

WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. ARMY LEARN FROM HISTORY? RECOVERY FROM A STRATEGY DEFICIT

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This monograph examines the potential utility of history as a source of education and possible guidance for the U.S. Army. The author considers the worth in the claim that since history (more accurately termed the past) is all done and gone, it can have no value for today as we try to look forward. This point of view did not find much favor here. The monograph argues that although history does not repeat itself in detail, it certainly does so roughly in parallel circumstances. Of course, much detail differs from one historical case to another, but nonetheless, there are commonly broad and possibly instructive parallels that can be drawn from virtually every period of history, concerning most circumstances.

An argument that finds very little favor here is that attracted to claims for the value of assertions of historical analogy. This monograph suggests that the strict requirements for detailed evidence that is required for credible claims of analogy are effectively impossible to meet. Since it can be important not to lose all grasp of the comparison, the idea—perhaps the habit—of claiming historical analogy should be dropped. Instead, a much more useful concept that avoids the error of foolish analogy is the idea of the historical parallel. The parallel claim conveys the core of the analogical one, while expediently saving us from the need to try to make claims that are bound to exceed the accessible evidence.

We explore and carefully consider the popular idea expressed by writer L. P. Hartley half a century ago that “the past is a foreign country.” This idea is important and remains quite popular, but it does not withstand careful criticism. Controversially, I am sure this monograph, though recognizing and welcoming much change in world affairs, is unconvinced that truly major themes in human political and spiritual life have altered significantly over the centuries. While

nearly all of the detail and what may be termed dismissively as the decorative and even mechanical features of private and public life have changed greatly over the past 2 centuries, the values of morality, politics, and the connections between effort and reward, have not really altered at all. For a leading example, the standard and traditional formula of ends, ways, and means (and assumptions) works for the interpretation of all cultures, in all periods of history. The reason is because the interdependence of the four vital ideas, at all times and in all circumstances, enjoys the rare status of being a truth for the whole human race, and it is an important key for unlocking the details of many disparate civilizations.

The analysis here is not unfriendly to the idea of change, but it is unimpressed with many claims for alteration that are not, in fact, evidence of radical improvement. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, relatively little with the highest value for human life is found to have changed over a long passage of time. By way of empirical evidence for this argument, the aspirations and achievements, as well as many of the crimes, as we might choose to label them, continue to make sense to us. It is impressive that three of the four greatest books on war, statecraft, and strategy were written millennia in the past, while the most outstanding book on land warfare, by Carl von Clausewitz, was first published 184 years ago.

Among the conclusions reached in this analysis is the important thought that history teaches no lessons—it is historians who do that. The study reaches four significant conclusions; they are the following:

1. Behave prudently (meaning with regard for the consequences of action).
2. Remember the concept of the great stream of time.

3. Do not forget that war nearly always is a gamble.
4. War should only be waged with strategic sense.

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