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## **AN ABSTRACT APPROACH. RATIONAL NON-SENSE TO REPLACE HISTORICAL NONSENSE IN EDUCATING LEADERS**

### **Abstract**

*This research questions the value of empiricism and historical case studies in higher level officer education. It will instead emphasize the need and importance of a rationalist approach to knowledge. It will outline a tentative example of an abstract approach to case studies. By doing this the author seeks to enhance the education of abstract thinking – an art that is required from joint level and general staff officers.*

### **Keywords**

Empiricism, experience, case study, higher officer education.

*“History will teach us nothing” (Sting, 1987).*

## **Introduction**

Armed forces and military officers love history. We especially love stories of heroism, fierce battles and victorious wars. We read the biographies of great commanders and statesmen. We have been told how our fathers, grandfathers and founding fathers fought for their freedom and independence and stood up against evil. We pass on the national narratives in the books that we write and in educating our soldiers and officers. Lessons learned, case studies, and staff rides take us back to Basra, into the battle of Bulge and onto the beaches of Normandy. Students in defence colleges browse books and websites, prepare presentations and visit the fields, forests and fjords of glorious battlefields. What do we learn – or do we learn anything at all? Is this but ineffective military voyeurism and a waste of time that could be replaced by something more focused and relevant?

This intentionally more polemic than scientific article swims against the current and argues that emphasizing empiricism, heavy epistemic belief in historical examples and experience and the case study method is overvalued and does not necessarily serve our educational purposes. To do this I shall begin by discussing the value of history in military education and move on to the fallacies of case study methodology. I argue that historical case studies are biased, often impotent, and seldom necessary. Some of the arguments are familiar from the Cambridge School of History but the article does not claim to represent any particular Cambridgian or linguistic methodology. I will finish by introducing an alternative methodology that focuses on thinking but not details. I in particular claim that in teaching leadership, decision-making and operational art – what the case studies are to teach to officer students – an abstract approach often serves the written learning objectives better than the historical case study method.<sup>1i</sup> The article does not go against historiography or empiricism as such but against an uncritical and unstructured use of history and a disproportionate belief in the power of sense experience. Case studies that do not force us to think or teach us to question are but one case signifying this trend. The trend is surprisingly alive and kicking. The approach is, however, but an educational tool which does not offer any direct solution or answer to other practical problems.

## **‘Lessons Learned’**

The current operating environment is complex. Most of us probably agree that, although war has always been a complicated state of affairs, the current mix of national, international, local and global actors as well as the expansion of warfare from three dimensional to multilayered has increased this complexity. Our political and strategic leaders and field commanders have to be able to operate amongst a constant flow of information and disinformation and in an environment where Corporal is strategic and Colonel tactical and vice versa. Joint and general staff officer level curricula correctly refer to understanding complex issues, exercising flexibility of thought and action, and being able to introduce new ideas and concepts.

One of main reasons for teaching military history and employing case studies is to learn from history. History is expected to contain ageless wisdom and universal ideas and studying it is expected to reveal this. They are sought out

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<sup>1</sup> For case study methodology see e.g. Yin, 1994 or Stake, 1995

to guide us through the stormy waters. We write, read and teach history not to repeat the errors but the successes of the past – be they technical, tactical or political. To learn we need to be taught the lessons learned. This belief is anchored in empiricism that ties knowledge to experiences as well as to a behaviouristic view on learning. Empiricism claims that knowledge can be obtained only by sense experience. It denies intuitive, *a priori*, and deductive knowledge. In officer education exercises, simulation and studying previous wars and conflicts substitute the real sense-experience of war. The logic is nevertheless the same. Behaviourism, as known, is associated to Pavlov and B.F. Skinner who experimented with repetitive control mechanisms to reinforce the desired behaviour. (Markie, 2008; Zalta, 2008; Blackburn 2008) The drill sergeant in us loves repetition because it works for teaching and training simple technical skills. It is also an effective method for training dogs, doves, dolphins and other animals. “Again, again, again and once more!” By valuing experience and learned behaviour the lessons-learned school supports the hierarchy present in the military and academia. Cadets cannot understand complicated issues but colonels do nothing but. The armed forces value experience without asking themselves much about the value of this experience.

Strangely we also adhere to inductive logic. We hope history will reveal to us patterns of behaviour, reduce them gladly to certain principles of war and expect us and anticipate the enemy to follow them. The concentration of forces to the decisive point and battle, and the doctrine of hearts and minds are but two examples of the [questionable] historical lessons learned; the former from ‘Napoleonic warfare’, the latter mainly from the Malayan Emergency. Is this attitude commensurable with the doctrine of deception we who have read Sunzi so dearly want to emphasize? Doesn’t deception as well as the indirect approach actually deny the value of induction, principles of war and lessons learned if and when we need to do the unexpected the unexpected way?<sup>2</sup> The next swan could be pink instead of white, or not a bird at all.

The other main reason, often unwritten, for teaching military history is to cultivate politically and administratively desirable attitudes. Newly independent nations as well as greater powers unsure of themselves repeat their national mythology. Nations are built on common stories that differentiate between the good, the bad and the ugly. The armed forces and services want to tell both their recruits and political decision-makers how

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<sup>2</sup> A fine example of exploitation of empiricist belief is the deception operation *Bodyguard* in the Second World War that led the empiricist German intelligence to conclude that the allied landing would take place in Calais.

glorious the past has been. They seek to convince that success can be repeated if only we follow the example of historical icons – and the utmost necessary financial resources are allocated. But as the same evidence can make one look both war-monger and peace-loving, the message memory politics forwards needs to be simple and amplified.

In *On War* we find Clausewitz supporting the use of historical examples that “clarify everything”, particularly in the empirical sciences like the art of war. He distinguishes between four ways to use history, namely to explain, to show an application of an idea, to support a statement, and finally to deduce a doctrine. Clausewitz would not however be Clausewitz without being critical of the actual use of historical examples which are “seldom used to such good effect”. He is ruthless in his verdict: he asks how much referring to history is due to vanity and charlatanism and states that “one rarely finds any honesty of intention to instruct and convince” (Clausewitz, 1991, Zweites Buch, 6. Kapitel “Über Beispiele”). Jon Tetsuro Sumida (2008) credits Clausewitz for creating a method of re-enacting the psychological difficulties of decision-making with the intention of promoting intuition. As historical information is insufficient, authenticity is less important than these intellectually and psychologically stimulating narratives. This theoretical attitude enables us to take essential things into account that the empirical approach is unaware of.

Let’s take a look at three cases to see how history is used and what the examples teach us.

The U.S. Army Field Manual 6-22 *Army Leadership* is said to establish “leadership doctrine and fundamental principles” for all Army personnel. The Field Manual contains 24 short historical accounts and examples that recount what individual people and groups have done but also explain their [truly] exceptional behaviour. Leaders and role models from the technical to strategic level, from Colonel Chamberlain (Civil War) to SSG Perez (Afghanistan) to Congresswoman Rogers (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) to General Powell (Philippines), among others, are marched before our eyes. These examples effectively strengthen the FM’s main message of “agile, multiskilled” pentathlete leaders “who have strong moral character, broad knowledge, and keen intellect”. (Department of Army, Oct. 2006)

The Malayan Emergency is an illuminating example of the power of the lesson learned argument. Firstly, we commonly ask why the Americans *didn't learn* from the allegedly successful and peaceful British experience and *apply* those *lessons* to win the Vietnam War. Secondly, we emphasise the central role of the local population in counter insurgency and seek to apply the principles of hearts and minds and well as a comprehensive approach in Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to take a closer look at the hearts and minds discourse.

The hearts and minds argument presents a rather jolly but limited picture of the Malayan Emergency. The Emergency is also known of the “British My Lai”, killing of 24 unarmed plantation workers in Batang Kali in 1948. The over 545,000 tons of bombs dropped in 4,500 sorties, 500 British personnel, 1,300 Malayan police, 3,000 civilians and 6,700 insurgents killed, 34,000 people interned and defoliant sprayed witness of the kinetic aspect of the ‘emergency’. (*The Guardian*, April 9, 2011) The authoritative biography of the 1952-1954 commanding general, the later Field Marshall Gerald Templer tells how he had wandered in the shops, talk to the headman and listen with attention to complaints. But it also acknowledges that Templer, by his own words, “had to administer some fairly harsh treatment to some villages that were behaving badly”. The treatment included of destroying villages and forced resettlement of 400,000, mainly Chinese, people to the 500 so called “New Villages” as well as also occasional “milder forms of collective punishment”. Strict food control causing hunger played a large role, too, in taming the communists. (Cloake 1985; National Army Museum) The New Village concept, initiated by the previous commander General Harold Briggs and prioritized by Templer, was in fact a violent method to separate the guerrilla from the population and thus to reduce their base area and access to political and logistical support. Nori Katagiri (2011) points out that because the doctrine of hearts and minds requires the third party participation, the political objectives become compromised. The British approach delayed the political solution to the Malay conflict and their strategic success was paid by the promise to abandon the region.<sup>ii</sup> In fact the policing objective was gained but imperial desires were lost. Douglas Porch (2011) argues that hearts and minds has seldom been a recipe for lasting stability. He urges

the historians to “establish the factual record so that mythologized versions of the past”, i.e. the reading of British, French and American counter-insurgency campaigns, “are not offered as a formula for the future”. Porch goes to argue that the counter-insurgency is on the agenda not to win wars but to “pre-empt civilian control by cloaking an adventurous interventionist foreign policy in the uplifting guise of the ‘civilizing missions’”.

What are the lessons learned to be taken to Vietnam and to Afghanistan? The Rand Corporation published altogether five memorandums on the Emergency. The last memorandum on the hearts and minds sums up and credits mastery of jungle warfare, resettlement, intelligence and information campaign but also recognizes that Her Majesty’s Government Labour Party supported Malayan independency (Sunderland, 1964). We can read the way we wish political, operative, social, or informative success stories from these accounts. Maybe the Americans ultimately learned that the political and factual situation in Vietnam differed too much from Malaya, or maybe the use of defoliants was the lesson learned? (See also Van Buren 2011) Robert O. Tillman already in 1966 concluded that because of the few parallels it would be naïve and misleading to transfer the Malayan experiences to Vietnam (Tillman, 1966).

One of the most referenced case studies is Graham Allison’s groundbreaking study on decision-making. Hardly any study of either the Cuban missile crisis or political or corporate decision-making can leave Allison’s work untouched. The Cuban missile crisis provides the study with its historical setting, and Washington the institutional. We who read the *Essence of Decision* do not need to go through an extensive account of the crisis or the Kennedy administration. Nobody has to visit the Oval Office, the Rose Garden, Cuba or the Caribbean Sea to grasp the essentials of this case. The crux is that this particular case study is able to depart from its setting and present a universal claim. It formulates before us three ahistorical models of decision-making. (Allison & Zelikow, 1999) The relevance of the setting and findings can of course be questioned. We can for example ask how representative the American, white, Anglo-Saxon, Catholic-Protestant and male-dominated environment is. The super-power setting with its

delicate balance of terror was unique and cannot be experienced in small or medium enterprises or units. Allison's historical accuracy and the omission and emission of some historical facts have also been criticized (Houghton, 2000).

Following Clausewitz, the three above-mentioned examples can be seen to represent three partially overlapping ways of using historical evidence and cases. The historical references in the Field Manual are there to convince the readers. The cases do not forward any new claims or knowledge but underline what has already been stated. Within the field of military science and education such verification is considered necessary because the audience is empirically oriented and values experience over rational reasoning. Secondly, historical evidence is used as an essential element of the argument. As the 'hearts and minds' case shows, histories can therefore either support or counter-attack the existing body of knowledge. Thirdly, history is used to create new knowledge, understanding and a way of viewing the world. This can be achieved by revealing new facts and by offering new insights and interpretations. The latter often requires that the focus be shifted from the actual, empirical and contingent subject matter to general and theoretical.

The use and content of history are subject to criticism. The first critical observation is that even in the case of single individuals and single incidents we do not really know what happened, how it happened or why it happened. Was the described impact actually the result of the described individual or collective action, or were there any other intervening factors and actors that could have affected them as much, or even more? What was General Marshall's role in establishing the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps Congresswoman that Rogers pushed forward in Capitol Hill? What were her political and personal motives? What trade-offs were made in order to get the southern congressmen on board? Did the outcome reflect the desired intention? Would a similar organization have been founded anyway, because of the *de facto* need of labour based on the British example? We do not know because this case does not tell us.

The second critical observation is that we tend to see what we want to see. In the case of Iraq and Baghdad, should we emphasize and explain the (even meagre) success of security measures, hearts-and-minds, welfare enhancement, or jobs-for-the-locals programs? Perhaps sheer political bargaining had some role too. Every general has their story. (Cloud & Jaffe, 2009) Thirdly, we like to create coherent stories that support our biased or

otherwise limited understanding. We fill in the blanks with our prejudice, hindsight and personal wishes. Mongol warfare was seen to be manoeuvre-oriented because the First World was not and Japanese *Bushido* warrior ethics were emphasized to serve the Social Darwinian purposes of the Western observers. (Skinner, 2002; Porter, 2009) Finally, even the best of lessons learned might no longer be relevant in new and different situations.

Military historical case studies are often uncritical and authoritative accounts of the acceptable. Historians do not want to speculate but present the facts. We can also wonder about the purpose and meaning of historical examples and the actual argument they support. Was the 153 word-long example of WAAC put in the current Field Manual for institutional and gender-related purposes rather than for teaching about leadership? Are counter-insurgency strategy and related activities popular because they offer to the defence establishment an escape from civilian control, as Porch claims, in order to turn war from being a public to a private affair, and is the comprehensive approach favoured because it offers a way to suppress the civilian with military logic?

John Boehrer and Marty Linsky (1990) argue that cases move "much of the responsibility for learning from the teacher on to the student whose role, as a result, shifts away from passive absorption toward active construction".<sup>iii</sup> This pedagogical observation compares passive absorption to lecturing. It thus fails to recognize that active construction is not platform- but stimulus-dependant. It also fails take into consideration the epistemic limitations of historical case studies which can be summarized as follows:

- (i) Everything relevant that has affected the situation or decision-making will never be known.
- (ii) What is said to be known is always biased, contingent and often insufficient.
- (iii) The same conditions can never be repeated.
- (iv) There was and is always the possibility to choose and act differently.
- (v) Even in the unlikely case that everything is known, conditions are similar and the decision is similar, the outcome is likely to be different.

The above-mentioned examples show how biased insufficient and contingent historical case studies and even historical research can be. Historical lessons learned might be correct but irrelevant, they might not be correct at all, and



they seldom have any universal or lasting value. If even the most thorough research can and should be questioned, we should not rely on the brief and simplified accounts the cases offer. They can foster some desirable attitudes, no question about that. But, most importantly, how can such a fixed and empiricist approach teach future leaders to become creative and critical or innovative and adaptive leaders, commanders and strategists? We rightly set high demands for our future comprehensive leaders. Otherwise they would not be able to face the unknown unknowns.

The U.S. Army Field Manual FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* that draws heavily from the historical examples of Malaya, Algeria, and Vietnam and advocates for the lessons learned system of the U.S. military at the same time recognizes this system's limits. It states that the non-military aspects of counterinsurgency "do not lend themselves to rapid tactical learning". (Department of Army, Dec. 2006) By referring to *rapid tactical learning* it implicitly acknowledges that operative, strategic and political-level leaders and learning require something more.

## **An Abstract Approach to Educating Thinking**

Robert Yin (1994) has presented a case study design that comprises of the components of defining the research problem and questions, study propositions and its units of analysis as well as linking the data to propositions and defining the criteria for interpreting the findings.<sup>iv</sup> Although Yin focuses on case study research and does not cover the use of case studies in education, he nevertheless offers two important insights. Firstly, teaching case studies need not be concerned with the rigorous and fair presentation of empirical data. Secondly, Yin reminds us of the role of theory in case studies. He emphasizes that theory development before data collection differentiates case studies from "related methods such as ethnography and 'grounded theory'". Yin warns students to move on quickly to collecting data without proper specification of theoretical propositions.<sup>v</sup>

In the following I shall depart from Yin's ideas and argue that (i) for a teaching case study empirical or an extensive amount of data is not necessary, and (ii) the role of theory is essential for a teaching case study too. The claims seek to promote the epistemic value of the case and observations by reducing the unfair, loose and contingent elements and replacing them with the abstract and theoretical. All choices and theories are similarly biased and contingent -

there is no Archimedean point - but these theories, generalizations or assumptions are assumed to have more durable value. In fact, using abstract settings to teach abstract thinking follows the logic of the empiricist approach! The content and subject matter are however theoretical and not empirical or contingent.

Contrary to the default empiricism of case studies, the approach in question prefers reason. I support the core of the rationalistic claim that we can acquire knowledge *a priori* and without sense experience by intuition, as well as by deduction from intuitive propositions. I will not, however, enter the realm of strong rationalism and claim that knowledge gained by intuition and deduction or knowledge that we have innately is (necessarily) superior to any knowledge gained by sense experience. (Markie, 2008)

The existence of intuition is generally accepted but its nature and value is debated. The epistemic value of intuition is, for the purposes of this paper, the main issue. Here we come back to the empiricist – rationalist debate. Even when admitting the existence of metaphysical truths, empiricists do not believe that they are knowable by intuitive but by empirical means. Intuition can then at best be said to be an educated hunch. On the other hand it looks feasible that we might have reliable intuitive-based knowledge on the mental subject matter, especially about the meaning of words and concepts. Intuitions, which also Clausewitz valued, can also be treated as causal or constitutive elements of beliefs or truths. By acknowledging the epistemic role of intuition either as evidence or belief, or even as a linguistic pattern, we broaden the epistemic ground of our knowledge-judgement nexus.

The following offers an example of an abstract approach to teaching critical and creative thinking as well as joint level students' understanding of subject matter. Here, empirical values are reduced to a minimum and knowledge is expected to be acquired by deduction and intuition. Deduction can and will be partially based on the experiences of the students but the abstract setting forces them to generalize and ultimately test their findings.

The setting for an abstract approach could be as follows. An organization (O) contains *inter alia* a sub-unit ( $a_1$ ) which has the task of performing ( $b_1$ ) in order to achieve ( $c_1$ ). The following formula illustrates the setting.

$$O \longrightarrow a_1 : b_1 \longrightarrow c_1$$

### Example 1: Leadership: A Leader's role

The purpose is to widen the understanding of the roles, duties and tasks of the leader of a sub-unit. The students (of a defence college) are assigned to be leaders of the sub-unit ( $a_1$ ). Their task is to describe, explain and discuss the duties of a leader. They are encouraged to use leadership theories, job descriptions and their own experiences as leaders and followers, as well as intuition, to come up with a list of abstract statements describing a leader's duties.

A simple set of statements could look like this:

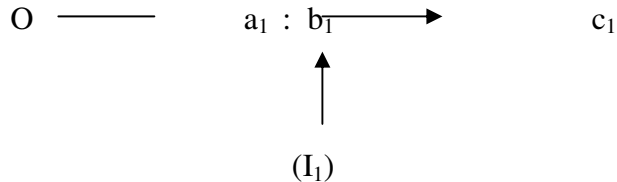
“The leader of the sub-unit ( $a_1$ ) has to

- (i) maintain that  $\text{input} \geq \text{output}$ , or the balance at least 1.0
- (ii) constantly evaluate the relationships ( $b_1$ ) .. ( $c_1$ ) as well as ( $a_1$ ) .. ( $c_1$ ) to redesign it if and when necessary
- (iii) develop ( $a_1$ ) to ( $a_{2..n}$ ) in order to meet the requirements.”

This abstract setting allows the students to see the forest from the trees. They recognize some common aspects of leadership regardless of service, level or nation. At minimum, the aspects can be appropriated and utilized in staff or other exercises. This allows the students not only to exercise leadership but also reflect on their skills, attitudes and behaviour and evaluate the value of their statements. For example, when the balance and the margins between the input and output are identified they could be discussed in financial, manning and material terms. We could then ask under what circumstances can we accept a balance that is less than 1.0? The students could also be asked in the second or third round to apply threat-, platform- or capability-based approaches to outline their answers. The purpose then could be to deepen the understanding of different approaches to defence planning. By adding such theoretical propositions, a simple task (here a setting consisting of four letters, one line and one arrow) can be expanded to cover theoretical, strategic and national level questions. The problem also develops basic abstract and logical thinking.

### Example 2: Decision-making during a mission

Here the primary purpose is to further develop logical reasoning and argumentation and the secondary purpose is to understand the factors that affect sub-unit decision-making. The setting is the same, but an incident ( $I_1$ ) takes place.



The students' task is to describe and discuss alternative decisions the leader of the sub-unit might make and why. They are encouraged to use their intuition and theory of war as well as their tactical and operative knowledge and experiences to draw up a set of abstract statements describing the leader's decisions and reasoning.

In this simple but often repetitive situation a set of statements (alternatives) could look like this:

- (i) "if ( $I_1$ ) jeopardizes the execution of the task ( $b_1$ ) then ( $a_1$ ) has to solve or negotiate it
- (ii) if ( $I_1$ ) does not jeopardize the execution of the task ( $b_1$ ) then ( $a_1$ ) can observe the situation
- (iii) if ( $I_1$ ) does not jeopardize the execution of the task ( $b_1$ ) but is critical for the overall aim ( $c_1$ ) then ( $a_1$ ) without threatening its task ( $b_1$ ) has to take care of it
- (iv) if ( $I_1$ ) does not jeopardize the execution of the task ( $b_1$ ) but is critical for the overall aim ( $c_1$ ) and ( $a_1$ ) cannot take care of it without threatening its task ( $b_1$ ) then the responsibility of the decision-making and solving the issue lies with the commander of the organization (O)."

Formulating these statements would have helped the students to elaborate on and understand the relationship between the task and the unit, the leader and the commander and the concept of responsibility. A property-rich environment

of the actual (historical) cases could have blurred their vision.<sup>3</sup> In the second round we can add qualitative propositions such as time or location. The third round could include propositions from different approaches to operations ranging from attrition to manoeuvre warfare or the ethical dilemmas of joint operations. Designing those propositions is a worthy task in its own right.

Abstract settings can be used for thought experiments and to test our theoretical and practical assumptions. By adding such additional actors as sub- or neighbouring units, local and global population, playing with factors like time and space, and gradually even giving some additional value-laden aspects like size, scale and seriousness, this pure mode of thinking and reasoning can be made more demanding. It all depends on the desired question and propositions which need to follow the desired learning objectives. The realm of game theory is not far away but it is not necessary to delve into it. The next example shows how an abstract case can develop critical thinking and test our assumptions.

### **Example 3: The notion of centre of gravity**

The primary purpose is to develop critical thinking by testing a theoretical assumption. The secondary purpose is to develop understanding of one of the central concepts in military theory. We now assume, as some do, that the centre of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*) is the main strength of the enemy (e.g. Strange & Iron).<sup>vi</sup> It is the biggest hammer that makes the most effective strikes. We can measure and rank our own and enemy forces by their size, equipment, training, morale, experience or by some other relevant factor. For the sake of argument, here we rank the three enemy formations (N), (C), (S) in a scale from 1 to 10 where 10 is the best possible score.

If the enemy unit (N) receives the value of 6.0, (C) 7.1, and (S) 6.2, then by definition the centre of gravity is the enemy unit (C). In fact, Clausewitz wrote that the centre of gravity is found or situated, “*wo die meiste Masse beisammen ist*” (Clausewitz, 1991, Buch 6: 27. Kapitel), where the greatest mass is concentrated, and not that the greatest mass is the *Schwerpunkt*, but we now follow the popular definition and thus concentrate our efforts accordingly against (C). Now we can start to test how plausible this assumption is.

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<sup>3</sup> The presented statements resemble the five strategic models General André Beaufre (1965) formulated in his *Introduction to strategy*. Beaufre based his theoretical arguments on his life-long experience of wars (the Second World War, Suez, and Algeria) as well as on his service in strategic level assignments. The models are however not coherently ordered.

If, within a timeframe ( $t_1..t_n$ ), we reduce the strength of the enemy to (N) 5.5, (C) 5.1, and (S) 5.7, would this mean that the centre of gravity had at some unspecified moment shifted to (S), which at ( $t_n$ ) scored best? Further on, if we accept that the evaluated strength of the enemy units varies, as they do, we then also need to agree that the units at ( $t_x$ ) can receive exactly the same value, say 5.0. Following the above definition, the centre of gravity now seems to have evaporated. How should we plan and operate in this situation?

	<u>N</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>S</u>	
$t_1$	6.0	7.1	6.2	Centre of Gravity: C
$t_n$	5.5	5.1	5.7	Centre of Gravity: S
$t_x$	5.0	5.0	5.0	Centre of Gravity: nil

The point here is that an abstract thought experience was able to reveal an implicit weakness in the theoretical assumption, which in a historical flesh-and-blood case study might have not been detected. Thus the definition in question does not seem to serve the planning purposes it is intended to serve. One can then return to and test the other alternatives like NATO or John Boyd's definition, or read Clausewitz once again. Perhaps the centre of gravity is something more holistic, organic and qualitative than a hammer.

## Conclusion

If we want to focus on leadership and operational art and the ability to think about and master complex issues in education and teaching, let us do so. Let us not limit ourselves to tactical, technical or contingent questions or even operative and strategic level experiences. It is especially important for higher level leaders that their analytical capabilities and their ability of critical and independent judgement be developed. Empiricist approaches that rely on the power of example and sense experience do not fully foster this. The link between knowing history and mastering the present might not even exist.

Empirical knowledge is often and by definition contingent. Historical case studies promise much but are often too loose, too narrow and subject to too many interpretations. They are useful if and when they are well designed and thoroughly examined. This paradoxically requires that the uncritical elements like contingent details and chronological story telling that many historians love be put aside, and that the theoretical aspects and considerations they

usually do not value be lifted up. It also requires the unhistorical elements of play and variations to be taken on board.

One way forward is to design abstract examples which penetrate right to the essence of the discipline. Whilst constantly changing and *reinventable* actual events are never real, such pure events are real but not existing. The difference between the actual/empirical and pure/abstract is here as essential as in the dualistic dimensions of Clausewitz (Paret 1989; Echevarria 2009) and Deleuze (Patton 2010; Deleuze & Guattari, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Abstract settings free the students from endless discussions on the empirical parameters of, for example, equipment, performance and physical conditions, or the rules of engagement. They need to be taken into account and tackled in education, in tactical teaching, war games, command post and live exercises, and in actual operations.

In order to conduct thought exercises and experiments, both the educators and learners must be familiar with the theoretical foundations of their subjects. At the higher officer education level this should be the case. Without proper theoretical and, ironically, empirical foundation the abstract would become artificial. It thus seems feasible that abstract exercises could take place during and after military theoretical education and before conventional staff or field exercises. This view finds support in schema theory which emphasizes the foundational role general knowledge has in establishing new understanding (Anderson, 1977).<sup>vii</sup> The real and pure events of the abstract cases function as schemata for new knowledge.

We should, however, always remember that any abstract statement should not be treated as law, nor even as a principle of war, but as a point of departure from which to develop thinking and the understanding of the nature of leadership and operational art. The content of a single statement might or might not be valuable but the process of formulating it always is.

Let us use history to remind ourselves of the ordinary people, servicemen and women, soldiers and civilians, doing extraordinary deeds in extraordinary conditions. History is fascinating, horrifying and interesting. It can make the present more understandable; it gives us clues about why we are here and

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<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz can be said to have argued by parallel lines of inquiry, the one being logical and conceptual and the other empirical and material. Especially within the logical line he played with dualisms that for him served more as fundamental points-of-departure and methods of its own right than part of dialectic methodology.

where we have come from. It hardly tells where we are going. Let us use abstract, thematically and theoretically designed case studies to teach us the art of critical thinking, to enhance our methodological skills and to widen, deepen and test our expertise on subject matter. The above-mentioned technique of posing *what if* questions and seeking *if then* and *why* answers in an abstract setting could help us to reach the qualitative learning objectives we have. We need to move from the trees to the forest. Let us also hope not to repeat the fallacies of empty narratives, cherry-picking and uncritical mythologies too many case studies and memory politics are full of.

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