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***The Past as Prologue
Lessons of the Past?***

By

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The Past as Prologue Lessons of the Past?

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The early Greek imagination envisaged the past and the present as in front of us – we can see them. The future, invisible is behind us... Paradoxical as it may sound to the modern ear, this image of our journey through time may be truer to reality than the medieval and modern feeling that we face the future as we make our way forward into it.¹

The great mistake made by all too many in this town is to attempt to draw specific lessons from the past. Unfortunately, we can never know the specific lessons until the future has become the past, and then we are in a position to play the favorite American game of Monday-morning quarterbacking. In fact, history's lessons are at best muted, ambiguous, and uncertain, but they are there for those willing to spend the time to study the past rather than simply ravage it for supposed lessons to justify current policies and weapons systems.² This paper aims at elucidating some of the lessons, as well as the difficulties that the past presents for those interested in thinking about the future.

¹ Bernard Knox, *Backing into the Future: The Classical Tradition and Its Renewal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), pp. 11-12.

² For the difficulties involved in thinking through the uncertain and ambiguous lessons of history see Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue, The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Let me begin with a quote from the most brilliant military and diplomatic historian of my generation, Professor MacGregor Knox of the London School of Economics about the importance of history to understanding the present and the future.

The owl of history is an evening bird. The past as a whole is unknowable; only at the end of the day do some of its outlines dimly emerge. The future cannot be known at all, and the past suggests that change is often radical and unforeseeable rather than incremental and predictable. Yet, despite its many ambiguities, historical experience remains the only available guide both to the present and to the range of alternatives inherent in the future.³

It is to that last sentence that I would call your attention. Only by an understanding of history can we gain insights into where we stand in the present. And if we do not understand where we stand in the present, then any road to the future will do. Unfortunately, that is the sad tale of American strategy over the past two decades. In the dismal adventure in Iraq, the United States and its military have repeated nearly every mistake its policy makers, military as well as civilian, made in the Vietnam War. And in that conflict, we managed to repeat every mistake the French had made in their conflict with the Vietminh between 1946 and 1954.⁴ Without a

³ MacGregor Knox, "What History can tell Us about the 'New Strategic environment,'" in Williamson Murray, ed., *Brassey's American Defense Annual, 1993-1996* (Washington, DC: Brassey's Publishers, 1996), p.

⁴ In 1964 when it was apparent that the Johnson administration was bent on intervening with major military forces in the Vietnam War, DeGaulle made available to policy makers in Washington his government's top secret

historically based understanding, statesmen and military leaders “will continue, in the immortal words of Kiffin Rockwell, a pilot in the legendary World War I Lafayette Escadrille, to ‘fly along, blissfully ignorant, hoping for the best.’”⁵

The third charge that the organizers of this conference have asked this panel to address, is: “Is the past prologue when it comes to forecasting the future security environment in light of the empowering aspects of modern technology, knowledge sharing, and communication?” Only in this town after the experiences of the past six years could such a question be posed.⁶ One would have thought that the nonsense spouted out in the 1990s about dominant battle space knowledge, or about how the U.S. military with its technological wizardry was going to be able to see and understand everything in the battlespace would have died when confronted by the reality of the insurgencies that American military forces have confronted in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷ But apparently it has not.

report on France’s defeat. It was sent over to NDU where it was promptly sent to the classified Library and remained unread and unappreciated throughout the American adventure in Southeast Asia. Of course, by 1968 we Americans did not need to read it, because by then we had repeated every mistake the French had made. For some Vietnam veterans who visited Iraq in summer 2003, the situation hauntingly reminded them of Vietnam.

⁵ Robert Gaskin, “The Great 1996 Non-Debate on National Security,” in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Brassey’s American Defense Annual, 1996-1997* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1996), p. 17.

⁶ For this author’s comments in the late 1990s on the dangerous road the American military were on see Williamson Murray, “Clausewitz Out, Computer In, Military Culture and Technological Hubris,” *The National Interest*, Summer 1997.

⁷ For the sorts of arguments that were bruted about in the recent past see in particular Admiral Bill Owens with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000). But Admiral Owens was only one among many in pushing technology as a decisive advantage.

The events of the recent past as well as those of the twentieth century have underlined that technology is an enabler. By itself it has rarely proven to be decisive.⁸ That is certainly the fundamental lesson of World War II. In terms of wars to defeat insurgencies, it has supported American efforts, but on the basis of the lessons of Vietnam and our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq has been that even more important than technology is the requirement to know and understand the human terrain, the sea in which the insurgents swim. Without that knowledge, all the technology in the world has proven of little consequence.

More information does not translate into knowledge. In fact even conventional military operations in 2003 saw commanders drowning in information. There was a real reason why the commanders of the spearhead divisions invading Iraq, Major General James Mattis of the 1st Marine Division and Major General Buford Blount of the 3rd Infantry Divisions, spent much of their time away from their TOCs: Because computer screens and icons do not reflect what is actually happening on the battlefield.

As Major General Robert Scales and I observed in our examination of the invasion of Iraq in 2003:

U.S. forces brought twenty-first-century technology to the battlefield and achieved 'information dominance,' but they never escaped the dangerous reality

⁸ One only has to look at the Germans at the end of World War II. In almost every respect they were ahead of the Allies from radar, to jet engines, to rocket technology, to armored fighting vehicles, to submarine design, and even to crew served weapons the Germans had considerable superiority over their opponents. The results of the war, however, speak for themselves.

that their enemies were trying to kill them. To quote Clausewitz...: ‘In the dreadful presence of suffering and danger, emotion can easily overwhelm intellectual conviction, and in this psychological fog it is ... hard to form clear and complete insights... It is the exceptional man [or woman] who keeps his powers of quick decision intact’⁹ under the conditions of combat.¹⁰

Let me emphasize: Afghanistan and Iraq have underlined in spades that Clausewitz is alive and well. Political concerns will dominate the conduct of war throughout the twenty-first century and beyond, if there is another century of human affairs. Fog, friction, ambiguity, and uncertainty will dominate the landscape of not only war, but human affairs in general. People will misunderstand each other; the enemy will react in unexpected ways; analysts will miss crucial pieces of the knowledge puzzle in the flood of information, a flood resulting from the very technologies that are supposed to enable greater understanding; confusion and ambiguity will compound the normal frictions of operations. And as suggested above, the horror of war will inevitably exacerbate the difficulties that confront men and women already in the haze of sleep deprivation and suffering the pangs of hunger.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have made it clear that an understanding of the enemy, his culture, his history, his political framework are even more important than technological

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 108,113.

¹⁰ Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales, Jr., *The Iraq War, A Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 238.

virtuosity, however useful that may be. U.S. forces have begun to master the IED problem not because of their technological wizardry, but because they have begun to master the cultural and social milieu in which they are operating.

History suggests timeless lessons about the fundamental nature of human conflict, the characteristics of human interactions, the extraordinary range of human attitudes and understandings of the world, and perhaps most important, the larger historical, cultural, and strategic framework within which the strivings take place. History also underlines that human nature will remain intractable, truculent, unpredictable, and irascible; that conflict in one form or another will remain a substantial and continuous part of the human landscape. In such a landscape conflict and wars will be the inevitable result.

Above all the cold, dark words spoken by the Athenians to the Spartans in 432 B.C. in the midst of the Peloponnesian war will continue to confront American strategists and policy makers throughout the coming century:

We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature to accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so – security, honour, and self-interest. And we were not the first to act in this way. Far from it. It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power. Up till the present moment you, too, used to think that we were, but now, after calculating your interest, you are

beginning to talk in terms of right and wrong.¹¹

Perhaps the greatest warning that history can impart to those arrogant or insane enough to predict the future is that we live today in times driven by vast, unpredictable change: change in social mores; change in technology; change in basic economic factors; change in politics; and of great consequence for American policy makers, change in the relations among the great states. Quite simply in the near future in historical terms, the United States will cease being *the* world's dominant power. Instead, Americans will confront a world of other great powers; their nation will be at best *primus inter pares*. They have not lived in such a world since the 1930s and in many respects it will come as a rude shock.¹²

Change, drastic change, has been a major theme throughout history, but the pace of discontinuities has clearly picked up over the course of the past century and a half, since the Industrial Revolution began drastically altering the physical environment in which mankind lives and fights.¹³ There is nothing in what we have seen in the twenty-first century's accelerating pace of technological change that suggests that human affairs will not continue on this well-worn path. Yet, most individuals continue seeking an existence in both their professional and personal

¹¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 80.

¹² One might claim that the Soviet Union was at least another great power, but the peculiarities of the Cold War very much dampened down the traditional nature of great power politics.

¹³ For the impact of technological change on war and military organizations over the course of history, see particularly William H. McNeil, *The Pursuit of Power, Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

lives in which change has little impact. That tension between the dreams of the imaginary continuities of the past and a world of ceaseless change is what provided much of the impetus for the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s.

A brief look at the past quarter of a century suggests that kind of changes that we need to think about in considering the world the United States and its military will face over the next quarter of a century. Twenty-five years ago the United States found itself locked in a great ideological struggle with the Soviet Union – a struggle which virtually everyone, including the so-called experts, foresaw continuing well into the next century. In other words nearly all the experts believed that the Cold War would last well into the next century even as late as 1988. The dominant foreign policy issue of 1983 was whether the Europeans were going to allow the United States to deploy the *Pershing* IRBM and ground launched cruise missiles to bases on their continent.

In 1983 it would have been inconceivable to everyone except possibly a few Middle Eastern experts that the United States would fight not one, but two major wars against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and then find itself mired deeply in insurgent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the military side CENTCOM had been only recently created to handle difficulties in the Middle East; GPS did not exist; precision weaponry involved the use of low-yield nuclear weapons. On the civilian side of the equation the internet did not yet exist; computers were just coming into use; cell phones did not exist. On the economic side, there was some talk of the Asian tigers, but China was just emerging from the dark years of Mao's rule with what appeared to be some slight chance for improvement in its economic situation, while India appeared likely to remain permanently mired in hopeless poverty. Globalization certainly did not yet exist even as a

concept. And in terms of the global movement of funds, the total had barely reached \$20 billion, while today the global movement of funds has reached \$1.6 trillion.¹⁴

There is no reason to believe that the rate of change in any of the above areas will not continue at the same rate over the coming quarter of a century. Above all, such a rate of change demands that the United States and its military institutions be prepared to adapt to the actual conditions of the war they confront. Here only history can provide statesmen and military leaders with what the Germans term the *Fingerspitzengefühl* – the sixth sense – to grasp what is actually occurring in both the strategic and operational realms. The great weakness that military institutions have had over the past century has been their tendency to attempt to force war to conform to their prewar picture of what future war will be like – rather than adapt their assumptions and presumptions to the reality they confront.

Perhaps the most ironic statement in Clausewitz's *On War* is his comment that “No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, the sad record of history suggests exactly the opposite: most political leaders, more often than not solidly backed by their military advisors, have begun conflicts with neither their aims nor the means necessary to conduct war through to victory clear in their minds.

Here, the essential prerequisite for strategic competence, the most important attribute a statesman can possess, must lie in the ability to ask the right questions about the nature and culture of the enemy as well as what may go wrong. Without knowledge of the history of one's

¹⁴ I am indebted to James Lacey of the Institute for Defense Analyses for these rough figures.

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579.

opponents, no analysts, no matter how brilliant, will find themselves capable of framing the right questions. And without the right questions, all the answers that bureaucratic organizations develop will prove false or misleading, or even disastrous.

The era that confronts the United States appears to be one in which new and unexpected challenges will dominate the landscape. There is a rather wistful desire among some strategic circles for another ground breaking article like George Kennan's famous "The Source of Soviet Conflict" which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947.¹⁶ In fact no such piece is ever likely to appear. Kennan's piece laid out in brilliant fashion the nature and framework for the ideological conflict that had already broken out between two dominant powers. It was predictive to a considerable extent, but only because of the peculiar framework and stability of the Cold War. History underlines the exceptionalism of that time and suggests that we will not have the luxury of having the luxury of a single opponent.

But the Cold War in retrospect was a great anomaly in historical terms – certainly in comparison to the history of the relations among the great states since the Treaty of Westphalia. It was an anomaly because so little changed over the next four decades in terms of the strategic framework within which it occurred – at least until the very end and even as late as 1987 it was largely unclear that the Soviet Union was near collapse. Kennan could write an article that seems so brilliant in retrospect, because the landscape of strategic competition remained so stable. No such article, such as Kennan's, laying out the next forty years could have been written in 1914, or 1938, or 1860, for that matter, because the landscape of the future was to prove so turbulent. And that is why few at best will prove able to capture even glimmers of the emergent

¹⁶ "X," "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, pp. 161-182.

future that will confront the United States over the next quarter century.

The very complexity and rapidity of change in today's world make the future largely unpredictable. Nevertheless, if history has difficulty in delineating what is going to occur, it can at least prepare us to adapt. It does indicate what things that will not change such as the competition among states and the fundamental nature of war. It will prepare us to recognize the nature of the kinds of wars that we may have to fight. And it should certainly prevent us from making the kinds of mistakes that occurred during the first three years of our occupation of Iraq. Above all, history will suggest the kinds of questions we should be asking. There is in history, I am afraid, not much solace for those who would like a clear strategic course set for the United States in its journey into the future. But it is better than the alternatives, which almost entirely involve leaping into the future without a clue. As General James Mattis suggested, we can learn from history or we can learn by filling body bags.