TEACHING ABOUT THE MILITARY: SOME BASICS
By Paul Herbert

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I take the inspiration for this talk from the distinguished military historian Maurice Matloff, who wrote that military history is a combination of general history and military art and science, and that it lies at the intersection of diplomatic, political, social, cultural, economic and intellectual trends in American history with military affairs. If it is not as well presented in secondary schools as it might be, I suspect that one reason is that teachers know that it's *terra incognita*. They approach the military as a sort of foreign world full of jargon. They're unsure how to organize their thinking about war and warfare, and so there's avoidance from lack of confidence.

In fact, one can teach military history without being a soldier just as one can teach politics without being a politician, law without being a lawyer, or any other discipline that is fundamental to our national story. So today I want to suggest methods of approaching military history in the classroom.

First, though, let me address why we should teach American military history.

We should teach American military history in order to understand American history. The story of our nation is intimately and inextricably wound around the issue of war and peace. Wars have had tremendous consequences for the U.S. The defense of the U.S. is a highly problematic political, emotional, cultural and social issue. Our population for generations has included those vulnerable to military service, whether voluntary or conscripted, and veterans, both important dimensions of our society. To leave military history out of the national story is to degrade that story

considerably and risks ignorance of who we are as a people.

The second reason to integrate military history is to preserve civilian control of the military. We are a very lucky nation in our relationship between our people, our government, and our military. Unlike many countries in history, our army has not been feared by our people. We ought not take our civil-military inheritance for granted. If we don't educate a rising generation in civilian responsibility for military affairs, we could lose it. We could outsource our own defense in the way that we outsource so many other things today.

The third reason is to foster informed, ethical reasoning with regard to war, defense, and military service. These issues are not going to disappear from the national agenda any time soon. All of our students either face them today or will face them in the future, as policymakers or military leaders or, like ourselves, taxpayers, voters, and people who are concerned about the future. To ignore a subject so fraught with ethical complications and problems is to do young people a disservice.

To know about war is not to advocate war. The relative absence of military history from general history, I believe, reflects distaste for the subject itself. War is a terrible thing to be avoided and so we avoid teaching about it. To teach about military affairs and war is neither to advocate war nor to recruit young people for the military. On the other hand, such teaching should not be to condemn all war nor to discourage military service. Teachers can approach military history very well in class without doing these things, just as they can handle other controversial topics.

TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Foundational Ideas

There are some foundational ideas that permit us to teach military history as part of American history, with all of the themes that compete for our attention and energy.

The first is that *war and conflict are enduring human experiences with profound consequences*. They are likely to remain so. Anything so directly and powerfully part of our experience as human beings ought to be dealt with in the classroom. There's a corollary, one that undergirded the

creation of our own country and the military clauses of the Constitution. That is that the ability to defend the country is a requirement of sovereignty. If a government cannot defend its country, territory, people, interests and constitutional order, then perhaps it has no country after all.

Students should know about *the military clauses of the Constitution*. Our Constitution was established in order to provide for the common defense and the secure the blessings of liberty. Importantly, the Constitution separates the powers of government over the military and over war making. It provides a sophisticated and enduring approach to reconciling democracy with defense, war, and the military. It is very important that students appreciate why those clauses were framed, how they have been manifested in our past, what stresses are upon them today, what solutions might be found to those stresses and what the students might anticipate in their lifetimes as citizens.

It's important to know something about *America's military institutions*, principally the armed forces—Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, some would argue the Merchant Marine, the Department of Defense once it was created. In the history of any of our services, one can track its primary purposes and actual roles. Why, for example, did we create an army? What is it for generally and what has it been for specifically in any particular era? What have been its formal and informal roles? A good example is the army's role in the expansion of the U.S. across this continent. The army facilitated that expansion by exploration, engineering, and a host of other auxiliary services that had very little to do with war but instead utilized the competence of military organizations in a whole host of technical fields, as well as in organization, planning, and operations.

American military institutions are primarily instruments of U.S. policy, both foreign and domestic. We can examine U.S. defense policy in each of America's wars and ask whether each service was a useful tool. For example, the Army on the verge of World War I was designed on paper to protect the continent from a foreign invader. However, most regiments, Regular and National Guard, were deployed along the U.S.-Mexican border to stabilize the region from the effects of the Mexican revolution. When President Wilson promised Marshal Joffre in the spring of 1917 that he would send a division to France immediately, Secretary of War Newton Baker might have said, "Mr. President, we have no divisions." So the army we had was inappropriate to the policy we pursued. (The problem was resolved. Four regiments—six including artillery regiments—were sent from Texas *post haste* by train to Hoboken, New Jersey, where the "first division" literally was organized on the docks. Four days later it boarded transports and crossed the Atlantic, landing in France at St. Nazaire, the first of 49 American divisions deployed in that conflict. The First has been on continuous active duty since then; currently some 2,500 young Americans serve with the 1st Division in Afghanistan.)

Our military institutions reflect American culture, its positive aspects and its problems. I became a commissioned officer in 1972 in an army reeling from the Vietnam years, not just the war itself but all the complications of that era. My early years as an officer were spent dealing with absenteeism, race relations, drug abuse, and other aspects of morale and discipline. I've had the experience of teaching an American soldier how to spell his name so he could sign for his pay, a reflection of U.S. culture at that particular time. The idea that we could take that army somewhere, for instance to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and intervene between two major combatants armed to the teeth, is amazing.

Our military institutions are social institutions. They have their own organization and culture and are to varying degrees closed societies, which can be very problematic in American history. The relationships among the regular, reserve and militia forces, and between those and American society, are important matters to understand.

A profound historical issue is *who serves and why*. We have addressed that question in many different ways, with emphasis alternately on citizen-soldiers, the militia, volunteers, and conscription. There was a time when conscription was executed by the military - uniformed members of the provost marshal's corps in American towns deciding who serves. Conscription has also been carried out by committees of our friends and neighbors. We have sometimes excluded important minority groups, who have had to fight for the right to serve equally in the military just as they pursue equality in society at large. The army in which I was commissioned had very few women, all of them in the Women's Army Corps. Today, women play a prominent role throughout our armed forces and are directly in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Obama recently opened the military to gays and all combat positions to women.

All of this implies that the civil-military relationship is an extremely important matter for all of us, as voters, taxpayers or soldiers. Our students should be introduced to these issues and encouraged to understand them.

America's Wars – What Changes and Why?

We should teach about significant changes in American warfare and military experience over time. From the colonial wars of 1607-1775 to today's conflicts, we can provide vicarious experience to students that enriches their ability to recognize and deal with analogous issues in their own time. In addition to major episodic foreign wars, we have been constantly in a situation of conflict where we have used our armed forces in a variety of ways to carry out national policy short of war.

The Conduct of War

Tracing change in warfare over time requires a general framework of military art and science, the actual conduct of war, a topic that seems to have fallen off the table in the trend toward cultural and social history.

A secondary school teacher can and should be reasonably comfortable with the following terms, and able to integrate them into a general course in U.S. history, identifying change and continuity and their causes.

We identify *three levels of war*: *strategy, operations, and tactics*. Civilians seem to use these interchangeably, but they actually form a hierarchy. The boundaries between them are subjective and vary from era to era and place to place, but in

general, strategy, at the top, is the overall concept for using military power to achieve one or more political ends. (In Western and certainly U.S. culture, but not in all cultures, the purpose of military power is to secure favorable political conditions.) Beneath strategy is the realm of operations, the positioning and movement of major forces—field armies, air forces, fleets--to gain advantages over an enemy. Operations may or may not involve fighting. It's the art of translating strategy into practical activity. Finally, tactics is the art of winning battles and engagements.

Strategy, operations and tactics are manifest in *campaigns and battles*. A campaign is a planned sequence of operations and engagements intended to lead to a strategic goal. A battle is the violent collision of forces, usually in a discrete time and place.

A familiar example from WWII is the western front just prior to the Battle of the Bulge. It illustrates strategy and some strategic considerations. The Allies came ashore at Normandy. After a month of fighting, they broke out and swept at an unanticipated rapid rate across France, liberating Paris, nearly destroying two German armies, with the British and Canadians to the north and the Americans to the south. This was what General Dwight D. Eisenhower at the time and historians since have called the "broad front strategy" - to pursue the Germans toward the western border of Germany with all forces across the entire face of northern France, Belgium, and the Benelux countries. The alternative, strongly favored by the British and especially Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, was to concentrate all available logistical support behind a single, narrow thrust intended to beat the Germans to the Rhine River, cross it and end the war in 1944.

Hitler decided to counter the Allied advance in the Ardennes as the Allies slowed due to their stretched supply lines in the fall of 1944. Though hard pressed on all fronts, he marshaled a fairly significant group of armies to seize Antwerp. Antwerp was absolutely critical to Allied logistics. It had been liberated by the British, but the mouth of the Rhine River was still in German hands, so the port, which was inland, could not be used. Hitler decided to attack through the Ardennes, turn north, go all the way to Antwerp and seize it, thus denying the port to the Allies entirely and, hopefully, splitting the British forces in the north from the U.S. forces in the south. This might precipitate a political crisis in which he could negotiate a separate peace in the west in time to turn around and take on the Soviets. This plan set up the famous Battle of the Bulge. All this illustrates strategy, both Allied and German – concepts for using military power to achieve a political outcome.

Operations and tactics are seen in the movements of the 1st Infantry Division in December, 1944, as it participated in the Allied response to the German attack. Relieved from heavy fighting in the Hurtgen Forest on December 5, 1944, 1st Division soldiers were resting and recuperating for the first time since D-Day when, on December 16, they were ordered back to the fight. They were rushed south in hastily assembled truck convoys and foot marches to occupy critical defensive ground on the northern shoulder of the "bulge" created in Allied lines by the German attack – an operational maneuver. Here, the division's 26th Infantry Regiment

fought tenaciously against successive German tank attacks, constantly adjusting weapons and positions to hold their ground and deny the Germans use of a key highway. Combined with similar heroic stands by other units across the battlefield, this fatally upset the timetable of the German advance. The ebb and flow of fighting around the Belgian village of Butgenbach illustrates tactics.

Logistics is the art of sustaining and moving military forces in the field or at sea. There is no military power at all if it cannot be moved to where it is needed and sustained while it is there. For example, in Europe in 1944, to sustain one U.S. division in combat for one day (not attacking, just on the front line) required delivery of 650 tons of fuel, ammunition, repair parts, supplies, replacement vehicles, etc. The plan for liberating Europe assumed that by D+90 (90 days after D-Day, or sometime in early September 1944), the U.S. Army would have 12 divisions in France, 120 miles from the invasion beaches, located generally along the Seine River. At that point, the Allies planned to pause to reorganize logistics for a second push toward Germany. Supplies and transportation were planned accordingly. In actuality, by D+90 there were 16 such divisions, 270 miles from the Normandy beaches. The Normandy ports had not been opened and Antwerp, as we have seen, was still in German hands. One can see the exponential increase in the logistical requirements to keep those divisions and soldiers moving against the enemy. With the Germans retreating across the front, one can appreciate the hope that the Allies could push on into Germany and win the war by Christmas. But a rapid offensive to take advantage of the military opportunity required reserves of supplies that were impossible to deliver. So logistics play a critical role in strategy and operations and constitute an important dimension of military affairs.

Intelligence is the art of determining the enemy's intentions, capabilities, and vulnerabilities in advance. The Ardennes battle is rife with intelligence and counterintelligence successes and failures by both sides. The Germans attacked when no one thought they could. Some historians detect hubris among the Allied high command - the Germans were on the ropes, the Allies safely ashore, Paris liberated. Despite some supply issues, victory was in sight - if we could just get into Germany, we could end the war. Hitler played on that by code-naming the counterattack operation *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine), which has a defensive connotation. The Germans cleverly concealed their preparations for the counter-attack, and the Allies, despite having broken German codes, failed to detect or understand the available indications, with disastrous consequences initially. Such intelligence failures have been important elsewhere in our history - Pearl Harbor, the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, 9/11 and the absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are other examples.

Technology and organization, important to many fields, are central to military affairs. Technology in the context of military history is the application of science to the practice of war. We think about technology in terms of constantly improving weapons, but often the most militarily significant advances have been in other arenas, such as industry (steel, computers), transportation (internal combustion engine, heavier-than-air flight), communications (telegraph, radio, radar, internet) and so on. The atomic revolution changed

nearly everything in American thought about war and strategy. The 1950s-70s was the era of the civilian strategist, first because the most creative and comprehensive thinking about nuclear strategy was done by civilians, and second because the prospect of such war seemed literally too important to be left to the generals. Technology is integrated into the forces through organization--the arrangement of people, weapons, and supporting technologies by purpose and function to win battles and campaigns efficiently.

Combat Power is the idea that any given military unit has a certain amount of capability to do what it was designed to do. A comparison of two opponents' combat power is a force ratio. The U.S. Army once made a near high religion of analyzing combat power and force ratios, but doing so is intuitive, not unlike comparing sports opponents, and can be highly instructive. In any given battle or campaign, the opponents each have their strengths and weaknesses. To some degree, we can appreciate which one is more likely to be effective, to win. Our government, of course, tries to make judgments of likely effectiveness in advance. Much of the defense budget debate is about how to organize potential power into real military power--armies, corps, divisions, ships and fleets, aircraft and squadrons, and so on. Numbers are important but insufficient. Combat power and effectiveness are just as much functions of subjective factors such as leadership, training, discipline and morale.

Finally, we should teach about *combat* itself. There is a quotation from Carl von Clausewitz that is very important in this regard. "[A] picture of war as a whole," Clausewitz wrote, "may be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will." Too often, the history of our wars is a chronological narrative that starts at the beginning and works step by step to a seemingly foreordained conclusion, whether glorious victory or tragic defeat. The enemy appears mostly as a foil. At every step in real war, there is at least one other party trying just as hard to execute his strategy against us, to defeat our purposes, to make us fail. The dynamic of combat so often misunderstood is that the issue is always in doubt until it is decided. When General Eisenhower decided to launch the invasion at Normandy, success was not foreordained. It was a horrific, though calculated, risk. Eisenhower's finest moment as a soldier may have been when he wrote the message to be released to the media in the event the invasion failed, accepting upon himself full, complete, personal responsibility. Such decisions are made throughout the ranks in every minute of military operations.

This dynamic of struggle between opponents creates compounding difficulties. "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult…the difficulties accumulate [to] produce a kind of friction…so that one always falls far short of the intended goal," wrote Clausewitz. Therefore, "[no] other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance, [through which] guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war." We can only force chance out to a limited degree through reason and rationality, discipline and order, organization and plans, cunning and cleverness, weapons and supplies.

Such theory should not disguise that war is killing, destruction, death, pain, fear, chaos and extreme suffering. It is not a good human experience, but humans repeatedly conclude that war seems necessary, and war's intensity tends to bring out admirable traits. A warrior who is terrified and exhausted and wants to go home also can be noble, determined, courageous, and unselfish. War provides perhaps the hardest imaginable conditions for leadership, yet extraordinary leaders emerge. Lieutenant Colonel Derrill M. Daniels was one, an entymologist in 1940 who, in 1944, commanded the 451 GIs of the 2d Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, at Butgenbach in the Battle of the Bulge. Examples like his can encourage our students to think about leadership, military and non-military, in tough times. They can take inspiration from heroes like Corporal Henry H. Warner, a 21-year old manning an antitank gun at Butgenbach. Attacked by three German tanks closing through the fog at about 200 meters, he and his crew knocked out the first but lost one soldier. They hit the second tank but the rest of the crew except Warner became casualties. As the third tank advanced on Warner's position, his anti-tank gun jammed. He was terrified. He couldn't reload, his buddies were hit, he knew this tank was going to close and kill him. He drew his .45-caliber pistol and fired into the onrushing tank, then dove into a fox hole behind his anti-tank gun, knowing that in seconds the tank would overrun the position and crush him. But nothing happened. Minutes went by. He heard the enemy tank shifting gears. He peered over his antitank gun to see the tank withdrawing, the commander slumped dead from the hatch, struck by one of Warner's pistol shots. Warner was also wounded, but refused medical attention, went back out the next day, and was killed in action hunting another German tank with a bazooka. He received the Medal of Honor.

This is another thing we can talk to students about. There are many military decorations awarded for distinguished service, for performing one's duty. But a soldier's duty is profound. We reserve the Medal of Honor for those things that are "above and beyond the call of duty." Nothing in Henry Warner's duty required him to do all he did. As we raise young citizens, we need to talk about duty, and those who go above and beyond the call of duty to make a difference, on and off our battlefields.

Military history belongs in our general history courses in secondary school. Teachers can and should master its basics. By doing so, we can prepare future citizens for their responsibilities in providing for the common defense.

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