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Writing History in the “End of History” Era—Reflections on Historians and the GWOT¹



Douglas Porch

Abstract

Military history can and should play a role, even a prominent role, in debates over strategy and policy in wartime. The problem begins when partisans, polemicists, and ideologues pluck examples from past military campaigns or wars that are subsequently interpreted in ways that support policy and strategy decisions. In the case of the current “long war,” neoconservative and neoimperialist historians construct and reconstruct interpretations of the past in ways deliberately calculated to promote and sustain a policy agenda. The danger is that history twisted by some partisans into an apologia for contemporary American policy, and ultimately as a weapon of intimidation to silence doubt, dissent, disagreement, and even debate, serves neither the cause of history, nor of policy and strategy formulation, nor even of democracy in a moment of national peril.

ANYONE who has read *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006) by Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor has been made aware of the debate over the

1. This article is based on the keynote address delivered at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Society for Military History at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. I would like to thank my colleague Donald Abenheim for his help in shaping this talk. Some of the ideas presented may be explored in his “We March as an Order

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strategic assumptions that informed Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The role played by intelligence in the run up to the war, especially the assertions that Saddam Hussein nurtured ambitions to acquire an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, has been discussed and investigated by hundreds if not thousands of analysts and critics. The relationship between the goal of regime change and the adequacy of the force required to stabilize the postwar environment has become a central feature of this debate.

Why has this debate over net assessment, the matching of ends to means broken out? After all, as one of my colleagues at the Naval Postgraduate School pointed out, even before the smoke cleared in Vietnam, Admiral Stansfield Turner launched a military history-based curriculum at the Naval War College in Newport which set the gold standard for other service schools. This was part of a concerted effort by U.S. forces to learn from the experience, and the mistakes, of Indochina.² Officers in the post-Vietnam U.S. forces have spent hundreds of hours reading Clausewitz, attending courses that, at the Naval War College and the Naval Postgraduate School at least, employ counterfactual history as a technique to hone the strategic thinking of officers. After such a huge investment in a systematic and logical approach to strategic decision making, one informed by and reasoned against appropriate historical examples, one might have expected that many of the problems that have beset the postconflict, phase IV operations in Iraq might have been avoided, or at least anticipated and better prepared for. Yet, despite the fact that the United States possesses today one of the best educated officer corps that this country has produced, those who rushed us into Iraq and who were ultimately responsible for postwar planning, seemed—on the surface at least—to pay scant attention to lessons that might have been extracted from the past.

To be sure, history and historians will be, and indeed are being, drawn into debates about policy and strategy, especially in wartime. That is what makes the theme of this year's conference, "the construction, reconstruction, and consumption of military history" such a timely one in the era of the Global War on Terrorism or, as it now called, "The Long War." As military historians and students of Clausewitz, we understand

of National Socialist, Soldierly, Nordic Men: Ideology, Soldiers and Civil-Military Relations in the SS d. NSDAP" in *Ethika: Sondernummer zum 60 Jahrestages Mai 1945: Zeitschrift des Instituts fuer Sicherheit, Religion und Frieden* (Vienna, Austria), pp. 20–45. The opinions expressed in this talk are the author's own, and do not reflect those of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government. The acronym GWOT, of course, stands for "Global War on Terrorism."

2. For a discussion of the debate on the "lessons" of the Vietnam War, see James Wirtz, "The 'Unlessons' of Vietnam," *Defense Analysis* 17, no. 1 (2002): 41–58.

that war is a dialectical process—Moltke the Elder's observation that no war plan survives the initial encounter with the enemy is practically a cliché. A new generation of policy makers and planners must relearn this insight that is our common property. We also understand that debate over policy and strategy is both a normal and essential process in a democratic society. That military history should play a role, even a prominent role, in this democratic debate is beyond doubt, at least in my opinion. The problem is that, as historians, we compete for influence in shaping strategy formulation against those who, armed with certainties grounded in ideology or an excessive faith in technology, are prepared to dismiss counsels informed by historical example as irrelevant. Military history also hardly speaks with a single voice. Nor should it in a free society where the image of the past is a source of constant debate. The problem begins when partisans, polemicists, and ideologues pluck examples from past military campaigns or wars that are subsequently interpreted in ways that support policy and strategy decisions. In short, might bad history engender bad policy—might some historians also bear some of the blame for encouraging rosy scenarios and wishful thinking?

The proposition that an education in military history can inform decision making should meet little dissent in this room.³ Many of us here teach history to men and women who desperately need it. As a scholar of military history in public service, I, as most of you, have devoted much of my professional life to packaging knowledge of past conflicts, not just for the record, but in ways that I hope are useful to contemporary policy makers and strategists, as well as to the courageous men and women who we send to carry out our nation's policies. Many of us strive through the use of historical example or analogy to illustrate for decision makers the connection between policy and strategy, the correlation of ends to means, and the interrelationship between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. At the same time, we remain acutely aware of the historian's circumscribed ability to influence contemporary decision making. History is certainly not an infallible predictor of the future—it tells us how we got here, but not necessarily where we are going. Things change, after all. Factors like technology, for instance, might appear to alter the strategic landscape in ways that make the "lessons" of history obsolete, or at least less obvious. This reproach is advanced by those skeptical of the contribution that our profession can make to the successful waging of war.

There are multiple reasons why policy makers and strategists might ignore past experience as a guide to the present action. The relevance of

3. Eliot A. Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," *Orbis*, Fall 2005, 577; Frederick W. Kagan, "Why Military History Matters," American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, June 2006, www.aci.org.

historical example may not be readily apparent to practitioners of war: recently, in Bogotá, Colombia, in the midst of a conflict, I lectured on the Algerian War to a group of senior Colombian officers. At the end of what I thought a borderline brilliant lecture on how the tactization of French strategy in Algeria, the French focus on “isolating the battlefield,” had allowed the insurgency to “isolate the theater,” a rather portly admiral in the front row raised his hand to ask if Algeria contains jungles. When I was forced to acknowledge that jungles are indeed a rare topographical feature of the Maghreb, the admiral replied that, in that case, my lecture had no relevance for Colombia.

There are reasons other than ignorance of history, or the feeling that the past is not pertinent to the present, that explain the various dysfunctions that Gordon and Trainor chronicle in *Cobra II*. However, keeping with the theme of this conference, I suggest also that we are witnessing another phenomenon that contributes to strategic muddle—neoconservative and neoimperialist historians who construct and reconstruct interpretations of the past in ways deliberately calculated to promote and sustain a policy agenda.

In the process, history in general, and military history in particular, threatens to become politicized, employed as an ideological weapon. This phenomenon can be explained in part by the author’s agenda, and his relationship to power. There is no denying that interest in military history is robust in U.S. society as it seldom has been in the past fifty years. The advent of television’s History Channel replete with endless documentaries on our themes, as well as the shelves in chain book stores groaning with volumes on decisive battles and great commanders, offer evidence of this fascination. Such a development is a theme in itself that overwhelms the confines of this modest essay. But the danger is that history twisted by some partisans into an apologia for contemporary American policy, and even as a weapon of intimidation to silence doubt, dissent, disagreement, and even debate, serves neither the cause of history, nor of policy and strategy formulation, nor even of democracy in a moment of national peril.

The politicization of the past is hardly a new phenomenon. Benedetto Croce reminded us that all history, after all, is modern history in that it reflects contemporary preoccupations and values. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books* entitled “History and National Stupidity,” Arthur Schlesinger also notes that history is less about getting at “truth” than a chronicle of “the preconceptions of our personality and the preoccupations of our age.”⁴ That said, however, my contention is that these neoconservative and neoimperialist historians

4. Arthur Schlesinger, “History and National Stupidity,” *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 7 (27 April 2006).

offer a menu of fanciful analogies and ersatz “lessons” from the past crafted to support the notion that coercion—in the form of “preventative war”—is a normal and necessary adjunct to diplomacy, national security, and world peace. They are crafted to prop up what Andrew Bacevich categorizes as the “technology-hyped mood” that informs both strategic policy and planning in the United States, combined with what he calls the “Wilsonians under arms” mentality of the post–Cold War Right.⁵ How then, does history that at least strives for objectivity have any chance in this environment?

How Should History Inform the Present?

In a recent article entitled “The Historical Mind and Military Strategy,” Eliot Cohen, a respected public intellectual and a scholar of the history of war, argues that policy makers and strategists should acquire what he calls the “historical mind—that is, a way of thinking that uses history as a mode of inquiry.” The historical mind will detect differences as much as similarities between cases, avoiding false analogies, and look for the key questions to be asking. It will look for continuity but also for more important discontinuities. “It is a well-traveled mind that appreciates the variability of people and places, conditions and problems; it avoids over-reliance on ‘lessons learned.’ For that reason, the historical education of the civilian and military strategist is more, not less, important in an age of rapid change.”⁶ In this passage, Cohen echoes Clausewitz but also offers a guide for thought and action that is especially valuable in the present.

Drawing parallels and analogies, and convincing “warfighters” and their political bosses that the past may have value as an intellectual guide for the present, is never easy at the best of times. All wars are exceptional. And it is their very exceptionalism that they hold in common. The argument for taking a historical perspective becomes especially difficult when the past is declared at an end, and the shards that remain are distorted and their relevance to the present misrepresented—this happened with the Atomic Bomb in 1945, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and with 11 September 2001. However, as Cohen notes, it is precisely in times of rapid change that we most need history. Unfortunately, the opposite appears to be the case in Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” *tabula rasa* world. History no longer has value to inform strategy, because ideology and technology now substitute

5. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19, 21. “Wilsonians Under Arms” is the title of the first chapter of the book.

6. Cohen, “The Historical Mind,” 575.

for strategy.⁷ And while Fukuyama has conceded that faulty interpretations of the past—specifically the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union—offer perilous guides for the future, some of his more ideological disciples apparently remain convinced that “History” has value in this new world only as a tool for inspiration and intimidation.⁸

History as Myth

History, and military history in particular, has always had nostalgic, even inspirational, as well as utilitarian value, as Cohen reminds us. The “greatest generation,” that is the reification of the “generation of World War II” by its children and grandchildren that began in the 1990s⁹ offers one example of an inspirational historical myth. On the face of it, “the greatest generation” proposes a benign and well-deserved tribute to a World War II cohort that undoubtedly accomplished great things for the United States. Nevertheless, I would argue that as “history,” the “greatest generation” thesis is both inaccurate and politically motivated. Inaccurate, because, at the time, few allied generals, especially defeated ones, were prepared to praise their troops as the “greatest generation.” *Au contraire*, the lament, and not just in France, was that the generation of World War II was not made of the same stuff as their fathers.¹⁰ As for its political thrust, as a piece of “inspirational history,” it has less to do with World War II than with Vietnam. It is intimately connected to questions of civil-military relations as they apply to the 1946–64 generation

7. In his *New York Times* review of *Cobra II*, Jacob Heilbrunn writes of those who conceived of and planned OIF: “Like the Western votaries of Communism in the 30’s, who projected their various fantasies about utopia onto Spain and the Soviet Union, administration officials seem to have viewed Iraq as a kind of abstract proving ground for their pet theories about warfare, terrorism or democratization.” *New York Times*, 30 April 2006.

8. Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).

9. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).

10. For France, Julian Jackson’s *The Nazi Invasion: The Fall of France in 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 4, takes on the myth of French “decadence” and demoralization as a factor in that country’s collapse. The British suffered their own image problem in the early years of the war: the Fall of France was as much a British defeat as it was that of France. And while the subsequent Battle of Britain and Churchill’s stirring war rhetoric gave the impression of strong popular will to win, the string of British débâcles in Greece, Crete, Singapore, Gazala, and Tobruk raised the question of whether the British soldier could, or would, actually fight. See Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), 292. The fighting qualities of “soft” and “overpaid” GIs in the wake of the 1943 defeat at Kasserine, as well as of French troops in North Africa, were also a subject of discussion. See Porch, *The Path to Victory*, 389–94.

in an ever-changing America. Indeed, the new American militarism as defined by Andrew Bacevich, with its "greatly overstated confidence in the efficacy of force," the "conviction that military power has come to be the chief emblem of national greatness," and the "romanticization of soldiers" as both intellectually and morally superior to the general population, suggests a subtle and virulent manipulation of the "greatest generation" myth to explain the U.S. failure in Vietnam as the result of a stab-in-the-back by the college generation of the 1960s.¹¹

Clausewitz and the Past

Unfortunately, enlisting the past as predictor for the present and guide for the future is a problem at least as old as Clausewitz. The Prussian philosopher of war and historian in his own right understood that all circumstances are contemporary ones to be shaped by individual choice. He also complained that history was more likely to be misused than applied in a responsible way to inform strategy.¹² Historical analogy lifted out of context for a specific purpose seldom advances fruitful debate over strategy and policy. Cohen questions the value of "single point comparisons made in the spirit of debate rather than historical-mindedness." They "run afoul of the historical mind," Cohen continues, "which has been trained to detect differences as much as similarities," and offer a "pointless" polemic stripped of "essential elements of context and detail that make up a complex political-military situation."¹³ Perhaps, Cohen had Victor Davis Hanson's opinion pieces in the *National Review* in mind, in which the latter pillories those who question the strategy of "preemption" (which is in fact a resurrection of the old doctrine of "preventative war"), or the wisdom of the Iraq War, as people who, had they lived and been listened to in the past, would have lost us the American Revolution, the Civil War, and even World War II.¹⁴ Here war in the past

11. Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California Berkeley, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people5/Bacevich/bacevich-con3.html>.

12. Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 348–49.

13. Cohen, "The Historical Mind," 580.

14. Appeasement and World War II continue to offer an embarrassment of historical analogies popular with politicians and polemicists. To second guess "the Decider" is practically unpatriotic. Consult, for instance, the *National Review* postings of Victor Davis Hanson (who believes that the United States has entered "the great age of ethical retrenchment") to discover denunciations of critics of the conduct of the on-going Iraq War as defeatists who, placed in the context of Valley Forge, "Lincoln's summer of 1864, or the 1942 gloom that followed Pearl Harbor and the fall of the Philippines, Singapore, and Wake Island," would have profoundly altered the

becomes a cudgel that has little to do with a reflective assessment of chronology, cause and effect, and a judgment of the context and likely consequences of a military enterprise. Rather, in this guise, the historian of war assumes the role of propagandist and even militarist.

The Delbrueck-Ludendorff Debate

Despite the dangers posed by the past as polemic, Clausewitz continued to believe that military history, if used appropriately, could supply a valuable tool to educate officers by the refinement of the union of intellect and character. And he managed to convince Moltke the Elder and Schlieffen that soldiers could sharpen their soldierly skills of leadership and command through the applied study of historical example.¹⁵ Unfortunately, under Schlieffen especially, Clausewitz's emphasis on the political nature of war and its link to other facets of the political world became lost. Schlieffen concentrated far too much on the operational and tactical dimensions of the study of the past in an age that, like our own, was roiled by partisanship and ideology. In the process, he laid the groundwork in post-Great War Germany for a dispute over "who owns military history?" This was a debate that was particularly poisonous because the masters of strategy had failed to deliver the rapid victory in the summer of 1914 that they had promised and planned for. Instead, they resorted to a strategy of attrition with horrendous consequences.

Hans Delbrück offers a paradigm of a military historian in public life, one who defied the German general staff's claim to monopolize military history as a way to liberate themselves from political restrictions and popular scrutiny of their professional shortcoming of having misunderstood the changing face of war and the requirement to harness Germany's fighting power without rupturing society in the process. The crux of the argument was over forms of strategy that tended to upend the

otherwise happy course of U.S. history. See, for instance, his "War & Reconstruction: For Bush's Critics, Even Hindsight is Cloudy," *National Review* Online 18 November 2005. Other "single point comparisons" include Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, who has been denounced by the Bush Administration as "a potential Adolph Hitler." Seymour M. Hersh, "The Iran Plans: Would President Bush Go to War to Stop Tehran from Getting the Bomb?" *New Yorker*, 17 April 2006, posted 10 April 2006. Others, of course, have found Vietnam to be a more useful analogy than post-war Germany. Stephen Biddle, "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon," *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2006. One is also reminded of President Bush's confident assertion in February 2003 that rebuilding Iraq will be a piece of cake as the United States had done this once before in Germany and Japan after 1945. Quoted in Douglas Porch, "Iraq and the Myths of 1945," *National Interest*, 72 (Summer 2003): 36.

15. Gordon Craig, "Delbrück: The Military Historian," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 326.

claim of the general staff to have a monopoly over the making of strategy and especially the application of the past to this process. Delbrück further antagonized those who claimed to own military history and strategy in Germany by his brilliant analysis of the campaigns of Frederick II and his radical reinterpretation of Frederick's strategy. He argued further that it was extremely important that the public be broadly educated in military affairs, so that they not fall for the assurances of "annihilationists" that they could deliver a quick victory, when what they delivered, in fact, was a war of attrition. Military strategists avoided strategies of attrition because attrition was more empowering of civilians than was a strategy of annihilation, especially in wartime Germany, where elites in uniform worried that a long war would lead to a collapse of the political and social order. He also understood the limits of military power, and that strategy is crafted in a political context—overwhelming military power was not "the end of strategy." Any attempt to segregate the military campaign from the political goal invited a tactization of strategy that might induce strategic failure followed by political meltdown.¹⁶

Delbrück was nothing if not humble. He acknowledged the limitations of his influence. The military historian, in Delbrück's view, was a sort of misfit, regarded with suspicion by both his academic colleagues and by the officers whose activities he chronicles. And Delbrück ought to have known, given his mammoth spat with Ludendorff over the value of the "decisive battle" in the strategic repertoire of the great generals of history.¹⁷ In today's America of the long war, such names are known to but a few, but they signify the core of the issue before us.

Who Owns History?

But the battle for the high ground of historical analogy and the generation of hegemonic paradigms continues, because the desire to validate policy and strategy decisions by having them blessed by "history" is a requirement too powerful for contemporary strategists and policy makers to forego. Many close to decision making have mustered arguments based on alleged historical analogies lifted from the history of military innovation, imperialism, of small wars, or the post-World War II occupation of

16. Ibid., 341–43; Frederick Kagan also appears to fall into the trap of drawing a distinction between "operational military history" and "war and society." See "Why Military History Matters," 3–4.

17. Delbrück argued that many great generals of the past had followed *Ermatungsstrategie*, or strategies of exhaustion, against a general staff that believed that *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, or that of annihilation, was the only viable strategy. Craig, "Delbrück: The Military Historian," in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 326–27, 341–42, 352.

Germany and Japan as evidence to anoint an aggressive military buildup and/or political agenda in the Middle East. The problem, New York University Professor Paul Berman argues, begins with Francis Fukuyama's "end of history."¹⁸ The triumphalist neoconservative interpretation of the collapse of communism as the workings of "the deepest laws of history" has inspired "a romance of the ruthless," among right-wing historians—"an expectation that small numbers of people might be able to play a decisive role in world events, if only their ferocity could be unleashed."¹⁹ Given the current fascination with empires as early models of the export of "globalized" standards and values, and as imposers of world order, one should examine more closely the actual record of such empires that is seldom factored into the partisan squabbles of the present.

1492

If I can be permitted a "single point comparison" of my own, I tried to think of other Fukuyama moments, periods when the past apparently terminated, leaving contemporaries with the firm conviction that the "deepest laws of history" had consecrated their convictions and halloved their enterprise.²⁰ The year 1492 in the Iberian Peninsula witnessed the fall of Granada in February followed by the discovery of the New World in October. The combination of these two events bestowed upon Castile a "sense of destiny"²¹—ideology and resources converged to catapult backward, underpopulated Castile into a world power.

The fall of Granada ordained the triumph of the Christian monarchy over the Infidel and sanctified a single political model. Fernando and Ysabel, triumphant, all powerful, liberated, they believed, from the need to compromise, celebrated the expulsion of the Moors by the forced conversion, or expulsion, of the Jews. As Hugh Thomas writes in *Rivers of Gold*, Fernando wanted to finish with Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula, which he regarded as a quaint anachronism, as he had finished with Islam. Ysabel desired to revivify and unify the Church through the Inquisition.²² This was the "end of history" in the Iberian Peninsula where the

18. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

19. Paul Berman, "Neo No More: *America at the Crossroads*, by Francis Fukuyama," *New York Times*, 26 March 2006.

20. This observation grows out of this author's professional involvement with international military education and training offered by the U.S. government in Colombia.

21. Hugh Thomas, *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire from Columbus to Magellan* (New York: Random House, 2004), 78.

22. *Ibid.*, 79.

three "peoples of the book" had coexisted for seven hundred years. *Los Reyes Católicos* were determined to impose a single political and ideological model in their homeland, and to propagate it aggressively abroad.

New World bullion gave Fernando and his successors the resources to "punch above their weight"—to become a power unchallenged by a peer competitor. The defeat of the Muslims and the exile of Jews reflected a confident religious spirit that inspired Castilian clerics and Conquistadors to Christianize and civilize the New World.²³

Mythology of Empire

Or, at least, that is the received view. However, although as a myth, the "Spanish Conquest" is both powerful and resilient, modern scholarship gives a more nuanced picture of the "end of history" and the birth of Iberian imperialism at the turn of the sixteenth century. First, rather than reflect the "laws of history," Columbus's discovery was the product of contingent events—sheer dumb luck. Columbus' voyages were also launched, Thomas reminds us, "in an era of intolerance."²⁴ The "end of history" in the Iberian Peninsula little benefited "Spain." In fact, what it produced was hubris and imperial overstretch sustained by deliberately concocted myths. The elimination of the internal enemy enticed the monarchy to dissipate its energies abroad in unfocused campaigns for imprecise or utopian goals. The end of "multiculturalism" in the Iberian Peninsula, the suffocation of social, ideological, and religious tolerance, may have made "Spain" more homogeneous. But it also made it less tolerant, less competitive, more insular. In short, the "globalization" of the world economy made possible by the discovery of New World bullion allowed Northern Europe to rival and ultimately bankrupt Spain. In the end, the Moors and Jews may have been the losers in 1492, but, in victory, Christian "Spain" laid the foundation for its own demise.

Nor does the "conquest" of the New World live up to its press notices. Rather, "conquest" translated on the ground into a process of accommodation and collaboration. Vast areas of the Western Hemisphere were never explored, much less "conquered" and occupied, by the conquistadors. And this was the pattern even though the arrival of Europeans launched a bow-wave of ecological and biological disaster in the Western Hemisphere.²⁵ Henry Kamen writes: "The Spanish empire was formed by sporadic advances of men who called themselves 'conquistadors,' but

23. Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 46.

24. Thomas, *Rivers of Gold*, 85.

25. Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

most of whom were not even soldiers. Spain sent no armies on the New World. The men who seized the Inca emperor at Cajamarca in 1532 were a cross-section of artisans, notaries, traders, seamen, gentry and peasants. The Church complained from 1511 that Spaniards in the New World behaved like robbers who seized everything & then claimed that they had ‘conquered’ it. They could not control the New World,” Kamen concludes,” so they compromised with it.”²⁶

The “End of History” and Lessons for the Present:

If the Spanish past contains food for thought for the U.S. present, and Paul Kennedy believes it does, it is about the limits of empire and of imperial ambition. In a recent review of *Rivers of Gold*, Kennedy draws a parallel between Cortés and his Conquistadores and the neoconservatives and neoimperialists eager to transform the world through conquest and conversion. If Niall Ferguson’s mantra is that you can’t have globalization without gunboats,²⁷ Kennedy’s is that is that you can’t have empire without collaborators, and this requires humility, compromise, and compassion.²⁸ The Spanish conscripted “history” to craft an image of conquest to validate policy by mythologizing it. That interest groups emerge to confiscate history to promote a political agenda dates at least from Thucydides, and is probably as old as organized religion. But it serves neither history nor policy when romanticized interpretations of imperial warfare and empire are served up as a historical validation of an aggressive political agenda in the Middle East or elsewhere,²⁹ or supply a foundation for a diatribe against the Powell Doctrine because it is seen as a brake on the realization of America’s neoimperial mission.³⁰

Let me offer three examples: In *Imperial Grunts*, Robert Kaplan compares the soldiers of U.S. Milgroups, that is, the military officers in

26. “Most were ‘encomenderos,’ which meant they went on expedition by virtue of the crown conceding them an *encomienda*, a contract that gave them rights to tribute & labor from natives in return for defending the crown and converting the Indians to Christianity. This was private enterprise in which the crown seldom invested. There were specific successes conferred by technology, advanced political organization, an urge to convert the heathen, thirst for gold, and disease. This was all correct in its own way, but the general picture was of Spaniards adapting to circumstances.” *Ibid.*, 95–98.

27. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), xxii.

28. Paul Kennedy, “Conquerors and Missionaries,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2004.

29. Robin Blackburn, “Imperial Margarine,” *New Left Review*, 35 (September–October 2005): 2.

30. See Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), chapter XIV.

the U.S. diplomatic representations abroad in such locales as Colombia or Mongolia, to Remington's bronzed frontiersmen, outriders of a new American empire. This romanticism redolent of Kipling may offer a powerful artistic analogy.³¹ But it requires both simplicity and "abdication of critical faculties," not to mention a staggering cultural insensitivity, to compare the GWOT to fighting Native Americans in the American West.³² Niall Ferguson's call for an American reincarnation of the British Empire is both out of touch with American culture as well as likely to be firmly rejected by the very peoples whom he means us to "civilize."³³ Finally, Max Boot's proposition that his superficial, anecdotal, treatment of the U.S. campaign to pacify the Philippines at the turn of the century and others in the Caribbean offers "lessons of history" that should be applied to reinforce an updated American campaign of "the savage wars of peace," is both ahistorical and simply irresponsible.³⁴

The infatuation of the neoimperialist right with the American frontier and the British Empire as analogies with a contemporary resonance carries the burden of a dark antecedent. After all, romanticism about Imperialism was central to Nazism. The fact that Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler looked with favor on the experience of the Teutonic Order and somehow melded it with the British Empire and the American West as a paradigm for *Lebensraum* and the "civilizing" of Eastern Europe should give pause about this neoimperialist dragooning of the past.³⁵

Conclusion

The good news is that history will always have a role to play in the debates over policy, strategy, and the conduct of war. The bad news is that history, properly conceived and applied to the making of strategy, will face strong competition for influence from ideological zealots and

31. Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground* (New York: Random House, 2005), 10.

32. David Rieff, "The Cowboy Culture. Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground," *New Republic*, 6 October 2005.

33. Together with *Empire*, *ibid.*, see also *Colossus, The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

34. "One final bit of advice, based on the lessons of history. In deploying American power, decisionmakers should be less apologetic, less hesitant, less humble. Yes, there is a danger of imperial overstretch and hubris—but there is an equal, if not greater, danger of undercommitment and lack of confidence. America should not be afraid to fight 'the savage wars of peace' if necessary to enlarge the 'empire of liberty.' It has been done before." Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, 352.

35. Woodruff Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Bernd Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten: Die Waffen SS, 1933–1945* (Berlin: Paderborn, 1999).

technology enthusiasts. There will also be a competition over ownership of the past, which inevitably politicizes and shapes interpretation to fit a political agenda, that places a historian who adheres to Clausewitz's ideal as well as that of Eliot Cohen at risk. Given this ideological landscape, what should we as historians do about the construction, reconstruction, and consumption of military history in the era of GWOT or "The Long War"?

Reminding ourselves of a few basic principles might help. Cohen cautions that we should avoid the trap of the "Doctrine of Historical Permanence"—that is, the belief that some things—like Afghanistan—just don't change.³⁶ Just because the "Muddle East," as it was called in the British Eighth Army, has been dysfunctional in the past does not mean that it cannot be reformed, rehabilitated, "globalized." Nevertheless, one should not be lured into risky, unfocused policies to be accomplished by dubious strategies informed by facile, pseudo analogies allegedly rooted in the "lessons of history." Gussied-up, sanitized visions of America's past, or romanticized analogies lifted from Roman or British imperial history hardly offer constructive utilization of the past to inform the present.

It may be, as Robert Kaplan and Max Boot argue, that small groups of armed men can accomplish America's goals on the cheap. But this policy and strategy fails to address the fundamental historical questions of how the world of the 19th century differed from that of the 21st, and what force can achieve as an instrument of foreign policy. Indeed, had Kaplan looked deeper into the actual accomplishments of his "Imperial Grunts," he might have concluded that their ability to influence the military culture of the host nations is extremely circumscribed. A more cautionary warning that we might lift from military history, as Hew Strachan, a figure every bit as dexterous in his analysis of the past and the military profession, has argued, is that the colonial soldier, the counterinsurgent, is a highly political soldier. He is one who fuses the divide between civil government and military operations. In the process, he expands the role of the soldier in the political arena, and breaks down the barriers separating the soldier from the politician, the policeman, the prison guard.³⁷ Politicians who engage in nation-building endeavors, especially those with a counterinsurgency dimension, must be prepared

36. Cohen, "The Historical Mind," 582.

37. Hew Strachan: *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108–9: "The difference between what was acceptable in India and what was acceptable in Britain was so obvious as not to need explicit formulation." Strachan argues that Imperial soldiering was the basis on which ambitious officers built their careers. The Empire gave the context in which they developed their political skills and convictions, which they transferred to the Home Islands. "The British army entered World War I politicized and versed in the arts of political intrigue," 116–17.

to deal with the political and military professional fallout. This includes the evolution of a stab-in-the-back as a guiding principle of civil-military relations and its leaching into domestic politics—that is, the belief that, in modern counterinsurgency warfare, win or lose, the military ends up feeling betrayed by civilians.³⁸

In a recent article in the *New Republic*, David Rieff warns, as does Strachan, about the politicizing effects of imperial policing. Advocates of the United States as the successor to the Raj or and its soldiers as disciples of "Fightin' Freddy Funston," he argues, lift their imagery from Gunga Din and various John Ford films to justify the dispatch of U.S. Marines and Special Forces like a posse to right the world's wrongs. As history, it is rather like trying to get at the "truth" of Reconstruction by reading *Gone with the Wind*. However, the more apt analogy might be that of Jean Lartéguy's *The Centurions*—French imperialism created a rootless, disaffected society of imperial warriors estranged from a homeland that they regarded as decadent and ungrateful. They even became estranged from a military organization they saw as bureaucratic and unresponsive. The risks of the importation of a freebooter mentality into the GWOT—especially with the phenomenon of the increasing privatization of war—with its heightened requirements for homeland security and domestic surveillance, would not be a positive democratic trend. Nor would it, in the long run, contribute to the maintenance of healthy civil-military relations in this country. That is the sort of legacy of empire that the United States certainly does not need to replicate. Let us hope, with Arthur Schlesinger, that History is and will remain, "the best antidote to illusions of omnipotence and omniscience."³⁹

38. Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "Young Officers Join the Debate over Rumsfeld," *New York Times*, 23 April 2006.

39. Schlesinger, "History and National Stupidity."