

# Seeing War as We Want It to Be: An Obstacle to Learning the Right Lessons?

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## Introduction for Lessons Learned

So let us begin today with a very important question: why are militaries capable of extracting the right lessons from their experience at times and incapable of doing so in other circumstances? That is great problem, so great that I doubt there is any single answer. This is something best approached on a case by case basis. I would, however, like to offer a theory that I believe helps us to understand the historical problem of learning from experience, and may have some applicability in the present as well.

Actually, my conclusion, which I have reached through a considerable effort of comparative history, can be reduced to a fairly simple and direct statement – societies and militaries have a strong tendency to see things the way they want to see them, and this may or may not reflect the way things really are. This happens not because people, or militaries, are dull. It happens because perception is necessarily going to be a product of preconception as well as of actual observation. I choose to express this in the language of cultural history, but it is a conclusion that, once understood, has a certain weight of common sense behind it as well.

The theory I propose today comes out of a book I have recently published, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, as an attempt to pursue

the history of warfare from the perspective of cultural history.<sup>1</sup> Please to not confuse my approach with that of Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, which is a very different kind of work.<sup>2</sup> My volume covers the ancient world to the present, with separate chapters on ancient Greece, ancient China and South Asia, medieval Europe, early modern Europe, eighteenth-century India, nineteenth century Europe, the U.S. Japan Pacific War, the 1973 October War, and Terrorism. In the process of studying these individual cases, I believe I came to see some general processes at work, and I expressed those observations in a model.

Let us begin by looking at that model. After this, we will consider how the model works in understanding the military history of a particular era, in this case the late Middle Ages in Europe, from about 1000-1500. Next, I would like to suggest how it may help us understand the complexities and difficulties of seeing things as they really are. My case here also is medieval, the Hundred Years' War. Finally, we will examine an intelligent and brave case of learning lessons from defeat in the more recent past by examining Egyptian plans for their cross canal operation at the start of the October War in 1973. This last study demonstrates that regardless of the problems that make learning difficult, we can learn from past experience successfully. We can, as they say today in the U.S., think outside the box.

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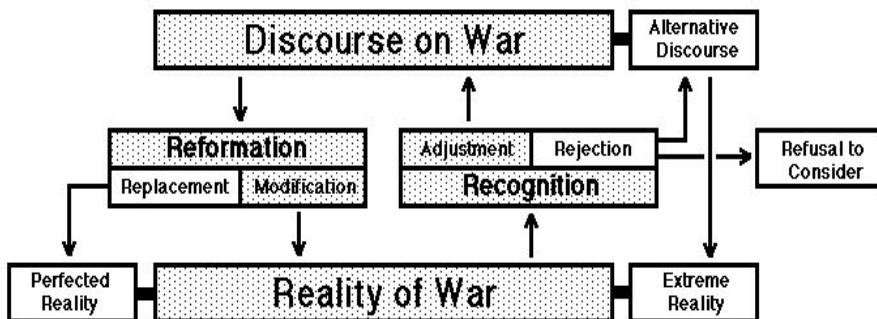
<sup>1</sup> John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: 2001).

## The Model

In *Battle*, I pursue a cultural approach by examining the relationship between the reality of war and what historians would call “the discourse of war.” To clarify my argument I present my model as a diagram, but do not be too concerned with the complexity of the labels and lines on the diagram. The main points are not difficult to grasp.

We begin by differentiating between the Reality of War and the way in which a culture conceives of war. These seem destined to be quite different, the one not matching the other. I have found it convenient to borrow a term from cultural history, “Discourse,” for the conceptual pole of the model. Here, “Discourse” includes the assumptions, perceptions, expectations, and values on a particular subject, in this case war. It is also necessary to point out that a single society can harbor several discourses on war that vary by class, gender, and profession – the last an important differentiation with the emergence of a professional military. Thus aristocrats might think of war very differently than did peasants, men than did women, and career soldiers than did civilians.



Societies and subdivisions of societies, professional militaries, for example, try to Reform reality to more nearly resemble conceptions of how

war *should* be. Thus, cultures Modify war by imposing conventions and laws on the conduct of war. Such limitations and restrictions lay at the very foundation of Western military history; one can hardly imagine a form of combat more defined by conventions than that practiced by the ancient Greeks who hemmed in their battle practice with agreements as to the place and timing of battle and concerning the armaments used, etc. Later ages may have had less intrusive agreements, but they have still accepted conditions on the taking and handling of prisoners, treatment of non-combatants, use of certain kinds of weapons, and other practical matters of war. In the other direction, reality can impose itself upon discourse, as a culture Recognizes that there is a discordance and Adjusts discourse to better accord with reality, if for no other reason than survival. So the heroic ideals of warfare as Europe spiraled toward World War I had to give way to much grimmer notions to cope with the reality of the trenches.

Forget about the special language for a minute and we have a basic feedback loop between discourse and reality, and this feedback most interests me. Discourse influences reality which in turn helps to shape discourse. However, its operation is not always a simple matter of what I have called Modification and Adjustment.

Two categories of more complex feedback pose particular challenges to societies and militaries. If a great gap separates the ideal from the real, and if reality cannot be modified to match conception, then a society might very well Replace actual warfare, with an artificial and highly ritualized form of military behavior, a Perfected Reality, that better matches the discourse on war. Such a perfected version of reality could take the form of

a kind of mock combat, such as the medieval tournament, or the less war-like, but more deadly, practice of dueling. Such a Perfected Reality can Replace or simply supplement Reality.

Looking at the other side of my model, if the actual practice of combat fundamentally clashes with a society's definitions of war or the warrior and, consequently, cannot be accepted as war, then a society might Reject it as such and create an Alternative Discourse to deal with it. In other words, it constructs a very different set of expectations, values, etc. outside the normal conception of war. However, as it does so, this alternative discourse abandons the conventions usually associated with armed conflict and, therefore, justifies a more Extreme Reality of war with few if any restraints. If, for instance, an enemy's behavior is considered utterly barbaric, then that enemy may be regarded as having forfeited any human consideration, and massacre replaces battle. This has been unfortunately common when one culture fights another.

There is another form of rejection as well, and this is a society's or a military's Refusal to Consider a particular form of conflict at all. We see that today in Iraq. One journalist has noted that many American officers involved in the occupation share a common "inability, or perhaps a reluctance, to recognize what was happening *as a war*."<sup>3</sup> This does not generate an alternative discourse but rather a belief that this is really not what an army should be doing. Pragmatic, ad hoc, responses may be necessary, but not the creation of new doctrine or organization. This is

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Danner, "Delusions in Baghdad," *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 2003, p. 92.

amounts to a lack of willingness to accept such combat as a legitimate part of a military's range of activities.

In its simplicity, a model such as this must necessarily fall short of the true labyrinth of reality, but the virtue of such intellectual maps is to reduce complexity to an understandable level by highlighting the most important processes and results. Our model has different values in different contexts. In our discussion of lessons learned, I am most interested in the imposition of Discourse upon Reality, pure and simple – that is the basic feed-back loop.

### **Medieval Warfare as and Example of the Model**

Now let us see how this general model applies to a particular era in military history, the European Middle Ages. To put this in perspective for a Japanese audience, this was the age of the knight in Europe and it had certain common characteristics with the age of the samurai in Japan before the rise of the Tokugawa shoguns. In fact I will speak today of the knight and his code of chivalry, and these are quite close to the samurai and his beliefs and values.

In the last decades, we have come to know the warfare of the late Middle Ages better than ever before thanks to a good deal of excellent scholarship that the literature on chivalry and contrasts it with the rough world or war as it actually was. I refer in particular to works by Maurice Keen, Richard Kaeuper, Nicholas Wright, and Clifford Rogers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: 1984); Nicolas Wright, *Knights and Peasants: The Hundred Years War in the French Countryside* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 1998); Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: 1999); and Clifford J. Rogers,

The extensive medieval writings on the code of chivalry imposed high standards on the knight, who ideally came from an elite warrior family. The language of Christian piety pervades chivalry, but this does not imply meek submission. To the contrary, much is made of the knight's warrior traits of prowess, courage, honor, and loyalty. The great emphasis on prowess, that is strength and skill with weapons, stresses the power of the knight. This often means the kind of force that literally cuts opponents in two. In describing an actual campaign, Gerald of Wales awarded high praise to the knight Meyler Fitz Henry: "Meyler, thus left alone, and surrounded by the enemy on every side, drew his sword, and charging the band, boldly cut his way through them, chopping here a hand and there an arm, besides hewing through heads and shoulders, and thus rejoining his friends."<sup>5</sup> Loyalty was also of immense importance in this aristocratic world held together by personal bonds. As lords, aristocrats were also to award gifts and to practice courtesy. This courtesy required love of the Church and avoidance of pride, boasting, envy, and slander. The knight was also to protect the helpless, particularly women, widows, and orphans. The Mainz Pontifical, one of the fundamental texts for the ceremony that raised a man to knighthood, blesses the sword, "that it may be a defense for churches, widows and orphans."<sup>6</sup> In Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, King Arthur requires an oath of his knights that included a promise "always to

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*War Cruel and Sharp: English Strategy under Edward III, 1327-1360* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Wright, ed., tr., *Historical Works*, p. 256 or 279, in Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Erdmann, *Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens*, p. 330, in Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 71

aid ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen and widows.”<sup>7</sup> This also leads to the next and last element of chivalric tenets – “that he should be a lover and that he should love truly for love’s sake.”<sup>8</sup> What we are used to calling “courtly love” provided an elegant code for the relations between the sexes. The knight’s heart must not only be courageous but romantic.

But should we expect this aristocratic discourse on violence to determine the nature of warfare we would be sadly mistaken. It was not chivalry but the *chevauchée* that typified real campaigns. This form of brutally destructive raid spared nothing and no one. Certainly warriors fought with prowess and courage, but they also engaged in indiscriminate violence. *Chevauchées* colored medieval warfare with flame-red fury. Armies intent on keeping moving could rarely stop for systematic demolition, but they could enlist fire to do the work for them. Along with driving off livestock, burning proved the most effective means for a mobile army to ravage the countryside. Writing of the Black Prince, a master of the *chevauchée*, the Chandos Herald reports that “the English to amuse themselves put everything to flame. They made many a lady a widow and many a poor child an orphan.”<sup>9</sup> Henry V quite literally took relish in flames; he asserted with zest, “War without fire is as worthless as sausage without mustard.”<sup>10</sup> Women, instead of being the subjects of veneration

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<sup>7</sup> Vinaver, ed., *Malory, Works*, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> *Raoull de Hodenc: Le roman des eles/The Anonymous Ordene de chevalerie*, ed. Keith Busby (Amsterdam: 1983), p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Chandos Herald, *Life of the Black Prince by the Herald of Sir John Chandos*, ed. Mildred Pope and Eleanor Lodge (Oxford, 1910), p. 7, lines 236-39.

<sup>10</sup> Henry V in Juvenal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI* in J. A. Buchon, *Choix des Chroniques* (Paris: 1875), p. 565, in Gillingham, “Richard I and the Science of War,” p. 85.



became the victims of rape. Soldiers admitted to, or boasted of, “raping women and deflowering virgins.”<sup>11</sup> One particularly vicious practice was to lock a man in a bin, while his wife was raped on the closed lid. He could only save the poor woman by revealing where he had stashed his money.<sup>12</sup>

When knight fought knight within these brutal contests, the rules of chivalry could still apply between them, because they were social equals who believed in the same discourse on violence, but the reality of war as a whole was very different. However, as a whole, glaring inconsistency separated the tone of chivalry from the fact of warfare. As Honoré Bouvet despaired in the fourteenth century: “In these days all wars are directed against the poor laboring people and against their goods and chattels. I do not call that war, but it seems to me to be pillage and robbery. Further the way of warfare does not follow the ordinances of worthy chivalry or the ancient custom of noble warriors who upheld justice, the widow, the orphan and the poor.”<sup>13</sup>

So different was the discourse on chivalry from the reality of war that the gap could not be closed. This caused chivalry to create its own perfected version of combat, the tournament, to approach what warfare should be. By the thirteenth century, true tournaments were not one-on-one jousts, but contests between “teams” of aristocratic knights fought over extensive areas of ground. Fatigued knights would enter roped-off

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<sup>11</sup> See such admissions discussed in Wright, *Knights and Peasants*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Described in *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris, 1405-1449*, ed. A. Tuetey (Paris: 1881), p. 356, in Wright, *Knights and Peasants*, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Bouvet in John Gillingham, “War and Chivalry in the History of William the Marshall” in Matthew Strickland, ed., *Anglo-Norman Warfare: Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Military Organization and Warfare* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 1992), p. 263.

sanctuaries to rest themselves and their mounts, but outside the sanctuaries they were fair targets to be attacked, captured, and ransomed, as in real war. Weapons might be dulled, but the fighting still could be injurious or fatal. Speaking of a late-twelfth-century tournament one contemporary reported, "Horses fell down there thick and fast, and the men who fell with them were badly trampled and injured, damaged and disfigured."<sup>14</sup> At the tournament of Neuss (1241), eighty knights were supposed to have died.<sup>15</sup> Tournaments mixed war with a kind of violent theater, replete with an audience of admiring and knowledgeable observers. Acts of prowess were seen and lauded. Women were an important presence and allowed for the courtly aspects of chivalry in a way that actual campaigns could not. Women even participated in such shams as attacks on a "castle of love," in which fair damsels defended mock battlements with flowers and rosewater against assaults by ardent knights. The imagery of women employing flowers and men swords is embarrassingly transparent.

### **Hundred Years' War Example**

This discourse that had the power to impose the creation of a separate, perfected form of violence upon elite society of knights and that insisted upon courtly rules even in the midst of amazingly brutal combat imposed itself upon the perception of war's reality. It encouraged the warrior elite of Europe to see war as they wanted to see it, rather than as it

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<sup>14</sup> *History of William the Marshal*, trans. Stewart Gregory, with the assistance of David Crouch, line 4837-40. This is available on the internet at <http://www.deremilitari.org/marshal.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, p. 87.

truly was. In doing so, the discourse on war hampered French efforts to understand their own battlefield defeats early in the Hundred Years' War. As much as possible, the discourse on chivalry filtered the view of actual warfare. Chivalry elevated and emphasized the privileged warrior aristocracy of Europe, who so resembled the samurai of Japan, and filtered their perception of combat during the Hundred Years' War, and these perceptions may have made it particularly difficult for the French to learn the lessons of the Battle at Crécy (1346), dooming them to defeat at Poitiers (1356) and Agincourt (1415).

At Crécy in 1346, Edward III's army of about 15,000 knights, Welsh spearmen, and English longbowmen defeated a much larger force numbering 38,000 under the French king, Philip IV. The English knights fought on foot rather than on horseback. Edward formed his army along the crest of a ridge, with his dismounted knights and common spearmen in the center of his line and his longbowmen as wings on either side of the center, projecting toward the enemy. The fighting began with an initial exchange of fire between mercenary crossbowmen in the pay of the French and the English longbowmen. With their superior range and rate of fire, the English archers easily drove off the crossbowmen, and then the battle resolved itself into charge after charge by the French knights on horseback against the English line. Longbow arrows broke the momentum of the French assaults, inflicted casualties on men and horses, and drove the onrush toward the center, where its remnants could be beaten by the dismounted men at arms and spearmen. Today we see the English victory at Crécy as a triumph of a combination of arms that emphasized the

longbow wielded by mere peasants, not as a triumph aristocratic English knights. But what lesson did the French military elite learn?

Ten years later, at Poitiers, Edward's son, the Black Prince, faced an army led by the French king, John the Good, at Poitiers. Was the French response to increase the number of their own archers or to outflank or bypass the English so as to void their potent tactics? No. The French dismounted two thirds of their knights and advanced on foot. The aristocratic French military elite refused to see Crécy as a victory of common archers; the secret had to lay in way the English disposed their own knights for battle, dismounting them. Now, instead of riding into the onslaught of arrows the great majority of the French knights trudged forward on foot. They would do the same at Agincourt in 1415 with even worse results.

The perception of English victory passed through the filter of the French discourse on chivalry and became distorted in the process, not because the French were foolish but because they were committed to a particular view of war. This view not only reflected how war was supposed to be, at least when aristocratic equals fought, it also justified the political and social privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy. As the ultimate warriors, they deserved their elevated and advantageous position, to question their dominant role on the battlefield was to question their dominant role in society. The costs of learning the right lessons were too great.

This example, and many others that I could have presented here, demonstrate that a discourse can be so powerful in its image of what war

should be that it can limit our understanding or even blind us to reality. It need not always be so blatant as my medieval example, but there is a strong tendency to see things the way we *want* to see them. Therefore, one of the greatest lessons to learn from the military past is just how difficult it is to see the right lessons when our vision is distorted by our own preconceptions.

### **The Example of the Egyptian Cross-Canal Attack in October 1973**

Recognizing the tremendous influence discourse exerts on perception should not, however, resign us to never being able to see things as they really are or make us despair of learning from the effort. Militaries can and do learn. Were I more knowledgeable in Japanese history, I could probably use the military reforms instituted by Emperor Meiji after 1868 as an example of such learning, but I will turn to another case of military learning that I know better.

I would like to discuss an example of brave examination and profitable learning by a military willing to question its own military culture. This process led to a very successful military operation – the crossing of the Suez Canal by Egyptian forces in October 1973. Because this campaign eventually turned against the Egyptians, many casual observers would dismiss the campaign as an Egyptian defeat, but for the first week of the war the Egyptians, who had failed in 1948, 1956, and 1967, were victorious. The astute historian Trevor N. Dupuy praised this operation as “one of the most memorable water crossings in the annals of warfare.”<sup>16</sup> He also

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<sup>16</sup> Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 417.

judged that in beating back counter attacks, the Egyptians handed the Israelis, “without a doubt ... the worst defeat in the history of the Israeli Army.”<sup>17</sup>

The Canal Crossing, know as Operation Badr, worked because Egyptian commander Isma'il 'Ali first recognized the shortcomings and strengths of his own troops and, second, drafted a plan of attack that abandoned received wisdom about the most effective, armor-based, form of desert warfare. By refusing to see things simply as he wanted to see them, Isma'il 'Ali, came up with a winning plan.

Egyptian troops displayed a set of characteristics that had hamstrung them in warfare since 1948. American commentator, Kenneth Pollack sees these traits as Arabic, not simply as Egyptian, but I will restrict my comments to the one army.<sup>18</sup> A primary problem was the character of tactical leadership. Egyptian military culture required that officers be extremely deferential to higher command in such an exaggerated fashion that it stifled initiative. Lower officers sought direct orders from much further up the chain of command before responding to the shifting circumstances of the battlefield. This deference led to inflexibility and lack of initiative in a number of ways. Armored forces would halt and await orders rather than exploit opportunity, and artillery found it very difficult to adjust fire to keep up with the flow of battle. For much the same reasons, fighter pilots did not dog fight effectively in fluid air combat, and air

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<sup>17</sup> Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 433.

<sup>18</sup> See Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: 2002).

operations against targets of opportunity on the ground were conducted poorly. The blunt Ariel Sharon berated Egyptian tactical performance in the Six-Day War: "I think Egyptian soldiers are very good. They are simple and ignorant but they are strong and disciplined ... but their officers are shit, they can fight only according to what they planned before."<sup>19</sup>

Egyptian attitudes toward responsibility and shame hamstrung reporting battlefield information. Hesitant to seem to resist proper authority, officers in the field agreed to orders they knew they could not carry out. Such officers also reported successes that they had not achieved and refused to report failures. In 1967, for example, Egyptians at Rafah reported success even as they were being battered, flanked, and cut off by Israelis. Therefore Egyptian forces further toward the Canal at El Arish thought the Israelis were being held, only to be confronted by victorious Israeli columns. As Mohamed Heikal reported in *Al-Ahram* in 1968, Egyptians suffered "behavioral flaws resulting from lack of discipline, namely delay in reporting the truth, if it is negative, to higher levels of authority."<sup>20</sup>

Such traits proved fatal in the ebb and flow of maneuver warfare. The armor/air combination, which was supposed to be the key to desert warfare did not work well for the Egyptians. However, if reasonably well lead, Egyptian infantry proved itself to be brave and tenacious. Resolute and cohesive, it fought effectively in set-piece defensives. Morale could be

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<sup>19</sup> Sharon in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> 28 June 1968 issue of *Al-Ahram*, cited in Raymond W. Baker, *Sadat and After: Struggles for Egypt's Political Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 188.

strong and cohesion resilient. When Sadat turned to Isma'il 'Ali to draft a new plan of campaign and gave him a free hand, Isma'il 'Ali began from a frank evaluation of his troops. As General Mohamed Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy, deputy chief of staff during the October War, testifies, Isma'il 'Ali, "had developed the conviction that the human element – the quality of the fighter – and not the weapon was what counted in victory."<sup>21</sup> This phrase, "the quality of the fighter," is a shorthand for the cultural characteristics of Egyptian troops in combat. Isma'il 'Ali would achieve success by adapting his war plans to the military culture of his army.

The new plan, High Minarets, would begin with the assumption that the best alternative would be for the Egyptians to fight a set-piece defensive battle constrained in space and time. They would not try to achieve a breakthrough and exploitation aimed at reconquering the Sinai. They would cross the canal in overwhelming force, seize a narrow band of territory on the other side and hold it against the inevitable Israeli counterattacks. By stoutly resisting these counterattacks and inflicting serious casualties on the Israelis, the offensive would prepare the way for negotiations that would achieve Egyptian political goals.

The offensive would not be a free-wheeling armored assault but a minutely scripted infantry/artillery advance with armor support. The script would rigidly prescribe every movement down to the squad level. Officers would not be allowed to deviate at all. Problems such as adjusting artillery fires would be solved by writing fire missions into the script. Technically the cross-Canal offensive had three phases, only the first of

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<sup>21</sup> El-Gamasy, *The October War*, p. 157, in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 100.



which brought Egyptian troops over the canal and entrenched them on the other side; however, this phase I is all that Isma'il 'Ali cared about. He hardly gave any attention to phases II and III, which existed as little more than intentions.

In perfecting phase I, Egyptian troops endlessly practiced their roles in the script. Each soldier learned only a single task and master it through repetitive practice. Individual soldiers rehearsed their roles hundreds of times.

Twice a day during four years these [engineer] units assembled and dismantled ... bridge [segments]. Similarly, every day for years all operators of Sagger anti-tank missiles lined up outside vans containing simulators and went through half an hour's exercise in tracking tanks with their missile. ... This system was repeated right down the line the army until every action became a reflex action.<sup>22</sup>

To make the preparations as realistic as possible, the Egyptians constructed extensive mock-ups of their objectives. General Shazli, Chief of Staff during the October War reports that the army rehearsed the entire operation thirty-five times, on top of the endless repetition by smaller units.<sup>23</sup>

To deal with the traditionally problematic flow of information from the front to the Egyptian high command, Isma'il' Ali intended to listen in on

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<sup>22</sup> Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement, October 1973* (Boston: 1975), p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Lt. Gen. Saad El Shazli, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco: 1980), p. 42, in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 102.

the Israelis. In lieu of honest information from Egyptian officers, the high command planned to monitor Israeli communications, because the Israelis commonly spoke in the clear over their communications grid, even about sensitive matters. So the Egyptians constructed a large electronic facility on Jebel Ataqah to eavesdrop.

High Minarets was honestly and bravely conceived, based not on how Egyptians would have liked to see themselves, but on an honest appreciation of reality far from ideal conception. Once Isma'il 'Ali made the intellectual breakthrough, his planners could draft a meticulous, original, and highly effective plan. Not surprisingly, it worked very well at the outset on October 6, 1973. Lt. Gen. Saad El Shazli praised the crossing as "a magnificent symphony played by tens of thousands of men."<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* reporter described how, "The Egyptian Army has doggedly adhered to a comprehensive, preconceived strategic and tactical plan. Military spokesmen insist that there have been no departures from the plan, no improvisations and no unauthorized initiative by local commanders."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Egyptian orders forbade junior officers from diverging from the script for the first twelve hours of the attack.<sup>26</sup>

In a paradoxical way, the offensive's success became its own undoing. The Egyptians were doing so well, that when Syrian President Asaad pled with Sadat to undertake a further offensive to relieve the

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<sup>24</sup> Shazli in The Insight Team of the London Sunday Times, *The Yom Kippur War* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Cairo correspondent of the New York Times in Insight Team, *The Yom Kippur War*, p. 221.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness," Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996, p. 547.

pressure on Syria, Sadat agreed. Isma'il 'Ali resisted any such move to Phase II, which he believed would fail. When the Egyptians undertook an armored attack on October 14, his fears were realized. In a matter of hours the attack failed after gaining only a few miles; Egyptians lost 265 tanks to an Israeli loss of only 40 tanks, of which all but 6 were repaired and sent back into action. Although generally not a critic of Arab armies, Brigadier General S. A. El-Edroos condemned the Egyptian conduct of the battles that day: "The catastrophic defeat suffered by the Egyptian tank corps reflected the inability of Egyptian commanders, from divisional to [company] level, to conduct mobile, flexible, and fluid armored operations."<sup>27</sup> In the simpler words of the Israeli brigade commander, Amnon Reshev, "They just waddled forward like ducks."<sup>28</sup>

The rest of the campaign does not concern me here, and it does not tarnish the proven ability of Isma'il 'Ali to learn very hard lessons and refashion Egyptian campaign plans in accord with them. Even though Israeli forces did eventually cross the Canal and surround the Egyptian Third Army, the Egyptian campaign still restored Egyptian military pride and helped make it possible for Sadat to carry out his own peace offensive and regain the Sinai for Egypt.

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<sup>27</sup> S. A. El Edroos, *The Hashemite Arab Army, 1908-1979* (Amman: 1980), p. 508, in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> Pollack interview with Reshev, September 1996, in Michael J. Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries," paper presented at meeting, *Diffusion of Military Knowledge, Technology and Practices: International Consequences of Military Innovations*, Washington, DC, 18 January 1999, p. 21.

## **Conclusion**

So what lessons can we learn from this discussion of learning lessons? Above all there is a tendency for us to see things as we think they are supposed to be. This means imposing conceptual patterns from the discourse on war. In a sense this is beginning with our conclusions before we go to reality to discover its true nature. The tendency to see things as we want them to be is not a simple act of short-sighted self-deception, but an expression of a fundamental fact of military/cultural history. Overcoming this tendency is neither natural nor easy, though an important place to start the process is to realize how the tendency exists and why.

I have said that history has lessons to teach us, that there is a power to knowledge, but that these lessons are not simple formulas. We must work to recover military lessons from the past, we must beware of deceiving ourselves with our own preconceptions.

It is not impossible to see beyond those preconceived notions and patterns, but it is as much an act of courage as it is of intelligence and knowledge. It can require recognizing unpleasant realities and errors. Defeat or frustration would seem to be a spur to accepting such disturbing conclusions, but not always, particularly if the conclusions challenge truly fundamental assumptions, as was the case in the example from the Hundred Years' War discussed earlier in this paper. There is something unbelievably uncomfortable in casting aside cherished assumptions. However, only by doing so can we learn certain lessons from hard-bought experience. Isma'il 'Ali had to recognize some very hard truths and reject

nearly universal concepts of desert warfare to engineer Egyptian success. Such intellectual courage is to be praised and studied.

Learning the right lessons is in no way easy, it means going against some very basic tendencies of human culture. To do it well, we must give a whole new definition to thinking outside the box, as we Americans say, or, in this case, thinking outside the discourse.

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