

# WHAT IF *YOU* HAD BEEN IN CHARGE?

## EXPLORING HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND TABLETOP EXERCISES

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the advantages of the experiential learning concept when teaching through the use of historical case studies. Historical case studies that focus on decision-making and problem-solving become more engaging and interesting to students and teachers alike when played out as very simple tabletop exercises. When students struggle with the decisions faced by historical players through role-play and the carrying out of the consequences of their decisions using tangible models on a tabletop map they gain a depth of insight into the situation which is impossible to recreate through study and discussion alone. When combined with prior study and followed up by focused discussion, the tabletop exercise becomes deeply embedded in the students' memories because they have been actively involved as participants in the case study. This methodology is particularly effective when students are practicing professionals—since they can readily see the practical results of their decisions and usually take their role-playing quite seriously. Direct experiential manipulation has many advantages over electronic simulations because it involves more sensory stimulation. It also has great advantages as to cost, materials, and ease of execution. The paper concludes with an example of the tabletop case study exercise which involved mid-career military officer as students. KEY WORDS: historical case study, experiential learning, tabletop exercise*

### INTRODUCTION

*The Lessons of History.* As Mark Twain once famously said: “History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

History is made up of the collective experiences of human groups and individuals. As such, it is interesting both in itself—as the unique record of human experience—as well as a potential source of wisdom from which we can learn. But history is not repeatable; nor are cause and effect relationships simple in history. Each historical event or series of event is unique. It occurred at a certain time and place and was shaped by a complex set of environmental and societal factors impossible to reproduce and impossible to fully understand in all their complexity. Thus, the usual methods of experimental science or social science do not apply to historical inquiry as such nor do they serve as tools to ensure the validity of a particular interpretation. Because of these and other complications that arise from the epistemological problems posed by history, historical inquiry has relied and continues to rely on traditional language-based Aristotelian logic and methods of empirical critical in-

quiry. Despite these difficulties, most people intuitively believe that history, as Mark Twain's celebrated witticism indicates, stands in an analogous relationship to the present. This means that, as the repository of collective human experience, history may offer lessons, in the form of analogical situations or examples that may serve as food for thought that contemporary decision-makers may use to decide on a course of action or that broaden their intellectual horizons as they search for a suitable solution. This has led to the use of the historical case study both as an object lesson and as a practical exercise in decision-making. Case studies are particularly useful in fields such as diplomacy, foreign policy, political and military strategy, and military operations and tactics. The classic exposition of the use of historical cases as a basis for understanding strategic decision-making is given in (Neustadt & May: 1986).

*The Historical Case Study.* The case study methodology somewhat artificially isolates a historical event and submits it to critical enquiry from various perspectives using the available sources of information. Notwithstanding the many methodological and epistemological problems posed by the case study method as compared to more rigorous social-science methodologies, it is arguably one of the best ways to elicit those elusive lessons of history for contemporary practitioners of applied disciplines such as statesmanship and military strategy. Some of the problems inherent in case studies include the arbitrariness of the definition of what constitutes a historical event, the criteria used in the selection of each particular case study, the limited or uneven availability of sources, the biases inherent in those sources, and the conscious and unconscious prejudices of the researchers themselves. Despite all of these obstacles, the richness of actual lived human experiences and the analogies and parallels such experiences offer to contemporary situations make the case study method a rich educational tool—particularly for professionals in applied disciplines. Thus, military historians at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth Kansas, routinely publish case studies intended for military practitioners. For a good example see (Gott: 2006). A solid introduction to the uses of case study methodologies in social science is given by (George & Bennett: 2005). However, as (Gaddis: 2002) points out, this should be supplemented by a recognition of the difficulties inherent in the case study method from the point of view of the historian.

*Baseline Assumptions.* This paper is based on the premise that history does offer a rich source of lessons that can be helpful, not necessarily as models to be copied, but as examples which can and should be taken in consideration for the analogies and parallels they may offer to dealing with contemporary problems. In other words, we accept history's contingent nature

while recognizing that it does not provide cookie-cutter solutions to present-day problems. It also assumes that despite the problems and limitations already mentioned, the case study method is a productive way to engage with history in a critical way. Furthermore, whereas, the idea of alternative history is not valid as a form of historical inquiry, it is the natural result of the acting out or playing out of many historical case studies. As such it offers rich possibilities in what “might have been” and on what conceivably “could happen” in analogous situations in the future. Nonetheless, it is important to use caution when thinking about alternative historical outcomes. As historian John Lewis Gaddis points out: “...to distinguish between laboratory and non-laboratory science. I made the point that historians can never actually rerun history, any more than astronomers, geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists can rerun time. But I also emphasized that these non-laboratory scientists do such experiments routinely in their minds.” (Gaddis: 2002). Historical tabletop exercises allow a group of students to work out this imaginary experiment in concrete, experiential terms. This provides them with a tactile, sensory-rich experience that is highly conducive to learning, and more importantly, to retaining the lessons learned.

*The Speculative Essay based on a Historical Case.* The acting out of a historical scenario may be done individually in writing by asking the participants to explore the possibilities which could potentially have occurred by changing some of the variables in the historical scenario. This is obviously a highly hypothetical imaginative exercise but it does have educational value because it forces the students to think of alternative outcomes which must be logical, plausible, and bound within the limits of their context. Such an exercise often takes the form of posing a “What would have happened if?” type of question such as “What would have happened if Britain would have intervened on the side of the Confederacy during the American Civil War?” or “What would have happened if the U.S. had not dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima? When expanded into a speculative essay any explanation provides the student the opportunity to play with plausible variables as inputs and then examine potential alternative outcomes from well-known historical situations. This exercise forces the student to come to grips with historical variables and their relative significance in an interactive way. This is not *doing history* in any meaningful way; it is *using history* as a way into exploring alternative possibilities for problem-solving.

It is important to point out that speculative exploration of alternative outcomes does not mean giving free rein to the imagination and ignoring the historical circumstances obtaining during the event being studied. Speculation, to be intellectually useful, must always keep in mind what was possible or even likely given the bounds of the cultural context and the particular historical period in which the events occurred. Once again Gaddis makes the point that: “...the use of counterfactuals in history has got to be highly disciplined. You can’t throw multiple counterfactuals into the pot, because this makes it impossible to pinpoint the effects of any one of them. You can’t experiment with single variables that weren’t within the range of the technology or the culture of the times.” (Gaddis: 2002) As we shall see, this also applies to the historical role-playing exercise.

*The Historical Role-Playing Exercise.* Another, even more intensive way to explore a historical case study is to present it

as a collective role-playing exercise in a class or study group where each participant would play the role of one of the historical decision-makers and perhaps introduce other variables which were not present in the original historical situation into the mix. Obviously, no one can approach a historical case study from an entirely fresh perspective. As mentioned before, history is something that happens once, and it happens under a unique set of circumstances which are by their very nature not repeatable. However, historical case studies may be modified by changing some of the inputs that went into the making of the event. In a role-playing exercise, the basic parameters normally are defined by the historical scenario; the changes introduced are mainly the decisions made by the players. The participants in the exercise will play out the historical case. They are constrained by the historical, cultural, and technological possibilities available at a particular historical juncture, but they are free to choose other courses of action as long as they are appropriate to the historical framework. The results can then be compared to the original historical case which serves as the base for the exercise and the ensuing discussion could be a rich source of lessons from thinking and playing with history.

Students or participants asked to role play should first become familiar with the socio-historical context of the exercise. The use of primary sources, memoirs, letters, transcripts, and other materials provide invaluable insights into the thinking that led to the historical decisions. The creation of emotional distance may also be a valuable tool in this exercise. This forces the players to change their preferred frame of reference and assess problems more objectively. For example, students may be assigned the more unfamiliar roles or they may be asked to play the roles of those historical players with which they do not identify themselves very closely or those which they actively dislike. These techniques create a sense of distance that may help students understand some of the more objective pressures and dynamics that may have occurred or which are likely to occur in similar circumstances. In any case, despite the epistemological distance that exists between what really occurred and the results of the role-playing exercise, participants in a historical role-playing exercise will likely gain valuable insights into both history and the challenges posed to decision-makers by a particular *type* of problem.

*The Historical Tabletop Exercise.* An even more involved and sensory-rich experience takes place when the case study is translated into a tabletop exercise for the participants. A tabletop exercise is perhaps the most sensory-rich experience available for acting out a historical case study. It can incorporate all the elements mentioned above, particularly if it is coupled with a speculative essay and followed up with a discussion of what took place. The tabletop exercise provides a vivid and thus long-lasting impression which the participants will likely remember in the future. Some authors propose that when teachers use concrete experiences, credible situations, and create a sense of emotional involvement in their students the ideas presented and discussed will “stick” in the mind with lasting results because people tend to remember what is distinctive and colorful. Thus: “Concrete, sensory experiences etch ideas into our brain—think of how much easier it is to remember a song than a credit card number, even though a song contains much more data!” (Heath & Heath: 2008)

To prepare a tabletop exercise the key elements in a histori-

cal case must be translated to visual and tactile objects such as maps, counters and small representative objects such as miniature soldiers and terrain. Case studies which are based on military campaigns and battles lend themselves particularly well to the tabletop. But cases based on diplomatic relations or commercial interchange may also be adapted to the tabletop. The popular game *Diplomacy* is an example of the former while the industrial administration game described by, Barçante Marcelo Correa et al. is an example of the latter (Barçante, Maciel, Correa, et. al.: 2011) Commercial board games often are useful as a source of ideas and as a point of departure for classroom exercises. An example of a well-known strategic level military game is the classic *Axis and Allies* and its derivatives. Normally the rules of these games tend to be more complex than what is practical in a class session and also they may be driven by the need to determine winners and losers or by the desire to create a “balanced scenario” so they are normally not appropriate for use in the classroom without modification. But many such games are useful as points of departure and the maps and playing pieces may be adapted to classroom needs. Another source of ideas that may be used in the classroom are the many rules sets intended for wargaming with miniatures. Some examples of both role-playing and miniatures rules in the context of a specific historical period are given in the book *Wargaming in History* by Simon MacDowall (MacDowall: 1991).

When selecting a historical case study for use as a tabletop exercise it is important that the event be of interest and significance to the participants. It is also important that it fit within the learning objectives of the course and that a sufficient amount of information exist so that participants can gain familiarity with the historical and social context in which the event occurred. The more information available; the richer the experience will tend to be. Since most case studies are intended as decision-making exercises the most important information is that which relates to the actual decision-making process and to the context in which this occurred. From an educational perspective it is important to realize that in order to reap the full benefits of a tabletop exercise the historical case study selected must be significant to the overall content of the course and not be merely of peripheral importance. A tabletop exercise, even a relatively simple one, represents a significant investment in time, effort, and resources and should therefore be conducted only when the benefits of such an exercise clearly advance the educational objectives for a given lesson, and preferably, those of the entire course. It is also very important to select and model those aspects of reality that are deemed to be the most significant in order to design the exercise around them. Reality is such a complex web of relationships between persons, objects, and events that it is impossible to model all of this reality and make sense of it. Therefore, exercise design is a selective process which frames reality so that it becomes intelligible and may be manipulated in reference to the selected parameters using known procedures. It is important to remember that the effectiveness of a tabletop exercise is not a function of its complexity nor is it a function of a design that portends to include as much detail as possible, or of one that aims to be as faithful to reality as possible. Often, the most effective exercises are effective precisely because they offer a simplified version of reality in which certain parameters are selected for special attention. As has been pointed out in a number of studies: “a higher level of fidelity [to reality] does

not translate into more effective training or enhanced learning.” (Feinstein & Cannon: 2001). This is important because the goal of a tabletop exercise is to learn through experience and active participation. The exercise is a vehicle for learning, not an end in itself. Therefore, exercise design should be driven by the desired learning objectives.

*An Example of a Tabletop Exercise in Class.* Our example is a tabletop exercise based on the events that took place during the siege of the city of San Juan in Puerto Rico by a British combined naval and land attack force in the spring of 1797. The exercise was conducted as part of a course entitled “The History and Cultures of the Greater Caribbean.” This is a graduate level area-studies course that explores the historical interactions between Native American, European, and African ethnic groups and cultures in the formation of a distinctive Caribbean cultural environment and its relations with the European powers and other regions of the Americas. Emphasis is placed on the geographical, cultural, political, economic, and military forces that shaped this new environment from the indigenous cultures before the European encounter to the present. The Siege of San Juan by the British in 1797 was a significant event in the political and cultural development of the island of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean region as a whole; a different outcome would have had profound implications for the subsequent history of the region, thus this event provided a good theme for a tabletop exercise that would help focus and integrate the various learning objectives of the course.

*Students.* All the participants in the class were serving military officers in the rank of major who were being prepared for positions of higher responsibility by partaking in the equivalent of a year-long professional course of studies. Thus, the selection of a historical case study with long-term strategic and political implications was an appropriate choice as the focus of the exercise since it not only reflected and integrated the learning objectives of the specific elective, but also many of the overarching learning objectives of the entire course of study.

The fact that the event is well-documented and that the personal diaries of the opposing commanders are available makes it all the more appropriate for the students since they can study how the commanders perceived the situation each day. Despite their common military experience all student officers had different backgrounds and specialties; they were a mix of male, female, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and Canadian Army officers. This diversity and the fact that the historical actors had very different technological capabilities from those of modern military forces pointed in the direction of framing an exercise designed to focus on the broad decisions made by the historical players rather than on the technical details of their environment. This was beneficial because the overarching aims of the class and the entire course of study focused on analyzing and finding approaches to solve problems of a broad nature rather than on solving narrow technical problems.

In previous class sessions the students had reached an understanding of the history and cultural development of the Caribbean area leading to the situation that formed the subject of the case study. They prepared for the exercise by reading a narrative history of the Siege of San Juan and reviewing the standardized Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) which they would use as their problem-solving framework during the exercise. Military leaders have always assessed situations in order to

decide on what course of action to take. However, the methodologies used to accomplish these things have varied widely throughout history. Since one of the overarching goals of the course is to help serving officers develop their problem-solving skills, they were encouraged to use current methodologies even if from the historical perspective these would obviously be anachronistic in their present form. Again, the purpose of the exercise was not to recreate history but to use a historical case study as an opportunity for learning.

*Setting the Stage.* To set the stage for the exercise the instructor provided a brief overview of the strategic situation and the campaign objectives of the historical players. He also described the capabilities and limitations of the opposing forces in some detail and provided information on the terrain, sea conditions, the current and expected weather, and the social context which could impact operations. He then divided the students into two groups: the British and the Spanish. A stylized map of the area of operations drawn on a cloth was set on the table and the “playing pieces”—miniature models of soldiers, ships, artillery and equipment—were given to the participants.

The students were given more detailed written information on terrain, weather, enemy and friendly forces, victory conditions, and other significant data. They were then asked to conduct a “mission-analysis exercise,” given an appropriate amount of time to do this and to make ready to begin the exercise. Finally, before allowing each group to proceed with the planning process, the instructor assigned various roles to the students and instructed them to work as collaborative teams rather than assign one student overall responsibility for each team. This preparatory phase set the conditions for what would follow and ensured that all the players had a common base of knowledge before the exercise started. It also exercised skills that are critical to military officers. Telling the students to work as a team created an environment favorable to the open discussion of the possibilities for a variety of decisions and the outcomes of the actions taken within the small group.

*Conduct of the Exercise.* Once the two groups analyzed the situation and came up with a general course of action. They were told that they could “play out their plan on the table.” The exercise was played out in alternating turns each of which represented a variable interval of time ranging from battlefield actions of a few hours to a few days of scouting and maneuvering on the battlefield. There were no rigid rules so the exercise was conducted with the instructor serving as “umpire”—both guiding the students in their discussions and moves, as well as adjudicating the result of these moves in the style of an old-style Prussian *Kriegsspiel* or (wargame in German). The *Kriegsspiel* is the grandfather of all modern wargames and simulations. As a result of the crises of the Napoleonic Wars, the Prussian Army created a permanent group of officers to serve as a general staff to the Army commander and advisors to the king. As part of their education and training they participated in tabletop exercises with counters to simulate the units on the battlefield. These exercises were led and arbitrated by experienced senior officers. Thus, decisions were adjudicated based on likely outcomes based on experience. Later, formal rules were developed based on probabilistic outcomes decided on the basis of die rolls. These basic ideas have been developed in great detail by modern wargames designers—both military and civilian—and have become the basis of both manual wargames as well as

electronic simulations. The advantages of an interactive experiential exercise became clearly evident to the leaders of the Prussian Army. As Philip Sabin explains: “...Baron von Reisswitz, a civilian adviser to the Prussian court at Bresslau, managed in 1811 to obtain royal patronage for his *Kriegsspiel* game, which simulated military operations using a sand table containing a relief model of terrain, over which wooden blocks representing various military units were manoeuvred. Von Reisswitz’s son later developed the game further with his brother officers and published the rules in 1824. Soon afterwards, General von Muffling [...] watched a demonstration. Although initially skeptical, the General famously exclaimed at the end, “This is not a game! This is training for war! I must recommend it to the whole army!”” (Sabin: 2012).

Our tabletop exercise followed the basic *Kriegsspiel* idea but used current U.S. Army problem-solving and planning models that the students understood from their experience and which had been treated in detail in other parts of the curriculum. Despite the intervention of the senior officers as “umpires” all players were encouraged to speak up and express their opinions and sometimes these opinions helped shape the outcome. As a minimum this give and take allowed for discussion of unforeseen situations and alternative results. The students enjoyed and profited from the exercise because it was fun, interactive, and built upon both their knowledge of the historical situation and their knowledge of and experience with the military-decision making process. Interestingly, in the end, the results achieved were very similar to the historic results and the ensuing discussion highlighted this.

*Discussion.* The final phase of a practical tabletop exercise is the discussion. Its purpose is to review what happened from the perspective of the participants and share each individual’s experience so that all can benefit. In our simulation, each person had the opportunity to explain his or her decisions and thought processes and the others could comment from their own perspective. The main role of the instructor in this phase is to guide the discussion, making sure that all participants are able to express their experiences and their perspectives to the benefit of all. The instructor must also ensure that the discussion remains focused on what happened and why it happened, on the lessons learned, and on comparing the outcome of the tabletop exercise with the historical case study. With no exceptions, the students expressed that they had reached a much deeper understanding of the campaign after the exercise than they ever imagined was possible. They also thoroughly enjoyed the class and will likely remember the key points discussed much more vividly because of the intellectual, physical, and emotional involvement required in this type of exercise.

*Conclusions and Recommendations.* In conclusion, the case study methodology when combined with a simple tabletop exercise creates a rich sensory environment that invites participation not only through the intellect but through emotional involvement and sensory experiences that not only enhance the learning experience but bring it to life in a vivid way. Such rich experiences tend to produce memorable and long-lasting impressions on the participants. It is important to highlight the unique advantages that such a tabletop experience has over alternative methodologies. For example, much effort and enormous amounts of money are routinely expended by military forces in very complex electronic simulations. These exercises attempt to

provide a thorough representation of actual terrain, weapon's capabilities, and all manner of technical detail, and are built according to very complex mathematical models. Although these types of simulations may be useful for some purposes, they are certainly very poor vehicles for learning and exercising decision-making skills—as someone who has suffered through a fair share of them in a military career spanning twenty-eight years can attest. Simple exercises which manipulate physical objects take advantage of the human need for physical contact. Objects that can be grasped and manipulated by the hands have a power to communicate a sense of immediacy through touch. When small objects are used to as symbols for other physical objects—such as military units—the players gain a sense of ownership over their own actions and these become impressed in their minds. This involvement of the senses is what makes tabletop exercises such rich experiential learning experiences. Another significant advantage is that tabletop exercises using physical objects are very low cost compared to electronic applications. In fact, as an instructor, the author created the map of the operational area himself and prepared many of the playing pieces as well. To the students this exercise was *the* highlight of the course and was effective because it offered the opportunity for active role playing and was thought to be “fun.” From the educational perspective, it successfully integrated many of the learning objectives of the class and offered the students an appreciation for the rich historical context in which the event occurred. This was true only because such an exercise truly involves the whole of our human capabilities—intellect, emotion, and the senses.

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