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Hillsdale College Hosts Lecture on the Limits of Historical Analogy

The Center for Military History and Strategy hosted Andrew J. Mitchell for a lecture titled ‘The Spanish Civil War: The Use and Abuse of Analogy.’

HILLSDALE, Mich. — Hillsdale College’s Center for Military History and Strategy hosted military historian Andrew J. Mitchell on Jan. 27 for a lecture titled “The Spanish Civil War: The Use and Abuse of Analogy.” Mitchell discussed the analogy between Russia-Ukraine War and the Spanish Civil War, which concluded just months before Hitler invaded Poland.

“Over the last two years, Andrew Mitchell has been a member of the Center’s Annual Faculty Colloquium, which is devoted to the study of military history and strategy, particularly for faculty,” said Jason Gehrke, associate director of the Center for Military History and Strategy. “And he has in so doing made himself a servant of our mission, which is to rebuild the discipline of military history for the good of our students and for the good of the country. We have reaped great benefits from his efforts.”

Mitchell said that historians have to rely on patterns to make sense of the facts but must resist the temptation to abuse them.

“As illuminating as analogies may be, there’s also a powerful tendency to abuse these constructions, oversimplifying patterns, turning guidance into diktat — ‘We must behave this way; we must enact this policy’ — on the flawed understanding that history repeats itself or rhymes,” Mitchell said. “What makes the abuse of historical analogy more dangerous as a substitute for critical thinking is how impressive it sounds, because it does rest on actual knowledge rather than understanding of one’s situation.”

Mitchell said military thinkers have looked at the parallels between Russia-Ukraine War and the Spanish Civil War to conclude that we are on the brink of a conflict like World War II. He argued that these analogies ignore critical differences and said the more applicable lesson to take away from the Spanish Civil War is how successfully various nations learned from it.

“The final point to ponder, one that I hope kind of ties together the operational, the strategic, and the policy levels, concerns the nature of the insights learned from the conflicts and, more importantly, who is making them,” Mitchell said. “Contemporary pattern seekers should be very attentive to which services in which countries are studying the use of drones in Ukraine and which are the most confident, perhaps even overconfident, in their conclusions.”

Andrew J. Mitchell is a professor of history at Grove City College. He received his B.A. from Hillsdale College and his M.A. and Ph.D. from The Ohio State University. He has taught United States Military Academy cadets and instructors at off-site programs and specializes in early modern European history, military history, and Spanish history. His current research focuses on asymmetrical warfare and strategic leadership.

For photos from the event, click [here](#). For a recording of the lecture, click [here](#). For photos of Hillsdale College, click [here](#). For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click [here](#).

About the Center for Military History and Strategy

The Center for Military History and Strategy (CMHS) studies warfare from all times and places to better our comprehension and military readiness. Its focus lies in academic research that joins military history with insights from strategic thinkers throughout history. By providing an education in the study of war and strategy, CMHS strives to prepare scholars, officers, and policymakers to preserve those “inestimable blessings” of liberty in a world that continues to ignore the lessons of the past. For more information, [visit warhistory.hillsdale.edu](http://warhistory.hillsdale.edu).

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 7.5 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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