



Photograph taken from Japanese plane during torpedo attack on ships moored on both sides of Ford Island; view looks about east, with supply depot, submarine base, and fuel tank farm in right center distance; torpedo has just hit USS *West Virginia* on far side of Ford Island (center); other battleships moored nearby are (from left): USS *Nevada*, USS *Arizona*, USS *Tennessee* (inboard of *West Virginia*), USS *Oklahoma* (torpedoed and listing) alongside USS *Maryland*, and USS *California*; on near side of Ford Island (left), are USS *Detroit* and USS *Raleigh*, USS *Utah* and USS *Tangier*; *Raleigh* and *Utah* have been torpedoed, and *Utah* is listing sharply to port; Japanese planes are visible in right center (over Ford Island) and over Navy Yard at right, Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941 (Navy Ministry, Empire of Japan/U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

A New Look at Operational Art

How We View War Dictates How We Fight It

By Chad Buckel

A particular strategic policy must be devised for every war; each war is a special case, which requires its own particular logic rather than any kind of stereotype or pattern, no matter how splendid it may be.

—ALEKSANDR A. SVECHIN, *STRATEGY*

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Since America's founding, most of our tactical experiences have been those of success in battle and hard-won campaigns. Beginning with General George Washington's ability to avoid defeat in detail while wearing down the British army, the United

States has enjoyed a long history of tactical victories and successful campaigns. Why, then, with so many *tactical* victories, is the American record of *strategic* success so dismal? What has prevented us from turning our battlefield successes to strategic victories, and why

have we struggled so much in attaining our stated political goals? The War of 1812, the Banana Wars, World War I, Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan all saw brilliant battlefield victories with limited strategic success. These failures are not a product of the American intellect, spirit, ingenuity, or will. They are a failure of the American view of war and a failure of our model for operational art. The current method by which the United States views the interplay of the *levels of war* is insufficient to translate tactical victories into strategic and political successes, requiring a new way of viewing operational art and warfare.

Operational Art and the Levels of War

Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, describes *operational art* as “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.”¹ By this definition, operational art encompasses all three levels of war (strategic, operational, tactical) by synchronizing the actions of units executing tactical missions with the political goals that placed those forces into a theater of operations. What is interesting about the joint definition is that the wording indicates a holistic approach to matching policy ends with national and regional means by developing appropriate ways of employment. The definition also suggests that operational art is a way of thinking that links all three levels of war; however, JP 1 places this definition on page I-8, under the *operational level of war*. This placement alludes to bounding the concept of operational art strictly at the operational level with only limited links to the other levels, despite those links being spelled out in the definition. This duality implies that, as a profession, we still do not have a solid grasp of what operational art is and how to appropriately apply the theory.

To clarify what operational art is, we must first understand where it came from, how it developed, why it developed, and the purpose it was designed to meet. Without this understanding, we are unable to adequately adopt the term and concept to meet our future needs. The term itself, as with the *operational level of war*, is a product of post-Industrial Revolution warfare and was developed to explain how the Napoleonic concept of decisive battle no longer applied to conflict, since armies were now more mobile, more lethal, and more spread out. Since the term evolved from an earlier understanding of the character of warfare, we must assume that it will continue to evolve as that character changes. Like any other art form, operational art must reflect the realities of its time to work appropriately.

A Brief History of Operational Art

Before and during the early years of the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the operational level of war did not exist. Weapons and tactics dictated the massing of troops, with short-range weapons, to engage and defeat an opponent in a decisive battle. At this point, only tactics and strategy existed, since strategy was about deploying one’s forces to the battlefield, and tactics were about employing one’s forces on the battlefield. The pinnacle of this method of warfare was Napoleon’s “strategy of the single point,” wherein he maneuvered to converge his forces onto the enemy at a single point for a decisive battle to settle the seasonal campaign or war.²

As technology matured and the Industrial Revolution changed militaries, “a critical change in the pace of battle emerged.”³ As deployment and employment became one singular whole, the pace and tempo of battle quickened. Napoleon’s single point and Carl von Clausewitz’s decisive point began to lose their effectiveness as armies sought to spread out and fight each other over “extended lines” and over longer periods of time and larger spaces.⁴ The change in the sizes of armies and battlefields was accompanied by changes in the number

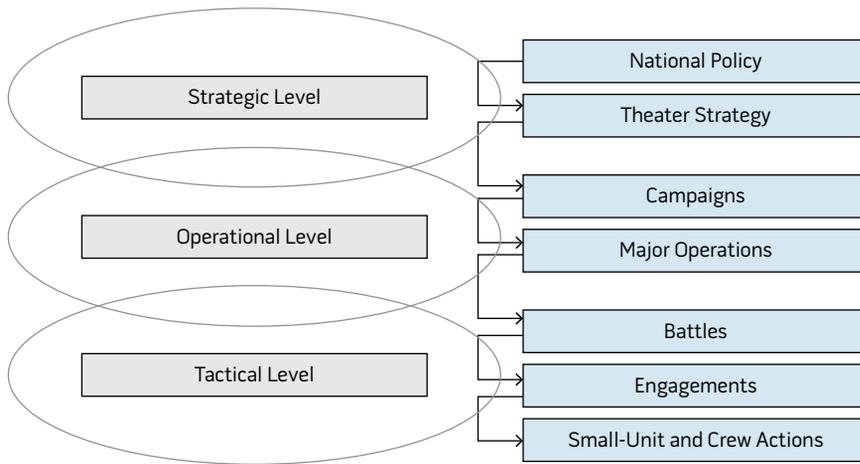
of resources used, the requirement of population support, the mobilization and movement of forces and resources, and the emerging link between rear area support and frontline engagements.⁵

The critical turning points in the development of operational art and the operational level of war were the wars of German unification (1806–1871) and the American Civil War (1861–1865), when weapons and transport technology extended the battlefield in length and depth and allowed for a linking of battles to achieve a strategic objective. These changes came to full maturation in World War I, when armies were “unable to achieve decisive results on an operational scale. . . . This meant that the main offensive thrust was often aimed at a point in the enemy’s line that could be easily pierced tactically, not ‘along an axis that promised operational results.’”⁶

As weapon ranges extended and troop formations spread out, military operations began to evolve. Between World War I and World War II, Soviet theorists sought to find a way to break the positional stalemate and to inject mobility back into warfare, discovering that modern warfare required the linking of multiple operations to bring about strategic success.⁷ Soviet theorists also provided some of the first definitions of *operational art*, with G.S. Isserson stating that “an operation is a weapon of strategy, while strategy is a weapon of politics”⁸ and Aleksandr Svechin stating that “all branches of the art of war are closely interrelated: tactics takes the steps that make up an operational leap, and strategy points the way.”⁹

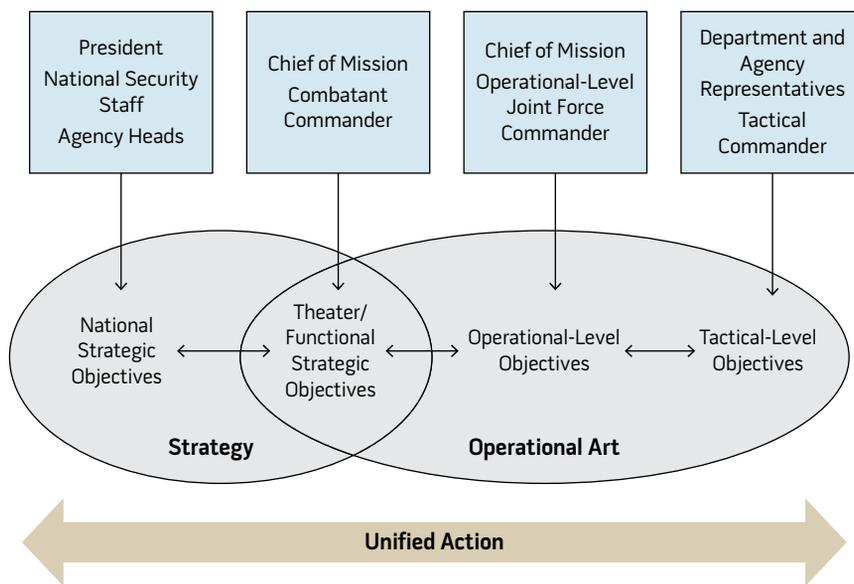
The U.S. military did not embark on a serious study of the *operational level of war* or *operational art* until the 1980s. The catalyst for this change was the Vietnam War and renewed interest in Soviet military studies. Today, the term and concept are under increasing pressure as the United States has been unable to translate tactical success into strategic victory since the Gulf War. As such, a detailed and deliberate look at why we continue to fail in our strategic goals—despite our massive political, diplomatic, military, and economic power—is warranted.

Figure 1. Levels of Warfare



Source: Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, July 12, 2017), I-7.

Figure 2. Relationship Between Strategy and Operational Art



Note: Operational art links tactical action to strategic purpose. Operational art governs the deployment of forces and the arrangement of operations to achieve and strategic objectives. Source: Ibid., I-13.

The Current Model—And Why It Is Failing

Our current joint doctrine spells out how the United States views the relationship between the levels of war and operational art. JP 1 states, “There are no finite limits or boundaries between these levels, but they help commanders design and synchronize operations, allo-

cate resources, and assign tasks to the appropriate command.”¹⁰ JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, further elaborates this point by stating that “tactical actions can cause both intended and unintended strategic consequences, particularly in today’s environment of pervasive and immediate global communications and networked threats.”¹¹ Figure 1 shows

how the United States views the three levels of war. The figure depicts a stratified Venn diagram with the three levels laid out linearly, with only the operational level experiencing overlap with the other levels. Furthermore, national policy is subsumed into the strategic level. This mental construct and model survive even though JP 3-0 clearly states that tactical actions can have strategic consequences.

JP 3-0 also offers a model of how operational art interacts with strategy and the three levels of war. Figure 2 shows operational art interacting with strategy at theater/functional strategic objectives, overseen by the chief of mission and combatant commanders. In this depiction, operational art is seen starting with the strategic objectives set by the national command authority and delivered via operational and tactical objectives. An arrow and text below indicate that unified action is achieved via this model and that successful operational art “links tactical action with strategic purpose.”¹² The reader should once again note that this is a linear model, showing the ideal situation of tactical actions nested in operations, which are in turn nested to strategic objectives. Both of these models fit well with Colonel Arthur Lykke’s ends-ways-means model.

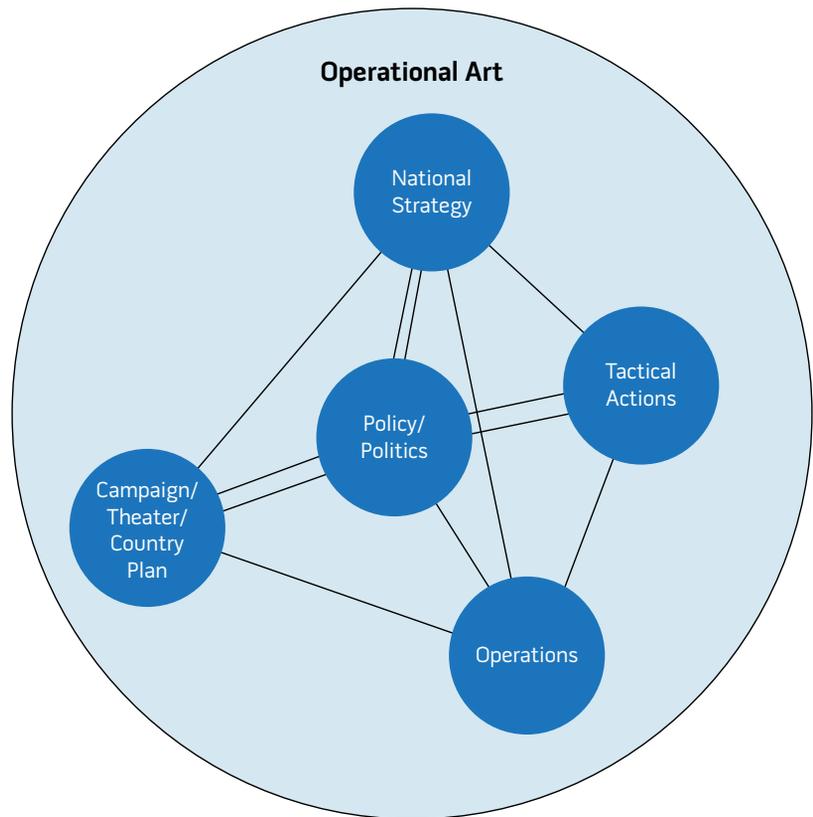
Both JPs place operational art at the operational level. Within these publications we find the seeds of failure planted. Any veteran or student of conflict will understand that warfare is not a linear event. Small occurrences can have major impacts on skirmishes, battles, operations, campaigns, strategies, and political policies. These disruptions are becoming even more pronounced as the information age allows for the transmission of events and ideas to audiences around the world in near-instantaneous time. Professor Harry Yarger points out that “with the advances in transportation and communications there has been a spatial and temporal convergence of strategy, operational art, and tactics. Increasingly . . . events at the tactical level have more immediate and, potentially, greater strategic consequences.”¹³

These publications also note that tactical and operational success do not always translate into strategic victory or attaining political goals. The history of human conflict teaches one critical lesson: Battlefield (tactical) success is useless and meaningless if it does not support political ends. Professor Yarger even argues that changes at the strategic level can have simple causes and that when those changes occur, they create a feedback loop that causes changes across the strategic environment.¹⁴ Our models and understanding of the interplay of the three levels of war and how operational art ties them together do not account for these anomalies and thus do not lay the intellectual framework and understanding for best practice operational art.

One of the chief intellectual failures of the current model is that operational art is “binned” under the operational level of war but is shown to traverse the strategic to the tactical level. This allows for two methods of understanding operational art and how it is supposed to serve the commander and his or her staff. Those who see it as a tool of the operational level lose sight of how tactical actions can be linked with strategic effects. This issue is reinforced by the linear model that we use to frame the interplay of the levels of war and warps our mental model to believe that every tactical action must link with an operational design to affect the strategic level—a false assumption. This linear model also leads us to attribute unit or headquarters size to a specific level of war, forcing us to equate force structure to each level versus mission or capability.

To illustrate this point, we need only look at our special operations forces and long-range bomber assets. When a special operations team or B-2 execute a mission, they are executing a tactical action that may have strategic or political effects. When this occurs, there exists a direct link between the tactical and strategic levels, based on mission and capability and not the headquarters size or type. Another example is that of the “strategic corporal,” wherein we recognize that the actions of a lone infantryman can have

Figure 3. Operational Art and the Levels of War



profound strategic and political effects. Once again, this tactical action links directly to the strategic and political levels.

The final issue with this model is that it does not represent political concerns or interests, domestically or internationally. National policy gets an honorable mention in the JP 1 model, but political considerations are otherwise not considered or understood. Indeed, the U.S. military does not participate in political discussions or decisions, but their effects are felt throughout the force and through all three levels of war. Rules of engagement, alliances, coalitions, force size, and missions are all affected by politics and political decisions. By failing to acknowledge this level and its immense impact on how wars are conducted, we hamper the civil-military dialogue and delink the political cause for conflict with the actual fighting. As Clausewitz stated, “War, therefore, is an act of policy. . . . Policy . . . will permeate all military operations, and . . . it will have continuous influence on them. . . .

The political objective is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”¹⁵

The current model fails in several ways to provide an adequate picture of how human conflict evolves. As conflict continues, policies, goals, and will tend to change. Long wars start under one set of political circumstances and often end under a different set. Policies change, and as a result, strategies to attain those policies must also change. This means that operational designs and tactical actions are affected by political and strategic decisions, with the relationship going both ways. This two-way relationship is not a linear one wherein effects are felt only up and down the chain of command and levels of war. Effects happen at different points, at different times, and with different intensity. Our inability to recognize and account for phenomena leaves us at a major disadvantage.



Soldiers with 101st Division Special Troops Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, watch as two Chinook helicopters fly in to return them to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, November 4, 2008 (U.S. Army/Mary L. Gonzalez)

A Nonlinear Model for a Nonlinear Reality

An appropriate model for thinking of the interplay of operational art and the levels of war should be nonlinear and show the complex linkages and connections that exist in reality. Figure 3 attempts to do just that, using a molecular model format common in chemistry to show the bonds and interplay of atoms. These chemical models use sticks and balls to depict the linkages and relationships between atoms and how those linkages bind together to make a single molecule. This same model and mental construct can be adapted to visualize the interplay of the levels of war and how they interact with one another to inform the commander and his or her staff of how to

approach a specific problem. Much as individual atoms bond together to form a molecule, these levels of war bond together to form the strategic and operational environment, and how we manage these individual spheres and the whole environment is operational art. In other words, this model gives us a better mental picture and baseline of how to view and apply operational art theory.

This model uses five spheres to indicate the core parts of the model. It does not stratify the levels of war but represents them by showing the various parts of the environment and how they interact with one another. The spheres are sized to represent importance. As with the chemistry models, lines depict the strength of the bond between the spheres, a single line indicating a bond

and a double line indicating a stronger bond. This model, set as a 3D construct, allows for decisions, events, and planning to account for the fluid nature of the international environment and how singular events can have multiple and varying effects across the spectrum, which is a key consideration in the proper use of operational art. The larger circle around the molecular structure shows that operational art is the consideration and balance of each sphere in relation to one another. The art is in understanding how events in each sphere affect and change the other spheres.

Policy and politics are central to this model and have the largest sphere. Whereas in our current model policy is subsumed into strategy, in this model it has its own sphere and holds the central location within the model.

This represents the idea that politics is paramount to all international discourse and must play a prominent role in any government or military action on the international stage. Also in this model, policy is bound to all the other four spheres, with strong bonds to all but the operational sphere. Since national policy is the starting point for national and theater strategy, it holds a strong bond to each of those spheres. This aspect of the model is similar to our current models. The drastic point of departure from current thinking is the link between policy and tactical actions. This is a strong bond, representing the fact that individual and small-unit actions are heavily influenced by political decisions. A single line connects policy to operations, showing that a connection does exist between the two, but is balanced by the influence of and connections to strategy and tactics.

The other two spheres, national strategy and operations, link to the other four spheres. This shows that both of these areas are influenced by and have influence on the other spheres, both directly and indirectly. National strategic documents derive from political goals to inform and affect theater campaign plans, operational designs, and acceptable tactical actions within given theaters. Operational design accounts for national strategic goals and campaign plan goals and influences tactical resourcing and decisionmaking.

Campaign plans and tactical actions are the only two spheres that do not have a connection to each other. Both these spheres are connected to policy, national strategy, and operations to indicate that each one has a direct influence or is directly influenced by those spheres but must pass through any of those spheres to affect each other. For example, a tactical success or mistake will not directly affect a campaign plan without first affecting an operational outcome, a national strategic objective, or a political policy. The converse of this is that a campaign plan will not directly affect a tactical plan without first affecting policy, strategy, or operational design. This is not to say that the two do not influence each other but that they do so in an indirect manner.

With this new model in mind, we must once again review our doctrinal definition of *operational art*: “The cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.” Since it calls for a cognitive approach, our model must support the creation of a mental picture of the environment that allows us to understand how actions and effects act and interact. A stratified picture of this environment limits our thinking, but a baseline mental model that represents the dynamic nature of the environment aids our thinking and supports more accurate understanding. The definition also calls for operational artists to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means. By using a nonlinear model, we are able to better visualize the interplay of policies down to tactics, which will aid us in understanding the best ways and means to achieve the desired ends. We can understand how operations and tactical actions do or do not nest with policies and strategic goals, and we can visualize how and why events in the environment affect each level and their desired endstates.

A Test

To test this model, let us look at the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor Naval Base through a Japanese lens. Using our linear model, we would trace the Japanese air raid as a tactical plan, which supported the operational objectives of securing vital lines of communication by crippling the U.S. Pacific Fleet to enable the capture of U.S. Pacific bases, thereby supporting the Japanese theater strategic aims. These aims included denying the United States the ability to interfere with Japanese military operations in the Pacific and mitigating the U.S. oil embargo by securing the raw materials. By this model, we can trace a logical line of thought and a nesting of tactical actions to strategic goals. We

can also see, if we look closely enough, the limitations that this model possesses.

By applying the proposed model, we are able to paint a much more comprehensive picture. Let us start with the Japanese policy (political goal) of securing raw materials. The strategy for this policy could include economic actions to purchase them, diplomatic options to secure access, or military operations to seize them. With the U.S. embargo in effect, Japan decided that economic and diplomatic measures were insufficient. So a national strategy of military action to secure the Southern Resources Area was required. This in turn created a theater strategy to attack Indonesia and Malaysia to physically seize the necessary raw materials. In planning for these operations, however, the strategy deviated by considering the U.S. positions as too risky to bypass. Again, a national strategy had to be created to deal with this issue. Japan could have used either diplomacy or military action to keep the United States from responding. The Japanese decided that military action against the United States best served their policy. As a result, the theater strategy was amended to include an assault on the Philippines, the Mariana Islands, Wake Island, and the Marshall Islands, with a supporting raid against Hawaii. With the theater strategy set, the naval strike force was formed, and the naval operation was planned. Within that operational plan, the tactic of an air raid was chosen, rather than a ground incursion, and Midway Island was bypassed as insignificant.

Conclusion

The current definition of *operational art* still remains valid as written, but it should not be misconstrued with the *operational level of war*. Our doctrinal understanding of the concept should reflect the “how” and not the “what.” Operational art, as with any art form, is about creative thinking and innovative problem-solving. To be creative—that is, to be a true artist—one must not only be trained and experienced, but also build a mental model that allows for agility and clarity of thought. By applying this model with the current



Marine with Weapons Company, Battalion Landing Team 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, captures member of opposing force during urban combat training in Okinawa, Japan, February 8, 2014 (U.S. Marine Corps/Andrew Kuppers)

definition, we will achieve clarity of thought and expand our mental boundaries to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges that we face. Operational art works only when those who are applying it can see the environment for what it is and not for how they want it to be.

Our current mental construct of the interplay of the levels of war and operational art prevents us from fully appreciating the complexity of the international strategic environment and sets us up for failure. Without a proper understanding of the nonlinear nature of international discourse and how the various levels of war interact and influence one another, we are unable to properly scope how to conceptually approach complex and complicated international challenges. This prevents us from grasping the interplay of politics and tactics and handicaps us in translating tactical successes into strategic and policy goal accomplishment. By using a linear model, we artificially constrain our thoughts and imagination and fail to accurately model the reality that we face.

The proposed model in this article seeks to accurately depict how the levels of war connect and how operational art can be applied to understand the strategic environment and apply resources and pressure in the appropriate time, manner, and place to achieve our national goals in the most efficient manner. By removing the linear construct and showing the strength of the connections between each sphere, it seeks to show how the whole is built and how each part plays a role. It is also designed to visualize how events in one sphere will influence or be influenced by events in other spheres. By crafting a more flexible nonlinear model, we improve our chances for success in crafting policy, strategy, operational design, and tactical plans to achieve our national goals. JFQ

Notes

¹ Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, July 12, 2017), I-8.

² Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips,

Historical Perspective of the Operational Art (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2005), 4.

³ Wilson C. Blythe, Jr., “A History of Operational Art,” *Military Review* (November–December 2018), 39.

⁴ Krause and Phillips, *Historical Perspective of the Operational Art*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Blythe, “A History of Operational Art,” 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 12.

⁹ Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, ed. Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis, MN: East View Information Services, 1992), 269.

¹⁰ JP 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-7.

¹¹ JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 17, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018), I-12.

¹² *Ibid.*, I-13.

¹³ Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 86–87.