

# AN INQUIRY INTO THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY FOR THE USE OF STRATEGY



*Vanitas*. Adriaen Verdoel (1620 – 1695)

Bismarck's remark that "only a fool learns from his own mistakes; the wise man learns from the mistakes of others" couldn't be more appropriate when trying to understand a high-stake field such as strategy (quoted in Hayward, 2016; p.180). A field in which the ability to practice is scarce, the margin of error is narrow, and choices are decisive. In a field wherein the intellectual minds rules supreme, historical insights provide a source of relatively risk-free learning (Gray, 2007). Whereas tactics are learned through drills and war-games, strategy is learned through complex and abstract intellectual exercises. This essay goes beyond the argument that we need history to understand strategy: history provides the empirical raw material to develop a philosophy. As such, this essay argues that history is not only vital to understand strategy; its ideas condition strategy. To grasp the power of history as a philosophy, we need to start by being aware of the pitfalls of history that might lead ideas into dead-ends. Over-determination, rationalization, interpretation, and simplification are but some of the downsides of a fast and superfluous reading of history. Rather than enable drawing quick conclusions, history ought to provide fertile grounds for the mind to practice and reflect. Its pitfalls should not overshadow the many benefits of history such as creating an awareness of our identity, serving as a well of inspiration, emboldening us with purpose, sharpening strategic intuition, emphasizing that strategy is a long-term process, equipping us with a strategic mind-set, and enabling us to get acquainted with the military lexicon. Overall, although the lessons of history are less tangible, less immediate than that of other fields of study; its insights are invaluable, its lessons timeless.

There are various downsides to history. To begin with, historical data is often incomplete and there are incalculable amounts of variables to take into account (Michael Howard, 1991). To compound the difficulty; every war is different. And yet, we can use analogies to compare one war with another because “all wars are things of the same nature” (Clausewitz, 1832: 1976; p.606). It is well known that the nature of war does not change, only its character. As such, history teaches by analogy. This entails however that history teaches one to be sensitive to the context and search for differences as much as search for similarities (Cohen, 2005). For instance, although the Peloponnesian war and the First World War shared the similarity that war was caused by the rivalry between a rising power and a declining power, they were not identical. Another important aspect to consider is that history is often arbitrary. It is experienced through the eyes of others. Indeed, as Professor Howard points out, history is “not about what happened in the past, but what historians *say* happened in the past” (1961; p.12). History can be seen as parts of a fragmented mirror that reflects our past in a distorted manner. Consequently, in strategy it is essential to be critical of the past. Moreover, history is often characterized by a rational bias in which causality is emphasized over probability. Most historians, seek to explain events by identifying causal relationships while downplaying the role of gambles, chance and randomness. It is undoubtable that everything is caused by something else. Yet, this involves both rationalizing and simplifying the past. The death of Pericles, caused by the pest; and, the death of Tsarina Elisabeth during the Seven Years War were both unexpected events and explain only one aspect as to why they changed the course of war. What appeared to be nonsense makes in retrospective a lot of sense. The reality however is that history is far more complex than historians make it seem (Murray, 2006). Similarly, history only exists once it has occurred; until then everything is possible. It is a summary of what happened, thereby dismissing everything what could have happened. History tends to discard the alternatives that sowed doubt in the eyes of the strategist. Furthermore, sometimes history fails to explain how seemingly unrelated and trivial changes can have complex repercussions at the tactical, or strategic level. For instance, technological changes such as barbed wire, first used in the agricultural sector, had massive military repercussions because it was easy to produce, difficult to destroy and get through and did not obstruct view and fire. Finally, history generally deals with success not with failure. Whereas, failure gives something to reflect upon, success tends to anaesthetise the victor from drawing the relevant lessons. For example, by the time World War II erupted, the French had drawn the wrong conclusions of World War I (Murray, 2006). They anticipated a war characterized by trench warfare similar to 1916 rather than mobile warfare similar to 1918; which led them to focus on the former rather than the latter (Gray, 2005). In contrast, the German general Hans von Seeckt created over fifty-seven committees to study why the Germans lost World War I. In sum, being aware of history is being aware of the pitfalls of trying to grasp reality. Since reality cannot be attained, it must be conceived. By training the mind to be critical, history teaches students of strategy to take nothing for granted and to focus on asking the right questions rather than seek the right answers. Ultimately, isn't it better to be uninformed rather than to be misinformed?

Historical facts do not constitute knowledge. The purpose of history is not to understand the past in and for itself, for that would amount to preserving factual relics of some ‘dead history’. On the contrary, the purpose of history is to provide practical guidance for daily life and philosophic reflection. A “mode of inquiry and a framework for thinking about problems” (Cohen, 2005; p.575). It is the events and people of the past that continue to be relevant in the present that constitute ‘living history’. The parts that continue to exert influence on our minds, direct our actions and engage us into a creative engagement with the world. As Frederick the Great remarked, “what is the good of experience if you do not reflect?” (quoted in Fuller, p.79). Similarly Clausewitz asserted that “the knowledge needed by a senior commander is distinguished by the fact that it can only be attained by a special talent, through the medium of reflection, study and thought” (1832: 1976; p.146). To be able to reflect however, our ignorance needs to be acknowledged. As Durant remarked, “education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance” (Durant, 1945). Consequently, by informing us of our ignorance history warns us against taking rash decisions or having idealistic presumptions. For instance, Gray grasps why the attempt at enforcing arms control failed historically by observing that “communities do not fight because they are armed; they are armed because they want to fight” (Gray, 126 ; 2006). Purpose comes first, violence after. As he remarked, “arms *per se* are not the problem. Ergo, removing arms, or even just controlling them in some manner, cannot be the solution” (Gray, 2007; p.7). The dramatic failure of historic precedents such as the Treaty of Versailles, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and the Washington Naval Treaty are a case in point. Wilhelm Dilthey recognized that the historian, like the philosopher, needs to discover “the rational within the real—not to impose the rational upon the real” for the simple reason that the humanities depend as much on understanding meaningful human interactions as the natural sciences depend on purposeless, repetitive, causal relations (Little, 2016). This then is historical knowledge: the ability to reflect, imagine and recognize the underlying drivers of reality.

History gives the opportunity to analyse subjects in *depth* and in *width*. The further one can abstract oneself in the past, the further one can project oneself in the future. As Kaplan writes, the inverse holds true: “the greater the disregard of history, the greater the delusions regarding the future” (2003, p.39). In transporting one’s mind across time or as Howard calls it, *width*, it becomes possible to discern change from continuity. *Width* needs to be complemented with *depth*; the ability to see clearly across a blurry history (Howard, 1961). It gives us insights into the various elements that influence strategy. It is the ability to identify and visualize the relationship between the dominant ideas. Sharpness is what enables the avoidance of knowing “just enough history to have confidence but not enough to have understanding” (Fergusson, 2015; p.31). It is the *coup d’oeil* that sees through complexity and abstraction, and enables one to have a holistic birds view of the campaign. By combining *width* with *depth*, one can develop intuition, the feeling of *déjà-vu* that empowers the strategist with swiftness of thought, and, action in the blink of an eye. History allows to experience reality through thought and learn strategy through imagination, or what Howard calls, “flexibility of mind” (Howard, 1961; p.14).

It allows to reflect upon the past. It is a laboratory of ideas in which alternative realities can be considered. Training our mind of what has not happened but could have happened, thereby helping us develop a strategic intuition.

History should be understood as a source of inspiration; not a static repertoire of facts. A source from which one draws creativity from, rather than copy mindlessly. Historical awareness enables men to see beyond the boundaries of the possible and imagine what he is capable of. By showing that the incredible is feasible, history strengthen our firmness in the face of indecisiveness. Precedents not only embolden decisions but also legitimize actions. During the evacuation of Crete in 1941, the British navy lost numerous warships: six destroyers were sunk while many others were damaged. When the decision came whether to continue with the evacuation or not, Admiral Cunningham pointed out that the navy had traditionally supported the Army arguing that “it takes the Navy three years to build a new ship; it will take three hundred years to build a new tradition. The evacuation will continue” (Cohen, 2005; p.577).

History is the story of mankind inasmuch as it is that of ideas. Ideas that define who we are and where we might be going. Ideas that guide our actions in times of peace and in times of war. As such, history is about discovering one’s roots in the world. The idea of separating the past and the present is dangerous as it alienates our heritage from us. History creates an awareness of our heritage and how it can be developed. It enables us to be acquainted with different world view and develop ours. As Will and Ariel Durant assert, “the present is the past rolled up for action and the past is the present unrolled for understanding” (1997). From a structuralist perspective, the manner in which states are organized influences the way they fight. Hence, understanding how these states are formed is crucial to understand what their strategies could be. For instance, during the English civil war in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the New Model Army reflected the meritocratic and professional values that the rebellious political elite sought to implement. Likewise, French Revolutionary armies reflected nationalism and notions of equality. Besides sharpening one’s senses of space and time, history also enables to see through humans. As Napoleon is quoted by Durant as saying on St. Helena, history is “the only true philosophy and the only true psychology”. Similarly, Durant asserts that “other studies may tell us how man might behave, or how he should behave; history tells us how he has behaved for six thousand years” (Durant, 1945). If history enables to grasp the thought process of others, it also enables to wire and program one’s own brain into the mind-set of strategy. It gives insights into the strategic process of thought of great generals and serves as a guide to action. History enables one to contextualize the present in light of the past. It gives meaning to the present by giving the context to why events unfold as they do.

To conclude, we need history because it provides the intellectual tools to grasp strategy. Besides highlighting change and continuity, history gives the raw material to reflect and develop one’s philosophy. As this essay as shown, it is essential to understand the pitfalls of history to develop a

critical mind and ask the right questions. The added value of history is found not in facts but in the opportunity to reflect and develop one's creativity. A thorough historical analysis can improve our intuition. Moreover, history offers a source of inspiration to strengthens our resolve as well as a clue as to our identity. Without a doubt, we need history to develop a philosophy that will guide our strategy.

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