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How Do We Learn from History?

by **James J. Sheehan**



2005 AHA President James J. Sheehan

Readers of *Perspectives* do not need to be persuaded that studying history is worthwhile. All of us, I assume, love history for its own sake; we want to know about the past because we find it challenging, frustrating, exciting, exhilarating, and depressing. And all of us believe that, by expanding our experience to the lives of men and women in different times and places, history teaches us valuable things both about others and ourselves. R. G. Collingwood expressed this with admirable economy when he said that we learn three things from studying the past: "what it is to be a man, what it is to be the kind of man you are, and what it is to be the kind of man you are and nobody else" (*The Idea of History*, New York, 1956, 10).

But what about the uses of history in a narrower, more pragmatic sense? Does the past provide lessons for the present, guidance for the future? In addition to telling us who we are, does history help us know what to do? I suspect that not many of us still share the confidence expressed by Lord Acton in his inaugural lecture of 1895 that "the science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the streams of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to making the future." (*Essays on Freedom and Power*, New York, 1957, 25–26). Many of us doubt that the facts of the past are as discrete and quickly recognizable as grains of gold glittering in the sand; nor are we sure that the truth of past experience can so easily be deployed as an instrument for action.

However professionally skeptical we may be about learning from the past, there is no doubt that we try to do it all the time. We constantly tell stories about the past to our students, friends, children—and to ourselves—stories that are supposed to convey moral and practical lessons about how to behave. Physicians compile histories of their patients' diseases in order to make diagnoses and determine therapies. Military units write after action reports that provide the basis for assessing the reasons for success or failure. And, of course, historical lessons are part of every political discussion and debate. Again and again, our political leaders use the past to warn, admonish, and inspire the public; to criticize their opponents; and to justify their own policies. Historical analogies, comparisons, and metaphors are all around us; they are a source of collective wisdom on which we must rely. It is unlikely that we could live without them even if we wanted to.

It seems to me that one of our primary responsibilities as professionals is to subject the alleged lessons of the past to persistent critical scrutiny. Let me illustrate what I have in mind with two contemporary examples.

First, a relatively easy and straightforward one: the lessons drawn from a comparison between the American occupation of Germany in 1945 and the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Resistance to American forces in Iraq, it was suggested, should neither surprise nor discourage us since similar resistance could be found at the beginning of the United States' extraordinarily successful project of nation building in postwar Germany. With the proper patience and resolve, this resistance would be overcome and a stable democratic state could emerge in Iraq, just as it did in Western Germany in 1949. This is an easy case because it rests on a single, empirically verifiable piece of misinformation: there was not, in fact, any violent opposition to American forces in Germany after May 8, 1945; indeed, the postwar German situation, as desperate as it was in many ways, was notable for the population's passivity and its lack of resistance to occupation authority. Not surprisingly, we have not heard much about postwar Germany in recent months.

While this particular lesson drawn from the two occupations was clearly wrong, to compare them might well have been illuminating. But such a comparison would have had to be intellectually rigorous and critically analytical, one that took into account the complexities of each case and carefully weighed their similarities and differences. It would have required comparing the two wars that led to the occupations, the character of the occupied societies, and size and structure of the occupying forces and the particular policies they implemented. Such a comparison would not have yielded any easy answers about what to do in Iraq (although it might have suggested some things not to do), but it

would have helped us to grasp the difficulties Americans forces faced in 2003 and perhaps to uncover aspects of the German situation that we had not noticed before. In learning lessons from the past, differences are often as valuable as similarities.

My second example, also from the debate on the Iraq war, is rather more complicated: it is the use of the "Munich analogy" to explain why preemptive military action against Iraq was both necessary and justifiable. To continue to appease Saddam Hussein in 2003, this argument runs, would have had the same unfortunate consequences as appeasing Hitler in 1938; both were signs of weakness and miscalculation, in which an unavoidable conflict was imprudently postponed. The lesson of the Munich analogy rests on at least two claims. The first is that Saddam and Hitler were alike, not simply because both were vicious tyrants (a proposition that is undoubtedly true), but also because they both could only be defeated by military force—that it would, in other words, have been necessary to fight them sooner or later. The second claim is counterfactual: if the democracies had fought Hitler in 1938, the Munich analogy assumes, they could have defeated him with less effort than was required a year later. A good (if, to my mind, not totally convincing) argument can be made for both these claims, but the value of comparing the two situations requires that the argument be made and tested, that is, that we carefully weigh the policies and performance of the two dictators and examine the balance of military forces in Europe in 1938 and the Middle East in 2003.

To public debates on the lessons of history, historians should bring our discipline's traditional virtues: a strict adherence to research methods that are public, transparent, and open to critical scrutiny; a commitment to examining as much of the relevant evidence as possible, even if it threatens our own interpretation; a critical approach to all sources, and especially those that seem to confirm conventional wisdom; the struggle to overcome personal bias, a struggle that should be no less persistent because it is unavoidably imperfect; and, last but not least, the resolute refusal to believe something merely because we wish it to be true. I can think of nothing more politically useful and practically important than these habits of mind. Without them what we extract from history will not be grains of wisdom but the fool's gold all too often offered as precious lessons from the past. *What* we learn from history depends entirely on *how* we do it.*

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