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The Study of Ancient and Medieval Military History: Benefits for professional military education

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Abstract. There is broad agreement that the study of military history is an essential component of professional education for military officers. Although many successful modern commanders, including Napoleon and MacArthur, advocated extending their reading back to ancient times, Clausewitz wrote: "The further back one goes, the less useful military history becomes." This essay argues, to the contrary, that officers have much to gain by including pre-modern warfare in their studies. A larger and more diverse data-set of examples and case studies allows for more reliable generalization, gives more opportunities for inspiration, and helps guard against the tempting but unwise assumptions that the next war will be similar to the last one, and the equally tempting and equally unwise presumption that material strength alone will ensure victory. Moreover, historians of ancient and medieval warfare, like officers exercising their core professional responsibility in combat, must grapple with scanty and conflicting evidence. Pre-modern history, like war, is a realm of uncertainty; many of the "facts" can only be known as probabilities. The best preparation for seeing through the fog of war, therefore, may be the exercise of peering through the mists of time.

The question of why military leaders should study the wars of the ancient and medieval periods is a subset of the broader question of why they should study military history at all.

To answer that, we might offer the glib response: "because General Wolfe, Emperor Napoleon, General Jomini, General Clausewitz, Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder, Marshal Foch, General Patton, General

MacArthur, and President Eisenhower all say they should."[1] Patton, for example – in a letter written on June 6, 1944 – instructed his son, a West Point cadet, that "To be a successful soldier, you must know history."[2]

But I need to go beyond such general assertions of utility if I want to argue for the importance and value of studying a particular sort of military history. The question is thus not *whether* the study of past wars is valuable, but rather *how and why* it is valuable to military professionals. Once we have a firm sense of the mechanisms by which this intellectual endeavour helps prepare leaders for the conduct of war, we will be in a position to examine whether there are ways in which the study of pre-modern conflicts would especially well support those processes, or conversely whether the benefits of historical study might be reduced if that study were limited to relatively recent warfare. It should be emphasized at the start that the topic at hand is the *study* of military history – a process – not *knowledge* of military history, which is just one of the valuable results of the process.

In order to recapitulate the basic arguments for why and how officers should study military history, let me begin with some thoughts on the value of studying history in general as part of a well-rounded education, for any student preparing to enter any of the Professions with a capital P (that is, in Samuel Huntington's sense of the word).[3] Next I will turn to the importance of studying military history for military professionals,

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[1] Most of these distinguished soldiers will be quoted below. For the views of Moltke, see Hajo Holborn, "The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff," – *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 289–290. Foch, like Moltke a disciple of Clausewitz on this topic, in his *Principles of War* notes that professional military instruction should be based on application of principles to historical case-studies, "in order (1) to prepare for *experience*, (2) to teach the *art of commanding*, (3) lastly, to impart the *habit of acting correctly without having to reason* [things through]." Ferdinand Foch, *Principles of War*, tr. Hilaire Belloc (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 11; see also *ibid*, *Precepts and Judgments*, tr. Hilaire Belloc (London: Chapman and Hall, 1919), 170 ("To keep the brain of an army going in time of peace…there is no book more fruitful to the student than that of history."), 184, 222.

[2] George S. Patton Jr., letter to George S. Patton IV, 6 June 1944, in Benjamin Patton with Jennifer Scruby, *Growing Up Patton: Reflections on Heroes, History, and Family Wisdom* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2012), 50.

[3] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1957).

cribbing liberally from Sir B. H. Liddell Hart and Sir Michael Howard. Finally, I will address my narrower topic.

So why should we study history at all?[4] First, because the rigorous study of history provides the same benefits that can come with any other aspect of a high-quality liberal education: exercise in developing valuable questions; identifying, finding, collecting, and organizing relevant information; assessing the quality of the evidence in light of its sources; analysing that information to identify patterns and gaps; filling in gaps and otherwise solving problems with the available data; refining questions and hypotheses in an iterative fashion as the research develops; reaching conclusions through rigorous thought, taking full account of arguments and facts that line up against your hypothesis as well as those that support it; then employing effective writing – with good structure and clear, concise, correct prose – to communicate your analysis and conclusions in a persuasive, efficient, and hopefully even elegant way. The study of history, moreover, should develop not just the student's mind, but also the student's character. History is a discipline built on the foundation of empathy: historical thinking requires an effort to see different worlds through the eyes of those who lived in them, to consider decisions and actions in the context of social constructions of values and mores that are almost never identical to our own. And to do the job properly, a historian needs to be curious, observant, open-minded, hard-working, humble, and resilient, and willing to learn from mistakes. The value of those characteristics for military officers should be obvious.

Second, because the human world of today is an extension of the human world of the past, and its current structures, tensions, problems, and ruptures cannot really be understood without knowledge and appreciation of their origins and development.

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[4] Although the following paragraphs are based on my own reflection on a quarter-century of teaching military history to West Point cadets, and not at all on Tosh's book, those looking for a thoughtful and concise exploration "historical mindedness" and "applied history" have practical benefits for the development of citizens (and officials) may see John Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2019). Tosh, however, falls prey to the same sort of emphasis on modern history that can discourage officers looking for "practical" lessons from studying medieval or ancient times – even though he himself also recognizes that "paradoxically the value of the past lies precisely in what is different from our world." Ibid., ix, 26, 128–29.

Third, to quote Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart: "There is no excuse for any literate person if he is less than three thousand years old in mind."[5] There is an old trope that age and experience bring wisdom. That is an oversimplification, of course – we have probably all known old men or women who were not particularly wise, and as Frederick the Great observed, "A mule who had served on ten campaigns under Prince Eugène would not become a better tactician through the experience; and it must be admitted, to the shame of humanity, that on this point of lazy stupidity many old officers are no better than such a mule."[6] Wisdom does not come simply from growing old and gaining experience, but rather from *reflecting* on experience with an open mind and a desire to learn. Gaining wisdom requires us to use the feedback from expectations that prove either justified or unjustified to see more deeply into the complexities of human interaction (including the interactions between individual humans; interactions of individual people with human constructs like governments, businesses, armies, or coalitions; and interactions between one such construct and another). Such reflection can provide a better appreciation not just of *which* factors shape the outcomes of such interactions, but also their relative *importance* and how their weights vary under different specific circumstances.

It is in some ways easiest to gain wisdom from our own personal experiences, which we observe most fully and feel most immediately. But the benefits of reflection on experience are only to a limited extent transferable from one sort of experience to another, and both the brevity of human life and the limits of our ability to observe our present world restrict our ability to gain wisdom through direct experience. From observation of our own daily lives, it can be difficult to gain a sense of how much of the human interaction we witness on a daily basis is shaped by universal (or at least general) patterns and processes, versus ones distinct to our own cultures, times, and circumstances. Moreover, the focal length

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5 B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History* (London: P.E.N. Books/George Allen & Unwin, n.d., first published 1944), 7–8.

6 G. A. Büttner, *Mémoires du Baron de la Motte Fouqué… dans lesquels on a inserré sa correspondence intéressante avec Frédéric II, Roi de Prusse*, vol. 1 (Berlin: François de LaGarde, 1788), 45.

of lived experience is short. Many of us live our entire lives without direct observations of the big decisions made by national or world leaders. Even those individuals who reach the pinnacles of power and responsibility often have only a few years operating at that level in which to gain experience of it – and meanwhile little time for to spare for reflection. It follows that if we want wisdom to help us address or understand big problems like whether an international military alliance should be expanded, or whether economic sanctions should be threatened or employed against a rival power, or whether fighting an actual shooting war may be justified, we need to draw on a greater range of experience than our own direct observation can provide, or indeed than we can get from the indirect observation (through the media) of the events of just our own lifetimes.

If it is granted that history as we know it was invented by Thucydides, then it is fair to say that the discipline of history was created as a tool to address just that problem. That is clear enough from Thucydides's own text but is perhaps best expressed by his first English translator, Thomas Hobbes, who considered the Athenian the "most Politique Historiographer that ever writ." Why? "He fills his narrations with that choice of matter, and orders them with such judgment, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresses himself, that, as Plutarch says, he makes his hearer a spectator. For he sets his reader in the assemblies of the People, and in the Senates, at their debating; in the streets, at their sedition; and in the field, at their battles. So that look how much a man of understanding might have added to his experience, if he had then lived, a beholder of their proceedings, and familiar with the men and business of the time; so much, almost, may he profit now, by attentive reading of the same here written. He may from the narrations draw out lessons to himself, and of himself be able to trace the drifts and counsels of the actors to their seats."[7]

The value of gaining wisdom by studying history, though it applies to all citizens, applies *a fortiori* to leaders, and especially to military leaders. Today, unlike in the days of the Roman Republic or the Hundred Years War, most years in most countries pass in peace, or at least in states of

[7] Thucydides, *Eight Bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre*, tr. Thomas Hobbes (London: Richard Mynne, 1684), n.p. (second page of "To the Readers"); English modernized.

conflict short of actual war. If the core of officership is war-fighting, then, as Michael Howard and others have rightly emphasized, military officers are the only professionals who can be expected to spend years without engaging in the core activity of their profession.[8] In many armies today, even very senior commanders have never seen a full-scale battle – or if they have, it was likely from the perspective of a company-grade officer. So if wisdom about how to fight a division or a corps, to say nothing of a field army or a national or coalition war effort, especially in a general war between peer competitors, could only come from life experience, then it would of necessity be in very short supply when it next proves most needed. It could be gained on the job, but the cost of that is very high. If having wisdom means anything, it means making somewhat fewer mistakes in complex human interactions than are made by less-wise people, and of all human activities, war is the one where a single mistake is most likely to cost many lives, and could even affect the destiny of a nation. It follows that military leaders have nothing less than a *moral obligation* to seek wisdom through history.[9] As Eisenhower wrote to the cadets of West Point: "Through a careful and objective study of [past campaigns], a professional officer acquires knowledge of military experience which he himself could not otherwise accumulate. The facts of a given battle may no longer serve any practical purpose... but when the serious student of the military art delves into the reasons for the failure of a specific attack… he is, by this very activity, preparing for a day in which he, under different circumstances, may be facing decisions of vital consequence to his country."[10]

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[8] Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," originally published in 1962, repr. in *Parameters* 11 (1981), 13; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History*, revised edition (N.P.: Sophon, 2012), 22–23.

[9] Liddell Hart was being a bit too limited (since we can profit from good examples as well as bad ones) when he wrote that "History is a catalogue of mistakes. It is our duty to profit by them." Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Random House, 1938), 153.

[10] Dwight D. Eisenhower to the Corps of Cadets, United States Military Academy, 22 April 1959, in *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, ed. Vincent J. Esposito, vol. 1 (New York: Praeger, 1959), iii. And similarly Douglas MacArthur, "Annual Report (1935)," – *General MacArthur Speeches and Reports*, ed. Edward T. Imparato (Nashville: Turner Publishing, 2000),

I already noted, however, that wisdom gained from one sort of experience transfers only to a limited degree to different sorts of problems or endeavours. Indeed, wisdom gained in one field can lead to worse judgment, rather than better judgment, when applied to a very different area. Does it not then follow that it makes perfect sense to focus officers' historical study on the recent past, which is presumably more like the present and the near future than the distant past is?

Perhaps so, but *not* if that focus is so tight that in-depth knowledge of the last war or the last few wars is pursued to the exclusion of the broader chronological sweep of military history. A general with vicarious experience of high command that stretches back ten, twenty or thirty times as long as his personal experience as a flag officer will surely be at an advantage over one without that historical insight, but such a still-limited chronological scope means knowledge of only a limited number of wars: a data set with a low *N,* which makes false generalizations and bad analogies dangerously likely. As Michael Howard has noted, it is easy to see how wisdom gained by the study of offensive successes of the Franco–Prussian and Russo–Japanese wars might have led to wrong conclusions and assumptions among military planners before the start of the very different First World War, and then in turn how study of the strength of the defence during that war could contribute to a failure to anticipate the full potential of the German *Bewegungskrieg* of 1939–1940.[11] "Must we conclude that [the study of] history has misled us?" wondered a French staff officer on the day of the German entry into Paris in the latter year.[12] If it did, though, it must have been a flawed study of history, too focused on the recent past and not enough on the full chronological sweep of history. A historian who had reflected on the campaigns of Alexander the Great should have been aware that a focused onslaught by a relatively small force of better-armoured, highly mobile troops can break through a seemingly powerful front, causing

107: "Devoid of opportunity, in peace, for self-instruction through the actual practice of his profession, the soldier makes maximum use of the historical record in assuring the readiness of himself and his command to function efficiently in emergency."

[11] Howard, "Use and Abuse," 13.

[12] Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974), 21.

confusion, then panic, then the dissolution of the opposing force. Students who had examined William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066 should have known that contests of grinding attrition are not the only way to win wars. Anyone who had examined the expulsion of the English from Normandy in 1449–1450 ought to have known that even extensive and strong fortifications may not suffice to hold a line if there is not a mobile force capable of winning in open combat to back up the defences. And thoughtful observers who considered these three cases together would have brought home to them that the worst strategic defeats generally arose in part from fractures or fissures in the losing side's body politic.

Moreover, recent history studied in isolation might have been misleading in 1940, but a broader view of the military past makes it clear that it is *not* a fair assumption that the next war will be "like" the last war in what *turns out to be* the ways that matter most, which may well *not* be technology or the structure of military organizations. We don't have to look back to the wars of the French Revolution to realize that. Officers of 1949 who looked only at the prior half-century of conflicts would naturally have been less than ideally prepared for the war of limited ends, means, and methods that was about to break out in Korea. American officers of 1964 who focused their attention solely on the Korean War and World Wars would not have been as wise about the war they were about to enter in Vietnam as they could have been had they stretched their historical literacy back to the Philippine Insurrection, or the successful counter-terrorism campaign of Lewis Merrill in South Carolina in 1871–1873, or Winfield Scott's occupation of Mexico in 1847–1848, or Louis Suchet's counterinsurgency in Aragon in 1809–1810 – or, to my point, Edward I's conquest of Wales in the thirteenth century.[13] That, in a nutshell, is why Howard insisted on the necessity studying military history in *chronological width* and in context, as well as in depth. Those who

[13] Readers for whom the last-mentioned case seems not to fit with the others should see Clifford J. Rogers, "Giraldus Cambrensis, Edward I, and the Conquest of Wales," – *Successful Strategies. Triumphing in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014), 65–99.

fail to follow that advice may find Clio a deceptive Muse, rather than a source of enlightenment and inspiration.[14]

If you will grant me (and Sir Michael) that point, that still leaves open the question of why it would be valuable to study ancient and medieval warfare, rather than broadening one's vicarious experience to include, say, the most recent past two centuries. Clausewitz, for one, though he had for his day a good knowledge of earlier warfare, wrote that it was only starting with the time Frederick the Great that wars were "close enough to modern warfare to be instructive." "The further back one goes," he continued, "the less useful military history becomes, growing poorer and barer at the same time. The history of antiquity is without doubt the most useless and barest of all."[15] This conclusion rested on two pillars. First, before Frederick's time cavalry was more important than infantry and the use of firearms was much less advanced. Since the relationship among the means of combat was so different, tactics were very different, and since tactics are the means of strategy, war as a whole was very different. Hence, any lessons drawn from the history of earlier eras would be of limited validity. Second, it is unwise to try to draw lessons from any examples that one cannot understand properly in the first place. Due to lack of sources comparable to those available for more recent times, Clausewitz argued, we cannot have for pre-modern examples the "precise knowledge of actual circumstances" that is needed for the proper use of military history as a tool for the development of military judgment.[16]

I don't like to disagree with Clausewitz, since those who do so usually prove to be wrong. But then, Clausewitz didn't like to disagree with Napoleon, whom he called the God of War, and Napoleon advised students of war to "read and read again the campaigns of Alexander, Hanni-

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[14] As John Tosh, author of *Why History Matters*, noted: "There is a great deal of analogical reasoning that is complete garbage. The point about analogy is that it's really completely counterproductive to focus on a single historical precedent....the more analogies one is aware of, the more one's understanding of what is going on in the moment is open to different readings and different understandings." Donald A. Yerxa, "Why History Matters: An Interview with John Tosh," *Historically Speaking* 10 (2009): 26; see also Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 56–70.

[15] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1984), 173–74.

[16] Clausewitz, *On War*, 173.

bal, [and] Caesar," as well as more modern generals, later adding as part of his deathbed advice to his son that "this is the only way to become a great commander and to discover the secrets of the art of war."[17] MacArthur, too, despite the much greater technological gap between his day and Alexander's than between Napoleon's and Alexander's, advocated the study of "the dust-buried accounts of wars long past as well as [of] those still reeking with the scent of battle," and condemned as "callow critics" those "who hold that only in the most recent battles are there to be found truths applicable to our present problems."[18] When he harangued the representatives of the Joint Chiefs for hours in order to persuade them of the wisdom of his plan for Operation Chromite (the Inchon landing), he bolstered his case with a slew of historical examples, the most memorable among them (at least for one officer who was present) being the case of Alexander's great battle at Gaugamela.[19]

In fact, despite his own specific conclusion on this point, Clausewitz offers more general observations that suggest why Napoleon recommended that officers study ancient as well as modern campaigns.[20] Clausewitz argued a senior commander's knowledge of war, which had to lead to capability to act rather than an abstract form of understanding, could be extracted "from the phenomena of life, as a bee sucks honey from a flower," "through the medium of reflection, study and thought,"

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[17] "Lisez, relisez les campagnes d'Alexandre, Annibal, César, Gustave, Turenne, Eugène, et de Frédéric; modelez-vous sur eux: voilà le seul moyen de devenir grand capitaine, et de surprendre les secrets de l'art de la guerre." *Maximes de Guerre de Napoléon* (Paris: Anselin, 1830), maxim LXXVIII (p. 46). Luvaas, *Napoleon on the Art of War*, 41. Also *Correspondance de Napoléon 1er*, vol. 31 (Paris: Henri Plon and J. Dumaine, 1870), 365: "la connaissance des hautes parties de la guerre ne s'acquiert que par l'étude de l'histoire des guerres et des batailles des grands capitaines et par l'expérience."

[18] General MacArthur Speeches and Reports, 108.

[19] Interview with LTG Edward Rowny, West Point Center for Oral History, available online at http://www.westpointcoh.org/interviews/a-veteran-of-three-hot-wars-and-a-cold-one, at 1:00 to 1:02. LTG Rowny refers to the battle by its other name, Arbela.

[20] Clausewitz, it should be remembered, was a dedicated educator as well as a practical soldier and a profound theorist, and he employed his penetrating intellect to think deeply about the intersection of his three professions. As Jon Sumida notes, his "special synthesis of history and theory constituted a system...of learning." Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "The Relationship of History and Theory in *On War*: The Clausewitzian Ideal and Its Implications," *Journal of Military History*, 65 (2001): 333–354, at 334.

as well as through personal experience. The purpose was not to know "all the details"; anyone who thought otherwise was a "ridiculous pedant." On the contrary, "great things alone can make a great mind."[21] When we combine those ideas with Clausewitz's observation that "the further one progresses from broad generalities to details, the less one is able to select examples and experiences from remote times," as "we are in no position to evaluate the relevant events correctly, nor to apply them to the whole different means we use today," there is a logical conclusion to be drawn about the inverse: that as one moves from the details to the "great things" that can make "great minds," the difficulties that accompany the study of the distant past become less and less important, and the study becomes more and more valuable.[22] Indeed, the signal-to-noise ratio increases dramatically. The lack of cluttering detail leaves the main lines of the story clearer and facilitates the inductive learning that creates the kind of understanding that becomes instinctive judgment and fuels the capacity to act. Clausewitz himself wrote that "the noblest and most solid nourishment that the mind of a general may draw from a study of the past" is an appreciation of "the importance of moral [that is, non-material] factors and their often incredible effect."[23] I don't know of any modern memoir that serves up that "noble nourishment" better than Julius Caesar's *War Commentaries,* and it is hard to think of a campaign that better exemplifies the power of intangibles to overcome material disadvantages than the one that culminated with Henry V's victory against the "fearful odds" of five to one at Agincourt in 1415.[24]

In the quotations above, Napoleon was directing his advice to study history towards those who aspire to be "great commanders." But the benefits of sound military judgment derived from the study of history (especially a better understanding of the so-called "moral forces," including

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[21] Clausewitz, *On War*, 146, 145.

[22] Clausewitz, *On War*, 174.

[23] Clausewitz, *On War*, 185.

[24] Anne Curry has recently argued for a much smaller numerical disproportion at Agincourt, but I do not concur with her analysis. See Clifford J. Rogers, "The Battle of Agincourt," – *The Hundred Years War (Part II): Different Vistas*, ed. L. J. Andrew Villalon and Donald J. Kagay (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37–132, at 114–121.

how leaders and soldiers are affected by the strains and circumstances that are inherent to the action of war in any age, yet also absent from peacetime experience in any age) are as great for junior officers as they are for generals. It takes a very large data set of examples and vicarious experiences drawn from widely differing times and places to know what elements of human-nature-in-war are universal and not contingent on particular cultural, technological, or societal contexts. The study of ancient and medieval military history helps provide the breadth of empirical data needed to assess those sorts of questions.

Moreover, although more recent generals and theorists have tended to emphasize the value of historical precedent as a source from which to derive *principles* of war, pre-Napoleonic writers put more emphasis on history as (in Frederick the Great's words) a "storehouse of military *ideas*." General James Wolfe, for example, modelled the training of his light infantry at Louisbourg in 1758 on the methods used by Persian troops against Xenophon; he commented that his fellow-officers were "astonished" by their effectiveness "because they have read nothing."[25] With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that when he compiled a reading list for a prospective officer, Wolfe included Xenophon, along with Thucydides, Vegetius, Caesar, and Polybius, and noted that "there is an abundance of military knowledge to be picked out of" the lives of the medieval commanders Jan Zizka and Skanderbeg, among others.[26] Although, as we have seen, Clausewitz questioned the usefulness of ancient or medieval military history as a basis from which to derive generalizations or principles, he himself noted that there are other valuable ways to use historical examples. He points out that "a historical example may simply be used as an *explanation* of an idea"; this, he says, "generally calls only for a brief mention of the case, or only one aspect of it matters," and the purpose is "to throw the necessary light on [the] idea and to ensure that the reader and the writer will remain in touch."[27] But this method only works if the author and the reader – or commander

[25] Beckles Willson, *Life and Letters of James Wolfe* (London: William Heinemann, 1909), 380.
[26] Ibid., 296.
[27] Clausewitz, *On War*, 170.

and subordinate – share a common understanding of the example, *and* if both can anticipate that that will be the case. Because military history is so expansive, if all students wended their way through it following wherever their interests might take them, an author could not presume his readers would know any particular case. But since the key figures and events of classical military history – principally the events of the Persian War, the strategic development of the Peloponnesian War, the conquests of Alexander, the march up country of Xenophon, the tactical genius of Hannibal and the effective counter-measures of Fabius, and the generalship of Julius Caesar – are limited in scope and are part of the common cultural heritage of all Western and Mediterranean nations, they have for this purpose the advantage over the far more voluminous and far more compartmentalized national histories of modern (or even medieval) times. Or at least they used to, and still should, and will continue to so long as we do not lose sight of the practical value of studying ancient warfare.

Clausewitz also notes that one can "appeal to a historical fact to support a statement. This will suffice whenever one merely wants to prove *the possibility* of some phenomenon or effect."[28] Anecdotal examples, whether from the recent or distant past, can inspire consideration of a wider range of alternative courses of action when faced with an unusual problem, and that is surely a good thing. Here again the *distance and difference* of medieval and ancient military history offers a positive value to the student: what might otherwise seem impossible because it never occurs in recent history may be shown to be possible – and therefore an opportunity that might be worth pursuing, or a risk that might need accounting for – by looking at the pre-modern repository of experience. Clausewitz makes a related point regarding Napoleon's decision to abandon the siege of Mantua to seek battle against Wurmser in 1796: "resisting a relieving army behind lines of circumvallation had fallen into such disrepute and contempt that it occurred to no one. And yet in the days of Louis XIV [or, we might add, Julius Caesar or Edward III] it had so often been successfully employed that one can only call it a whim of fashion that [in 1796] it

[28] Clausewitz, *On War*, 170.

never occurred to anyone *at least to weigh* its merits." Clausewitz goes on to say that "one only has to shed the tyranny of fashion" in order to recognize that as a possible course of action.[29] What he does not add is that it was his own knowledge of the military history of earlier eras that gave him the ability to recognize that the fashion of his own day was neither timeless, nor even normal.[30]

Another way in which the distance and difference of medieval warfare makes its study beneficial is that it offers many examples of asymmetrical warfare; of wars involving sub-state or non-state actors; and of non-binary, non-zero-sum warfare that was resolved by effective political compromises. It used to be thought that medieval warfare was practically devoid of strategy or of strategic lessons, but that very belief was strong evidence of the value of studying medieval warfare, since it arose from an inability to conceive of strategy in non-Jominian terms.[31] In fact, since strategy is essentially the harnessing of military action to political purpose, it should not be surprising that the Middle Ages, when wars were almost always directed at the political level by the same men who led armies into the field and even fought themselves in battle, strategy was in fact quite sophisticated and varied, and can thus be very valuable to study. That is all the more true because in recent years Western military and political leaders have had difficulty understanding or coming to grips with the ways violence and politics interact in areas where the Western-style state is weak or absent, for example in Afghanistan, Waziristan, or Somalia. In the modern period, states have generally raised large revenues through taxes, loans, and expedients in order to fund military operations, but during the Early and High Middle Ages, war-leaders often had to find ways to make war pay for war, through plunder, the distribution of conquered land to supporters, or the exaction of protection money from

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Considering how long ago he wrote, Clausewitz possessed a surprisingly good understanding of how war changed from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and how those changes related to "the nature of states and society as they are determined by their times and prevailing conditions." See *On War*, 586–93.

[31] See Clifford J. Rogers, "Henry V's Military Strategy in 1415," – *The Hundred Years War: A Wider Focus*, ed. L. J. Andrew Villalon and Donald J. Kagay (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 404–415.

productive citizens under threat of violence.[32] Of course, those methods are not of much use for modern Western militaries: but modern variants of them are used by warlords in failed-state areas today. Understanding how Robert Guiscard ("the Wily") terrorized the inhabitants of southern Italy and Sicily into submitting to his rule could be useful to understanding the strategies employed by strongmen in conflict-prone areas today, and therefore be useful in figuring out how to defeat them. More broadly, medieval wars were fought in a social-cultural-political context in which kin-networks were powerful factors, religion was profoundly important, and both leaders and soldiers actively sought out opportunities to fight in order to gain the martial honour that was perhaps the most valuable coin of social status. Medieval wars were usually very far from the pattern seen in many modern wars, in which the objective of at least one side is the complete defeat and surrender of the enemy, in which a negotiated compromise settlement, if it is the result, emerges only when it becomes clear that complete victory is out of reach. Medieval wars were commonly fought among members of an extended family over the division of an inheritance, or to adjust the terms of power-sharing arrangements between two partners in rule, or both. They could last for decades or even generations, fuelled by cycles of vengeance, deep-seated ethnic antipathies, and shifting allegiances among subordinate actors who did not want to see any individual become too strong. Officers who have studied only conflicts between modern nation-states are missing out on an opportunity to gain a class of vicarious experience that could help them understand the very different sorts of warfare and armed conflict that continue to plague the worst trouble-spots of the modern globe.

In Afghanistan, for example, first the Soviets and then the Americans faced the problem that an invader "can never hope to conquer in one single battle a people that will never draw up its forces to engage an enemy army in the field, and will never allow itself to be besieged inside fortified strong points." The native fighters "do not lose heart when things go wrong, and after one defeat they are always ready to fight again." "They

[32] The implications of this point are developed in Clifford J. Rogers, "Medieval Strategy and the Economics of Conquest," *The Journal of Military History* 82 (2018): 709–738.

are not troubled by hunger or cold, [and] fighting does not seem to tire them." "The entire nation, both leaders and the common people, are trained in the use of arms." When fighting they are accustomed to enduring privation, are skilled in ambushes and hit-and-run tactics, and are at home in the roughest, most mountainous terrain, where heavy armoured forces cannot operate effectively, and they often fight in ways that their enemies consider violations of the laws of war. "Passionately devoted to their freedom and the defence of their country," they "willingly sacrifice, suffer, or die" to throw out foreign invaders, and because it is their homeland, they have the advantage in determination and focus compared to foreign powers, even superpowers, which cannot concentrate all their strength or attention on any one international problem. Of course, neither the Soviets nor the Americans were the first to encounter these difficulties, either in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Had they been truly "prudent and provident," they would have studied earlier examples of similar wars in the past, to "find out what pitfalls are to be avoided, by taking note of the disasters which have befallen others in the same position," as "it costs nothing to learn from other people's experience." That, at least, is the advice of the twelfth-century bishop Giraldus Cambrensis, who in 1194 devised an extremely sophisticated (and ultimately successful) plan to conquer and control the Welsh, the people about whom all the quotations in this paragraph were written.[33]

Let me close with what I think is my strongest argument for the utility of studying pre-modern military history for modern officers – which actually is a benefit that comes from studying any pre-modern history, military or not. In the end, the purpose of studying history is to help officers make better decisions: not just in planning or staff work, but also, probably most importantly, in combat. I have already argued for the value of vicarious experience, and particularly of vicarious experience that extends to before the modern era, for that purpose. But as everyone knows, it is easier to recognize that it is a good idea to decide to attack the enemy on an open flank than it is to have the moral fortitude to make the attack proceed through friction. Even the latter may be easier than seeing

[33] Rogers, "Giraldus," 70–71.

through the fog of war in the first place, to recognize that the enemy *has* an open flank, and to figure out where it is. As Clausewitz emphasizes, one of the things that causes both commanders and armies to fall short of their goals, or even to freeze up in paralysis, is lack of knowledge about the enemy's situation, and knowing, to paraphrase Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, that in addition to the known unknowns, unknown unknowns pose a constant threat.[34] "War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in was is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a *skilled* intelligence to scent out the truth."[35] It follows that a key part of a military education should be developing the intellectual skills to make judgments about the truth when key facts are not known, but must be guessed at or estimated on the basis of intelligence received, when "many…reports…are contradictory, even more are false, and most are uncertain."[36] The study of ancient and medieval warfare can be an ideal exercise for developing such judgment, since in order to reach conclusion about why events turned out as they did, the historian must begin by establishing the basic facts – *what* happened – based on assessment of the quality of various conflicting and mostly unreliable written accounts, some given by eyewitnesses, more at second or third hand.[37] In the study of modern history, the main facts are usually agreed upon, though interpretations of them vary. That is not the case for ancient or medieval history. Establishing cause-effect relationships or even generally understanding

[34] Clausewitz, *On War*, 140, 101.

[35] Ibid., 101.

[36] Ibid., 117.

[37] For any given battle of the American Civil War or World War Two, there are likely to be thousands of pages of official reports, memoirs, private letters, and other primary sources, making it impractical for the student to grapple with them all. For an ancient battle, there may be just one or two. A number of medieval battles (for example, Hastings, Crécy, Poitiers, or Agincourt) have a golden mean: a large enough number of sources of sufficiently variable detail and quality to make for a good exercise, but a small enough total that it is possible for students to work through them all and, in that respect, to be able to stand on even footing with the historians who themselves debate the facts of the event and also their causal relationships. Students generally will not be able to reach conclusions as solid as the ones they might (given sufficient time) be able to reach regarding a modern engagement, but the point here is about the value of the process, not of the output.

a past event is complicated by having to treat each "fact" as a mere possibility, where the facts shape the pattern, but the emerging pattern can then help judge among sources and therefore determine the facts. Grappling with those problems is an experience that should ideally be part of the wisdom-building of every well-educated officer. To study the battle and campaign of Hastings, moreover, is not just a matter of examining how William the Conqueror overcame problems of incomplete information, politics and strategy, morale, logistics, and terrain to achieve decisive victory in 1066. It is also an opportunity to learn from the ways in which past historians have tackled the challenges of judging between or reconciling seemingly contradictory assertions by medieval authors, and the methods they have used to determine the most probable answers to important questions that no witnesses spoke to directly. Historians cannot observe the human past directly, yet the human past is their topic, so they collectively have spent 2,500 years developing and refining methods to overcome that fundamental difficulty. One of the greatest problems facing military commanders in wartime is that they have to make decisions based on factors that they cannot observe directly (regarding their own forces) and that may be very obscure indeed (regarding the enemy). By the careful study of pre-modern military history, today's officers can not only learn from the leaders of the past the art of command, but also learn from the scholars of the past (and present) the art of rigorously analysing difficult and indirect sources of information. The best preparation for seeing through the fog of war may be the exercise of peering through the mists of time.

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