of Hans Delbrück’s *Geschichte der Kriegskunst*, which was published in 1900. Delbrück’s treatment of the battle of Cannae in 216 B.C. convinced Schlieffen that Hannibal had won his lopsided victory by deliberately weakening his center and attacking with full force from both flanks. The much publicized Schlieffen Plan was an adaptation of this idea. Having thus discovered the “key,” Schlieffen turned in his writings to the idea of envelopment to unlock the secrets of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, both of whom, he claimed, had always attempted to envelop the enemy. Similarly, Captain B. H. Liddell Hart was to discover from his research for a biography of Sherman that the key to Sherman’s success lay in a strategy of indirect approach. When he turned to history at large for confirmation, of course he “discovered” that nearly all successful generals, whether they had been aware of it or not, had employed something akin to the strategy of indirect approach. The future British field marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, who always found Liddell Hart’s ideas stimulating whether he agreed with them or not,

once slyly suggested to the captain: "With your knowledge and brains and command of the pen, you could have written just as convincing a book called the 'Strategy of the Direct Approach.'" Wavell appreciated that it was Liddell Hart and not the muse of history who preached this attractive doctrine.

Moreover, nothing is necessarily proven by citing examples from history. There are many works on military theory that provide examples of bad argument from analogy or authority; such faulty use of historical examples, according to Karl von Clausewitz, "not only leaves the reader dissatisfied but even irritates his intelligence." The mere citation of historical examples provides only the *semblance* of proof, although the reader who understands little about the nature of history may set aside his book convinced of the essential truth of some new theory, and the audience exposed to a well-organized and seemingly cogent lecture sprinkled with examples from history is equally vulnerable. "There are occasions," Clausewitz noted,

where nothing will be proven by a dozen examples. . . . If anyone lists a dozen defeats in which the losing side attacked with divided columns, I can list a dozen victories in which that very tactic was employed. Obviously this is no way to reach a conclusion.

And if the author or lecturer has never mastered the events he describes, "such superficial, irresponsible handling of history leads to hundreds of wrong ideas and bogus theorizing."

Perhaps the greatest disservice to history and its lessons comes from its frequent association with a given set of military principles or doctrine, and here the celebrated Swiss theorist Baron de Jomini may have had an unfortunate influence. Drawing upon an exhaustive examination of 30 campaigns of Frederick and Napoleon, Jomini deduced certain fixed maxims and principles which he claimed were both eternal and universal in their application. If such maxims would not produce great generals they would "at least make generals sufficiently skillful to hold the second rank among the great captains" and would thus serve as "the true schools for generals."

To future generations of young officers, Jomini said, in effect: "Gentlemen, I have not found a single instance where my principles, correctly applied, did not lead to success. They are based upon my unrivaled knowledge of the campaigns of Napoleon, much of it acquired at first hand, and of the basic works of Thiers, Napier, Lloyd, Tempelhof, Foy, and the Archduke Charles. Thanks to my labors you need not invest years of your own time in scrutinizing these voluminous histories. Did not Napoleon himself confess: 'I have studied history a great deal, and often, for want of a guide, have been forced to lose considerable time in useless reading'? You have only to study my principles and apply them faithfully, for 'there exists a fundamental principle of all the operations of war' which you neglect at your peril."

Jomini had many prominent disciples, and their books were nearly all written on the assumption that battles and campaigns, ancient as well as modern, have succeeded or failed to the degree that they adhered to the principles of war as explained by Jomini and could be confirmed by the “constant teachings of history.” But where Jomini read history, many of his followers read primarily Jomini and thus were one step removed from history and its processes.

The emergence of doctrine (as late as the American Civil War there were only drill manuals) and the introduction of historical sections on most European general staffs after the Prussian victories in 1866 and 1870 meant that increasingly, in the eyes of professional soldiers at least, military history was linked to doctrine and, more specifically, to the principles of war as these principles were rediscovered and refined. Since World War I it has become fashionable to use history to illustrate the official principles of war as they are variously defined.

There are three dangers inherent in this approach. In the first place, pressed into service in this way history can only *illustrate* something already perceived as being true; it cannot prove its validity or lead to new discoveries. This is probably the terrain on which most soldiers first encounter the subject, and they would do well to heed the warning of Clausewitz that if “some historical event is being presented in order to demonstrate a general truth, care must be taken that every aspect bearing on the truth at issue is fully and circumstantially developed—carefully assembled . . . before the reader’s eyes.” In other words, the theorist ought to be a pretty good historian. Clausewitz goes so far as to suggest that, even though historical examples have the advantage of “being more realistic and of bringing the idea they are illustrating to life,” if the purpose of history is really to explain doctrine, “an imaginary case would do as well.” Moreover, to use history primarily to illustrate accepted principles is really to put the cart before the horse. If one starts with what is perceived as truth and searches history for confirmation or illustrations, there can be no “lessons learned.” How can there be?

A second weakness in linking history to doctrine is the natural tendency to let doctrine sit in judgment of historical events. Sir William Napier, who had a healthy respect for Jomini’s theories, used his maxims as a basis for rendering historical judgment on the generalship of French and British leaders in his classic *History of the War in the Peninsula*. Similarly, Major General Sir Patrick MacDougall “discovered” that these maxims could also serve as criteria for judging the generalship of Hannibal, and Matthew F. Steele’s *American Campaigns*, which was published in 1909 and endured as a text at the Military Academy and other Army schools even beyond World War II, used the maxims of Jomini, von der Goltz, and other late-19th-century theorists to form the basis for historical commentary on the generalship of individual American commanders.

Most serious of all is the ease and frequency with which faith in doctrine has actually distorted history. This was happening frequently by the end of the 19th century as each army in Europe developed and became committed to its own doctrine. It is the primary reason why the tactical and strategical lessons of the Civil War, which in many respects was the first modern war, went unheeded. Even the elaborate German General Staff histories on the wars of Frederick the Great and the wars of liberation against Napoleon never failed to drive home the soundness of current German doctrine, and the German official histories of the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War similarly serve to demonstrate above all else the continuing validity of German doctrine. The Boers had applied that doctrine and therefore usually won, at least in the earlier battles before the weight of numbers alone could determine the outcome. British doctrine was faulty, if indeed the British yet had a doctrine, and therefore the British suffered repeated defeats. The Germans had trained the Japanese army and the Japanese had won in 1904-05, "proving" again the superiority of German doctrine. Had a trained historian instead of an officer serving a tour with the Military History Section analyzed the same campaigns, surely he would have asked some searching questions about the differences in the discipline, morale, and leadership of the two armies. Did the Japanese cavalry win, for example, because of superior doctrine based on shock tactics or because it was better disciplined and led? To the officer corps of the day, the results demonstrated the weakness of the Russian army's mounted infantry concepts in the face of shock tactics, whereas ten years later, in a war that, at the outset, was strikingly similar in the conditions prevailing on the battlefield, shock tactics did not prevail anywhere for long.

Thus military history distilled by Jomini and his disciples ultimately found itself shaped by a commitment to doctrine, and the instinct of most professional soldiers before World War I was to explain away exceptions to the official rules rather than to use history as a means of testing and refining them.

Facts in History

Although it is not always evident in a lecture or a textbook, we can never be completely certain—and therefore in agreement—about what actually happened in history. Frederick and Napoleon knew this well. Skeptical both of the historian's motives and of the reliability of his facts, they evinced a healthy skepticism about the ability of the human mind ever to recreate an event as it actually had happened.

"The true truths are very difficult to ascertain," Napoleon complained. "There are so many truths!"

Historical fact . . . is often a mere word; it cannot be ascertained when events actually occur, in the heat of contrary passions; and if, later on, there is a

consensus, this is only because there is no one left to contradict. . . . What is . . . historical truth? . . . An agreed upon fiction. . . . There are facts that remain in eternal litigation.

A Union staff officer whose corps bore the brunt of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg put it a different way:

A full account *of the battle as it was* will never, can never, be made. Who could sketch the charges, the constant fighting of the bloody panorama! It is not possible. The official reports may give results as to losses, with statements of attacks and repulses; they may also note the means by which results were attained . . . but the connection between means and results, the mode, the battle proper, these reports touch lightly. Two prominent reasons . . . account for the general inadequacy of these official reports . . . the literary infirmity of the reporters, and their not seeing themselves and their commands as others would have seen them. And factions, and parties, and politics . . . are already putting in their unreasonable demands. . . . Of this battle greater than Waterloo, a history, just, comprehensive, complete, will never be written. By-and-by, out of the chaos of trash and falsehood that newspapers hold, out of the disjointed mass of reports, out of the traditions and tales that come down from the field, some eye that never saw the battle will select, and some pen will write what will be named the history. With that the world will be, and if we are alive we must be, content.

This writer intuitively understood that as soon as the historian begins to impose order on something as chaotic as a battle, he distorts. If his narrative is to mean anything at all to the reader he must simplify and organize the "disjointed mass of reports." He must, for lack of space, omit incidents that did not contribute to the final result. He must resolve controversies, not merely report them, and he must recognize that not every general is candid, every report complete, every description accurate. Orders are not always executed; not every order is even relevant to the situation. At Gettysburg, the watches in the two armies were set 20 minutes apart, and after the battle Lee had some of his subordinates rewrite their after-action reports to avoid unnecessary dissension. Well may it be said that "on the actual day of battle naked truths may be picked up for the asking; by the following morning they have already begun to get into their uniforms."

During World War I, German General Max Hoffman confided to his diary: "For the first time in my life I have . . . seen 'History' at close quarters, and I know that its actual process is very different from what is presented to posterity." *Plutarch Lied* is the descriptive title of an impassioned indictment of the French military leadership on the other side of no-man's land:

Men who yesterday seemed destined to oblivion have, today, acquired immortality. Has some new virtue been instilled in them, has some magician touched them with his wand? . . . Civilian historians have studied historical events from a point of view which is exclusively military. Far from trusting to their own judgment, they have not considered it respectful to exercise their critical facul-

ties on the facts as guaranteed by a body of specialists. An idolatrous admiration for everything which concerns the army has conferred upon them the favour of having eyes which do not see and memories which are oblivious of their own experiences. . . . An incredible conspiracy exists in France at this very moment. No one dares to write the truth.

Even with the best of intentions and an impartial mind, it is difficult to reconstruct what actually happened in history. This truth was given eloquent expression by a French pilot on a reconnaissance flight to Arras in May 1940 as he reflected on the chaos engulfing a dying society 30,000 feet below.

Ah, the blueprint that historians will draft of all this! The angles they will plot to lend shape to this mess! They will take the word of a cabinet minister, the decision of a general, the discussion of a committee, and out of that parade of ghosts they will build historic conversations in which they will discern far-sighted views and weighty responsibilities. They will invent agreements, resistances, attitudinous pleas, cowardices. . . . Historians will forget reality. They will invent thinking men, joined by mysterious fibers to an intelligible universe, possessed of sound far-sighted views and pondering grave decisions according to the purest laws of Cartesian logic.

Even where there can be agreement on facts, there will be disagreements among historians. "To expect from history those final conclusions which may perhaps be obtained in other disciplines is . . . to misunderstand its nature." Something akin to the scientific method helps to establish facts, but the function of the historian is also to explain, to interpret, and to discriminate, and here "the personal element can no longer be ruled out. . . . Truth, though for God it may be One, assumes many shapes to men."

This explains the oft-quoted statement of Henry Adams, the famous American historian: "I have written too much history to believe in it. So if anyone wants to differ from me, I am prepared to agree with him." Only one who understands something about history could possibly know what Adams meant by this apparently cynical statement. Certainly he did not intend to imply that history, because it lacked unerring objectivity and precision, is of no practicable use to us. Quite the contrary. To recognize the frail structure of history is the first essential step toward understanding, which is far more important in putting history to work than blind faith in the validity of isolated facts. History tends to inspire more questions than answers, and the questions one asks of it determine the extent to which the subject may be considered practicable.

Making History Instructive

What, then, can the professional soldier expect to learn from history? If it can offer no abstract lessons to be applied indiscriminately or universally, if it cannot substantiate some cherished principles or official doctrine, if the

subject itself is liable to endless bickering and interpretation, what is the point of looking at history at all?

Here Napoleon, whose writings and campaigns formed the basis of study for every principal military theorist for a hundred years after his death, provides a useful answer in his first major campaign. When he assumed command of the French army in Italy in 1796, he took with him a history of a campaign conducted in the same theater by Marshal Maillebois half a century before, and more than one authority has noted the similarity in the two campaigns. "In both cases the object was to separate the allies and beat them in detail; in both cases the same passes through the maritime Alps were utilized, and in both cases the first objectives were the same." In 1806, when he sent his cavalry commander, Murat, to reconnoiter the Bohemian frontier, he recommended that Murat take with him a history of the campaign that the French had waged there in 1741, and three years later Napoleon approved the location of pontoon bridges at Linz because Marshal Saxe had successfully constructed two bridges there in 1740. In 1813 he sent one of his marshals "an account of the battle fought by Gustavus Adolphus in positions similar to those which you occupy."

Obviously history served Napoleon not so much because it provided a model to be slavishly followed, but because it offered ways to capitalize on what others before him had experienced. History, Liddell Hart reminds us,

is universal experience—ininitely longer, wider, and more varied than any individual's experience. How often do we hear people claim knowledge of the world and of life because they are sixty or seventy years old? . . . There is no excuse for any literate person if he is less than three thousand years old in mind.

By this standard Patton was at least 900 years old after studying the Norman conquest of Sicily.

Napoleon also proposed, in 1807, the establishment of a special school of history at the College of France that would have practical application for officers. Trained historians would teach the military student how to make sound historical judgments, for Napoleon understood that "the correct way to read history is a real science in itself." He regarded the wars of the French Revolution as "fertile in useful lessons," yet apparently there had been no systematic effort to retrieve them. This too "would be an important function of the professors in the special school of history." For similar reasons Napoleon ordered his War Minister in 1811 to have the Depot of War prepare comprehensive records of the sieges and attacks of the fortified towns captured by the French armies in Germany, not for publication but for ready reference. And he did not discourage the printing of a similar volume on the sieges in Spain.

Napoleon thus conceived of history as serving a purpose similar to that of the publications of the Old Historical Division and its ultimate successor, the Center of Military History. He would have applauded the appearance of the *Guide to the Study and Use of Military History*, for some way had to be

found to steer the military student through the “veritable labyrinth” of campaign studies, technical treatises, and memoirs. Like Frederick, who viewed history as “a magazine of military ideas,” Napoleon would have been delighted with the official histories of the campaigns of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and with the extensive monographs on specialized subjects such as mobilization, logistics, and medical services.

On St. Helena Napoleon spoke of the need to publish manuscripts in the Imperial Library as a way of establishing a solid foundation for historical studies. Probably one of the first proposals of its kind, it anticipated by half a century the decision of the US War Department to publish in 128 meaty volumes *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, a unique compilation of the after-action reports and official correspondence of Union and Confederate leaders. Napoleon also gave the first impetus to official military history when he created a historical section of the General Staff and named Baron Jomini to head it.

His most enduring suggestion, however, was the deathbed advice he offered to his son: “Let him read and meditate upon the wars of the great captains: it is the only way to learn the art of war.”

Because Napoleon occasionally mentioned certain “principles of the art of war,” he is often thought to have meant that the study of the Great Captains is valuable because it leads to the discovery of enduring principles or illustrates their successful application in the hands of genius. While acknowledging that these Great Captains had “succeeded only by conforming to the principles” and thus had made war “a true science,” Napoleon offered more compelling reasons for studying the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, and Frederick:

Tactics, the evolutions, the science of the engineer and the artillerist can be learned in treatises much like geometry, but the knowledge of the higher spheres of war is only acquired through the study of the wars and battles of the Great Captains and by experience. It has no precise, fixed rules. Everything depends on the character that nature has given to the general, on his qualities, on his faults, on the nature of the troops, on the range of weapons, on the season and on a thousand circumstances which are never the same.

The Great Captains must therefore serve as “our great models.” Only by imitating them, by understanding the bases for their decisions, and by studying the reasons for their success could modern officers “hope to approach them.”

Napoleon agreed with Frederick, who considered history “the school of princes”—princes, that is, who are destined to command armies—and who wrote his own candid memoirs in order that his successors might know “the true situation of affairs . . . the reasons that impelled me to act; what were my means, what the snares of our enemies” so that they might benefit from his own mistakes

“in order to shun them.” And both would have endorsed Liddell Hart’s observation that “history is a catalogue of mistakes. It is our duty to profit by them.”

Whereas Jomini concentrated upon maxims, Frederick and Napoleon focused their attention on men. They stressed the need for a commander to view a military situation from the vantage point of his opponent, and for the military student to become privy to the thinking process of successful commanders. This was the advice Prince Eugene, Marlborough’s sidekick and the greatest commander who ever served the Hapsburgs, gave to young Frederick when, as the heir to the Prussian throne, Frederick accompanied the Prussian contingent serving with the Imperial Army along the Rhine in 1734. After he had become the foremost general of his day, Frederick urged his own officers, when studying the campaigns of Prince Eugene, not to be content merely to memorize the details of his exploits but “to examine thoroughly his overall views and particularly *to learn how to think in the same way.*”

This is still the best way to make military history practicable. “The purpose of history,” Patton wrote shortly before his death,

is to learn how human beings react when exposed to the danger of wounds or death, and how high ranking individuals react when submitted to the onerous responsibility of conducting war or the preparations for war. The acquisition of knowledge concerning the dates or places on which certain events transpired is immaterial. . . .

The future field marshal Earl Wavell gave similar advice to a class at the British Staff College shortly before World War II:

The real way to get value out of the study of military history is to take particular situations, and as far as possible get inside the skin of the man who made a decision and then see in what way you could have improved upon it.

“For heaven’s sake,” Wavell warned,

don’t treat the so-called principles of war as holy writ, like the Ten Commandments, to be learned by heart, and as having by their repetition some magic, like the incantations of savage priests. They are merely a set of common sense maxims, like “cut your coat according to your cloth,” “a rolling stone gathers no moss,” “honesty is the best policy,” and so forth.

Merely to memorize the maxim “cut your coat according to your cloth” does not instruct one how to be a tailor, and Wavell reminded his listeners that no two theorists espoused exactly the same set of principles, which, he contended, “are all simply common sense and . . . instinctive to the properly trained soldier.”

To learn that Napoleon in 1796 with 20,000 men beat combined forces of 30,000 by something called “economy of force” or “operating on interior lines” is a mere waste of time. If you can understand *how* a young, unknown man inspired

a half-starved, ragged, rather Bolshie crowd; how he filled their bellies, how he out-marched, outwitted, out-bluffed, and defeated men who had studied war all their lives and waged it according to the text books of the time, you will have learnt something worth knowing.

But the soldier will not learn it from military texts.

Sometimes military history is treated, in books and lectures alike, as though it exists primarily for the future field commander. Frederick might have assumed something of the sort in his own writings, but he wrote more about such practical subjects as feeding and drilling an army, the gathering and evaluation of intelligence, and how to treat friendly and hostile populations than he did about strategy. Likewise, Napoleon was concerned about military education at every level, and his advice to his son on studying the decisions of the Great Captains should not obscure the fact that he believed strongly in military history in his officers' schools and also as a practical subject for research.

History can be made practicable at any level. The future field marshal Erwin Rommel did not have future corps commanders necessarily in mind when he wrote *Infantry Attacks* in 1937. His lessons, deduced from the experiences of his battalion in World War I, could indeed have been of value to any company or field grade officer. For example, describing the events he witnessed in September 1914, Rommel concluded:

War makes extremely heavy demands on the soldier's strength and nerves. For this reason make heavy demands on your men in peacetime exercises.

It is difficult to maintain contact in fog. . . . Advances through fog by means of a compass must be practiced, since smoke will frequently be employed. In a meeting engagement in the fog, the side capable of developing a maximum fire power on contact will get the upper hand; therefore, keep the machine guns ready for action at all times during the advance.

All units of the group must provide for their own security. This is especially true in close terrain and when faced with a highly mobile enemy.

Too much spade work is better than too little. Sweat saves blood.

Command posts must be dispersed. . . . Do not choose a conspicuous hill for their location .

In forest fighting, the personal example of the commander is effective only on those troops in his immediate vicinity.

The rain favored the attack.

Rommel drew his own conclusions from his experiences, but a discriminating reader could probably have extracted them for himself.

These observations were not lost on Patton, who probably shared similar experiences and had been involved in training troops. During the Saar campaign in early 1945, Patton confided to his diary:

Woke up at 0300 and it was raining like hell. I actually got nervous and got up and read Rommel's book, *Infantry Attacks*. It was most helpful, as he described all the rains he had in September 1914 and *also the fact that, in spite of the heavy rains, the Germans got along*.

And so, shortly, did the Third Army.

Another book of this genre is *Infantry in Battle*, which was prepared at the Infantry School in 1934 under the direction of then Colonel George C. Marshall and revised four years later. Written on the assumption that "combat situations cannot be solved by rule," contributors to this book fell back upon numerous examples from World War I to introduce the reader to "the realities of war and the extremely difficult and highly disconcerting conditions under which tactical problems must be solved in the face of the enemy."

Military history has also been used to test the ability of military students. In 1891 a British colonel published a tactical study of the battle of Spichenen, fought 20 years earlier. In the introduction he explained:

To gain from a relation of events the same abiding impressions as were stamped on the minds of those who played a part in them—and it is such impressions that create instinct—it is necessary to examine the situations developed during the operations so closely as to have a clear picture of the whole scene in our mind's eye; to assume, in imagination, the responsibilities of the leaders who were called upon to meet those situations; to come to a definite decision and to test the soundness of that decision by the actual event.

Learning From History

What Frederick, Napoleon, Rommel, Patton, Wavell, and many others referred to here have shared in common can be summed in one word: *reading*. An English general in the 18th century urged young officers to devote every spare minute to reading military history, "the most instructive of all reading."

"*Books!*" an anonymous old soldier during the Napoleonic wars pretended to snort. "And what are they but the dreams of pedants? They may make a Mack, but have they ever made a Xenophon, a Caesar, a Saxe, a Frederick, or a Bonapart? Who would not laugh to hear the cobbler of Athens lecturing Hannibal on the art of war?"

"True," is his own rejoinder, "but as you are not Hannibal, listen to the cobbler."

Since the great majority of today's officers are college graduates, with a healthy percentage of them having studied for advanced degrees, they have probably long since passed the stage at which they can actually benefit

from a conventional lecture on history, with the emphasis on factual content and the expectation of a clear conclusion. The leading question therefore becomes: How do we teach them to learn from history? J. F. C. Fuller, coauthor of the concept that later became known as *blitzkrieg*, had this problem in mind when he addressed a class at the British Staff College a few years after World War I. “Until you learn how to teach yourselves,” he told the students, “you will never be taught by others.”

Fuller did not specify how this was to be accomplished, but he probably would insist that to teach the officer how to teach himself should be the avowed objective of every course in military history. Certainly he would agree that no course in military history can really do much good if the officer is exposed every half dozen years throughout his career to no more than a structured course of only a few months’ duration, especially if in the process he has gained little understanding of history as a discipline or a scant appreciation for how it can be used and abused. Assuredly such a voracious reader as Fuller—who at age 83 confessed to having recently sold off all of the books in his library that he could not read within the next ten years—would argue that there would be no point to any history course whatever if the student is not stimulated to spend some time afterwards poking around the field a bit on his own. “Books,” Fuller once wrote, “have always been my truest companions.”

Any student of history must learn to identify with the men and events he reads about, seeking above all to understand their problems and to accept the past on its own terms. The student must also learn to ask questions, not of the instructor necessarily, but of his material and especially of himself. Historians usually worry more about asking the right questions than finding definitive answers, for they know from experience that no document or book can answer a question that is never asked. Had Patton read Rommel’s book when the sun was shining, for example, and all was going well, chances are he would never have paid any attention to the casual observation that rain seemed to favor the attack. Cannae was an important battle to Schlieffen because the double envelopment achieved by Hannibal suggested a method by which a battle of annihilation might be fought in a war against France and Russia. But to Colonel Ardant du Picq, the foremost French military theorist of the 1860s, Hannibal was a great general for a quite different reason—“his admirable comprehension of the morale of combat, of the morale of the soldier.” The two men were searching for solutions to different kinds of problems, and in reading about Cannae each responded to his individual interests.

In the old Army, when there was enough leisure time for reading, riding, or a regular game of golf, it was probably understood that the burden of learning from military history must rest primarily upon the individual officer. The annual historical ride to the Civil War battlefields—which had been preserved by Act of Congress “for historical and professional military study”—directly involved students from the Army War College in the unend-

ing dialogue between past and present. Students were frequently asked on location how they would have handled some problem in tactics or command and control that had confronted a commander during battle. "It is not desirable to have the question answered," the instructions specified. "Some will know the answer, but all who do not will ask themselves the question."

This is the only way to learn from history. The textbook or the instructor can organize information, but only the student can put it to work. "Mere swallowing of either food or opinions," Fuller reminds us, "does not of necessity carry with it digestion, and without digestion swallowing is but labour lost and food wasted."

Today there is a shortage of both "labour and food," as other budgetary priorities and manpower shortages have forced severe cutbacks in history courses throughout the Army.

But in a sense this blinds us to the real problem, for it does not necessarily follow that more money and instructors must be the solution. A formal course in military history, however desirable, is not the only way and may, in fact, not be the best way to teach students how to teach themselves history, which is the goal. George C. Marshall, as future Chief of Staff, regarded his two years at the Army Staff College in 1906-08 as having been "immensely instructive," but not because of the quality of the courses there. "The association with the officers, the reading we did and the discussion . . . had a tremendous effect. . . . I learned little I could use," Marshall wrote, but "I learned how to learn. . . . My habits of thought were being trained."

Marshall's words touch upon the essence of practicability. Military history may be of indeterminate value for the immediate future (if World War III were to be fought next week, for example), but among the captains in the career courses today are the Army's top administrators and leaders of tomorrow, and not all graduates of the war colleges in June will retire in the next six or eight years. Those that remain are bound to benefit from anything that can heighten their understanding of society, of other armies, of the political process, of leadership, of the nature of war, of the evolution of doctrine, and of a dozen similar areas of human activity in which history, pursued by an intelligent and inquisitive reader, can still be strikingly practicable to the modern soldier.

To any set of military maxims, whatever their origin, perhaps the following literary maxims should be added:

The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.

If you want a new idea, read an old book.

'Tis the good reader that makes the good book.

A book is like a mirror. If an ass looks in, no prophet can peer out.

