

Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purposes, Problems, and Prospects of Military History

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In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the gallant king challenges his comrades to press the siege of Harfleur: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more." The editor of this journal has similarly challenged me to consider again the fate of military history in American academe. It is not my first assault on the question, for I have been publishing my thoughts on the matter for nearly thirty years.¹ As is perhaps inevitable for a military historian, I interpret the fate of my field as a struggle, a combat of ideas and values. Yes, indeed, once more unto the breach.

At the outset, let me offer my working definition of the field: military history is the study of military institutions and practices and of the conduct of war in the past. This definition frustrates those whose real interest is in the causes or the consequences of war. Certainly these are terribly important matters and involve military factors, but they are much broader than military history per se. Doubtless, some would disagree with my definition, but I will stick with it.

¹My earlier forays on this question include: "Military History in the Classroom: A Strategy for Enrollments," *Military Affairs* (December 1979); "On Military History," *Swords and Ploughshares* (March 1987); "The Embattled Future of Academic Military History," *Journal of Military History* 61 (October 1997); and "Reflections on the History and Theory of Military Innovation and Diffusion," in *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001). Most recently I presented a keynote address, "Is There a Genre of Military History?" at the 2006 meeting of the Australian Historical Association at Canberra. This article is a revised version of that talk.

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And let me also make clear what I mean by “military historians.” They are those who write military history, whether this work comprises their main scholarly effort or simply part of it, and whether or not they define themselves as military historians. Consequently there are many individuals, for example Geoffrey Parker or James McPherson, whose interests and scholarly work goes beyond military history, but whom I would still call military historians because a significant part of their output addresses the history of military institutions and the conduct of war. The important thing is not what they call themselves but what they do.

I must make clear that there is usually a very important distinction between the history of international relations and military history. Historians of international relations are interested in many peaceful pursuits in addition to war. Moreover, they are most likely to examine the causes, resolution, and consequences of armed struggles, not the struggle itself, which historians of international relations often accept as a *fait accompli*, the point from which their discussions begin. War plays a role in their work, but so do economics, ideology, and internal politics, which many see as the true keys to foreign policy. Such matters are related to military history, but they really are distinct from it. Historians of international relations have their own societies and journals, a fact that indicates that they see their field as distinct from military history.

For me, war—no matter how regrettable—is of obvious importance in history. Its costs in lives and fortunes are undeniable. It can determine regimes, borders, and economies; it can decimate or destroy peoples. The conduct of war can have incalculable human and cultural effects, as both world wars demonstrate. But even those who would deny the ultimate impact of particular wars cannot dismiss the social, cultural, political, and economic importance of military institutions and practices. These institutions and practices have defined social orders, a fact that is particularly obvious in societies ruled by military elites. Combat and the preparation for combat have also strongly influenced cultural values, for example, attitudes towards violence, self-sacrifice, obedience, and gender. Concepts and systems of political representation, leadership, and hierarchy have often been based on military participation. And the tremendous costs of maintaining military forces, particularly in the early modern and modern worlds have monopolized resources and shaped economies. All this merits our attention and justifies regarding military history as a distinct field.

And since I have already slipped into the personal pronoun many times, let me clarify that what I offer here is very much my own take on the subject,

informed by forty years as a military historian to be sure, but still essentially personal. Moreover, in a brief discussion of an immense topic, I will cut to the chase, simplify, and opt for the provocative to make a point.

The Three Genres of Military History

Military history is not a single genre of historical studies but three, each with its particular purpose, audience, and standards. These three genres—what I call here popular, applied,² and academic—are not absolutely separate; sometimes a single work operates under all three rubrics. Yet it is still very useful to separate the three, because real tensions can exist between them. Although I have worked in all three genres, my main concern is academic military history. It is the most intellectually exciting and challenging field, but it also faces an uncertain future. It will have to breach some thick walls in order to gain a firm hold within the university's history community.

Popular Military History

Since my argument requires us to recognize military history as a triptych, let us begin by looking more closely at each panel.

Popular military history appeals directly to a broad audience. Its origins probably go back to when early humans regaled their comrades with stories of daring and skill in battle. From the campfire tale it became poetry and song, and later took the form of written accounts. Today, television provides a new format for popular military history. I remember when the Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E) showed so many programs on war that critics chided that A&E actually stood for "Armies and Enemies." Now, we have the History Channel and the new Military History Channel to captivate American viewers, who are almost certainly mostly male.

Why do I say male? Let me tell you a story. My younger son used to collect esoteric comic books, some of them graphic novels. Before he had his driver's license, I would on occasion take him to the shops that specialize in this literature. One of these shops also boasted two sections of used books, so

²In earlier discussions I used the terms "professional," "practical," and "pragmatic" for the second form of military history, but I will go with "applied military history" here. In his discussion of the field for the *Journal of American History*, Wayne Lee borrowed my tripartite division of the field but used the label "applied," and I rather like it. Wayne E. Lee, "Mind and Matter—Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007), 1116.

while my son rummaged earnestly among the comics, I looked at the books. Oddly enough, two sections at the back of the store were boldly labeled “Women’s Books” and “Men’s Books.” This intrigued me, so I first ambled over to the women’s books, expecting to see feminist literature—I do live in a university town after all. Instead, the entire section was composed of romance novels. Next I walked over to the men’s books, expecting perhaps *Playboy* and *Sports Illustrated*, but all the books were popular World War II histories. It then struck me that popular military history really constitutes the male equivalent of the romance novel.

This may argue for the moral superiority of women, since women are interested in love, while men are into death; however, women and men are attracted to the book racks for much the same reasons. Both varieties of literature provide a form of escape, in which the key to an author’s success is excitement and readability. In the case of military history, this requires that the author stress drama and not trouble the reader with too much context or complexity. Battles are all too often described as “decisive,” and generals praised as particularly talented or condemned as particularly inept. Often, but certainly not always, the result is a portrait painted in strong colors that leaves little room for nuance.

Popular military history is, indeed, an industry. It fills bookracks in the United States and around the world. It has its own magazines and journals, for example, *Military History*, which boasts eighty thousand readers; its own book clubs; and now its own television channels. There is a great deal of money to be made on popular military history, a fact that did not escape the likes of S.L.A. Marshall and Steven Ambrose—to their own undoing—and now rewards the rather different talents of Victor Davis Hanson.

There is nothing wrong with popular military history as a form of entertainment, but I suggest that it inherently fosters certain problems. Prospects of fame and fortune tempt authors to appeal to the largest potential audience, if need be by paying less attention to historical accuracy and interpretive complexity. Scholarly critics of military history often seize upon the weaknesses of popular military history to condemn the academic form of the field. Popular military history can be very, very well done, but much of it is superficial or trivial.

Here, the media that produce the different genres really matter, and the kind of popular military history presented on pay television exaggerates both its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, television multiplies mass by giving popular military history a new and larger audience. However, the very nature of television programming makes popular military history seem all the more superficial and unsophisticated, with some important exceptions.

Applied Military History

Applied military history is typified by its utility, specifically for the military profession. Some of that utility lies in the military's desire to create an esprit de corps and to boost morale. But more important is the use of military history as part of the professional education of officers and as a guide in establishing doctrine and planning and waging war.

The military audience can be immensely intelligent, but it also may tend to ask the historian to curtail the examination in order to cut to the chase and offer "lessons learned." This is far from my favorite term. I would rather support the study of applied military history because it greatly aids the development of professional judgment. Historical examples can provide warnings against poorly conceived actions on strategic, operational, and tactical levels or in weaponry and logistics, while also suggesting more effective courses to follow. In addition, knowledge of the past can serve as a kind of checklist pointing the way to important factors to be considered now and in the future. To be sure, there is no guarantee that historical knowledge translates into current wisdom, but knowledge is a better hedge against disaster than is ignorance. Military historians should be cognizant and proud of the fact that we pursue one of the rare subspecialties of historical scholarship that is actually regarded as important for training and guidance by real world practitioners.

Napoleon himself wrote: "Read and reread the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, and Frederick; take them as your model; that is the only way of becoming a Great Captain, to obtain the secrets of the art of war."³ Today, the U.S. military seems to concur with Napoleon's judgment. However, this was not always the case. For those interested in applied military history, I recommend a new and very interesting volume of essays, *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*.⁴ One contributor, the very scholarly U.S. Marine Corps General P. K. Van Riper, argues that only the shock of the Vietnam War reawakened the U.S. military to the importance of studying history. Now, each of the services has reading lists of works to be studied by different ranks, and

³This reminds me of "Study history, study history. In history lies all the secrets of statecraft" (Winston Churchill), which demonstrates that like the military, the institutions of diplomacy are most interested in the study of history—and both fields are in decline in academe.

⁴William Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

each of these lists is heavily laced with military history, going back at least to the Peloponnesian Wars. The Air Force seems to have the shortest list, but even here works of history figure prominently. In addition, the military professional journals—the Army’s *Parameters* and *Military Review*, the *Naval War College Review*, the *Marine Corps Gazette*, and the Air Force’s *Air and Space Power Journal*—all give attention to historical perspectives. Hopefully, the new Air Force journal, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, will echo this approach.

As in the case of popular military history, applied military history can be very good. The services’ reading lists include many excellent works by noted historians. But there remains the strong tendency to want to strip down military history to produce those schematic lessons learned.

Also, I find it particularly troublesome that military audiences prefer a military historian to play the part of a pundit. The attitude of certainty demanded of a pundit runs counter to the need for complexity, qualification, and contemplation essential to scholarship. Those who consume applied military history need to realize that the past does not predict the future, that each situation is unique, and that they must meld their own professional experience and knowledge of current events with historical background, precedent, and analogy.

However, it is my experience that military audiences are too easily seduced by those who project a sense of dogmatism, often presented with podium-thumping vigor. This is nowhere more true than during the lectures and briefings that carry such weight in applied military history. Telling the military what it wants to hear, particularly in the way that it wants to hear it, can win an author acceptance. And herein lies the most dangerous temptation of all for those who get on the war college circuit: to succumb to the illusion of influence and notoriety. At the very least, there is the groupie effect that comes from being close to the powerful.

In the United States, popular and applied military history are thriving and in all probability will continue to do so, but academic military history has suffered a very different and disturbing fate.

Academic Military History

Academic military history is much like the study of other historical specialties: its goal is to understand the past for its own sake; its standards demand the same high level of scholarship; and its intended audience is, above all, the community of historians. It boasts scholarly journals similar to

those of other history specialties: the *Journal of Military History*, *War in History*, and *War & Society*.

There is a belief among American departments of history that military history was once a dominant form of historical study. However, it has never been dominant, and has often been rejected as unworthy or dangerous by those academics who consider military historians to be politically conservative, morally suspect, and intellectually dull. In 1912, at the height of aggressive nationalism, historian R.M. Johnson could complain that the military history course he taught at Harvard was the only one offered outside the walls of the public and private military academies.⁵ When I began graduate study of military history at Berkeley in 1964—hardly an astute choice on my part—I was ridiculed by other graduate students. Materialist social history ruled in those days and had little use for me and my interests. Academic military history did finally enjoy some success in the late 1980s, but this waned in the mid-1990s. I will say more about what I see as a continuing crisis in academic military history, but let me first point out some of the intellectual parameters of the field.

Debates over the Last Three Decades

Intellectually, military history is probably more exciting than it has ever been, with real vitality and a very impressive agenda. Actually, military historians have been fairly introspective about their field, as witnessed by such works as Jeremy Black's *Rethinking Military History*.⁶

During the last thirty years, three trends in academic military history have most impressed me. The first has been the “new military history” which first saw light in the 1960s and 1970s. This scholarly trend, which is hardly “new” any more, emphasized social and institutional history. It reflected the historical tastes of the time before the linguistic and cultural “turns.” The fact is that campaign and battle histories and military biography are not the rule but the exception in academic military history, and the “new military history” exaggerated this tendency. Its great contribution was to encourage much

⁵R.M. Johnson, cited in John K. Mahon, “Teaching and Research on Military History in the United States,” *The Historian* (February 1965), 170–71.

⁶Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For an earlier look at the field, see Russell F. Weigley, ed., *New Dimensions in Military History: An Anthology* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing Company, 1975).

broader contexts; its major problem was to downplay the central role of combat. The new military history seemed almost happier with armies at peace than with the messy business of war. Consider such works as André Corvisier's magisterial *L'Armée française*, Peter Karsten's *Naval Aristocracy*, and the considerable number of books with "war and society" in the title, for example John R. Hale's excellent *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620*.⁷

The second major trend, the debate over the Military Revolution, has benefited those of us who study early modern Europe and its colonial extensions. The theory of a Military Revolution argues that a number of technological innovations in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe revolutionized warfare, drove state formation, and facilitated colonial expansion. Michael Roberts first broached this idea in the mid-1950s, but it received greatly renewed energy with the publication of Geoffrey Parker's *The Military Revolution* in 1988.⁸ Parker's work has stimulated further scholarship on early modern military history; we are still enjoying its benefits. Aspects of the Military Revolution include expanded armed forces, increased military expenses, and more effective administration, and as a consequence we have a good deal to say about European "Absolutism"—a term which has taken some hard knocks from revisionists but which retains much of its validity when focused on the relationship between armies and states.

Also, applied military history took up the idea of military revolutions as a series of dramatic, technology-driven changes over the centuries and, in doing so, turned an academic debate into a way of discussing military development up to the present day. For an example of this, see *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050*.⁹ While I see problems with the theory as proposed by Roberts and Parker, and have engaged in cordial combat over it, let me make it clear that we are all in their debt.

The third established direction of scholarship has reevaluated the powerful influence of racism on the course of war. In *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis,*

⁷ André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVII^e siècle au ministère du Choiseul: Le soldat*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964); Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1972); J. R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985).

⁸ Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁹ Williamson Murray and McGregor Knox, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and *War in the Third Reich*, Omar Bartov questioned established theories of combat motivation based on small-group cohesion and argued that the German army on the eastern front was inspired by Nazi ideology and racial hatred.¹⁰ The army was not simply defending Germany, but carrying out Nazi racial and political programs. Other scholars, such as Christopher Browning, have extended this interpretation.

John Dower has offered a race-based interpretation of the intensely brutal combat between Japan and the United States in *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*.¹¹ His argument shares many characteristics with Bartov's work, although in the end I am less convinced of Dower's conclusions. Still, Dower's interpretation has been supported by the work of Ronald Takaki and Craig Cameron, among others. That racist sentiments fueled the cruelty of war in the Pacific seems incontestable, insofar as it influenced the refusal to take prisoners, the abuse of enemy wounded and prisoners, and the mutilation of the dead. That it did more than this, however, is debatable. In any case, race-based theories coincide so much with current trends and emphases in American historical scholarship that they have received a very strong reception.

New Directions

More recent directions in academic military history also promise to be exciting. Reflecting the current interest in cultural history, "war and culture" and the "culture of combat" have become new foci of discussion and debate. This was bound to happen in one manner or another, but the publication of Victor Davis Hanson's *Carnage and Culture* in 2001 jumpstarted a useful debate about the existence of a culturally determined Western Way of War.¹² His theory links toe-to-toe, close-order infantry tactics and a tradition of decisive battle dating back to the Greeks, with the citizen soldier, rationalist thought, capitalist production, and Greco-Judeo-Christian ethnics in a 2500-year-long continuity of Western military superiority. He is enjoying power

¹⁰Omar Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹¹John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

¹²Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

and wealth as a reward for his “wisdom.” The likes of Vice President Cheney and Republican hopeful Fred Thomson profess great admiration for Hanson. Because Hanson’s theory is another way of explaining the rise of the West and because it emphasizes the use of ancient tactics, some noted historians, including Geoffrey Parker, have also endorsed it heartily, although with greater nuance.

I reject Hanson’s conclusions as fatally flawed and heavily political. The manuscript of my own *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* was already largely written before Hanson’s book appeared, but I had to deal with him more directly when *Carnage and Culture* came out, so if you want to read a frontal assault on Hanson, look at the first chapters of my *Battle*.¹³ Yet, if I object to his conclusions, I share his cultural approach to the history of warfare. This promises to be a new and productive wave of scholarship that will free us from the tendency to see warfare as determined primarily by technology and from simplistic statements about the unchanging nature of war and warriors—assertions common in popular and applied military history and represented in the term “the universal soldier,” also the title of some really *awful* movies. I believe we are already leaving behind Hanson’s framing of the issue and moving on to much more interesting approaches.

We now see considerable discussion of cultures or “ways” of war. A large section of the September 2005 *International History Review* presented a discussion of my *Battle* and a broadly conceived debate on culture and war, and the April 2006 *Journal of Contemporary History* was entirely devoted to the question of combat, culture, and the psychological impact of war in the twentieth century. In March 2007, Wayne Lee’s survey article for the *Journal of American History* highlights cultural analysis, and Robert M. Citino’s article in the October 2007 *American Historical Review* also addresses the war and culture and ways of war discussions.¹⁴ Books are now marching along this route as well; this year alone we have seen Adrian R. Lewis’ *The American Culture of War* and Brian McAllister Linn’s *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War*.¹⁵

¹³John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003, rev. 2004).

¹⁴Robert M. Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” *American Historical Review* 112 (October 2007).

¹⁵Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). The latter is Linn’s critique of the now classic Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

This discussion of Western and American ways of war should lead as well to an examination of non-Western ways of war. This is a more difficult task than you might think, because, while specialist studies of military institutions and practices in the West abound, they are much rarer for Africa, South Asia, and East Asia. Also, military history outside the West still tends to be driven by narrow campaign histories, with the possible exception of South Asia. There may *not* be a Western way of war, but there seems to be a Western way of military history, and translating non-Western military experience into it is a challenging, but potentially very rewarding, path along which we are only starting to advance.

Exchanges with colleagues, particularly in American and French history, convince me that we also stand on the threshold of a major historical discussion of women in military forces. Past works on women and warfare have tended to emphasize women who fought in battle, either as women or cross-dressed as men, often with a goal of entertaining the reader with stories of the unusual or in order to press a political and military agenda. But we are starting to look at women and gender in a far more sophisticated way, and learning much from it.

My own book, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern History*, hopes to do precisely this.¹⁶ Not only did women accompany armies in great numbers, but the degree and importance of their participation on campaign tells us a great deal about early modern warfare. In particular, their presence becomes a key influence on and indicator of those military transformations that produced a new style of army in the mid-seventeenth century.

There are other doors begging to be opened through which we have yet to enter. For example, the nature of war should suggest a revision of ideas concerning inevitability and contingency in history. For all the talk today about the value of “theory” in history, we could benefit from returning to one of the most enduring of historical theorists, Carl von Clausewitz, who confronted the role of chance in human affairs in a way we should still study.

Also, just as we have benefited from introducing new categories of analysis, I think we could gain greatly by re-conceptualizing war into the broader category of security. Playing on that very important article by Joan Scott, we need to see a piece entitled “Security: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.”¹⁷ Samuel Johnson wrote that “Nothing focuses the

¹⁶John A. Lynn, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁷Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91 (December 1986).

mind like a hanging,” and the fact is that life and death issues trump the contemplative meanderings so dear to many cultural historians. At least in my head, one way to get back to reality is to deal with security. And by security I would include violence, illness, and economic threat. War encompasses all of these in the extreme.

In sum, perhaps the three genres of military history may be best considered not as three particular bodies of work, but as three arenas for military historians, each with its own goals and incentives that shape standards of evidence, logic, and style of presentation. In addition to a desire to inform, popular military history aims to entertain a large general audience; its rewards are in wide distribution and financial profits. The dangers are in producing work designed primarily to attract and hold an audience at the cost of accuracy or sophisticated argument. Applied military history hopes to enlighten a specialist military audience and achieve influence; success is measured by the acceptance and use of the historian’s work by the military. The dangers here are in simplifying complex information to produce easily grasped lessons learned and in presenting material as a pundit, cutting out complexities and qualifications in order to appear authoritative. Academic military history aims at informing and engaging an audience made up of trained professional historians by employing the highest academic methods and standards in pursuit of subjects recognized to be important by the intended audience. As with other academic specialties, success is judged by publication in scholarly journals, strong reviews, and inclusion of the work in other scholarly treatments; book sales are not key to measuring success. Temptation to cut corners is far less in academic military history, because the intended audience is trained and knowledgeable in the field.

Academic Military History: On the Outside Looking In

The remainder of this paper will concentrate on problems faced by the academic form of military history. Despite the fact that it seems obviously important, deserves our attention, and holds endless possibilities, military history has been disturbingly abandoned by university historians in the United States. My fears, first laid out in my 1997 article “The Embattled Future of Academic Military History,” are not simply my own. In the 9 October 2006 issue of the right-leaning *National Review*, John J. Miller presents his critique, “Sounding Taps: Why Military History Is Being

Retired.” Miller observes of military history: “It’s dead at many...top colleges and universities....Where it isn’t dead and buried, it’s either dying or under siege.”¹⁸ In the 7 May 2007 issue of the liberal-leaning *New Republic*, David Bell voiced similar concerns in “Military History Bites the Dust: Casualty of War.” After noting that “most historians pay scant attention to military history,” Bell asks, “How can we explain the academy’s odd neglect?”¹⁹ In the more centrist *U.S. News & World Report* of 3 April 2008, Justin Ewers points out, “On college campuses, historians who study military institutions and the practice of war are watching their classrooms overflow and their books climb bestseller lists—but many say they are still struggling, as they have been for years, to win the respect of their fellow scholars.”²⁰ In that bastion of the historical profession, the *American Historical Review*, Robert M. Citino complains in the October 2007 issue, “Military history’s academic footprint continues to shrink, and it has largely vanished from the curriculum of many of our elite universities.”²¹

Military history in the United States is widely seen as being 180 degrees off the mainstream of current historical fashion. To be sure, all intellectual pursuits follow fashions that change over time. Therefore, to say that history is caught up in a certain trend is in itself not saying much. The difference is not so much of kind as it is of degree; current fashions in the study of history seem to me to be more self-righteous and intolerant than they have been for generations.

Such statements probably strike many scholars as extreme, perhaps as the whining of a partisan specialist. The best way to recognize the true severity of the problem is to offer some hard statistics. One way of gauging what is deemed worthy by the self-proclaimed “cutting-edge” of the profession in the United States is to survey articles published in the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), that flagship journal of the historical profession. To put it

¹⁸John J. Miller, “Sounding Taps: Why Military History Is Being Retired,” *National Review* 56 (9 October 2006); also available in line at <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MTcwOGU3MzhkNmI0Y2FmZjYzNjVlOGZhYWJiZWJjYjM>. Republican hopeful Fred Thompson followed this with his musings on the “reasons that military history is no longer taught,” blaming it on “the ideological shift in university faculties over the past few decades,” *National Review Online* (16 May 2007); <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NzUwZjRlNjdmZWY1YjJmOWNiODVhZmI3Mzc0MjhjOGY>.

¹⁹David A. Bell, “Military History Bites the Dust: Casualty of War,” *New Republic* 236 (7 May 2007); <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20070507&s=bell050707>.

²⁰Justin Ewers, “Why Don’t Colleges Teach Military History?” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 3, 2008, <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/2008/04/03/why-dont-colleges-teach-military-history.html>.

²¹Robert M. Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” *American Historical Review* 112 (October 2007).

mildly, articles concerning military history, whether written by self-defined military historians or not, did not fare well in the 150 issues that appeared between 1976 and 2006. During this time, the *AHR* failed to publish a single research article focused on the conduct of the Hundred Years' War, the Thirty Years' War, the Wars of Louis XIV, the War of American Independence, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and World War II. There was one article on atrocities in the English Civil War. Only two articles discussed the American Civil War as a military conflict. The first described atrocities committed by Confederate troops at Chambersburg, so military atrocities seem to be attractive to the *AHR* editors. The second article on the Civil War was the presidential address by James McPherson in the February 2004 issue. That same issue contained the only article on World War I, an interesting piece on women soldiers in the Russian army, justified to the editors, I suppose, not by the fact that it dealt with war, but the fact that it dealt with women.²² If I seem upset with the editors' choices, it is because I am. At the same time that there was no article on the conduct of the Vietnam War, the *AHR* devoted an entire forum debate to the film *JFK*, and many of the articles published over the years seem to my prejudiced mind downright trivial.

Military historians need not be paranoid to conclude that *they* are after us, that many cutting-edge historians have honed their blades to surgically remove us from formal studies. And they do so for very well-meaning reasons. Just before Gunther Rothenberg retired from the Department of History at Purdue University, he asked if the department intended to hire another military historian to replace him. His chairman replied "No," and justified the decision by saying that there was no social purpose to the study of military history. This is an immensely illuminating reply.

As always, the study of history stands at the uncertain and conflicted frontier between the past and the future. In other words, the subtext of historical studies has often been about dealing with the present and advocating a course of things to come. That most ambitious of historical theorists, Karl Marx, spoke of the past, but he did so in order to confront the morality of his times and to argue for the inevitability of a different future.

One of my mentors, Charles Nowell, justified military history by insisting that just as doctors must study disease, historians must study war. But I am

²²Melissa K. Stockdale, "'My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914–1917," *American Historical Review* 109 (February 2004).

not completely happy with his utilitarian analogy. On the one hand, I am not really sure that in historical terms war is best regarded as a pathology. Too often it is simply the way things work, not evidence that things have broken down. On the other hand, doctors study diseases with the hopes of curing or eliminating them, and military history is not really about ending war. To twist Clausewitz's aphorism, military history is not the continuation of peace studies by other means. Military history, particularly its applied genre, concerns the management, not the elimination, of warfare.

Insistence on social purpose implies that somehow the study of history should not only produce knowledge but must tie into some current political cause. In my department at Illinois, the strongest emphases are women and gender, race and ethnicity, and labor history.²³ All of these are seen as contributing to social movements if only in the fact that they help to highlight identity, with its correlates of pride and outrage.

Many historians tend to empathize with their subjects and see the people they study as admirable, although often oppressed: women, racial minorities, and workers. They seem at times to extrapolate from their own kind of commitment, reaching the conclusion that military historians must like, or at least approve of, war and its horrendous costs. So, for many in the historical profession, the military historian's lack of obvious social cause becomes evidence of her or his perverted values.

Do They Hate Us for Who We Are?

In the dazed debates that followed 9/11 in the United States a common question was, "Do they hate us for what we do or for who we are?" It seems apropos for academic military historians to ask the same question of their university colleagues. When I wrote "The Endangered Future of Academic Military History" ten years ago, I proposed that altering what we do would make for better military history and at the same time win the respect of our colleagues in other subdisciplines. In specific, I argued for taking a cultural approach to war and incorporating the history of women and gender. Then I followed my own advice, pursuing cultural themes and examining the

²³Our new chair, a remarkable scholar and person, Antoinette Burton, has brought the *Journal of Women's History* to Illinois, and by her count half the department either works explicitly in the history of women and gender or has that as one of their major interests. And now she is leading the department to try to bring the history of race and ethnicity to the same level of emphasis.

presence and activities of women with military forces. But now I am convinced that “doing” new things will not change the situation, because the problem is more fundamental. They really do disdain us for who we are; that is, for our basic values and opinions.

We do have some very different assumptions. While most historians would like to forget about military institutions and the conduct of war, military historians believe that military institutions and practices are fundamental to societies, that societies cannot be fully understood without reference to socially sanctioned, organized violence. While most historians consider war to be a byproduct of more important factors, military historians are far more likely to see war as an independent variable that must be understood in its own terms. And although international violence is regrettable, military historians are likely to see it as inevitable in history and to insist that it cannot simply be wished away in the past, present, and future.

Signs of Better Things Ahead?

Such opinions on the part of the historical community form a thick wall of opposition; are there signs that it can be breached? In particular, has military history gained more acceptance lately? The attention that military history has received from the likes of the *National Review*, the *New Republic*, and *U.S. News & World Report* may bode well, although that attention is related to the all-too-obvious political fact that there is a war going on. Better still, the discussions of the field in the *Journal of American History* and the *American Historical Review*, while perhaps spurred by the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, are at heart more academic than political. Only time will tell if the current public debate is an abnormality or a harbinger.

In my academic neck of the woods, the Big Ten universities, the study of military history has suffered some serious blows, but is not down for the count. The Big Ten has traditionally boasted the strongest U.S. program in military history at The Ohio State University. However, when military historians retired at Michigan, Wisconsin, and Purdue, the field disappeared with them, and when I leave Illinois soon, a sixty-five-year tradition of teaching military history at my alma mater will almost certainly come to an end.

The hiring season of the 2006–2007 academic year at first promised rewards, but ended with frustration. The University of Wisconsin at Madison, which did not replace the noted American military historian, Edward

Coffman, when he retired in 1992, received an endowment from Steven Ambrose to create a chair in American military history. John A. Miller began his 2006 article in the *National Review* by deriding Wisconsin for not filling the endowed Ambrose-Heseltine Chair; however, soon after Miller published his criticism, Wisconsin announced that it would, indeed, conduct a job search. Many in the profession cheered. But when the search committee finally made its choice, the department of history rejected it. Others will have to testify as to the details, but it would appear that the department simply did not want to hire a military historian after all. It is an unfortunate coincidence that the attempt, also in the fall of 2006, to fill the Gen. Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair in Military History at Ohio State came a cropper as well, although for different reasons.

Yet during the fall of 2007, a silver lining haloed what seemed to be an unmitigated rain cloud. Ohio State went back to the task and filled the Mason Chair by hiring Col. Peter Mansoor (USA), an officer close to Gen. David Petraeus and author of an award-winning volume on World War II.²⁴ In addition, Northwestern University offered me, and I accepted, a half-time position as Distinguished Professor of Military History Part-Time to begin immediately after I retire from the University of Illinois, so my brand of military history will move north from Champaign to Evanston, but remain in a Big Ten school. Now we need to see what Wisconsin will do.

There are those who argue cogently that the strong enrollments enjoyed by military history classes, when they are offered on the college level, should win faculty proponents for the field, at least among university administrators. There is no question that our courses draw very strong enrollments. My two-semester survey course in military history brings in between 200 and 250 students each semester, making it the most heavily-enrolled course in my department after the basic surveys of U.S. and European history. Other historians have similar stories to tell. However, high enrollments have done little to save the field. Departmental colleagues seem to view such mass appeal as evidence of popular military history, with all its flaws, and a distraction from what the students should really be learning; thus high enrollments can, paradoxically, work against the survival of academic military history. We seem to be cursed by our own success.

²⁴Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), which won the 2000 Distinguished Book Award from the Society for Military History.

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Henry V embraced his comrades as “we few, we happy few,” boasting that there was all the more glory to be won because their numbers were small. Well, I would gladly exchange the glory for a larger cohort of similarly-minded historians, because the wall still looks pretty formidable to me.

Few top-rated graduate schools offer programs in military history. By my definition, a department has a “program” if it has more than one specialist in military history, which is a common requirement to offer a historical specialization as a “field” for the Ph.D. exams. *U.S. News & World Report* lists ratings for ninety-one history departments that grant the Ph.D. Among these, only four can claim to have programs in military history: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (13), Duke University (15), The Ohio State University (26), and Texas A & M (74). There would seem to be a fairly wide-open opportunity for top-tier schools to achieve notice here; however, there may be too much intellectual inertia at the top. The short-sightedness of many major universities has opened up the possibility for institutions further down the food chain to offer programs that compete with a UNC, a Duke, or an Ohio State. Schools that have adopted this course include Kansas State University and the University of Southern Mississippi.

While a strategy for anchoring the field of military history concerns me most, in the long run what should concern us all is promoting and preserving historical studies in their full range. A limited selection of fashionable approaches to history studied in isolation is by its very nature a distortion. We gain by broad inclusion, not by narrow exclusion. Should the study of the conduct of war and military institutions be lost as a serious historical subdiscipline, it is not simply military historians who lose; it is all of us. My reading of the trend of the historical profession today is that commonly, although not always, incorporation of a specialty in vogue seems to entail piling on new positions in that field at the cost of eliminating other kinds of approaches. The philosophy seems to be that you cannot have too much of a good thing, but in historical studies that is a myopic argument.

Some savvy historians argue that such piling on makes good sense for a department that is striving to make a name for itself. As a strategy for gaining recognition among the closed and often incestuous world of professional academic historians this may make some sense. However I find it regrettable and even unethical. It is regrettable in that such concentration gives a department a one-sided, warped character in which historians are not challenged but reinforced in their conclusions. It is like looking through

binoculars: you may see one thing more clearly, but you miss its relationship to everything else. It is unethical because, with rare exceptions, our main responsibility should be educating students, not impressing other scholars. Piling on is self-indulgent. It is a tight, inward-facing circle of intellectuals patting each other on the back when they should be looking outward toward their students, responding to their needs and interests and preparing them to become informed citizens.

To be sure, the need to maintain our breadth in general historical studies has a corollary in the study of military history; it too should be studied in combination with other approaches to the human story. One point of my advocating cultural and gender studies a decade ago was to win over support from historians who otherwise would not take military history seriously, but much more importantly, it was, and is, to make military history a better genre of historical studies.