The Civil War Battlefield Staff Ride in the Twenty-first Century

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, Prussian military leaders made the systematic study of history a critical part of their program for training officers. One manifestation of this emphasis was their making participation in a staff ride the final step in the training of officers for the elite general staff. The staff ride consists of an in-depth study of an historical campaign through systematic reading of related primary and secondary sources, followed by an extensive visit to the actual sites associated with the campaign. In contrast to battlefield tours, which entail listening to a guide describe and explain events, the staff ride requires extensive student participation and emphasizes analysis and discussion in order to sharpen critical thinking skills on matters such as the effect of terrain on operations, the range of factors that shape command decisions, and the timeless human dimensions of warfare. The remarkable effectiveness of the Prussian military in the Wars of German Unification inspired the U.S. Army to adopt many of its methods, including the staff ride as an instructional tool, which led the War Department to take a leading role in the preservation of America’s battlefields. Today, staff rides are formal parts of officer training programs throughout the country, including those at the U.S. Military Academy, Marine Corps University, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and U.S. Army War College.¹

¹ For a good introduction to staff rides and their conduct, see William Glenn Robertson, The Staff Ride (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1987). Shortly after the appearance of this pamphlet, the United States Army’s Center of Military History devoted an issue of its
In recent years, preservation and education groups seeking a hook to attract the legions of Americans who enjoy studying the Civil War to their organizations have begun to repackage their tour programs as staff rides. This has been most obvious at Gettysburg College’s Civil War Institute, but it has professional newsletter to the subject of the staff ride, with an introductory essay by the chief of staff underlining the importance the United States Army attached to it as an educational tool. See Carl E. Vuono, “The Staff Ride: Training for Warfighting,” Army Historian: The Professional Bulletin for Army Historians (Oct. 1988): 1–2, as well as the essays in that same issue by Robert A. Doughty, “Studying the Operational Level of War: A Staff Ride to Sedan,” Army Historian: The Professional Bulletin for Army Historians (1940): 3–6; Billy A. Arthur, “Battle of the Bulge Staff Ride: Integrating Leader Development into Exercises,” Army Historian: The Professional Bulletin for Army Historians, 7–9; Harold Nelson, “What the Staff Ride Can Depict: Face of Battle, Clash of Wills and Arms, Generalship, and Cause and Effect,” Army Historian: The Professional Bulletin for Army Historians, no. 13 (Oct. 1988): 15–17. For a discussion of the development of German military education and the importance it attached to the study of military history and the “practice tour” in the late nineteenth century, see Spenser Wilkinson, The Brain of an Army: A Popular Account of the German General Staff (Westminster, UK: Archibald Constable & Co., 1895), 147–72. An excellent examination of the development of the use of Civil War battlefields by the United States Army as “open-air classrooms” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is provided in Carol Reardon, Soldiers and Scholars: The U.S. Army and the Uses of Military History, 1865–1920 (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1990), 50–66. Reardon provides an informative and insightful account of the Army War College’s experience with staff rides of Antietam before the First World War in “From Antietam to the Argonne: The Maryland Campaign’s Lessons for Future Leaders of the American Expeditionary Force,” in The Antietam Campaign, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999), 289–315.
also been implemented by Duke University, Washington and Lee University, the Civil War Trust, and other institutions. The staff ride as a means of exposing undergraduates, alumni, and the general public to the enduring lessons and insights of the war is clearly becoming increasingly popular. Drawing largely on the experiences of rangers for the National Park Service, tour and staff ride leaders for Civil War preservation groups and civilian academic institutions, and instructors in the professional military education (PME) system, this article addresses the staff ride as an instructional tool for both the military and the public at large and explores some of the questions surrounding it in the early twenty-first century.

A staff ride is not a battlefield tour, and not all staff rides are created equal. The general purpose of a PME staff ride, whether it be at the service academy level (i.e., West Point), intermediate level education (Command and General Staff College), or at the War Colleges, is to hone and inspire critical and creative thinking skills as they pertain to issues of command and control. History is therefore used as a means by which the ends of stronger cognitive abilities—as they relate to military leadership and management—may be realized. Specific movements of regiments and brigades, human-interest stories, designs of monuments, and sub-tactical decisions made by colonels and majors may have some merit in certain staff rides, but most often the battlefield in question is more valuable when analyzed through the eyes of the principal commanders and their civilian masters.²

This is accomplished by participants’ immersion in pertinent primary and secondary sources in the weeks prior to the ride, which allows them to better appreciate and synthesize the experience of walking the historical ground. All three levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic) are in play during a successful ride, and indeed a good facilitator will guide participants toward understanding how the three levels conflated into a nexus at certain times and locations on a given field.³ Contingency, the role of chance, and military fog

² For a presumptuously titled, but nonetheless useful discussion of the use of battles and battlefields as teaching tools, whose findings and arguments are invariably echoed in this essay, see Ethan S. Rafuse, “How to Teach a Civil War Battle,” OAH Magazine of History 27 (Apr. 2013): 17–22.
³ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the tactical level of war is where “battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives.” The strategic level is “the level of war at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) strategic security objectives and guidance, then develops and uses national resources to achieve those objectives.” The operational level
and friction as defined by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz should also find their way into the group’s discussions. It is a delicate balance between emphasizing the decision-making of key historical leaders and walking the ground for a better awareness of the terrain, all the while keeping an eye on the clock and endeavoring to fully engage every participant in the staff ride in the effort to glean useful insights from past events. Thus, the role of the facilitator is critical to a good ride.

There are two general methods for preparing and conducting a PME staff ride: the role-player technique and the Socratic dialogue. The role-player approach, which faculty from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College generally follow, allows each participant to become a historical leader for the day and, hopefully, gain a deeper appreciation of the thinking behind that leader’s specific actions and synthesize that knowledge for the rest of the group during the ride. The staff ride facilitator sets the stage at each stand or stop on the chosen battlefield by offering geographic orientation, pinpointing key landmarks, and sometimes painting a brief verbal picture of the action that took place there. Then he turns the discussion over to the students, who, playing their respective military or even political leaders, remark on their specific roles and/or decision-making at that point in the campaign or battle. A strong facilitator will allow the key players to speak first, thereby providing the group with a good starting point for learning about that particular stand’s significance, and progress toward secondary and tertiary players as applicable. Not everyone, therefore, speaks at each stand, and not every stand lasts the same amount of time, but near the conclusion of each the facilitator should interject a question or two about how understanding the history might assist in modern military decision-making. Ideally, at the end of the entire staff ride, the facilitator leads an “integration session,” in which all the parallels, connections, and “take-aways” are discussed and reflected upon by participants.

In the Socratic dialogue method, the Army War College’s preferred staff ride model, specific roles are not assigned beforehand, but students are given

occupies the theoretical space in between strategy and tactics, being the “level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to achieve strategic objectives within theaters or other operational areas.” Joint Publication 1–02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Dec. 8, 2010 (as amended through June 15, 2014), 196, 251, 258.

substantial primary and secondary source readings focusing on the key decisions made by leaders at the strategic and operational levels of war. These readings are designed to provoke critical and creative thinking about how to solve complex, uncertain, and ambiguous problems that—regardless of time or place and despite the advances of technology and changes in political and military structures—confront military leaders and their advisors at the highest levels. The American Civil War thus becomes a perfect laboratory in which to explore issues of current strategic importance, such as how leaders deal with rapid change, challenging command and civil-military relationships, troublesome allies, ethical and ethnic problems, the difficulty of securing political objectives after military victory has been achieved, managing potentially hostile civilian populations, and the influences/constraints on military strategy created by diplomatic and informational power.

On a typical Gettysburg staff ride, then, the facilitator might follow the same sequence of stands as in a role-player approach, perhaps starting with the Reynolds statue or McPherson’s Woods, progressing to Oak Hill, Oak Ridge, the Eleventh Corps Line/Barlow’s Knoll, and so on, but would simply begin each stand with a brief geographic orientation and then immediately ask, “What happened here and why do we care today?” The students would then be expected to offer their observations, intermixing the history related to that particular stand with what we call the “so-what for today.” Walking short distances often enhances this synthesizing process while reminding participants of the value of terrain, which by itself offers little of strategic value but can help explain why certain decisions were made that clearly did have strategic impact (such as Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles’s movement of the Union Third Corps from southern Cemetery Ridge to the Peach Orchard and Emmitsburg Road).

Depending on the preparation level, composition, and overall interest of the group, the facilitator may choose to set the historical stage more or less elaborately. For instance, at a recent staff ride to Antietam for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other top senior military leaders, a National Park Service ranger briefly offered a few remarks on the tactical-level history at the beginning of each stand and the instructor followed with questions and observations about how that finite tactical history might translate into valuable insights about the status of the current Force, our joint and multinational operations worldwide, and the salience of good strategic communications and civil-military relations. Hence, the chairman and the Joint Chiefs heard not only about the tactics at the Sunken Road but also the slaughter of the Irish
Brigade in front of it, which, coupled with the ensuing disaster at Fredericksburg, helped spawn an ethnic-political problem for Abraham Lincoln among the North’s Irish American population. This historical correlation between the battlefield and the Executive Mansion in turn raised questions about the strategic ramifications related to a potential political disaffection of a major modern American ethnic group and how such an event, whether or not initiated on a battlefield, would affect current U.S. military strategy and policy.

The staff ride, if adequately prepared for in advance and carefully led, can therefore offer participants a rich opportunity to apply historical insights to modern strategic and operational issues and potential problems. At the very least, students leave the battlefield with their critical and creative thinking skills reinforced. If the facilitator has done their job correctly, the entire staff ride becomes a vast, poignant classroom for comprehending how the past may inform the present, and hopefully, the future as well. To do that, both the staff ride leader and the group must simultaneously understand the unique historical context of a campaign waged 150 years ago while thinking hard about current and potential challenges. When that difficult nexus has been achieved, another level of meaning can be gleaned from Lincoln’s immortal words: “that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

Although the staff ride is a proven educational tool for the American military, broader questions exist regarding its meaning, relevance, value, and future within the greater historical community and indeed as an interpretative tool for the American public at Civil War battlefields. One of the more compelling concerns that have been raised regarding staff rides, and the study of history in general, is whether a lessons-learned approach, which characterizes many approaches to education, especially in the military, where the emphasis is often on training to achieve quantitatively measurable skills, rather than education, can lead to ahistorical thinking.


6. “We must keep in mind,” diplomatic historian George C. Herring perceptively noted in 1990, “that history does not prescribe explicit lessons, and we must be aware of the many pitfalls and the false trails down which it can lead us. We must also recognize, as Michael Howard has observed, that the ‘true use’ of history is ‘not to make men clever for the next time’ but ‘to make them wise forever.’” Herring, “Vietnam, American Foreign Policy, and the Uses of History,” Virginia Quarterly Review 66 (Winter 1990): 16.
This is indeed a potential danger; one need only consider the existence of books that use Ulysses S. Grant as a model for business leadership to recognize the decidedly problematic directions this can lead one along. Yet the purpose of a properly constructed and executed staff ride is not to provide students with the impression that lessons from history are interchangeable—for instance, “Since Lee did this at Chancellorsville, you should do that at your next rotation at the National Training Center or when dealing with problematic subordinates or business rivals.” As Clausewitz once observed, “If anyone lists a dozen defeats in which the losing side attacked with divided columns, I can list a dozen victories in which that very tactic was employed.”

Rather, the purpose of the staff ride is to teach critical thinking in an active learning environment in which the importance of context is emphasized in explaining why certain courses of action were adopted and effective—or not.

Another concern that has been understandably raised about staff rides is whether its central tool, namely the battlefield, might lead to a narrow focus on military tactics and engagements at the expense of other issues of compelling relevance to modern students of the past. As is true of a lessons-learned approach, there is indeed a danger here—but not if the ride is properly developed and executed. A properly conceived and executed ride always and invariably accounts for the politics of war. After all, one reason the study of historic battles can be so beneficial to any students of history is that, when done well, it helps them make connections between and develop a better appreciation for the relationship between the ways and means of war and its ends. Civil War battles were fought within the context of campaigns that were planned and conducted to achieve (or at least advance the pursuit of) strategic ends. Of course, the Civil War’s political and military leaders might not have employed this modern theoretical construct, but they well knew the political ramifications of won and lost battles. Hence, seasoned staff-ride leaders take great pains to connect the battlefield and the Executive Mansion or the halls of Congress, and in so doing, ensure that participants never lose sight of the fundamental relationship between politics and war.

Moreover, discussion of the role of personality in shaping the conduct of military operations invariably necessitates discussion of the politics of war. Although the intertwining of politics and the military (despite the misguided

7. We thank Grant scholar Brooks D. Simpson for calling this point to our attention.
efforts of some to draw sharp lines between them) is present in any conflict, it is especially powerful in civil wars in general and the American Civil War in particular. There is no way, for instance, that one can discuss or fully understand the course and outcome of the Second Manassas or Gettysburg campaigns without delving into the often exceedingly problematic relationship between the high command of the Federal army and Washington, or the changes in the northern political landscape and the way northern political objectives expanded in the months between August 1862 and July 1863.9

Because war involves the use of physical violence, it invariably raises questions of ethics and morality. On staff rides, where the teaching method is naturally focused on the movements of armies and decisions of commanders, how to incorporate discussion of moral and ethical issues in warfare is a valid concern. Of course, an immediate response to this is that these issues are inherent to the nature of war itself and thus are always suitable for discussion on staff rides, for war and the forces that shape its conduct are inextricably connected to the larger social, cultural, and political contexts from which notions of ethics and morality come.10 However, it should be conceded that it is a bit harder to stimulate such discussion when the focus is unavoidably on the tactical and operational conduct of major campaigns and their strategic effects, as these were generally conducted in accordance with rules for the application of violence that both sides and society as a whole generally agreed on.


On the major battlefields of the Civil War, a sophisticated way to delve into ethical issues is to address the historical escalation of violence to target non-combatants and resources—that is, the “hard war”—as either a backdrop to or dynamic at work in particular campaigns. This was a major force shaping the strategic and operational environment, for instance, during Maj. Gen. John Pope’s tenure in command of the Army of Virginia in 1862, the Confederate march into Pennsylvania the following year, and perhaps most notably, the Federal March to the Sea under Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman in 1864. Smaller actions, particularly those associated with the irregular war, can also be fruitful points of departure for analyzing the moral and ethical angles. A staff ride of Fort Pillow, Tennessee; Lawrence, Kansas; or the various sites associated with the military operations of John S. Mosby’s rangers would invariably involve discussion of moral and ethical issues, such as the legitimate use of force and the degree to which civilians and noncombatants can and should be able to claim immunity in what President Abraham Lincoln properly described as “essentially a People’s contest.” This can, in turn, provoke a fruitful discussion of what historian Russell F. Weigley argued to be the traditional American preference in war-making, which tends to emphasize high-intensity conventional warfare, despite a military history and much recent experience that provides evidence to the contrary.

Another point to consider involves whether or not the staff ride educational method, developed as it was for the uniformed military, is truly suited for general audiences. What possible benefits could the average high school teacher,

11. Abraham Lincoln, "Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861," in Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 4:438. Staff rides to the aforementioned locations have actually been created and executed in PME at various levels and have included strong components regarding the ethical issues at hand.

retiree, or mechanic derive from participating in staff rides? In fact, general audiences (and professional academics, too) can profit from them in ways similar to members of the professional military. Namely, they can be exposed to and apply ways of thinking about complex problems that can inform just about any problem-solving effort, regardless of the career field or profession. They can also deeply explore the importance of terrain and the effect of good leadership, experience, and education on participants, friction and chance, and various frameworks of analysis that can be useful when thinking about issues that do not lend themselves to immediately identifiable solutions. All walks of life include challenges that can be better met by thinking about these timeless concepts. Perhaps most important, the staff ride can inform general public audiences about the basics of the levels of war and the inextricable relationship between politics and military strategy and operations. In a democratic republic such as the United States, where the people are the final arbiter of decisions regarding the use of military force—and especially considering today’s complex, multi-threat world—it is more critical than ever that at least some citizens understand some of the fundamentals of the nature of war. It is, in fact, part of the democratic citizen’s duty. Both the role-playing and Socratic methods of instruction work well with non-military audiences.

Although the authors have met few people whose firsthand experiences with staff rides have been anything but positive, there are a few clouds on the horizon. The staff ride’s birth and resurrection in the American military both occurred at times in which there was an openness to the injection of intellectual rigor into the culture of the United States Army. The late 1890s and early 1900s comprised the Progressive Era in America, when the modern notion of professionalism was gaining ascendancy, with its notion that specialized training was essential for one to claim the privilege of performing a particular function for society. In the U.S. military, this period saw the emergence of post-commissioning schools and a general intellectual ferment that was manifest in the recognition of the value of history in training officers. That institutional support led to the adoption of the staff ride, as well as the Root reforms that provided a greater degree of professional efficiency to the army organizationally. Likewise, the revival of the staff ride during the 1980s was

13. For full discussions of the development of professional military education in the army during this period, see Timothy K. Nenninger, The Leavenworth Schools and the Old Army: Education, Professionalism, and the Officer Corps of the United States Army, 1881–1918 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1978). For discussion of the tension between the “soldiers and scholars” during the early twentieth century, see Reardon, Soldiers and Scholars, 145–81.
part of a larger effort to revitalize the American armed forces intellectually in the aftermath of Vietnam.

Yet even in these periods, those who championed the vigorous study of history as vital to the United States Army’s professional and intellectual health had to deal with tensions rooted in two dynamics. The first of these was the somewhat overblown but nonetheless very real existence within the military of an anti-intellectual, “muddy boots” strain of opinion that questioned the practical value of studying military history and viewed it as a distraction from “real” soldiering and “productive” training activities. The second was the attitude of the historical profession. During the Progressive Era, critical elements with the United States Army embraced the study of history at the same time the modern historical profession emerged.14 The latter, though, was sensitive to interlopers on a field where it was endeavoring to establish an exclusive claim to expertise. During the 1970s and 1980s, as the study of history was reviving within the United States Army, a variety of factors was reinforcing its generally conservative outlook and its lack of sympathy for cultural liberalism.15 Simultaneously, the historical profession saw a rise to ascendancy of fields such as social and cultural history that reflected the increasing hegemony of the sort of cultural liberalism that enjoyed few friends within the military and was manifested in what many have perceived to be a much diminished place within civilian academia (although not among its students) for traditional military history.16


15. For the conservative ethos of the military profession and its tension with mainstream liberal American society, the classic work is still Samuel Huntington, The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil–Military Relations (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), though Huntington’s argument that military professionalism did not emerge in the United States until the late nineteenth century has been compellingly challenged by students of the antebellum United States Army. See William B. Skelton, An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784–1861 (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992); and Samuel J. Watson, Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1821–1846 (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2013).

16. For evidence of the enduring legacy of this, observers have pointed to the limited number of faculty members specializing in military history of any sort, but especially operational
The staff ride, however, offers a terrific opportunity to bridge the “muddy boots” with the academics and the general public. The physical exertion involved in the staff ride and the concrete experiences it offers can provide something for the soldier and the former high school football player alike. We have also found in our own teaching experiences that military officers can be interested in the social and cultural issues that intrigue most academic historians, especially if they can see a relevance to their own situation and what they expect to face in the future. The current operating and organizational environment among all the armed services certainly offers plenty of targets of opportunity on this account. Few today would question the notion that sensitivity to local cultural and social traditions, or the lack thereof, can have a significant impact on one's ability to achieve strategic, operational, and tactical goals. Integrating discussion of the social and cultural life of the local communities in which armies operated in the past into staff rides (which mirrors in a very real sense the current United States Army’s primary missions of power projection, nation-building, and policing troublesome elements) can be an excellent way to connect military and academic history. And in an organization that has struggled with the challenges posed by the diverse groups from which it draws its personnel, an appreciation of and sensitivity to heritage can be of real value, which can be fostered through the study of military history. Likewise, the effort to understand the “face of battle” and

“mask of command” from social and cultural contexts can offer opportunities for integrating military history with its civilian brethren, and thereby bring the “military” back into the academic study of Civil War history.17

Whether that study occurs in the collegiate classroom, within a National Park Service–led tour of the Gettysburg battlefield, or in the halls of PME institutions, the possibilities inherent in the staff ride approach are rich, numerous, and, in the hands of the talented facilitator, laden with educational merit. In the end, the successful implementation of a battlefield staff ride depends less on the academic and educational background of the participants and more on the creative, informed, and enthusiastic approach of the staff ride leader. The ground will remain relatively the same— it is what we make of its interpretation that matters.

17. The terms “face of battle” and “mask of command” were popularized as approaches to the study of warfare by military historian John Keegan in his works The Face of Battle (New York: Viking, 1976) and The Mask of Command (New York: Viking, 1987).