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## Professional Reading: On Military Theory

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# PROFESSIONAL READING

## On Military Theory

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Rear Admiral Henry E. Eccles, US Navy (Ret.)

“The Art of War is the giant among the branches of learning, for it embraces them all.”

**T**he remark, attributed to Napoleon, is clearly brought out in Julian Lider’s scholarly discussion of 20th century military theory.\* His research has been enormous; his bibliography lists about 600 books and around 450 articles, including many Soviet works. He makes clear that the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries have tried to create a unified military theory which includes: the teaching on war and the army, military science, and military doctrine. The typical Marxist-Leninist approach consistently includes new disciplines dealing with various aspects of war while Western studies are more diffuse.

Lider divides his study into three parts:

- Socio-Political Analysis of Military Affairs,
- The Theory of the Use of Military Force, and
- Selected Problems of Military Policy.

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\*Lider, Julian. *Military Theory*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1983. 407pp.

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Rear Admiral Eccles publishes widely on military theory and national security affairs.

After discussing these matters and others in great detail with quotations from practically every 20th century military writer, he concludes with an excellent discussion of the structure and status of military theory.

This finale is a splendid analysis and commentary on the nature, scope and importance of military theory as seen by a social scientist. It makes good sense, particularly for a sociologist. The professional military student, interested in the more immediate use of theory in military education, will find it valuable in giving him a perspective on a major intellectual problem which will remain with us as long as human beings exist in organized societies. Moreover, he adds in an appendix his own proposal for a structure of military theory; but I see no way that the structure of theory he recommends can be of any practical value to a military professional or as a guide to those developing the educational policies or curricula in our service war colleges. It simply is too complex and too distantly related to vital military decisions.

But this book is primarily a commentary on the academic research in these various fields rather than a review of the most important substantive parts of military thoughts and actions. It is very difficult to discern any consistent coherent line of thought and a major problem, semantic in nature, involves the many meanings and uses of the word "war."

Since the United States Constitution reserves warmaking power for the Congress and since there are strong differences between the Congress and the President, Linder's extensive discussion of the almost innumerable theoretical ways of classifying nearly all imaginable forms of armed conflict, as war or wars, raises many more questions than it answers. For this very reason it might have been a useful exercise if the members of the US Congress had been able to study these 15 pages before they undertook the monumental task of legislating a War Powers Act to limit Presidential power!

As do many other people in and out of the military, Linder uses strategy as an all-purpose word. His discussion of "The Concept and Problems" illustrates the nature and extent of the semantic problems that one encounters all through this book. The word doctrine is used with so many different meanings that I am bewildered by the ensuing discussions. He starts by saying "The term, military doctrine (or 'strategic doctrine' or 'defense doctrine') is relatively new." Thereafter, he continually refers to "the opinion of some military researchers." Apparently in the belief that all "scholarly" opinions are equally valid, he tries to inventory and state fairly every possible use and variation of the word as used in political military discussions regardless of any evaluation of their semantic consistency or logical merit. Unfortunately, much arrant nonsense and unrealistic blather can be found in the writings of the military intellectuals of the last few decades. Yet, Linder's treatment of principles of war is extensive and interesting and, of course, are intertwined with discussions of doctrine.

Linder's detailed study and description of Soviet military theory is a good

way to approach some of the intricacies of Marxist-Leninist thought. But I can see no way in which such a detailed theoretical analysis can usefully guide the policy, force structure, or operational planning in a US society which operates on such differing assumptions. Furthermore, I doubt that in the long run it will succeed for the Soviets in any except their own territory and contiguous areas.

Lenin formulated his concepts and theories of power and power control while in exile or in prison where he had ample time for study and meditation. The military theory—concepts and perceptions—of the Soviet Union evolved in an atmosphere of the Marxist-Leninist view of the world superimposed on the ancient Slavic-Russo traditions of ruthless violence in the exercise of political authority. It is only reasonable that their military theory and doctrine should differ from the military theory and doctrine in a free society.

The critical philosophic difference between the Soviet approach and concept of military theory and the Western approach is that:

- The official Soviet view is that Marxist-Leninist military theory is an infallible guide to action.

- In contrast, the Western view follows Clausewitz' teaching that all theory can do is to *educate* the mind of the commander.

One might expect that there may be Soviet military and political leaders who do not necessarily believe in the infallibility of the official doctrine or theory, but they do not advertise their skepticism. Similarly, there are many Western writers or officials who take a more didactic or prescriptive view of military theory and particularly of "doctrine," whatever that may mean. Nevertheless, the contrast between the two views is important. Knowledge of military theory is essential to the effective use of military power and force. But to be useful, such knowledge must be accompanied by an intuitive understanding of practical military operations. Conversely, and intuitive understanding of operational factors does not imply an equal knowledge of either major strategic factors or strategic analysis.

The foregoing brings us to the main problem of formulating a modern, comprehensive, coherent military theory in a free society. Military theory should have a central theme of purposeful action and discipline because these are the essence of military systems and affairs. On the other hand, in a free society, political action is essentially undisciplined, with its purposes frequently obscured by the diversity and ferment of special interest and partisanship.

Furthermore, successful military action involves immediate life and death decisions and precisely timed physical operations that have a tangible physical inertia and momentum. These operations require a relatively small trained body of disciplined responsible people. This is in sharp contrast to what can be expected in political, economic and sociological affairs. The failure of

communism is that it attempts to apply its strict theoretical discipline to social and economic affairs contrary to the natural behavior of human beings.

**S**emantic discipline and consistency are important in describing military theory. Given discussions where people ascribe different meanings to descriptive terms, long and unnecessary arguments tend to prevail when trying to develop some form of coherent logic. In 1959, Max Ways, in his *Beyond Survival*, mentioned the problem as follows: "Theories arising from specific military technologies are contained in a more general military theory which is contained by a political theory which is part of a philosophic theory." Ways further writes that "The technical judgment of military men, like any technical judgment, works well only within the framework of a general strategic theory that everybody understands and relies upon." A theory and the discussion of theory is of little practical value unless it can be expressed in language that is so clear, simple, and coherent that the people who will be expected to apply it can readily understand it. In order to accomplish this, the major elements of the theory should be illustrated either by historical examples or specific hypothetical situations and actions.

All too often today, the so-called nuclear strategists, many of whom are cited in Lider's book, write in highly specialized language and qualify their ideas and recommendations with many "mights" and esoteric speculations. So much so that their elaborate structures of "strategy" seem to totter aimlessly on a foundation of implicit or obviously faulty assumptions.

I have a sense of unease in Lider's apparent lack of feeling for the intuitive elements in military affairs, a lack of emphasis on the human values that are a fundamental source of strategy, and for the life and death aspects of military command. Of course, these are hard to express in any formal structure of theory but, nevertheless, an awareness of them—an intuitive sense of the special responsibilities of command decision—are vital aspects of the conduct of military affairs, especially in combat and especially for the military professional. It is certainly not the function of military theory to develop human values. However, military theory should express and reflect a sense of their importance as part of the vital intangible elements of military thought and action.

Lider may think of these as parts of "armed forces as a reflection of society," a subtopic of his "Theory of Military Force" in his broad subject of Socio-Political Analysis of Military Affairs, in his proposed structure of military theory. Still, neither the words morale nor discipline appear in his index. Nor does one find any mention of combat or effectiveness. A similar lack of this appreciation of how human beings can be expected to act in times of sudden crisis seems to permeate much of the writings and speculations of the academic nuclear strategists who have been given such prominence in this work.

There are extensive discussions of differing views of deterrence, nuclear policy and strategy as related to military doctrines. No matter how one studies

these as they occur in various parts of the book, they still remain in the limbo of speculative controversy; where, in the absence of clear historical evidence, they will remain indefinitely. The chief common characteristic of the discussions seems to be that the basic assumptions on which they are based are not stated.

**I**n a free society, military theory has two chief purposes. One is to provide coherence, discipline, and rigor to the education and subsequent decisions and actions of military professionals; the other is to provide a sense of realism and the military "facts of life" to the politicians and their ambitious young staff assistants who compete to exercise civilian control over military affairs. To attain either end, the theory should be concise, semantically consistent and, as previously stated, illustrated by historical examples. To be of practical use, the theory should strive for simplicity; for simplicity is just as important to sound theory as it is for actual operational planning in times of armed conflict.

The essential elements of a good military theory are relatively few and simple. Their practical application, however, can be almost innumerable and very complex. Hence, the more details included in the statement of the theory, the more limited its application and the shorter its useful life. With this perspective, what military theory can do is educate the mind of "command" so that it can act with wisdom.

This perspective also assumes that what we call "war" is an art and not a science, even though it employs scientific perspectives and methods in many ways and in many areas in the practical exercise of that art. In that practice, and in the organization and structure of the armed forces which are to be employed, it is vitally important for our commanders, both civilian and military, to understand the nature and significance of the ideas and theory of prospective adversaries who may look at "war" and military affairs from a quite different perspective; and, who consequently, evolve a military theory that differs decidedly from ours.

The Soviet system is based on the assumption that Marxism-Leninism is a science of such scope, nature and vital importance that it should dominate all human activity. Its believers seem to treat it also as a religion of such dogmatic and didactic power and importance as to be infallible. This is related to the Leninist concept of truth as that which serves the purposes of the state. The dogmas may not be challenged by anyone outside of the Soviet hierarchy and control, but instead are kept pure and true by continuing analysis through the leadership of the Communist Party. When it is, from time to time, officially revised by that leadership, the new truth is also infallible. Obviously, Julian Lider is keenly aware of the importance of the Soviet point of view, for, in addition to frequent reference to the thought throughout his book, he devotes an entire chapter to it.

This raises the question: can these fundamentally different approaches to

military theory be contained in a universal theory or should they be treated separately? I am not sure of the right answer and this brings us to a third perspective—the purpose of this book. And the book raises several questions. But the one which concerns us is to what degree does it contribute to the understanding and conduct of military affairs?

It certainly should be made available to war colleges and major military research institutions, if only to give further evidence of the extreme intellectual complications involved in the serious study of the art of war, as “The Giant Among the Branches of Learning.” Even though the practice of military affairs requires a great appreciation of its major scientific and technological aspects and implications, I do not share Lider’s optimism that military theory has a chance to become a “science.” Its practice has too many subjective intangible aspects that defy precise stimulation or evaluation to be formally classed as a science.

Yet, Lider’s extensive comment on this matter is excellent—particularly his concluding thought, that “the development of a generally adopted conceptual framework of the research including the concept, structure, and main problems of military theory, seems to be a precondition for establishing this as a science.”

This is precisely what I have been trying to do for the last thirty years; not so much in the interest of science but rather with the hope of improving the understanding and quality of the decisions of those charged with the conduct of military affairs in our diverse free society, and in this dangerous and complex world of fallible human beings seeking to control intractable violent human conflict.

## The Lebanon War

Daniel S. Mariaschin

**I**n *Israel's Lebanon War*\* Zeev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari have essentially written two books: one, a detailed battlefield account of the Israel Defense Forces' engagements against the PLO and Syria and the other, an analysis of the political process that preceded and accompanied the fighting to its seemingly inconclusive end.

This book is one of several that have appeared in the past year and a half on the Lebanon war. It presents an extra measure of the substance in that its authors are veteran observers of the Israeli scene. Zeev Schiff, defense

\*Schiff, Zeev and Ya'ari, Ehud. *Israel's Lebanon War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984. 308pp. \$17.95