



# The Phalanx Drift to the Right

Commander William Hines  
United States Navy

## *Abstract*

*History is filled with stories of leaders' triumphs and failures, assessed through the lens of hindsight, and their judgment scrutinized accordingly. Many current leaders, as well as aspiring leaders, look to those stories in the hope of gleaning guidance and possibly pinpointing "virtues or vices" to emulate or avoid. A student of leadership should be careful not to apply history so literally as to ignore the realities and circumstances of today. On the other hand, one cannot ignore history and its lessons or fail to incorporate the study of history into their own growing well of experiences.*

## History, Leadership & Attila the Hun

The student in search of reading material on historical examples of leadership will soon discover there is no shortage of material on the subject. Indeed, a quick search through the shelves of the nearest bookstore will demonstrate there is a thriving cottage industry in this field. Typically long on platitudes and short on meaningful details, these books promise insight into the “secrets” of a wide range of notable leaders, including legendary statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, revered sports figures like basketball coach John Wooden, and hard-nosed businessmen the stature of Jack Welch, former chief executive of General Electric. One of the long-standing bestsellers in this genre is *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*. While his methods may have been somewhat heavy-handed, there is no doubt Attila had more than his fair share of success pillaging Europe. But as the historical record of Attila’s life is thin to the point that no one is even sure of his physical appearance, we must be dubious as to what leadership lessons can be gleaned from his example.

Nevertheless, this desire to look to historical figures for guidance is hardly new. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek author Plutarch penned *Parallel Lives*, where he compared the career of a prominent Greek with that of an equally illustrious Roman. In his introduction to Alexander the Great, whose biography was paired, not surprisingly, with Gaius Julius Caesar’s, he cautioned, “It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men.”<sup>1</sup> With that statement, Plutarch might be considered history’s first student of leadership.

What exactly do we hope to gain from such study? What can we truly learn from an Alexander, Caesar, or Lincoln or even a poorly-described Attila for that matter? What attributes, what “virtue or vice” should we be seeking? Successful military leaders such as Field Marshal William Slim and General Lawton Collins, whose essays form an important part of the Naval War College curriculum, and numerous others have written on leadership and provided their thoughts on the integral qualities of a senior leader. While illuminating, many of the qualities they enumerate simply cannot be learned. A coward will not find courage in a book. No essay, regardless of its originality or brilliance, will impart integrity upon a scoundrel. Yet there are other qualities that can be developed, and one of these qualities that both Slim and Collins agree upon, in essays authored after their experiences in the Second World War, is judgment.

Reinforcing this nexus of historical study and judgment, Paul Kennedy stated “... [grand strategy] relies upon wisdom and judgment, those two intangibles which Clausewitz and Liddell-Hart [...] esteemed the most. Finally, we need to understand that wisdom and judgment are not created in isolation; they are formed, and reformed, by experience—including the study of historical experiences.”<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, war colleges and business schools alike search the past looking for those episodes that somehow seem relevant to the present day, hoping to convey with a single, dramatic, historical case that which could not be imparted in a dozen theoretical textbook examples.

Even here the well-intentioned curriculum designer and student can (and usually do) go astray. There is a wealth of experience to explore and a seemingly limitless supply of wars and dynastic struggles, warriors, and monarchs to learn from with recorded history beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C. and the first documented battle occurring in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. between the Egyptians and

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, p. 801

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War & Peace*, p. 6

Canaanites at Megiddo. Yet it often appears that this font of knowledge is of little use for it seems every historical example that appears to offer confirmation of a valuable point is instantly and effortlessly countered by a score of contradictory illustrations. Even worse is that there is no guarantee the most recent event is the most relevant (or even relevant at all).

Consider the quandary of European statesmen after 1935 confronted with the resurgence of Germany. History today condemns them for the politics of weak-kneed appeasement, yet at the time, it appeared more important to avoid the one-upmanship and escalation that led to the cataclysm of the First World War. If Austria's desire to punish backwater Serbia (a land in Bismarck's original estimation that was not "worth the healthy bones of a Pomeranian musketeer"<sup>3</sup>) brought all of the great powers into conflict, how were Chamberlain and Daladier to know that abandoning seemingly inconsequential Czechoslovakia to its fate would ignite a series of events that led to an even greater calamity? One obvious answer is that a statesman with sufficient wisdom and judgment should be able to discern the difference between the clumsy mechanics of Austrian imperial maintenance and the sure-handed hell-bent-on-conquest maneuverings of a revanchist Nazi Germany. Or is it really clear?

Confusing stuff trying to see the future, but as noted anti-historian Nicolas Taleb points out in *The Black Swan*, "In the end we are being driven by history, all the while thinking that we are doing the driving."<sup>4</sup> Still, we instinctively sense that it is in our best interest to be furnished "with the clearest discoveries of virtue and vice in men" even if the historical record on this score is muddled. To help confront this dilemma, this essay's intention is to provide guidance to students of leadership seeking to form and reform their judgment through historical experience.

### The Murky Waters of History

The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana famously observed, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>5</sup> One can hardly go wrong by repeating this quotation: All thoughtful persons within earshot will sagely nod their heads at this received wisdom. Indeed, this phrase is trotted out with great regularity, typically after some sharp reverse on the battlefield or at the diplomatic negotiating table, with some pundit sourly noting what blockheads our generals and statesmen are for having been caught unawares. After all, was it not obvious on December 8<sup>th</sup> that the Japanese would have launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor? Had they not done exactly the same thing to the Russians at Port Arthur a mere 40 years prior, launching a war against a materially superior enemy with a *coup de main*?

A fair point, but what of the Japanese hopes that the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack would fatally demoralize the Americans as the events in Manchuria had done to the Russians? No such luck for the Sons of Bushido who quickly found their empire relegated to the scrapheap of history as a result of their ill-founded gamble on a repetition that did not occur. It is instances like this that reveal the one thing that Santayana and those fond of quoting him appear to have in common: neither apparently ever bother to read the succeeding pages in whatever history book writ large they have in mind. If they had, they would have quickly realized that history does *not* repeat itself except perhaps superficially. As Robert Jervis noted, "A too narrow conception of the past and a failure to appreciate the impact of changed circumstances result[s] in 'the tyranny of the past upon imagination.'"<sup>6</sup> The Romans and

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman*, p. 167

<sup>4</sup> Taleb, *The Black Swan*, p. 211

<sup>5</sup> Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense*, p. 82

<sup>6</sup> Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics*, p. 217-18

Carthaginians fought the three Punic Wars over a period of 120 years with none of the conflicts remotely similar to its predecessor. The causes and courses of World War II played out very differently than World War I. The list of non-repetitions is endless. Those who claim the next war America gets involved in will be “the next Vietnam” would be wise not to wager any substantial sum of money on this prediction. In fact, students hoping to discern the next historical pattern are not developing judgment; instead, they are looking in the answer section of the textbook.

Related to the “repeat of history” is the impulse to use history as a template. In this case, the practitioner acknowledges the course of current events differs from the past but hopes the techniques can be reused. In military circles, this manifests itself in a rigid adherence to doctrine developed from the last war. As an example, the desire to emulate Napoleon would plague militaries for almost a century. This lingering fascination is odd because it was the Corsican upstart who lost and spent his final days in exile on a stormy rock in the South Atlantic, not his victorious, but less illustrious foes. The “history as template” method is also the appeal of the “secrets of leadership” books mentioned above. If Lincoln’s approach towards his military leaders eventually brought him victory, then by implication one would be a fool not to do likewise. After all, he was Lincoln, and who is the humble student to question one of history’s great figures? Of course, the failure of “history as template” is that it overlooks this very base question: Did a particular figure succeed because of a particular trait or action or despite it? Seen in a less charitable and hagiographic light, Lincoln’s approach towards his generals could be interpreted as unwarranted interference in military affairs that actually reduced the effectiveness of the Union war effort.

A final misuse (or non-use to be more exact) of history that can impair the development of judgment is what the author C. S. Lewis referred to as “chronological snobbery” or “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”<sup>7</sup> If those who use history as either predictor or template pay excessive homage to the past, then the “chronological snob” sees himself as having risen above the archaic notions and practices of yesteryear, either from the superior wisdom or technology of the modern age. Featured prominently in the Senior Leadership Seminar, Field Marshal Douglas Haig was very much a chronology snob, with some biographers suggesting he saw history merely as confirmation of his own beliefs. His failure to alter tactics or truly consider the options available to the Germans during the First World War suggests an “uncritical acceptance” of his own convictions. More interesting, though, are those who decry Haig’s blindness, secure in the certainty that they would never be caught in a similar situation. The last person to recognize snobbery is the snob himself.

The use of history as a predictive tool, as template, or, worst of all, as self-justification actually works to undermine the development of judgment. Instead of acknowledging the murky, uncertain nature of history, the student instead tries to force clarity where none exists. At best, this can lead to misguided decision-making. At worst, it produces hubris.

### **The Indirectness of History**

With these rather muddying limitations in mind, the senior military leader, already hard-pressed for time, might then ask what good is history if it cannot be harnessed to a practical application such as prediction or template. Is history, as Taleb asserts, at “a level slightly above aesthetics and

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 200

entertainment, like butterfly or coin collecting”?<sup>8</sup> Or is there perhaps a more subtle, indirect use? Recognition that while good judgment has never been, and probably never will be, a virtue that lends itself to the mechanistic check-list approach so favored by modern militaries, it must somehow be developed and the ordinary passage of our lives is insufficient to do so to the depths required of a senior leader commanding disparate forces in exotic locales. As Slim reminds us, “Any man’s personal experience, however wide it may have been, is limited.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, current Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once quipped, “Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.”<sup>10</sup> Left unstated, however, is that we do not wish our admirals and generals to gain this empirical education at the expense of costly reverses on the battlefield. As the eminent military historian Sir Michael Howard rightly warned, “The appalling dictum of the lazy man, that the British Army loses all battles except the last, glosses over a vast quantity of misery and bloodshed, not least at the expense of Britain’s allies, and is not something to be particularly proud. If there were another conflict, the first battle might well be the last.”<sup>11</sup>

Let us first assert then that the study of history can assist in the processing of “forming and reforming” our judgment simply by improving our knowledge base. The world is a vast place and our lives are tragically short. As Howard observed, “If there are no wars in the present in which the professional soldier can learn his trade, he is almost compelled to study the wars of the past.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, a senior military leader’s understanding of the consequences of disastrous military defeat in a time of relative peace can only come vicariously from reading about events such as the encirclement at Cannae, the retreat from Moscow, or the panic of Anual. The only taste of irregular warfare may come from reading about British operations in the Transvaal or French campaigns in Algeria.

The knowledge acquired from the trials and tribulations of others improves our judgment foremost by providing us with moral and emotional ballast prior to events descending upon us in full force. As Neustadt and Mays point out, one does not wish to be like “a host of people who did not know any history to speak of and were unaware of suffering any lack, who thought the world was new and all its problems fresh [...] and that decisions in the public realm required only reason or emotion, as preferred.”<sup>13</sup> Even a brief study of history gives one more proof against the whipsaw of compelling arguments from competing and persuasive advocates, all asserting their alarm is the most pressing, their concerns unprecedented.

With a better understanding of history, most of the supposedly new ills of the modern age can be seen as just the latest episode in a story that goes back to the beginning of time. The leader that fears the supposedly ominous new interconnection of drug dealers with terrorist movements should consider that the British East India Company forced opium into China sparking several vicious wars. Think Afghanistan is bad today? Consider another British experience: Three wars over 80 years, a field army destroyed near Kabul, thousands dead and very little to show for it. Concerned with human migration? The Roman Republic, then Empire, spent centuries beating back waves of Gallic and Germanic tribal movements. Troubled by Somali pirates? As Plutarch relates, the great Julius Caesar himself was captured by pirates in the Mediterranean, though he had the great satisfaction of later hunting the miscreants down and executing them.

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<sup>8</sup> Taleb, p. 171

<sup>9</sup> Slim, “Higher Command in War”, p. 10

<sup>10</sup> Wilkerson, “Sprinting Through the Tape”, p. 28

<sup>11</sup> Howard, “Military Science in an Age of Peace”, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> Howard, “The Use and Abuse of Military History”, p. 13

<sup>13</sup> Neustadt & May, *Thinking in Time*, p. xi-xii

If anything, historical knowledge helps the leader take the proverbial deep breath. As Kipling put so eloquently in his poem *If*, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you [...] Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it.” History informs us how bad things can be and usually reminds us that things are not as bad as they seem. Conversely, a good historical sense can also provide one with the judgment to recognize the rare occasions when hitting the panic button is truly warranted.

The second avenue to improved judgment is to view history not as predictive but merely as cautionary. The story of the Maginot Line is well known: The French built an expensive line of fortifications to stop the traditional axis of German advance only to see the Germans use the new armored corps concept to outflank it and achieve in six weeks what it had failed to accomplish in four years of slaughter during the Great War. Typically lost in the criticism of France’s deplorable performance in 1940 is the fact that the Maginot Line did the job it was designed for quite well: forcing the Germans to find a new solution. The French failed to consider that the Germans would act differently once they had changed the rules of the game. History provides us with very good reminders of that age-old aphorism “the enemy has a vote” and a long tally of how those votes have been cast.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, is that history at its core is a study of human behavior or as Plutarch put it “not histories but lives”. Technology changes, tactics change, the great powers change, but human nature remains immutable. In antiquity Greeks would fight in a rectangular block of spear-armed heavy infantry known as the phalanx. It was well known that in combat the phalanx formation would always drift right as it approached the enemy. This drift occurred because individual soldiers would instinctively try to gain as much protection from the shield held by the man next to him on the right. What value does this lesson have today? Is there the possibility of a revival of the armored spearman? Will the Naval War College begin to offer electives in operational phalanx warfare? Of course not. But what is instructive is how the ancients tried to counter this human tendency by putting their most stalwart men on the right or designing their battle plans knowing their formations would not, could not, march straight ahead. A small example, but it is a clear reminder of the human element, where the greatest leadership lessons of history may be found. As such, it provides a powerful antidote to the “chronology snobbery” that takes us all unawares as we mistake technological progress for judgment and focus obsessively on material factors, ignoring the moral forces that Clausewitz insisted were “the spirit that permeates war as a whole.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

From the days of Plutarch in the Iron Age up to our own time in the Information Age, leaders have attempted to gain some sort of advantage from the lessons of history. In part, this interest is driven by the recognition that our own personal experiences are simply inadequate preparation for the myriad situations that may confront us on the battlefield or in diplomatic salons. For many a field commander, the first taste of battle often sadly proves to be the last and only as well. Given the high stakes but relatively infrequent nature of war, this desire to gain any edge in judgment is both understandable and laudatory.

Unfortunately, these eagerly sought-after historical insights typically prove illusory, contradictory, or impossible to quantify because history simply does not repeat despite popular aphorisms to the contrary. Nor does it distill down conveniently to a few handy points that lend

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<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 184



themselves to a PowerPoint presentation. Given these limitations, it is not surprising that the utility of history is frequently called into question, especially in this technophile era of computer spreadsheets, quantitative methods, and six-sigma processes. This perceived lack of usefulness can lead many into believing that what matters is today, and what happened yesterday is merely old news, swept away by shiny new gadgets that have changed everything. Yet it would be best to remember Antonio's caution in *The Tempest*: "Whereof what's past is prologue; what to come/In yours and my discharge."

Ultimately, leadership is not about technical expertise, statistical precision, or organizational ability. It is about the very human and very imprecise qualities contained within ourselves. Many of these traits like courage, intelligence, and daring are simply innate and not susceptible to alteration. For those qualities that can be further developed, it is incumbent upon those aspiring to senior command to do their utmost today in preparation for tomorrow. The future will bring the next enemies to confront and the next generation of weapons to fight them, but it is only in the past that we can forge our wisdom and judgment.