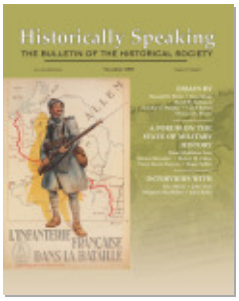
# Response to Linn and Showalter

Victor Davis Hanson

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Any discussion of the current status of military history, whether by intent or not, inevitably evolves into a wide-ranging critique of the Western university. Both Professors Linn and Showalter, for example, agree on what now has become a generally recognized paradox. In uncanny fashion, the more military history seems to recede in the academy by traditional standards of importance (whether measured by publication in academic journals, formally recognized professorships, or general attitudes about the dispassionate study of the history of war among the faculty), the more it thrives in both popular culture and in new and dynamic outlets associated with higher education. I wish Linn and Showalter had speculated more about the cause and effect. That is, does military history bloom because of, rather than despite, university neglect? And if so, how exactly does that transpire?[1]

Linn is right that military history is more widely read than what is written by most of its critics on campus, who themselves are increasingly fossilized in their thinking and marginalized in their writing. And too often, even the nation's few military historians who hold titled professorships at distinguished universities deny the general academic decline in military history by pointing to the success of their own programs, graduate students, popular classes, and numerous publications—without recognizing that in most other places the field is moribund on campus. I do not think there has been any convincing refutation of military historian Edward Coffman's casual point that within the nation's top twenty-five history departments (as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*), only twenty-one of the 1,000 history professors employed listed a specialty in military history.

Linn points out that war studies have a hold on the popular interest and imagination, which ensures robust book sales and resonance within popular culture. Unlike historians of other fields, military historians of varying sorts, in and outside the university, are quite influential as public intellectuals, and help adjudicate current defense policy. Officers themselves often are military historians, and they serve as rich conduits between theory and practice. Linn is to be commended for reminding us again how "warrior-scholars such as H. R. McMaster, Peter Mansoor, John Nagl, James H. Powell, and David Petraeus, conceptualized and then helped execute the shift to a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq."

I wish I could say that few scholarly disciplines have shown such relevance to contemporary politics and government policy-making. But remember that the obsession on campus with postmodern theorizing has perniciously rippled out into film, television, primary and secondary education, and politics at large. Two decades ago I used to laugh that my six-year-old's first-grade reading books seemed to mimic exactly the nonsensical themes taught across the hall at the university's School of Education.

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Linn is confident that military history archives, some sympathetic foundations, military history bloggers and Web sites, and a variety of privately and publicly supported seminars, workshops, conferences, lectures, and other venues of intellectual commerce all seem to offer recompense of sorts for the absence of major military history billets at both research and teaching universities and colleges. Moreover, unlike many disciplines within formal academic history, the study of war offers the newly minted Ph.D. opportunities in public archives, think tanks, and private companies where they can continue to conduct research, lecture, and write. Linn offers a comprehensive list of examples, and suggests that the trend is spreading. Indeed, the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University is creating a new program on "Military History and Contemporary Conflict." The center will seek to integrate its current educational partnership with the military, bring to campus war correspondents, conduct military history symposia, offer weekly commentary on ongoing conflicts, invite scholars and students of military history for periodic billets and visiting posts, and in time establish permanent positions.

Yet there are insidious effects that follow from the academy's neglect of military history. The scholarly rigor of academic military history is of value as a blueprint and model for those who write about war outside the university without graduate training. And the relative dearth of undergraduate classes on military history ensures that much of the general public misses the opportunity to learn about the history, role, and future of war.

Dennis Showalter offers a valuable complement to Linn's well-researched and candid article. While I think Showalter underestimates the degree to which politically correct beliefs have undermined military history (note, for example, the concurrent rise of the Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution programs that are often ideologically driven and thus have prospered from fragmentation), he is absolutely right to focus on the culprit of specialization, which transcends politics. We have unfortunately seen history atomized into hundreds of different subfields whose legitimacy is rarely publicly questioned. Who now dares to say on campus that a thesis on cross-dressing among the Russian aristocracy is any less important than a study of the economic effects on the Russian countryside of Napoleon's invasion of 1812?

After three decades of specialization, we now lack department heads, deans, and provosts who know much, if anything, about the Peloponnesian War, the gunpowder revolution, Chinese military classics—or how such knowledge has influenced history and may be of critical interest today. No one wishes to assert that familiarity with Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Tacitus, Machiavelli, Gibbon, Prescott, and Churchill or general acquaintance with the Persian Wars, the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Ottoman expansion, the Civil War, and the First World War offers a better foundation to teach broad survey courses to undergraduates than does a mastery of theories about power machinations in terms of race, class, and gender.

Showalter, like Linn, reminds us that the university is slowly catching on to what specialization and ideology have wrought. University press books are beginning to be more interested in marketability, and that means by extension military history. Further, Showalter gives proper recognition to the creativity of Norwich University, whose on-line classes and degrees have filled some of the void left by the traditional campus's neglect of military history. Such opportunistic marketing is part of a wider phenomenon, in which private on-line colleges cherry-pick prime areas of study that for a variety of reasons are neglected by conventional colleges and universities.[2]

Showalter concludes that military history is not coming back to the campus. But he is not too perturbed, since, like Linn, he knows that "military history has solid prospects of comprehensive de-

velopment outside the conventional academy." Here we should remember that two-and-a-half millennia ago the military historians Herodotus and Thucydides created Western historiography—inductive inquiry based on evidence apart from, or in addition to, religion, myth, poetry, and mere anecdote—without a university, an irony that few history departments today appreciate. In the end, Linn and Showalter leave us with another paradox: the struggling cotemporary university needs military history far more than a vibrant military history now needs it.

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[1] I have written about the status of contemporary military history, and classical war studies in particular, emphasizing this irony that the study of war is becoming popular almost in direct proportion to its steady decline in formal academic culture: "Why Study War?" *City Journal* (Summer 2007); "The Dilemmas of the Contemporary Military Historian," in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (Taylor and Francis, 1998), 189-201; and "The Status of Ancient Military History: Traditional Work, Recent Research, and Ongoing Controversies," *The Journal of Military History* 63 (1999): 379-414.

[1] Victor Davis Hanson "The Humanities Move Off Campus: As the Classical University Unravels, Students Seek Knowledge and Know-How Elsewhere," *City Journal* (Autumn 2008).

# State of Play: A Response to Linn and Showalter

Roger Spiller

The complaining went public about a dozen years ago. An essay by John Lynn of the University of Illinois in the *Journal of Military History* lacerated the department culture in which American academic historians did their work. Lynn's indictment read this way: military history, a subject never held in high esteem in the academic world, was more than ever under siege, beset by new, more stylish, yet less productive approaches to the study of history. Military history might be able to survive these newest intellectual fashions, but only if we learned from our adversaries, who occasionally had something innovative to say. Of course, he addressed his essay to his fellow military historians. The chance that any of his adversaries might read anything in the *Journal of Military History* was, well, remote.

Lynn's essay may not have started the talking, but it did capture sentiments that were in the air at the time. At our professional meetings, stories were passed around of military history positions abolished or demoted, left empty, or filled by scholars with more modish interests. We heard of tenures denied or delayed, stalled promotions, and declining influence in departmental councils. And in all the stories the reason was the same: military historians traffic in a most unsavory subject. Who might spend a career in such a dismal, even grisly, field? A fantasist, playing at war? A closet militarist? A truly progressive academic history department, dedicated to the advancement of humane knowledge, is clearly no place for such people (never mind that the antipathy seems a bit irrational, something like despising oncologists because of their interest in cancer).

It is difficult to know how seriously to take such criticism, but then I've never known how to take the complaining either. It is certainly true that great universities—Duke and Michigan, for example—once known for their military history programs have allowed them to erode. After a long and reportedly contentious search, the University of Wisconsin finally made an appointment to its military history chair, but one wonders how the new occupant will be received by his colleagues. Most faculties list only one military historian. I recently received a letter from an old mentor who predicted that when he retired, his department would probably not replace him with another of his kind. He teaches seven different courses in military history. The courses all fill immediately at registration, but, he wrote, "there is a distinct anti-military odor in the department." And besides, what history department would actually want to attract *more* students?

> Military history certainly seems more popular than ever, and in part this may be a generational phenomenon.

And so we march on, troubled by the kind of news my old friend sent, but without much evidence of systematic mistreatment behind the sad anecdotes. Does one hear the same sort of complaint from colleagues in political, or diplomatic, or intellectual history? Yes. As both Brian Linn and Dennis Showalter have written, academic historians seem more and more parochial, more inward looking than ever, indulging themselves in questions so minute that they have a hard time answering the basic question, "So what?" But can we say that these historians behave any more badly toward military historians than their other colleagues? I do wonder.

Before going on, I ought to declare my colors. I have spent a career in a kind of neverland between the academic and professional military worlds, at staff and war colleges, service academies, and even a brief period on general staffs—certainly a different sort of environment from the one Lynn describes. The department where I spent most of my professional life was entirely made up of military historians, although I did my apprenticeship long ago in a traditional academic setting. Most of my professional acquaintances still make their way in that environment, and so I'm keenly aware of their tribulations. My own department was as civil as any I know, but more than once I saw behavior even in this setting that in a bar would have led to someone getting punched in the nose. Common intellectual interests do not guarantee friendly colleagues. Within any department, traditional or not, the reasons for churlish behavior and long-standing feuds are many and varied.

Of course, the tides of academia never flow in the same direction for long, and military historians seem to have been swimming against them more successfully than one might expect. The years since Lynn wrote his now well-known essay have seen membership explode in the military historian's leading professional organization, the Society for Military History. The Society's annual meeting is no longer the clubby little affair it once was, and the