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Uses & abuses of military history

by *Victor Davis Hanson*

On the value of the discipline and its applications.

War accelerates and intensifies the human experience. The story of dramatic scientific discoveries, technological breakthroughs, and political, economic, and cultural upheavals, as well as radical changes in art and literature, is so often inseparable from the wartime conditions that birthed them, whether atomic bombs or combustion engines.

More practically, military history rests on the hallowed notion that human nature is unchanging over the centuries. The study of wars of the past, then, can offer timeless lessons about why wars in the present and future start, how they proceed and end, and what, if anything, they accomplish. Clausewitz was right about the immutable essential nature of war when he remarked that "War is in no way changed or modified through the progress of civilization."

Yet for a discipline that is both ancient and relevant, military history is relatively little studied these days. Over the last quarter century, military historians have rued declining college course offerings, and the titles of their lamentations usually are self-explanatory in periodic articles: "Our Elite Schools Have Abandoned Military History" (Peter Berkowitz), "Don't Let Academia Destroy Military History" (James Carafano and Tom Spoehr), "The Course of Military History in the United States Since World War II" (Edward Coffman), "American Universities Declare War on Military History" (Max Hastings), "The Embattled Future of Academic Military History" (John Lynn), "Why Military History Matters" (Fred Kagan), "The Current State of Military History" (Mark Moyar), "Reimagining Military History in the Classroom" (Carol Reardon), "Military History and the Academic World" (Ron Spector), and "Why Study War?" (my own).

The consensus is that the decline of military history has not been caused by the American people's innate lack of interest in studying the nature of war, and especially not by the American experience with armed conflict. Rather, the fault is found in the interests and

The degreed classes have deprecated military history.

prejudices of our educated civilian elites in higher education, politics, and the media. The degreed classes have deprecated military history, even as they are largely the demographic that has adjudicated when and where the United States goes to war, and the degree to which Americans should aid or oppose other nations that do.

More recently there has been a parallel decline in the historical education of our military elites themselves at the academies. Our highest-ranking officers seem to have few historical referents to ground their policies other than contemporary trends and pressures. In June 2021, Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before Congress and talked grandly about the revised "recommended reading list" in the military academies and training programs, praising especially the "anti-racist" work of Ibram X. Kendi. Under cross-examination, Milley seemed unable to explain how Kendi's work would make America's enlisted soldiers more lethal to its enemies or valuable to its allies—or why these latter aims would even be important.

At about the same time, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin testified before Congress, promising to root from the armed forces supposed cadres of white supremacists driven by "white rage." Yet neither he nor Gen. Milley ever supplied data or evidence that such cells or movements exist in the U.S. military.

That the Pentagon should foster such ungrounded suspicions of white males—one of its most important sources of recruits—is as if the British war ministers had questioned whether there were too many sexist British Gurkhas in the ranks, or Russian generals had wondered whether there were Cossacks that seemed clannish, or the Indian government had fixated on Sikh recruits as religious chauvinists.

Implying that white males collectively are intrinsically suspect of improper behavior seems a near-suicidal U.S. Army policy, given that the group died at a rate double its percentages in the general population in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

In response to woke pressures, the U.S. military was properly to be envisioned more as a social-justice institution, in which progressive racial and gender agendas could be fast-tracked through the chain of command without the Sturm und Drang of congressional haggling. Of course, military history is replete with examples of the advantages of military forces enhanced by emphasis on a cohesive and common national identity, whether in the agrarian and largely middle-class hoplite armies of ancient Greece or with the rise of broad-based people's armies and nations-in-arms in revolutionary France, Russia, and China.

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But such fetishization of ethnic and racial identity in a multiracial, multiethnic modern democracy is dangerous business for a military. Historically, the accentuation of difference more often tends to erode battlefield efficacy. Racial and ethnic

chauvinism and diversity were no advantage to nineteenth-century Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian armies, as well as those in modern Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and Iraq.

What was not ambiguous was that a subsequent U.S. Army failure to meet recruiting goals, especially among young men of families that traditionally had joined combat units, followed within months of the new agenda's implementation. Apparently few in the military, despite their recommended lists of authors to be read, had realized that all armed forces historically draw all sorts of soldiers asymmetrically from regions, ethnicities, and classes—and for particular reasons, ranging from patriotism and regional pride to family traditions and economic opportunity.

All these recent symptoms of the decline of military history among our elites reflect in part the lack of cohesive university programs and academic departments. A variety of historians cite the paradoxical absence of institutional support for faculty hiring and graduate-degree offerings by pointing to a huge—and growing—course demand for the few military history classes that are still offered.

Nevertheless, the argument that the status and direction of military history are even in decline remains hotly disputed by a small number of hardworking and prominent military historians. They argue that the health of military history as a discipline is underrated, as shown by the survival of classes on strategy or wars. They are reminiscent of dedicated classicists who cite small but vestigial enrollments in Greek as proof of a robust field of classics.

The real disagreement perhaps rests on the notion that military history should be a *major* field of university study rather than a current minor one in a survival mode. After all, history itself was born in ancient Greece as the study of war in general, and the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars in particular.

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The data of decline can be interpreted in a variety of ways, especially as a departure from what the "normal" role of military history once was or should have been before its present state. For example, the military historians William Hitchcock and Meghan Herwig, in a glass-half-full argument, recently reminded pessimists that military history courses still represent on average some 7 percent of all history course offerings at major universities. And they are taught mostly by tenured and tenure-track professors.

Both, however, concede that military-themed classes—and especially those focused on military history *per se*—suffered among the greatest decline in history course offerings between 2015 and 2021. So how can military history be declining while at the same time ascendant or at least vigorous? The most likely answer is found in contested definitions arising over what constitutes "military history."

Many current military history classes emphasize quite narrow social, economic, and cultural themes that only touch tangentially on operational, logistical, tactical, or strategic aspects of armed forces on the battlefield—or for that matter on particular wars at all.

Hitchcock and Herwig note the sort of questions posed by the new, wider military history: "What impact does war have upon social movements, civil liberties, race and gender relations, the environment, and humanitarian attitudes? What ethical questions must the student of war confront?" My own general impression is that such questions are of course important. But to resonate meaningfully in the context of military history, these interests must be grounded in some factual familiarity with war and battle and discussed in the landscape of particular conflicts. For example, to appreciate properly the critical role in World War II of over a thousand American female pilots, in dangerous conditions, ferrying new bombers to forward bases, one would need familiarity with American strategic bombing campaigns, the wartime mobilization of the U.S. aircraft industry, recruitment, the draft, manpower pools, the nature of the B-17, B-24, and B-29 heavy bombers, and the combat-loss and replacement figures for male pilots and their planes.

Again, to use the example of classics, efforts to expand the discipline to include issues of theory, race, class, and gender may enrich the field, as long as the core that grounds all such discussion—instruction in and knowledge of the classical languages and literatures—remains vibrant. By contrast, as the military historian Fred Kagan put it of the new military history,

> "War and society," also sometimes called "new military history" (although it is by now decades old), normally studies everything about war except for war itself: how soldiers are recruited or conscripted, how they feel about war, how they and others write about it, how war affects society, politics and economics, gender and war, and so on.

Perhaps recent military historians rightly have been sensitive to the fact that the discipline is caricatured as too conservative. Thus, they seek to widen its boundaries to encompass more popular contemporary fields of instruction. They have also been careful to emphasize that the study of war reflects no ideological aim other than to ensure that a democratic citizenry is informed about why or why not it should make war. Nearly twenty years ago, at the height of public dissatisfaction with the stalemated Iraq War, Kagan also properly noted,

> This problem [of the decline of miliary history] should not be a partisan issue or even an ideological one. Solving it is simply an essential precondition to maintaining a healthy democratic process in a time of danger and conflict.

Again, there are many ways of measuring the decline of "traditional" military history: in the erosion of faculty numbers and course offerings within higher education; in the waning attention of the elite media; in static, government-directed military outreach and training; or, in contrast, in the growth of films and podcasts on military subjects in popular culture. The last point underscores a striking paradox. The more U.S. officials and the foreign-policy elite have resorted to arms, the less they seem to know about historical patterns and innate tendencies of war. But the

more the general public has been turned off by seemingly endless armed interventions abroad, the more it has become interested in wars of the past and the rules of conflict.

In a democratic republic, civilians declare wars. Americans are supposed to instruct and audit the military about when and where—and sometimes how—to fight them. Yet such civilian guidance and oversight require some civic awareness of what the responsibility entails. The people's representatives often order the military to do things it does not wish to do or reject what the military insists a democratic government must do. For example, polls say that Americans wish to protect Taiwan from a Chinese takeover. But to what degree are they first made aware that such commitment involves risks in the nuclear age, such as the likely sinking of a $13 billion, five-thousand-person aircraft carrier (or two) and the loss of a dozen huge C-5 or fifty C-17 transport jets? A Chinese nuclear threat against the West Coast? Tokyo, Seoul, or Melbourne?

Popular knowledge of military affairs can be inculcated by elementary and higher education, the media, and public rituals and commemorations, as well as by members of the military themselves. Only that way, in the modern era of all-volunteer armed forces, can voting citizens—over 90 percent of whom have never served in the military—know something about what wars are and how and why they start, are fought, and end. Yet since World War II, a series of popular ideologies and historical events have discouraged informed civilian oversight of American war-making.

Five years after the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were dropped, and with theories of ending conventional armed forces coming into vogue, the United States was shocked by the North Korean invasion of the south. We quickly rediscovered the need to rearm and rebuild conventional forces and to revisit classical military strategy that was not made obsolete even by terrible new weapons.

In part, the contrast of a prior clear-cut American success in World War II, the indisputable moral need to stop global Nazism, fascism, and militarism, and the dispatch with which the United States helped win the war left as their legacy a nearly impossible ideal for all subsequent American wars, even in the decolonial nuclear age when the rules of intervention and expeditions abroad had vastly changed.

In part, the Vietnam decade of 1965–75—fifty-eight thousand American combat troops dead, massive anti-war protests, draft resistance, and eventual defeat—birthed a widespread antipathy to the idea of any war in general, and in particular to the U.S. military.

As military history struggled in the university throughout the late 1970s, conflict-resolution and peace-studies curricula spread on campuses. By 2022, there were over eighty-seven colleges and universities offering peace-studies and conflict-resolution degrees. (About 1,200 such degrees were completed per year.) In contrast, there were less than half that number of schools that offered either a BA, MA, or Ph.D. in military history. The British military historian Max Hastings recently summed up the scarcity of military history on university and college campuses. "The revulsion from war history may derive not so much from students' unwillingness to explore the violent

past," he suggested, "but from academics' reluctance to teach, or even allow their universities to host, such courses."

Stubborn historians of war and their students naturally became dubious of all conflict. The general anxiety is akin to the suspicion that oncologists who study cancer are *ipso facto* fond of malignancy, or those who insist on fixed human nature across time and space are faith-based denialists of modern neuroscience, biology, or social science.

Yet it is hard to argue that the United Nations has prevented any more wars than did the short-lived League of Nations, which collapsed on the eve of World War II. What prevented the Soviet Red Army from entering Western Europe after 1949 was not a UN commission but the armed nato alliance and U.S. nuclear deterrence. What saved South Korea was the U.S. military and a rare moment when the United Nations authorized a multilateral armed force to resist Chinese and North Korean aggression.

Deductive peace-studies programs have little record of being more valuable than inductive military history in preparing the citizen to evaluate ongoing wars, prevent future ones, or achieve lasting peace. After the 1960s, certainly, the rise of peace-studies programs did not coincide either with an American avoidance of war or increased success in it. Nonetheless, social science and therapeutic approaches to war insidiously replaced the ancient Thucydidean idea that studying prior conflicts can instruct those in the present to avoid the strategic errors and military fallacies of the past.

In the post–Cold War era, a second series of wars followed, mostly marked by voluntary U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya. And most ended either in chaos, stalemate, or American defeat. Over seven thousand American soldiers died in wars in Afghanistan and the second war in Iraq—to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis and Afghans—without victory or much clear strategic success in Western nation-building.

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All these expeditionary wars, some of them decades long, were optional. They only occasionally proved successful in meeting their stated goals. For the most part they were waged within the oil- and terrorist-rich Islamic Middle East. As a result, war itself grew synonymous among American cultural elites with supposed Western chauvinism, neocolonialism, and oil-driven imperialism. It is a truism that when a nation wages optional, costly, and ineffective wars, support for military-history studies usually declines—either due to an instinctual recoil from the very mention of war or from a practical sense that strategists were not aided by their formal studies. And, of course, this causes a vicious cycle as the decline in military-history studies then leads to more poorly thought-out wars.

For the Left, "No blood for oil" was a common anti-war cry during the Iraqi wars, along with "Islamophobia." To the American Right, such wars did not pencil out in cost-benefit analyses—or they were deemed extraneous to the real American strategic interests in supporting NATO against renewed Russian expansionism and in creating a circle of Pacific allies to resist encroaching Chinese power.

The net result was that by 2016, a growing number in the United States believed that a decade and a half of war-making in the Middle East had not made the United States more secure and certainly had not gained it allies, deterrence, or prestige. Contemporary events, recast by elites as further reason to be suspicious of formal military history, helped massage attitudes. The entire idea of "experts" versed in military history and strategic analysis obviously suffered, as if the new generation of the Best and Brightest had learned nothing from Vietnam but simply repeated its mistakes on a smaller scale in the Middle East.

When strategic objectives in Iraq were either poorly spelled out or not met, and as casualties mounted, the public was told repeatedly that the supposed *casus belli* of "weapons of mass destruction" was a *deliberate* lie ("Bush lied, thousands died"). Ubiquitous cultural figures openly cheered on the enemy. The documentary filmmaker Michael Moore spouted unhinged historical comparisons: "The Iraqis who have revolted against the occupation are not 'insurgents' or 'terrorists' or 'The Enemy.' They are the revolution, the Minutemen, and their numbers will grow—and they will win." As in the Vietnam era, this second suite of mostly stalemated or stalled operations was seen not as an argument for renewed study of the origins, causes, conduct, and end of wars, but one for general renunciation or rejection of war, as if the enlightened had such unilateral power.

A third stage in the decline, the so-called woke movement from 2015 to the present, is marked by a fixation on matters of race, often manifesting in mandates for diversity, inclusion, and equity of result. In this regard, prior American or indeed Western wars in general were redefined and reduced to racist-driven exploitation, usually waged by white Europeans and Americans against indigenous peoples or the largely innocent nonwhite abroad.

Melodrama, not tragedy, became the operative methodology of studying the past. "Unfortunately," the historians Tami Davis Biddle and Robert Citino note, "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." Ironically, the most destructive wars of the twentieth century were intra-ethnic: Asian Japanese against Asian Chinese, Africans against Africans, and, most notably, Europeans fighting each other. It is hard to see any predictive racial patterns among the twentieth century's most prominent genocidal killers, whether Mao Zedong, Hideki Tojo, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Enver Pasha (the architect of the Armenian genocide), Pol Pot, Kim Il-Sung, Mengistu Haile Mariam, or Yakubu Gowon (the brutal Nigerian dictator during the Biafra War). In any case, the result of the melodramatic, racialist approach was the same: a further erosion of the study of and interest in formal military history.

Yet as has been regularly observed, this half-century-long deprecation of military history coincided with a steadily growing popular interest in wars of the past, both narrative histories and tactical and strategic analyses. Bookstores enlarged their military-history sections. Podcasts on war, ancient and modern, grew. Cable television channels welcomed war documentaries.

As formal elite study has withered, there has grown over the last fifty years a significant popular interest in America's wars of the past, and especially in the Civil War and World War II. Despite their horrific carnage, perhaps these conventional wars were felt to have solved the problems on account of which they began, since they had seen the entire male population subject to the draft and had ended in victory for the good guys.

Tellingly, studying these wars did not necessarily involve deprecation of ancient ideas of honor, bravery, courage, and patriotism. In the popular culture, successful documentaries such as Ken Burns's *Civil War* or blockbuster films such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* reflected popular interest in these themes. And even the scattered conflagrations in the post–Cold War era were sometimes presented without overt editorialization.

For every critical film such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* or Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* that focused on disastrous American tactics and strategy, there appeared a Ridley Scott *Black Hawk Down*, a Peter Berg *Lone Survivor*, and a Clint Eastwood *American Sniper*, which all took a tragic rather than a melodramatic approach to America's more unpopular wars. Such movies recognized the courage and heroism of the American armed forces, often in the most trying of circumstances and amid strategic and operational command stupidity. In popular culture, a full-throated celebration of war such as *300* can score at the box office, in part because its cartoonish characters are unapologetic and, as defenders, felt to occupy the superior moral high ground at the last stand at Thermopylae.

Again, the problem with the decline of military history has not been the American people's lack of interest in studying the nature of war, which emerged unscathed from the American experience with armed conflict. The fault is found in the interests and prejudices of our educated civilian elites in higher education, politics, and the media.

There are consequences to this ignorance of our officials, in terms of referencing or ignoring history as a benchmark to ground present policy. What follows is a potpourri of current policies and assumptions that might have been enriched or corrected by even a rudimentary knowledge of past wars.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, most expert observers predicted a quick Russian victory. Moscow was a nuclear power with a huge, sophisticated arsenal of conventional weapons. Russia enjoyed over three times the population, thirty times the area, and fifteen times the gross national production of Ukraine. Accordingly, in the first hours of the Russian invasion, a shocked U.S. government offered to airlift the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, out of Kyiv—a move that would have effectively ended the heroic Ukrainian resistance and given Russia

an immediate victory by default.

Yet the initial Russian shock-and-awe effort at decapitating the Ukrainian government in Kyiv proved an utter failure before a stunned global televised audience. The Russian setback eventually led to a more historically typical reboot, one of massive artillery and missile pounding of borderlands and rocket attacks on civilian infrastructure in western Ukraine, which rendered the Ukraine war more a World War I battlefield than a blitzkrieg.

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By late 2022, those who had initially gone wild in praising the unexpected and ongoing success of the Ukrainian resistance, and urging more billions of dollars in aid, were growing somewhat troubled about the eventual endgame of the conflict. Some cautioned that the war of attrition on Ukraine's borders was lowering the threshold of confrontation between a nuclear Russia and United States—especially as Vladimir Putin deliberately raised the issue of tactical nuclear weapons. All began to see that Russia's blunt use of indiscriminate firepower was designed to grind down a smaller Ukraine before its far larger aggressor would run out of steam. Ukraine's survival depended on whether its allies could match Russian resupply, bomb and shell for bomb and shell—and how many losses in men and matériel an increasingly isolated Putin would be willing to suffer for dubious strategic advantages.

Those familiar with military history, however, might have foreseen just such a transformation of the battlefield. The Russian military, whether Czarist, Soviet, or post–Cold War, has rarely done well in expeditionary efforts beyond its Russian-speaking borders. The Russian wars with Japan (1904–05), the Baltic States (1918–20), Poland (1921–22), Finland (1939–40), and Afghanistan (1979–89)—like the Kyiv shock-and-awe campaign—proved fiascoes. They variously exposed the sloppy logistics, poorly integrated arms, weakness in maritime and air forces, inferior weaponry, faulty reconnaissance of enemy capabilities, and poor morale that has often plagued the Russian military abroad.

Yet the Western giddiness of late February and March at videos of stalled and destroyed Russian expeditionary armored columns, stranded in central Ukraine, erroneously led to the opposite extreme, the belief that the Russian military was incompetent and would shortly lose the war—as if it did not matter where and how the Russian military was deployed to fight.

Again, study of military history likewise suggests that if the Russian military is inept in expeditionary roles, despite these initial setbacks, it has usually proved formidable on its home soil, or at least when operating close to its borders, benefitting from interior lines and the propaganda of foreign violations of Mother Russia. Invaders as diverse as the once-confident Charles XII, Napoleon, the Japanese on the Mongolian border, and the Wehrmacht eventually

learned that to their despair. Russians have repeatedly fought and defeated large armies of invasion, or against armies on their immediate borders, when such conflicts became seen as existential crises or invoked patriotism that transcended politics among the general population. For all the Ukrainians' foreign arms and impressive resistance, it may prove quite difficult for even these heroic and ascendent resistors to expel all Russian forces from majority-Russian-speaking borderlands.

Americans were often shocked as to why Putin chose to invade Ukraine in 2022—or for that matter why at all. Military history, however, might also have reminded us that deterrence or its absence so often proves decisive when threatened hostilities break out into war. Remarks or gestures deemed trivial at the time can send unintended signals that indifference rather than deterrence will meet aggressors. We remember that the Chinese and North Koreans took note of Secretary of State Dean Acheson's nonchalant remark to the National Press Club in January 1950 that South Korea was outside the American "defensive perimeter," and they soon acted accordingly. The much-studied remarks of April Glaspie, the American ambassador to Iraq, to Saddam Hussein in 1990 that the United States did not especially concern itself with internal border disputes within the Arab world may have encouraged Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

Putin predictably entertains irredentist dreams of emulating Catherine the Great or Peter the Great in his imperial ambitions, especially of reconstituting the former Soviet Empire. What has kept him inside the borders of the Russian Federation is not his politics or agendas, but rather his careful assessments in cost-benefit analyses of when it was profitable or at least possible to invade a former republic and when not.

The United States talked loudly while carrying only a twig.

The Russian expeditionary operations in Georgia (2008), eastern Ukraine and Crimea (2014), and central Ukraine (2022) all met certain Russian criteria. One, Russia was flush with petrodollars from high oil prices; in contrast, the West was vulnerable to oil shortages and price spikes. Two, Russia felt that a current U.S. administration was so encumbered by domestic or overseas burdens that it would not likely respond. The United States talked loudly while carrying only a twig, as it agitated Russia by hinting at Ukrainian nato membership or boasted openly about interfering within the internal politics of Ukraine at the expense of Russian interests.

That paradigm held true for America during the latter Bush administration in 2008, the second-term Obama administration in 2014, and the early Biden administration in 2022. In contrast, periods of petroleum surfeit and low oil prices helped the fuel-hungry West and hurt oil-exporting countries. An administration that seemed unencumbered by foreign wars, had recently raised defense spending, and was deemed unpredictable and even dangerous in its responses seemed to deter Putin. So it was with America in 2017–20 when Putin talked provocatively but stayed quiet within his borders.

Historically, a sudden loss of deterrence vis-à-vis a particular adversary can ignite similar aggressions from a host of belligerents. The flight from Afghanistan and the publicly aired problems in the U.S. military, coupled with the poor deterrent reputation of the Biden administration, did not encourage just Vladimir Putin. China also opportunistically became blunt in its threats to the United States over the visit to Taiwan of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and began sending missiles over the island. Iran announced it would shortly possess a nuclear bomb. North Korea then began launching missiles in any direction it wished. Such aggression was similar to even an ossified Soviet Union invading Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979—at a time of perceived American hesitation and internal economic and cultural upheaval.

Deterrence rests on the certainty of some sort of unpleasant reaction to perceived unwarranted aggression. Even weaker powers become adventurous when stronger ones signal, albeit inadvertently, that they are indifferent or will offer concessions to ensure peace rather than strike back forcefully at any such perceived aggression.

Lack of knowledge about prior wars, their generals, and the nature of command can also mislead presidents. Donald Trump came under intense criticism, often for sounding unduly militaristic, when he nominated at least four army and marine generals as cabinet secretaries or cabinet-level appointments: Gen. Michael Flynn (National Security Advisor), Gen. John Kelly (Homeland Security) Gen. James Mattis (Defense), and Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster (National Security Advisor).

Trump repeatedly defended his penchant for inviting retired generals into his administration with references to his World War II heroes Douglas MacArthur and George S. Patton. He was explicit in his assumptions that modern generals, like those of an earlier generation, are can-do operators. He apparently thought generals were apolitical, or at least nonpartisan men of action—highly patriotic, conservative, traditional, and intensely loyal to their commander-in-chief. Still, in less than two years, all four either resigned, were fired, or had their nominations withdrawn. And in at least two of the four cases, the generals publicly blasted their commander-in-chief in the strongest terms of personal disparagement.

Trump apparently had romanticized the military leadership of World War II and had little idea that since the Civil War, or even since antiquity, top-ranking generals have often been highly political. His appointees were not necessarily conservative, often outspoken rather than reserved, and constantly in the news rather than reticent—precisely those most likely to collide with a controversial president.

Trump's favorite, Patton, at the pinnacle of his fame and military success, was relieved of his command and humiliatingly reassigned for openly questioning the American–Soviet post-war protocols. MacArthur was fired from his command in Korea for publicly blasting the war policies of his president Harry S. Truman.

Ironically, military history might have reminded Trump that the outspoken generals he admired would have been the most likely to be fired by him, while those who were more administrators than battlefield commanders, such as George S. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower, became extremely effective political operators.

Another misconception insists that military history became sclerotic at the dawn of the nuclear age, and that classical deterrence, balance of power, and doctrines such as preemption and alliances have not applied since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, all that changed for a few generations were the levels of destruction, not the principles of war. We can be assured that the eternal cycle of challenge and counterresponse survives, and thus eras of the offensive giving way to the defensive will follow, as one day lasers or space-based systems will knock down even sophisticated nuclear missiles—that in turn eventually become ever more sophisticated to avoid them.

Military history reminds us of the need for humility, or at least the perspective that no generation is the end of history, but simply a phase, extended or brief, in an endless and unchanging sequence of new weapons and ideologies birthing counter-weapons and antithetical belief systems. And the effort to remind the public of those truths continues. At the Hoover Institution, the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict, with over forty affiliated scholars (of which I am one), has met for over a decade and continues to publish historical analyses of current wars and threats to peace in its online journal *Strategika* (now in its eighty-first issue). In addition, Hillsdale College just announced the creation of a new Center for Military History and Grand Strategy to bring the light of the past to strategic decision-making in the present.

In the decades ahead, we will likely see frightening new weapons, revolutionary and unstable foreign aggressors, and ideologies that profess to change the rules of history. But these will all be transport systems—pumps, if you will—that merely accelerate the delivery, but do not alter the essence, of the timeless water of military history, based as it is on unchanging human nature.

Victor Davis Hanson is a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and the author of *The Second World Wars* (Basic Books). He is *The New Criterion*'s Visiting Critic for the 2021–22 season and the 2018 recipient of the Edmund Burke award.

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