

# LEARNING FROM MILITARY HISTORY

Jeremy Black

This essay will explore the ways in which historical reflection on the nature of war can deepen our understanding of the challenges of military conflict and the difficulties of attaining the political objective for which violence is employed. It will begin with the concept of the so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA), which was much in vogue during the 1990s following the development of precision-guided munitions and stealth technologies. I will argue that the RMA was not in fact a revolution, and did not alter the fundamental nature of war, forcing a paradigm shift as was argued at the time, which, in practice, has remained consistent throughout human history.

The RMA reflected the fusion of a technological confidence based on the apparent potential of new weaponry with the misleading historical concept of development through a series of revolutionary changes. The two were linked in an understanding of war as primarily the product of material culture. Thus, the move from one form of weaponry or of a related technology, for example in communications, to another, apparently described capability, explained effectiveness, and established a new paradigm that determined success. Indeed, there was a teleology and a determinism at stake. This is an aspect of the role of modernisation theory in military history; and vice versa.

Academic theories in the Humanities and Social Sciences gain traction not because of any inherent intellectual merit but because they are readily usable and very useful. The ‘pull’ dimension, the usefulness of a thesis, and, more especially, its usefulness in a particular context, is one that can be approached in materialist terms, whether filling textbooks and lecture slots or advancing academic careers, but also with reference to the value of an argument at a specific moment. Indeed, from that perspective, it is the unoriginal thesis that generally does best, as ‘thinking within the box’ or, at least, a similar box, helps to make a proposition readily digestible. The ‘push’ dimension is an aspect of the same factors, of material and ideological import. The key one is the ability to appear cutting-edge but in terms that are in practice somewhat predictable.

And so with the idea of an early-modern military revolution, a proposition that drew heavily on already established ideas and literatures of modernisation and, eventually, globalisation. These ideas had a long genesis, but the key origin was that of progress as measured in and by social development, an approach that put to one side religious notions of time as leading toward a millenarian outcome. If Montesquieu, Smith and Robertson are all key names in this intellectual project, it was in practice one of a longer pedigree, with notions of improbability in human life accompanied by that of development. These ideas lent themselves to nineteenth-century interest in scientific formulation and application. Darwinism is part of the mix, as evolutionary ideas provided

metaphors and concepts, notably what was to be termed functionalism, in the shape of serving goals necessary for survival and therefore strength.

These ideas affected new developing sciences such as sociology, geopolitics and anthropology, and were brought into academic history through a shared concern with modernity and therefore modernisation. Rational choice was seen as at play, from biological preference to economic and political practice, but there was a difference between an emphasis on constraints as, with Durkheim or with contingent outcomes, as with Weber. There was a parallel with geographical ideas of determinism or 'possibilism.' Weber's approach to modernity led him to define it in terms of rationality and standardisation, with motivation in terms of instrumental behaviour as opposed to traditional action. Weber also linked the prudent rationality related to capitalism with Protestantism. Taken into American thought by Talcott Parsons, Weber was the forbear of what was to be called the Structural-Functional approach, and Modernisation theory became a key tool in the Social Sciences, a theory emphasising rational abstract principles and an abandonment of past practices. Key texts included Walt Rostow's *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (1971) and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the latter a work propounded around the means, goals and modernity of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. In the 1960s, and again in the 1990s, modernisation was regarded as a form of global New Deal, able to create a new world order, and information and theory were deployed accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Modernisation theory, however, was often advanced with insufficient attention to practicalities, let alone reality, as with the failure to understand Vietnamese society. As a related, but separate point, the attempt to produce 'modern,' quantifiable criteria of military success fell foul of the ability of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to soak up heavier casualties and to defy American equations of success with their emphasis on quantification.<sup>2</sup> It would be easy to draw a line between these (and other) modernisation writers and the proponents of, and even more response to, the thesis of a military revolution, with Geoffrey Parker in particular offering a parallel account to Fukuyama. While that is apposite, there are other elements of modernisation theory that should first be addressed. A key one was that of secularisation, as again analysis, means and goal of development. Durkheim, Weber and many others argued that modernisation meant a decline in religious practice and significance, and this approach affected a broad tranche of writing in the Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as discussion of historical change.<sup>3</sup> The cult of reason, understood as inherently secular, with faith banished to the private sphere, meant that the present necessarily understood the past better than the latter did: reason could reveal the prospectus to a better future and a better-understood past.

A circularity in thought and selectivity in evidence were inherent to this process, and both, indeed, were very much to be seen in the work by the proponents of a military revolution. As far as the first was concerned functions were presented in a quasi-automatic fashion, with needs and drives

readily ascribed to states, and effects ascribed to functions while those functions were defined by the effects they produced.<sup>4</sup>

A key aspect of the cult of a modern reason, in terms of secularism and of other elements, is a total failure not only to understand the military cultures of the past (and even arguably the present), but also to appreciate the nature of development. Failing to perceive the values of the past and to understand its practices understandably leads to a neglect of key factors in the evaluation of proficiency, capability and success, both individual and collective. Honour is misleadingly disparaged as conservative if not redundant, and practices of aristocratic officership are misunderstood. A more informed comment can be found in the work of Gregory Hanlon,<sup>5</sup> and it is instructive that his new book makes scant mention of the military revolution, a thesis that is presented as ‘argued to an indecisive end.’<sup>6</sup>

Revolution was a term in more than fashion in the twentieth century, reflecting not only political commitment, but also that it became the standard way to describe and explain structural change. This practice owed much to the industrial revolution, a term first used in 1799, but popularised by Arnold Toynbee in 1881, with significant capitals. This term was much applied thereafter, and was to be the basis for subsequent revolutions, as with the Agricultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup> It was not therefore surprising that the term was deployed in military history. There were precursors, but the most influential argument was advanced in 1955 by Michael Roberts in a work published in 1956<sup>8</sup> that liberally employed the idea of fundamental change and the term military revolution, and closed with a clear affirmation of transformation: ‘By 1660, the modern art of war had come to birth. Mass armies, strict discipline, the control of the state, the submergence of the individual had already arrived’ and so on, culminating with ‘The road lay open, broad and straight, to the abyss of the twentieth century.’ With its failure to grasp the nature of pre-1560 or post-1660 warfare, its neglect of navies and the global dimension, its failure to understand the requirements of command, and its simplification and misreading of modern warfare, this was a disappointing piece, a classic instance indeed of footnotes rather than foresight; but it was given publicity, not least in Sir George Clark’s *War and Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1958).

Parker was far more impressive with his inclusion of the naval dimension, his wider-ranging chronology, and his engagement with the world scale. Initially Parker focused on the Spanish dimension, but he broadened out with his hugely influential *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1988). That work deserves a careful reading as does the perceptive criticism by a number of scholars including Bert Hall, Kelly DeVries, and David Parrott. It is particularly instructive that Parker addressed the global question, employing ‘the Military Revolution of the sixteenth century’<sup>9</sup> to in effect explain both the rise (and multipolarity) of the West and why it was to provide the most successful of the ‘gunpowder empires’ to employ a term probed by William H. McNeill. The strengths of Parker’s work can be qualified empirically, not

least, but not only, by questioning the idea of a three-century revolution, or by reference to the limitations of Western success, the nature of late medieval circumstances, the importance of the post-1660 period, and, despite the brilliance of the footnotes, to the selection and deployment of evidence.

There are also, which is the intention of this note, debatable assumptions in terms of theses of modernisation, and the characterisation of capability. Parker's emphasis on particular notions of proficiency, and his embrace of the proposition of change that is fundamental because described as revolutionary, and described as revolutionary because fundamental, fits within a practice of historical writing that increasingly looks very much that of a particular period. Alluding earlier to Fukuyama was deliberate because there are instructive parallels between the mindsets represented in these two works. Each appears qualified at the very least by the more varied presentation of modern warfare that the subsequent three decades were to offer. Parker very much takes modernisation theory on board: 'the Muslim states ... could no longer meet and defeat the expanding repertory of innovations developed by their Christian adversaries, because the Westernisation of war also required replication of the economic and social structures and infrastructures, in particular the machinery of resource-mobilisation and modern finance, on which the new techniques depended,'<sup>10</sup> which doubtless explains why the United States was invariably successful in the Islamic world over the last two decades, as well as Israel in Lebanon. Instead, it is the specificity of conflict and individual conflicts and the multivalent character of war, that emerge; and the language of modernity, modernisation, and revolution is misleading as an account, narrative and/or analytical, of this phenomenon.

Thus contemporary debates have a strong and still insistent historical and contextual perspective, although it is one that most practitioners seek to ignore both those who consider military history and those who write on the present. Instead, they cite Clausewitz in an attempt to discern timeless characteristics of conflict.

At the same time, ironically, there was, and is, generally a focus on technology. That, however, was, and is, to put one aspect of military activity to the fore and to do so in a decontextualized fashion that did not assess adequately, or sometimes at all, the contexts of such conflict. This was particularly so of the dynamics involved in tasking, the key measure of effectiveness and achievement. Indeed, ironically, one of the classic lessons from military history became that of the relationship between proficiency in terms of weaponry and failure in terms of outcomes and tasking. That was a lesson that was often unwelcome both to military figures and to their political allies/masters. Indeed, that very reluctance became an aspect of military history that deserved attention but that scholars proved unwilling to address adequately. In particular, there was a focus on debating theorists, notably Clausewitz, rather than addressing key practical, methodological, conceptual and historiographical problems in learning from the past, and notably so with counter-insurgency. Here there was no the developmental slant seen in work on technology nor, indeed, the variant advanced in some discussion

of insurgency, and particularly that of the impact of the revolutionary theorist, propagandist or practitioner of the moment, for example Mao Zedong or Che Guevara.

Consideration of the theses of insurgency underlines the extent to which the standard approach of focusing on training by and for military is insufficient, and, frequently, indeed, inadequate as an approach to learning from military history. While important, that is made even more questionable due to the importance of political issues in both tasking and implementation. Thus the process of learning from military history becomes an aspect of the 'history wars' in which the past is contested. This is frequently done through the shorthand of historical analogy by phrasing. Thus Vietnam or Suez or Munich are key aspects of debate, with the first used to debate counterinsurgency. It is at this level that it is necessary to add to the consideration of military history because it tends to be the aspect of the learning process that is underplayed.

And yet it is important to see how politicians frame discussion. When, for example, in February 2020, Matthew Hancock, the British Secretary of State for Health, referred to the Maginot Line in terms of the folly of relying on a stoppage of travel as a means to prevent the spread of coronavirus, he was of course not interested in the idea that the Maginot Line (like the anti-ship guns at Singapore that allegedly pointed in the wrong direction), worked by confining the likely direction of attack, only for the overall strategy to fail because of problems in handling the mobile stage of the campaign. Similarly, with the Vietnam War, it is not helpful in terms of public debate to suggest that, while tactically and operationally problematic for the Americans, the intervention ended with the United States allied to China, with the spread of Communism restricted in South-East Asia, with Indonesia securely in the Western camp, with the Viet Cong shattered, and with the North Vietnamese both greatly weakened by the struggle and now committed in Cambodia and facing Chinese hostility.

These points can be contested, but they underline the extent to which 'learning from military history' involves inherently political, and, for many, therefore, problematic, questions about goals, policies and strategies, questions that the military deliberately seek to avoid both in military education and in presenting a role to the public. These questions can be further amplified if the consideration of military history is taken into broader currents of issues in the public sphere. That might appear to be a learning process that has little to do with applicability for policy, but that would be a misleading view because these very constructions affect the parameters of public debate and thus an aspect of the applicability of strategic assumptions.

This conspectus of methodological problems helps explain the attraction of answers, of which the most seductive, as already mentioned, are those of technology. That answer serves important military, economic, political and popular constituencies; and does so in a manner that works in terms of a modern culture fascinated with material culture. In practical terms, this can be a case of 'Get me the weapons and I will get you the war that makes them work,' only for it to be discovered that this

rarely works that way, and certainly less so in the longer term beyond the initial campaign. Indeed, friction really arises not so much as usually understood within campaigns (and generally then for operational reasons), but more within conflicts as a whole, and then essentially because the strategic paradigms have altered.

What then does history teach and how should statesmen and military practitioners think about war? That might be the key point to assess not at the end of the essay, as is the convention, with that section bolted on as a conclusion that does not always link well with the remainder of the, generally heavily footnoted, piece. Indeed, that was a problem affecting the attempt to use historical case-studies as a learning tool during the 1950s and 1960s, and remains an issue today. First, why teach military history? Military history serves a variety of purposes. These include institutional education, academic scholarship, popular interest, commercial opportunity, and collective myth-making. All and each needs to be considered when the subject is evaluated, and to judge one by the standards of another is not necessarily helpful. Indeed, it can be positively misleading. The question why teach military history might seem to shrink the options to the educational process. That is not, however, in practice the case, for teaching, understood in the widest sense, embraces the question of the nature and sustaining of civic militarism, and also overlaps with the issue of commercial opportunity.

To approach the subject in another typology, one that draws heavily on the role and resonance of civic militarism, there is also the question of the point of reference. The question Why teach military history? can be approached in the abstract, but it also depends on the country and society that is in the forefront. The issue is different, or, at least appears very different, in Sweden or Israel, Spain or Estonia, Ireland or South Korea. It is appropriate indeed to begin with this point, rather than to start by focusing on the USA or Britain, although, for the USA, I would like to direct attention to an excellent piece by Victor Davis Hanson, 'Why Study War?', published in *City Journal* in summer 2007.

As a reminder of the variety of social contexts and needs, in many states, indeed, the teaching of military history is an aspect not simply of civic patriotism, a task Hanson chides many American academics for slighting, but also of a wider social engagement that owes something to conscription. This is seen, for example, in Finland, Israel and Switzerland. In these cases, as also more generally, the teaching of military history fulfils pedagogic purposes, but also helps in fostering the engagement of the civilian soldier, including the civilian reservist. Thus, morale, as widely conceived, plays a role in the reasons for teaching military history, and also in the content and tone of the teaching.

Conscription can be unrelated to immediate threats, the case, for example, of Switzerland, but, usually, this is not the position. Thus, the teaching of military history, whether professional, educational or civic, is an aspect of a threat environment, and the assessment of value has to take note

of this context. That, indeed, helps explain the role of military history in America's culture wars, as its downplaying is associated with a downplaying of the threat environment; and vice versa.

The prominence of the threat environment is also the case with societies, such as contemporary Iran and Myanmar, where the politics of paranoia are crucial to the mobilisation of enforced consent on behalf of the government. In some states, moreover, such as Turkey, Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, the military present themselves as crucial to national integrity and identity.

Considering these and other cases serve to underline the unusual, not to say eccentric, character of Western commitment both to intellectual independence, and to academic and educational detachment from public politics. Indeed, on the world case, the pressure of public politics on education will probably become more salient as China rises in relative importance, not least as an economic-political model. This underlines the need to appreciate the diversity of national cultures within which military affairs are considered, with the teaching of military history presented as an aspect of the politics of these cultures.

The teaching of military history in the USA, by far the world's leading military power, is currently a matter of controversy. This is not least due to the widely-repeated charge that this teaching is being downplayed by the 'politically correct'. Indeed, it is widely argued that they are preventing the appointment of military historians in American universities and marginalising the subject as a whole. Is this true? Does it matter? Is military history desirable, a 'politically correct' view, or, indeed, from 'non-politically-correct' dimension and the specific perspective of military change, not least technological change and the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, relevant? Does military history have a future?

The last is the key issue, both for the USA and more generally, but let us first address the question of whether the subject is being deliberately downplayed or discarded. Once one moves from the easy polemic of press discussion, it is possible to see this in two lights. On the one hand, the problems facing military history are not unique to the subject but are part of a wider issue that involves the range of subjects that were central to the teaching of history prior to the 1960s. Thus, this is as much a question of constitutional history, of legal history, of diplomatic history, of ecclesiastical history, and of high political history, as much as of military history.

Indeed, constitutional history and pre-1900 diplomatic history have fared considerably worse than military history, not least because they do not have the support offered by the military academies and by widespread public interest from outside higher education. Each of these ensures that military history is buoyant, whatever the situation in the universities. To a limited extent, professional interest in the law operates in a similar fashion.

The sense of a wider issue of shifts in the nature and understanding of history that are also relevant to other sub-disciplines, is not one that most military historians tend to grasp, as they generally have the tunnel vision common to most subject specialists. Nevertheless, this wider issue needs addressing, not least because of the extent to which this is an aspect of a more wholesale marginalisation of the longer-term continuity of American history. In part, this reflects a jettisoning of a historical tradition that looks back toward colonial days, the struggle for independence, and the early decades of the republic, a tradition sometimes, inaccurately, referred to as the ‘dead white men’ approach.

In its place, has come an emphasis on more recent decades, and on social forces and movements, as the agents of change. The same process can be seen at work in Britain, although there, as in the USA, it generally fails to make sufficient allowance for other factors that have moulded recent history including not only economic trends, fiscal policy and high politics, but, also, the impact of war. Thus, for example, World War Two had more of a consequence for twentieth-century American developments, and was more central to them, than Civil Rights; this was the case not simply as far as America’s international position was concerned, but also with reference to its development as both state and society. War had even more traumatic consequences for the internal development of France and Russia, Germany and Japan.

An emphasis on social forces as the causes and agents of change can misleadingly make military history appear redundant or simply the expression of social developments. This, incidentally, is an approach that helps those on the Left who see ‘peoples’ warfare’ as bound to prevail over regular, professional forces, an approach that is of limited validity, but one that flourished during the period of so-called wars of national liberation, and was powerfully advanced in the USA by particular readings of the Vietnam War. The current terrorism/insurrection in Iraq is seen by some in the same light, but it is necessary to note, first, the military perspective – that insurrections do not necessarily succeed, and, secondly, the political point that, by any standards, many of these movements were and are highly undesirable.

The relative diminution of military history thus reflects wider currents including those in both society and in historical scholarship. In the former case, it is pertinent to note the degree to which the individualism, hedonism and atomisation of society associated with both 1960s **and** post-1960s values sapped general adherence to collectivist solutions and commitments. Thus, conscription, and the accompanying mental attitudes and social patterns, no longer commanded support, and, in part, this is relevant for the context of military history, at least compared to the 1950s.

In the case of historical scholarship, it is possible when discussing the relative decline of military history to point both to the rise of social history and cultural studies, and to the influence on historical work of perspectives derived from other social sciences including anthropology and

collective psychology. This process is not restricted to the USA, which indicates that locating the issue solely in terms of America's culture wars is inadequate. It requires a broader contextualisation that is alive to the interaction of American and international developments.

Turning more specifically to the history of war, there is a tension between military history as understood by many, but by no means all, of those who are interested in the subject, and the history of war. For many, particularly, but not only, in the non-academic world, this is a subject that should be about fighting, about battles and campaigns, troops and weapons. This operational dimension is indeed important, and military history should not be demilitarised, but it is not the complete subject. Indeed, part of the tension in the discussion of military history, not least among specialists, revolves not so much around its neglect, but, instead, is in terms of how the subject is treated. Here, it is necessary to note differences among military historians. The operational historians, sometimes unfairly, but frequently all too accurately, referred to in terms of drum and trumpet history, are indeed neglected within the academy, but those looking at wider dimensions, such as the staples of war and society, and war and the state, are generally assured of an audience.

This is further the case because the 'history' in these cases is as much explored by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, as by those seen more conventionally as historians. In part, therefore, the discussion of military history today is a case of tensions among military historians and about the character of such history. This debate is not always explicit, but, in practice, exists not simply in terms of the content of the subject, but also of the way in which topics are pursued and presented, as well as of the powerful issues of patronage and appointment, and publication strategies. These latter issues are difficult to discuss, but are none the less important for that. Indeed, this can lend a shadowboxing character to public debate, with vague remarks about general attitudes when, in practice, it is the views of a small number of individuals operating in particular institutions that are crucial and at issue. Those of publishers are also particularly important, because, if the major presses do not publish military history, then it seems to lack scholarly weight. This makes it far more difficult for academics in this field to obtain posts in leading universities, and there is no doubt that that is a factor in the politics and culture of appointments; not least because of the American habit of validating opinions and individuals by their labels, as if a book or person was necessarily better because published by, or at, Yale than Oklahoma.

It is easier to probe questions about the appropriateness of the standard approach to military history, because this moves us from the more shadowy world of patronage. This approach is characterised by a fascination with technology, both definition of capability and an explanation of change, and by a focus on the Western way of war. The West dominates attention not simply because it is indeed important, but because it is seen as setting global standards for effectiveness. This, however, is an aspect of a misleading tendency to dismiss non-Western military history as primitive, a

tendency that makes it more difficult to devise an appropriate doctrine for waging war with such powers.

These fundamental parameters of the subject are, in turn, linked to other issues. The fascination with technology and, more generally, with the material culture of war, contributes to a presentation of military history in terms of revolutionary developments, rather than of incrementalism, understood in general in terms of an evolutionary change based on trial and error. This is mistaken, as incrementalism is crucial, not least in terms of the response to allegedly revolutionary developments. The latter have to be grasped, a response defined, and the response embedded in terms of procurement and training. These responses involve what may be seen as cultural dimensions and these repay attention in a subject that is frequently overly oriented toward battle, whether operational or in terms of the experience of war. A response open to cultural dimensions, is also less overly determined, not least in terms of the habitual emphasis on the material aspects of war. More generally, this serves as a reminder that the subject is far from 'closed' or 'done'.

The treatment of war in universities can be mocked by focusing on some research topics that are indeed far removed from fighting, and, more seriously, by asking whether an emphasis on civilians, atrocities, or the memorialisation of war, all three of which play a major role in the literature, has been pushed too far. These are relevant points, and some of the war and society literature indeed tells us far more about society than it does about war, and more about victims than about fighting. I note this tension in the discussion of military history by colleagues in my own university.

Nevertheless, in terms of conflict, it is also clear that victory is obtained when one of the sides is persuaded that it has lost, and this involves more than just fighting. The cultural dimension is also present in the shape of very different responses to loss and suffering. Current conflicts around the world serve as an abrupt reminder that victory and defeat, suffering and loss, have very different meanings in particular contexts, and success in such conflict, in part, depends on an accurate perception of these contrasts.

Far from being ignored, war also plays a crucial role in international relations studies, not least those on the rise and fall of great powers. Again, there is scarcely any sense that the subject is ignored from this perspective. It can, however, be treated in an overly reductionist fashion, as in the tendency to ascribe likely, if not inevitable, results to more powerful economies. This was seen in Paul Kennedy's influential *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (1988), which encapsulated a widespread tendency.

There is an undoubted lack of interest in most American universities in military history. This is particularly true of the Ivys, in several of which the serious neglect of the subject contrasts pointedly with the impressive memorials to the many who lost their life in war. This is the case, for example, with Yale and its powerful presentation of loss in the First World War. This lack of interest is also

true of the University of California system. Furthermore, a number of universities that were noted for the subject have lost relevant posts, as with Florida State, or have become less dynamic, as with Hawaii Pacific. There are a number of universities with important programmes; but there is a problem at the senior level, as John Lynn has pointed out. Many of the best and the brightest did not go to graduate school in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, those who did rarely chose military history, and, of those, few chose American military history. Thus, there is a lack of suitable senior applicants comparable to those in other fields, such as early-modern European military; but student interest lies precisely in modern American military. So the profession faces a major crisis here.

This of course matters. Military history is a key element of military studies, a point to which I will turn later, and it is unsatisfactory that these are at best spottily developed in the American education system. I was once asked by a student at Chapel Hill why it mattered, and I replied that if he became a politician it would be of great value if he understood the potential and problems of war. More generally, this point might be made about public opinion as a whole.

As the study of war matters, so it is obviously desirable. The question is whether military history as an aspect of this study is relevant, and if so why, and thus how. This idea of relevance was strongly challenged, directly and indirectly, by the belief in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This was advanced strongly in the 1990s and early-2000s as a description of changes in American military capability and as a prospectus for fresh change.

It is instructive to consider the RMA as it indicates the tension sometimes discerned between (new) doctrine and historical perspectives, and was earlier employed within the military to deny the value of military history. Integral to the RMA are a number of concepts each rich in acronyms and jargon. The common focus is on smart doctrine: operational planning and practice, in order to take advantage of a new generation of weapons and the possibilities posed by advances in information technology. The emphasis on precise information as a means, as well as a tool, of conflict, relates to its use in order to locate forces accurately, as well as to destroy enemy units with semi-automated weapons. Accurate targeting is required if precision weaponry is to be effective. This, in turn, entails 'information dominance', in order to deny such a capability to opponents. The RMA also calls for 'network-centric warfare': a focus on the new capability of information systems, rather than on traditional practices and structures of command and control. The concept thus linked developments in weapon systems with a doctrine that meshed with theories of modernization that rest on the adoption of technological systems. In the language of the RMA, weaponry is designed to ensure what are termed dominant manoeuvre, precision engagements, full-dimensional protection, focused logistics, and information warfare.

Broader requirements were also served by this creation of a belief that total victory can be ensured through a specific type of High Intensity Conflict. These tasks and assumptions can be

discussed, without any suggestion of prioritisation, in terms of liberal internationalism, the particular requirements of American foreign policy, and the growing disjuncture between highly ambitious Western goals and a widespread reluctance to risk casualties. Liberal internationalism became part of the new world order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the argument, fed in particular by the atrocities in Rwanda in 1994 and Bosnia in 1995, that there was a duty to intervene in order to prevent humanitarian disasters. Such intervention presupposed success, and relied on the notion of a clear capability gap between the two sides. Indeed, from the humanitarian perspective, the forces of good had to be successful in order to avoid the suffering that would result from a difficult conquest. This concept helped explain the difficulties faced by Anglo-American representatives when discussing Iraqi casualties during and after the war of 2003.

From the perspective of American foreign policy, the RMA also apparently explained how policy goals could be fulfilled, as this policy rested in part on a military underpinning, and in particular on how best to forestall threats. The need to be able to respond to more than one threat simultaneously, was regarded as particularly necessary, and the force multiplication apparently offered by the RMA was especially important in this context. In short, the RMA made American foreign policy possible: it contributed not only to strategic concerns but also to foreign policy interests around the world. Looked at more critically, the RMA aided in a militarisation of this policy in which, furthermore, the views of allies were of limited significance.

The value of the RMA as an analysis can be debated, not least the extent to which current conflicts apparently qualify its applicability. However, the key issue here is whether the RMA made military history redundant by moving warmaking forward to a new plane, as was claimed. The answer is no and it is valuable to note that Victor Davis Hanson comes to a similar conclusion in the piece already referred to. Aside from the point that the RMA can be historicised by reference to other revolutions in military affairs, an approach on which there is a useful literature, the claim that the RMA made history redundant clashes with other approaches.

It is not so much that there are unchanging realities in war, though that is the theme of a literature, as, rather, that military history throws light on the variety of military trajectories in the world as different societies have responded in contrasting ways to the opportunities and problems of their situation. This can be seen further if the emphasis in military development is placed on changes in ‘tasking’, in short on the goals and functions of the military, rather than a focus on capability, in particular on weaponry. Understanding the contrasting rationales of militaries, and how they rest on different strategic cultures is important because this provides a way to understand the military drives of opponents. This is particularly important for the West as force projection has become so important since the close of the Cold War.

Military history thus has a direct value as an aspect of understanding strategic culture, which now is a key concept in military studies with military history proving a key aspect in these studies. Military history is also important as the repository of experience and thus the background of training. Experience is particularly important, because war, at the tactical, operational or strategic level, is about the management of risk. Experience helps define the understanding of risk. Furthermore, when two powers begin a war, each generally assumes that it can win, and at least one is wrong. History helps explain victory and defeat and also shows that the balance between them was frequently very narrow. At the tactical level, staff rides are a valuable part of training, while operational exercises can indicate principles of manoeuvrist warfare, such as concentration and defeating opponents in detail (separately).

This is a continuing process. The 2000-3 handbook for the Nonresident Seminar Syllabus of the Strategy and Policy Division of the College of Distance Education of the United States Naval War College noted 'The overall purpose of the National Security Decision Making Course is to educate military officers and U.S. government civilians in the effective development and command of armed forces within the constraints of national resources'. The case-studies that year were Theory and Prototype Studies; The Classical Prototype: Athens vs. Sparta; The American Revolution and Maritime Theory; Policy and Strategy in a Revolutionary Era: Europe 1792-1815; Limited War and Escalation Control: The Wars of German Unification; The Russo-Japanese War and Modern Naval Strategic Thought; World War II: The United States, The Grand Alliance, and Global War; The Cold War, Containment and Korea; Limited War in a Revolutionary Setting: The Vietnam Conflict; Limited War in a Global Setting: The Gulf War; Strategies and Policies of Terrorism; and Retrospect and Prospect: The Terror War. The latter two reflected the rapid response of military educators to the issue of the moment, and the need to make historical courses relevant.

More generally, the need to make historical courses relevant can be seen with a stress on the history of joint warfare. Such operations, and associated doctrine, planning, command structures and procurement, became more important from the 1980s and, even more, 1990s, leading to a more integrated sense of military power, as well as to a questioning of former boundaries between tactical, operational and strategic perspectives and activities. For example, the shift in the strategic nuclear role from air power to submarines in the USA and Britain led to a reconsideration of the doctrine and history of air power in terms of a greater emphasis on joint operations.

The reconceptualization of military power indicates the interplay of 'real world' experience in the reformulation of doctrine, a process that also alters the parameters of historical relevance. Thus, American interest in co-operating with local forces, seen in Afghanistan in 2001, led the Army Command and General Staff College Press to publish in 2002 *Compound Warfare. That Fatal Knot*, a collection produced by its Combat Studies Institute on regulars and irregulars fighting in concert. The preface declared, 'knowing how the dynamics of compound warfare have affected the outcome of past conflicts will better prepare us to meet both present crises and future challenges of a similar nature'.

Reference to history is also widespread elsewhere. For example, in December 2000, Alain Richard, the French Minister of Defence, declared ‘the place of history is fundamental in the formation of officers, in order to illuminate their actions and their role in society’. In 1994, the French Ministry of Defence had been responsible for the foundation of a Centre d’études d’histoire de la Défense, based at Vincennes from 1995. In Germany and Japan, however, defeat and humiliation in the ‘last war’, and concern about being accused of being militaristic, has lessened, if not killed, professional interest, rather than stimulating it.

A more specific cause for historical debate was provided by the extent to which history was used to provide a frame of reference for debating military options. Thus, before the Iraq War of 2003, there was much reference in Britain to the 1956 invasion of Egypt, the Suez Crisis. In this, as in many other cases, ‘history’ served as a box from which words and images could be pulled for citation. This was seen, moreover, as the frame of reference offered, by outside commentators (sometimes well-informed and often not) for American military activities in Iraq from 2003 moved from being the rapid success of the Gulf War of 1991 to the intractable commitment of the Vietnam War. In turn, in August 2007, President George W. Bush cited the chaos in South East Asia that followed American withdrawal in 1973 as a reason for continuing to persist in Iraq. Compared to this questionable, if not somewhat crude practice (although a speech is not the place for an informed debate), part of the value of military history is that it should offer the possibility of a more sophisticated usage of references, not least in terms of the public debate.

Claims that a historical perspective on war is irrelevant are misguided, although, as discussion of the RMA indicates, they reflect a powerful impulse within modern American military culture that draws on a wider practice in the West. For at least a quarter-millennium, it has been customary to emphasize the importance of an approach, insight or development by stressing its novel character and consequences; and the search for them has been an important aspect of Western intellectual culture.

This emphasis on innovation has had multiple advantages, and to argue that military history should abandon its focus on the new and revolutionary might seem counter-intuitive, especially if cutting-edge technology is regarded as the great force multiplier. Military realities, however, are both too complex and too dependent on previous experiences to make a focus on change, let alone revolutionary change, helpful. An emphasis on continuities captures the role of limitations, especially of Western tactical, operational and strategic military effectiveness and limitations with regard to non-Western environments; although, of course, continuity does not imply an absence of change. Such an understanding, of both continuity and change, underlines the crucial value of an historical approach.

Secondly, aside from the last point, what else does military history offer modern-day statesmen and military practitioners? Bullet points would include:

1. The contingent nature of capability advantages, and notably so in light of the degree to which anti-tactics, anti-operations, and anti-strategies exist and/or rapidly develop.
2. That the world is not an isotropic surface, equal in all points, and thus readily open to particular technologies.
3. That the past has to be understood not as a template, but as a thinking tool, and notably so about the role of non-linear change.
4. That related to these points, it can be highly misleading to focus on the methods of the leading power in the system, as its goals and capabilities will be inherently different.
5. That most military participants are not even second-level powers, however the levels are assessed; but that that does not mean that they lack potential and notably so on their own turf.
6. That there is a tendency to underplay the role of civil conflict when considering military goals and means.
7. That, linked to that, there is a widespread disinclination, and notably so in the West, to see that policing agencies are a key element in military capability.
8. That the last point is related to a reading of strategy as much more than a practice of operationalisation.
9. That the prioritisations of goals, tasks and means that are central to strategy are not only inherently political but also necessarily contingent.
10. That the latter characteristic leads to a process in which history should not be used to set the pattern.
11. Instead, history emerges in part as an analytical device, even rhetorical tool, in discussing prioritisation and, more particularly, in assessing the practicalities of what are variously advanced as goals, tasks and means, not least in considering the interacting relationships between these facets.
12. That the historian can offer particular insights on the various strategic cultures at play across the world, both at state level and within states; and that this concept helps in the assessment of the threat and opportunity perceptions of other players, and, crucially, how one's own intentions and actions will be understood by others.
13. That the more strategic culture is advanced as a conceptual tool in understanding the motivation, pursuit and impact of conflict, the more history take son value, because strategic culture is very much a presentist meditation on the lasting impact of persistent factors. Moreover, the concept of strategic culture directs attention to beliefs, ideas and assumptions, and in a fashion that relates to far more than the formal pursuit of strategy.

This list could, and should, be extended, and readers are invited to do so. What is more germane is to return to the question about how to think about war. A frequent canard is to argue that those who have not fought cannot think about war, which is unhelpful as

1. many in the military have only experienced particular types of conflict;
2. the ability to kill or to risk being killed is no guide to operational, let alone strategic, skillsets;
3. politicians have a duty to try to understand the issues involved in war.

Moreover, politicians, whether in democratic or in authoritarian societies, have a public interface, and it is best if they understand what they are trying to justify/elicit support for, and, in particular, grasp the risks involved, and the possible timetables. This is made more important because of the evidence that concerns even disaffection on Home Fronts play a role in affecting capability. Moreover, this is even more the case in modern contexts when troops are in easy contact with their families through social media. Morale has always been an issue, but has become more so ever since the collapse of empires that began in 1917.

Indeed, this dependence on the military effort on a broad understanding of capability is one that emerges as a major lesson. In the 1910s, this included not only the demise of the governing systems in Russia, Austria, and Germany, but also the role of the military in the Chinese revolution, and, in the early 1920s, in the transformation of the Turkish/Ottoman empire. It would be ironic, indeed, if, while the agenda of the present is focused increasingly on the consequences of great-power confrontation between America and China, that, in practice, the major use of the military across the world hinged on insurrection and/or suppression. Moreover, as during the Cold War, the great-power confrontation will relate to this issue. Again, however, that very phrase carries the message of this piece. ‘As during the Cold War’ does not mean that the course of events will be the same, nor that say ‘Suez’ or ‘Vietnam’ will be useful as guides other than to the uncertainties of outcome. When two powers go to war, generally both think they can win, and at least one is always wrong, and often both.

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<sup>1</sup> M.E. Latham, *Modernisation as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2000) and *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernisation, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, New York, 2011); N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2003); D.C. Engerman, ‘American Knowledge and Global Power,’ *Diplomatic History*, 31 (2007), pp. 599-622.

<sup>2</sup> G.A. Gaddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> For a critique, J.C.D. Clark, ‘Secularisation and Modernisation: The Failure of a “Grand Narrative,”’ *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 161-94.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Hawkins, 'Modernity and the Victorians,' unpublished paper. I am grateful to Angus Hawkins for providing me with a copy.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, G. Hanlon, *Italy 1636: Cemetery of Armies* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> G. Hanlon, *European Military Rivalry, 1500-1750. Fierce Pageant* (Abingdon, 2020), p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup> J.D. Chambers, and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> M. Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660* (Belfast, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> G. Parker, 'In Defense of *The Military Revolution*,' in C.J. Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate* (Boulder, Colorado, 1995), p. 356.

<sup>10</sup> Parker, *Defense*, p. 355.