

# *Bunk or Battle Tested? Historical Mindedness in Today's Soldier*



A POOL IN THE DESERT.

**W**hy does history get so much rough handling? Ambrose Bierce in the *Devil's Dictionary* defines history as "an account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools." It was the humorist Bierce who disregarded the advice of his friends, folks who apparently possessed a greater sense of historical judgment, and ventured into revolution-torn northern Mexico in 1913 to seek out Pancho Villa, a bandit turned rebel who had never been known for his sense of humor. It is not surprising that the acerbic-witted Bierce was never heard from again.

While no one would contest the importance of memory to our everyday existence, even though it is sometimes in error, many can disregard history as a factor in our lives. "History is bunk," says Henry Ford, the mass production genius who didn't know who Benedict Arnold was and who thought the War of 1812 was a revolution. Called an ignoramus by the *Chicago Tribune*, Ford's simple credulity led him in and out of ill-advised enterprises with such frequency that the once admired industrialist died regarded by many as a crackpot. Ironically, Ford was responsible for building elaborate museums, undertaking massive restorations,

and dotting Dearborn with replicas of America's shrines and historic sites.

A student in an advanced officers' course, a captain in her late twenties, told me that history is pretty much valueless to today's soldier. The record of combat with the tactics and weaponry of yesterday has no relevance to the modern doctrine and advanced weaponry of today. Her point is an extension of Walter Millis' contention that nuclear warfare has rendered military history mute.

Michael Fukayama, commenting on the seeming end of the cold war, said that history has come to an end.

A Command Sergeant Major, with enough military experience to have worn his hair away, told me, in the same vein as Henry Ford, that history is bullshit.

They all have a point. He who rules out history as being useless is probably correct because he will not use it. He who welcomes the enriching qualities of that art will be enriched.

Admittedly, history is subject to contortions and abuse. Man is the only species able to record his memories. But he also has the power to revise his memories and even invent them. While historian Leopold von Ranke called upon his colleagues to "tell it like it was," sadly many remember things as they wish them to have happened.

Advocates for a course of action often use an example from history to buttress their recommended course of action. Sometimes they pull analogies from history to sanction actions already taken. In both cases the use of history is an

afterthought and the example is most often a false analogy forced to fit conclusions already reached.

Maybe history is ignored because former theories promised to give men patterns they could rely upon but failed. The keys of history did not fit any locks. Or maybe it is because we mistake the forbidding and unfriendly academic history for the more gregarious common, everyday experience of history. But more likely it is because the remembered past is fraught with illusions. Truth is an elusive and relative concept in the practice of history.

With history getting such bad reviews, self-serving historians such as myself feel compelled to leap to its defense, even if this enterprise is risky and even quixotic. I am mindful that history is sometimes unreliable and can mislead us, but I am able to make that judgment only by examining history to produce instances of those times when history has failed, and thereby history serves as an authentic source of knowledge, despite its more limited failings.

The precise value of military history is not its ability to provide exact instructions for action in a predictable future, but to alert the mind to the need to prepare for the unexpected, to be familiar with the complex and synergetic nature of history. General H. Norman Schwartzkopf reported that he concluded each day of Operation Desert Storm worrying about whether or not he had covered every possible contingency. Of course no one has the breadth of mind to think of everything, but a reliance upon experience [history] increases

the odds of conceiving of more possibilities and thus being better prepared.

A knowledge of history does not guarantee all the right answers for the future but it does increase the odds in favor of making the right decision. And who doesn't want the odds on their side, especially in combat?

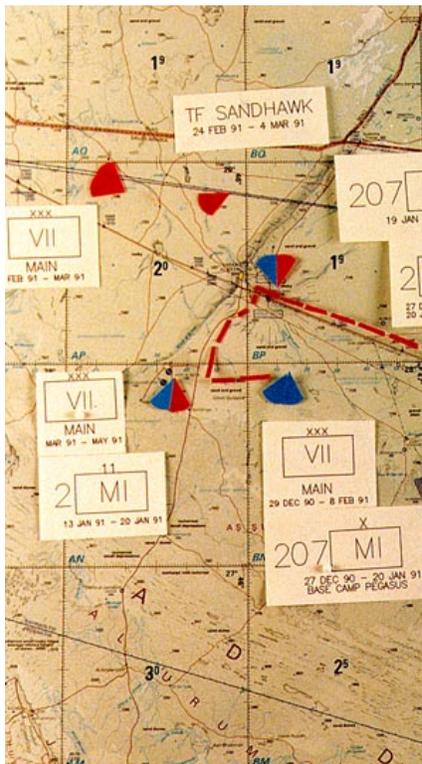
The important part that history plays in bringing sanity to our intoxicated age," was a favorite subject of Bertrand Russell. He was careful to point out that he was not talking about the "lessons of history" or "anything easily put into a verbal formula." "What history can and should do," he said, "... is to produce a certain temper of mind, a certain way of thinking and feeling about contemporary events and their relation to the past and future." Those who misuse the lessons of history are the same who lack any real sense of history, a historical-mindedness that comes from habitually thinking critically about the past.

History played a remarkable role in the Persian Gulf War. During the congressional debate on the war, history was raked up by virtually every speaker. Politicians are fond of invoking history. It cloaks their arguments in legitimacy; adds the persuasiveness of the past to their position. Their knowledge of history is sometimes confused and their choice of historical parallels sometimes strained. But at least they can be credited for recognizing that historical experience can teach and form values.

On the official side, the Army's Center of Military History circulated information papers to the

Army Staff and prepared book lists of titles for the forces in Saudi Arabia. On the nightstand of Gen. Schwartzkopf were T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and Robert Lacey's history of Saudi Arabia, *The Kingdom*.

Military leaders also used to formulate their plans. But they had the advantage of building all the scenarios they wanted, planning for a host of contingencies, and then



reacting and revising plans as events unfolded. The gamble is less when you can predict literally thousands of outcomes and thus be prepared for them in a military sense.

Often large organizations are reluctant to discard shopworn beliefs for new, untested ones, accounting for their traditional resistance to change. An in-depth knowledge of the past helps us accept new concepts, teaches us to be critical of untested ideas, and, if

they stand up in the laboratory of past experience, to assimilate them.

What we saw happen in China, the Soviet Union and its satellites at the end of the 20th century was the inability of communist leaders to shore up the crumbling foundation of Marxist myth in the face of economic reality. There has been a crushing repudiation of a view of history that has proved false. We have entered a post-Communist era in world history.

Aside from being just practical, history has enormous entertainment value. American historian Frederic Jackson Turner has enunciated some of the pleasures of history. He said:

To enable us to behold our own time and place as a part of the stupendous progress of the ages; to see primitive man; to recognize in our midst the undying ideas of Greece; to find Rome's majesty and power alive in present law and institution still living in our superstitions and our folklore; to enable us to realize the richness of our inheritance, the possibility of our lives, the grandeur of the present—these are some of the priceless services of history.

Philosopher Bertrand Russell has suggested that men must have an awareness of history and its forcefulness if they are to free themselves from the mire of hatred and view their fellow man as collaborators in the common tasks of humanity, if men are to have a future as well as a past.

Philosopher John Dewey touches on the forcefulness of history when postulates that thought is an ordering of what we know from experience in order to

solve problems of our present situation. Thought is always practical, aimed at dealing with a problematic situation in a “world of hazards.” Ideas use a knowledge of the past as a predictive plan of action for the future. Dewey says, “ideas are anticipatory plans and designs which take effect in concrete reconstruction of antecedent conditions of existence.” [Essays in Radical Empiricism, p. 117] When we make plans for action or when we make moral judgments we rely solely on antecedent conditions of existence, or history.

The idea that history is the basis for all human actions has a Darwinian parallel. That we use past experience and knowledge of past events to adapt to present circumstances suggests a sort of human evolution based on adaptation to past requirements, a survival of the historically fittest.

Wide acceptance of a historical theory can, according to William McNeill, alter human behavior and therefore become self-validating. From the capacity to err comes the capacity to change and adapt. “What a particular group of persons understands, believes, and acts upon, even if quite absurd to outsiders, may nonetheless cement social relations to act together and accomplish feats otherwise impossible. Moreover, membership in

such a group and participation in its sufferings and triumphs give meaning and value to individual human lives. Any other sort of life is not worth living, for we are social creatures.” We need to share truths.

This is where the museum comes in. The Fort Huachuca Museum is the custodian of our historical heritage. To it is entrusted the story of the thousands of men and women who have passed this way before. A visit to the museum can put you in touch with a past

for our actions but also discouraged the attempt because we have been vividly reminded that knowing the past is the key but complete knowledge is futile. We must admit that there is more to know than we can ever know and reach for a sense of scale, salvage realistic and meaningful structures from the winds of change.

It is no longer enough for the officer or NCO to just be familiar with the intricacies of all-source analysis, or to know the Soviet

Order of Battle. Changes are too fast paced. Army training cannot become mired in a lesson plan for the moment. Today history must figure into the equation. If the study of the shadowy past has taught us anything, it is that history will have appeal for the above average.



that is rich in human drama. William Butler Yeats touched upon the mission of museums when he penned the lines: “They but thrust their buried men/Back in the human mind again.”

History museums offer a sense of permanence in tumultuous times while at the same time helping to explain change. In the 20th century history has moved at a whirlwind pace, leaving confusion and exultation in its wake. The sweep of events has emphasized the need to understand the foundations