

Naval War College Review

Volume 26
Number 4 *July-August*

Article 13

1973

Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defense 1919-39

B. M. Simpson III
U.S. Navy

Peter Dennis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Simpson, B. M. III and Dennis, Peter (1973) "Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defense 1919-39," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 26 : No. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol26/iss4/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

82 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

intends, as is implied throughout the book, that it is the province of the strategic thinker (unless he is a mere manipulator of quantitative relations, innocent of historical insight) to instruct the military leaders, and "through them the political leaders," in what it means to subordinate military means to political purpose. On the constraint side, one is reminded of Brodie's 1965 exchange with André Beaufre, the pre-eminent European nuclear-era strategist and his own most worthy confrere, whom he chided for appearing to mistake strategy for a branch of philosophy concerned with ultimate truth. In the more exalted role of critic Brodie has done again what he did so successfully in his *Strategy in the Missile Age*, in which he mingled intellectual history, strategic analysis, and a biting critique of contemporary Air Force priorities. He has intermixed brilliant reflections on the neglected teaching of Clausewitz, the history of changing attitudes toward war, and past and contemporary theories of war's causation with trenchant comment on exaggerated claims for the efficacy of strategic bombing in World War II, on Korea as "the first modern limited war"—and on Douglas MacArthur as the general in whose hands that particular war was left much too long—finally, and above all, on Vietnam, that exterior infection from whose poisons the American body politic is now hopefully beginning to recover. The perspective is historical, political, psychological, and moral as well as strategic (in the narrower sense that indicates the orderly subordination of military means to political ends). Evidently this is what Brodie means by the domination of strategy by the political purpose after the Clausewitzian model—it seems to this reviewer also to be very close to what Beaufre has in mind when he places strategy in its "philosophical" context. But whatever it is, its critical fruits are rich, and not least so on the Vietnam war, by which

doubtless most of his readers will be attracted to this memorable work.

James E. King
Professor of International Relations
and Director of Advanced Research

Dennis, Peter. *Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defense 1919-39*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972. 244p.

In April 1939, Britain adopted peacetime conscription for the first time. This step was obviously taken as a response to Hitler's swallowing of the rump of Czechoslovakia in violation of the Munich agreement of September 1938. With admirable scholarship, Peter Dennis has examined the course of British defense policy from the end of World War I to the adoption of peacetime conscription.

This period is particularly important for the professional military officer because it tends to prove Murphy's law: if anything can go wrong, it will. In this period the original failure was one of political analysis and acumen. It was compounded by a failure to understand and to apply elementary strategic thinking.

At the highest political level the British Government failed to recognize that Britain had very real interests on the Continent in maintaining the political order established by the Treaty of Versailles. The basis of this order was the prevention of German hegemony, which required a strong British ally on the Continent. The French, understandably paranoid about a German resurgence, sought assurances from both the British and the Americans. In both cases they were disappointed.

British policy until almost the eve of World War II eschewed a continental role for the British Army. The reasons were twofold. First, an understandable desire to avoid the slaughter of World War I trench warfare, coupled with strong pacifist influence. Second, the traditionalists urged reliance on sea-

power and airpower. Such a reliance led to the suspicion in Paris that Britain would fight to the last French soldier. This policy came to be known as limited liability under the Chamberlain government. Unfortunately, since the main threat was Germany and the Wehrmacht, sea and airpower—no matter how strong—could be expected to have little effect on the European military political balance. Not only did the British Governments consistently fail to identify British interests, but when that was more or less done correctly, the original error was compounded by failing to make the necessary connection between those interests and the military and political means of pursuing them.

The 1925 Locarno Treaty settled the Franco-German frontier issue, and at that time Britain effectively withdrew from European problems. The negative military implications of this withdrawal neatly meshed with British domestic fiscal policy. The Conservatives sought to cut spending, and the Labor Party sought to maintain living standards and welfare programs. No large defense expenditures were contemplated, and the result was the 10 year rule which hypothesized no war for 10 years. The 10 year rule lasted until 1932.

In 1932 the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Lord Milne, pointed out that regardless of any treaty commitments, a threat to France and to the Lowlands would be a threat to Britain. He correctly concluded that the strength of Britain's Armed Forces had to be related to potential threats. Germany was the only major European power with whom war was likely.

The Chiefs of Staff recommended a continental role for the British Army. Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, underlined this recommendation by stating that Britain could count on French support only if France saw Britain as a positive military value in a

war with Germany. This would require a land contribution in the form of an expeditionary force. The problem was that no such forces were then available or would be for several years.

Mr. Dennis has examined the appropriate records of the Foreign Office, Cabinet, Treasury, War Office, and Air Ministry, along with journals and newspapers for contemporary comment. He skillfully traces the debates at the lower levels and relates them to the better known political developments at the Cabinet level and on the international scene. These primary sources shed light on the debates which were generally not made public at the time. They also put the public controversy in better perspective. The military planners come off much better than the civilian politicians, who not only erred, but persisted in their errors of perception and analysis.

After Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936, in direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles, the Cabinet was still unwilling to conduct broad staff discussions with the French for fear that they would turn into a commitment, as pre-World War I staff discussions had. Yet the Government recognized the possibility of sending an expeditionary force to the Continent if Germany attacked France, but refused to commit itself in advance.

The Baldwin government was adamant against conscription in peacetime. The strength of the army depended upon voluntary enlistment. However, the Ministry of Labor was opposed to a recruiting campaign, especially among unemployed men, because it would seem to be a form of indirect conscription. But more important, public opinion, especially among intellectuals, the Labor Party and the nonconformist churches, was still ardently pacifist. The result was that recruitment lagged.

When Chamberlain succeeded Baldwin as Prime Minister in 1937, his idea of limited liability was adopted by the Cabinet. This concept depended upon

84 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

seapower, the development of airpower, and a form of offensive mobility, all of which undercut the need for a continental commitment. Limited liability was based on the assumption that Britain would have strong continental allies who would fight.

Vansittart pointed out that this assumption was essentially invalid. Britain's allies would not consider sea and air participation sufficient. International politics required a sizable British land contribution, if only because the French Army would have to bear the brunt of any German westward move. Furthermore, the Little Entente would resist German pressure to the extent that French guarantees were backed by British military power.

Nevertheless, by the end of 1937 Chamberlain had committed Britain to limited liability, even though military and diplomatic advisers had warned of its potential effects. Nineteen hundred and thirty eight saw not only Hitler's annexation of Austria, but also the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia at Munich. Mr. Dennis succinctly comments, "The power of persuasion rested ultimately on the ability to threaten: that the British utterly lacked." After Munich, the French looked to the British to make up for the loss of some 35 Czech divisions.

By this time it was abundantly clear that some sort of British continental commitment was necessary. Unfortunately, the current state of Britain's Armed Forces precluded one. Peacetime conscription was the only answer. From January 1939 the Government took halting steps, in Mr. Dennis' words, to prepare the nation for war, not as part of any coherent plan, but as an attempt to pacify public opinion. Hitler's annexation of the non-German people of Slovakia in March 1939 led directly to the adoption of peacetime conscription by the end of April.

Mr. Dennis has written a thorough and factual account which is an ex-

cellent study in how not to relate defense policy to national interests.

B.M. SIMPSON III
Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

Powell, J.R. *Robert Blake, General-at-Sea*. New York: Crane, Russak & Company, 1972. 352p.

At first glance, there seems to be an air of distant unreality about the naval wars of the 17th century. The yellowed paintings of the time depict long-beaked ships encrusted with gilded carvings and ornamented with gaudy banners. Lace collars, ruffled sleeves, and flowing, shoulder-length hair seem to contrast starkly with burnished armor and the glint of sword blades in the portraits of great leaders. How could ships such as these sail the Atlantic; how could such men be sailors?

It was an age of contrast. This was the era that saw the early colonies in North America struggling for survival, yet, it was also the sophisticated age of Spinoza, Grotius, Rembrandt, Dryden, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton. It saw the flourishing of the Dutch maritime empire and the triumph of absolutism in France under Richelieu and Louis XIV. In England, Oliver Cromwell, with a Puritan minority, had beheaded the King and established a dictatorship in the name of constitutional and parliamentary government. While Cromwell ruled uneasily at home, his foreign policy was more successful. Ireland was subjugated; a successful attack was launched on Dutch maritime ascendancy; and war with Spain brought the prize of Jamaica, the star of English possessions in the Caribbean. To accomplish this, Cromwell spurred the greatest flurry of naval activity in England since the days of Henry VIII.

Amidst this setting, Robert Blake stands as the most important figure in 17th century British naval history. J.R. Powell's portrait of Blake is not painted on so broad a canvas, but it is important for a newcomer to the 17th century to