

Our Elite Schools Have Abandoned Military History

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The Union's victory in the Civil War, whose opening shots were fired by Confederate forces 150 years ago this month, established that the United States, which had been conceived in liberty, would endure as a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Many college students will hear in that assertion echoes of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Few will know much about the bloody three-day battle of Gettysburg that Lincoln's revered speech commemorated.

There is little chance today's college students will study the strategy that underlay Gen. Robert E. Lee's decision to lead the Army of Northern Virginia on a second invasion of the North, or the tactics that Gen. George Gordon Meade and his commanders of the Army of the Potomac adopted to repel the attack. They are probably no better versed in any other Civil War battle.

One reason for this ignorance is that our bastions of liberal education barely teach military affairs. No doubt the same post-Vietnam hostility to all things military that impelled faculties and administrations to banish ROTC from campus is a major factor.

To be sure, military history continues to command popular audiences through best-selling books and television documentaries. It is taught at the service academies and flourishes at a few, mostly public, universities including the University of North Carolina, Ohio State, Texas A&M and the University of Wisconsin.

Where it is taught, courses in military history attract impressive numbers of students. But as military historian Edward M. Coffman (professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin) notes, only about 5% of America's approximately 14,000 history professors identify military history as an interest.

The study of military affairs has not disappeared from the college curriculum, yet the neglect is dramatic. In history departments, survey courses may discuss the social, political and economic dimensions of wars. But the traditional topics of military history—how wars begin, how they are waged, and how they end; the cultural foundations, the recruitment and training of military forces; logistics, tactics and strategy—receive scant attention.

As for courses that focus on military affairs, one would be hard-pressed to find more than one or two courses offered during the 2010-2011 academic year among the approximately 80 courses that Harvard's history department listed for undergraduates, the 150 undergraduate courses listed by Yale's history department, and the 130 classes listed by Stanford's history department. Yale's wonderful "Studies in Grand Strategy"—an interdisciplinary course developed by Profs. John Lewis Gaddis, Charles Hill and Paul Kennedy—stands nearly alone.

The situation in political science departments is better, where courses in security studies are routine. But these usually provide a narrow and attenuated view of military affairs. They typically explore decisions taken by high officials in matters of war and peace in terms of theories of international relations, such as realism (emphasizing the primacy of power) or idealism (focusing on the advancement of democracy and human rights).

Or they adopt a game-theoretic approach that models such decision-making. Stanford Prof. Scott Sagan's course, "The Face of Battle"—which examines the translation of military strategy into tactics in critical battles in American history—is a rare exception.

Expanding the study of military affairs in history and political science departments is only a first step. The core curriculum of any self-respecting liberal education should require a course on the subject.

An introduction to military affairs might begin with classic works—Sun Tzu's "The Art of War," Thucydides' "History of the Peloponnesian War," and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani's "The Islamic Law of Nations." It might include classics of modern strategy beginning with Clausewitz's "On War," explore the dilemmas of nuclear deterrence and the challenges posed by asymmetric warfare in an age of weapons of mass destruction. Finally, the course might study closely the background, conduct and consequences of several landmark battles.

If a liberal education is to acquaint students with the variety and complexity of human affairs, and prepare them for the responsibilities of citizenship, the study of military affairs is essential. War is coeval with human civilization and pervasive in human history.

From time immemorial, it has been waged by tyrants to acquire and conquer. It was a vital instrument of expansion for successful imperial states including democratic Athens, republican Rome, and liberal-parliamentary Britain. In today's dangerous world, even affluent liberal and democratic nations that seek to resolve disputes through diplomacy and are increasingly averse to both suffering and inflicting pain must remain prepared to defend themselves.

War, moreover, displays as do few other undertakings the grim and the great in human nature. It produces death and destruction while generating innovation in organization, technology, ethics and law. It unleashes cruelty and exposes cowardice while inspiring

camaraderie and courage. It produces regimentation, obedience and a concentration on self-preservation even as it cultivates leadership, instills a sense of duty, and honors principles worth dying for.

The United States faces novel and difficult national security challenges, but too few intellectuals and political decision-makers have served in the military, personally know someone who has, or have studied the history of war. In particular, the failure of our leading universities to teach military affairs impairs the nation's capacity to defend itself and wage war effectively and justly. Such study would yield better proponents, and better critics, of America's national security policy.

What is critical is to recover the wisdom embodied in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: The preservation of liberty and democratic self-government depend on learning the lessons of what has been lost and gained on battlefields.

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