

Marines with Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, convoy light-armored vehicles across beach as Navy landing craft, air cushion with Assault Craft Unit 4, departs beach of Sierra del Retin, Spain, during Spanish Amphibious Bilateral Exercise 2014, February 24, 2014 (U.S. Marine Corps/Austin Hazard)



The *Tao* of Doctrine

Contesting an Art of Operations

By G. Stephen Lauer

Pity the theory that conflicts with reason!

—CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

According to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, “Operational art is the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time,

space, and purpose.”¹ With this definition, the U.S. Army broke with both its prior doctrinal paradigm of an operational level of war and the joint model in Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, of the three levels of war.²

In contrast to ADP 3-0, however, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, emphasizes the joint definition, acknowledging an operational level: “Operational art is applicable at all levels of war, not just to the operational level of war.”³ Thus, a contested delineation of operational art entered the cognitive space of schools and commands throughout the Army. This article is not specifically about

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whether there should or should not be an operational level of war; rather, it is concerned with the concept of “doctrine” and its relationship to history and theory in the context of an operational art.

While definitions of operational art appear in self-described doctrinal manuals, do they describe, in fact, a *doctrine* of operational art? Can one prescribe *art* in doctrine? These questions lie at the heart of the contest engendered by the dual measures changing the Army doctrinal definition of operational art and dropping the operational level of war, both within a joint philosophical and *doctrinal* composition that retains that level. The term *doctrine* may be the most overused in the military lexicon.⁴ It can describe any written manual of guidance for any size force in either a training or combat environment. This article offers an approach to make clear where the term *doctrine* can most effectively be located in relation to an art of operations within the framework of the policy aim, allowing greater precision in its expression and clarifying its relationship to the larger concept of military ends, ways, and means—the context of strategy, operations, and tactics.

Anticipation, Adaptation, Emergence

The words *anticipation*, *adaptation*, and *emergence* evoke a flow of movement in experience, as in the concept of *Tao*, useful to describe both the purpose and evolution of doctrine.⁵ History and theory bind the term doctrine in time as a statement of the institutional understanding of the current nature and form of warfare in the context of an internal and external discourse. The internal discourse starts from analysis of the most recent employment of forces and capabilities of the Army. Second, the dialogue anticipates a resonance with all other individual Services, as well as with the conceptual joint force, including exploration of its results and effects by schools, in publications, and within official and unofficial papers and correspondence. Finally, this interchange includes American societal expectations and constraints, especially

limitations imposed by budgets, policy and politics, and strategic limitations. The external discourse involves exploration of its relationship with allies, but more importantly with a presumed or constructed antagonist. In essence, doctrine is the result of this discourse applied to an institution’s perception of its own historical continuity in action, pending its next engagement. Doctrinal manuals then anticipate the *near* future and assume its usefulness in the future environment. Since we cannot *predict* the future, we anticipate at least a level of utility that will suffice in planning as we assess a potential commitment.

Because of this future uncertainty, doctrine presents the practitioner with the problem of anticipating and adapting to the new environment in the most expeditious manner. This includes the possibility that what is “next,” requiring adaptation, may be so radically different from the anticipation as to constitute a crisis, requiring an essential rethinking of expected conditions.⁶ The options in adaptation lie on a spectrum from the need for minor procedural modifications to a response to a fundamental surprise and the recognition of the need for a new doctrinal paradigm. This demand underscores the view that doctrine is primarily authoritative as a means to provide a common *historical* understanding for the forces, the means, going into action anew. Doctrine cannot extend beyond the anticipation of a *near* future because the context of the approaching conflict or commitment environment, especially the future opponent’s will, requires a nearly immediate adaptation of the doctrine to the new contextual circumstances.

This adaptive response to the environment requires recognition, a learning response, of the imperative for emergence and change within the new environment, at whatever level this is recognized. The old discourse crystallizes in time and space with the engagement of an opposing will—the new external discourse—seeking to adapt itself to the new situation. An emerging doctrine, concurrent with its dissemination through the force, enters again the process of anticipation, adaptation, and

emergence. Seen in this light, doctrine, as the *Tao* itself, becomes understood as a living form, agile enough to flow and adjust to the demands of the complex, adaptive system model that we teach is the character of modern warfare. Absent this understanding, and training to implement such, doctrine becomes a rigid and stilted endeavor. It binds and blinds the force to the requirement to flexibly adapt its use—to be more correct than incorrect in the new environment, to adapt immediately to the new context, and then to embrace and disseminate an emergent consensus that allows for the agility and responsiveness necessary to save American lives in battle. The need for this agility becomes an embedded and emergent purpose of institutions such as the School of Advanced Military Studies. This is the education of the art, the imagination, of the student.

Throughout *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz described these qualities as necessary for a commander at any level, but especially for those most senior officers commanding a theater of operations, for example.⁷ The use of the terms *art* and *judgment* was intimately tied to the nature of war and its conduct.⁸ Judgment was the end result of both an individual’s talent and his personal experience of war, or vicarious experience in the study of history in the development of an informed intuition and the willingness to follow one’s path despite the distractions and uncertainty inherent in the clash of wills, driving our present understanding of complexity in war.⁹ His understanding resonated with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. It was the realm of the *irrationality of genius*:

Hence the concept of genius corresponds to what Kant sees as the crucial thing about aesthetic taste, namely that it facilitates the play of one’s mental powers, increases the vitality that comes from the harmony between imagination and understanding, and invites one to linger before the beautiful. Genius is ultimately a manifestation of this vivifying spirit for, as opposed to the pedant’s rigid adherence to rules, genius exhibits a free sweep of invention and thus originality that creates new models.¹⁰



instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. . . . Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.¹²

The manifestation of the commander’s art lies, in doctrine, in the joint concept of a commander-centric philosophy of command and the U.S. Army mission command concept with its split between the art of command and the science of control.¹³ There are few concrete differences between the two concepts of command. The Army defines *mission command* as “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”¹⁴ JP 3-0 describes *mission command* as “the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders. Successful mission command demands that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission.”¹⁵

Nothing in these words denies the essence of the development of the art and judgment of the commander. Both include the admonition that control, through synchronization, is immanent in this dialogue.¹⁶ As both the art of command (commander-centric) and the science of control, synchronization, exist together, the opportunity exists for one to dominate the execution of any operational structure. At what level of command is a subordinate empowered to break synchronization if he or she sees an opportunity?

As operations become more complex at the granular, local level within a theater of operations, and especially in light of the tight control of rules of engagement inherent in our post-World War II wars

Marine mortarman assigned to 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion “Wolfpack,” 1st Marine Division, during tactical training briefing during Integrated Training Exercise 2-16 at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, California, January 23, 2016 (U.S. Air Force/Efren Lopez)

Thus, the development of judgment depended upon the openness of the individual to adapt:

Judgment is necessary in order to make a correct evaluation of the concrete instance. . . . Every judgment about something intended in its concrete individuality (e.g., the judgment required in a situation that calls for action) is—strictly speaking—a judgment about a special case. That means nothing less than that judging the case

involves not merely applying the universal principle according to which it is judged, but co-determining, supplementing, and correcting that principle.¹¹

In the context of this presentation, the “principle” is the nature of doctrine:

Agility and flexibility of mind, then, became a product of one’s experience, one’s art: Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of

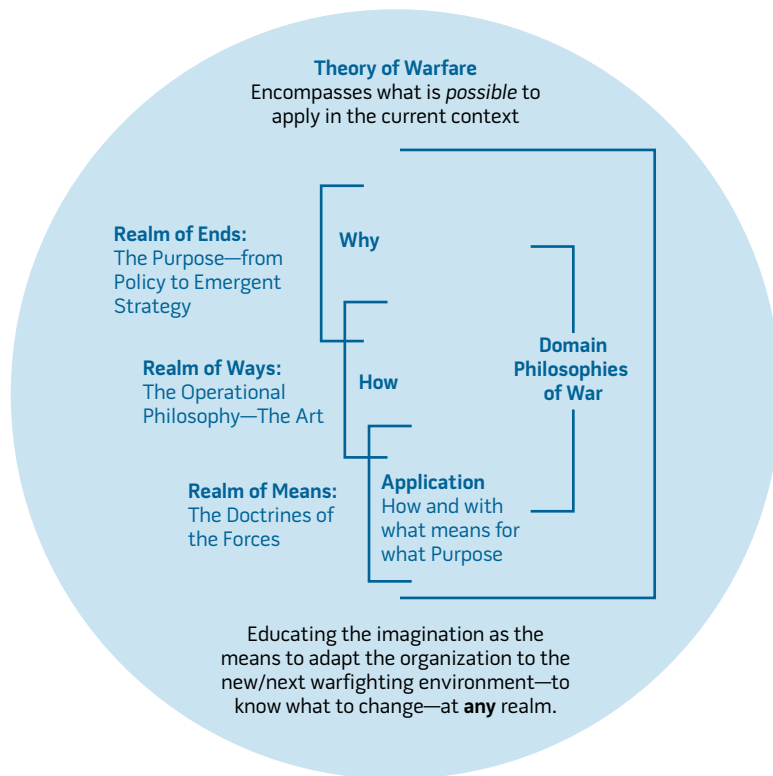
of limited aim, how much freedom can a commander be allowed to make these nonsynchronous decisions? This is especially so when a single judgment by a junior officer or enlisted leader may lead to significant political and policy risk, even if that decision was within the small unit leader's understanding of the commander's intent. Clausewitz noted that the more limited the political aim, the less effort demanded to achieve that aim, and the less involved the population, the application of violence as the fundamental nature of the phenomenon of war appears more politically effected and derived, and less military in its execution. Political and policy risk¹⁷ dominates the concerns of the military instrument—

*But the weaker the motives and the tensions, the less will the tendency of the military element, the tendency to violence, coincide with the directives of policy; the more, therefore, must war be diverted from its natural tendency, the greater is the distance between the political object and the aim of an ideal war, and the more does war seem to become political.*¹⁸

Thus, in limited war, mission command as a doctrine becomes ever more difficult to execute. Rules of engagement in the 21st century reflect more directly the concerns of politics and policy, not the use of violence to attain a political aim, limiting operational and tactical flexibility.¹⁹ This is especially the case when the consequences of junior leader decisions, or unfortunate or unexpected soldier actions, resonate in negative policy impacts for the theater commander and the policymaker.

Whereas the *Tao* of doctrine implies an inherent ability to adapt doctrine to conditions in the new context, this same doctrine, in its application in wars of limited aim, appears to have just the opposite effect. If the commander of the joint force cannot survive junior leader deviations from synchronization, including the rules of engagement, adapting when and where he believes essential to the conduct of the mission and the protection of the lives of soldiers, doctrinal adaptation through judgment becomes problematic.

Figure. Overarching Theory of War: Human, Social, Political, Economic, and Technological Phenomenon



The commander, in effect, becomes instrumental in preventing the recognition of changes in the new environment and adaptation therein, relying on strict execution of known doctrine and synchronization to avoid errors in judgment. The clarification of the terms *doctrine*, *philosophy*, and *theory*, then, may provide a way for senior commanders to arrive at solutions permitting both the adaptation necessary to save lives and the control necessary to achieve the policy aim.

Placing Doctrine in Context

If all things written in a green (or blue or black) manual are doctrine, how do we distinguish and bring to clarity the concepts that underlie the new definition of operational art and the end of the operational level of warfare? As Clausewitz noted, a purpose of theory is to “clarify concepts that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.”²⁰ To distinguish those things that are doctrine from those that may more succinctly be defined as philosophy,

I propose to paraphrase Clausewitz's use of the term *realms* and apply it to a description of the ends, ways, and means in a discussion of doctrine, philosophy, and theory.²¹ With the model shown in the figure, we can more accurately place the role and function of doctrine in the realm of the means as against the philosophy that guides the art of operations in the realm of the ways. Each in turn relates to the realm of the ends, wherein lies the policy aim. The location of *operational art* lies in the discourse between policy and the tactical means. It is from this discourse that an emergent strategy appears. The purpose of this emergent strategy, then, is to achieve the aim of policy in the application of the ways that ties the tactical to the strategic in consonance with that policy.

Furthermore, we can see the relationship of “domains” whose Service philosophies of warfare guide the doctrines of the forces, as well as the true role of the joint *philosophy* of warfare

that attempts to bind the whole in terms of unified action, which again cannot be so prescriptive as to constitute a *doctrine*. The domains not associated with a Service include the means associated with *space* and *cyberspace* and may include *information* as a human domain element. Limiting the term *doctrine* to the realm of the means makes clear the distinction that the word *art* implies a location in the realm of ways and ends—the art of operations lies in the ways the actions of the means relate to the realm of ends—the why or purpose, through a military strategy, to which the means aim. Operational art, then, lies in the realm of ways, not the doctrinal frame for the manner and methods of the employment of the means—the inherent complex interaction at the tactical level that constitutes the flow of fires and movement, the art of battle maneuver in direct contact with an enemy’s will during the engagement.

In contrast, an *operational art* may best find definition as a philosophy within a theory of war, a philosophical understanding of a theory of warfare that highlights the imagination of the commander in the determination of the ways in which to employ the means to achieve policy. If, as Clausewitz noted, art is an expression of talent and experience, then the ways cannot be limited by doctrine.²² This fits an understanding in our times that Clausewitz’s definition of strategy as the use of the engagement to achieve the ends of policy fulfills a theoretical placement of operational art in that locus, the realm of the ways.²³

Using this model, a definition of operational art emerges as a philosophy for the employment of the means to achieve a strategic aim derived from, and in concert with, a policy/political aim that provides its purpose and logic. Operational art is an expression of the *imagination* of the commander. It is effected as an understanding of the ways in which to orchestrate the actions of the means—the forces that must act—to achieve the policy aim in a warfare characterized by uncertainty created by the clash of wills with thinking, complex, adaptive opponents. This art cannot be defined by doctrinal lists of tenets,

especially when those tenets become substitutes for understanding the nature of such expression by a commander. The precepts that may be used to illustrate the characteristics of art may only define the nature of the canvas and the tools necessary for its creation. These are never sufficient to identify and restrict the nature of the imagination employed by the commander in his manifestation of the art of command.

An Operational Artist

Who is this operational artist? Current doctrine as written in ADP 3-0 states that anyone can be doing this in any formation at any level of command.²⁴ The figure, however, implies something entirely different—the operational artist is the person tasked with both the authority and responsibility to decide and order the ways in which the means will be employed, within the defined policy aim. How do we identify this person in terms of modern warfare and experience? Who is the person given the authority to negotiate for the means with which to achieve the policy aim? In the Afghanistan context, that person would have been the joint task force commander (of the International Security Assistance Force), the person who met with the Secretary of Defense to obtain and clarify the war policy and to coordinate that understanding with and for the means available to him.²⁵ In this location, defined by authority and responsibility within a delimited theater of operations, lies the role that must allow and expect the adaptation of the doctrine of the means to facilitate the emergence of doctrine specific to the new environment. Thus, the location of the art of operations in the realm of the ways drives the placement of an operational artist as the person charged with this role.

Examples of this placement abound in the history of theater of war commands both during World War II and after. As the Supreme Allied Commander of the European theater of operations, General Dwight D. Eisenhower routinely interacted with policymakers. These included military representatives of

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, such as Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, to determine the means necessary to carry the war onto the European continent, as well as the ways necessary to achieve the strategy that emerged to defeat the German war machine in northwest Europe.²⁶ Admiral Chester Nimitz had the same responsibility in the Pacific theater of operations and a similar relationship to policy with President Roosevelt and Admiral Ernest King as the Chief of Naval Operations.²⁷ General Douglas MacArthur met personally with President Harry S. Truman in ongoing discourse to determine the aims and the means necessary to the emergent strategy determined to achieve those aims in the Korean theater of operations.²⁸ General William Westmoreland met alike with President Lyndon Johnson and his chief civilian policy advisors such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also to determine the policy aims and the means necessary for these aims through ways deemed essential to accomplish the emergent strategy in Vietnam.²⁹

At its most basic level, theory fails to explain and differentiate that which is unclear if everyone (and everything done at every level) is potentially an operational artist. The mission, placement, and rules of engagement provided to the tactical means can only come from the person tasked with the determination of the ways in which the means act to achieve policy. It is in the theater of operations, where the joint force commander is in discourse with policy in the determination of the means required to achieve policy aims, that strategy emerges and operational art resides.

Philosophy, Not Doctrine

To paraphrase Michael Howard, it is not simply a matter of not getting the doctrine too wrong at first contact in a new environment; it is the recognition that the doctrine of the means, by its nature, will and *must* change once in contact with a new environment.³⁰ The force must be capable of such anticipation and, through this understanding, to immediately adapt, and then to embrace the emergence of a new



Marines with 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion suspend from special-purpose insertion and extraction rope after being extracted from jungle during patrol at Jungle Warfare Training Center on Camp Gonsalves, Okinawa, Japan (U.S. Marine Corps/Mark W. Stroud)

doctrine. This further underscores the importance of the *art* inherent in the development and adaptation of the ways that are solely the responsibility of the *artist* whose task lies in what we call the operational art—a philosophy—not a doctrine. JFQ

Notes

¹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, October 2011), available at <www.army.mil/e2/rv5_downloads/info/references/ADP_3-0_ULO_Oct_2011_APD.pdf>.

² “The operational level links the tactical employment of forces to national and military strategic objectives. The focus at this level is on the design, planning, and execution of operations using operational art: the application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience—to design strategies, campaigns, and major operations and organize and employ

military forces.” See Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, August 2011), I-13. Marine Corps and joint doctrine offer a similar construct of the operational level of war. Marine Corps doctrine notes, “The operational level of war provides the linkage between tactics and strategy. It is the discipline of conceiving, focusing, and exploiting a variety of tactical actions to realize a strategic aim. With that thought as our point of departure, this publication discusses the intermediate, operational level of war and the military campaign which is the vehicle for organizing tactical actions to achieve strategic objectives.” See Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-2, *Campaigning* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Navy, 1997), foreword.

³ Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, May 16, 2012), 4-1.

⁴ *Doctrine* is “[f]undamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.” See JP 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington,

DC: The Joint Staff, 2010).

⁵ These terms first arose in a conversation in the “hayloft” at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) between the author, Rick Herrera, and Kurt Taylor, a member of the SAMS Lyceum, from a question concerning the purpose and evolution of doctrine. Clarification of the relationships therein belongs to discussions with Jeff Kubiak, Bob Tomlinson, and Chris Marsh, then also of the “hayloft.” Mark Calhoun also provided a thoughtful review of an early draft of this article. Here, *Tao* means “The world . . . is the efficient cause of itself. It is resolutely dynamic, autogenerative, self-organizing, and in a real sense, alive. . . . a “pathway” that can, in varying degrees, be traced out to make one’s place and one’s context coherent . . . at any given time, both what the world is, and how it is.” See Roger T. Ames, *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 50; “The *tao* ‘can be understood as the natural order of the universe,’ and people can act in accordance with the ‘way’ by attempting to live in harmony with those around them and with the natural forces at work in the universe. People are supposed to live in accord with the way, in harmony with the world around them, by living



Senior Airman inspects parachutes on a C-130 Hercules aircraft during Red Flag–Alaska 14-3 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, August 5, 2014 (U.S. Air Force/Chad C. Strohmeier)

according to the precept of *wu wei*, or nonaction. What is meant by this is not that people do nothing, but that action should be effortless and in harmony with the natural forces at work in the universe. It is therefore ‘effortless doing,’ or ‘acting without acting’ (*wei wu wei*).” See Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 152.

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 84; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30–31.

⁷ Clausewitz, 111, 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 147–149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Continuum Publishing Group, 1989), 46. See also Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, 1790, Part I, §46–49.

¹¹ Gadamer, 34–35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 350.

¹³ ADP 3-0, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ JP 3-0, II-2.

¹⁶ ADP 3-0, 9, 13; JP 3-0, II-3.

¹⁷ Alan C. Lamborn, “Theory and Politics in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1997), 191–197.

¹⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by O.J. Matthias Jolles (New York: Random House, 1943), 17.

¹⁹ Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Sydney, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2013), 54–56, 74.

²⁰ Clausewitz, 132.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

²² *Ibid.*, 146–147.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁴ “Operational art is not associated with a specific echelon or formation, nor is it exclusive to theater and joint force commanders. Instead, it applies to any formation that must effectively arrange multiple, tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve a strategic objective, in whole or in part.” See ADP 3-0, 9.

²⁵ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 344–358, 367–386.

²⁶ Paul Kennedy, *Engineers of Victory* (New York: Random House, 2013), 235–236.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 288–289 (map), 305, 312, 367.

The Pacific Ocean Areas included the Southwest Pacific Area under Douglas MacArthur, within United States Strategic Direction, by structure under Admiral William Leahy “as titular head of the Joint Chiefs.”

²⁸ Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 121–123.

²⁹ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 234, 324; and H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 244–245.

³⁰ “I am tempted to declare that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives. It is the task of military science in an age of peace to prevent the doctrine being too badly wrong.” See Michael Howard, “Military Science in the Age of Peace,” *RUSI Journal* 119, no. 4 (March 1974), 4.