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## Set and Drift—The Study of Strategy

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# SET AND DRIFT

## The Study of Strategy

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Captain Reginald R. Belknap, U.S. Navy

**O**NE DOES NOT GO FAR IN ANY READING ON STRATEGY without realizing how closely strategic considerations are intermingled on the one hand with questions of policy, and on the other with questions of logistics; or in more general terms, how largely the method of accomplishment is determined by both the end in view and the disposable means. And so, in the arrangement

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The paper (never before published) from which this article is extracted was read as a lecture at the Naval War College on 9 August 1922, during a twelve-day “Fleet–War College Session.” Captain (later Rear Admiral) Belknap, who had in 1918 commanded the minelayer flotilla that established the North Sea Barrage, reported in 1919 to the College as head of the Strategy (now Strategy and Policy) Department. In March and April of that year he was Acting President.

The lecture was intended “to impress, especially on younger officers, the importance and advantage of systematic and wide reading as a foundation for applied study later.” In the belief that these purposes remain compelling—and notwithstanding outdated specifics about the College’s course of instruction, a certain overoptimism as to the significance of the outcome of individual war games, and reflections of contemporary prejudices—the lecture is reprinted as delivered. Editorial intervention has been limited to minor revisions for clarity, identifications, and truncation, especially of quotations, for reasons of space. For general background, see John B. Hattendorf et al., eds., *Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the U.S. Naval War College* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1984).

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of the course at the Naval War College, the Department of Strategy includes the studies of policy, strategy, and logistics.

There is fundamental need also in almost any study touching the relations between countries, of some familiarity with international law. One must have a working knowledge of the rights and duties of nations, their exemptions and obligations established by accumulated experience as necessary and so recognized by the civilized world. Especially in a war study, one needs to understand what is normal practice and, when normal conditions are overthrown by war, what practices may be approved, tolerated, questioned, or condemned. The great force behind all manifestations of governmental power is public opinion, and international law is a formulation of that opinion in such matters and to such extent as discussion has settled down into agreement. All naval officers-of-the-line by requirement, and many others through interest, study this branch of law in the course of service, and here at the War College one's interest in the subject is stimulated by the many and various situations that may confront a naval command. Specific questions in international law arise constantly and some of them are given special discussion at the College. This is only one aspect of the widely recognized influence of the Naval War College on the formulation and observance of international law. The subject is the work of a separate department of the College, but it needs mention here as the common groundwork of all our studies.

The basic concept of international law is agreement, as distinguished from the compulsory enforcement of a nation's internal laws. Outside a nation's boundaries there is neither a court for appeal nor any common force to compel another nation. Arbitration has become of frequent resort but is not yet accepted for vital matters, in which the pressure and support for war might be widespread and strongest. In the field of the world, all nations claim equal right, with no restraint other than voluntary agreement by treaty, the moral influence of international law, and the limitations of their own power. And so, the government has need to consider other nations' interests in the international field, if our own are to be so conducted as to gain the ends desired without clash or disaster.

As people multiply, their activities push more and more beyond the home boundaries, becoming wider and [more thoroughly] interwoven with the interests of other peoples. Racial, geographical, social, and other elementary factors influence a nation's development, gathering force so quietly yet so powerfully as often to exceed the control of government during the average life of one administration. But in the course of years, as the vitality of these tendencies becomes manifest through the recurrence or persistence of similar indications, the administration formulates a corresponding attitude or course of action on the part of the government, to guide, foster, or restrain the tendency in question, as may best

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serve the welfare of the nation as a whole. Such are the origins and nature of national policy.

Between strong pressure at home and competitors [with] equal claims abroad, it is evident that shaping a foreign policy is not a free choice but rather the discernment of the natural causes which underly a national activity. When such an external policy comes into competition with the valuable interests of other nations, the possibility of war may arise, and it is here that the study of strategy connects, for it is an obvious duty of government to consider whither a nation's policy may lead, and if persistence in it may bring on war, then to weigh the gain by war against the probable cost. To determine the possibility of such gain and the cost of it are questions of strategy.

The large idea conveyed by the word "strategy" deals with the ways and means to achieve the ends of policy. It is applied with equal freedom to broad schemes, such as a general plan for war, and to comparatively minor and more specific matters, as the disposition of the forces for a single engagement. Briefly, strategy answers the question of how to do what policy requires, and in making the answer, it runs down successive stages, each one entering more into detail, to the final province of war preparation and tactical action. [Alfred Thayer] Mahan says, "How best to use naval power . . . is naval strategy, whether applied in peace or war."

How a force may be employed to best advantage depends of course upon the kinds, degrees, and places of the effects it can produce. To determine these we must consider not only the power and mobility of a force but also its maintenance; for to gain the ends of policy by war usually requires not merely a single blow but a sustained military effort. Considerations of maintenance lie in the field of logistics, which in naval application embraces supplying, moving, and refitting the fleet in the best order and security. Under this head come matters of direction, distance, bases, supply, resources, lines of communication, and the degree of preparation during peace, considering how the enemy's side will be affected by all these factors as well as our own side.

Thus policy, strategy, and logistics, [against] the background of international law, form one study—[that is,] of the national purpose combined with the method and the means to effect it by military force if necessary. Policy, though the product of natural forces, must yet give heed to the warnings and advice of strategy. Strategy, though working in terms of life and death, must yet as the servant of policy, aim at the objective dictated by policy. Logistics, which deal with necessities and possibilities, influence the decisions of strategy, often to a controlling degree. For example, in the late war [World War I] policy called for a mine barrage across the North Sea. Strategy tentatively chose the location Aberdeen-Ekersund, near the Skagerrak, but in that position constant support would have been necessary and the logistics for such support required a base in Norwegian waters.

Policy could not stand for that, so strategy moved the location far enough northward, away from the enemy, to dispense with constant support.

The course in strategy as conducted at the War College consists of four main parts—reading and thesis writing, problem-solving chart maneuvers, and discussion.

The reading list issued by the Strategy Department, although far from comprehensive, includes many more books than the average reader can absorb during the eleven months of the course; but most of the officers in every class are already familiar with some of the works recommended, and many of them will of course continue their reading after completing the work here. Beyond outlining the reading course, inviting comments on it, and examining the theses turned in, the [faculty] exercises no direction over student officers' reading. But there is one important suggestion made, that in reading on strategy, some one or more works should be studied with deliberation, in order to get the authors' true meaning and fully consider their deductions and illustrations. This suggestion is made with Napoleon's oft-quoted avowal in mind that his apparent flashes of genius were but inspirations arising from diligent study. Such painstaking, reflective reading is the best kind to stock the mind with information and develop the ability to apply it. Though several books may be read rapidly in order to get a wide range of view on some particular topic, the understanding of principles which is derivable from the works of [Gilbert] Murray, Mahan, [Julian] Corbett, [Kolmar] von der Goltz, [Spencer] Wilkinson, [Karl] von Clausewitz, and [Ferdinand] Foch, can be realized only by painstaking study. [As Mahan observed,] "Sound military principle is as useful to military conduct as moral principle is to integrity of life."

In direct connection with the reading comes the writing of theses, one on policy and another on strategy and logistics. This part of the course seems at the outset very laborious, but with few exceptions the members of every class pronounce in favor of it, as the best means to clarify one's understanding and crystallize one's thoughts upon the subjects read. Clear understanding and clear thinking are indispensable for imparting to others a clear expression of one's own views and intentions, and, as Admiral Mahan says, "A man who thinks clearly will very soon want to speak clearly, and to have accurate words in which to express his thoughts."

Reading and thesis writing cultivate the powers of analysis, critical examination and comparison, reflection, and expression. One acquires true appreciation for the principles of war through observing how their correct application or their disregard has made for success or failure in the past, and wider reading shows more and varied instances of similar results from similar measures. The mind is thus broadened, the memory stocked, and the imagination stimulated, all of which are essential to preparation for high military responsibility. More than

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these are needed, however; for while it is important to know and to understand the past critically, the military commander must also, and above all, have constructive ability, to penetrate quickly to the essentials of a situation and thereupon decide with confidence. He must be able to grasp and to act appropriately in season.

In his book *The Art of Fighting*, Rear Admiral Bradley A. Fiske says, "The sine qua non of the strategist is imagination. He must foresee the circumstances under which the next great conflict will be fought, and prepare plans and appliances of the highest order of completeness and novelty to meet them with success. It is well to study the campaigns of the great commanders of the past, but not exclusively. The war that the strategist must win is not the last war but the next war." And Spencer Wilkinson says, "The clear eye, which sees . . . into the heart of the situation, can never be obtained except by a man who by repeated efforts has thought out to the very essence, and to their ultimate elements, all the problems of war, so that the principles of strategy have become incorporate with the fibre of his mind, and he is incapable of violating them."

Whether one possesses both the requisite grasp of the principles of war and the ability to apply them constructively can only be determined by test, and the solution of problems furnishes such a test.\* War College problems are based on an assumed general situation, which is known to both sides, and a special situation for each side, known only to that side. They are made as realistic and as true to possibilities as known experience permits. Existing types of vessels and weapons and existing fleets are used. In this way the problems serve to develop facility in applying the principles of the art of war to the forces of the present day; while by throwing light on current and proposed methods, these studies sometimes bring out the desirability of new or modified types or of greater numbers of existing types, or other apparent improvements, and furnish a test of them before any money is spent on actual experiments.

The strategist's real field of operations is the chart; [as Antoine-Henri] Jomini said, strategy is "war on the map."

About half of our problems in strategy are accordingly given the further test of actual maneuver on the chart. Two officers are selected as the chief commanders on the two sides, each to put into effect his solution of the problem.

Subordinate commanders are detailed, given their first orders, and shut in separate rooms: communication is allowed only by radio, cable, or signal, with the lapse of time for transmission as it would be in reality; and wind, sea, and

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\* "Problems" were practical exercises eliciting from the student, in writing, "a clear conception of the mission," an "estimate of the situation," and a "decision that was the logical result" of these (Hattendorf et al., p.118). This exercise, and the "chart maneuvers" discussed below, together constitute the equivalent of curricular war gaming as practiced today at the Naval War College.

atmospheric conditions are taken from weather charts. The officers concerned are conscientious in always making decisions with serious attention, not doing anything that could not or would not be done in actual practice, and not using information which has been received informally or contrary to possibilities in similar actual circumstances; and in all other respects service conditions are simulated as far as practicable. As soon as a little familiarity with the machinery has been acquired, the maneuver progresses in a very interesting way. Some artificiality is unavoidable, decisions on contacts and minor engagements must be arbitrary, and the maneuver sometimes drags; yet with all its imperfections the chart maneuver impresses the care, anxiety, doubt, tension, the unremitting responsibility of naval commanders. With thirty to fifty experienced officers intent on the problem, during the maneuver and afterwards in the critique, the conduct of the forces is sure to undergo an instructive inspection. But the chief value lies in the demonstration, plain before all. There on the chart each officer can see his own work, his chief's work, every other commander's work. It is no longer a question of what you would do. There is the record of what you and they *did*—where one can judge by actual results whether plans, orders, subsequent decisions, when put to a fair, open test, proved to be “the right thing, rightly applied, in time.” Mutely but eloquently the chart testifies that luck favors good management and that “fate punishes errors of judgment as remorselessly as guilt.”

The fourth means of training, frank discussion, is second only to individual effort on problem work. After the student officers' solutions to a problem have been read by the staff, a written critique is drawn up, analyzing the problem, commenting on features of the students' solutions, comparing them with the treatment of similar points in a solution prepared by the staff, and bringing out the important principles involved. A solution by the staff is given out, not as the only correct answer but as one deemed acceptable which, so far as it withstands criticism itself—to which it is freely open—furnishes a standard by which to compare and criticise the others constructively. The moves of the chart maneuver are shown by lantern slides, and some situations are shown also as they would have been under the staff solution, for clearer illustration of the principles or suggestion embodied.

This critique is the basis for discussion of the problem in all its features. The discussion is entirely impersonal, aiming only at mutual and general benefit. Considerations of rank do not enter. Rank of itself confers no degree of infallibility in war, but the recognition by high rank that the military art depends upon facts and principles, not opinions, goes far to foster that confidence in the leader on which success so largely depends. The fundamental characteristic of all higher institutions of study is freedom of thought and expression, which is indispensable in all investigational work. We are seeking for truth, to prepare ourselves to deal with cold, hard facts, in the face of an active, trained enemy doing his utmost

against us. No test applied during our preparation can equal the stress of war. How then can we be satisfied with less than the severest test that is available? If my solution of a problem is not proof against the kindly criticism of my friend in the next room, what chance would it have in war? If my junior beats me on the maneuver chart, I should be thankful for the lesson. An enemy would not consider my feelings until after the battle. If there be any error committed, any defect, let it be revealed in time for remedy, and if the matter in doubt proves to be really sound, the question establishes it. Only weakness shuns the light.

The following words of Julian Corbett published in 1911 seem prophetic of some difficulties of the late war: "How often have officers dumbly acquiesced in ill-advised operations *simply for lack of the mental power and verbal apparatus* to convince an impatient minister where the errors of his plan lay? How often, moreover, have statesmen and officers, even in the most harmonious conference, been unable to decide on a coherent plan of war from inability to analyze scientifically the situation they had to face, and to recognize the general character of the struggle in which they were about to engage?"

In such connection, and on lower planes as well, discussion, in addition to its investigatory value, trains officers for staff duty, to present their views and estimates concisely and clearly, and trains a chief to grasp and weigh them. To retain the admiral's confidence, the staff must see that he is correctly informed, including views which differ from his own. To express such opinions may not always be easy to do, yet whenever an opinion is given, it should be genuine conviction, unbiased by different views held by others. In the chief's consideration before deciding, the opinions of his staff have weight. One of the maxims printed on Marshall Field's\* pay envelopes read, "Loyalty requires a subordinate to stand up for his own opinions to his chief and for his chief's policies to the world." Free discussion improves the quality of one's opinions and accustoms officers to express them acceptably as well as with due force.

Thus the course provides for reading on broad lines and on the particular, for writing on the abstract and on the concrete, for derivation of principles from the past and their application to problems of the future, for repeated and varied practical test of our own work by experienced hands, and finally, for the review of all in the light of full and open, first hand discussion and constructive criticism. "Reading maketh a full man, writing an exact man, conference a ready man." Military character requires all three qualities and it is on well developed character that efficiency fundamentally depends.

From the foregoing description it will be seen that the course combines the historical and analytical with the applied and constructive. From past performances we learn the apparent reasons for success or failure, but deductions from

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\* Marshall Field (1834–1906), American merchant, founder of what was then the largest wholesale and retail dry goods establishment in the world.



history must usually be taken with reservation, because seldom is our information complete and altogether trustworthy. Official reports conflict, first-hand notes often lack essential details, and historical writings are inevitably tinged with the author's views, sometimes intentionally colored. And in any case, it is never possible to reproduce a situation in its entirety nor to interpret exactly, after the event, the mind of another person who was a factor in it. The cold critic in his quiet study breathes a far different atmosphere from the active commander. Examination of the mistakes of others, while instructive, is negative, showing what not to do. The same kind of study also brings out the good and strong qualities of successful leaders, but one does not acquire practical skill merely by observing other players. One can learn, to be sure, more that way than by merely studying the rules and penalties, but constructive ability as an actor—as one who creates an effect—is developed only by practice under rules well understood. Our problems and chart maneuvers give this constructive practice, and in so doing they introduce the human equation under the conditions of the man who must decide. These elements, the personal equation and the mental attitude of the man who faces responsibility—elements which are lacking in a merely critical course of study—are indispensable for true appreciation of the principles of war.

The purpose of our study, however, is not to dwell on the mistakes but to seek out their causes. How does it come about that, making due allowance for the fog of war, weight of responsibility and pressure for time, decisions have yet not infrequently been made on certain courses of action, objectives, or distributions of force which the outcome shows to have been initially wrong? The repeated commission of similar mistakes seems a sure indication of the existence of some cause or causes of such errors. To discover what these may be is what interests us most, for in proportion as these underlying causes of error can be eliminated or diminished, we shall advance towards the successful conduct of war. Our problems and chart maneuvers reveal some striking indications of such fundamental causes of error.

First, as to the purpose of action. There is no cause without some effect. Military action is a cause employed by government to produce or hasten a desired effect. How important then for the commander to grasp thoroughly what the desired effect is, so that, among several courses of action that may bring it about, he may choose the one best suited to the purpose; how necessary that a vague or indifferent understanding shall not lead astray. This seems so obvious, why mention it? Yet history, recent as well as remote, and examples in our work here, show numerous instances where, instead of knowing the purpose of their instructions, military commanders misunderstood their purport, had only a feeble grasp of it, or were in the dark.

Against such lack of true directive force, a lack which fosters the tendency to pursue or accept a course blindly, the best corrective is the broad cultivation recommended by Mahan and by other authorities of our profession.

Every naval officer should order his study, and his attention to contemporary events, abroad and at home, by the reflection that he may some day be an adviser of the Government, and in any case may beneficially affect events by his correct judgment of world-wide conditions. In [Horatio] Nelson's phrase "An officer should have political courage." Political courage, to be well based, requires political knowledge as well. That you may more effectually concentrate upon this necessary knowledge, avoid dissipating your energies upon questions interior to the country. . . . The sphere of the navy is international solely.

So likewise with subordinate commanders in successive lower grades. When leaders understand the main purpose, they may direct their efforts towards the desired result effectively, sometimes even when orders from higher authority no longer apply. Knowing the great purpose, each can see his own task not as a separate operation but as part of a larger undertaking, and the most decisive successes have come about where the chief's purpose and spirit found expression in the unity of his subordinates' actions.

A second lesson—obvious like the first, yet far from general observance—is to have a plan appropriate to the purpose. Often there have been parts of plans and plans of parts, but such looseness tends to confuse rather than to lead straight. The plan should be complete for accomplishment of the mission, with reasonable promise, barring resistance that cannot be foreseen, of carrying through to a finish. It is not implied by completeness that there shall be a mass of detail—quite the contrary. The dominant characteristic is not a strait-jacket but backbone, with the elasticity and flexibility, as well as strength, of an expert boxer. How to make such a plan, determining the kind, the place, and the strength of effort which the purpose requires, together with provision against enemy interference, can be attained only by painstaking study of war. To acquire such ability to plan is one main purpose of War College training.

The most expensive lesson of all history, yet the one most persistently ignored, is that for any plan there should be adequate preparation. Field Marshal Robertson says, "It is a difficult and long business in war to make up for a bad start." Viscount Esher says, "Naval supremacy cannot be extemporized. It must be forecast and carefully prepared." [General] Cordonnier says, "In proportion as war becomes more scientific it comes less within the province of improvised soldiers."\* So much for the material side; but of all elements of preparation, the most important and the longest to develop is the professional training of officers.

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\* Field Marshal Sir William Robertson was Chief of the [British] Imperial General Staff, 1915–1918; Viscount Esher (Reginald Brett) was an English military reformer and editor; and General Cordonnier was a French World War I corps commander.

Our service furnishes experience and opportunity for study, but the results depend on the effort of the individual.

Chief of Staff, British Expeditionary Force in France 1914, afterwards Chief of Imperial General Staff until March 1918, Sir Joshua Reynolds [observes that] "Instruction forced upon the mind by others is lazily and ineffectually received; few have been taught to any purpose who have not been their own teachers."

A fourth great lesson is the importance of adherence to plan. The first requisite is that the plan must be made with a view to command confidence under the stress of conflict. Next, for its execution as intended, the surest guaranty, after character and training, is freedom from subordinate detail in high places. In naval warfare it may often be impossible for the high commander to be detached from the hot fighting and on occasion his mere presence may exert decisive influence. With due skill on his part, however, such occasions will come about in accordance with his plans, not in spite of them, for the wider their scope, the more important becomes adherence to them.

By reserving to himself no special function but, instead, committing the several parts of the conduct and support of his plan to competent hands, he is thereby relieved of all current detail, free to keep in touch with the situation as a whole, and on that impartial basis to decide any question that may arise. Such freedom likewise enables him to move about at will on the instant, without necessity for turning over local command. He still retains general command but there is no reason why he should control current affairs or the local fighting incident to support. His principal subordinates, and their subordinates in turn, are competent in their respective spheres to decide and act locally as their respective local situations require, viewed in relation to the whole plan. So long as they make good toward the plan—and as to whether they are doing so or not can usually be judged best on the spot—why should the higher commander interpose? Executive affairs in war take precedence over all else. Decisions on the battle-field cannot wait. Hence, when a general officer takes on also a subordinate function, some matters affecting the whole may at any moment be thrust aside by relatively minor yet imperative demands of a single part. The heat of action, interruption, loss of time, hurried thought, irritation, fatigue—some or all of these will surely impair sound deliberation. Where great decisions are made there should be leisure and detachment from temporary influences. According to a recent story, Foch, when asked how he won the war, replied, "By smoking my pipe."

A plan that is the result of deliberate study must not be lightly put aside—neither by the high commander himself who made it nor by a subordinate in his own sphere. It is not sufficient merely to fight; the fighting in each area must accomplish towards the plan. The skillful leader shapes his tactics accordingly. As General Hamley\* says, "The Commander of a detachment has often a very

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\* General Edward B. Hamley was an authority on land and naval warfare.

difficult task to perform. To carry out his task satisfactorily he must have a thorough knowledge of the broad situation and the plans of his general in chief. He must constantly remember that success at the decisive point is everything—that his every act must be directed towards, and sub-ordinated to, that end. He must strive to gain the ends in view without exposing his detachment to defeat or unnecessary loss, but when the end cannot otherwise be gained he must not hesitate to fight, even in the face of certain defeat.”

And Clausewitz: “Modern war calls for an intelligent use of initiative by subordinates, and it is certain that the subordinate who grasps the broad situation most clearly will solve the local situation most intelligently.”

Another lesson impressed by the late war is the necessity for competent staff work. In his report on Features of the War, Sir Douglas Haig\* said, “. . . The principles of command, staff work, and organization elaborated before the war have stood the test imposed upon them and are sound. The military-educated officer has counted for much, and the good work done by our staff colleges during the past thirty years has had an important influence upon the successful issue of the war. In solving the various strategical and tactical problems with which we have been faced, in determining principles of training and handling of troops, and in the control and elaboration of army organization generally, the knowledge acquired by previous study and application has been invaluable. . . .” Admiral [John] Jellicoe, Field Marshal [John] French,\*\* and our own high commanders speak in similar terms of the importance of competent staff work, and the German and the general European view is well known to be the same.

The function of the commander may be summed up in the words, consider and decide; the function of the staff is to submit for consideration and then to translate the decision into the detailed instructions requisite for execution. Safe to say, in matters where only the chief can decide, his judgment is most likely to be clear and rapid when his mind has been set free from distractions by the good work of his staff. Hence the value of such training as acquired at the War College for lieutenant-commanders as well as for higher grades, nor can younger officers begin too early to lay a good foundation of studious reading, in anticipation of a command course as early as it can be obtained.

The supreme lesson which all studies of war force home is that collectively and singly, all of us on the experience of yesterday should prepare for tomorrow.

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\* Field Marshal Douglas Haig commanded the British Expeditionary Force from December 1915.

\*\* John Jellicoe was (from 1919) Admiral of the Fleet, Royal Navy, Commander in Chief of the Home Fleet, 1914–1916, then First Sea Lord; General Sir John French served as commander of the British Expeditionary Force, 1914–1915.