

**TEACHING HISTORY IN THE ARMY:
KEY TO OFFICER PROFESSIONALISM**

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The dramatic world events since the late 1980s have altered fundamentally the assumptions that military planners had embraced after World War II. The Persian Gulf War; collapse of the Soviet Union; realignment of basic security arrangements in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific Basin; apprehension about nuclear proliferation; prospects for global economic change; and the resurgence of regional instabilities, ethnic disputes, and nationalism—all these events offer challenges to U.S. interests not faced even during the darkest days of the Cold War. Indeed, the deployment and use of American armed forces over the past decade in such areas as Latin America, the Middle East, Caribbean Basin, Libya, Southwest Asia, Liberia, Somalia, and Bangladesh emphasize that U.S. military leaders must understand more so than at any time in the recent past not only operations and tactics but also strategic implications regarding regions with diverse historical, political, economic, social, and cultural traditions. Despite the claims of some optimists that the prospects for conflict have diminished, the post-Cold War era will be fraught with danger and require recognition of the tensions created by the trends of continuity and change.

One way the Army prepares officers for this uncertainty is by weaving a historical thread through its formal and informal professional education system. This philosophy is not a new one but rather has been revived with increasing sophistication. Between 1865 and 1920 the Army placed important stock in the study of history, focusing on Civil War battles and the Indian Wars, seminal events in which the military played a pivotal role in shaping the development and conscience of the nation. It was in such an environment that the staff ride concept emerged in the late nineteenth century as officers studied the landscape and lessons learned from the growing number of sites being preserved from the nation's military engagements. Furthermore, during this period, the most important scholarship in military history flowed from the pens of commissioned officers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan (*The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*) and Emory Upton (*The Military Policy of the United States*). Thus, for three generations, history, and particularly military history, became the cornerstone of the Army's officer education system from basic branch training for lieutenants through the War College for senior field grade officers.¹

Unfortunately, the teaching of history declined in Army service schools after World War I for two reasons. First, the American Historical Association, which had assumed the leadership of the discipline in the early twentieth century, criticized the

¹ For a recent work on the Army's emphasis on the study of history in the nineteenth century, see Carol Reardon, *Soldiers and Scholars: The U.S. Army and the Uses of Military History, 1865-1920* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991).

quality of history taught and written by professional officers. Second, society's revulsion to war in the 1920s and 1930s undermined the study of history in the services.² Despite this trend, however, a few voices, such as that of General Douglas A. MacArthur, argued that history remained relevant to the professional development of the officer corps. His 1935 annual report as Chief of Staff of the Army highlights MacArthur's intense belief in the value of history:

More than most professions the military depends upon intelligent interpretation of the past for signposts charting the future. Devoid of opportunity, in peace, for self-instruction through actual practice of his profession, the soldier makes maximum use of historical record in assuring the readiness of himself and his command to function efficiently in emergency. The facts derived from historical analysis he applies to conditions of the present and proximate future, thus developing a synthesis of appropriate method, organization, and doctrine.³

The outbreak of World War II briefly piqued again the Army's interest in history. Not surprisingly, the focus was on a review and analysis of campaigns. Nonetheless, except in rare cases, the serious study of history still eluded the military service. Colonel William A. Ganoe, the U.S. Army's Chief Historian in the European Theater of Operations, chided the failings of the Army: "History is the last thing we care about during operations and the first thing we want afterwards. Then it is too little, too late, and too untrue."⁴

Colonel Ganoe's criticism went largely unheeded for over two decades, primarily owing to the nation's disappointing episodes in Korea and Vietnam. Indeed, the Army's premier mid-level officer school, the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, taught little or no history, including military history, even at the height of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s.⁵ However, almost simultaneously the academic community experienced a revival of the study of history, including military history, generated by the phenomenal growth in undergraduate enrollment in the decade and the concurrent expansion of graduate programs in specialties that previously had been little explored or ignored.⁶

² *Ibid.*

³ Excerpts from the *Annual Report, Chief of Staff of the Army (General Douglas A. MacArthur) 1935* as reprinted in Memorandum, "Historical Mindedness in Army Officers," March 11, 1985, Department of History, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY.

⁴ Billy Arthur, "Clio in Desert Shield and Desert Storm," *Army History*, Spring 1991 (PB-20-91-2, No. 18), 13.

⁵ Ronald H. Spector, "Military History and the Academic World," *Army History*, Summer 1991 (PB-20-91-3, No. 19), 2.

⁶ Peter Paret, "The New Military History," *Parameters*, 21 (Autumn 1991), 10-18. See also Allan R. Millett, "American Military History: Over the Top," in Herbert J. Bass, ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970).

These developments influenced a change in the Army in the early 1970s. In 1971 the Department of History at the United States Military Academy at West Point, responding to a request by the Army Chief of Staff, prepared a four-volume study that surveyed the use of general and military history by the service "in the past, present, and future" with a particular emphasis on the "study, publication, and use of history both within and outside the Army service school system." According to the report, history provided a means for officers to "systematically, progressively, and comprehensively study their profession." The study is especially noteworthy because it introduced the concept of "historical mindedness" as an important trait of officership. According to the report, historical mindedness was "a characteristic view of thought that enables one to view an idea in the context of human experience and to judge its applicability under current or anticipated conditions."⁷

By the late 1970s the Army had incorporated the historical mindedness philosophy into its formal educational system. The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) at Fort Monroe, Virginia, the headquarters that oversees Army educational and training programs, required all service schools to establish core and elective courses in history and teach problem solving through:

- (1) a search for broad themes that survey developments over a long period of time;
- (2) identification of the relationship between cause and effect;
- (3) an analysis of the past in the context of its own time;
- (4) the consideration of present circumstances in light of the past.

Thus, TRADOC required that all officers, regardless of their rank or particular military specialty, adopt historical mindedness as a way of thinking and developing a disciplined, mental approach to their profession.⁸

The historical mindedness thrust gained significant momentum in the 1980s. The Army's uniformed and civilian leadership became an advocate for history to serve as a laboratory in which to study problems, develop solutions, draw comparisons, and likewise recognize differences in situations that on the surface might appear similar. History was viewed as an important tool of policy, planning, operations, decision-making, management, and administration for commanders at all levels. The officer corps received a mandate from the Secretary of the Army to adopt a serious approach to the study of history as a means to build a framework for military theory and doctrine and gain an appreciation for the American military tradition. For example, the staff ride concept reemerged but in an expanded fashion as a multitude of officers and soldiers trooped across not only Civil War battlefields but also sites accessible in Europe and elsewhere. Furthermore, in the 1980s the Army created the School for Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Officers are carefully screened for selection to attend this year-long school that employs heavy doses of history to prepare the next generation of military strategists for the Army. It was from

⁷ Memorandum, "Report of the Committee on Historical Mindedness at West Point," January 20, 1989, Department of History, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY.

⁸ *Ibid.*

this pool of officers that the famed "Jedi Knights" emerged to assist in the planning of the campaign against Iraq in 1990-1991.

More broadly, the Army leadership's change to become knowledgeable in history aimed at inspiring officers to "think in time" and to be sensitive to the hallmarks of disparate cultures and societies in which they might be called to serve. Further, officers began to teach and mentor subordinates on the utility of history to the profession of arms. While military history understandably was the vanguard, historical mindedness found converts in all areas of the discipline because of the rapidly changing nature of the world, the growing diversity of the strategic threats posed to the United States, and the national debate about the role that America should play in the international arena in the 1990s and beyond.⁹

Nevertheless, as the White Queen said in *Alice in Wonderland*, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." In this regard, officers were cautioned that the past never fully prescribes a course of action for the present because differences in historical events always exist. Officers must know enough history to avoid the error of selecting attractive but inappropriate historical analogies. Thus, the Army leadership challenged officers to become serious in their reflections on history, both in formal study and private reading, in order to gain an enriched perspective on both contemporary affairs and potential developments related to the defense and security of the nation.

More recently, the U.S. victory in the Persian Gulf War emphasized this approach. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf's heralded "Hail Mary" move west of the heavily defended Kuwaiti border completely surprised the Iraqi army. This tactic somewhat replicated the brilliant maneuver of "Stonewall" Jackson in 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville in which the Confederate forces successfully skirted the Union right flank. To be sure, this was a different army at a different time. However, the knowledge of history planted a seed, one that proved important in securing a quick victory with many fewer casualties than expected.¹⁰

Beyond the general call to heed the lessons of history, in the 1980s the discipline discovered fresh life in the two major sources for commissioning new lieutenants: The United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at civilian colleges and universities. These institutions adopted more stringent standards for infusing history into their curricula. The results have been spectacular and deserve special attention in this paper.

The West Point experience constantly exposes cadets to history. Each of the 4,000 cadets must study two semesters of either American or world history as a plebe (freshman) and two semesters of military history as an upperclassman. Standout students are selected for advanced sections of the respective courses, providing the opportunity for more challenging and in-depth study.

⁹ Memorandum for the Superintendent, United States Military Academy, "Report of the committee on Historical Mindedness at West Point," December 10, 1989, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY.

¹⁰ *Baltimore Sun*, February 13, 1992.

The emphasis on history, however, goes far beyond the classroom. Cadet history courses schedule outstanding guest lecturers, participate in staff rides through West Point's Revolutionary War fortifications and nearby Revolutionary and Civil War battlefields such as Stony Point, Gettysburg, and Antietam, peruse the historical exhibits in the Military Academy's impressive museum, and take field trips to places such as Philadelphia, the Franklin D. Roosevelt home and library in Hyde Park, New York, and the Cloisters and Metropolitan Museums in New York City. In addition, the Department of History sponsors a Great Films Forum and assists with several Academy programs such as the annual Student Council on United States Affairs (SCUSA), Crossroads Africa, Fine Arts Program, and Debate Council and Forum, all of which have as either a stated or implied goal the understanding of the relationship among things past, present, and future.

In 1989 the Academy instituted an academic enrichment program that provided upperclass cadets the opportunity to delve more deeply into their chosen major during one summer. Cadets studying history have opted to attend courses at civilian colleges or universities, to do research at libraries or archives across the country, or to participate in regional trips to such areas as Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Far East.

The strength of West Point's history program, however, lies in its curriculum and faculty. The Department of History has developed a strong elective course offering to complement its core program. Its popularity has grown since the mid-1980s so that currently more than 100 cadets enroll in history for a major or field of study. The difference between the two programs is that a cadet who declares history as a major must write a senior thesis. The department sponsors four areas for majors or fields of study: military history, American history, European history, and international history. In addition, it serves in an advisory capacity and offers elective courses that support interdisciplinary programs or various fields in other departments, such as languages, geography, foreign area studies, law, political science, and international affairs. The philosophy underpinning each academic program in history is that cadets must have both depth and breadth in their studies. For example, if a cadet chooses to major in American history, he or she must ensure that at least one elective course is taken from the offerings in European, military, and international history. This emphasis on breadth will pay important dividends for young officers who may be required to respond to unexpected, worldwide contingencies such as Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989 and Desert Shield/Desert Storm in Southwest Asia in 1990-1991.

The Department of History faculty emphasizes TEACHING as its number one priority. West Point is an undergraduate institution that has as its mission to educate, train, and inspire cadets to a lifetime of service to the nation. The selection and development of qualified faculty is essential to accomplish these goals. Currently, fifty active duty officers are assigned to the Department. Two full professors in the grade of colonel serve as Head and Deputy Head. Seven associate professors in the grades of colonel and lieutenant colonel chair or assist the chair in each one of the four areas in which majors or fields of study are offered. The professors and associate professors, chosen through a rigorous selection process that reviews academic and military qualifications, serve in an active duty status in the Army and are tenured upon selection for the positions. They remain at West Point until retirement to teach,

contribute to the discipline through research and writing, provide continuity in the curriculum, supervise the junior faculty, and serve in Academy governance positions.

The remaining forty officers, usually in the grade of major or captain, serve as instructors or assistant professors. This group is selected on the basis of a strong undergraduate academic background and an outstanding record of military service, highlighted by successful company command as a captain. These officers are enrolled in the nation's finest graduate programs for two years to complete a Master's degree in history. A large percentage of the officers pursue work beyond the M.A. level in the two-year period and attain A.B.D. status. Following graduate school, the officers report to West Point to serve on the faculty for three years.

Another important aspect of the history department's approach is the visiting professor program. Each year a distinguished professor from a civilian institution takes a teaching sabbatical at West Point to provide fresh perspective for not only the students but the faculty as well. These scholars provide an important role model and give developmental guidance to junior faculty members who are novices in the field. As a result, a number of officers have become active in professional organizations, presented papers at conferences, and published works related to their graduate study.

Several other elements of the academic program also boost the teaching success at West Point. First, the classroom size rarely exceeds sixteen students. This policy allows for intense instruction and discussion with the students. Thus, instructors may become a true *magister* or mentor to their cadets. Second, since the faculty's primary mission is to teach, great emphasis is placed on ensuring that individual cadets receive additional instruction if they have problems in the classroom. This personal attention to learning is extremely effective in emphasizing the importance of scholarship in a tough environment in which cadets find academic, physical fitness, and military duties competing for limited time.

The nation's ROTC programs also experienced a revival in the teaching of history in the 1970s. The 1971 West Point Study recommended that each of the institutions that sponsored an Army ROTC program have a minimum of one member on the military faculty with an advanced degree in history. In addition, the report suggested that civilian faculty members teach courses in military history as part of the ROTC curriculum. As an outgrowth of this proposal, in 1980 West Point established a summer fellowship to teach a course in military history to civilian history professors in preparation for their instruction of a similar course at their colleges and universities. The fellowship not only has produced excellent teachers for the ROTC program but has had a positive influence on the understanding of the military in American society and strengthened the relationship between the Army and important academic institutions in the country. Through the summer of 1993 over 500 college professors representing nearly every state in the union had attended the program. The fellowship program has received rave reviews from attendees and each summer has to turn away requests from numerous professors who wish to participate.¹¹

¹¹ Spector, "Military History and the Academic World," *Army History*, 5; Memorandum, "Historical Mindedness Report," January 20, 1989.

In conclusion, recent events have forced U.S. civilian and military leaders to focus on developing a new national security strategy. The lessons of the past make it clear that the military instrument will not be disarmed, despite a new world order and budgetary constraints. Rather, it will be retooled to protect the security and interests of the country and respond to global emergencies. It is safe to assume that future military leaders must comprehend the nature of the world in which U.S. forces might be deployed. The study of history—during pre-commissioning, at military service schools, at advanced civil schooling, at senior service colleges, and through independent study and reflection—will continue to be an essential element in the professional development of the next generation of Army officers and serve the nation well while they are on active duty and beyond.