WHY WE SHOULD STUDY WAR

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HOOVER INSTITUTION

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This Hoover Institution ebook makes the case for restoring military history to its rightful place in academia and public understanding. Victor Davis Hanson argues that war, far from being obsolete, remains central to human affairs—and that ignoring its lessons invites peril. Drawing on classical and modern conflicts, Hanson reveals why deterrence matters, why human nature resists utopian ideals, and how understanding past wars can help prevent future ones.

WHEN I WAS A GRADUATE STUDENT SOME 40 YEARS AGO, military history had already become unfashionable on campus. And the academic neglect of war is even more acute today. Military history as a discipline has atrophied, with very few professorships, journal articles, or degree programs.

After the carnage and savagery of the twentieth century's world wars, leaders and governments attempted to refashion international politics with therapeutic organizations to make war a thing of the past. The League of Nations and the United Nations both fostered the hope that global cooperation would lead to collective security and international order. Nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction were supposed to make future conflicts unthinkable. Yet our world today is as violent and conflict-ridden as ever. And whether we like it or not, the central issue in our life is whether we are going to have a war. Therefore, studying military history is, in essence, an attempt to prevent it or at least ameliorate its catastrophic effects.

The importance—and challenge—of the academic study of war is to elevate general interest into a more serious and widespread understanding, one that seeks answers to such questions as: Why do wars break out? How do they end? Why do the winners win and the losers lose? How best to avoid wars or contain their worst effects?

A wartime public illiterate about the conflicts of the past can easily find itself paralyzed in the acrimony of the present. Without standards of historical comparison, it will prove ill equipped to make informed judgments.

This concept dates back to at least 400 BC, when Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War. By studying that war, Thucydides believed, people would be better prepared to interpret future conflicts. Human nature, emotions, and rhetoric remain constant over the centuries, and are thus generally predictable.

Indeed, by ignoring history, the modern age is free to interpret war as a failure of communication, or of diplomacy—as if aggressors don't know exactly what they're doing. Yet it's hard to find many wars that result from miscommunication. Far more often they break out because of malevolent intent and the absence of deterrence.

Military history is as often the story of appeasement

as of warmongering. The destructive military careers of Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler would all have ended early had any of their numerous enemies united when the odds favored them. Western societies have often been reluctant to use force to prevent greater future violence.

In the twenty-first century, it's easier than ever to succumb to technological determinism, the idea that science, new weaponry, and globalization have altered the very rules of war. But the study of war tells us that it's highly doubtful that a new weapon will emerge from the Pentagon or anywhere else that will change the very nature of armed conflict.

Finally, military history has the moral purpose of educating us about past sacrifices that have secured our present freedom and security. If we know nothing of Shiloh, Verdun, and Okinawa, the crosses in our military cemeteries are just pleasant white stones on lush green lawns.

The United States was born through war, reunited by war, and saved from destruction by war. No future generation, however comfortable and affluent, should escape that terrible knowledge.

What, then, can we do to restore the study of war to its proper place in the life of the American mind?

> **“SOME MEN WILL ALWAYS PREFER WAR TO PEACE; AND OTHER MEN, WHO HAVE LEARNED FROM THE PAST, HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO STOP THEM.”**

The challenge isn’t just to reform the graduate schools or the professoriate, though that would help.

On a deeper level, we need to reexamine the larger forces that have devalued the very idea of military history—of war itself. We must abandon the naive faith that with enough money, education, or good intentions we can change the nature of mankind so that conflict, as if by fiat, becomes a thing of the past.

In the end, the study of war reminds us that we always just be men, not gods. Some men will always prefer war to peace; and other men, who have learned from the past, have a moral obligation to stop them.

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY OF WAR AND MILITARY HISTORY:

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? HOW CAN HISTORY HELP US?

I think also every historian, whether they're overt about it, assumes that human nature stays constant across time and space.

And it's sort of the tragic view of history versus the therapeutic. In other words, in our modern age, we believe if you give people enough power, enough technology, enough improvement in the material conditions, they can alter, and make a new man like the Soviet Union. And therefore, history is not necessary because the new man reacts so differently from the past man that it would be useless.

But we go back, I think all historians go back to the seminal text of Thucydides when he says this history will be of value in time to come. Not that the wars will be the

same, but human nature is unchanging, and the same principles and the same ideas and agendas will reappear in different contexts.

And that, I think, is what all historians believe, that human nature, even though its technology and wealth and all different types of environments and landscapes change. And it's almost unrecognizable, that we're still the same people as the Greeks or the Romans, and our appetites are what drives us.

WHAT ARE THREE BOOKS YOU WOULD RECOMMEND THAT WILL PROVIDE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MILITARY HISTORY?

I'll talk about just three, I think, that are classics of military history. And one is EB Sledge's *With The Old Breed*. It's a personal memoir. I wrote the introduction to one of the paperback versions, and it's about the 1930s generation that stayed in the Marine Corps, and then they taught the new draftees and what they did on Okinawa.

It's the most frightening memoir you could possibly read, but it's ultimately a paean to American soldiers. Yeah, it's a very beautifully written book. He was an etymologist, of all people at the University of Alabama.

Another one is, we all read Grant's memoirs, but the best memoirs on the Civil War, is *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman — Volume 2*.

He was not just a tactician or strategist, but he was really a cultural geostrategist. And he talked about how to defeat the South in a very holistic way that was way ahead of his time. He had an enormous influence on Liddell Hart and others. He wrote in a strange prose style that was very different from Grant's more straightforward tactical writing, but it was beautiful in its own right and surprisingly easy to read.

And then more contemporary, I've always been a fan, I knew him very well and I liked him. He was a wonderful man, John Keegan, and he wrote a book called *The Face of Battle*. And his argument was that in just this 100-mile radius, history had radically changed.

And he looked at the Battle of Agincourt, the Battle of Waterloo and the Battle of the Somme. But he did it unusually, from the point of view of what it would been like to fight there and the dirt and the grime and the wounds and how horrific these experiences were.

And he's also just happened to be a master pro-stylist, so it's a classic book and it's often underappreciated as well. But it's a great read.

WHAT WAS THE TURNING POINT IN WORLD WAR II, AND HOW DID IT CHANGE THE COURSE OF THE CONFLICT?

Sometimes, just a few months can change the course of civilization. That's what happened in 1942 when a series of decisive events changed the trajectory of World War II. Before that turning point, Germany seemed destined for victory. In 1939 and 1940, Hitler's army had won a series of border wars, giving the Führer control over ten conquered European countries. By the autumn of 1940, Britain was the sole European power standing against Hitler—and it was being mercilessly bombed by the Luftwaffe. At the same time, Russia was colluding with Germany, and America remained isolationist. Hitler and his allies, who reigned over an area larger than the present European Union, believed that the European wars were over, for all purposes—and decisively won.

But suddenly in 1941, Hitler's calm march to victory ended and the global inferno of what we now call World War II began. The surprise German invasion of the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941), the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Singapore (December 7-8, 1941), and the declaration of war by Germany and Italy on the United States (December 11, 1941) precipitated a level of violence and destruction never before seen in world history.

Because of the global expansion of the dormant European border wars, the conflict became the deadliest event in human history, with about 27,000 soldiers and civilians lost each day of the six-year conflict, leading to a total of 60 million deaths.

Until late 1942, the three Axis powers believed that they could quickly win their war against the new global alliance of Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States—despite being vastly outmatched in both population and industrial capacity. But the Axis seemed invincible. The new Third Reich extended from the English Channel to the Volga River and from the Arctic Circle to the North African desert. The war had been afoot since the mid-1930s and the Nazis were among the most battle-hardened soldiers in the world. Japan has expanded its even larger so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere from the Indian Ocean to Alaska and from the Mongolian border to Wake Island. The Japanese had been at war in China even longer than Germany had in Europe.

Much of their early successes had derived from surprise attacks on ill-prepared neighbors followed by the rapid capture of resource-rich territories. Indeed, by mid-1942, forward elements of the German army—now more than 2,000 miles east of central Germany—were nearing the oil-rich Caucasus. Gen. Erwin Rommel, after

taking British-held Tobruk in Libya in late June 1942, was headed for Alexandria. He hoped to reach the Suez Canal and link up with the Japanese. By July, the Japanese had landed on Guadalcanal and felt confident that they could isolate and strangle Australia. The Axis strategy was to demonstrate to the Allies and neutral bystanders that their own German and Japanese soldiers were so much better trained, equipped, and experienced that further resistance would be futile. Fascism was pronounced superior and modern—the future.

Still, the Axis had bet on winning before the undeniable Allied advantages in industrial capability, manpower, and geography would kick in. If and when Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States fully mobilized, the Allies—which alone deployed heavy four-engine bombers and two-ocean navies—had the unique ability to bomb and destroy the German and Japanese homelands. The vast industrial base of Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States beyond the Urals could not be seriously harmed by existing German and Japanese armies, ships, or planes.

Seventy-five years ago, in late 1942, the Axis lost their foolish gamble.

World War II changed overnight as the Allies mobilized millions of new troops and recalibrated their already large economies for total war. No longer could the Axis

powers count on surprise attacks and Blitzkrieg against neighbors, as World War II settled down to a global conflict of attrition.

By late September 1942, the huge German Sixth Army had stalled near the Volga River, and was trapped by the Red Army at Stalingrad. It would eventually surrender what was left of its once formidable force. In October, Rommel ran out of supplies and troops at the Battle of El Alamein. He was beaten back by the material preponderance and professionalism of British troops. An Allied invasion of western North Africa followed in November 1942, dooming all Axis forces on that continent.

At about the same time, the U.S. First Marine Division had demonstrated on Guadalcanal that that it could fight as well as battle-hardened Japanese troops—and that the Japanese could not supply their soldiers in the manner of the American Navy, which fought and eventually won a series of lethal sea battles nearby against the Japanese Imperial Navy. Earlier, in June 1942, at the battle of Midway, the Americans had already proved that their smaller prewar Pacific fleet was still a match for the Japanese, even as a new American one seven times larger was well under construction.

In sum, by late 1942, the trajectory of the global war had entirely changed almost overnight.

Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States had over twice the population base of the combined three Axis countries. The huge Soviet and American militaries each exceeded 12 million soldiers—and the Soviet Union fielded the largest ground army in the history of conflict. By 1945, the gross domestic product of the American economy alone was almost larger than that of the Axis and other Allied powers combined. British imperial technology and cryptology, along with aircraft and vehicle production, were superior to Germany's. British imperial munitions output outmatched that of the Third Reich.

Allied supreme leaders—Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin—avoided the disastrous quagmires that Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo so routinely encountered in the Soviet Union, North Africa, the Balkans, and China. And their armies learned to fight as savagely and effectively as the Wehrmacht and the Japanese imperial military. The Allied potential to mobilize industry and deploy had been ignored earlier in the war due to American isolationism, British appeasement, and Soviet collusion. But it became lethally manifest in late 1942. Germany, Italy, and Japan simply never learned to mobilize and produce like their enemies.

The war would go on for almost three more years. This time around, the Allies, unlike the victors of World

War I, insisted on unconditional surrender and total victory—difficult goals that required the eventual occupation of Germany, Italy, and Japan, the destruction of those countries' economies, and the defeat, death, or humiliation of over 15 million Axis soldiers in the field.

What can we learn from the dramatic turnabout of late 1942?

> **"WAR ACCELERATES HUMAN BEHAVIOR. THE VICTORY THAT SEEMED ASSURED TO THE AXIS IN MARCH 1942 BECAME AN ABSURD ASPIRATION JUST SIX MONTHS LATER."**

War accelerates human behavior. The victory that seemed assured to the Axis in March 1942 became an absurd aspiration just six months later.

War often starts over emotions, but is settled by reason: The Axis bombast about racially pure supermen was silenced by the efforts of hundreds of millions of ordinary workers in Allied factories.

Morality counts—so does propaganda. Britain, the

Soviet Union, and the United States reminded neutral countries that the Allies held the moral high ground: The Axis powers had started the war through surprise attacks; their leaders had murdered millions of innocents; and they proved to be brutal occupiers. The Allies, by contrast, claimed to be liberators. Most of the world agreed and preferred to be liberated by the Americans or British—although not by the Soviets, for to be liberated by them meant to be subjugated by them—than to be occupied by the Germans and Japanese.

Fighting power cannot just be assessed by battlefield discipline, will power, and martial ardor, but also by industrial output, technology, and logistics. The Axis powers grasped that reality far too late.

Cooperation between allies is crucial. The Axis powers rarely synchronized strategies or weaponry. Hitler had as little warning of the Pearl Harbor attack as did the Japanese of the German surprise invasion of the Soviet Union. Mussolini's Italy knew about neither of his allies' surprise attacks in advance. In contrast, the Allies consulted constantly, apportioned responsibilities, and shared supplies and technology. Everything from the D-Day operation, to Lend-Lease, to the modifications in the P-51 Mustang fighter and Sherman firefly tank were a result of inter-Allied cooperation.

In an existential conflict, the strategy must consist of destroying an enemy's ability to make war. Hitler declared war in 1941 on the United States and the Soviet Union with an air force (and navy) that had been unable to destroy or capture Britain, and certainly could not reach Russia beyond the Ural Mountains—or harm New York, Detroit, or San Francisco. The same strategic imbecility was true of the Japanese.

In contrast, shortly after the Allies entered the war, they had concrete plans to reach or bomb Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo. And they quickly developed the striking power to do just that.

To be effective, deterrence must be unambiguous and understood. It should have been folly for the smaller Axis powers to take on the combined might of an undefeated Britain, a neutral America, and a colluding Soviet Union in 1941. But they had at least one good reason to do so: Before 1939, the Allies had not properly rearmed nor made it clear to Germany and Japan that their overwhelming strength would inevitably crush the fascist powers.

War, however, is a tragic laboratory that corrects such impressions. Sadly, aggressors often mistake magnanimity for weakness and the lack of preparation for an inability—rather than a temporary and correctible reluctance—to arm. These are tragic lessons that seem backward or even

dangerous in peace, and so over the ages have to be relearned at great cost through war.

Germany, Italy, and Japan learned that deadly lesson in 1942, just months after starting an expansion of a previously successful war that they now had no way of winning.

YOU REFER TO "THE SECOND WORLD WARS". WHY IS THERE A PLURAL IN THE TITLE?

I think for two reasons. One is that from 1939, when Germany divided up Poland with the Soviet Union, until April of '41, there was a Polish war, there was Norwegian war, there was a Danish war, there was a low country war, there was a French war, there was The Blitz, there was the Yugoslavian War, there was a Greek war. All of those together really weren't called the Second World Wars or World War II. They were seen as isolated, border blitzkriegs in which Germany, with the exception of The Blitz, won every one of them.

Then something weird happened. In 1941, Germany preempted and invaded its de facto ally the Soviet Union on June 22nd of 1941. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and Malaysia and Singapore on the next day and brought Japan in the war, not just against us, but against Britain too. Then nobody thought on December 11th, Italy and Germany would declare war on us. Suddenly, these border wars that nobody really knew what they were, were renamed the Second World War, and because it really was in Asia and North Africa, even in the Americas, in the sense of off the coast of South America and it was a submarine campaign. Suddenly, they were plural.

Then the other thing was, of course, nobody had

ever fought a war where it was so disparate. Disparate, I mean, you're fighting in the desert in armor. You're under 500 feet of water in the North Atlantic. You're 20,000 feet above Germany in a British bomber. You're fighting in Burma. You're one of the 15 million people who were probably killed in China. It was so disconnected. What did somebody that was fighting in Bulgaria have to do with the Japanese fighting in China, yet nominally they were on the same Axis side.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT DETERRENCE FROM STUDYING WORLD WAR II?

When stronger nations behave as if they're unlikely to respond to aggression, tragic consequences often follow. This is why it's imperative to understand that deterrence requires more than just military might. For deterrence to effectively prevent conflict, it also requires the willingness to use that might. There is no greater example of this than the Second World War.

From the beginning, it was abundantly clear that the Allied nations - led by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, were stronger than the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy. They had over 3 times the industrial capacity of the Axis powers, and had superior weaponry on land, sea, and in the air.

But despite their obvious power, the Allies projected weakness and timidity from the outset. As German tanks rolled through Eastern Europe, the allies were declaring "peace for our time." And their lack of resolve sent a clear signal - the Axis powers could continue their military conquests, and the Allies would not intervene.

It was only after years of bloodshed that all sides could agree on who was stronger.

The devastating reality is that if the Allies would have demonstrated their power from the beginning - and their

willingness to use it - it might have averted World War II and saved millions of lives.

WHAT WERE THE PRIMARY DRIVERS BEHIND THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND HOW ACCURATE IS THE CLAIM THAT IT WAS SOLELY MIKHAIL GORBACHEV'S DOING, RATHER THAN A RESULT OF REAGAN'S PRESSURE?

Well, that's a perverse interpretation of what happened.

Gorbachev didn't do the perestroika and glasnost because he wanted to weaken the Soviet Union. He wanted to reform it, he thought, and make it more powerful. And it turned out to be, and it turned out to be something that once he unleashed the spirits slightly of free market capitalism and freedom, it took a life of its own and weakened the Soviet Union.

But why did he want to reform it in the first place? Because he, his central planners, had come to him and said, the United States, technologically, economically, is so far ahead of us that the Cold War mentality will not work. And why was it so far ahead of us?

Because Reagan had reversed much of the Carter doctrine and not the doctrine officially, but he had rearmed. He increased the Navy to 600 ships, he talked about whether it was fantasy or not, it didn't matter. The Soviets took him literally about Star wars, that he was

going to build this anti-ballistic missile system, that was so sophisticated it was beyond technology available to the Russians.

So in conclusion, they realized that the Cold War was going to be lost by a new dynamic kind of renaissance America that was determined to win it. Reagan said, we win, they lose, that was his definition of the Cold War. And so he tried to reform Russia, either to appease the United States, but more likely to improve its competitiveness.

And once you start to tamper with communism and give people a taste of entrepreneurship, even a tiny one, and freedom, that takes a logic of its own.

DO WE HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT'S IN THE MIND OF XI JINPING, OF VLADIMIR PUTIN?

We have no idea. We thought Xi thought like us—just as George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama did. All bipartisan. They all thought that he is so impressed with Western civilization. He's globalizing, he's changed his economy. Yes, he's rough around the edges, but our leisure, our affluence, globalization will acculturate them and China will take their place among the family of nations.

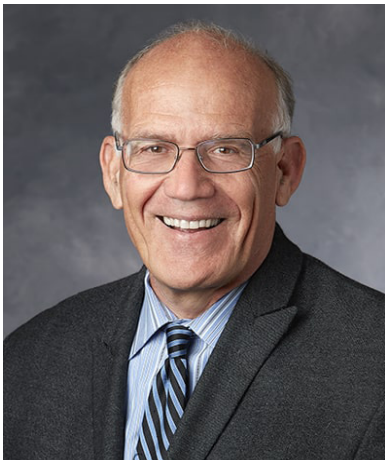
They don't understand that that is exactly what the Byzantines said about the Ottomans, that's exactly what people said about Alexander, that's exactly what they said about the Carthage. And these people don't understand, so in our, whether it's Putin, so when Putin says I'm going to use nuclear weapons if I lose.

And there's been about 17 threats from high members of the Russian military, high members of the Russian parliament such as it is and Putin himself, tactical, nuclear, even. We say this is crazy. They would never do that.

We never say, well if I was going to lose and be humiliated or if I wanted Ukraine the breadbasket of the old Soviet Union and ports on the Black Sea and a window right under Europe I'd be willing to do a lot of stuff for it. And I've done, so there's an unreality and then

on the part of the attacker they need to understand what the attacker is capable of.

Please note: Some of the answers from Victor Davis Hanson in this eBook were adapted from live transcripts and may retain the informal structure and cadence of spoken conversation, which can result in unconventional phrasing.



Victor Davis Hanson is the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he focuses on classics and military history. A renowned historian and commentator, Hanson has written or edited twenty-four books, including *The Case for Trump*, *The Second World Wars*, and *Carnage and Culture*. His scholarship spans ancient warfare, agrarian life, and contemporary political culture. He is a syndicated columnist for Tribune Media Services and a weekly contributor to *National Review Online*. Hanson previously served as a visiting professor at Stanford University, the U.S. Naval Academy, and Pepperdine University, and has received honors including the National Humanities Medal and the Bradley Prize. He holds a PhD in classics from Stanford University.

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