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Brookings Research Director Says Policy Makers Need to Know More History

By James Thornton Harris, features editor, *History News Network*

Michael E. O'Hanlon is the director of research in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, where he specializes in American national security policy. He also serves as an adjunct professor at Columbia, Georgetown and George Washington universities. He is the author of six books on U.S. defense policy and has just published a new book, *Military History for the Modern Strategist: America's Major Wars Since 1861*.

HNN spoke with O'Hanlon about the new book and why policy makers need to understand history.

Q. Your previous books have focused on specific defense and foreign policy issues (e.g. *Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*). This new book reads more like a conventional military history, albeit one with several lists of strategic recommendations for current policy makers. Why write a military history book now and who is your intended audience?

I will answer the question with equal parts enthusiasm and trepidation! I know I am wading into the territory of a professional discipline in which I have not been formally trained. I do not claim to be an historian.

However, I am a strategist and a defense analyst—and I know people like me need history to do our jobs. In fact, we need it more than many realize. Not just for the inspiration that great and courageous leaders of the past can provide us in current and future wars (though that is important). Not for simple analogies from one past conflict to a possible future one (because the clear analogies are usually difficult to establish).

Rather, we need history to help us understand the basic nature of war, and the patterns of war that recur over the centuries. Studying war in this way should humble us about our ability to control and contain it in the future. War is hell. War is unpredictable, difficult, dangerous—and usually (though not always) worse than its initiators expect when conflict begins. War has features that remain fairly similar from century to century, once you take a reflective perspective and look back on things.

The big, bold, new plans for rapid victory that military organizations tend to develop usually don't quite pan out. That fact should dissuade us from thinking that future war will somehow be different.

I want *everyone* to read this book, if it can be useful to them! But I am particularly hopeful of reaching people who may not have been trained in history, yet need to know it reasonably well in order to do their jobs properly. Graduates of policy schools and political science departments where this kind of material is usually *not* taught enough. Intelligence specialists. Foreign service officers. Congressmen and senators and their staffs. Military officers. Enlisted military personnel. Voters. Citizens. Yes, Chinese and Russian and Iranian counterparts. Other foreigners, friendly and otherwise—because I want America's potential adversaries to understand that war is hard, and unpredictable, too.

Q. The book begins with a review of the strategy and tactics of the U.S. Civil War. Why start with a conflict fought with horses and single-shot rifles? What lessons can we learn from this war which ended 160 years ago?

You make a good point, but the Civil War was effectively our first industrial-scale war. It led to mass mobilization at the human and economic/industrial levels. It also involved long-distance movements and communications, by train and telegraph, in ways that arguably make it the first modern war. It produced as many American casualties as all the rest of our wars combined, so can hardly be ignored in a book about major U.S. wars. It also illustrated warfare at the campaign or theater level of analysis perhaps more clearly and cleanly than any other conflict.

Q. Your book refers to our nation's historic "paradox of power." What is that and how is it manifested in the current tensions with Russia and China?

That term can mean many things. For me, we are at once the most powerful nation in the history of the human race, yet because of nuclear weapons, we are vulnerable to rapid destruction by foreign powers in a way we cannot prevent. That is a paradox. We also have lopsided advantages over most other countries (perhaps not China, but definitely Russia). Yet those advantages do not guarantee victory in war in the modern era (we struggled against the Vietcong, the Taliban, Iraqi insurgents and militias—the list goes on).

Q. You conclude that the Korean War was a military failure for the U.S. One of the reasons you cite was the "public insubordination" of General MacArthur, who wanted to use nuclear weapons against China, an act rejected by President Truman. Do you think this contentious situation, a "heroic" general, popular with the public, who quarrels openly with the President, could happen again?

First, to Korean War vets out there, thank you for your amazing contributions. I do not think they were in vain. The war concluded in a stalemate and that stalemate has, on balance, contributed to our success in the Cold War and thereafter. Today the Republic of Korea is among our most important allies and northeast Asia, while tense, remains prosperous and successful.

The main thing I would say about your specific question is that, yes of course it could happen again, but no, it won't happen with the current generation of American military officers. They

understand the Constitution and their own proper role in civil-military relations better than most of the rest of us. I am a fan of this generation of American military officers, with only very few exceptions.

Q. As the Ukraine War drags on and the costs of U.S. support rise, the Biden Administration has come under attack from several quarters as either having "a failed strategy" or no strategy at all. What are your thoughts on our current military support of Ukraine and do we have the resources to sustain it for the long-term?

First, yes of course we have the resources. Ukraine is costing us about $50 billion a year. We held an event at Brookings recently about the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; that conflict cost us at least $2 trillion over two decades, or at least $100 billion a year—for 20 years. So the burden of Ukraine is considerable but tolerable for a country with a GDP of $20+ trillion, a military budget of $858 billion, and important interests in not seeing Europe destabilized by a Russian military machine that consumes Ukraine and then looks for new victims. It is important to stop Moscow before anything like that could happen.

But at a broader level, we don't want this war to go on for 20 years of course, and by the time we get to summer, we will need to reassess where the conflict stands. It may be time to think creatively about strategies for negotiations at that time. It may not be realistic for Ukraine to get back all of the 17% of its territory that Russia holds as of this writing in March 2023. We should stand firmly with the Ukrainian people on the core matter of their survival as a nation and their desire to reclaim as much of their territory as possible. But that should not be a blank check for unlimited assistance indefinitely. Getting this nuanced strategy right will be crucial, and challenging. So far Biden has done a good job, but the hard part may still lie ahead.

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