

PATHFINDER

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THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN EDUCATING AIR POWER STRATEGISTS

'[t]he study of military history lies at the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practices.'

Rear-Admiral A.T. Mahan, 'The Naval War College,'
The North American Review, 1912, p. 78.

What is history? What is its relevance to an air power strategist? These are important questions; however, as Richard Muller, a senior member of the faculty at the US Air Force's School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, reflected in 2016, 'as a rule air forces have not embraced historical study to the same extent as have their army or navy counterparts.' Nevertheless, in 1912, a year after an Italian aeroplane dropped the first 'bomb' over Libya, noted US naval historian and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan reflected on the link between military history and 'sound military conclusions.' However, history does not provide clear lessons, nevertheless, the study of the past offers a lens through which to analyse, understand and reflect on the challenges currently faced by modern air forces.

This *Pathfinder* considers some of the issues related to applied military history beginning with an outline of the purpose of history and the challenges of applying the past to the present. It also considers how air forces have used the study of the past as a tool for education while concluding with some tentative thoughts on how history can be used to educate strategists in the continuing challenge to achieve professional mastery.

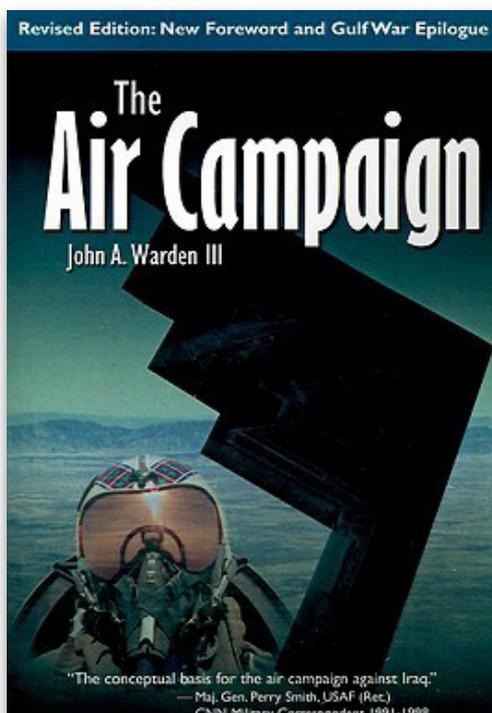
To start with, the term 'education' is used in this narrative in a broad context and incorporates both formal and informal learning. Similarly, the term 'strategist' is used in a collegiate manner and assumes that modern air forces seek personnel who are professional masters, well-versed in the core knowledge that underpins the application of air power.

As the British historian John Tosh reflected, the term history is ambiguous at best. Is history a collection of facts related to what has happened or is it the scholarly discussion and representation of the past? If the latter statement is accepted as being correct, then it can also be assumed that the interpretation of the past is an argument without an end. While a hackneyed observation, history is a dynamic field of study, one where historians continually re-examine evidence and re-interpret the past. Linked

to this is the extent of historical information available to historians and, by default, strategists who seek to apply lessons from the past to the present. The archival records and evidence that underpin the interpretation of the past are normally incomplete. For example, the National Archives of Australia only preserves a small amount of the material generated by the Australian Government.

Moving beyond the above understanding of history, the field of military history can be split into three subfields: popular, academic, and applied history. There is a degree of overlap between the latter two. The main criticism of applied military history is that it is a form of weaponising the past to cater for the present. Underpinning this

criticism is a view that those writing such history do so without sufficient understanding of the context in seeking to deduce lessons learnt. Unfortunately, this criticism is currently directed at academics working at institutions delivering professional military education. These institutions use history to illuminate and provide context



The Air Campaign by John A. Warden III

to the ambiguous challenges that officers attending them are likely to confront in the future.

Historically, the criticism of weaponising the past does carry some weight, and therefore air power strategists could be criticised for the poor use of history to support their arguments. Indeed, as Sir Michael Howard, a distinguished military historian, noted in his 1961 lecture on *The Use and Abuse of Military History*, '[W]hen great [interwar] pioneers of air war...advocated striking at the homeland and at the morale of the enemy people...they were basing their conclusions on *their* interpretation of past wars.' (emphasis added)

More recently, Colonel (retired) John Warden III's book, *The Air Campaign*, has been criticised for his use of a selective reading of history to fit the theory being propounded in it. Admittedly, Warden is not a historian. However, such selective use of history becomes problematic to the broader task of delivering professional education when such texts appear in, for example, Staff College reading lists where they can reinforce a narrow, and at times wrong, understanding of some of the officers they are meant to educate. Despite this criticism, it is clear that many air power thinkers have recognised the value of a broad reading of history. For example, in a 1921 article on 'Strategy and Air Strategy', Group Captain John Chamier of the RAF reflected on the challenge of deducing appropriate principles for the use of air power given the brief history of air warfare till then. Nevertheless, Chamier recognised that 'strategic principles are derived from the study of history', and he recognised that examples from 'naval and military strategy' could provide the necessary framework for a discussion of 'air strategy.'

While history and the application of its lessons by air forces is fraught with challenges, its importance as a didactic tool for the military cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the study of history has been, and remains, an element of the curricula at educational establishments of most air forces. However, considered in a broad manner, the study of history has been unbalanced. For example, in the late-1940s and 1950s, history and related subjects featured little on the curriculum at the Royal Australian Air Force College. As Alan Stephens has noted, the RAAF of this period identified itself as a 'narrow technocracy' with knowledge of the Air Force's core business to be deduced from its 'technical components' rather than a 'study of its history and ideas.'

There are several areas where the contemporary study of history plays a key role in the education of air power theorists and strategists. Perhaps most important is that a deep and contextual study of history provides an important understanding for military personnel seeking to gain professional mastery of the profession of arms. Indeed, if it is accepted that the aim of learning is to develop the cognitive ability to understand and deal with ambiguity, rather than to provide clear-cut answers to current problems, then the study of history has a role to play.

The skills associated with historical analysis refines human cognitive areas such as the ability to make considered judgements. An important contributor to the effectiveness of this learning process has been the increasing civilianisation of the academic delivery at institutions catering to professional military education. At a practical level, the use of Staff Rides as a learning tool could also ensure that history could be used as a means to explore ideas outside of the confines of the traditional education environment. However, this process also has its own challenges. In the final analysis, Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely's remark that the study of history needs to form an essential part of a 'balanced diet' of education for the military professional in order for them to develop the knowledge to be effective, rings completely true.

'The word *history* carries two meanings [...] It refers both to what actually happened in the past and to the representation of that past in the work of historians.'

—John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 1999, p. viii.

Key Points

- *Even though history may not provide clear lessons, the study of the past offers a lens through which to analyse, understand and reflect on the challenges currently faced by modern air forces*
- *History could be considered a rather dynamic field of study, one where historians continually re-examine evidence and re-interpret the past.*
- *It is recognised that 'strategic principles are derived from the study of history'*



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