

## Why Military History Matters

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Of all fields of history, military history is among the most popular. In most bookstores it is not uncommon for half the history section to be devoted to books about great commanders, campaigns, battles, and the weapons with which wars are fought. The droves of readers who buy them have, for the most part, no particular agenda. They read military history because they enjoy it, in the same way that others read fantasy and science fiction.

My own interest in the subject began in just the same way. Among the first books I can recall having read, aside from those about Sally, Dick and Jane, was *Great Fighter Pilots of World War II*, which was written specifically for young people. Later I moved on to adult works such as Ladislas Farago's *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph* and David Howarth's *Waterloo: Day of Battle*. Then at the age of twelve I encountered *A Stillness at Appomattox*, the Pulitzer Prize winning book by Bruce Catton. I have been hooked on the American Civil War ever since.

As far as I recall, no one from my youth asked me why I was interested in military history. I seldom asked the question of myself. Nor did I ever wonder why military history mattered, though if pressed I would probably have pointed to the number of human conflicts decided by violence, and almost certainly would have mouthed the platitude about war being revelatory of human nature. But my interest in military history led me inexorably toward a career in military history—I teach the subject at a large midwestern university—and having devoted most of my life to it, the question, “Why

does military history matter?" is, in personal terms, almost tantamount to asking why my life matters.

Not until my college years did I begin any sustained consideration of the value of military history. The most extensive presentations on the subject came from two of my professors, Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, whom many readers will recognize as among the most distinguished military historians practicing today. Allan Millett in particular had a standard opening lecture that focused on military historiography. It makes a very good point of departure in answering the question of why military history matters.

Millett divided military history into five types, overlapping in some respects but sufficiently distinct to form a useful taxonomy. The first he called inspirational military history. Works in this category emphasize human qualities, seek to elicit an emotional response, and are usually centered on combat. They are, he said, essentially humanistic morality plays. Many campaign narratives and military biographies (as well as some autobiographies) conform to this type. It is the sort of military history I encountered most often in my youth, and it comprises the bulk of military history read by the general public.

Next came national military history. This could be viewed as a subset of inspirational military history, Millett conceded, but merited a separate category because of its notable appeals to patriotism and nationalism. This type was more or less obviously designed to strengthen allegiance to the state by emphasizing the costs of national traditions and values: "Freedom Isn't Free" with footnotes.

Few books in this genre actually announce themselves as nationalistic propaganda. The example Millett used for a number of years was in fact a 1956 textbook, *The Military Heritage of America*, by R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy. The book's purpose, according to the authors, was "to provide for all Americans a military history presented from the American point of view," although its main audience was ROTC cadets. It focused heavily on combat leadership and the "immutable" principles of war. But from the first page it blazed with a fiery American nationalism: "We as a nation pride ourselves on being a peaceful people," the authors wrote. "But our own United States was born through human conflict and rededicated through the fires of a tremendous civil war. Since the onset of the Revolution marking the birth of the nation, and down through the Korean War, the United States has been engaged in no less than eight major wars, plus an untold number of minor campaigns, expeditions, pacifications, and other armed bickerings, including more than a century of almost continuous warfare against the North American Indian. . . . Today's world turmoil, resulting from the torrent of godless communistic ideology which gnaws at the dikes safeguarding all we hold sacred, should be evidence that the United States must be prepared for future wars, in which the national existence will depend upon the success of our arms."

Third on Millett's list came antiquarian or hobby history, which is often not history in any real sense but consists rather of books about military uniforms and weapons, especially the latter. These are long on descriptions of, say, the M1 Garand rifle or the Kalashnikov AK-47 assault weapon and short on the political purposes these deadly instruments have served. Power might grow out of the barrel of a gun, as Mao

Zedong once famously said, but readers of this genre are interested less in the power than the gun barrel.

Millett shot by the first three categories—inspirational, nationalistic, and antiquarian—within a few minutes. He devoted the bulk of the lecture to the remaining two, which he called “military utilitarian” and “civilian utilitarian” military history.

The former tend to be books written by and for the personnel of military institutions. Some of it focuses on the heritage of various units and is designed to instill a feeling a pride and *esprit de corps* among those who serve in them. Some of it is intended to influence civilian policymakers to make the “correct” choices about manpower policy or weapons appropriations. But most of it is written to support the professional education of military officers. It employs history to underscore principles of leadership, strategic and operational art, the challenges of counterinsurgencies and civil affairs, and so on: all the formidable array of issues a good officer is expected to master. The American armed forces, like those of other nations, employ dozens of career military historians, many of them quite gifted, to generate this form of military history, some of which is classified and most of which is never seen by the general public.

Last came civilian utilitarian military history, the sort that formed the principal rationale for teaching courses on the subject in a liberal arts university. Military history, Millett argued, matters for the same reason that all history matters. It affords a window into the human condition and the nature of human societies: an especially useful window because war often places extreme pressure on those societies, exposing its strengths and weaknesses.

Military history could also serve to make students better citizens. This was especially true for citizens of a superpower like the United States, whose preeminent status in world politics depended heavily upon military strength and the willingness to use it. At the height of the Vietnam War, Department of Defense consumed 70 percent of all Federal discretionary spending. In the years since, that figure has never dropped below 48 percent. Also in the years since, American policymakers have sent troops into harm's way on numerous occasions, most notably Lebanon (1983), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990-1991), Somalia (1993), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001- ) and Iraq (2003- ). Many of these have proven to be dubious ventures. Policymakers have invariably supported their rationales for war with historical analogies, some of them specious, most of them tendentious, and nearly all of them expressed in the most superficial terms. An informed citizenry, Millett averred, ought to have a healthy skepticism. Thus, an important reason for students to secure a firm grasp of military history was to be in a position to critically assess the wisdom of U.S. military expenditures and, especially, the resort to armed conflict and the conduct of military operations.

The thrust of Millett's lecture heavily privileged the military- and civilian-utilitarian types as the most worthy forms of military history, and when asked why military history matters, most of my students, both undergraduate and graduate, instinctively reach for explanations along these lines. So, for many years, did I. But while I still respect these types of military history, and have published my share of books and articles to prove it, in recent years I have become intellectually curious about the other types, particularly inspirational military history.

The point of departure for this reconsideration was something that literally had been staring me in the face for years: the students who sit in my undergraduate military history courses. Year in and year out, a whopping 85 percent of those who enroll in those courses are male. Some of them are ROTC cadets and thus required to take courses in military history, but for everyone else the courses are elective. Students take them simply because they want to take them. What do they hope to get from the experience?

The satisfaction of an intrinsic interest is the obvious answer, but it begs the question: Why an interest in *this* subject and not some other—particularly since mine is one of the largest history departments in the country and other choices abound?

As I pondered the matter, I increasingly suspected that military history functions as one of the ways—perhaps a very important way—by which males in our society learn how to be men, although I do not think males necessarily realize that they use it for such a purpose. A number of “straws in the wind” buttressed this hypothesis, among them:

- My own interest in military history, which dates from an early age—but also the realization that *many* males report the same early fascination with the subject;

- The fact that the “hobbyist” interest in military history focuses heavily on certain themes—Great Captains, battles, weapons and technology—and resolutely ignores many others, e.g., the relationship between war and the state, the impact of war on civilians, the prevalence of military regimes in developing countries—that from an intellectual standpoint are just as relevant;

- An offhand comment by military historian John A. Lynn that men read books on military history the way women read Harlequin romances, as escapist entertainment;

- The observation of military historian John Keegan, in *The Face of Battle*, that the study of generals and generalship, besides being in some quarters almost synonymous with military history, "too often dissolves into sycophancy or hero-worship, culminating in the odd case in a bizarre sort of identification by the author with his subject—an outcome," he continues, "common and understandable enough in literary or artistic biography but tasteless and even mildly alarming when the Ego is a man of blood and iron, his Alter someone of scholarly meekness and suburban physique;"

- The pointed exclusion of women from most military history as irrelevant, coupled with an illogical hostility toward the use of gender as an analytical category by which to understand this artificially constructed but nonetheless exclusively male world.

I frequently haunt a used bookstore with an extensive military history section (as if one could find a bookstore that doesn't). The section is in an alcove where only three or four patrons can browse at a time, so it can easily get crowded. During one memorable visit it was crowded all right, but with exactly one person: a man in his mid- to late-30s, perhaps, and of enormous girth. If he weighed a pound, he weighed three hundred.

It was odd to see such a man surrounding himself among books plastered with the faces, bodies, and action-filled exploits of lean, chiseled, dashing warriors. It was, at the same time, familiar; for the man simply incarnated something I see all the time in the lives of military history enthusiasts, students, scholars, and myself. It is not always that we are out of shape, although many of us are. It is not always that we procrastinate, although most of us do. Or lead disorganized lives. Or defer physical examinations, disregard a doctor's advice, and lose ourselves in television, video games, DVDs—anything but real life.

Maybe that is just the way people are, and maybe when people get interested in military history it's just a form of Walter Mitty escapism. But maybe it isn't. Maybe people are intensely concerned with real life. Maybe somewhere inside they feel that their lives are less than they could be. Maybe the interests they develop are not accidents, but flow from a suspicion that here is something that might provide a key to that better life, a key to their better selves. Maybe the pull felt by many people toward military history—some of them female but most of them male—comes from that same suspicion. If that is the case, then it might make sense to tease this suspicion into the open.

Some years ago, historian Michael C.C. Adams remarked, in his review of a book on the battle of Chancellorsville, "It is peculiar that Civil War writing does not seem to be held to the same scholarly standards as other areas of the discipline, where knowledge of recent works is expected and where detailed reference to sources is essential. It is almost as though the war functions as folklore, the epic tradition of male culture, much as Beowulf and Roland functioned for the warriors clustered in the mead hall. What matters is a rattling good accounting of the grand old story rather than a serious contribution to historical understanding." I would say that Adams got it absolutely right, not just for Civil War history but for much of military history. But I think the way out is not to ridicule what might be called the mythic dimension of military history but to give it respectful attention.

If Beowulf and Roland served a *function* for the "warriors clustered in the mead hall," it was to call attention to the warrior ethos, to gird them for the plunge into battle, to confront the foe, to live life courageously and look death in the face. The startling commonalities of the warrior myth in cultures the world over, masterfully delineated by

mythologist Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, suggest that the warrior ethos is less about literal combat than metaphorical combat in a life filled with obstacles, challenges, and setbacks. This fundamental insight lies at the very core of the martial arts. Bruce Lee, a master of those arts, once remarked that when an individual asked to become his student, what she or he was really asking was to embark on a journey toward greater self-knowledge.

If this is the case, then there must be an equivalent *function* for the warrior ethos in the life of the 300-pound man I saw at the bookstore, and for that matter, in all our lives. These insights lead toward a new answer to why military history matters. It matters because it can point us in the direction of the warrior ethos. In and of itself, to be sure, military history is a very bad way to learn the warrior ethos because those who simply read military history do not enact, and therefore do not internalize, the ethos, any more than reading a book about strength training will improve one's physical condition. The warrior inside them is asleep, lost in a dream world from which it may never awaken.

For that reason I have begun to reorganize my courses so as to make explicit the connection between military history and the warrior ethos. In my History of War course, students now learn, side by side with classical Greek warfare, the warrior code as depicted in Homer's *Iliad*, the code of the Samurai alongside warfare in medieval Japan, and so on. I also emphasize how the way of the warrior translates into everyday life. I learn as much as the students, for this is largely something new to me. I still teach plenty of military history in the "civilian utilitarian" sense: the nature of war; the causes, conduct, and consequences of specific conflicts, how the emergence of new societal forces compels changes in warfare. But I believe I have reached a deeper understanding

of why military history matters—and as someone who has made a career of writing and teaching military history, why my own life matters.