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STRATEGYMAKING FOR THE 1980'S

by

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The effectiveness of the armed forces is described by the utility we find in them and the excellence of the strategy that guides them. At the same time, the American military professionals, with the exception only of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, have an undistinguished record of original contributions to strategic thought. The thesis of this article is that classical strategy alone, while it is a worthwhile subject for study, cannot form the basis for the tasks our nation now faces. Our professional responsibility is to seek and develop strategies that will meet those tasks.

This article will present broad concepts for the development of such strategies. While the treatment of this subject can never really be definitive, the aim here is to expand understanding and to suggest some approaches to the art of strategymaking. I will explore new concepts, rather than the familiar, and illustrate them with some historical examples.¹

THE AMERICAN TRADITION AND STRATEGY

We, the American military, have since our Civil War entered all of our conflicts with advantages over our opponents. We have had advantages in firepower, manpower, and technology. These advantages have permitted us to pursue strategies not available to our opponents. First, we have had the time to mobilize and prepare. Second, we have been able to overwhelm and seek as a principal objective the destruction of the armed forces of our enemies.

Opulence is not the most fertile environment for the military strategist. It permits options that work, but it lacks the pressures presented by limited resources. An

uncomplimentary view of the US military was noted by a retired Army officer:

Except for our first two wars, an overwhelming abundance of economic power has been the deciding factor that has given the United States Army its victories. America has been inclined to rely on raw strength to the neglect of brains.²

The advantages that permitted such a strategy are now either gone or wasting. I believe that these changes make necessary a reconsideration of strategy. We need to examine other strategies to determine which is the best match to our capabilities and those of our prospective adversaries. We can no longer rely on raw strength and must now turn to brainpower.

THE SOLDIER AND STRATEGYMAKING

In the United States, the development of strategic concepts has become the province of the civilian, academician, part-time strategist. I believe it is the responsibility of the professionals to develop and examine credible alternatives. We in uniform should be better qualified to do so, and it is we who will have the responsibility for executing whatever strategy is chosen.

My view is that a student of strategy profits both from an understanding of history and from those who wrote about it and drew conclusions from it. At the same time, I am adamant in my view that there are no final answers in either of these sources, no matter how esteemed they may be. Even Clausewitz, unmatched in his field, has no answers for me. He has hundreds of ideas and insights. Through these we must seek to develop

understanding, and with this, some few of us may demonstrate the creativity that lies behind all great strategies and strategists.

If you accept my characterization of the problem and its solution, where do we begin? I suggest we start with a study of history and those who draw lessons from it. I will present ideas that I have drawn from study that seem relevant to today's situation and also point out some situations where the maxims of the strategic masters have not been supported by specific events or have been misused. Again, the masters offer us ideas—not answers.

THE GOALS OF STRATEGY

First, I suggest that we consider what we seek to accomplish through our strategy. There is an understandable tendency on the part of the uniformed military to assert that we can inflict "X damage" on "Y target." This information, in itself, is of almost no value or importance, even if we are correct in our assertion. The important information is whether we can do something that is worth doing. We must start with the objective of military forces. Even here, we need to be explicit. Clausewitz' oft-quoted statement that "war is . . . a continuation of political activity by other means"³ is not enough. Our object in war or strategy is the behavior of a limited number of people. We wish to conduct our affairs in such a way that these people will act in a way that we prefer—our goal in strategy is to influence human behavior in a way favorable to our objectives. On this thought Liddell Hart stated: "I am now coming to think that [the causes of war] are decisively 'personal'—arising from the defects and ambitions of those who have the power to influence the currents of nations."⁴ He came to the view that "the profoundest truth of war is that the issue of battles is usually decided in the minds of the opposing commanders, not in the bodies of their men."⁵ I suggest, then, that our strategies ought to seek this as their principal object—the mind of the opposing commander.

In my view, there are a few real fundamentals of military strategy, by and large self-evident, but I will discuss them briefly.

TECHNIQUES FOR THE STRATEGIST

Liddell Hart wrote that "the principles of war . . . can be condensed into a single word—'concentration.'"⁶ This was a restatement of Clausewitz' dictum, "There is no higher and simpler law of strategy than that of *keeping one's forces concentrated.*"⁷ This is so universal a principle that we must take as a given that forces will be concentrated against us when the enemy thinks they will best suit his objectives, quite likely to our maximum disadvantage. I argue that even so fundamental a premise as this is inadequate in itself. Clausewitz further develops this principle. He regards his precept of all precepts as "*unity of conception, concentration of strength.*"⁸ This further development makes clear that concentration itself is not the sole objective. Rather, the objective is now expanded to place concentration on a par with the excellence of the strategic concept being advanced.

In my view, Clausewitz' discussion of concentration does not stop with this apparently definitive precept of all precepts. I find the most useful Clausewitzian concept to be that of the center of gravity, a concept both consistent with and a refinement of those just mentioned. Clausewitz states that the basic problem confronting the strategist is one of discerning the center of gravity, which is defined as "the hub of all power and movement, . . . the point against which all our energies should be directed."⁹ However, it is an oversimplification of this concept—and his view of it—to conclude that the center of gravity is, of necessity, the mass of the enemy's forces. As an example, he points out:

In countries subject to domestic strife, . . . [it] is generally the capital. . . . Among alliances, it lies in the community of interest, and in popular uprisings it is the personalities of the leaders and public opinion.¹⁰

We must expect that the few ideas presented here are common knowledge and normal objectives. All sides can expect that

their opponents will seek a center of gravity and will concentrate their forces on that center. Let me apply this concept to the European environment, not as a recommendation or a prediction, but rather as an explanation of an idea. Here, two alliances confront one another. Several Clausewitzian thoughts bear on alliances:

In small countries that rely on large ones, [the center of gravity] is usually the army of their protector.

If you can vanquish all your enemies by defeating one of them, that defeat must be the main objective in the war. In this one enemy we strike at the center of gravity of the entire conflict.¹¹

From a NATO perspective, the army of the strongest is clearly that of the Soviet Union. Were Soviet forces defeated, it makes sense to me that their allies would weaken and be prepared to terminate the conflict. This would indicate some merit in examining a strategy that would place maximum effort, by all of NATO, on Soviet forces wherever they are. In a target-rich environment, the target list could be reduced and concentrated. The relevant force ratios then become those present at the selected center of gravity rather than merely Warsaw Pact/NATO alliance strengths.

As with any, this strategy affords both a concept and a threat. We can only speculate on the Soviet perception of the center of gravity in NATO. It is a perception that would certainly be influenced by their own political objectives in such a conflict. Certainly alternate objectives could be formulated and defended. As an example, let me postulate, for purposes of explanation, that from the Warsaw Pact perspective Clausewitz' one enemy is the US forces.

If these forces were defeated, it would not be surprising if other members of NATO found merit in terminating the conflict. Concentration of Warsaw Pact forces on those of the US could give them much greater

firepower advantages than those deduced from the overall NATO/Warsaw Pact force relationships. Soviet views support such a strategy:

*To attain victory over the enemy one must not dissipate his forces and means equally across the entire front, but the main efforts must be concentrated on the most important axis or sector and at the right time in order to form there the necessary superiority over the enemy in men and weapons.*¹²

One can read Liddell Hart, however, and come to a very different conclusion about the most profitable target in an alliance:

Analysis of history suggests that in a campaign against more than one state or army it is more fruitful to concentrate first against the weaker partner than to attempt the overthrow of the stronger in the belief that the latter's defeat will automatically involve the collapse of the others.¹³

Conceptually, this is the reverse of a strategy based on center of gravity and the defeat of Clausewitz' "one enemy." One can interpret World War I campaigns as an effort

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to employ this concept advanced by Liddell Hart. The World War I stalemate in France led the Western allies to a series of peripheral attacks—the Dardanelles, Salonika, Mesopotamia, and Palestine. In J. F. C. Fuller's view, "All these peripheral endeavours . . . were a waste of effort, and . . . costly in the extreme. The stalemate laughed each to scorn."¹⁴ There may be a successful alternative to Clausewitz' emphasis on the center of gravity, but World War I did not provide it, due perhaps to either defective execution or defective strategy.

My use of selected quotations and overly simplified examples illustrates the error in seeking simple answers to complex questions and substituting dogma for thought. My critical use of Liddell Hart was unfair and incomplete, one that advanced my logic but serves to limit understanding. Actually, I believe Liddell Hart adds to Clausewitz' concept of center of gravity, a concept that could be used, wrongly, to prove that a single or narrowly drawn objective was the ultimate in strategy and tactics. Liddell Hart's words help clarify the concept of center of gravity: "There is no more common mistake than to confuse a single line of operation, which is usually wise, with a single objective, which is usually futile."¹⁵ If you take a line that offers alternate objectives, you inevitably distract the enemy commander's mind and forces. Again, the target is the mind of the enemy commander.

The Battle of Britain also provides the opportunity to illustrate the application of concepts of different classical strategists—Douhet and Clausewitz. Douhet wrote:

In the future, war will be waged essentially *against the unarmed populations of the cities and great industrial centres.*

A complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country subjected to this kind of merciless pounding from the air. . . . The peoples . . . would rise up and demand an end to the war.¹⁶

Had this premise been correct, then the appropriate target indeed was the city of London (and Berlin, Hamburg, and so forth). In retrospect, though we all must sympathize with Douhet's search for an escape from the bloody stalemate of World War I, we now generally accept that his premise was incorrect.

Alternatively, we now generally agree that the key to the Battle of Britain was the defense—its radars, crews, and aircraft; they were the hub of all power and movement—the center of gravity. Clausewitz provides better insight here than Douhet.

ON DEFENSE AND OFFENSE

Perhaps the most fundamental strategic concepts are those of offense and defense. Armed forces of all nations tend to share the Soviet view that "only the offense leads to victory." While I do not minimize the importance of the offensive, I agree with Clausewitz that "the natural course in war is to begin defensively and end by attacking."¹⁷ For this reason I will emphasize the defense. I also suggest that there are credible options available to the defender and that one may not always have the option to take the offensive. History provides too many examples of battles and campaigns won by the defender to permit us to neglect the defensive option. Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Napoleon's campaigns in Russia and Spain, and the Battle of Britain should be enough to convince us of that.

Several objectives might be sought in the development of a defense. First, I suggest that the basic objective is that one should avoid defeat. While this appears to be self-evident, it is an objective not always specified or achieved. As an example, while the British lost the battle at Dunkirk, they conducted their affairs in a way to avoid defeat. Conversely, the German 6th Army at Stalingrad was denied the opportunity to withdraw and thus could not maneuver to avoid defeat.

Implicit in this objective is the view that the defender must retain the initiative. In peacetime, he must seek intelligence on his

enemy's plans and objectives and prepare plans and forces to counter the enemy. In war, even though faced with adversity and tactical losses, the defender must seek to channel the enemy. He must seek to retain the option to hold when he must and withdraw where he prefers. The defender must retain and exploit the initiative to avoid defeat.

A second objective for the defender is to increase his strength relative to his opponent. Almost by definition, the attacker will be stronger, at least at the point of attack. The defender's strategy must seek as a basic objective those actions that will serve to increase his relative strength. There are a number of ways to do this.

Time, for example, is an important factor for the defense. In the words of Clausewitz:

The commander's aim in a defensive battle is to postpone the decision as long as possible in order to gain time. . . . The aim of the commander in an offensive battle is to expedite the decision.¹⁸

The defender's strategy, then, must seek a way to obtain the time needed.

The defender can seek to change the numerical balance of men, weapons, supplies—combat power. He can change the numbers absolutely, by more rapid reinforcements. He can change the numbers relatively, by inflicting disproportionate losses. The objective is a change in force ratio; obviously, it is not to your net advantage to inflict losses in a ratio of two-to-one if you start with a two-to-one disadvantage.

The defender can also seek to gain relative strength through maneuver. The most obvious of such maneuvers is one that seeks through concentration of force to gain strength. Withdrawal is a maneuver, one that can stretch the enemy's lines of communication, reduce those of the defender, and, through this, change relative strength. Maneuver can be directed to exploit terrain to the defender's advantages.

Either the defense or the offense can seek relative advantage through technology. The history of war is replete with examples in

which technology, especially, has shifted the balance from one form of war to another. The coming of artillery undermined the defensive strength of the medieval castle and shifted the advantage to the offensive. The advent of the minié ball, repeating rifle, barbed wire, machine gun, and aerial observation swung it back to the defensive form of war. Technological improvements in armor and flying artillery (*Stuka*), among other things, so undermined the defensive strength of the trench systems that the blitzkrieg has enjoyed the advantage from 1940 until very recently, at least. Now there is some speculation that improvements in ground-based air defense, wire-guided antitank weapons, and precision guided munitions have shoved the pendulum back toward the defense. It is a possibility we must consider.

Finally, "A defender must always seek to change over to the attack as soon as he has gained the benefit of the defense."¹⁹

I mentioned earlier that strategy has as its principal objective the mind of the enemy commander. I then discussed fundamentals that bear on the development of a strategy, fundamentals even for those who have chosen, consciously or unconsciously, another objective for their strategy. Now we turn to some thoughts on how one might reach the mind of the commander.

DEFEATING THE WILL OF THE ENEMY COMMANDER

In defining war, Clausewitz states, "The true aim of warfare [is to] render the enemy powerless."²⁰ It seems to me that we have too often associated this quotation with another: "The destruction of the enemy is what always matters most."²¹ If we accept that we must render the enemy powerless as a way of influencing the commander, then I offer two basic concepts for this purpose: destruction and disorganization.

First, we can seek to destroy the enemy physically. Even here, there are alternatives. One can seek to annihilate the enemy. If he is annihilated, then the mind of the enemy commander is irrelevant. If he has no forces,

he cannot fight. It is not possible for him to continue. I would add that such annihilation does not necessarily assure that the desired political objective is then met. The nation or its people may fight on. According to Professor Russell Weigley, the American way of war is annihilation.

A second way to destroy the enemy physically is attrition. Using attrition, we seek to inflict losses that, in sum, the enemy commander finds to be excessive. It is the characteristic of attrition warfare that the enemy makes the important judgments on our effectiveness. So long as the enemy avoids annihilation, he decides whether his losses are too great. Our target remains the mind of the commander, but it remains an elusive one.

The concept discussed, physical destruction of the enemy, is one more readily available to those who enjoy relative advantages in combat power. Alternatively, we can look at other concepts to render the enemy powerless.

One such concept that has been used against us and our allies seeks to attack the mind of the commander and render his forces powerless through disorganization of his forces rather than by their destruction. It has been a concept for those relatively weak to employ against those relatively strong.

The application of this concept was brilliantly demonstrated by Guderian in 1940. He faced a French Army that was superior in numbers of tanks and equal or superior in the quality of tanks. Guderian sought neither the annihilation of the French forces nor their attrition. Rather, he destroyed their cohesiveness and effectiveness through generating panic and despair at all levels. He reached the minds of the opposing commanders. First, he outthought the French, and then he outfought them. There is also some appropriate parallel with the battle of Cannae. It has been said that Cannae required not only a Hannibal but also a Varo. The battle of France was the product of both Guderian and the French Army.

Disorganization rather than destruction is a classic concept. It is a basic concept of guerrilla warfare—choosing the battle,

yielding terrain, demoralizing and outwitting the enemy, pitting strength against weakness.

These two examples, Guderian and guerrillas, contain a common concept that might provide an alternate strategy to one based on the destruction of the enemy's armed forces. Further, it is a concept consistent with successful operations of weaker forces against stronger forces.

The concept has as its dominant objective the ability to present the enemy with challenges and to do so more rapidly than the enemy can receive information, process it, and act on it. The concept was formulated by Colonel John Boyd of the US Air Force. He developed this insight after years of analysis of air-to-air combat. He found that the important combat advantage could not be described as just acceleration, thrust-to-weight, turn rate, and so forth. Rather, the important advantage was the ability to switch from tactic to tactic, constantly presenting the opponent with a new situation and doing so more rapidly than he could respond.

I think this concept underlies the success of both Guderian and the guerrillas. In both cases, their opponents were faced with a rapidly changing environment. Guderian used speed and audacity to present the French with unexpected events. His adversaries were particularly vulnerable to this kind of approach. The searing experience of the French in the trenches of World War I had decimated their leadership not only in the physical sense, but in the moral as well. Thus, Guderian was able to act more rapidly than his opponents could react. The guerrilla also has the option to strike without warning and withdraw more rapidly than his opponent can receive and evaluate information and respond.

In practice, this concept seeks to disorient the enemy by presenting incomplete and inaccurate data; to disrupt operations to generate confusion, disorder, panic, and chaos; and, through these actions, to shatter cohesion and cause paralysis and collapse.

I have raised two alternative concepts for

strategy: destruction and disorganization. They are not mutually exclusive; they could exist simultaneously. A relatively strong force could seek to use disorganization as a preliminary or complementary step to destruction. A weaker force could retain the option of destroying a disorganized stronger force as Hannibal did at Cannae. However, it may well be that one would change his weaponry and tactics depending on a judgment of his basic concept: destruction or disorganization.

Implicitly, though not actually, I have recommended the concept of disorganization rather than destruction. However, I accept that this concept must provide a response to some very real and hard questions. Is this concept relevant to attacks that could be mounted by the Warsaw Pact? The concept has worked for an offensive blitz, but what confidence can we have in it to counter a blitz? The Soviets are not the French of 1940. They may well offer the speed of Guderian's attack and could bring with it favorable force ratios not available to Guderian. The Soviets can present not only movement but also mass. On the other hand, the Soviets may offer a more rigid command and control structure that could be vulnerable to disorganization.

It is clear to me that this concept is more risky than that of destruction. I have no historical examples of larger engagements that demonstrate the effectiveness of the concept. Forces that have the potential to destroy their opponents have relative advantages in combat power that serve to reduce risk regardless of the concept adopted. I suppose the basic risk analysis would seek to evaluate the possible capabilities of each alliance and then identify a concept or combination of concepts that presents the least, though perhaps still substantial, risk.

ON THE NATURE OF STRATEGIC MAXIMS

There are many maxims in strategy and tactics, and I have discussed only a few. Many of these maxims are of assistance in determining how to do things rather than in

determining what should be done. No one can argue with an emphasis on surprise. Sun Tzu wrote that "all warfare is based on deception." Stonewall Jackson had as his basic strategy, "Mystify, mislead, and surprise." Liddell Hart is well-known for his strategy of "indirect approach." He concluded that:

Decisive victories in military history have come from the strategy of indirect approach, wherein the dislocation of the enemy's moral, mental, or material balance is the vital prelude to an attempt at his overthrow. The strategy of indirect approach is, indeed, the highest and widest fulfillment of the principle of surprise.²²

Clearly, these writings and precepts were the product of much thought and experience. However, they are, in my mind, a better guide as to how to do things than in determining what to do. Like all precepts, they are ideas, not answers. For example, in World War II, the Japanese executed a successful invasion of the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. The United States was deceived and surprised by this indirect approach that found us unready to defend and respond. But this Japanese attack was not directed against their enemy's center of gravity; it was a tactical triumph, but a waste of resources.

Of course, before a plan of action is selected, one must understand the adversary's objectives and alternatives. They, too, wish to control the center of gravity. It is not in their interest to accept strategies that work to our advantage. What options do they have to counter the actions that we propose? What will we do under those circumstances? Think through the alternatives, theirs and ours.

THE ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MILITARY STRATEGIST

The conceptual product of our considerations could well be a strategy consistent with our values and priorities but one which we view as unlikely to effect the behavior change sought. We have the obligation to do our jobs professionally and

to provide professional advice on the likelihood of success. Not all situations will afford the opportunity to have high confidence of success.

It is my conviction that the source of strategy is the creativity, insight, knowledge, and understanding of individuals and groups of individuals. As an example, T. E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia—came to command the Arabs in their fight against the Turks in World War I. He brought to the war neither command experience nor formal military instruction. He did bring years of experience in the Middle East, intelligence, understanding, and the ability and willingness to devise a strategy based on his particular situation. Unlike his World War I counterparts on the Western Front, he was not captured by the notion that the only way to fight was a head-on assault against the organized forces of the enemy. This could hardly be the way for the commander of Arab forces not organized according to the European standing army model. He well understood that the Arab psychology held that a man could hardly enjoy the freedom he had fought for if he were dead. The successful strategy Lawrence developed—through logic, not rote—we call guerrilla warfare.²³

Finally, returning to my thesis, strategy is the business and responsibility of the professional officer. American military professionals have excelled in mastering the employment of our forces, but we have an undistinguished record in developing strategies for this employment. In Liddell Hart's words, "In all our military training . . . we invert the true order of thought—considering techniques first, tactics second, and strategy last."²⁴ The American

way of war has historically sought the results of annihilation, a wartime luxury limited to those rich in manpower and resources.²⁵ I suggest that our nation's military forces can no longer be described as rich in manpower and resources relative to the Warsaw Pact. We share a continuing and personal responsibility to match our skill in employment with wisdom in developing the strategy that will successfully direct this employment.

NOTES

1. This article has been adapted from a speech to the *Führungsakademie*, Hamburg, Germany, on 27 November 1978.
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3. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 87.
4. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1944), p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
6. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 1st. rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 347.
7. Clausewitz, p. 204. Emphasis in original.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 634. Emphasis in original.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 595-96.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 596.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 596-97.
12. V. Ye. Savkin, *The Basic Principles of Operational Art and Tactics (A Soviet View)*, trans. and published under the auspices of the US Air Force (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 201. Emphasis in original.
13. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War*, p. 60.
14. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789-1961* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 165.
15. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War*, p. 244.
16. Giulio Douhet, as quoted in Fuller, p. 241. Emphasis his.
17. Clausewitz, p. 358.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 530-31.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 600.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 577.
22. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War*, p. 238.
23. John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), pp. 211-12.
24. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War*, p. 129.
25. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 89.

