

Bring back battlefield observers

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23 February 2023

Version 3.2

Abstract

Which lessons is the United States missing from foreign wars? Without observers on the battlefields, we may never know. On-the-ground observers of foreign conflicts could analyze assumptions and drive doctrinal development. Based on a comparison of six historical cases, this article concludes that observer missions should publish a single view of a conflict based on the findings of a task organized team based on clear and authoritative guidance. Despite changes in both warfare and politics since the observer's hay-day in the late 19th Century, modern observer teams would provide valuable information and inputs into debate about the character of conflict.

Only warfare drags doctrine through the mud and blood of combat. For the last twenty years, the United States drew lessons from their conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the United States looks towards future battlefields, new sources of information are necessary.

Foreign wars offer an opportunity to learn from the mud and blood of others. Journalists, think-thanks, and others debate the lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine, while other recent wars likely also have important lessons for the United States. But without expert military observers on the ground, the joint force may miss information important to prepare for future conflicts. To ensure that the changing character of warfare is captured, observer missions should publish a timely, single view of a conflict based on the findings of a task organized, expert team based on clear and authoritative guidance.

Combat observation missions succeed when the information they capture from foreign battlefields leads to debate about military concepts, and, ideally, makes their military more successful in future conflicts.¹ This analysis focuses on observations of military observers from the United States on foreign battlefields either during or immediately following an armed conflict in which the United States was not a belligerent.²

The United States should dispatch observer missions when it wants to learn from foreign conflicts. “Diffusion” often spreads ideas over time, but a civilian or military leader dispatching such a mission would signal an openness to new ideas—critical for innovation.³ As standard military procedures often impede integrating new ideas, foreign crises or high-profile failures may serve as an exemplar for the joint force.⁴ However, this paper does not aim to present a final determination on *when* an observer mission is suitable, instead focusing on how to structure such a mission.

Given that a senior military leader wants to learn from a foreign war, this paper describes a proven method over four sections. First, I explore the barriers to information from foreign conflicts and how observers cut through those barriers. Second, I describe the factors likely to be

¹ Kelly P. Alexander, “Marine Corps Combat Observer Program: ‘Messengers of Warfighting in the 21st Century’” (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, April 18, 2002), 3 and Jack S. Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 287.

² See Thomas S. Grodecki, “Military Observers 1815–1975” (Washington DC: US Army Center for Military History, March 16, 1988), for a longer discussion of types of military observer missions.

³ Nina Kollars, “Genius and Mastery in Military,” *Survival* 59, no. 2 (May 2017): 126., Ryan Grauer, “Moderating Diffusion: Military Bureaucratic Politics and the Implementation of German Doctrine in South America, 1885–1914,” *World Politics*, 67, no. 2 (April 2015): 268–312, Frank G. Hoffman, “Wartime Innovation and Learning,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (September 2021): 101, Deborah D. Avant, “The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine: Hegemons in Peripheral Wars,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1993): 427.

⁴ Colin J. Bennett, “How States Utilize Foreign Evidence,” *Journal of Public Policy* 11, no. 1 (March 1991): 49, Dan Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliances, and World Wars*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 31–32.

associated with successful observer missions. Third, I compare six observer missions. Finally, I discuss the results and conclude with recommendations for the joint force.

Providing unique information

Information from foreign conflicts can improve outcomes in future conflicts by invigorating debate about warfighting concepts and methods. Success might take the form of debate on or incorporation of ideas from foreign battlefields into military doctrine, organizations, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy.

Unfortunately, no entity provides authoritative analysis on the conduct of foreign military conflicts. The United States' robust intelligence apparatus does not prioritize collection on how war is changing and the limited information collected on foreign wars is largely classified. Developers of concepts and doctrine, and engaged military officers, must then acquire their information from less expert open-source resources like the media or private analysts who track foreign militaries on social media.⁵

Military observers should step into this gap. Dispatched by an authoritative source and with appropriate expertise, observers could glean lessons important from foreign military conflicts to drive conceptual and doctrinal development within the joint force.

Barriers for information from foreign conflicts

Three significant barriers prevent military conceptual development efforts from systematically integrating information from foreign wars: propaganda from the combatants, the low priority of information from foreign conflicts for the United States' intelligence agencies, and classification of the limited information collected.⁶

First, combatant propaganda effort obscures key warfighting lessons. In war, both sides have incentives to promote their successes and mask their failures as they seek support from domestic and international audiences. States also must balance what they reveal about their activities with what they conceal from their adversaries. Ukraine provides a perfect case, enlisting advertising executives early in the war, banning publication of casualty figures, and tightly controlling photos of Ukrainian dead.⁷ This propaganda can lead observers to draw faulty conclusions. For example, clips of Ukrainian soldiers destroying Russian tanks with Javelin missiles in the Battle

⁵ Robert Lee, "Moscow's Compellence Strategy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (blog), January 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/01/moscow-s-compellence-strategy/>; Robert Lee, "Rob Lee (@RALee85) / Twitter," Twitter, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RALee85>.

⁶ See Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs*, 33. Reiter suggests the foreign party's degree of secrecy and institutions to facilitate lesson sharing as important factors.

⁷ Morgan Meaker, "How Ukraine Is Winning the Propaganda War," *Wired*, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/ukraine-propaganda-war/>.

of Kiev led observers to conclude that tanks, along with fighter jets and warships were “being pushed into obsolescence.”⁸ However, that obsolescence is hard to square with more recent Ukrainian requests for M-1 Abrams and German Leopard tanks.⁹ Peering through propaganda is hard, and presents a barrier that intelligence agencies might be able to penetrate, if they were so inclined.

Second, information on the conduct of wars is not a high intelligence priority. Our robust national and service-level intelligence organizations rightly focus on answering the biggest questions for national-level policymakers. For example, the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency assess the decision making of foreign leaders, strategic trends, and nuclear weapons among other issues.¹⁰ Of note, the Defense Intelligence Agency posts defense attachés across the world to openly collect information from foreign capitals. Though their roots lie in 19th and early 20th century battlefield observation missions, attachés rarely observe battlefields today.¹¹ The information attachés do collect is then transmitted through classified systems for limited distribution. Unfortunately, our national intelligence agencies do not prioritize the collection or analysis of information on the conduct of foreign wars because of their focus on informing strategic decision-making.

The third barrier to integrating foreign war information into doctrine is intelligence classification. To access the limited information on foreign wars collected, individuals must possess a clearance, the “need to know” specific information, and access to classified information, usually through a classified computer network. All these factors restrict conceptual and doctrinal development, which often occurs at unclassified levels.¹²

Structural barriers inhibit learning from foreign military conflicts. Enter observers.

Importance of observers

Studies of the United States’ observer missions find consensus on their importance for conceptual and doctrinal development. Comparative studies by Brent Stirling and Jesse Harden

⁸ Phillips Payson O’Brien, “War Will Never Be This Bulky Again,” *The Atlantic*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/ukraine-russia-putin-war/638423/>.

⁹ “Inside Washington’s about-Face on Sending Tanks to Ukraine,” *POLITICO*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/25/inside-washingtons-about-face-on-sending-tanks-to-ukraine-00079560>.

¹⁰ “About CIA,” accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/about/>; “About DIA,” accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.dia.mil/about/>.

¹¹ John Prout, “The Origins of the Military Attaché Corps,” *American Intelligence Journal* 21, no. 1/2 (2002): 47–55.

¹² Some exceptions exist. For example, see Gwendolyn R. DeFilippi, Stephen Francis Nowak, and Bradford Harlow Baylor, “The Importance of Lessons Learned in Joint Force Development,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (June 2018) that describes how the Joint Lessons Learned Program collects lessons learned, but is not focused on foreign conflicts. Additionally, magazines like the Army’s *Operational Environment Watch* translates sections of foreign articles and provides commentary on foreign military topics, but not with sufficient detail to drive concept development.

offer the broadest lessons. Sterling, in his 2021 *Other People's Wars*, investigates the United States' experience with observers, concluding that they are most effective when they compile a complete and accurate history, maximize information dissemination, consider how other nations interpret a conflict, and look for lessons that may not comport with our concepts of conflict.¹³ Likewise, Harden, in his thesis written at the United States Army Command and General Staff College, defined three principles for observers based on his analysis of the 1855 Crimean War Commission and 1870 Sheridan expedition: objective and neutral observation, detailed and appropriate analysis, and a timely and complete report.¹⁴

Significant evidence from studies of specific observer missions also shows their effect on doctrine. Matthew Moten, in his doctoral thesis, described how the reports of the 1855 Crimean Commission immediately "became the most current and useful text in its field of military science."¹⁵ Likewise, Secretary of the Army Elihu Root incorporated *The Armies of Asia and Europe*, the report of Brevet Major General Upton, as a key input into his 1899 plan to reform the Army.¹⁶ By driving doctrinal reform, recommendations from observer missions can reformulate how the Army organizes or fights.¹⁷

Finally, observers can also lead to successful innovation by influencing technological or material changes. Moten argues the Crimean Commissions "were successful if measured by the standard of material additions to the army inventory and organization." The smooth-bore Napoleon cannon practically defined artillery during the Civil War, while the Commission also returned with knowledge of desiccated food, new ideas about casualty care, a peek into how the telegraph and railroad would transform war.¹⁸ However, others caution against observations that steer a military onto a completely new path. Decisions to invest in new technologies should be carefully considered to ensure the observed lesson is valid for the requirements of the United States.¹⁹

However, changes to doctrine are insufficient unless officers are educated on the changes in doctrine and trained accordingly. After the Russo-Japanese War, the Army failed to integrate the

¹³ Sterling, 283-288.

¹⁴ Jesse Lee Harden, "First United States Army Observers of Military Conflicts in Post Napoleonic Europe (1855-1871)" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, June 12, 2015), 55, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA624015>.

¹⁵ Matthew Moten, "The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession" (Thesis, Rice University, 1996), 391, <https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/16972>.

¹⁶ Chanley M. Mohney, "Lessons From the East: Nothing New That's Not in the Books;" Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, May 1, 2000), 1, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA378244>.

¹⁷ John L Ronjue, "From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973-1982," TRADOC Historical Monograph Series (Fort Monroe, VA: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, June 1984), 104.

¹⁸ Moten, 394.

¹⁹ Paul Barnes, "Learning the Wrong Lessons: Biases, the Rejection of History, and Single-Issue Zealotry in Modern Military Thought," Modern War Institute, February 4, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/learning-the-wrong-lessons-biases-the-rejection-of-history-and-single-issue-zealotry-in-modern-military-thought/>.

observer's suggestions though their findings were taught in professional military education venues. In fact, Mohney found that "academic instruction at the military schools, such as the Army War College, and the writings of officers in the professional military journals did pass on lessons from the Japanese campaign in Manchuria."²⁰ By changing both doctrine and the content of military education, successful military innovation is more likely.

Despite the benefits, the Yom Kippur War of 1973—nearly fifty years ago—marked the last time the Joint Force undertook a significant observer mission. The average number of years between observer missions is 26.2 with a standard deviation of 15.8.²¹ This means that the 49-year gap between the Yom Kippur War and today is well outside the typical range.

What accounts for the long gap in observer missions? The reasons are not clear, but may have to do with three factors. First, before World War I, military officers shared a sense of collegiality and willingness to share experiences. Armies during that period were also relatively less busy, freeing officers for the lengthy travel required. Second, countries have become relatively less willing to allow observers to roam around their countryside. Borders and population control measures have become more stringently enforced in many areas, reducing freedom of movement for observers. For example, the post-World War II Cold War closed many areas for observers from the United States. Additionally, the United States was party to many of the significant Cold War conflicts, eliminating the need for observers. Finally, since 1973, engagement in the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan likely crowded out the inclination to learn from foreign conflicts. However, observers at the Yom Kippur War demonstrate these barriers can be overcome if the United States decides to send observers.

The stakes then are high for observers sent abroad. Not only must they survive and thrive on a foreign battlefield, they must synthesize their findings and make clear recommendations. In the next section, I describe factors associated with successful observation missions.

Methodology

This paper employs a comparative case methodology to determine which factors are most strongly associated with successful observer missions.²² Relying primarily on secondary sources, this paper does not seek to render novel determinations of the success of historical observer missions. Instead, both a mission's factors and success are based on evaluation of primary and

²⁰ Moten, "The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession," 2.

²¹ This average and standard deviation are based on the number of years between the six observer missions from the Crimean War to the Yom Kippur War.

²² David Collier, "The Comparative Method," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II* (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association), accessed February 20, 2022, <https://polisci.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/people/u3827/APSA-TheComparativeMethod.pdf>.

secondary sources. Characterizations of mission factors and success are based on statements in at least two secondary sources.

Based on a wide review of the literature on observers and doctrinal change, I compare cases across five factors. The factors described below include taking place when the United States is at peace; a talented, task-organized team; clear and authoritative guidance; unlimited access to the battlefield and other observers; and single, timely and coherent report with recommendations that is widely disseminated.

Each description includes directional arrows that show the trends across the cases summarized in the table that follows the case descriptions. ↑ indicates better performance, ↔ indicates mixed performance, and ↓ indicates weak performance in that variable.

An observer mission is considered successful (↑) based on (1) attestation in secondary sources of debate about the war's significance for military conceptual discourse, and/or (2) general agreement in secondary sources of the observers reports leading to improved outcomes in the next conflicts. Mixed success is represented with ↔ and failure with ↓.

Peacetime. Observer missions are most successful when they significantly precede subsequent conflicts. Missions are considered *fully peacetime* (F) if the United States was more than ten years from either fighting a major war, and *partially peacetime* (P) if more than five years from a major war, and *not peacetime* if within five years of the next major war (N).

Team. Effective teams (↑) draw highly talented individuals at the appropriate experience level with a breadth of military specialties suitable for the assigned task. *Less suitable teams* (↔) may have less talented individuals, or a mismatch between experience or specialty and the task. *Poorly organized* (↓) teams will lack in all three areas.

Guidance. To ensure focus, the most effective military commissions will have *clear guidance from an authoritative source* (↑) to validate an emerging warfighting concept. *Less effective guidance* (↔) could either come from an authoritative source but lack specificity or come from a less authoritative source but be highly specific. *Poor guidance* (↓) would lack both authority and specificity.

Access. Teams with *unlimited access* (↑) can freely observe the battlefield and talk with other observers, while teams with *limited access* (↔) might have either battlefield observations or access to other observers limited. *Restricted access* (↓) will significantly limit both battlefield observation and discussions with other observers.

Report. Effective teams (↑) publish a timely and coherent report with recommendations that is widely disseminated, while less effective teams (↔) might limit the dissemination of their report, be tardy in their publication, or produce narrowly parochial recommendations. Ineffective reports (↓) will reach limited audiences, and be late and narrow in their recommendations.

In all, review of the literature on combat observer missions suggests these five variables are associated with success. In the next section, I compare six cases to determine the most important.

Historical Observer Case Comparison

This analysis includes six cases of American observer missions between 1855 and 1973. Cases focus on prominent American examples of observer missions as historical evidence is available and that evidence suggests these had the greatest impact on military policy. Furthermore, this study assumes that each observation and factor is independent; a mission's successes and factors are not related within an expedition or other expeditions.

These cases cover nearly the entire history of the United States, drawing from individual expeditions, small observer teams, and through the advent of attachés as important information sources during conflict.²³ Notably, I could find no record of observers to prominent counter-insurgency campaigns in the 20th century alongside the French in Algeria or British in Malaysia.²⁴ United Nations observer, professional development, and individual training missions are excluded, as these teams do not include modernization or theory-testing as primary goals. Excluding smaller and lesser-known cases might overstate the ability of observer missions to lead to significant change.²⁵

Below, I first briefly discuss each case and then summarize each case's variables in the table.

Crimean War (1855)

The Delafield Commission failed to significantly alter the Army because of their late, parochial, and narrow observations. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis dispatched "three of his ablest military officers" with clear guidance to learn from the conflict in an attempt to modernize the Army.²⁶ Once in Europe, the commission sought access to French, British, Russian, and Ottoman sides of the conflict. Unfortunately, due to political tensions between the United States and

²³ See Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *The RUSI Journal* 138, no. 1 (February 1, 1993): 26–30. This paper seeks to balance width, depth, context, and concision to present useful analysis of combat observers.

²⁴ Colonel Charles Beckworth created the modern Delta Force based on his experience with the British Special Air Service in Malaysia, but he was an exchange officer, not an observer as defined in this article.

²⁵ This analysis also excludes similar, but non-official recent cases like "warm" battlefield tours by West Point cadets, and trips by civilians or retired military personnel.

²⁶ Harden, "First United States Army Observers of Military Conflicts in Post Napoleonic Europe (1855-1871)," 15.

several European powers, they failed to access battlefields during the conflict. After the conflict, they accessed French and British trench lines and abandoned Russian works.²⁷ After returning, the commission published three separate and parochial volumes between 1857 and 1861. The final volume was published four years after Davis left the War Department and seven months after the start of the American Civil War.²⁸ However, technical observations did further the development of the minié bullet and Napoleon cannon that proved valuable during the Civil War.

Franco-Prussian War (1870)

General Sheridan's observations of the Franco-Prussian war failed to drive change in the Army. Hearing about the outbreak of war, Sheridan proposed and obtained permission from President Grant to observe the Franco-Prussian War.²⁹ Lacking guidance, Sheridan and his longtime aide traveled across Europe, but focused more on personal travel and sightseeing than military observations. He only toured Prussian military facilities and was co-opted by the Prussian elite into feeling disdain for the French side of the conflict.³⁰ Finally, Sheridan failed to submit timely or thorough reports. He sent one letter to President Grant six months before the end of the war and published comprehensive findings almost twenty years later as part of his memoir.

Russo-Japanese War (1904-5)

Observations from the Russo-Japanese War succeeded by stimulating "nearly ten years of intense but inconclusive debate about its exact military meaning" though it failed to drive major change because of a lack of clear conclusions.³¹ Over the course of the Russo-Japanese War, the United States dispatched twelve officers to join the Japanese field armies though only five observed active combat.³² With regular guidance from the War Department, several of the observers authored volumes on their observations from across the war. General John Pershing described his experiences in Manchuria as "Invaluable" for his later leadership during World War I alongside five other officers who served with distinction in that conflict. The war was also a "turning point" in the professionalization of observers into attachés.³³ Unfortunately, the lack of clear conclusions, questions about the validity of the conflict for the American context, and a constrained budget prevented changes to the military going into World War I.

World War I (1914-1917)

²⁷ Harden, 23.

²⁸ Harden, 24.

²⁹ Harden, 30.

³⁰ Harden, 31.

³¹ John T. Greenwood, "The U.S. Army Military Observers with the Japanese Army during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)," *Army History*, no. 36 (1996): 11.

³² Greenwood, 2.

³³ Banerjee and MacKay, "Communities of Practice, Impression Management, and Great Power Status," 6.

Observations from World War I failed to significantly prepare the Allied Expeditionary Force for the battlefields they would face in Europe. Once World War I began in Europe, American military leaders dispatched field and company grade officers to observe the French, British, and German armies. Despite this excellent access to competing sides in the conflict, the observers initially lacked clear guidance. This lack of guidance led to them tracking down information of interest to them, rather than the most important information for the War Department. These reports also went primarily to the War Department, rather than into a synthesized view of the conflict or into branch journals for more public debate. Without clear guidance and because the United States entered the war so rapidly, the observer's suggestions failed to make an impact on the Army's preparations for the war.

Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

Throughout the Spanish Civil War, American attachés sent observations from the frontlines and based on interviews with leaders of the Spanish army. Colonel Stephen Fuqua, who primarily led the observer mission, had taken a reduction in rank from Major General and Chief of Infantry to continue service as the attaché to Spain. Arriving in 1933, he had access to leaders and battlefields across the civil war though with significantly greater access to Republican than Nationalist forces.³⁴ The Army also sent Captain Townsend Griffiss to join Fuqua as the air attaché in an effort to learn about how air operations were evolving.³⁵ Fuqua sent reports to the War Department's Intelligence Section every other week with supplemental reports where appropriate.³⁶ Unfortunately, reporting from the Spanish Civil War was never published in a comprehensive volume with recommendations. Overall, the impact of these lessons on the Army and Army Air Corps were limited.

Yom Kippur War (1973)

The Yom Kippur war left a clear and decisive impact on the United States military, both in doctrine and equipment. While the United States did not directly observe the short Yom Kippur war, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger sponsored the United States Military Operational Survey Team to determine lessons from that conflict. In response, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Creighton Abrams, assigned the newly formed Training and Doctrine Command to send observers to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt over several months.³⁷ The Israelis proved generous hosts, providing access to key leaders, battlefields, and destroyed equipment. Their reports ushered in a period of debate for the Army and Air Force, ultimately leading to the

³⁴ James W. Cortada, ed., *Modern Warfare in Spain: American Military Observations on the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, Illustrated edition (Washington, D.C: POTOMAC BOOKS, 2011), xxiv.

³⁵ Cortada, xxv.

³⁶ Cortada, xv.

³⁷ Earnhart, 27-29

development of Active Defense. Lessons from the Yom Kippur war were then revisited during the development of the AirLand battle, a consequential Cold War doctrine.

Case comparison

Below, cases are directly compared in a table based on the preceding narratives and previously defined factors. To summarize cases in this table, I made judgments about the average level for each factor. For example, during the Crimean Commission, the observers were only granted battlefield access after the conflict concluded. Based on this, I evaluated the Crimean Commission's access as *limited*. Each judgment was based on primary or secondary reports.

In the table, arrows indicate the general trend of each mission's success and factors as described in the previous section. ↑ indicates the highest level for a factor, ↔ the intermediate level, and ↓ the lowest level.

Conflict	Outcome	Important	Necessary, not sufficient		Less Important	
		Report	Team	Guidance	Access	Timing
Yom Kippur (1973)	↑	↑	↑	↑	↔	F
Russo-Japanese (1904-5)	↑	↑	↑	↑	↔	P
Spanish Civil (1936)	↔	↔	↑	↔	↔	N
Crimea (1855)	↓	↔	↑	↑	↔	F
Franco-Prussian (1870)	↓	↔	↓	↓	↔	F
World War I (1914-1917)	↓	↓	↔	↓	↑	N

Table. Summary of determinants for observer missions organized by success.

Results

Successful observer missions are associated most strongly with the publication of a single view of the conflict with recommendations written by a talented, task organized team based on clear and authoritative guidance. The timing of a war in relation to adjacent American conflicts and unimpeded access to all sides of a conflict are relatively less important.

Of the six observation missions considered, only the Yom Kippur and Russo-Japanese qualify as successful cases due to the discourse both generated. The Yom Kippur mission had profound impacts on doctrine and armor development. The Russo-Japanese War led to debate on concepts, but no firm conclusions on the validity of those conflicts for the United States or the lessons that should be applied. The Spanish Civil War's observers delivered clear recommendations, but perhaps achieved only mixed success due to a lack of will to implement them. Crimea and the Franco-Prussian wars failed for different reasons, but a key component for each was the delay in publication of their reports. By the time their conclusions were public, conditions had significantly changed. Finally, World War I observers failed due to their lack of guidance and the enormity of trying to alter the force development efforts of the Allied Expeditionary Force in mid-stride.

Timely reports of the conflict that then spur professional discourse are the most important variable. The Yom Kippur observers published timely reports that immediately fed into doctrinal and material changes in the Army and Air Force, and launched a flurry of follow-on visits and professional discourse. Likewise, the Russo-Japanese observers published five volumes of conclusions along with significant professional writings and speaking that launched a decade of professional debate. The Spanish Civil War's observers sent primarily restricted communications back to the War Department, which limited the information available for professional discourse. The expeditions to Crimea and the Franco-Prussian War primarily failed due to their tardiness, but the Crimean team also wrote parochial and highly technical reports, further weakening their impact.

Having talented, task organized teams appears to be a necessary but not sufficient factor for success. The Yom Kippur War, Russo-Japanese War, and Spanish Civil War all had talented task organized observers. However, the President and Secretary of War's handpicked choice of General Sheridan failed despite him being one of the most highly regarded officers in the Army. Observer missions need more than just talent.

Clear guidance from an authoritative source also appears to be a necessary but not sufficient factor. Authoritative sources might include the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, or service leadership. As a successful example, the Secretary of Defense sponsored the Yom Kippur War's observers, but only provided limited guidance. However, Secretary of War

Jefferson Davis, certainly an authoritative source, authored incredibly clear guidance for the observers of the Crimean War. However, the lessons were not immediately applicable to the U.S. Army's frontier operations until the start of the Civil War. Once that war began, new printings of their reports proved essential reference material. Likewise, authoritative sources are not sufficient alone as the previously discussed case of General Sheridan demonstrates.

Finally, access and timing appear relatively less important. Observers must have access to the battlefield and other observers. However, the peacetime conditions and access to both sides, as the United States did during the Russo-Japanese and World War I, did not make for significantly better reporting. Rather, observers should gather as much information as possible and take an unbiased view of the warring parties. Timing of the conflict in relation to American wars matters most when the Army is deliberately reorienting after a previous conflict or period. The most successful mission took place the same year the United States withdrew combat forces from Vietnam. Conversely, when the United States is on the cusp of a new conflict, observations are less influential because the Army may not have time to incorporate them. Observations may then be relatively more important when the military is seeking to pivot from one type of war to another.

Based on this analysis, those considering dispatching observer missions should focus on five considerations. First, a senior leader should hand-pick and empower a talented and appropriately task organized team. Second, the leader should invest time in developing clear and authoritative guidance for the team. Third, the observer mission must publish reports from the conflict with recommendations in a timely manner. Battlefield access is necessary for the success of these missions, but even limited access can provide important lessons. Finally, missions should be timed for periods of transition when they can be most influential. The next section builds upon these results by offering concrete recommendations.

Observing modern battlefields

Facing new threats, the United States should learn from conflicts around the world during this period of transition from counterinsurgent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan towards renewed competition with adversaries. Without observers, the military may overly rely on perspectives from well-meaning journalists and academics that lack expert knowledge of the art and science of war.

Fortunately, the United States does not have to miss the next opportunity. Observer missions offer a valuable method for senior political or uniformed leaders to inform concept development with real world information. The United States should continue investing in exercises and wargames but should also consider observer missions as valuable inputs for conceptual and doctrinal development processes. To ensure the success of observer missions, senior leaders

must ensure that observers publish a timely view of the conflict with recommendations written by a talented, task organized team based on clear and authoritative guidance.

To better prepare for future conflict, the joint force should take the following steps. First, they should designate gathering information from active conflicts as a priority. Then, the Joint Force Development directorate should draft clear guidance on the information most necessary to refine concept development.

After revising and approving the guidance, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs should hand-select a talented, task organized team with the professional qualifications necessary to observe and report. Officers with experience abroad and proven abilities to communicate in writing and speech would be most suitable. To modernize observers, teams should include a chief data officer and reach-back analytic support to ensure the team collects and organizes the most important information for future study. The observers, and the military, will also benefit from exposure to combat—an experience that is too rare in junior and mid-grade officers.

The Chairman must also ensure that the observers publicly publish their findings with clear recommendations. A public report, with classified annexes, is important for three reasons. First, the report from a well-resourced, independent mission with high-level support will public anchor debate around modernization, limit bias in debates about future force structure, and force others to address the report in their commentary. Second, an open report helps set the debate on what the lessons are, allowing others to comment on whether or how the lessons are valid in the American context. Finally, everyone assumes the United States learns lessons from foreign wars, so an open report will help align the Department, United States Government, and allies, while signaling to adversaries. But the United States can also compartmentalize away the most sensitive lessons.³⁸ By being public about the things the United States can share, adversaries may not look as hard for the hidden.

Academics, both in civilian academia and professional military education, have a role as well. Minerva grants tied to learning from conflicts and access to proprietary Defense data would encourage academics to debate the lessons from foreign wars. Minerva Decur Partnership grants might be especially appropriate; these grants connect civilian academics with defense experts in professional military education, improving research outcomes.³⁹ Furthermore, the Department of Defense could task the war and staff colleges to focus cohorts on lessons from foreign wars, generating dozens of reports like those referenced in this article.⁴⁰ For a small amount of money

³⁸ Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, “Conceal or Reveal? Managing Clandestine Military Capabilities in Peacetime Competition,” *International Security* 44, no. 3 (2019): 48–83, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/6/article/746395>.

³⁹ United States Department of Defense, “Minerva Research Initiative,” accessed February 23, 2023, <https://minerva.defense.gov/>.

⁴⁰ Models for focused cohorts could include the Holloway Group at the Naval War College that studies the Russian Navy or the Scholars programs at the Army Command and General Staff College.

and focus in the department's educational institutions, the United States could learn a lot about foreign wars at a low cost.

Observations from foreign wars will further discourse about the future of the joint force, tussle with tricky questions of validity, and leading to modifications to joint and service concepts. Rather than rely on bureaucratic processes that protect parochial interests, opening the observers' information wide will generate creative and challenging concepts to sustain the American warfighting edge.

[4759 excluding abstract]