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Rather than a function delegated to the military in a time of emergency, the formulation and execution of national strategy has come to be recognized as a blend of military and political factors—the work of soldiers and statesmen together. This integrated process may, however, prove ultimately unsatisfactory to both parties. The singular skills of the military professional tend to become diluted as his role becomes more broad and politically oriented; his position in the social system—once clear and limited—becomes rather ambiguous; and the actual implementation of the military strategy is too often abdicated to nonmilitary policymakers acting strategically.

THE STRATEGIC PROCESS: IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

An article prepared

by

Mr. William Reitzel

Men have always found it necessary to engage in modes of thought and patterns of action to which we collectively refer to as "strategy" and "strategic." The conditions or situations requiring this, as old as human society itself, are marked by conflict involving some form of organized force; such force being directed to some stated purpose, aim, or end. I suggest that this mode of thought and pattern of action can be usefully regarded as a process set in motion by an objective, operated by professionals, concerned to organize and control the interaction of men, material, and an opponent within a given time and space.

The elements of strategy have not changed over the millennia: Athenians facing Sparta, Fabius Maximus facing Hannibal, Caesar moving to Gaul, Marlborough heading for the Danube, Nelson hunting the French Fleet, Nimitz and others finding cracks in the

Japanese defenses—all were operating the same process. Nevertheless, the basic identity of strategy has witnessed obscuration through endless changes in the mechanics of the process: collection of data, analysis of relations, organizing resources, setting action in motion, maintaining momentum—matters generally handled by staffs under the direction and control of a commander. These mechanics admittedly have become more complex. The net effect of this situation has been that a concentration on the mechanics has diverted attention from the elements of strategy.

In many ways the strategic process is only a form of the general decision-action process, but it differs in one important respect. That is, it is set in motion when the interests of a state are *critically* affected, when conflict becomes probable, and when the response calls for use of members and resources of the state on a scale greater than

normal. Add one other traditional difference—the strategic process has historically been delegated to military professionals.

So the process starts with a situation affecting the interest of the state, and some agency of the state reacting to it. Let us label this agency, this ruling authority, with Clausewitz' neutral term "cabinet." It does not matter how the situation is created—offensive aims, defensive needs; the cabinet determines it as a matter of high concern. The cabinet equally determines that non-forceful means have been exhausted or are not applicable.

Until the last half of this century, once this determination was made, the cabinet, in principle, delegated responsibility to the professional organizers and managers of armed forces to:

- Develop a strategy; that is, propose a way of using armed force to achieve the objective of the cabinet's decision.

- After approval, to convene the strategy.

- And, when once set in motion, to control the action in relation to the objective.

While the delegation was never absolute, some military systems in the last century spoke and acted as if it had been—the German Staff in the Franco-Prussian War, some British commanders in WW I. In reality, delegation was made under the following terms of reference:

- The process would focus on the objective set by the cabinet.

- Professional strategic proposals would be criticized, modified, and adjusted to other state considerations by the cabinet.

- The cabinet controlled when and how the approved action would begin and end.

- The cabinet could and would intervene during the action. In short, strategic thinking and action was considered to come into play only in specific situations, for specific purposes,

and was the function of a specialized professional group. All else was policy or statecraft and was the undisputed function of the cabinet. Control of the action rested with the cabinet in the interest of gaining the objective and keeping an eye on costs; with the professional in relation to the opponent—to time and space factors and to the tactics of the encounter—all with an eye to modifying the strategy as needed without losing the objective.

Although policy and strategy are held to be separate functions, this distinction holds only in the initial stages of the process. When strategy becomes action, the reality is a more or less continuous interplay between the two functions—very often of an argumentative and acrimonious kind. The cabinet interferes with the control of strategic action while the military appear to make excessive claims for professional autonomy. At best, the cabinet and the military commander take divergent views as they face increasingly different problems. For example, Wellington, writing from the Peninsula: "Instead of attending to what I recommended, the Government chose to debate the expediency of maintaining an active war upon the frontier. Of this as an abstract proposition, there could be no doubt, but unfortunately we were deficient in the means, which they did not consider providing." So Wellington made his adjustments by his own strategic views and built the static lines of Torres Vedras. This, of course, was in the good old days when Wellington was safe behind slow and erratic communications.

The concrete problems of maintaining a strategy over a prolonged action inevitably call for adjustments. These can rarely be purely military or purely cabinet-political. They invariably raise awkward questions about the departure from an agreed strategy. Also, the extension of a conflict in time or space alters the best plans and the finest intentions. As Sun Tzu noted: "There is

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no evidence of a country ever having benefited from a long war." Clausewitz also had strong views on this subject:

Strategy must take the field with the army to make modifications in the general plan which incessantly become necessary. If the control of Strategy in action is to be kept in the Cabinet, this is permissible only if the Cabinet remains so close to the army as to be its chief headquarters.

I mentioned earlier that the strategic process of thinking and action was considered to come into play only in specific situations and for specific purposes. In this respect, it always tended to be tied tightly to concrete reality. Increasingly, from the days of the German General Staff and its imitators, and even more so in our time, the strategic process has been set to work on imagined situations—scenarios, war games, or in various kinds of strategic studies. In this atmosphere, strategic thinking becomes an abstraction and tends to lack the rigor of analysis and the completeness of calculation needed for dealing with a real situation.

While such exercises give useful practice in handling the mechanics of the process, these exercises in the abstract have little in common with strategy in reality. I also hazard a guess that repeatedly going through the motions in a vacuum creates the situation for the application of a rote formula. Such works against the freshness of attack and professional intuition that a real, unique situation requires.

Let us now consider the relationship between the two actors in the strategy process—the cabinet (ruling authority) as the initiator and the military commander (plus staff) as the delegated executor. There exist other actors in the wings: society, with its normal requirements and claims, which will be cut into by the strategy process and its demands; an opponent, who naturally activates an equivalent strategic process of his own.

However, we will not bother here with actors in the wings, important though they are, because the relations between the cabinet and the commander are our primary concern and bring us straight into the jungle of politics/strategy.

Without being too subtle, we can identify four patterns of this relationship:

1. A cabinet and C-in-C combined in one person (Adolphus, Frederick, Napoleon) or one small group (Marlborough, Godolphin, Queen Anne). This is not necessarily perfect. As Jomini noted of Napoleon, "One might say his victories teach what may be accomplished by activity, boldness and skill; his disasters what might have been avoided by political prudence."

2. A cabinet based on a small ruling class, with C-in-C a member of that class. This presupposes an identity of sociocultural background; a sympathetic interplay between the actors.

3. A cabinet that is an unstable fluctuating group, changed by election, competition, et cetera, with C-in-C representing a special professional group maintained by society for defense of the state.

4. A cabinet (Politburo) as a self-perpetuating committee in full control of levers of authority, with C-in-C a subordinate servant of cabinet.

Obviously the first and fourth patterns do not delegate a strategic responsibility to the military professional. With them, armed force is simply the tactical servant of their policy, wholly without freedom of action. In contrast, the second and third patterns, in various forms, are political systems with which we are familiar. The concept of a specialized function called strategy, separated from a cabinet function called policy, is peculiar to these two systems.

Since we are most familiar with these situations, I will focus on the second and third patterns. However, before doing so I would like to set forth two sets of definitions that reflect differing

views of the relations of the major actors in the strategy process.

SET I (Representing Ideas of 1810-1914)

- Assumes that strategy is a military function, clearly separated from a policy function.
- Asserts that strategy follows from a policy decision.
- Limits the area of strategic thinking, keeps it narrow and precise.

SET II (Representing Ideas of 1920-1970)

- Assumes that strategy is a diffused function of an activity in which policy-making and military thinking are intermingled.
- Asserts that action follows from an intermarriage of policy and strategic considerations.
- Expands the area until its margins become blurred and ambiguous.

Set I represents a longstanding consensus that policy (a cabinet function) was generally a separate and self-contained matter that would, on occasion, require the use of armed force to implement its purposes. It was then that the professional military would both generate a strategy relevant to the cabinet objective and manage its application in action. The dividing line was clear: the cabinet ordered, and the military proposed and acted. It is interesting to note that these definitions have nothing to say about the first step in the process—that of generating a strategy—but a great deal to say about step two, the initiation and direction of strategic action—"the art of generalship." We shall examine this later.

In contrast, Set II reflects a fairly widespread consensus that a cabinet should always assume that there was a built-in component of force in policy. Professional military should accordingly

participate in policy formulation, and the cabinet should understand the requirements and uses of force. Conversely, the military should always be aware of the built-in political component in the organization and use of force so that strategic action would be linked with political purposes. In short, the cabinet must think strategically; the military must think like statesmen.

Historically, the switch-over point from Set I to Set II began between WW I and WW II, largely in the form of criticism of the attitudes of the military professionals in their conduct of WW I. It suggests that there was more to "the art of generalship" than traditional professionalism in the control of action once set in motion; that a conflict of national wills quickly initiated a competition for economic resources, productive capacity, social organization, and public morale—all matters belonging to the cabinet. In this view, strategy should not be something delegated to the military but should be a composite of military and nonmilitary considerations developed by a marriage of cabinet and military. To complete the shift, WW II left the impression that the cabinet and the military had to be integrated if the marriage was to be fruitful. This was gradually given institutional forms and has been increasingly reflected in strategic theory.

Space limitations preclude our going into the historical cases and experience that supported these two divergent views. I accept the notion that each was rooted in reasonably valid readings of the structures and needs of the societies of their times. I also accept the thesis implicit in the dissolution of Set I, not because it was fundamentally wrong but that the pressures of 20th century war strained its assumptions. The professional military had rigidified its practices and—in the name of delegated responsibility—laid unacceptable claims on the society for which it acted, claims which were disputed by the cabinet.

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I make this point because I consider that there exists a long-lasting validity in the thesis that strategy is a military function (Set I), while there may be unsuspected consequences from too absolute an acceptance of the broader interpretation (Set II).

Here are just a few observations on the implications of these broader interpretations. The role of the military professional in the social system and his relation to the ruling authority of the state, formerly clear and limited, becomes blurred and ambiguous by being enlarged and broadened. As a continual participant in shaping a range of policy called national strategy, his professional judgment of the resource needs of organized forces tends to become open ended, addressed to theoretical scenarios and all imaginable contingencies. This is a fundamentally different matter from being called on to define the needs of a particular action for a particular purpose in a particular situation. And, even though he has been a participant in the formulation of national strategy, when force is applied in reality, he becomes merely a manager of its application. The critical control, marriage vows to the contrary, is automatically asserted by the cabinet. This tendency, always present, is now reinforced by modern communications and command and control system. So, in evolutions that require considerable detail, he finds that his professional skills are now usurped by nonprofessionals acting strategically.

I will suggest later that these considerations are both a disadvantage to the military professional and can be a serious impediment to the effective performance of his role. However, before going into this, let us examine the post-World War II evolution of the policy-strategy relationship. In World War II the elaborate machinery for meshing policy (military strategy) and resources (logistics) was highly successful. But, it must be remembered, this

problem was managed in an actual conflict conducted in finite time. The same machinery (now even more elaborate) and the same interlocking functional concepts are now more firmly held. Nonetheless, it does not have an equally sharp focus since it is applied primarily to a generalized state of international relations. Under these conditions, what was war policy (a concrete, time-limited focus) becomes defense policy (a continuing, unrolling process)—for the open-ended protection of the state's position, interests, international role. The focus has shifted from the use of force in actual conflict with a specific opponent to the designing and maintaining of a potential force for use against a threat, open ended in time, unconfined in space. Strategy is now seen not as a design for entering upon and conducting armed conflict but as a pattern of thought for handling a permanently unfolding situation of potential threat.

Theories of strategy accordingly called for a national structure of interlocking parts, to which existing institutions responded. It cannot be said that either the cabinet or the military have been entirely happy and comfortable in their new home. While this elaborate interlocking system may have been somehow effective in the conduct of the cold war, it was largely because the cabinet dominated the relationship and the military strategy inputs were mainly verbal noises. When, however, the cabinet called for the use of armed force, the operational output of this complex machinery has been open to question. The machinery has been unable to oblige the cabinet by setting objectives that could be translated into a military strategy. Further, the military professional could not get a clear and final decision for his conceived strategic proposals. What has happened to strategy as a military function and a professional mode of thought at this juncture is anybody's guess.

My guess is that the actual practice of strategy has suffered attrition and that true professional strategic thinking has little scope and impact. In its place, one can recognize the following substitutes:

- An immense amount of energy given to exercising the *mechanics* of the strategic process with consequent large quantities of paper only incidentally related to concrete situations.

- A steady flow of proposals—plans, opinions, eye-catching suggestions—all designated “strategies” and all requiring someone’s critical attention.

- The appearance of individual armed services statements of the merits, qualities, usefulness, and importance of their respective missions presented to the cabinet—for congressional and public consumption—as “strategies.”

- A flood of books, articles, et cetera, always with the word “strategy” in the title and which nearly always are little more than an impassioned author telling the nation what it must do to be saved.

Yet the basic strategy process is as important as it has ever been and just as capable of yielding benefits. But to be effective it must be used in the right way and for the right purposes. This may again require and clear distinction between cabinet function (policy) and the military function (strategy—both thought and action).

I believe that the view of the U.S. Naval War College publication *Sound Military Decision* is worth reconsidering, no matter how unfashionable it may sound:

... the State adopts a national decision (policy). To carry out this decision, each of the primary divisions of the State’s organization is assigned a specific task. Given a task, each organization of the national armed forces is governed in its action by the task assigned it. It behooves policy to ensure not only that military strategy pursue ap-

propriate aims, but that the work of strategy be allotted adequate means, and be undertaken under the most favorable conditions.

Liddell Hart views it thusly:

Clear cut nomenclature is essential to clear thought and the term “Strategy” is best confined to the literal meaning of “generalship”—the actual directing of military force, as distinct from the policy governing its employment and combining it with other forms of state power: economic, political, psychological.

This is in consonance with my general theme, but I wish to make it clear that it does open up a blank spot in my analysis, one that should be noted before this discussion ends. Recall earlier that I mentioned that various definitions of strategy had a great deal to say about “the direction of strategic action,” in other words, “the art of the general,” while at the same time saying practically nothing about how a strategy was developed by a commander, developed as a basis for and a guide to action. Yet, this would be the first step in the strategy process. Presumably, when the cabinet called for the use of force, it became a military function to furnish a *comprehensive proposal* for applying *organized force*.

The nature of this particular task and how men go about it was not really dealt with by theoretical analysis and definition. Certainly, none of the so-called great commanders were ever very articulate on the subject. Jomini notes: “it is confined to the understanding of the great captains, [but] exists in no written treaties.” Sun Tzu said, “All men can see the tactics by which I conquer, but none can see the strategy out of which I evolve victory.” Repeated references to “the sweeping view of things,” or the “bird’s-eye position,” do not help much. Marshal Saxe perhaps throws some light on the subject when he insists that the responsible commander has a fundamentally different approach to professional prob-

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lems, a different habit of mind from the competent run-of-the-mill officer. As he puts it:

I have seen good colonels become very bad generals. Very few officers study the grand detail and so, if they arrive at the command of armies, they are totally perplexed. From their ignorance of how to do what they ought, they merely do what they know, often with disastrous results.

Brodie puts it in a more kindly way:

Tactics and administration are areas in which the military are most completely professional. Unless an officer attains some independent and important command, he may never in his career have to make a decision that tests his insight as a strategist.

This suggests to me that a successful military strategist brings to this part of his role an attitude somewhat like that which a successful medical diagnostician brings to his role of dealing with an illness:

- An accumulation of professional experience.

- A professionally based intuitive ability to grasp the complex relations of a range of factual data and a range of tenable assumptions.

- An ability, partly intuitive, partly conscious and rational, to apply this to the solution of a specific concrete problem.

It is the exercise of these highly professional skills that produces a strategy. It will, I suppose, always be an open question whether this highly individual and rather rare skill can ever be satisfactorily replaced by a committee. Most records of councils of war are either marked by a commander overriding discussion or are marked by ineffectiveness. Yet, the committee technique is the tendency of our present concept of how to develop strategy and to take strategic action.

The kind of military strategist that Saxe has in mind is one that, after gaining

approval for the strategy, then applies his skills to maintaining the guidelines of that strategy in the fog of war, the inertia of people and things, and the actions of the opponent.

At this juncture it is time that we pause and fix our attention on my goal for this paper; that is, the notion of whether a limited concept of the strategy process is more or less effective than the expanded concept with which we now live. My contribution to this problem will be two deliberately categorical and provocative statements designed to set up points for further thought:

- The military profession is more likely to be effective in developing relevant strategies, explaining them, and executing them if its function is clearly separated from the political.

- Too close and constant participation in a policy-strategy continuum tends to blur the real nature of the military role—even for the military. Thus, it exposes its professionalism to unreasonable and unnatural strains and saddles it with a shared responsibility for political-strategic choices that often lie beyond its competence to achieve.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Mr. William Reitzel served in World War II as a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean theaters. He has served as professor of social science at Haverford College, occupied the

Chester W. Nimitz Chair of National Security and Foreign Affairs at the Naval War College, been active with the Central Intelligence Agency and the Brookings Institution, and served as a Director, Division of Strategic Studies, Center for Naval Analysis at Cambridge, Mass. His publications include *The Mediterranean: Role in U.S. Foreign Policy*, *Major Problems U.S. Foreign Policy*, *U.S. Foreign Policy: 1945-1955*, *Background to Decision-Making*. Mr. Reitzel resides in Newport, R.I., where he is engaged in independent research and writing at his leisure.
