



# The Relevance of a Pragmatic Approach to History in the Training of American Logisticians

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

"That if I go even further, and among these diverse traits I look for the main one and the one that can summarize almost all the others, I discover that in most operations of the mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his reason".

Alexis de Tocqueville, "of Democracy in America".

Since the middle of the 19th century, the French armies have been working to develop doctrines based on the Over time, they have debated for each theory its positivist rather than Popperian degree, or its more or less heuristic dimension[1]. 1] On the other side of the Atlantic, faithful to the Cartesianism that has characterized them since their origins,[2] the United States testifies that the conceptualization of history is not the only way to draw lessons from events that will be useful to future military leaders. Also, while Michel Fabre makes this observation in the field of education, that today "America is returning the Cartesian gift to us, but this time adorned with the more modest clothes of pragmatism". 3], it seems appropriate to ask ourselves if the simple relationship between the American army and history is not, all things considered, one of the most virtuous. As a trainee of the 6th class of the Theater Logistics Studies Program [4] (T-LOG) at the US Army Logistics University (ALU), I was able to observe how this institution makes use of its extensive experience in the field of logistics history to enrich one of its courses, while carefully avoiding speculative scholarship. After presenting the place of military history in the training and then illustrating the type of content, I will examine how the option of a pragmatic approach to this discipline can be highly relevant for officers in charge of logistics planning.

## The "weight" of history

Within the ULA, military history is an essential component of training. In the T-LOG, each day, trainees are required to read a large number of articles and other excerpts from historical works and then to return the next day with the lessons learned. In addition, throughout the course, the timetable is punctuated by multiple lectures and visits to

historical sites (staff rides and battlefield tours). Curiously, despite the large amount of time devoted to it, history never proves to be boring. Indeed, by mastering the art of delivering information in an attractive way by usefully diversifying the teaching aids, by willingly instituting informal discussions and by staging the visits, the teachers even manage to raise military history to the rank of the trainees' favourite discipline.

Among the multitude of conflicts covered, the American Revolutionary War is the focus of particular attention. There are several explanations for this: While one cannot exclude that of fervent patriotism, nor that resulting from the location of the school in Virginia, the cradle of the homeland, it is undeniable that the school was not located in the United States. It is undeniable that it is primarily for its intrinsic interest that this founding episode was developed into a military school. There is nothing absurd about using the lessons learned from an ancient conflict to form the most modern army in the world, when these lessons fully meet the qualities of comprehensibility with which the best illustrations are forged. The War of Independence is full of expressive situations, anecdotes and strong symbols which, independently of any doctrine, help to underline the decisive impact of unfailing logistical support.

### **George Washington, father of the nation... and the privatization of support**

The pragmatic use of history conveniently provides, first of all, irrefutable legitimacy to ideas. For example, when questioning the merits of outsourcing military action and avoiding having to spend too much time on "the special stakes and risks", the pragmatic use of history provides, in a convenient way, an irrefutable legitimacy to ideas.<sup>5]</sup> the narrative of the father of the nation's resounding victory over Lord Cornwallis in the 18th century comes at just the right moment. Everyone can recognize the decisive role played by private individuals and private organizations (contractors), to whom General Washington had entrusted General Washington had confidently entrusted the supply of supplies to the continental army in a 700-kilometre race against the clock between New York and Yorktown. In terms of persuading American officers of the virtues of outsourcing, Washington's experience is proving to be a more convincing ally than Williamson and Wilson's theories.

Served raw, military history also feeds an inexhaustible source of practical precepts and behavioural lessons. For example, General James Mease's account of the unconsciousness of General James Mease, chosen to illustrate the need to provide the combatant with suitable clothing but, above all, to remind us of the demand for responsiveness expected of a decision-maker. The frightening "bureaucratism"<sup>[6]</sup> that this character demonstrated in 1778, when the continental army ordered 500 coats to face the winter, led to the death of many soldiers due to exposure to the cold. Given the American appetite for the factual, it is not surprising that the celebrity of military leaders is more the result of their quotes or character traits than of their theories. Illustrating rather than theorizing.

### **The relevance of historical pragmatism to planning**

To what does the U.S. military owe such a commitment to the real world? Probably not to a pronounced taste for the prosaic. Rather, it would be tempting to answer: to the special relationship that the American system of thought has with pragmatism, that quasi-philosophical attitude that what really works is regarded as true. Also, although it is aware that there are rarely solutions that can be directly transposed from one scenario to

another, the American military institution is particularly fond of the study of events from the past because they are a rich source of inspiration. Moreover, it believes that the clarity of real-life accounts, which are considered worthy of memory and free of dogmatism, have the great advantage of making a lasting impression by promoting awareness and memory.

Behind its apparent simplicity, the raw story would therefore conceal many virtues. For the followers of pragmatism, the refusal to theorize would first of all make it possible to limit the excesses of a misinterpretation of the facts. This is Charles Sander Peirce's idea when he assimilates the doctrine, whose partisans "struggle desperately in a chaos of ideas", to "falsification" [7]. The other merit of the pragmatic use of history in armies would be to encourage adaptation and innovation among planners. These qualities are all the more precious in an unstable environment where the leader's faculty of appreciation still prevails over mathematical rationalization. Also, although it is based in the field of logistics on the principles of Lean management and Six Sigma and is very well adapted to the most learned metrics, the Military Decision Making Process recognizes the essential role of "common sense" in the process. 8] in decision making, by urging each officer involved during the conception of the different scenarios (courses of action), to show discernment based on his own knowledge, especially historical, and personal experience (background). Considering that there is not one, but an infinity of good solutions, it is then advisable, throughout the process, never to lock the individual into a restricted field of ideas. Pragmatic recourse to history thus takes on its full meaning when the individual is asked to think for himself.

### **Pragmatism, a useful attitude as long as it remains modest**

In conclusion, the US Army endorses the use of pragmatic reasoning based on simple historical facts by its logistic planners. Is this an irreproachable pedagogical revolution in the teaching of military history? Not so sure, because there is a real risk of falling into an excessive pragmatism which would prove even more rigid and "falsifying" than doctrine, that of trying to draw conclusions from isolated facts with a view to general application. Moreover, within T-LOG, this threat is perfectly identified: The first days of the course are entirely devoted to the development of critical thinking, aimed at inculcating in the trainees the art of detecting pitfalls in reasoning, such as precisely that of not making the exception the rule.

1] Michel Goya, "L'emploi de l'Histoire dans le processus d'évolution des armées", "Res Militaris: de l'emploi des forces armées au XXIème siècle", Economica, 2010, pp. 3-9.

2] "America is therefore one of the countries in the world where one studies the least and follows Descartes' precepts the best. (...) Americans do not read Descartes' works because their social state diverts them from speculative studies, and they follow his maxims because that same social state naturally disposes their minds to adopt them. Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America II", Garnier-Flammarion, 1981, pp. 9-10.

3] Michel FABRE (Director of the Centre de Recherche en Education de Nantes), editorial in the CREN Review, No. 5 "Education and pragmatism", June 2008, p. 6.

4] Session 09-002 from July to December 2009. T-LOG trains officers from all US and allied armies to serve primarily in theatre logistics headquarters. T-LOG provides theoretical and practical instruction in the design and implementation of joint theatre logistics maneuvering in a potentially multinational context.

5] Read Didier Danet "Iraq war and public-private partnerships: controversial public-private partnerships", Revue française d'administration publique, n° 130, 2009, pp. 249-262. The author identifies the modes of governance induced by the outsourcing of regalian activities. He draws in particular on the work of Oliver Eaton Williamson (winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics) and

James Wilson to underline the need for "probity" in relations between public authorities and society. It draws on the work of Oliver Eaton Williamson (winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics) and James Wilson to highlight the need for "probity" in relations between public authorities and private military companies, a quality that is symptomatic of structures where the application of rules, the clarity of the hierarchical system and the spirit of service prevail.

6) Mease, a steward and candidate for Congress, insisted that only an official manufacturer should be allowed to process the order, regardless of the urgency of the situation. He then went away for a long time, and when he returned he refused to accept the order that had arrived in the meantime on the grounds that the gold color of the buttons did not match the silver color assigned to a Pennsylvania regiment. Read James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, "matter of buttons", The logistics of war, Air Force Logistics Management Agency, August 2000, p. 12.

7) Charles Sanders Peirce, founder of the pragmatic current in the United States, "La logique de la science", La revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger, 1879.

8) "Ability to distinguish the true from the false, to act reasonably", Petit Larousse.

Commissioner under contract promoted career officer by competitive examination, Commissioner Commandant LEBRETON was administrative and financial director of the 2nd<sup>foreign</sup> parachute regiment from 2003 to 2007. Holder of two masters 2 in the fields of public administration and management control, he is today a trainee of the 83rd promotion of the higher<sup>course of</sup> the commissariat of the army. In 2009, he attended the U.S. Logistics University's "Theater Logistics Program", which awarded him the distinction of "Honor Graduate".

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