

Chapter 1

Why This Stuff Is Important

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The U.S. military doesn't exist, as some people argue, "to kill people and break things." Quite simply, it exists *to provide security for the American people*. Sometimes that does indeed mean killing people and breaking things. Other times, it means precisely the opposite. In World War II, the armed forces, in order to protect America, had to destroy the enemy's armed forces in conventional combat. However, during the Cold War, the military's primary focus was to prevent a catastrophic World War III by maintaining peace rather than making war.

Basically, U.S. military history is the story of how we've maintained our security and how we can continue to do so in the future. That means military history actually affects your life.

Security is *the* basic necessity of life. Without security, nothing works. Security is sort of like your health. If you don't have your health, you're in deep trouble. If you do, then it's easy to take it for granted. Imagine, for just a moment, if your life were devoid of security. For the purpose of self-defense, your home would be a bunker, with no creature comforts, not even electricity or indoor plumbing because those things are the product of stable communities and foresighted engineering. With no police, firefighters, or soldiers, your main focus would be to protect your family from predators. There would be no supermarkets, no Starbucks, no local mall, and (gasp!) no bookstores. Instead, your existence would be governed by the law of the jungle. Not a pretty picture, is it? Sadly, conditions similar to these exist in far too much of the world.

But Americans are fortunate. We enjoy relatively peaceful, stable lives that come from our collective security as a country. We live in safe homes, drive on regulated, fairly well-maintained roads, shop at secure businesses, and work in safe, peaceful jobs. In truth, none of these blessings can exist without — you guessed it — security. And, for America, that security comes from the armed forces, which are made up of individual Americans.

One of the most fascinating aspects of U.S. military history is that it's largely the story of ordinary Americans in extraordinary circumstances. Perhaps that's why most of us are so moved by it. Plus, if you know military history, you know American history, because they're closely intertwined. You also begin to understand where security — our most basic necessity — actually comes from.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explain what U.S. military history is, how profoundly it has affected our country's development, and why it's important to your life.

Shaping a Country through War

Americans like to think of themselves as peace-loving people. To some extent, the characterization fits. Most Americans tend to think of war as unusual and quite undesirable, something to be avoided if at all possible. To them, peace is the norm, war is the aberration. Security is a given. Violence and chaos are only frightful exceptions to an otherwise orderly existence. Throughout American history, only a minority of Americans have ever fought in combat. All of this is obviously a good thing.

However, there is no question that war is a central theme in American history. War created this country, shaped it, and propelled it into world-power status. It is literally impossible to study American history without studying war. By my count — and this is a conservative estimate — Americans have fought and died in well over 100 wars since colonial times. Those wars ranged in size from small skirmishes against Native American tribes to World War II, the largest conflict of all time. Like it or not, American history is really something of a Jekyll-and-Hyde duality between the peaceful and warlike sides of America. For this reason, military issues relate to almost every aspect of the American story. And this story that loops from the past into the present touches you in more ways than you may be aware.

Reaping the sociological and political rewards of war

Military conflict has decided a large number of major issues in U.S. history. That's the essential paradox of America. A country founded on notions of representative government, peaceful compromise, tolerance, and universal human rights nonetheless resolved many of its conflicts through violence. Here's a brief list that demonstrates the momentous effect of wars on the development of the United States as a nation:

- ✓ The **Revolutionary War** (see Chapters 6 and 7) created an independent American republic. The **War of 1812** (see Chapter 9) solidified that independence and gave Americans permanent control of the Mississippi River. This led to massive economic growth.
- ✓ **Wars against Native Americans** (see Chapters 8 and 12) led to the precipitous decline of Indian cultures in this country. Those wars also expanded the United States across the continent, creating a coast-to-coast nation built around the Constitution.
- ✓ A **war with Mexico** (see Chapter 10), fought in 1846 and 1847, won control of the entire Southwest for the United States.
- ✓ The **Civil War** (see Chapter 11) destroyed slavery, propelled race to the forefront as a thorny American issue, and guaranteed that the United States would develop as a free-market, capitalist, multiethnic republic.
- ✓ The **Spanish-American War** (see Chapter 13) led to colonial commitments for America overseas.
- ✓ **World War I** (see Chapter 14) created widespread disillusionment with the idea of war itself. It also furthered the idea that Americans should remain aloof from world affairs. This notion, known as *isolationism*, still exists in American political thought.
- ✓ **World War II** (see Chapter 16) turned the United States into a world-leading power of immense proportions. It also sparked major changes in race relations, gender roles, economic growth, political norms, and lifestyles.
- ✓ The **Vietnam War** (see Chapter 19) proved the limits of American power. It caused many Americans to question the country's basic morality. The war also spawned massive social protest movements, the ripples of which we still feel today.

Remember that those are just a few examples, among many. Nor do they even take into account the military's considerable peacetime impact on the American people throughout the span of U.S. history. The main point I'm conveying is that modern America is, to a great extent, the product of its martial past.

Reaping the innovations of war

Many things you encounter in your daily life eventually relate to military history or security. Indeed, I would venture to say that nearly every product you use is dependent, in some way, upon military security. Here are just a few examples:

- ✔ **Automobiles:** Every American automaker during World War II converted from the production of civilian cars to vehicles with a military purpose, such as tanks, trucks, planes, and jeeps. The Jeep and the Hummer originally were exclusively military vehicles. Also, civilian cars are, of course, dependent on oil-based petroleum for fuel. The United States has fought wars in the oil-rich Middle East and maintains a major military presence there to safeguard the world's oil supply.
- ✔ **Cotton:** This crop is, obviously, useful for making comfortable clothes. In the early 19th century, the South's economic system was heavily dependent upon slave-based cotton production for foreign markets. This led to the growth of a slavery-centered economy, political system, and culture in the South that ultimately clashed with the North's industrial, free-market economy, helping lead to the Civil War. The impact of the Civil War's outcome has continued into the present with civil rights being extended to all ethnic groups. And those cotton khakis you love originated from military uniforms.
- ✔ **Penicillin:** This was the wonder drug of the mid-20th century. Penicillin was so effective in fighting infections that it led to a dramatic rise in the production of antibiotics. What does penicillin have to do with U.S. military history, you may ask? The drug was developed during World War II for American military forces. The war also led to other major advances in medicine, including improved prosthetic limbs, reconstructive plastic surgery, better psychiatric care, and a slew of new surgical techniques that doctors still employ.
- ✔ **Detroit:** The city started as a French trading post. British soldiers and American militiamen captured it from the French during the French and Indian War. Later, the British and their Native American allies took the city from the Americans in the War of 1812. The Americans subsequently took it back. It's been part of the U.S. ever since and was a driving force (pun intended) in automobile manufacturing in the U.S. And without Detroit as part of the U.S., would we have ever had the Motown sound?
- ✔ **Insecticide:** During the Vietnam War and in the Pacific Theatre in World War II, American soldiers were issued bottles of insecticide to ward off mosquitoes, ants, leeches, and other tropical insects. Vietnam-era soldiers greatly prized their bottles of "bug juice" in the country's insect-ridden environment. Today, with the threat of bird flu and other mosquito-borne diseases, bug repellent is just as important. It's also nice to have along on picnics!
- ✔ **Kid Rock:** What, you may ask, can this pop icon anti-hero possibly have to do with the military? Kid Rock travels overseas to play free concerts for American troops, as do other entertainers such as Jay Leno, Gary Sinise, and Toby Keith. The greatest troop entertainer of all time was Bob Hope, who traveled tens of thousands of miles over the course of many decades to brighten the morale of Americans in uniform. Chances are, your favorite singer or actor may entertain the troops, at military bases here in the U.S. or overseas.

Seeing the Value of Understanding the Past

You may be tempted to say, “Well, that’s interesting, but it’s all in the past. Why is this stuff important to me now?” It’s a good question, and it requires an equally good answer that I think can be summed up in a passage George Orwell wrote more than 50 years ago. “We sleep safe in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm.” This was true in Orwell’s time, and it’s certainly true now. Basically, it amounts to this: Without security, you have nothing; without an effective military, you have no security; without military history, you have no knowledge of what you must do to ensure your security.

History is not just about the past. It’s about the present and the future, too. You’ve probably heard the old cliché that “those who don’t learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.” This statement is trite and even a little condescending, but sometimes it’s actually true. Take, for example, the mistakes of American national security policymakers in the last half century. Since World War II, most American leaders have relied upon technology, air power, and sea power to fight America’s wars, at the expense of ground power. Yet, most of our modern wars have actually been fought and won on the ground. As a result, Americans have usually been ill-prepared for the wars they fought, from World War II through now. The waste in American blood and treasure has been nearly incalculable. So, yes, it’s a very good idea to learn from the past and apply it to the future.



We live in troubled, bloody times, and this is nothing new. The sad lesson of history is that human beings make war on one another. This has been true in most every culture, in every time period, and it’s certainly true today. Closing your eyes and wishing away humanity’s warlike tendencies won’t make them extinct. The stark reality is that your security and mine are dependent upon those who serve in the United States armed forces. They are the “rough” men — and now women — standing ready to do violence against anyone meaning to harm us.

Make no mistake. The United States has plenty of enemies who readily kill Americans when given half a chance to do so (see Chapter 2). It doesn’t matter whether you are a liberal Democrat, a conservative Republican, or anything in between. If you are an American, you are a target for a variety of enemies. Who keeps those enemies at bay so that we can enjoy secure, healthy lives? Those who serve in the U.S. military. They serve all over the world, on long deployments, in combat zones, far away from their families. They know the ache of loneliness and homesickness. They routinely risk their lives for us. In some cases, they lose their health or their lives in the line of duty. The least we can do is know what makes them tick. (Chapter 3 takes a look at who fights on our behalf, and Chapter 5 explains what they

face in war zones.) If you know military history, you begin to comprehend those who ensure your security and how they accomplish that mission. What can be more important than that?

Listening to American Military Historians Tell the Story

History is the true story of real people told by other people (*historians*) who happened to come along later in time. All good historians are storytellers. Military historians tell stories about soldiers in uniform, the conflicts they fight, and the ways in which humanity is affected by military issues. American military historians have a lot to talk about, from the story of colonial militiamen to the 21st-century, all-volunteer armed forces and everything in between. The American military past is so enormous that an army of historians (pun intended) could study it for decades and not even come close to covering everything important. But we do our best!

Reporting tomorrow's history today

One good way to appreciate the vastness of American military history is to pick up a copy of today's paper, keeping in mind that today's news stories are tomorrow's history. Take note of every story that has some sort of military angle or topic, from the latest Army Corps of Engineers river project to reports of battles. Chances are you've located a fair number of military-oriented stories in your paper. For each one of those military stories, several others didn't get published. That's a lot of stories, right? Now multiply all of those stories by the full length of recorded American history, roughly 150,000 days. That gives you a sense of the enormity of U.S. military history and the challenge historians face in telling that aspect of the American story. So those historians tend to concentrate on what they feel is most important. They also focus on topics that are well recorded because they must have good sources to do their work.

Working the military history beat

American military historians work in a variety of places. Some, like me, are academics who teach at the higher-education level. Many work for the armed forces as official historians or as professors in service-run professional schools. Others work for the National Park Service as battlefield guides, rangers, and consultants. Quite a few work in the popular sector as analysts, authors, military magazine editors, historians for battlefield tour companies, memorabilia collectors, or as producers, writers, and hosts of movies and TV

shows that cover military topics. Almost all American military historians *sub-specialize*. This means they develop expertise in one, or several, aspects of American military history. Here are just a few examples:

- ✓ Tom Fleming, although he has published books on nearly every time period in American military history, is best known for his excellent work on the American Revolution.
- ✓ Gary Gallagher and James McPherson are known as Civil War historians.
- ✓ Brian Linn is the foremost authority on the Philippine-American War.
- ✓ D'Ann Campbell is a leader in the field of American women and the military.
- ✓ Stephen Ambrose earned a reputation as the foremost chronicler of the American GI in World War II.
- ✓ Samuel Eliot Morison wrote the history of the United States Navy like no one else, before or since.
- ✓ Joseph Glatthaar is a pioneer in the study of African Americans in the military.
- ✓ Allan Millett is a leading authority on the history of the United States Marine Corps and also the Korean War.

So, as you can see, American military historians cover a wide variety of topics, practically everything from battles of the 19th century to the ways in which American education was affected by the growth of military bases.

U.S. military historians may study all sorts of different subjects, but most fit into one of two categories.



- ✓ *Traditionalists* tend to focus on generals, senior leaders, and the narration of great battles. They describe strategy, tactics, and the influence of powerful individuals on the outcome of history. This is generally known as a “top-down” approach to history.
- ✓ The other category, more prevalent from the 1960s onward, is known as the “new” military history. This is a somewhat silly, vague term that refers to a “bottom-up” approach that is roughly akin to social history. In other words, these socio-military historians are primarily interested in the impact military history had on ordinary individuals, whether common soldiers or civilians. They approach military history by asking “What was it actually like?” Thus, for instance, some of these “new” military historians write battle histories from the perspective of those who did the actual fighting, often relating the horrible realities of combat.

You may be wondering which kind of historian I am. Definitely the latter. Generals are important, but in the end, U.S. military history is made by the average American in uniform and the everyday civilian on the home front.

