



THE ROLE OF MILITARY HISTORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY ACADEMY

By Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino

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This essay was originally published as a Society of Military History White Paper and is reprinted with permission. FPRI has long worked on teaching military history through its [Butcher History Institute](#), in cooperation with the First Division Museum at Cantigny and with Carthage College. A collection of essays drawn from seven history weekends for high school teachers – [American Military History: A Resource for Teachers and Students](#), edited by Paul H. Herbert and Michael P. Noonan – is available on our website. The next history institute in this series will be held April 18-19, 2015 on [Ethical Dilemmas in American Warfare](#).

The resort to war signals the failure of far more satisfactory means of settling human conflicts. It forces us to face and wrestle with the darkest corners of the human psyche. It signals the coming of trauma and suffering—often intense and prolonged—for individuals, families and societies. War-fighting concentrates power in non-democratic ways, infringes upon civil liberties, and convulses political, economic, and social systems. From the wreckage—the broken bodies, the re-drawn boundaries, the imperfect treaties, the fresh resentments and the intensified old ones—altered political and social patterns and institutions emerge that may help to prevent future conflicts, or sow the seeds of new ones. All of this creates a difficult, complicated, and fraught historical landscape to traverse.

Though the study of war is demanding, both intellectually and emotionally, we cannot afford to eschew or ignore it. Examining the origins of wars informs us about human behavior: the way that we create notions of identity, nationality, and territoriality; the way that we process and filter information; and the way that we elevate fear and aggression over reason. Analyzing the nature of war informs us about the psychology of humans under stress: the patterns of communication and miscommunication within and across groups; the causes of escalation; and the dynamics of political and social behavior within nations and across populations. And studying the consequences of wars helps us to understand human resilience, resignation, and resentment; we learn to identify unresolved issues that may lead to further strife, and we develop a heightened ability for comprehending the elements of political behavior that can lead to sustainable resolution and the re-building of broken—indeed sometimes shattered—social, political, and economic structures and relationships.

Research in military history not only informs and enriches the discipline of history, but also informs work in a host of other fields including political science, sociology, and public policy. Students need this knowledge in order to become informed, thoughtful citizens. If the role of a liberal education is to hone analytical thinking skills and prepare young people to accept their full responsibilities in a democratic society, then it is more than ever imperative that we prepare our students to think critically and wisely about issues of war and peace. Among its many roles, scholarship has a civic function: it facilitates our understanding of the institutions we have created, and opens a debate on their purpose and function.¹

¹ Professor Walter McDougall, Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, makes this point powerfully in a short essay for the Foreign Policy Research Institute entitled, "The Three Reasons We Teach History," Footnotes 5, no. 1 (February 1998). See

The members of the Society for Military History have a broad and inclusive sense of our work and our educational mission. We see our realm as encompassing not only the study of military institutions in wartime, but also the study of the relationships between military institutions and the societies that create them; the origins of wars, societies at war; and the myriad impacts of war on individuals, groups, states, and regions. Our mission encompasses not only traditional studies of battles, but also of war and public memory. The cross fertilization in these realms has been extensive in recent years, and each one has influenced the others in salutary ways.

Several decades ago the phrase “new military history” arose to highlight a shift away from traditional narratives that focused on generalship and troop movements on the battlefield. But events have clearly overtaken the phrase. The “new military history” is simply what military history is today: broad-based, inclusive, and written from a wide range of perspectives. In an essay for *The American Historical Review* in 2007, Robert Citino wrote: “Once controversial, and still the occasional subject of grumbling from a traditionalist old guard, the new military history is today an integral, even dominant, part of the parent field from which it emerged. It has been around so long, in fact, and has established itself so firmly, that it seems silly to keep calling it “new.”²

Those of us who labor in this realm believe that our work, which is regularly published by some of the most discerning presses in the world, deserves not only a wide readership, but serious scholarly attention. The increasing number of university presses initiating military history book series reflects our field’s vitality. And the National Endowment for the Humanities has signaled its support for our work by launching a major new initiative to fund military history research: <http://neh.gov/veterans/standing-together>. Beyond this, we believe that for our democracy to remain healthy, the study of war must be included in the curricula of our nation’s colleges and universities.

The short essay that follows will argue the case for integrating a broadened, revitalized military history subfield into history departments nationwide. And it will highlight the potential dangers of failing to do so.

Overcoming Old Stereotypes

The phrase “military history” still stirs conflicted emotions or hostile reactions among those who teach history in the nation’s colleges and universities. Indeed, this fact has convinced some of those who study war to distance themselves from the phrase, or to eschew it altogether. But there is a case to be made for retaining and reinvigorating the term, linking it to the body of innovative scholarship that has been produced in recent years, and continues to be produced today. The first step is open communication and exchange between those inside the field and those outside of it. Within the academy, conversation and education ought to be the first steps towards breaking down stereotypes.

The challenges facing those who study war extend beyond the fact their terrain is challenging, morally-freighted, and emotionally-draining. Wariness towards the field persists despite its evolution in recent decades. Other historians—for instance those who study slavery, or the history of Native Peoples, or the dictatorship of Josef Stalin—work in fraught spaces without finding themselves the object of suspicion or stereotype. Part of the problem stems from the way that military history is, and has been, identified and categorized inside American popular culture.

Anyone walking into a large bookstore will find, in most cases, a sizable section labeled “military history.” Some of the work located there will be of high quality – serious, deeply- researched, and conforming to the highest scholarly standards; but some of it will consist of shallow tales of adventure and conquest, written for an enthusiastic but not terribly discerning audience. Some of it will cover esoteric topics that appeal to those with highly particularized interests, such as military uniforms, weapons types, or aircraft markings. Popular military history varies immensely in quality, and there is a great gulf between the best and the worst it has to offer. Outside the subfield, all this work tends to be lumped together, however, and academics with little exposure to serious scholarship in the field may assume that it is a discipline defined by the weaker side of the spectrum.

Popular television also complicates the lives of academic military historians. “Info-tainment” via commercial media shapes ideas about what military history is, and how its practitioners allocate their time and energy. The academic subfield struggles also to free itself from association with popular writing and popular film that grasps too readily at “great man” theories, triumphalism, nationalism, gauzy sentimentality, or superficial tales of derring do. We face a suspicion that those drawn to the

www.fpri.org/footnotes.

² Robert M. Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reinterpretation,” *American Historical Review* 112 (October 2007): 1070-90.

field are mesmerized by the whiz-bang quality of arms technology, or the pure drama of organized violence. We find ourselves called upon, sometimes, to answer the charge that by studying armed conflict we are glorifying it or condoning it. Because the field was predominantly male for a long time, many of our colleagues assume that it remains so, and is hostile to women.

Unfortunately, many in the academic community assume that military history is simply about powerful men—mainly white men—fighting each other and/or oppressing vulnerable groups. The study of the origins of war was fertile ground during the 1920s and 1930s as scholars searched for answers about the complex, wrenching, and seemingly incomprehensible event that was the “Great War” -- as it was then called. But by the 1960s, critics had begun to conclude that military and diplomatic history focused too much on presidents, prime ministers, and generals; many felt it had become dry and stale, and had few new insights to contribute to our understanding of the past. In the United States this problem was exacerbated by the Vietnam War, and the terrible, searing divisions it created in the domestic polity. No small number of senior academics today came of age during that war, and, understandably, they resolved to put as much distance as possible between themselves and engagement with military issues of any kind.

Shedding the Baggage and Making a Difference

Shedding these burdens will require ongoing and mutual outreach from both military and non-military historians. Perhaps the best way for military historians to make their case to the broader profession is to highlight the range, diversity, and breadth of the recent scholarship in military history, as well as the dramatic evolution of the field in recent decades. Military historians believe that our work is a vital component of a liberal education that prepares students to be informed and responsible citizens.

Young scholars taking up the study of war are broadly-trained and well-trained—and they must be since high-quality military history demands that its practitioners understand the intricate relationship between a society and its military institutions. This requires competence not only in political and economic history, but in social and cultural history as well. Scholars fortunate enough to have grown up in departments that are home to outstanding social and cultural historians have benefited immensely from the privilege, and it is reflected in their work.³

Over time, the practitioners of academic military history have become more diverse, and have looked at war from new angles. As minorities and women enter the field, they bring to it their own unique lenses and fresh perspectives. In 2005 the Society for Military History elected its first woman president, Carol Reardon. In recent years the SMH has awarded a high percentage of his prizes, grants and scholarships to young women, specifically the Edward M. Coffman Prize for First Manuscript. Recent awardees include Ellen Tillman from Texas State University, San Marcos, for “Dollar Diplomacy by Force: US Military Experimentation and Occupation in the Dominican Republic, 1900-1924” (2014); Lien-Hang Nguyen, University of Kentucky, for “Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam” (2012); and Kathryn S. Meier, University of Scranton, for “The Seasoned Soldier: Coping with the Environment in Civil War Virginia” (2011).

Even a quick glance at the program for the 2014 Annual Conference of the Society of Military History reveals a thriving subfield that is diverse and dynamic. Papers delivered this year included: “The Chemists’ War: Medical and Environmental Consequences of Chemical Warfare during World War I” (Gerard J. Fitzgerald, George Mason University); “World War I, Manhood, Modernity, and the Remaking of the Puerto Rico Peasant” (Harry Franqui-Rivera, Hunter College); “British Counterinsurgency and Pseudo-warfare in Palestine, 1936-39” (Matthew Hughes, Brunel University); “War, Disease, and Diplomacy: Transatlantic Peacemaking and International Health after the First World War” (Seth Rotramel, Office of the Historian, Department of State).⁴

The scholarship in our field entitles its authors to claim a legitimate place among their colleagues in the academy and beyond. Indeed, books about war continue to earn national and international recognition. Fredrik Logevall’s superb work, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*, was a recent (2013) winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Francis Parkman Prize. It examined the way that disastrous decisions at the end of France’s war in Indo-China set the Americans up for their own catastrophe in Vietnam. Just over a decade ago, Fred Anderson’s account of the Seven Years’ War, *Crucible of*

³ In her essay for the Times Literary Supplement special issue, “New Ways in History,” Stella Tillyard commented on the productive cross-fertilization between academic and popular history. She specifically cited the influence of social history upon military history. See Tillyard, “All Our Pasts: The Rise of Popular History,” TLS, 13 October 2006, 7-9.

⁴ Gerard Fitzgerald presented his paper as part of a Presidential Panel on “The Environmental Dimensions of World War I” sponsored by the Society for Environmental History, which has established a productive partnership with the Society for Military History.

War, set a new standard for history that is deeply perceptive, sweeping in scope, and able to comprehend and convey the overarching trajectory and import of the story, including its most subtle and nuanced details. Several of the nominees for the inaugural Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize in Military History – including Rick Atkinson’s *The Guns at Last Light*, and Allen C. Guelzo’s *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* – are works not only of breathtaking research but also of profound literary merit. The first book in Atkinson’s trilogy on the Second World War, *An Army at Dawn*, won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2003.⁵

Contemporary military history has been incorporated into some of the best broad- scope and survey literature written in recent decades, allowing the narrative of conflict to become part of a comprehensive story that includes—rather than avoids—warfare and all of its wide-ranging and long-lasting effects. Here the excellent volumes produced by for the “Oxford History of the United States” series come immediately to mind.⁶

At the same time as it has branched out into new areas, however, military history retains a footing in “operational history,” the province of war, of campaign, and of battle. As today’s military historians recognize, battlefield history gains maximum impact when it is infused with insights into the nature and character of the organizations taking part. It requires knowledge of their social composition, command hierarchies, norms and cultural codes, and relationships to non-military institutions. Insights from social, cultural, gender and ethnic history have influenced the study of more conventional military history, with scholarship emphasizing aspects of mobilization, training and doctrine, and combat as a reflection of values and institutions in society. Operational history enables us to make sense of the larger story of war because battlefield outcomes matter: they open up or close off opportunities to attain (or fail to attain) important political ends.⁷

In addition, combat sheds light on the civil-military relationship within states, and the way that societies are able (or unable) to leverage technology by setting up organizations and processes to take advantage of it. What happens on the battlefield also influences, and sometimes crafts, key social and political narratives. For instance, the tactical and operational reasons for stalemate on the Western Front matter precisely because this stalemate shaped the human experience of the war, burdened its settlement, and shaped its legacy. The stalemate also changed the way that European power was understood and interpreted by those peoples under the yoke of European colonialism in the early part of the 20th century. Similarly, one cannot understand the intensity of the Truman-MacArthur civil-military clash during the Korean War— and its long and damaging legacy—unless one understands the power and influence gained by the latter through his military victories in World War II, and, in particular, at Inchon in 1950.

Adding Depth and Insight to College Curricula

Scholarly military history puts big strategic decisions about war and peace into context; it draws linkages and contrasts between a nation’s socio-political culture and its military culture; it helps illuminate ways in which a polity’s public and national narrative is shaped over time. All this gives the field relevance, and, indeed, urgency, inside the classroom. Scholars in our field are well-positioned to draw linkages and build bridges among subfields in history, and to engage in interdisciplinary work. Because warfare has dramatic consequences at every level of human existence, it must be a central element in the way that we understand our own narrative through the ages. To avoid the study of war is to undermine our opportunity to fully comprehend ourselves—and our evolution over time—in social, political, psychological, scientific, and technological realms.

Students long for intellectual frameworks that help them understand the world in which they live—and the study of war and conflict is an essential part of such frameworks. For instance, it is difficult if not impossible to understand the geo-political fault-lines of the 21st century world if one does not understand the causes and outcomes of the First World War. Students will not understand Vladimir Putin’s contemporary Russian nationalism if they do not understand (at least) Western intervention in the Russian civil war, the history of the Second World War, the Cold War that followed it, and the expansion of NATO following the Soviet collapse in 1989.

⁵ Atkinson’s “Liberation Trilogy” on the US Army in the Second World War includes: *An Army at Dawn* (2002); *The Day of Battle* (2007); and *The Guns at Last Light* (2013).

⁶ Two prominent examples include David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The former won the Pulitzer Prize (2000) and the latter won the Bancroft Prize (1997).

⁷ This is a point that is made and emphasized in another Pulitzer Prize-winning volume in the Oxford series, James McPherson’s classic analysis of the US Civil War, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). This work too won the Pulitzer Prize in history.

Through popular media and public discourse in this decade alone, American students have heard about such events as the bicentennials of the Napoleonic Wars and War of 1812, the centennial of the First World War, and the sesquicentennial of the battle of Gettysburg. They realize that in order to fully comprehend the significance of these commemorations, they need a basic historical grounding that can explain why the events mark turning points—and have thus become influential pieces of our contemporary narrative.

Our students' desire for knowledge creates an important opportunity for Departments of History. The late recession has produced a drop in humanities majors as students seek courses that seem more likely to produce an immediate payoff in terms of jobs and wages. Legislative budget cuts have forced even state schools to conform to a tuition-driven model, and departments that cannot attract a sufficient number of students can expect hard times to get harder.

University college administrators, particularly college deans and chairs of History Departments, may find some relief in the appeal of military history. Courses in military history tend to fill, not only with history majors and minors, but also with students from other disciplines who are interested in the field. And because military history intersects regularly with the profession's other subfields, it can serve as an ideal gateway to the other specializations any given History Department has to offer. It may, as well, lure back some of the students who have been drawn away to political science, international relations, and public policy departments. But the central reasons for an embrace of contemporary military history go far beyond the practical realities of departmental budgets.

Civic Responsibility

Military history ought to be a vital component of a liberal education, one that prepares students to be informed and responsible citizens. Since civilian control of the military is a foundational element of American democracy, our civilians must have enough basic knowledge to carry out this function competently and responsibly. In the US today, the burden of military service is carried by only about 1% of the population. The remaining 99% have only limited (if any) contact with serving military personnel, and military institutions; our young people know little about warfare—and its profound costs and consequences—outside of what partial and often unhelpful information filters through via the popular culture. We do little to prepare our citizens to understand their role in owning and controlling a large military institution. Indeed, many of our young people have no idea of how the US military came to exist in its present form, what tasks it has been called upon to carry out in the past (or why), and what tasks it may be called upon to carry out in the future.

This is an unsettling state of affairs, especially since the US military does not send itself to war. Choices about war and peace are made by civilians – civilians who, increasingly, have no historical or analytical frameworks to guide them in making the most consequential of all decisions. They know little or nothing about the requirements of the Just War tradition and the contemporary legal and ethical frameworks that affect *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*. They know little about the logistical, geographical, and physical demands of modern military operations; they do not realize that the emotional stresses, profound complexities, and constant unpredictability of war-fighting make it more difficult than any other human endeavor to carry out successfully. And they do not sufficiently link this fact to the family stresses and emotional wounds that veterans endure.

Any use of military force is so consequential on so many levels that it demands serious contemplation and full comprehension by all those in a democratic polity who own some piece of responsibility for it. In a democracy, the burden—including and especially the moral burden—of choosing to use violence for political ends belongs to elected officials and to the people they represent.⁸ And, once a choice to use force is undertaken, elected officials continue to have a serious responsibility to remain fully engaged in the wielding of violence on behalf of the state. When Americans go to war, they do so because they have been sent by the elected leaders of the Republic; they carry the flag of the United States, and wear that flag on the sleeves of their uniforms. Civilians must respect the requirements of Just War; this is essential not only for the preservation of American leadership in the world, but also for building a foundation on which a stable post-war peace can be built. Just as crucially, civilians must realize that respect for Just War requirements is essential to the mental and emotional health of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen they send to war.⁹

⁸ An illuminating argument about the need for citizens to reclaim this responsibility is found in Sebastian Junger, “Veterans need to share the moral burden of war,” *Washington Post*, 24 May 2013. The citizen's role in the use of military power is the central concern in Rachel Maddow's, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (Crown: New York, 2012).

⁹ Richard K. Betts puts the case powerfully: “Any significant resort to force will hurt people on a large scale, without definite assurance of achieving its purpose. For these reasons, force should be used less frequently, with better reason, and with more conscious willingness to

In addition, civilians need to understand how consistently and tirelessly one must work to align means and ends in war. Soldiers will be fully occupied trying to cope with the intense and ever-changing demands of the battlefield, while civilian policymakers will be fully occupied trying to build and maintain support for national strategy. With both groups working round the clock in their own realms, it is easy for them to begin to drift apart.¹⁰ An intentional and unflagging effort must be devoted to maintaining the ongoing civil-military communication that gives strategy its meaning, and that prevents the nation from engaging in counterproductive or even senseless conflict.

The rather cavalier and shortsighted way that Americans sent troops to war in Iraq in 2003 spoke to vast gaps in civilian understanding of the capabilities of blunt military instruments, in the complexity of sectarian political divisions (exacerbated by a colonial legacy) within Iraq, and in the myriad and long-lasting costs of warfare and war-fighting—among individuals and societies.

Officers and NCOs who enter the US professional military education (PME) system are educated about the responsibilities they hold in a society where civilians control the military and make decisions about where and when to use military force. At the most senior level of PME, for instance, War College students become well-versed in the special responsibilities they hold on the military side of the civil-military equation. Today's civilians, by contrast, are under-educated about their responsibilities. Even as the American people built a large military and handed it vast responsibilities, they devoted less and less time to equipping their future civilian leaders with the knowledge they need to interact with the military in informed and constructive ways. This affects the nation's ability to develop, implement, and sustain an optimal national security strategy for itself, and to adequately address the great range of crucial issues pertaining to the effects and consequences of war.

It is incumbent upon those who train our college and university students—our next generation of civilian leaders—to address the civilian side of the equation. They must teach today's students about the role of the military in a democracy, the blunt character of military force, and the lasting consequences of the decision to wage war. To ignore the study of such an enterprise is, in the end, corrosive of the Constitutional principles that legitimize choice and action in the American system of government. The strong body of literature produced by contemporary military historians, and the knowledge and pedagogical skills that they bring to the classroom, can surely help in this crucial task.

pay a high price than it has been in many cases since the Cold War.” He adds, “The presumption should actually be against it unless the alternatives are unambiguously worse.” See Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 12-13.

¹⁰ Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 7.