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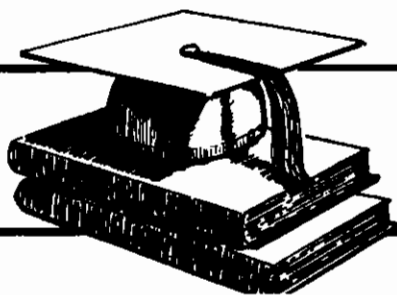
Edward Luttwak

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PROFESSIONAL READING

REVIEW ARTICLE

War, Strategy and Maritime Power

by

Edward Luttwak*

What is a navy in the absence of a maritime strategy? The United States has interests overseas in need of naval protection, and it also depends on much commercial traffic that is maritime. The United States has a large, if diminished, inventory of warships and auxiliaries, as well as sundry ancillary air forces and many shore facilities variously related to naval functions. Just over 500,000 people in uniform operate and administer these ships, aircraft and shore facilities, and another 200,000 operate a complete, self-contained armed force historically associated with amphibious operations, and now still administratively associated with the naval force as such. But the one thing that the United States plainly lacks is a maritime strategy.

What is a navy in the absence of a strategy? It is, in effect, a priesthood. Ships, aircraft and facilities are maintained, as temples are kept clean, repaired and repainted. Fleets are rotated from home bases to overseas deployment areas, and then back again, as liturgical services are performed at set hours, in the days set by the priestly

calendar. Routine ceremonies alternate with the consecration of new ships, and with the introduction of new devices, much as new temples are from time to time commissioned to replace those beyond repair, or to augment their number when faith is on the rise, and the harvest gods have been kind. In all priesthoods there are degrees: some priests are confined to the supervision of the lesser sanctuaries of rustic gods; others are deemed elevated enough to officiate at the inner altars where the most powerful gods reside; the analogy with the nuclear guardians in our Navy need not be belabored.

The priests of ancient pagan faiths had many complex tasks, but it was no part of their duty to ask why the sacrifices were made and the prayers chanted. Nor could they question the wisdom of rites or suggest better ways of appeasing the gods. As for those outside the priesthood, they were disqualified to ask questions by their lack of knowledge of the secrets of the faith. And so we ourselves continue with the upkeep of the ships, aircraft and facilities and with their ritual movements—year after year—never asking fundamental questions about our purposes and methods.

Sometimes the peasants rebel and refuse to pay the tithes exacted for the

*Research Professor, Georgetown University and Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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building of replacement temples; sometimes they react at the cost of some new idol made of exotic materials by expensive craftsmen. Then the members of the priesthood unite in their corporate solidarity to evoke all the sinister dangers that will attend the diminution of the number of temples, or the reduction of their magnificence. Sometimes the peasants are successfully intimidated, and are frightened into paying homage in hard cash; at other times it is the priests who give up, and then they take care not to undermine faith in the temples and idols still in hand, and so they refrain from insisting on the dangers of the gods left unappeased or by temples not built.

What else can a navy do but perform as best it can as a priesthood, if it has no maritime strategy? For only in a strategy may rational ideas be found to inform the choice of sea and air platforms, to provide meaningful guidelines for subsystem design priorities, and to define the pattern of requisite deployments.

A navy in being is a necessary condition of any maritime strategy but is not a substitute for such. Ever since the defeat of the Imperial Japanese Navy the U.S. Navy has had to live without a comprehensive strategy. Now that there is a growing Soviet Navy of already impressive proportions, it may seem that a strategy for the U.S. Navy could be found effortlessly, by summing the requirements of defeating the Soviet Navy. Unfortunately this easy answer is foreclosed: the Soviet Navy itself can find sufficient strategy in the neutralization of American naval power and its alliance adjuncts, but the latter in turn must accomplish positive purposes, and cannot exhaust their function in neutralizing Soviet naval strength.

The United States thus unavoidably needs a positive maritime strategy, i.e., a coherent statement of its own role in the world with a consequent delineation of the maritime requirements of this

role. (Maritime rather than merely naval, because to a large extent naval force is merely the protective framework for the use of oceans in all its aspects.) The source of the problem is no mystery: we have no maritime strategy because we have no national strategy. But this in turn is no excuse for the failure of the U.S. Navy as a corporate body to formulate a coherent strategy. It merely means that the maritime strategy must be defined in terms of a *presumptive* national strategy, in the hope that the nation will indeed accept the logic of the former, even if it does not fully acknowledge the latter. But this most basic of tasks continues to be evaded. Preoccupied with purely managerial problems, absorbed by the narrow thoughts of bureaucratic role-playing, determined to promote these bureaucratic interests through the sub-strategic devices of systems analysis and all the other numbers games, much more interested in new technology than in the purposeful operation of all technologies (and only strategy may confer purpose on mere technicity) our higher naval leadership has not even seriously tried to develop the intellectual structure of a maritime strategy. In some cases there has been the belief that the mere listing of "missions" is a substitute; in others faith has been placed in *posture statements* poised to exploit the latest headlines (e.g., oil in FY 1975 and 1976). It is true that both the internal customs of resource allocation in the Department of Defense, and also our congressional budgetary process demand specifics and are structured to reject rational strategic discourse, as the latter cannot be quantified. The mindless insistence on numbers, even when the absence of a strategic context makes the numbers meaningless is a fact of life. But there is no reason why the Navy cannot develop its own internal strategic discourse and eventually present its own analysis of the nation's maritime needs, even while continuing to feed all

the bookkeepers and slide-rule artists with the deceptively precise numbers that they crave. One must hope that the corrosion of the minds caused by bureaucratic factionalism has not so far developed that the Navy is now in fact incapable of true strategic discourse.

*War, Strategy and Maritime Power** is not a statement of naval strategy, nor is it a strategic treatise such as would serve directly to guide the formulation of an American naval strategy. It is, however, a most valuable source book that could be of much use to inform the strategic discourse now long overdue. The first group of essays by Bernard Knox, Gordon Turner, Basil Liddell Hart and Norman Gibbs makes a good introduction by addressing the broader problem of war and peace; except for Liddell Hart's notoriously ignorant misapprehension of Clausewitz (he deplores the fellow, plainly never having read him) it is all solid stuff, in a historical vein. The next section has pieces by Herbert Rosinski, Henry Eccles, James Field, and William Reitzel; it focuses more directly on the nature and purposes of strategy itself. Rosinski's contribution amounts to a lucid miniessay

that offers what I believe to be the best brief definition of strategy itself, in contradistinction to tactics ("strategy is the comprehensive direction of power; tactics is its immediate application"). Eccles pursues at much greater length and to good purpose the definitional route; neither good nor bad, his contribution is simply basic, and reflects a sustained interest in the fundamentals of strategy that is itself a valuable rarity among us.

The essays by Field and Reitzel, not to be summarized here, are concerned more closely with the specifically naval aspect, but their focus is on the history of naval strategy rather than on naval strategy *tout court*. What follows after this in the book is a long series of diverse case studies and essays of re-appraisal, including Stephen Ambrose on seapower in the two World Wars, Martin Blumenson on the continuities and contrasts between the two World Wars, and the editor's own essay on the rearmament of Germany, or rather its immediate prelude. Brisk and well-written, it is a useful piece of work even for those who have no interest in the past, because it is now easy to see that the issues of 1950-54 are about to reemerge in full force, one way or the other. Readers will want to explore the remaining rich menu of essays on strategic, military, and politicomilitary issues. Necessarily uneven, the average standard is nevertheless high.

*B. Mitchell Simpson III, ed. *War, Strategy and Maritime Power*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1977, 356pp. A collection of articles and essays on strategy and maritime power that have appeared in the *Naval War College Review*, selected and edited by a former editor of the *Review*.