

Foreign Language and History

The Enlightened Study of War

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The greatest leaders must be educated broadly.

—Maj. Gen. George H. Olmsted, U.S. Army

Thirty-eight years ago, as a combat-seasoned captain of infantry, and a recent Olmsted scholar fluent in Spanish, I was counseled by a revered senior officer distinguished for valor and highly esteemed. I had served under him in war and would again serve under his command in peacetime. He was a consummate professional and a gentleman of the first order. The officer bluntly informed me that my ongoing pursuit of a master's degree at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., undertaken on my own time while carrying out demanding duties at Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, was a waste of time. In the 1970s, the Marine Corps did not permit returning Olmsted Scholars to pursue a master's degree while on duty. Funding for my studies, regardless, was borne by the Olmsted Foundation and GI Bill education benefits.

In the 1970s, U.S. military culture tended to devalue graduate study. Today, advanced, refined education cannot be treated as a nice-to-have frill for the officer corps. For all of recorded history, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—war, death, pestilence, and famine—have ridden stirrup to stirrup as causes of human misery and political change. Of the four, war still rides a glossy steed, foddered by many of the advances that have weakened its companions. The war-horse remains a charger that casts a long shadow. The design of its bit and bridle should become one of the principal, if not the principal, preoccupations of political leaders, military officers, and learned thinkers. That preoccupation should take the form of advanced study.

The study of the causes of war, in contrast to its course or its conduct, is a modern phenomenon that dates no earlier than from the Age of Enlightenment. The attention the officer corps has now grown accustomed to paying the subject is more recent still—coterminous not only with a sense of horror of the military failures of the past century but also with an interest in political and social sciences.

One author states that studying war is somewhat similar to studying economics.¹ Western scholars have made some progress in mastering the intricacies of economics, but not so much the study of war and preserving peace. In fact, in the United States, it was not until the dawn of the nuclear age that the study of war and peace commanded anywhere near the degree of intellectual attention that had been devoted to economic analysis. Suffice it to say the incidence of war today, the state of play in the actual study of war, the rising Far Eastern powers, and the actions of Russia suggest focusing intellectual attention toward the study of war. Moreover, it behooves the military services to engender and to ensure an enlightened study of war. That study is accomplished only through advanced education that includes languages and history, in order to come to grips with the dynamics of human social behavior.

The Field of Strategic Studies as a Human Endeavor

The field of strategic studies, that is, the analysis of force in international relations, has not found its own John Maynard Keynes. Can we isolate strategic studies, as economists isolate topics of study with varying success, from the problems of human organization and international politics?² Perhaps not.



(Photo by Sr. Airman Patrick J. Dixon, U.S. Air Force)

Iraqi Maj. Gen. Othman Ali Farhoud (left), commander, 8th Iraqi Army Division, shakes hands with U.S. Army Gen. John Abizaid 27 October 2005, Camp Echo, Iraq. Abizaid, an Olmsted Scholar who studied at the University of Jordan, Amman, is a fluent Arabic speaker and an advocate of cultural and language training. "So much of the problem that we are facing in the Middle East is a cultural gap that can be closed by earlier education in an officer's career," Abizaid said in an Armed Forces Press Service interview 26 May 2007.

First, war is a product of the clash of ideas and beliefs. Ideas are not to be grappled with, much less understood, unless the cultures from which they emanate are understood. A culture cannot be understood other than through an in-depth knowledge of its language.

Second, history must be the handmaiden of those who would be policy shapers. Those who ignore or eschew the importance of ideas and beliefs as propellants of human action are on a fool's errand. Moreover, to comprehend and understand human cultures requires grounding in such diverse disciplines as anthropology, sociology, social sciences, brain science, psychology, and much else. The tragic consequences of ignoring

these disciplines are readily found in the United States' misadventures in Vietnam in the 1960s, Lebanon in the 1980s, and now the Middle East.³

The costs of failure endure for decades, if not longer. The ignominy of Vietnam lingers still. El Salvador and Honduras have deteriorated socially and economically into a state of near lawlessness after failed U.S. interventions.⁴

Nor can ignorance be nullified by arrogance. The legendary Gertrude Bell, a British colonial official who a century ago made herself indispensable in a man's world, correctly remarked of the British mandate over what was to become Iraq, "can you persuade people

to take your side when you are not sure in the end whether you'll be there to take theirs?"⁵ Those were prescient words. While Kaiser Wilhelm II was planning the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway, Bell was making herself intimately familiar with a great swath of Arabia, from remotest Syria to the waters of the Persian Gulf. Fluent in Persian and Arabic—as well as German and French—she had an uncanny knowledge of regional history. She was also the first female to receive a first class honors in history from Oxford University.

Owing to conventions of the time, women were not allowed to matriculate or graduate from university before 1920. Failing to groom the best people a nation

has to offer, regardless of gender, was shortsighted and ultimately inimical to the national interest. For these reasons and a myriad more, the United States must require the officer corps to be denizens of the bastions of advanced learning wherein that multiplicity of vagaries and propensities of what is called humankind can be studied and analyzed. Only thus can the armed forces of the Nation effectively execute their primary function within society. To neglect this obligation would be anachronistic. Moreover, it would be a dangerous gamble with the future.

The Great Diversity of Intellectual Qualities

Professional military education can be viewed in two general facets. The first is the inculcation and shaping of new officers into an integral part of the larger whole. A new officer is impressionably accepting, malleable even, of the mores and ethos of the profession of arms. The second generally occurs at mid-field-grade ranks such as lieutenant colonel or junior colonel, and increasingly with flag officers, wherein the services' war colleges (and generally for flag officers, civilian universities) allow for an intellectual maturation of the officer. In the words of Carl von Clausewitz, "The influence of the great diversity



(Photo courtesy of International Military Forums)

U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones, supreme allied commander, Europe, speaks with Belgian NATO Reaction Force soldiers during Exercise Steadfast Jaguar 22 February 2006 in Sao Vicente, Cape Verde. Jones speaks fluent French thanks to a childhood spent mainly in Paris where his father worked for International Harvester. Additionally, he honed his foreign engagement skills by earning a degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

of intellectual qualities is felt chiefly in the higher ranks, and increases as one goes up the ladder. It is the primary cause for the diversity of roads to the goal ... and for the disproportionate part assigned to the play of probability and chance in determining the course of events."⁶

The challenges facing military officers are prodigious and consequential. Technology, with all that it portends, is just one area of interest. Americans are the consummate experts on focusing on technology to win wars. Research into electromagnetic pulse warfare, information dominance, advanced information technology systems (susceptible to inexpensive hacking), and increasingly expensive hardware are but a few examples. In general, Americans are good at technology. It is good U.S. forces continue to enhance expertise in those areas where they have a comparative advantage.

Recall, as well, that if destructive technology amplifies violence, constructive technology amplifies compassion, and the lessons of technology are universal. One of those lessons is that technological teleology is not an accurate yardstick of actual product performance. Is it not ironic, however, that the study and learning, and yes, the entrepreneurial spirit, that have brought forth all these wonders might not have been directed a bit more on the software? Specifically,

U.S. policymakers, and perhaps military leaders, have given short shrift to the ideas, beliefs, motivations, and dreams of human beings.

The discipline given the shortest shrift is the learning, truly learning, of a foreign language. Arguably, foreign languages are viewed as just another adjunct in the fixer's toolbox. That language proficiency takes time to inculcate and constant attention to maintain is not readily recognized. As good as Americans are at technology and its myriad offshoots, they are dejectedly abysmal in fostering anything approaching an appreciation for, or recognition of, the need for individuals to learn a foreign language. Spillover of this attitude into the military realm is natural. For years, the military has deluded itself, particularly when dealing within the Western Hemisphere, with the illusion that given the number of Hispanics, particularly among its enlisted personnel, there exists little need for a formalized approach to ensuring Spanish language proficiency.

The officer ranks suffer a disproportionately small number of individuals who can claim foreign language fluency. Often as not, fluency in another tongue has not been acquired through any formal education or dedicated immersion into a foreign culture. In addition, the fact that an individual is, say, from Puerto Rico, and is fluent in Spanish, does not mean she or he will work well with indigenous tribes in the jungles of Peru. Americans typically consider Peru a Spanish-speaking country, but what if those indigenous peoples speak only Quechua or Aymara?

The dearth of linguistic and cultural knowledge—not to mention historical acumen—was a contributing factor of no small consequence in the morass of Vietnam, the tragedy of Beirut in 1983, the failure of Mogadishu in 1993, and the current serious confrontation with Islamic fundamentalism.⁷ Would military leaders having a firm grasp of language and an in-depth appreciation of regional history have avoided these conflicts? Could U.S. military failures have been averted if the military had made the necessary concerted adjustments to the education of the officer corps, so that officers understood human factors? Perhaps not, but these two faculties, properly employed and applied, would have pragmatically enhanced decision making. The nature of the interventions, and possibly their outcomes, might not have been so tragic.

Therefore, might we not be subjectively committing the nation to living a lie when we trundle off on some

quixotic foreign errand? In any case, the point is that within a Clausewitzian context, the United States has failed significantly in inculcating the “influence of the great diversity of intellectual qualities” within the officer corps of the armed forces.

The Study of Languages

The George and Carol Olmsted Foundation, known as the Olmsted Foundation, offers scholarships to active duty junior officers recommended by the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force. They must have completed at least three years of commissioned service, but not more than eleven years of total active military service at time of selection. Each year, selected officers receive the unparalleled opportunity to study in a foreign language at a foreign university. The nature of the program is particularly suited for the military challenges today's officers will face. Further, officers have the opportunity to study languages and cultures in depth relatively early in their careers.

How the services view the Olmsted program is somewhat inconsistent, if not assumptive. None treats the Olmsted program as a separate and distinct entity. For example, the Marine Corps offers the program within a Marine Corps order that also announces Burke Equivalent Scholars, Fulbright, Rhodes, and Guggenheim Scholarships. Given the Olmsted Foundation's vision and success, the services ought to consider the program as a separate entity when soliciting candidates. If properly utilized, the Olmsted program permits an essential introduction to foreign language and culture that can be expanded on throughout an officer's career. Nineteen Olmsted scholars were selected in March 2016 for the fifty-seventh Olmsted Scholar Class. To date, 620 scholars have completed or are completing studies, or are preparing for two years of study abroad. Scholars have studied in forty languages in over two hundred foreign universities spanning sixty countries worldwide.⁸

The Study of History

History fares little better than foreign language in terms of how the services prepare officers. The serious study of history languishes in the supposed dusty and sterile realms of academe. It is something pursued at one's whim rather than, in the words of Sir Winston Churchill, “to come to the root of the matter” for

one's own understanding.⁹ One could do worse than ponder Rudyard Kipling's admiring verses about the tribal warriors who attacked British infantry forces during the 1898–1899 Sudan campaign. The munitions used by professional British soldiers against indigenous irregulars included Martini-Henry rifles—an advanced technology of the era. Nonetheless, the vigorous attack embarrassed the British by breaking their infantry formation, known as a square:

We sloshed you with
Martinis, an' it wasn't 'ardly
fair; / But for all the odds
agin' you, ... you broke the
[British] square.¹⁰

This raises another consideration: what of the enemy who does not play fair, or perhaps who devises a new set of rules of play? Americans sometimes forget how a small group of revolutionary fighters held off two waves of British forces at Bunker Hill on 17 June 1775.¹¹ The British commanders entered the battle confident of their superiority, and the cost of their victory over amateur militias was over one thousand casualties, including many officers.

What assumptions do U.S. commanders make about their enemies? Perhaps Americans imagine their superiority over enemies rests in technological dominance—which is transitory. Might I suggest that Americans, too, have been caught up in hubris engendered through supposed superiority of the professional military, like the British at Sudan or Bunker Hill? The American square has been broken more than once since the end of World War II.

Linguistic knowledge and proficiency coupled with deep historical acumen foster strategic consistency. They help bestow a certain universal understanding of human grievances, motivations, and probable actions. Lay aside for the moment professional military education, important though it is, including the war colleges. Consider programs such as the Olmsted Foundation, offered to company grade officers. Think in broader terms, like

Stanford University, Johns Hopkins University, the Naval Postgraduate School, Georgetown University, and others that prepare officers for the challenges the Nation faces today and the unknowns of tomorrow.



(Photo by Paolo Bovo)

Army Brig. Gen. Christopher Cavoli, commanding general of the 7th Army Joint Multinational Training Command, speaks with Mariagrazia Santoro, Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, during the Sustainable Training Area Management Conference in Udine, Italy, 9 June 2015. Cavoli speaks fluent Italian, Russian, and French, and holds degrees from Princeton University and Yale University.

Inadequate study has impaired military operations in years past. As Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill noted of the Royal Navy on the eve of World War I,

[It] was not mute because it was absorbed in thought and study, but because it was weighed down by its daily routine and by its ever-complicating and diversifying technique. We had competent administrators, brilliant experts of every description, unequalled navigators, good disciplinarians, fine sea-officers, brave and devoted hearts: but at the outset of the conflict we had more captains of ships than captains of war.¹²

Apropos these words, a 2015 study describing U.S. Navy deficiencies, *Navy Strategy Development: Strategy in the 21st Century*, echoes Churchill's concerns of over a century ago. The study asserts that the Navy "places little institutional emphasis on educational and intellectual development of its officer corps beyond operational matters."¹³

The Understanding of Human Nature

Our captains of war need to be absorbed in thought and study that can only come through advanced education. The mastery of languages should come from acculturated immersion. Rosetta Stone and even the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center may be good for what they purport, but they are entry level, introductory. Likewise, there is a need to truly understand history, or otherwise military leaders will stumble about blindly.

Foremost, our captains of war must strive to understand human nature. Advanced education of the officer corps is not a mere luxury but rather an absolute. Anything short of taking this on board is foolish and perilous. ■

This article is adapted from a speech given 24 July 2015 for the Naval Postgraduate School Marine Dining Out, at the Pacific House, Monterey, California.

Biography

Col. John McKay, U.S. Marine Corps, retired, is a writer, consultant, and speaker. He is a twice-wounded infantry officer having served in three wars. He holds master's degrees from Georgetown University and the National War College. Reared in Latin America, he is an Olmsted Scholar and a Spanish linguist. He served as naval attaché to El Salvador during the civil war in the 1980s, and in 1995-96 as commanding officer of Joint Task Force-160, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He has worked in South America for a national intelligence agency and in Mexico for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Notes

Epigraph. U.S. Army Maj. Gen. George H. Olmsted, quoted at the Olmsted Foundation website, accessed 12 May 2016, <http://www.olmstedfoundation.org>.

1. Alastair Buchan, *War in Modern Society: An Introduction* (London: C.A. Watts & Co. Ltd., 1966), xi.
2. *Ibid.*, ix-xiii.
3. For more on failed U.S. interventions in Vietnam, Lebanon, and the Middle East, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 93, 98-100, and 121-27; and *America's War for the Greater Middle East: a Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016).
4. For more on El Salvador and Honduras, see Douglas V. Porpora, *How Holocausts Happen: The United States in Central America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Also see the writings of Horacio Castellanos Moya, such as *Con la congoja de la pasada tormenta* (San Salvador: Editorial Tendencias, 1995); *Recuento de incertidumbres: cultura y transición en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Editorial Tendencias, 1993); and *The Dream of My Return*, trans. Katherine Silver (New York: New Directions Books, 2015).
5. Gertrude Bell, quoted in Christopher Dickey, "'The Unraveling,' by Emma Sky," *New York Times* online book review, 8 July 2015, accessed 18 May 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/books/review/the-unraveling-by-emma-sky.html?_r=0. See also Gertrude Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, vol.

- 1, at Project Gutenberg Australia website, accessed 19 May 2016, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400341h.html>.
6. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 139.
7. See Gilles Kepel, trans. Anthony F. Roberts, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 317-19, and Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: a Military History*, 143-59.
8. The Olmsted Foundation, "Locations Announced for OSC 2016," The Olmsted Foundation website, accessed 19 May 2016, <http://www.olmstedfoundation.org/news/locations-announced-for-osc-2016>.
9. Winston S. Churchill, "The Old Lion," (radio speech broadcast from London to America, 16 June 1941).
10. Rudyard Kipling, "Fuzzy-Wuzzy (Soudan Expeditionary Force)," *Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 150-52.
11. John Whiteclay Chambers, II, ed. *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96.
12. Winston S. Churchill, *The Collected Works of Sir Winston Churchill*, Centenary Limited Edition, vol. VIII, *The World Crisis, Part One, 1911-1914* (London: The Library of Imperial History, 1974), 58.
13. James A. Russell et al., *Navy Strategy Development: Strategy in the 21st Century*, Navy Research Program Project FY14-N3/N5-0001 (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School: 2015), 6.