

Reading #1: An Introduction to the Study of the History of the Military Art

The need for future military leaders to conduct a detailed study and possess a sound understanding of the history of the military art should be self-evident. Perhaps no one has summarized the utility of military history for the modern military professional better than Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) James Carafano did in a recent *Army* magazine article. In that article, LTC Carafano stated that, "History serves one fundamental purpose for the military professional: to sharpen the critical thinking skills of combat leaders." In a clear and concise argument, LTC Carafano then proceeded to demonstrate how a thorough study of military history achieves this goal:

Commanders fight battles and engagements for one purpose: to impose their will on the enemy. They accomplish this feat of arms by being stronger at the decisive point. The key to having maximum relative combat power at the decisive time and place is the synchronized application of combat power.

Synchronization begins in the mind of the commander. He must be able to see the battlefield – to visualize the factors and forces that affect the outcome of combat. From this visualization, the commander determines how to impose his will on the enemy.

The talent to see the battlefield derives from the ability to think critically about combat, to weigh quickly the influences that determine the outcome of battle. This is where military history can aid combat leaders. The systematic analysis of military history demands critical thinking. History offers an opportunity to reflect on the dynamic nature of warfare and illuminates the leader's ability to see and understand the battlefield.¹

Keep LTC Carafano's words of wisdom in mind as you proceed through this two-semester course in the History of the Military Art. As you study the leaders, battles, campaigns, and wars covered in this course, seek to visualize them and come to a firm understanding of "the influences that determine the outcome of battle." If done successfully, your understanding of how armies have been organized, how they have fought, and how military commanders have gained victory on the battlefield in the past, will undoubtedly assist you greatly should you be called upon to perform similar feats on future battlefields.

As you begin your first formal study of the history of warfare in the western world, you should not only understand the importance of doing so, but also the tightly intertwined relationship that exists between the military and society outlined in the following article.²

The history of human society has been thoroughly permeated by war, but studies of military history have often been narrowly specialized, or written as if war existed in a vacuum. One reason for this is that by far the greater number of those who studied war in the past had a professional interest in it. Battlefield experience, training maneuvers, war games, and tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs)—important ways of learning about war—were seen as not enough to provide the understanding that the practice of war required. Only by reading history could the mind of the future commander be trained. So the military student turned to military history.

¹ LTC James Carafano, "Learning the Lessons of the Past: Military History and the Future", in *Army*, June 1994.

² Richard Preston, Alex Roland, and Sydney Wise, eds., *Men in Arms – A History of Warfare and Its Interrelationships with Western Society*, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.

Military history is no longer the interest only, or primarily, of soldiers. Although there is much talk of its abolition, war has, in fact, become ever more closely a part of the life of the community, rather than the plaything of kings. Just as war has been more and more affected by other aspects of society's evolution, so it in turn has affected the course of events far and wide. Therefore, general history cannot be understood without a knowledge of military history, nor military history without a knowledge of general history. These facts have not always been appreciated. In the period between the two world wars of this century, distaste for things military, growing out of the bitter experiences of 1914—18, led to the relegation of military history to a very minor place in the curriculum. There are indeed some academics who still appear to believe that by not thinking about war, they may be able to induce it to go away.

This is unfortunate. In modern war, civilians make decisions that are vital to a war effort. Indeed, in modern times the higher direction of war in most countries is in the hands of civilian leaders, not of soldiers. Furthermore, preparation for defense in times of peace needs an understanding of war's purposes and functions. The degree to which civilian life, even in peace, is affected by war, and the amount of civilian energy and resources that it absorbs, make it essential that all, whether politicians, business people, engineers, manufacturers, or teachers—indeed, all voters—know military history and understand warfare. What they need to grasp especially is the relation between warfare and the way society has developed in the past and presumably will continue to develop in the future. For this purpose the military history of their own country is not enough. They must study war as a universal institution.

There has been some disagreement whether it is better, for both military and civilian students, to concentrate on a few wars, campaigns, battles, or leaders, or, on the other hand, to make a wide survey. Narrow intensive studies can come closer to recreating reality, including what has been called "the fog of war"; but such specialized studies provide relatively few illustrations, examples, and experiences. On the other hand, surveys, which give a varied experience by the production of many examples, tend to oversimplify the story. The ideal system is to use both approaches. What is most important is that the student should read over a number of years not limited to the duration of an academic course or to the preparation for a professional examination. The essential first step is to gain the interest of the student, whether military or civilian, so that he or she will continue reading after the first period of acquaintance with military history ends. It can be argued that that first critical acquaintance can best be made through an overall survey.

Whether one accepts the thesis that war is the child of civilization or the contrary one that war stems from human nature, it is clear that development in warfare has been closely related to the process of historical change. Man's social, political, economic, and cultural progress has been affected both for good and for ill by the incidence and impact of armed conflict. The verdict of war has been, time and again, the deciding factor in the process of historical change. The Persian Wars have been said to have saved Europe from Asiatic tyranny. The Roman Empire was established by warfare, and warfare contributed to its destruction. William the Conqueror, as his name indicates, exercised his influence upon the history of England because of a successful war. And so it has gone on through the centuries. War has thus always been the arbiter when other methods of reaching a decision failed. But the judgment it has given is based on might rather than on right; it is never a moral judgment. At times right has prevailed, but whether this was accidental or due to inherent moral strength is a question upon which agreement is impossible.

But war has also been much more than a crude trial by combat deciding the course of history. It is intimately involved with the whole historical process. The nature of war itself has been fashioned by social factors and by technical development; war and organizations for war or for defense have affected social and technical progress or retrogression.

That war has been affected by social and technical change needs little elucidation. Weapons are the products of contemporary technology. Armies reflect the society from which they spring. When social

or industrial revolutions take place, when power is passed from one economic class to another, when new techniques of administration or of distribution are discovered, warfare is automatically affected. The ever-accelerating rate of scientific discovery in our own time has made this clear as never before, so much so that one British writer on military affairs, General J. F. C. Fuller, has gone so far as to say that weapons account for 99 percent of victory. While few would agree with so extreme a statement, it is a fact that "superior arms favor victory," as I. B. Holley, Jr., wrote in *Ideas and Weapons* in 1953. Therefore, because of the present acceleration in invention, success in war depends more than ever before on the facility with which soldiers adapt their organization, tactics, and doctrine to the use of improved weapons. It may equally depend upon the extent to which military leaders bring their forces into line with the society from which they come and which they are designed to defend. Armies that are anachronisms will be swept away like the *condottieri* of Renaissance Italy. In the past, partly through a conservatism inherent in their craft, soldiers have often been peculiarly slow to adopt weapons and methods that were ready to hand. Resistance to improvements in military efficiency has sometimes resulted from militarism, which includes among other things a distortion of military values by an overemphasis upon the superficialities of military traditions and the insulation of the military craft from society at large. Only in very recent times has scientific research been accepted by the soldier as an important part of defense; and only slowly is it becoming understood that an army cannot stand aloof from the rest of the community.

The other thesis, that war shapes society, raises more contentious issues. Stanislaw Andreski, in his *Military Organization and Society*, argues that all societies reflect their armies because societies that do not develop adequate defensive systems inevitably disappear. Some thinkers have actually concluded that war has been a constructive force in social and technological progress. The German economist Werner Sombart argued that war fostered the modern economic system and therefore modern society: that the medieval knight was the earliest example of the specialization of labor; that the growth of professional armies developed the spirit of discipline and the organizing spirit essential to modern capitalism; that the cost of war led to the expansion and development of credit; and that the demands of modern armies for standardized products on a huge scale compelled the introduction of the techniques of mass production in the basic metal-working and textile industries. The American social philosopher Lewis Mumford contended that the machine was propagated by war; that the invention of gunpowder stimulated the production of the basic element of modern civilization, iron; that since the gun was itself a primitive single-chambered combustion engine, it inspired also the invention of power-engines; that war produced the military engineer who was the prototype of the industrial director and something very different from the simple craftsman of the Middle Ages; and that it was in the professional army that there was elaborated the ideal form of organization for a purely mechanical system of industrial production. Furthermore, a host of writers have dwelt upon the military virtues as they are revealed by individuals, especially in time of crisis; and some, like Friedrich Nietzsche, have argued that war must therefore be an ennobling experience for society as a whole.

A conflicting view was advanced by A. J. Toynbee in his multi-volume *Study of History*, which, along with due recognition of the importance of the martial virtues, showed that war was the "proximate cause" of the breakdown of every civilization in the past. Toynbee's description of the death-symptoms in the "time of troubles" of previous civilizations was uncomfortably similar to the nationalist wars and proletarian revolutions of the early twentieth century. Although he wrote about many ancient civilizations, he was thinking primarily of the classical periods of Greece and Rome and parallels with contemporary problems.

A great many other writers have held that war is a great destroyer, both of materials and of moral standards. Some have attempted to distinguish between militarism and other military characteristics and have come to the conclusion that there is a strong tendency, perhaps an inevitable one, for the efforts expended in necessary defensive organization and operations to lead to excesses of the military spirit which, in the end, tend to destroy the society that it was the original intention to defend. Many books and articles, inspired by the revelations made by scientists about the atom and hydrogen bombs, and by the impact of total warfare, have resurrected the theme of Armageddon and of the destruction of civilization, perhaps even of man himself.

Published in 1950, J. U. Nef's *War and Human Progress* is a most detailed investigation of the impact of war upon society, written to refute Werner Sombart. In it, many of the claims of the "constructive" school about the contributions made by war to society were shown to be either false or exaggerated. Nef contended that it is the "limitations" on war, rather than war itself, that led to social and technical advance.

War may be limited in several different ways. It may be limited in duration, in space or location, in intensity or mode of fighting, in its impact upon the contending peoples, or in objective. All of these forms of limitation need not be present at the same time. The origin of such limitation is diverse. Shortness of the duration of wars is likely to be brought about by a preponderance of strength on one side rather than by lack of zeal of the contestants; limitation in location may be caused by the localized nature of the issues in dispute; restraints in the mode of fighting, lack of impact upon the civilian populations, and limitation of objective can be caused by physical limitations as well as by a climate of opinion which places restrictions on the nature of warfare. Limitations of this latter kind existed in theory in the Middle Ages and were a powerful restraint in the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment.

Total War

It is obvious that the concept of limitation is opposite to the concept of totality in war. Furthermore, just as limitation can never be absolute, so also totality in war is a relative concept rather than an absolute one. Total warfare in the most complete sense would mean fighting with all resources and all kinds of weapons without any restrictions imposed by humanity or by expediency, killing all prisoners and civilians without respect for age or sex, disregarding completely the rights of neutrals, and using psychological techniques to wipe out individual personality and to obliterate all standards. No warfare has yet reached this stage. Clausewitz said that total war of this kind is an abstraction that exists only in theory; in practice, all war is limited by the political ends it seeks. The conqueror does not wish to find at his feet a pestilence-ridden lazaret. Absolute totality in warfare could only mean chaos and a return to barbarism. Hence, when we speak of limitations upon warfare, we mean that the growth of civilizing influences, or the lack of ability to overcome physical barriers, has exercised restraint upon warfare and so has lessened its impact upon society, and when we speak of total warfare, we really mean approximation to totality.

Man's increasing power of construction has been closely paralleled by the growth of his power of destruction. Similarly, his greater capacity for destruction has been matched by, and to some extent has produced, a desire to place limitations on warfare in the name of humanity. Through the centuries, the forces moving toward totality, on the one hand, and toward limitation, on the other, have been roughly in balance with a tendency first to one side and then to the other. Just as the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century were periods of limitation, so the ages of the Reformation and of the French Revolution saw increasing approximation to totality. The nineteenth century was a period when it seemed as if man had a choice between two alternative paths. In 1910 Sir Norman Angell, in *The Great Illusion*, showed that war profited neither victor nor vanquished. A logical conclusion was that rational man would eventually desist from resorting to it to settle differences. However, the twentieth century showed a swing toward total warfare. It was also marked by more conscious efforts than ever before to control the scourge of war.

The invention of the atomic bomb seemed to threaten civilization and perhaps even the very existence of man. Although it showed that war had stimulated the rate of scientific and technical advance seldom achieved in peacetime, war had now become a destructive force of boundless potentiality. Failure to restrict atomic power to peaceful uses accentuated the danger, which was suspended, like the sword of Damocles, above man's head. Movements to abolish war, which had already been stimulated by the horrors of modern strife, were greatly strengthened. Pacifism, limitation of armaments, collective security, and even the creation of a super-state by general consent have been advocated as means by which war might be ended. The annihilating power of the new hydrogen bomb is so vast that some responsible statesmen, scientists, and military men have begun to say that the frightfulness of the weapon will, in itself, be a deterrent against the onset of another major conflict.

William McNeill, in *The Pursuit of Power* (1982), argued that throughout the ages the course of history has been determined by technological development that affected the nature of warfare and of society. Technology led to the commercialization of the exercise of violence and to the professionalization of armies. The exercise of command of the technical developments and armed forces by monarchs or elites drastically changed the societies that they controlled. McNeill sees no evidence of an end to this process in the foreseeable future.

More recently Paul Kennedy, in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1988), which like Toynbee's *Study of History*, was derived from a contemplation of the contemporary scene, argued that Western Europe's success in extending its sway across the face of the whole globe led to a changing internal balance of power among the national states on the continent and to the prevention of the creation of a single imperial power like those that dominated all earlier civilizations. Kennedy argued that prolonged wars lead to economic collapse and therefore to social and political change. As a result of the two world conflicts of this century, two superpowers have emerged, the United States and the USSR, states that originally were peripheral to Western civilization. He says that with the emergence of Japan, China, and the European Economic Community, there are now five such potential centers of power. His interpretation suggests that the leadership gained by mid-century by the United States having quickly waned; it may be followed by intense conflict between all five.

All these various scenarios warn against the uncontrolled and unlimited conflicts that could bring disaster to the human race; but at the same time they show the need for the vigilant maintenance of technically competent and up-to-date armed forces and defense strategies.

The study of the history of warfare, its relation to society, and the impact of social and technical development on it . . . is necessary to help us to speculate fruitfully upon the search for a means to control or limit conflict and so to eliminate a present danger to mankind and civilization. It is, at the same time, also essential for an adequate understanding of the way in which armed forces and conflict developed in the past and also the way in which they are likely to adjust in the future to changing circumstances and changing needs.