



President Obama meets with Secretary of Defense and Chairman

DOD (Chad J. McNeeley)

# The Strategist as Hero

By COLIN S. GRAY

**W**ith undergoverned space as its context, the purpose of strategy is to secure control of that turbulent zone. More often than is acknowledged in history books, the political and military battlespace for the strategist is, or certainly approaches, a condition of chaos. The theme of this essay is the struggle by the strategist to devise, sustain, and satisfactorily conclude purposeful behavior. There are grounds for doubt as to whether or not most strategists are heroes. However, the impediments to even adequate, let alone superior, strategic accomplishment are so numerous and so potentially damaging that there is little room for skepticism over the proposition that the strategist's profession is a heroic one.

One can photograph an army but not the strategy by which the strategist seeks to direct it. One can have

paintings of Carl von Clausewitz but not of his theory. Strategy is ethereal. It can be explained and understood, but in common with love, happiness, pain, fear, or security, for example, it cannot be represented directly. Its presence or absence, as well as its quality, can be inferred from behavior as registered in the course of events, but then only if there is a plausible connection between known intention and that record. It is notable that the media, especially the electronic media, do not often try to address strategy. Rare indeed are the books on great (or

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DOD



President Roosevelt and General George C. Marshall watch Major General George S. Patton, Jr., award Congressional Medal of Honor to Brigadier General William H. Wilbur, 1943

poor) strategists, and the television channels that provide vicarious military excitement for armchair warriors almost go out of their way to avoid discussing strategy. When, exceptionally, strategy is the subject, the program more often than not limits its ambition to coverage of operational level effort. One must sympathize. The medium, be it print, film, or PowerPoint, has a way of commanding its subject more than it ought. And of course, one should not forget the client. Publishers can sell books about famous generals or admirals but not about little known strategists (for example, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery but not Viscount Alanbrooke, or General George Patton but not George Marshall). Strategy is a familiar word and is widely believed to be an important concept, but it is barely comprehended. Indeed, even today, it is little understood that the concept commonly is misidentified and that the word, especially in adjectival form, is misapplied.

Unquestionably, strategy is as important as it is awesomely difficult to do well enough. The title of this essay is not a casual choice. Only rarely are medals for outstanding performance won easily. The subject truly is challenging, and the strategist's role, properly understood, is a heroic one. To be performed well, its multiple demands require extraordinary natural gifts, advantages that need nurturing by education and experience.

That granted, successful strategic conduct should not be so difficult as to evade plausible explanation.

### The Purpose of Strategy

*De quoi s'agit-il?*—"What is it (all) about?" "What is the problem?"—to borrow from Marshal Ferdinand Foch and Bernard Brodie.<sup>1</sup> If the strategist's most potent question is "So what?" Foch's question must be directed at strategy itself. Strategy functions as the only purpose-built bridge connecting political ends with the methods and means for their attempted achievement, most especially the military tools. While the basic function of this metaphorical bridge necessarily is to connect, say, policy and army, the purpose for which this key task is performed is to achieve some degree of control over the polity's security context. Those holding the strategy bridge are charged with the planning and higher orchestration of the policy instruments that in threat and action should impress themselves upon the bodies and minds of those who ought to be concerned by such behavior. The strategist needs to be able to influence enemies, allies, and neutrals, which means influencing minds and actions, foreign and domestic. To bend an enemy's will to resist and, if required, to reduce the capacity of his military means to do harm, the strategist needs to have control over the course of events. For this heroic

task to be feasible, the strategist first must ensure that he controls his own capacity to do the harm he intends. This is the practice of command. Not for nothing is *command* paired with *control* in the standard military formula. So complementary are the two concepts that in effect, command and control are fused as a meta-concept. The purpose of command is to control friendly armed forces so that they can prevail in combat with an enemy whose strategists also are exercising command in search of control (in their case, over us) so as to shape and even dictate the course of strategic history. This is what strategy is all about. This is the answer to Foch's fundamental question. But the strategist as would-be controller of history is ever locked in a struggle against severe odds. The political-bureaucratic policymaking, the military execution, and the political consequences of the strategy process in those distinctive but overlapping phases always threaten to dissolve process into chaos. Preparation for war and war itself and its warfare inherently are hostile environments for good order in strategy. Unfortunately for good predictive order, confusion verging upon chaos approaches the natural condition of war writ large and of its warfare, as well as being a constant menace to the invention, development, and execution of rational and reasonable strategy. The strategist must operate in "bandit country," and that country has both domestic and foreign provinces. The enemy is apt to be the single largest factor among the problems that can frustrate the strategist with his preferred strategy. But a policymaking process at home and among allies that is more than marginally dysfunctional and a military that is something less than tailored and razor-sharp will come a close second.

### Strategy and Strategies: Theory and Practice

It would be unwise, though not wholly implausible, to risk an unwelcome historical echo by declaiming for strategy what might read as a severely parsimonious declaration of

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*the strategist needs to be able to influence enemies, allies and neutrals, which means influencing minds and actions foreign and domestic*

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General Petraeus successfully overhauled U.S. and Iraq military strategy during implementation of “surge” in 2007

faith: “One theory, one theorist, one historical challenge!” Translated, this trinitarian credo would claim that there is only one general theory of strategy; there is only one strategic theorist fully worthy of the job title; and there is only one set of strategic problems, eternally and universally. This extreme example of reductionism happens to be useful because it does highlight two all but axiomatic truths while it exaggerates a justifiable, though arguable, claim. First, there has been, is, and can be only a single general theory of strategy. Different theorists will present this theory in ways that reflect the conditions unique to their historical context as well as their personalities; nonetheless, they must all paint pictures of the same essentially unchanging landscape.

Second, it is not wholly unreasonable to argue that the one general theory of strategy is located and explained well enough by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*. Although I no longer endorse this judgment, it is appropriate to record a massive note of confidence in Clausewitz’s theorizing. I am prepared to defend the claim that our general theory of strategy is to be found in the works of 10

authors at most. Apart from Clausewitz, a list of the greatest strategic theorists should include Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, Antoine Henri de Jomini, Basil Liddell Hart, J.C. Wylie, Edward N. Luttwak, Bernard Brodie, and Thomas C. Schelling.<sup>2</sup> Each of these authors augments, enriches, and corrects the Prussian sufficiently to warrant a place on the all-time short list of outstanding strategic theorists.

Third, it is reasonable—strictly, it is unavoidable—to argue that one general theory, and potentially even one general theorist, has eternal and universal validity because the fundamentals of strategic challenge do not alter. Each of the theorists identified here speaks to the problems that every practicing strategist has to solve, regardless of his circumstances and historical location. This is less true of Brodie’s writings, but some of his strategic analyses, despite their period-piece Cold War foci and flavor, nonetheless reflect an exceptional awareness of the general theory of strategy.

It is vital to recognize the persisting authority of a single general theory of strategy, no matter that it is presented in various

forms and styles. Such singularity has a fundamental authority over a vastly variable historical domain. This imperium—for that is its nature through the whole course of strategic history—witnesses the creation and execution of specific strategies keyed to command and control in unique contexts. Thus, the realm of general strategic theory is unchanging, while that of the practicing executive strategist is always liable to alter by evolution and even revolution.

There is an inescapable sense in which the apparently clear conceptual distinction between theory and practice may mislead. Although making and executing strategy as a plan for action lie within the realm of practice, every such plan inherently is a theory, paradoxical though this may seem. A strategy expressed in the form of a plan, formal or informal, must be a theory of victory, however defined for its historical context. This strategic plan or strategy, more or less detailed, more or less optimistic, predicts a desirable course of events. In effect, the plan, which is to say the strategy, explains how military, inter alia, success will be made to happen. It will specify,

in whatever detail is appropriate for its level (overall military, operational, tactical), and in more or less discretionary terms, who will do what, with what, in what sequence, where, and when. The strategy may or may not explain why tasks are to be performed. Anchored in time and place, and hence in strategic context, the pragmatic and responsible executive strategist is obliged to practice theory. To plan is to theorize. Theories appear in many guises, but nonetheless the practicable looking military solution to a pressing real-world problem is, in a vital sense, a theory of victory. The practicing strategist must engage in “if . . . then” logic and prediction.

Whereas all strategies are plans, not all plans are strategies. Military action may be guided by a plan, but the plan might simply direct forces to be used in a tactically effective manner, with no careful attempt to relate such intended use to the achievement of goals that have much operational, strategic, or political value. Many of strategic history’s so-called war plans have been nothing of the kind. They can fail the strategy test in several ways. For example, they may be designed with no more discernible ambition than the intention to bring on a “decisive” battle. In the best Napoleonic tradition, one would maneuver in order to fight at an advantage. But this could be in the worst Napoleonic tradition of not having a clear idea how victory would conclude a war satisfactorily; just what would the purportedly decisive battle decide? For another class of example, armed forces can be committed to the fight in the absence of any reasonable expectation that the fight, no matter how well or poorly conducted, will achieve any positive result. An all-too-plain example of this second category of mainly expressive violence would be a large-scale bilateral nuclear war. Nuclear war plans are a practical necessity, but in execution above a modest level of well-calibrated firepower delivered for intended coercive effect, they must require destructive behavior indulged for its own sake. In actuality, the use of nuclear weapons on a large scale would mean only that their owner could think of nothing else to do, even though such action could serve no strategic or political purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The literature on war planning is voluminous but typically is so concerned to turn over every bureaucratic stone that as a result, the plot at several levels often is lost.<sup>4</sup> The context for, and consequences of, specific cases of war planning have a way of evading the attention they merit. Furthermore, the

kind of professional expertise that deep knowledge of war planning experience both needs and attracts is not an expertise often inclined to spark creative theorizing by its owner. On the one hand, historical war planning experience is reasonably well understood by historians, but they tend to be professionally allergic to bold theorizing, including that with a strategic focus. On the other hand, our contemporary war planners, competent and even occasionally creative as they may be, are inhibited from contributing to the theory of strategy with respect to the role of planning by both the need for official secrecy and their own lack of professional proficiency in such theorizing. The predictable result of the situation just described is a strategic studies literature that is weak in its general understanding of the roles and significance of what generically has been known as war planning, though today often is called defense planning. Plans, formal and informal, explicit and implicit, are of crucial significance for the translation of politically guided, strategically educated intention into military achievement.

### The Value of Strategic Theory

For many defense professionals, military and civilian, theory is a word and concept more likely to induce hostility, certainly indifference, than respect. Pragmatic strategists, their staffs, other advisors, and their executive agents in the military field can have no small difficulty grasping the connection between, say, most of Clausewitz’s philosophizing about the nature of war and solutions to their own contemporary problems.

Officials usually are not interested in the nature of strategy. Instead, for example, they need to know how best to bring down Hitler’s Third Reich. Strategic philosophy can seem more useful for alleviating insomnia or supporting a damaged table leg than as a source of useful advice. The practical strategist, locked into a contextually unique challenge, will look in vain to the classics of strategic theory in his search for usable specific answers to particular problems. In 1944, Dwight D. Eisenhower and his master commanders on the Combined Chiefs of Staff committee needed to decide how to win the war in the West in the context of the war(s) as a whole, European and Asia-Pacific. They could have found few usable particular answers in the pages of Sun Tzu, Thucydides, or Clausewitz.

The general theory of strategy, however it is presented—mingled in a historical nar-

rative (Thucydides), all but PowerPointed cryptically (Sun Tzu), or more than a little entangled in a challenging philosophical exposition (Clausewitz)—can only educate; it cannot instruct with specific advice for today. The general theory explains the nature of strategy everywhere, for all times and for all conditions. What it can do is to educate practicing executive strategists so that they are mentally adequately equipped to tackle their historically unique problems. In short, the practicing strategist is taught, if he proves teachable, how to think about his real-world challenges. By category, he knows what he needs to worry about and he understands, again by broad category, how he might succeed in evading or defeating many of the causes for his anxiety. Alert both to complexity and to the wholeness of his subject, the strategist also knows that the categories he employs to achieve some mental order all interpenetrate to help produce messily compounded strategic effects and consequences. Between high theory and command practice for and in combat lies the enabling agency of doctrine. Only the educated strategist can be trusted to develop the multilevel body of doctrine that must serve to staple together synergistically efforts in performance at every level of warfare.

Clausewitz—who else?—provides a thoroughly persuasive explanation of why theory has value for practice. In justly honored language, we are advised that “theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it but will find it ready to hand and in good order.”<sup>5</sup> He advises also that “theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of *manual* for action.” Rather, “it is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.”<sup>6</sup>

The case for general strategic theory is inscribed in the whole practice and malpractice of strategy throughout history. Theory

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Admiral Mullen addresses Marines deploying to Afghanistan as part of President Obama's troop surge



U.S. Navy (Cherie Cullen)

requires clarity and suitability of definition and the specification of relationships among distinguishable elements in the structure of the subject. Also, not least, theory provides explanation of causation. When policymakers, soldiers, and commentators are ill educated in strategic theory, they misuse concepts, and such misuse contributes readily to unsound planning and faulty behavior. For a leading example, a fundamental lack of intellectual grip upon the distinctive natures of policy, strategy, and tactics licenses appalling self-harming misuse of the adjective *strategic*. If theory does not educate as to the difference between a policy instrument and that instrument itself—as, for an historical example, in the *Strategic Air Command*, or *strategic* missiles, or the *strategic* deterrent—then the strategy function is unlikely to be well served. If a military force is called strategic, an existential meaning of that force is asserted. Such a claim is a logical, and often will be a practical, absurdity. Since the tactical behavior of all troops has strategic consequences, be they ever so modest, it follows that the adjective is deprived of sense.

By no means can the general theory of strategy provide all the education that a practicing executive strategist requires and

should be able to employ usefully. In addition to book-learned theory, the strategist will be educated by professional enculturation, informal as well as formal, by personal experience, and by wider extra-strategic learning. Probably the example of examples was the influence of Homer on Thucydides, and indeed on all Greeks of that period.<sup>7</sup> Whatever may be said in praise of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the military dimension they are far more tactical than strategic. How much, how well, and what the strategist acquires by way of strategic education will depend considerably upon his biology, psychology, and the accidents of time and place that provided the unique contexts, perhaps the strategic moments, for his instruction. The strategist learns his strategy not only with reference to what the classics and culture and events bring to him. Just as much, the strategist's education is shaped, even sometimes determined, by what the mind and body of the individual human being bring to the education on offer. It is agreeable to note that Clausewitz advises that: “[theory] must also take the human factor into account, and find room for courage, boldness, even foolhardiness. The art of war deals with living and with moral forces. Consequently, it cannot attain the absolute,

or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty, in the greatest things as much as in the smallest.”<sup>8</sup>

These words should shake the confidence of theorists who seek to purvey a science of strategy. There continue to be theorists who believe that, for example, war's fog and friction can be dispersed and avoided by reliable material means. Such foolish people fail, or at least refuse, to recognize that the most significant dimension to the strategic function is the human. Moreover, a noteworthy aspect to this human dimension of difficulty and achievement is the adversary's nature and character.

Stripped to the barest, one can claim that strategic theory is an aid to clear, perhaps just clearer, thinking about all aspects of war and peace, nested in political and other contexts, domestic and foreign. In its general form, this theory provides clarity in definition, in identification of relationships, and in causation, which is to say in the crucial matter of consequences. In truth, strategic theory is not an optional extra. All practical strategists practice the theory of strategy. They differ only in the quality of their practice, a quality that most historical experience tries to tell us can and should owe much to strategic education.

ISAF Joint Command Commander Lieutenant General David M. Rodriguez talks to Afghan National Army officer



### Strategy is Possible but Difficult

Strategy is not an illusion.<sup>9</sup> However, it is so difficult to do well enough, let alone brilliantly, that a security community needs to provide some redundancy of high competence in the activities most vital to strategic performance in order to have a reserve supply of strategists to replace those who appear to fail. This means that the strategist's role needs to be well supported by prudence in policy, efficiency in organizational system, method in process, and—last but not least—effectiveness in the combat power available. The less prudent his policy guidance, the more constipated the organizational machinery of strategy-making and execution by the chain of command, and the less impressive the fighting power of his soldiers, the heavier the burdens that must be laid upon strategy and the strategist. More often than not, the contemporary strategist will lack a spark of genius sufficient to compensate, personally, for the multiple dysfunctions, the friction, that harass and inhibit his overall command performance.

The bad news for the would-be strategist is truly forbidding in severity, scope,

and number. An adequate grasp of the range of difficulties by category for the strategist cannot afford to note fewer than eight:

- existential (misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of strategy)
- the enemy (frequently neglected, almost invariably misassessed)
- currency conversion (command performance as military events in the five geographies of contemporary battlespace need to be converted into strategic and then political consequences)
- strategy-making (poor, even dysfunctional, organization and process for strategy-making)
- human performance (reflecting the influences, not always positive, of culture, biology, psychology, and historical situation)
- complexity (there are too many things that can go wrong for them all to be evaded)
- friction (the mainly unknowable and unpredictable unknowns that can impair performance)
- civil-military relations (dysfunctional asymmetries among soldiers, politicians, and civil servants).

Each of the eight categories of problems for the strategist has the potential to harm his ability to perform the bridging function between policy and army. Some of the eight are well known and appreciated, but others merit more explicit recognition. For example, there continues to be an existential problem of understanding that hinders strategic performance. Rephrased, although strategic effect must be generated simply by the consequences of all tactical behavior and misbehavior, with or without much operational direction, a deficit in the grip needed for purposeful strategic command is apt to prove fatal in the waging of war as a whole. Tactically, one may win, at least not lose, most of the warfare, yet because there was a strategy deficit, the war must be lost. Examples abound: Napoleonic France, imperial and Nazi Germany, France in Algeria, the United States in Vietnam, the United States and Britain in Iraq (2003–2007), and the United States, Britain, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan from 2001 to the present.

Since military behavior always must have some strategic effect on the course of

history, the absence of a strategy, a theory of victory in war worthy of the name, does not mean that that behavior must lack strategic consequences. Far from it. One need look no further than to America's record of warfare waged tactically with adequate competence in Southeast Asia between 1965 and 1973 and the apparently paradoxically abysmal strategic and political result.<sup>10</sup> Since history abhors a vacuum, the gap that the strategy bridge should span is filled by encroachment on the part of the political, operational, and tactical functions. Such mission creep may be characterized as the politicization and tacticalization of strategy, though it might be more perceptive to recognize that enhanced roles for politics and tactics substitute for, rather than capture, strategy.<sup>11</sup> The strategy bridge cannot be seized by politics or by tactics (or operations). If the bridge is not manned by strategists, it does not function—period.

It is important to be clear as to the inherent difficulty of purposeful strategic performance. It is no small task to plan military operations such that one should be able to control events militarily in such a way and to such a degree that the political future is shaped favorably. This strategic function necessarily entails prediction in the face of typically formidable problems. Moreover, ironically, if one succeeds militarily far beyond one's expectations—the Germans in May-June 1940, for example—the challenge is extreme in deciding how far, indeed how, to exploit such success. Again more than a little ironically, if one is dealt too weak a military hand to succeed tactically and operationally, strategic excellence may, or may not, be demonstrated in the way in which one copes with defeat.

Several senior American military professionals, whose names must be withheld in order to protect the guilty, have confided to this theorist an astrategic, bordering on an antistrategic, proposition. They have suggested that when a country is so potent in the quantity and tactical effectiveness of its armed forces that it should always win the warfare, it has scant need for strategy. Rephrased: perform well enough tactically and perhaps operationally, and strategy, as the necessary strategic effect, will take care of itself. This is a vintage misreading of Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke's expression of apparent disdain for strategy in favor of tactics.<sup>12</sup>

Of all the problems that beset the strategist and fuel yet further difficulties, the super category of sheer complexity and consequent

potential for multiple disharmonies warrants special mention. No matter how clearly the human actors leading a belligerent polity in war and warfare understand the essential unity of all their behaviors, the reality of performance on the different levels of conflict unavoidably promote what can be a lethal cumulative mega-disharmony. In theory, each of war's levels should complement each other. War is so much a gestalt that the relations among policy, grand strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics need to be understood to be horizontal in their interdependencies, as well as vertical in their chain of command authority.<sup>13</sup> But each of these standard levels of behavior has its own nature, reflected in unique dynamics, needs, and concerns. For example, tactical performance does not naturally serve operational design optimally. And operational success need not contribute to strategic achievement in a way at all proportionate to its costs. For a capstone negative, we have to note that even a strategically well-conducted conflict might not be succeeded by a sustainably stable, tolerable political order. When military and strategic performances retire from center stage, largely to be replaced by active diplomacy (and relevant domestic politics), there will be no guarantee that the blood and treasure expended will be cashed competently by the politicians. Tolerable cooperation among the levels of a polity's or coalition's effort in conflict has to be made to happen, but such harmonization will never be a natural process than can safely be left to some Hidden Hand of History that functions on autopilot.

Incredibly, purposeful centralized strategy can and sometimes does function in practice, though rarely as well as in theory, let alone elegantly, but frequently well enough. How can this be, given the problems that can threaten to render it irrelevant or worse?

First, every category of difficulty that in principle must threaten to defeat a belligerent strategically also must menace the enemy in principle. One can hardly repeat too often the reductionist Clausewitzian mantra that "war is nothing but a duel on a larger scale."<sup>14</sup> There is no need to excel strategically in order to win a war or succeed in competition. Rather, there is need only to perform to better net strategic effect than does the enemy. Second, war's very complexity contains within its diversity the possibilities of compensation for particular failures and weaknesses. Provided a competitive weakness is not unduly imperial

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in domain and severity—for example, a catastrophic collapse in the morale of the polity's main army, such as the Italian army at and following the disastrous battle of Caporetto (October 24–November 12, 1917)—fungibility may be commanded to ride to the rescue.<sup>15</sup> For a while the U.S. Navy loses its battle line in the Pacific because of the tactical loss at Pearl Harbor, so the fleet aircraft carriers must step up to take the strain. Of course, there will be occasions when no compensation fit for purpose can be located and applied. However, not for nothing is the strategist's second master question, "What are the alternatives?" (The first question is, "So what?")<sup>16</sup> The U.S. Navy in 1942 did not answer the second of the strategist's questions by refraining from offensive action pending the restoration to health of its battle line in the Pacific.

### **Strategists, Command, and Strategic Effect**

The strategy bridge, like Florence's Ponte Vecchio, can carry many buildings (as well as, incredibly, a secret passage), but it is the human strategist who must make the bridge work. One can identify with confidence a standard set of distinguishable roles that always need to be performed if purposeful strategy is to be a reality. For a polity to have and attempt to execute a strategy, it must provide for performance of the following roles: politician-policymaker; theorist-planner; and commander who has to manage and lead. The three functions indicated almost with unduly graphic clarity by the bridge metaphor are purpose, strategy, and tools (ends, ways, and means). The bridge need not only be anchored on its political and military banks, but it can also extend some distance overland from the water. Since the nature of the broad strategic function is to staple military and other behaviors to political interests, motives, and goals, it is obvious that there cannot be barriers at each end of the bridge. The executive strategist, as contrasted with a scholar writing strategic theory, has some need to think and talk politically in order to understand and probably try to influence the content of his policy guidance for a better fit

with his practicable ways and available means. Also, he often will be better served should he be able to improve the strategic and military education of both his political masters and his military and civilian subordinates.

The strategic function—hence, the domain of the strategist—cannot be confined to the realm of ideas, even when those ideas are expressed in plans and doctrine manuals. After all, “strategic theory is a theory for action.”<sup>17</sup> The strategist is not only a sponsor of the world of practice—at least, he should not only be such. His strategy exists strictly as a contingent theory for victory, a plan devised to solve—or, at the general level, to help solve via education—actual or anticipated problems. It follows that the role of the strategist is meaningless absent provision for strategy execution. Whether or not the principal conceptualizer of a strategy is designated to command its implementation in the field, the function of command must feature prominently on the strategy landscape. Both as general theory and as historically unique plans, the purpose of strategy is to improve a polity’s competitive performance. And the quality of that performance should be influenced to advantage by a choice of strategy executed by armed forces commanded by people who endeavor to achieve a purposeful control of events. This apparently complex, yet essentially simple, process is most likely to happen advantageously when all the many behaviors commanded are controlled for complementary and synergistic impacts and consequences. Such command and control, no doubt devolved as it must be to and among many layers in the military hierarchy, is integral to the strategic function. To repeat the logic: a master strategic idea, a dominant narrative, should drive the design of actual plans, and those plans must be executed by forces that are commanded and controlled so that their efforts serve a common, centrally intended purpose. The existence, promulgation, understanding, and use of a coherent body of authoritative sound military doctrine should contribute notably to the achievement of such purpose.

What does strategy produce? The answer is as challengingly opaque as it is unavoidable: strategic effect. Apparent tautology or not, this concept has to be the keystone in the arch of the strategy bridge. Performance of the strategic function can only be to generate desired effect upon the future course of events. The subject is as straightforward as this, even though all matters of strategy

design, decision, and execution in an adversarial environment are inherently complex and typically are uncertain far into the zone of unpredictability. Strategic effect is one among those mysterious qualities that cannot be observed and measured directly—security, love, happiness, and grief are examples of others. But even if we are unable to record strategic effect exactly, we can and must try hard to recognize evidence of its current condition. Its future impact typically will be a topic fit only for guesswork, but we can find material evidence of its recent and current presence. For example, the hasty retreat by the ragged remainder of the German army from Normandy toward the frontier of the Third Reich in August 1944 yielded unmistakable evidence of massive positive strategic effect achieved by Allied command performance. But what did this German retreat-cum-rout mean? Would the war be over in 1944? How much fight was left in the *Wehrmacht*? The answer could not be calculated. This was not a metric challenge.

Strategists cannot escape the laws of physics, even though their job requires them to seek to control some aspects of the future. Although competent strategists and more than adequate commander-managers often do succeed in shaping events to a broadly advantageous outcome, it is never possible for them to remove entirely the potentially sovereign role of chance in war. Yet again, Clausewitz is thoroughly persuasive. He specified chance and its dependent associate, uncertainty, as an organic component of the “climate of war.”<sup>18</sup> No matter how cunningly theorists strive, they cannot eliminate uncertainty from war. In truth, knowledge of nearly everything about the future, in almost any detail below the generic, is precisely unknowable. And yet the strategist’s core duty is to develop, and to see commanded in physical performance, plans that are predictions and contingent intentions—in other words, theories. The strategist’s plans purport to explain how desired endstates will be achieved.

Strategic effect, the dynamic and more than slightly unpredictable result of the strategist’s labors, is the product of every element specified as acting and interacting in the complete general theory of strategy. In principle, nothing in this general theory is irrelevant to any particular historical context, but the many subjects must play roles of variable significance from case to case. The strategist’s plan must seek to anticipate how

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tactical action, commanded for operational level consequences, will shape the course of future events; assessed overall, this is strategic effect. For more reasons than it would be sensible to attempt to itemize comprehensively, it is difficult to perform even competently as a strategist, let alone as a strategist of true historical distinction. Happily for most of history’s would-be strategists, which is to say for those with average biological endowment, education, experience, and luck, there is need only to be good enough.

Strategic effect is felt and has consequences in stages and across levels of conflict, and the transitions from one level to another are not reliably predictable. By stages, strategic effect happens and is felt in first-order, second-order, and probably third-order and beyond, consequences, untraceably in confirmable detail. Tactical first-order effects should have second-order tactical and operational effects, and those effects should have meaning in strategic effect. Alas, strategy is apt to be curved in its trajectory of consequences. Tactical behavior may well be the trackable product of a grand strategic design, but in its turn, it could blow back to reshape the strategy itself.

Theorists of a metric persuasion who strive against heavy odds to convert the art of strategy into applied quantifiable science are always going to be outmaneuvered fatally by the authority of the contextuality as well as the contingency of events. Strategic effect and its achievement via command performance strategically, operationally, and tactically must be a product whose weight is determined by dynamic and unique circumstances. Defeat in battle may, or may not, so demoralize an army or a nation that its morale sags beyond recovery.<sup>19</sup> The strategic meaning of tactical and operational success and failure can be anticipated, guessed intelligently, but by no means can it be predicted with rock-like reliability.

### The Good (Enough) Strategist

To conclude on a moderately upbeat note, strategy is possible; the strategist often



can succeed because true excellence in his calling is rarely necessary. The victorious strategist need not even be the particularly good strategist. Because the strategist has to perform as a duelling competitor, he need only be good enough to achieve by his command performance a necessary measure of control over the enemy's decisions. The quality and quantity of that enemy (and enmity) decide just how good the strategist has to be, always assuming obedience to the rule of prudence in the provision of his political guidance. For some comfort, it is more than a little encouraging to reflect upon these words by the journalist-novelist Robert Harris: "In the absence of genius there is always craftsmanship."<sup>20</sup> The strategist strictly does not require the right stuff, only enough of the right-enough stuff to meet the challenge of the day. For him to do that, he can only benefit from some education by a general theory designed and refined to assist practice.

Happily, perhaps, although the general theory of strategy can be rewritten endlessly, with each drafting reflecting the time, place, circumstance, and personality of the theorist, it does not necessarily register progress in comprehension. The general theory can be identified and explained at any time and in any place and circumstance in history. This theory for the strategic function must be expressed in the manner characteristic of the period, but it does not have a linear and progressive intellectual narrative. Clausewitz is superior in important respects to Thucydides and Sun Tzu, but that is not because he wrote 2,200 and more years later than did they. The strategic function is universal and eternal and is not the product of culturally circumscribed conceptualization. It follows, therefore, that great works of general strategic theory in principle can have equal value for today and tomorrow and can be written at any location and at any of history's many moments, those both allegedly momentarily "strategic" and those that plainly are much less plausibly so. Everything there is to know about strategy as the basis for general theory was as knowable in ancient Greece as it was in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Prussia and as it is today. Strategy, not strategies, endures. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marshal (Ferdinand) Foch, *The Principles of War*, tr. Hilaire Belloc (London: Chapman and Hall, 1921), 14. See Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile*

*Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), ch. 2, and *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, tr. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, rev. tr. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996); Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), and *The Revolution in Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946); J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989); Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, tr. Ellis Farnsworth (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), *Discourses on Livy*, tr. Julia Conaway Bondarella and Peter Bondarella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and *The Prince*, tr. Peter Bondarella and Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1992); Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946), *Strategy in the Missile Age*, and *War and Politics*; and Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), and *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> A period piece that has residual significance is Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson, eds., *Strategic Nuclear Targeting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Also see Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), and Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> General wisdom on war planning is in short supply; one should begin with Clausewitz, book eight, "War Plans." After *On War*, one admittedly struggles to find much enlightenment. Some help can be derived from Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1941-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), xiii-xx, and Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, 141.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> See M.I. Finley's introduction to Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tr. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 9-32.

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, 86.

<sup>9</sup> See Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security* 25 (Fall 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For a range of perspectives, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Bal-

timore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998); Mark W. Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999); and C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Although by definition warfare is waged for political ends, this necessary fact does not mean that politics and warfare are fused. Acts of organized violence committed for political purposes may be regarded as a form of political behavior—war is armed politics and suchlike formulae—but warfare has a lore and dynamic all its own, no matter what the political intentions might be. Clausewitz is admirably explicit on this point: "Its [war's] grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic." Clausewitz, 605. On the malady of the tacticization of strategy, see Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 355-360.

<sup>12</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, tr. Daniel J. Hughes and Gunther E. Rothenberg (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 47.

<sup>13</sup> See Handel, 353-360.

<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz, 75.

<sup>15</sup> German General Otto von Below assaulted 41 Italian divisions with 45 (7 German, 38 Austro-Hungarian) divisions and routed them in a classic panic. The Italians lost 40,000 casualties, and 275,000 were taken prisoner. The loss of materiel was formidable (2,500 guns were captured by von Below's storming troopers), but his victorious forces lacked the logistical means to convert a tactical victory into either an operational or a strategic decision. The complexity of war and warfare has a way of frustrating those who are only tactically outstanding.

<sup>16</sup> See Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Brodie, *War and Politics*, 452.

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, 104.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in the estimation of the victor, Hannibal Barca, the catastrophic defeat of the army of the Roman Republic at Cannae in 216 BCE should have led to Rome suing for the best peace terms with Carthage that it could negotiate. In the instructive words of Adrian Goldsworthy, "[b]y his own understanding of war Hannibal won the Second Punic War at Cannae, but the Romans were following a different set of rules and when they did not admit defeat there was little more that he could do to force them." See Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare* (London: Cassell, 2002), 85. Britain's defeat in Flanders in May 1940 was far less bloody than was Rome's at Cannae, but it appeared to place her in scarcely more hopeful a strategic situation.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Harris, *The Ghost* (London: Hutchinson, 2007), 141.