

Teaching War

Providing a Different Perspective to Engage and Challenge Your Students

By Dennis Showalter

The military experience of the United States is not merely a diminishing presence in education—it may be fading from the curriculum altogether. Educators at all levels often downplay this integral part of U.S. history for a variety of reasons. For example, they may dismiss war as primitive and irrational and the study of war as immoral, appealing to what literary critic Edmund Wilson called “patriotic gore” and philosopher J. Glenn Gray described as “lust of the eye.” Or they may simply view teaching war as legitimating xenophobia and male privilege and distorting the U.S.’s history by focusing affirmatively on its violent aspects.

To take such positions, though, is to ignore a strong pragmatic reason for including military history in the curriculum. Given that students are naturally attracted to the history of war and warfare for its action and narrative, and that we are in a time when apathy and alienation are of increasing concern to educators at all levels, a subject that engages interest should by no means be dismissed out of hand. In pedagogic terms, the spirited discussions that can develop around themes from the Civil War, World War II, or the Vietnam War facilitate the teacher’s functioning as “guide on the side.” And while interest in war is in no way gender-specific, disengaged boys, a growing concern in secondary education, are more likely to be drawn into participation by the chance to study that subject than by most other elements of the curriculum.

Beyond its appeal in the classroom, it should be made clear to students that war has indeed played a central role in the development of societies and in the formation and survival of states. It was certainly a part of prehistoric cultures and remains a dominant form of interaction among peoples and governments to this day. Consider, for instance, the role that war has played in intellectual life. Science, mathematics, philosophy—all have been shaped, at times defined, by their relationships to conflict. To deny this is not merely to rewrite history, but to

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reject it in favor of a version that, although kinder and gentler, is also totally imaginary—a corruption of education’s ethical and intellectual aspects alike. Military history, in other words, offers a viable perspective on the human condition, meriting consideration alongside cultural, religious, gender, and economic history. And it serves to remind us all of our personal stake in the survival of the United States.

“Good ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or very bad acts. All depends on the principles which direct them.”
—Napoleon Bonaparte

In order to cultivate the citizenship and community so essential to the nation’s well-being, it is imperative that one include an understanding of the United States’ military experience as well as its wars. At the basic level, this involves awareness of the unique, complex relationship of government, people, and armed forces under the U.S. Constitution, as well as a true grasp of the balance of powers, which is vital in a military context. The balance of powers has helped Congress to maintain civilian control of the military, has endowed the commander-in-chief with the powers to make war effectively, and has enabled the judicial system to step in if need be. Such a system is not self-sustaining; it requires the steady input of citizens who understand the relationship between United States military history and its civic institutions.

To understand this relationship is to understand that citizenship in a democracy is predicated on the general concept of a synergy of rights and responsibilities. Presenting military service as one of the focal points of citizenship in a democracy can help to bridge the enduringly vexing gap between the respective claims of individuals and communities. In war—the ultimate test of civic order—neither individual nor community is likely to survive without the other. And in an era of massive cross-cultural migration, the importance of service in arms is a time-tested, time-honored means of bonding newer citizens with older ones.

We must also remind ourselves that the United States was founded on a strong classical heritage. In Greco-Roman culture, which formed the root of our

present-day system of government, voluntary military service was understood as an essential aspect of citizenship—a key distinction between the citizen and the subject, with subjects serving under compulsion. In the U.S. form, service can be direct and voluntary, or structured through administrative systems like selective service. The fundamental link between service and citizenship nevertheless remains constant: a free people securing its rights by accepting the responsibility to defend those rights in arms.

The study of military history further contributes to citizenship by providing intellectual and informational matrices for addressing questions of national interest and security, questions essential to a citizenry. War is not going to vanish from the world in any calculable time frame, nor can the U.S. avoid conflict by sealing itself off politically or psychologically. Students correspondingly need to understand the causes and conduct of past wars—why the U.S. has asserted itself in arms, and how it has reacted.

At a different level, the inclusion of military history in the secondary curriculum also fosters links with life outside school in the form of media and entertainment. Series with military themes, like HBO's *Band of Brothers* and the History Channel's *Mail Call*, populate programming on television. Books and magazines on military subjects top the list of history publications marketed to the general public, and the majority of these are written in a dramatic, narrative form designed to engage readers. That is a quality not to be ignored—one that may even lure otherwise reluctant students into the terra incognita of a Borders or a Barnes & Noble as they seek to follow up issues raised in class. Such integration is valuable—one might say essential—to a democracy that cannot afford to see its educational systems become inward-looking.

Military history makes one final and important contribution in the classroom: it facilitates perspective. Fostering a complete and humble view of the United States' role in the world properly contextualizes the student's understanding not just of U.S. history, but also of its contemporary battles and wars.

It seems clear that the political and social systems of the U.S. depend fundamentally on an informed, committed citizen body—more so now, in an age of

global immigration, than ever before. The kind of civic identity that creates and sustains community requires cultivation. Cultivation begins with history, and history begins in the classroom.

The core value of *Essential Histories* is that each volume contextualizes the war it analyzes. The texts address the diplomacy that antedates campaigns and battles and the politics that accompany them. Douglas Meed's *The Mexican War* presents a clash between systems so different that their only common trait was courage. Charles Robinson's *The Plains Wars 1757–1900* is a tour de force analyzing the struggle for control of the Great Plains, from the first Spanish penetrations to the aftermath of Wounded Knee. In *The Wars of the Barbary Pirates*, Gregory Fremont-Barnes presents U.S. reaction to the seizure of its ships and men by highlighting the new nation's connections with Old Europe. On more familiar ground, Daniel Marston's *The American Revolution, 1776–1783* covers the operational side of the American Revolution in a way nicely complementing a course taught from a social/cultural perspective. Marston's *The French-Indian War 1754–1760* illuminates the complex interaction of European, Euro-American, and Native American cultural-political systems. Andrew Wiest's *The Vietnam War, 1965–1975* devotes no less attention to the multifaceted protest movement in the U.S. than to the air and ground wars in Indochina. The series volumes also incorporate wider cultural and social elements.

The current capstone of Osprey's contribution to the study of U.S. wars is *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land*, edited by Andrew Wiest and developed from his Vietnam War volume in the *Essential Histories* series. It includes fifteen chapters that, in three hundred pages, combine to provide the best overview of the war in print. Each chapter addresses an essential aspect of the war, and each is written by an acknowledged expert in that subject area. Able to stand as a main text, with collateral reading assigned to supplement it, *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land* conveys strategy and tactics, the Vietnamese civilian experience, the role of U.S. media and public opinion, and the experience of the South Vietnamese armed forces—all reinforced by Osprey's outstanding maps and graphics.

About the Writer

Dennis Showalter is a Professor of History at Colorado College and Past President of the Society for Military History. As Joint Editor of War in History, he specializes in comparative military history. His recent monographs include The Wars of Frederick the Great (London: Longman, 1996); Tannenberg: Clash of Empires (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2004), and Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century (New York: Berkeley, 2005).

Suggested Reading

In January 2001, Osprey Publishing issued the first volume of *Essential Histories*. Written by established historians and incorporating state-of-the-art maps and graphics, the books are aesthetically pleasing and limited to 96 pages (although multi-volume works on the Civil War and the two world wars are also available in larger bindings). They are a time-effective read that can be integrated into general courses without overbalancing their syllabi. Series editor Robert O'Neill, former professor of the history of war at Oxford University, writes, "Study them and gain a deeper understanding of war and a stronger basis for thinking about peace."

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by Carl Benn Osprey, TR, 978-1-84176-466-5, 96 pp., \$14.95

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