



## Footnotes

## The Newsletter of FPRI's [Wachman Center](#) What Students Need To Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919

by Trudy Kuehner, Reporter

September 2008  
Vol. 13, No. 21

On July 26–27, 2008, FPRI's [Wachman Center](#) hosted 37 teachers from across the country for a weekend of discussion on teaching U.S. Military history. The Institute was co-sponsored and hosted by the Cantigny First Division Foundation of the McCormick Foundation in Wheaton, Ill. and webcast worldwide. See [www.fpri.org/education/americaswars1/](http://www.fpri.org/education/americaswars1/) for videocasts and texts of lectures.

[The History Institute for Teachers](#) is co-chaired by [David Eisenhower](#) and [Walter A. McDougall](#). Core support is provided by the Annenberg Foundation; funding for the military history program is provided by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The next history weekend is Teaching the History of Innovation, October 18-19, 2008, in Kansas City.

### The Revolutionary War and Early American Military History

[Kyle Zelner](#) of the University of Southern Mississippi observed that conflict was instrumental in America's development. There was either a declared war or a conflict for 79 of the 179 years from just before the founding of Jamestown until 1785. These conflicts can be broken down into three types: contact or settlement wars, imperial war, and revolutionary warfare.

The early contact wars with Native Americans included conflicts like the Anglo-Powhatan Wars in Virginia or the Pequot War in New England. Later contact wars like King Philip's War in New England (1675–76) and the Tuscarora and Yamassee wars in the Carolinas in the early 18th century had more to do with disputes over land and trade. As Native Americans acquired and excelled in the use of European weaponry, these wars became very deadly—more people died in King Philip's War proportionate to the population than in any other American war.

The colonies were also brought into imperial warfare between European colonizing powers, as in the Anglo-Dutch Wars and the conflicts between the French and English: King William's War, Queen Anne's War, King George's War, and the 1754-63 French and Indian War, the final showdown between these two powers in America

The Revolution was by its end a world war, and one of mass participation. Our students tend to see only disjointed battles and campaigns, but historian John Shy identified three major phases of the war. The first British policy for dealing with the growing American resistance movement was a police action strategy (1774–77) centered in New England. The April 1775 Battles of Lexington and Concord began as police actions: the British were trying to confiscate arms from the region's colonists.

Beginning in 1776, the British adopted a classical strategy, attempting to win the war by destroying Washington's army in battle and then capturing the American capital. General Howe did not destroy the Continental Army, though he did severely weaken it, and while he captured Philadelphia, this meant nothing, since the government simply left the city.

By the early 1780s, the British developed a third strategy: Southern Pacification, since loyalist support was strongest in the South. The plan was to arm loyalists so they could hold an area once the British Army moved on. The British started by invading Georgia and then the Carolinas. However, as soon as the British Army left the area, the region broke down into civil war, fueled by old grudges, family feuds, and even class warfare.

As the war dragged on, the British populace grew weary of the conflict and the government in Britain was in serious trouble. The defeat of the British in 1781 at Yorktown forced the British into peace negotiations, and in 1783, the Peace Treaty of Paris ended the War for Independence.

Students need to know about all of these things because war was so vital in its effects on the American people and the developing American society and culture, including the American reliance on the citizen-soldier.

## The Mexican-American War

[Paul Springer](#) of the U.S. Military Academy discussed this forgotten war. While it is vastly overshadowed by the Civil War, there are many parallels between it and our current war in Iraq. Most American textbooks characterize this war as a U.S. land grab, but it's a much more complex topic.

During the 1844 presidential campaign, Democratic candidate James K. Polk announced a platform of territorial expansion. He wanted at least to annex Texas and resolve with Great Britain the question of the Oregon Country. As President, Polk was able to solve the latter matter easily through diplomacy, arriving at the solution of simply extending out to the west coast the border that already existed. Mexico was not so simple. The area had already been in conflict for more than a decade since the brutal Texas War of Independence. Thus in the ten years between the fall of the Alamo and the beginning of the Mexican War, the U.S. had refused to annex Texas, knowing that to do so could provoke a fight.

When Polk moved to annex Texas in 1845, Mexico's only concern was the question of the border, which according to Texas was the Rio Grande River; according to Mexico, it was the Nueces River. The U.S. accepted the Texan view and sent a military force across the Nueces to guard U.S. possessions; Mexico responded by sending an army across the Rio Grande to guard its possessions. The two armies inevitably blundered into each other, triggering a conflict.

This would be a protracted campaign. The two key American leaders were Zachary Taylor ("Old Rough and Ready") and Winfield Scott ("Old Fuss and Feathers"), military rivals who were also political rivals, both having presidential ambitions. The first skirmishes of the war, in May 1846 at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, drove the Mexican Army back across the Rio Grande, but Taylor was nonetheless ordered to invade Mexico to compel it to come to the treaty table. After a fairly short siege of Monterrey, Taylor signed an armistice, let the Mexican Army march out of the city on parole, and moved in to occupy. But Mexico continued to fight. Taylor won at Buena Vista, but still Mexico didn't surrender. Scott captured Veracruz, but with fever season approaching, had to get out of the lowlands. A young West Point graduate, Robert E. Lee, led a group of pathfinders in finding a route for Scott around the Mexican Army at Cerro Gordo. Scott's forces launched an assault, and Santa Anna was forced to retreat all the way back to Mexico City.

Even as the enlistments of Scott's volunteers was coming due and they were abandoning him, Scott marched forward and captured Mexico City. The Mexican government disappeared, Scott occupied the capital and eventually began to reconstitute the government. Finally, in February 1848, under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the U.S. received the Mexican Cession—California, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming—in exchange for \$15 million plus the forfeiture of \$3.25 million of U.S. claims against the Mexican government.

The war's effects are still felt in the *reconquista* movement, which argues that native people should reclaim the American southwest through immigration. Almost simultaneous with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, gold was discovered in California. The rapid settling of the territory set up a lot of the political conflicts of the 1850s and caused conflict between Native American and white populations. California's petition for statehood in 1850 provoked the overturning of the Missouri Compromise. Although the war temporarily unified the nation, it hastened the arrival of the Civil War by reopening the slavery debate. That is why we cannot teach the Mexican War as just a precursor to the Civil War.

## The Civil War

[Mark Grimsley](#) of The Ohio State University discussed the culture that permitted the Civil War to happen at all and what that means to American history and us as Americans today. As a republic that has endured for more than two centuries under the same form of government, the U.S. has faced, adapted to, and endured many challenges, nearly all

of which have been addressed within the framework of a constitutional government. The exception to this rule is the Civil War, when 11 states refused to abide by the result of a fairly conducted presidential election with an unambiguous winner and instead left the union to form their own republic.

Historians have offered different explanations for this breakdown in an otherwise tremendous American success story. Perhaps the best answer is that the war reflected a failure of American citizens themselves. In the 1840s-50s, they took for granted the durability of the republic, instead emphasizing their own private economic interests and moral visions.

This was exactly the behavior that had worried the country's founding fathers, who created a government based on the tenets of classical republicanism. Republics, they knew, are held together not by authority imposed from above, but rather from below, by the citizens themselves. Historically, republics have tended to fall apart. They die when their citizens prove unworthy of citizenship and through laziness or self absorption let the republic fall into dictatorship or anarchy.

According to Machiavelli, the prerequisite for having a political voice in a republic was civic virtue—the ability to see beyond their own narrow self-interests to the good of the larger republic. He and others thought that citizen-soldiers were indispensable to a sound republic, that military service could verify one's willingness to sacrifice for the republic and instill civic virtue.

American revolutionaries tied civic virtue to property ownership, but by 1820, most of these property requirements had vanished. By 1830, there was a growing sense that white men possessed the wisdom needed for good self-government simply because they were common people. This was the triumph of Jacksonian, or what's been called "the white man's," democracy.

Abraham Lincoln, who for many Americans is the very embodiment of the wisdom of the common man, urged in an 1837 speech that reverence for the law must become the political religion of the nation. He then saw the American experiment in republicanism spiral out of control. In 1861, William T. Sherman, the future Union general, concluded that the real problem was not agitation over slavery but "the democratic spirit, which substitutes mere opinions for the law." Our country, Sherman complained, had become so democratic that "the mere popular opinion of any town or village rises above the law. Men have ceased to look to the constitution and law books for their guides, but have studied popular opinion in barrooms and village newspapers."

Once the war broke out, the Union possessed only a tiny professional army. It would have to depend on the volunteer forces raised, officered and manned by civilians. Since the government lacked the institutions required to impose discipline, the volunteers had to impose discipline on themselves, finding in themselves the civic virtue to save the republic that had been so signally lacking in the political environment of the previous 25 years.

Fortunately, they accomplished this feat, fusing republican ideology with Victorian ideas about manliness. This is the interpretation of the Civil War that we emphasize today, memorializing their patriotism and self-sacrifice. The Civil War tested whether a nation based on liberty and equality could long endure. But focusing too much on the fact that it did and finding reassurance in that answer makes it easy for us to overlook the failures of 19th-century Americans that led to the war.

It is impossible to revisit the Civil War without reaching disquieting conclusions about our values and ourselves. What we believe about a war that took place almost 150 years ago exerts a profound influence on what we believe about ourselves today. In teaching the Civil War, we face a choice between reinforcing the American civil religion by emphasizing the necessity and justice of the struggle and the soldiers' valor, or tacitly questioning that religion by emphasizing that the war's commencement reflects the breakdown of American democracy.

We must remember the fragility of our democracy. It failed once, and that failure was retrieved only by the sacrifice of 620,000 Americans. At any given time, our democracy is only a generation away from failing again. Thus every generation is responsible for maintaining, protecting, and promoting our republic.

## The Frontier Years

Vance Skarstedt of the National Defense Intelligence College discussed the four-century frontier wars, the nation's longest and bloodiest conflict. As we debate the status and treatment of Native Americans, these wars continue to be a source of friction. One prominent view poses the Native American as hapless victim to a never-ending wave of unscrupulous Euro-Americans who, armed with superior technology, stole, infected, massacred, and imprisoned the native peoples of America. But to simply present these wars as one society exterminating another is simplistic and inaccurate. The outcome of those wars not only completed the continental U.S., but also taught invaluable lessons regarding warfare that are still be practiced today.

Historian Richard Dillon estimates that at the time Columbus landed, there were almost 4 million people in 3,000 tribes, speaking more than 2,200 different languages, on the North American continent. Traditional images of nomadic tribal units wandering a vast wilderness wearing war bonnets and following bison herds oversimplify this population.

Native American societies varied from nomadic to forest-dwelling to coastal-dwelling to city-dwelling tradesmen. At the time Columbus arrived, the former domains of the peaceful Cahokians, Pueblos, Anasazis, and Zunis had been supplanted by the fierce Creek, Navajo, Comanche, and Apache tribes. Indian warriors like the great Apache Geronimo were tough as nails. Lightly armed, they could move fast. They knew the terrain and had a broad spectrum of weaponry—muzzle-loading muskets, repeating lever-action rifles, cavalry carbines. They could survive for days in the mountains without water or food.

One reason for the length of these wars is the sheer size of North America. As the U.S. expanded westward, it had to pacify a diverse and rugged group of societies that were very adept at warfare, from the Powhatans of Virginia who almost destroyed Jamestown, to the nomadic Sioux who controlled the Upper Great Plains, and to the Modocs of California who with 51 fighters were able to hold off over 1,000 U.S. Army cavalry.

The Europeans who first arrived were used to the conventional 17th-18th century styles of siege warfare and maneuvering in open fields away from society; the Indians used stealth, camouflage, surprise, deception, and other small-unit tactics that used the terrain as cover and greatly confused their European opponents. The colonists quickly adapted and even began using Indian tactics when fighting each other.

But after the Civil War, the Indian culture proved no match for Western civilization. The Indians succumbed not to supposed Euro-American advantages in technology but to disease and economic and political pressures. The economic pressure was the loss of their environment with the arrival of the railroad, transcontinental communications, agricultural developments such as barbed wire, the ever-growing population of Euro-Americans, and the great buffalo slaughter after the Civil War. The Indians could not survive against the Western economy of development and consumption. Politically, the Indians suffered because they could not unite after centuries of rivalry among the thousands of tribes.

The Indian way of war taught the Americans to adapt, and that solving problems is key in soldiering. One of the American military's greatest strengths today is that it educates our enlistees and teaches leadership. We want our service people to possess critical thinking skills. This practice was begun on the frontier, when all a squad or company leader had to rely on was his wits and the discipline and training of his men. The U.S. military's experience with special operations, relying on small-unit tactics, began with learning from Indians such as Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, Ocoela of the Seminoles, and Red Cloud of the Sioux, who are a critical part of the American military heritage.

Today, how do we chase down our foe in Afghanistan, or weaken them in Iraq? On horseback, as in the frontier wars. Rangers in training at Ft. Benning, Georgia, still study the theorems of Robert Rogers, a colonial warrior who formed Roger's Rangers. The U.S. army learned to conduct operations at night and in bad weather, an enduring legacy. Pacifying Indians and keeping them under control is also probably the first example of postwar peacekeeping done by the U.S. government, even if there was a lot of corruption, tragedy, and innocent deaths, and the greatest injustice to the Indians usually came after they had agreed to Euro-American demands.

But students need to know that there is much more to this conflict than popular culture has shown. They need to know what a varied and accomplished culture Native Americans possessed, that they put up an incredible fight, and that failure to unify beyond family or tribal limits contributed heavily to their ultimate defeat.

## The American Military and Society

[Peter Karsten](#) of the University of Pittsburgh outlined key points for students about the effects of war on society, the economy, and the individuals who served.

Direct effects of war include casualties, the devastation of private property and public infrastructure, and changes in territory. Physical casualties before WWII, when sulfa and plasma came into use, were extremely costly, and recent scholarship is helping us better understand the psychological consequences in the past of extensive combat. Civil War soldiers wrote home about the “hardening effects of war” and the dehumanizing effect of seeing so many casualties; songs and poems tell us of the shell-shocked soldiers of WWI, or those with Belleau Wood syndrome, after the June 1918 battle that included the bloodiest day in the Marines’ history until then.

Soldiers’ political perspectives and worldviews can also change. In studies, Revolutionary War soldiers from Pennsylvania and New York who served outside their own state were found to tend toward cosmopolitan political perspectives. They had seen more of the confederation and felt more keenly the need for strong bonds in the constitution. Like black veterans of WWI, they saw themselves as having played important roles in the creation of a republican form of government.

The economic consequences of war are wide-ranging, including changes in employment and production rates, home-front shortages, hoarding, inflation prices, rationing, and the use of public funds for weapons and manpower rather than infrastructure. There have also been spillover benefits for the U.S. of technological innovation arising from wartime efforts, including construction of roads, bridges and dams, the dredging of harbors, the mapping of the West, the surveying of the Pacific and its ports, and the Navy’s late 19th-century construction of steel vessels that made it possible for the next generation of architects to start building skyscrapers.

For centuries, most Americans regarded the volunteer as the ideal soldier. And indeed, the volunteers ran roughshod over foes in most of our wars. Early 19th-century songs celebrate the capabilities of our wonderful “mountain boys” and “Kentucky boys.” Through the colonial period, the diversity of militia policies reflected the differing needs of the tightly knit New England townships as opposed to the diffusely settled and socially stratified Chesapeake area. In early stages of settlement, every man was expected to play a role in the militia, but as a region’s economy developed, one saw something more like the modern selective service, with deferments for ferry boatmen, millers, attorneys, etc. Colonial New England standing forces were disproportionately made up of younger sons of yeoman farmers who had yet to inherit land.

By the late 18th century Americans saw enlistment as a voluntary act, a contract between equal parties. Economic incentives played no role, and volunteers were subject to no governance except their own bylaws. It was not until WWI that there was again a concerted, successful effort to compel service.

## The Spanish-American War and the Philippine War

[Brian McAllister Linn](#) of Texas A&M University discussed the difficulties of teaching these “unknown wars.” Many Americans find it hard to understand how isolated the island culture was and the complexity of the military missions involved in these wars. The Philippines comprise hundreds of islands, dozens of dialects and cultures. Because we tend to think about peoples as nation-states that have long been nations, it’s hard to explain that when Americans were fighting in the Philippines, they were not fighting nationalists with a concept of a Philippine nation.

By 1898, Americans were concerned that the war between Cuban nationalists and Spanish forces threatened U.S. investments in Cuba and that this would destabilize the entire Caribbean area and invite European intervention. As part of his administration’s pressure on Spain to resolve the conflict, McKinley sent the USS *Maine* to Havana. On February 15, the *Maine* was destroyed by an explosion that was quickly attributed and possibly wrongly to Spain. McKinley did not seek war, but war sentiment grew in the public and Congress, which on April 19 proclaimed Cuba free. War was declared on April 25.

The U.S. navy planned to blockade Cuba and mount a diversionary attack on the Spanish squadron in Manila Bay, where on May 1 Commodore Dewey’s small squadron wiped out the decrepit Spanish squadron. This victory rallied

public opinion and U.S. financial interests, but also set off some very serious events in the Philippines. Spain could no longer prevent Philippine insurgents from throwing Spain's isolated garrisons out. Emilio Aguinaldo, who had left the Philippines, returned and declared Philippine independence.

The war soon became a fiasco for the U.S. Army, which only had about 2,800 troops. McKinley called up over 200,000 volunteers, and Theodore Roosevelt resigned as assistant secretary of the Navy to form the Rough Riders. But there were no camps, weapons, tents, or food for these volunteers. Thousands fell sick and hundreds died.

In any event, the war was over before it began. After a chaotic departure from Tampa, 18,000 troops landed at Daiquiri and moved to besiege Santiago. By August 2, most American soldiers were sick. However, the Spanish were in even worse shape. On August 16 the Spanish surrendered, probably a week before the U.S. would have had to.

The Spanish-American War was followed by a far less "splendid" war, the Philippine War, 1892-1902. When U.S. ground troops captured Manila in 1898, they excluded Aguinaldo's army from the occupation. The Spaniards had essentially struck a deal with America to move in and then face off Aguinaldo. In December McKinley announced that the U.S. intended to annex the Philippines. Under his Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation, the U.S. Army was to be the forefront of an American mission to perform a host of civic reform duties and win Filipino support for American sovereignty. But Benevolent Assimilation did not resolve the issue of independence. Aguinaldo organized an Army of Liberation, and in February 1899, one of a series of skirmishes escalated into full-fledged fighting. The conflict was now called an insurrection, and Campaign Philippines became extremely costly to the U.S. Within a week 30-40 percent of the troops had been lost to disease and fatigue. After finally defeating Aguinaldo's army, as far as the U.S. was concerned, the war was over, and all that remained was to hold on until the civilian government could come in and take over.

Unfortunately, the conventional operations proved to be the easy part of the war. As the Americans garrisoned villages and towns, they attracted a great deal of resistance. Along with Benevolent Assimilation, there was also a great deal of repression and punitive raids. After December 1900, when several provinces had already been pacified, the Americans intensified the property destruction and coercion. The last campaigns were grim indeed.

The dominant interpretation in textbooks is that this was America's first Vietnam, that its "Kill and Burn" tactics suppressed Aguinaldo's legitimate nationalist revolution. Another interpretation is that the Philippines exemplify the ideal way to wage a counterinsurgency. What we can agree on is that the impacts of 1898 were huge. From a military non-entity in 1897, the U.S. emerged as a global power. But the war also led to Americans being increasingly pulled into Caribbean interventions and ultimately to conflict with Japan and to what we now accept as a norm: a large military state.

## World War I

[Michael Neiberg](#) of the University of Southern Mississippi discussed how, while WWI remains a living memory for Europeans, American students are unlikely to have a close association to the war, which for America was a brief event. For France and Great Britain especially, the Great War remains *the* war. The British suffered 908,000 deaths—more than twice the number of WWII—and the French an estimated 1.3 million, compared to 567,000 in WWII. Europe is still suffering from that huge loss of its best men and struggling to figure out how to cope with their memory. Europe's ambivalent attitude toward the U.S. and European unification come into sharper focus set against the backdrop of WWI.

Although the war did not bring destruction for Americans on the European scale, it nevertheless had deep impacts. It led to fundamental changes in the way Americans relate to the world. Woodrow Wilson committed America to international sponsorship of an idea of foreign policy based around the quest for democracy, capitalism, and freedom. Historians and teachers often contrast the interventionist Wilson to the supposedly isolationist years that followed. But the contrast is not entirely accurate. American isolationism, to the extent that it even existed, is best seen as simply a desire not to go to war.

The war had equally dramatic impacts on the American home front. Among the groups most deeply affected were African-Americans, thousands of whom moved north to take jobs in northern factories. Violence erupted when white

workers returned and demanded their jobs back. Many African-American died in the racial violence of the turbulent period 1917–23.

What makes this complex war ultimately so difficult to teach is the absence of a straightforward narrative. There is a simplicity in teaching the Civil War as the end of slavery and WWII as the destruction of Nazism and Japanese totalitarianism. WWI's narrative is much more complex. Nevertheless, it is a critical part of American history and deserves a greater place in the curriculum.

### Teaching American Military History: A Panel Discussion

**Paul Herbert**, executive director, First Division Museum, began his remarks by stipulating that wars are always terrible tragedies. The tendency in U.S. culture is therefore not to deal with wars except to talk about how we got into them, what they decided, and how bad they were. In fact, wars are always far more complicated than they seem at the outset.

Historically, we can point to very few cases where responsible leaders entered into war blithely, or deliberately seeing difficult consequences and then leading the country into war nonetheless. But providing for our common defense is a fundamental responsibility of U.S. citizens. So we need to include in the way we teach military history how wars are actually prosecuted—how the government, military services, commanders, and soldiers tried to solve the problems they faced.

FPRI Senior Fellow **Paul Dickler** reviewed teacher resources available at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org), [www.historyteacher.net](http://www.historyteacher.net), [www.pptpalooza.net](http://www.pptpalooza.net), the National Archives ([www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)), Federal Resources for Educational Excellence ([free.ed.gov](http://free.ed.gov)), Historycentral.com, Gilder Lehrman, Patrick Reagan at Tennessee Technical' military history website ([www.tntech.edu/history/military.html](http://www.tntech.edu/history/military.html)), the Vietnam Center at Texas Technical University, and the website of the University of Minnesota's Institute for Global Studies. Visits to battlefields and museums like Cantigny are invaluable, as are films (e.g., the first 28 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*), songs, and literature.

You may forward this email as you like provided that you send it in its entirety, attribute it to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and include our web address ([www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org)). If you post it on a mailing list, please contact FPRI with the name, location, purpose, and number of recipients of the mailing list.

If you receive this as a forward and would like to be placed directly on our mailing lists, send email to [FPRI@fpri.org](mailto:FPRI@fpri.org). Include your name, address, and affiliation. For further information, contact Alan Luxenberg at (215) 732-3774 x105.

- [Become an FPRI member](#)

Copyright © 2001–2009 Foreign Policy Research Institute, All Rights Reserved.

Site developed by [Argo Potomac](#)