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On learning

by Williamson Murray

Why a doctrinal publication on learning? It would seem that the subject is so obvious and so fundamental to military professionals that almost anyone would understand the concept. But it is not. History, however, does suggest that learning is the basic skill that separates incompetent military organizations from competent ones. In effect, one can posit that not only is the military profession the most demanding physically but it is also the most demanding intellectually. That is the result of the fact that military forces confront a unique challenge that other human organizations do not: they rarely get to practice their profession. Moreover, their profession invariably occurs under the terrible conditions that war carries in its train. Those conditions carry with them a frightening combination of fear, uncertainty, chance, and horror. As the British military historian, Michael Howard has noted:

[a]fter all historical allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity. All are fought, as Clausewitz insisted, in a special element of danger and fear and confusion. In all large bodies of men are trying to impose their will on one another by violence, and in all events occur which are inconceivable in any other field of experience.¹

In the largest sense, both the great Greek strategic historian, Thucydides, as well as Clausewitz instinctively recognized that human beings live in a non-linear world, particularly when they find themselves involved in the sharp end of combat. That world is one where the great majority of systems are non-linear in their behavior. Thus, as one historian of science has noted: “Systems with

>>Dr. Murray is a Professor Emeritus of History at The Ohio State University.

feedback loops, delays, ‘trigger effects,’ and qualitative changes over time produce surprises, often abruptly crossing a threshold into a qualitatively different regime of behavior.”² The world of combat is intimately intertwined with the vast complexities of the interactions between individuals and weapons systems, between our actions and those of the enemy, all of which make clear predictions extraordinarily difficult. Thus, the great German General Helmut von Moltke once commented that “no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main enemy force.”³ In any war, Marines must possess the intellectual preparation to adapt to the unexpected.

It is impossible to replicate the nature of war in peacetime because, in the end, war is about killing the enemy—more often than not in large numbers—under terrifying circumstances. Moreover, while the fundamental nature of war will not change, the character of war through the ages has always involved change because of a host of factors: disruptions in the political and strategic environments, technological advances, the impact of cultural shifts both in our polity and those of our potential opponents, not to mention the consistent impact of luck or chance on plans and operations either well or poorly designed. Moreover, technological change has occurred over the past century with increasing rapidity. Nevertheless, while changes are the norm in weapons capabilities and tactics throughout history,

they are also the norm in the political and strategic relations between and among states.

Not surprisingly, there are vast differences between the challenges military organizations confront in peacetime and what they confront in war. In peacetime, military organizations have time to think about the future environment in which they may find themselves engaged, but who the enemies might be is often unclear, as well as what their intentions might be and how they might choose to fight, what the potential changes in technology might suggest about future war, and a host of other concerns must concern their leaders and staffs. Invariably, they must absorb a host of changes, most of which carry no clear guidelines as to what their impact on the future battle space might be. Still, there is more than enough time, if used wisely, to think about the future.

But again, Professor Howard has set out a salient warning:

There are two great difficulties with which the professional soldier, sailor, or airman has to contend with in equipping himself as commander. First his profession is almost unique in that he may have to exercise it once in a lifetime, if indeed that often ... Secondly the complex problem of running a [military organization] at all is liable to occupy his mind and skill so completely that it is easy to forget what it is being run for.⁴

The simple bureaucratic life of military organizations can create a deadening effect, particularly in successful ones. The torpid belief in France and Britain that their armies could rest on their laurels and need not prepare rigorously for the next war set in motion the catastrophe of May 1940, which came close to destroying Western civilization.

In war, time is of the essence; there is little of it, and the enemy will invariably come up with new and surprising approaches to the conflict, particularly because his aims, ideology, and approach are so different than ours. In virtually every historical case that we know of, those who initially have gone to war got the tactical, operational, or strategic realities they face wrong. The cost for learning the right lessons have always been heavy both in human as well as material terms. Nevertheless, those military institutions in peacetime, which have prepared seriously through the honest study of the present and the past, have adapted to the realities of war more effectively than those who have not. Learning honestly and rigorously in peacetime creates a culture that can adapt best to the reality of what the enemy actually can do as well as the adaptations he will inevitably create in response to our actions. It also has prepared some military organizations to grasp the nature of the “other.”

Learning represents the crucial enabler to military effectiveness. Here, there are two major issues. The first involves the differences between learning for the present and learning for the future. Learning for the present involves basic preparations, for which all Marines must focus on and understand, to handle the issues of combat today. In the largest sense, learning for the present involves focusing on tactical preparations. These obviously include a thorough knowledge of weapons, doctrine, tactics, the basic culture of the Marine Corps, and how the different pieces of combined arms can fit together on the battlefield. Rigorous training and day-to-day involvement in these various pieces must remain a major focus. But for success, it also requires that those in command position emphasize the teaching and mentoring of those under their command. Without a culture of learning, those who may in the present or immediate future find themselves in combat will lack the necessary intellectual tools to understand and adapt to the enemy.

The second aspect of learning involves learning over the long term. Learning for the future involves greater

difficulties because it involves considerably greater time and effort while remaining cloaked in ambiguities. Here, history is a crucial enabler. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Gen James N. Mattis was asked by an instructor at the National War College why history was important in a world of such technological change; his reply got to the heart of the matter:

Alexander the Great would not be in the least perplexed by the enemy we face right now in Iraq, and our troops going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, vice just reading) the men who have gone before us. We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. ‘Winging’ it and filling body bags as we sort out works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of incompetence in our profession.⁵

It is not that history can provide a sure, clear guide to the future. It cannot. As Mark Twain supposedly said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, it often rhymes.” But history is the only guide we have to the future. If you do not understand how we got to the present, then any road to the future will do. But to draw anything useful from history, officers must have become thoroughly immersed in the past. Thus, an officer cannot show up at the Command and Staff College and begin his initiation into the complexities and insights that history offers at the same time. A useful knowledge of history must begin at the start of an officer’s career and then proceed in stages from a study of tactical history to operational history to strategic history. Moreover, military and strategic history must represent not just a topic to be studied at the schools, but rather a reading program that forms a significant portion of an officer’s learning in the field. Only history can fully enlighten him on topics such as leadership, operational art, strategic decision making, and successful innovation and adaptation in peace and war. It is significant that most of the twentieth century’s first-rate generals—to include Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, Bernard Montgomery, William Slim, and Erwin Rommel—were voracious readers of military history.

Above all, the Marine Corps must become a learning organization from the bottom to the top. On one hand, sergeants must mentor privates on a constant basis, not only so that they become proficient in their immediate responsibilities but so that they become able to assume additional responsibilities and higher ranks as their career progresses. Similarly, if a battalion commander has focused entirely on making his lieutenants and captains the most proficient platoon and company commanders in the Marine Corps, he has done them and the Corps a disservice, because their value lies not just in their proficiency in their current duties, but in their potential to lead at higher ranks. The junior enlisted and officers are the seed corn of the Corps and from them will come the future. Their intellectual preparation is both an individual and leader obligation in peacetime as well as in war. If the education of our enlisted and officer corps is to become more than time spent in schools, then it is the responsibility of its senior enlisted and officer ranks to ensure that education becomes and remains a vibrant portion of every Marines time on and off duty.

Notes

1. Michael Howard, *The Causes of War and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983).
2. Alan Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” *International Security*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Winter 1992-1993).
3. Quote attributed to Helmuth von Moltke, the Elder, available at <https://en.wikiquote.org>.
4. *The Causes of War and Other Essays*.
5. Quoted in Williamson Murray, *America and the Future of War, The Past as Prologue*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 2017).

