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War and Politics

James E. King

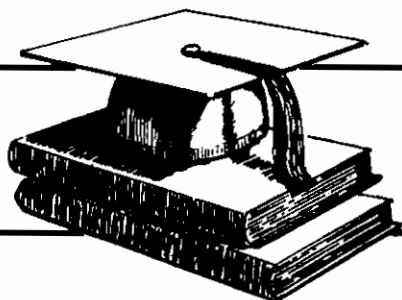
Bernard Brodie

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PROFESSIONAL READING

Brodie, Bernard. *War and Politics*. New York: Macmillan. 1973. 514p.

Bernard Brodie has written a book that should stand for a long time as an authoritative statement on the dangers of tunnel vision where war is concerned. "War," he says, paraphrasing Clausewitz, "takes place within a political milieu from which it derives all its purposes." And he calls this "the single most important idea in all strategy." No one is better qualified to remind us of this too frequently neglected truth. For not only was Brodie preeminent among the pioneers of the difficult task of rethinking the role of armed force in support of foreign policy in the nuclear era, but also, more than anyone else, he has remained at that task, adapting his thinking to changing events and maintaining his position as the leading American civilian authority in the field.

The major theme of *War and Politics*, then, is Clausewitz's principle that "war is (nothing but) the continuation of politics with an admixture of other means," or, as Brodie says at one point, the requirement that political purpose *dominate* strategic thinking. He never seeks to reduce it to a formula, but it is abundantly evident that what he means by "political purpose" is an imaginative and sensitive, as well as courageous, balancing of all the considerations relevant to the making of foreign policy—including specifically such unmilitary and unpower-political factors as moral values and the limits of patience and endurance characteristic of popular democratic states. It is the specialists,

with their tendency to see the issues of war and foreign policy in a single dimension, who come in for hard knocks. The charge applies particularly to the military profession, to which Brodie attributes a stubborn addiction to "winning," regardless of other considerations (such as the less tangible costs of protracted local wars) and a consequent institutionalized inability to face unpleasant truths about the course of a war in which it is engaged—or to pass such truths along to higher authority. But the military are by no means the sole or worst offenders. That dubious distinction goes to political leaders and their intellectual advisers, who diminish the political purpose they are supposed to serve by substituting for responsible thought about the consequences of their decisions ritual incantations invoking such stereotypes as "falling dominoes" and the necessity of preserving military "options," the Government's prestige, and the President's "face."

Not everyone will share Brodie's constrained yet curiously exalted conception of strategy and the strategic thinker's role. The constraints are evident when he insists that strategy is "strictly pragmatic . . . a 'how to do it' study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently, . . . a theory for action . . . and not at all like pure science, where the function of theory is to describe, organize, and explain and not to prescribe." But his conception of the role of the strategist is broad and elevated indeed if he really

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intends, as is implied throughout the book, that it is the province of the strategic thinker (unless he is a mere manipulator of quantitative relations, innocent of historical insight) to instruct the military leaders, and "through them the political leaders," in what it means to subordinate military means to political purpose. On the constraint side, one is reminded of Brodie's 1965 exchange with André Beaufre, the pre-eminent European nuclear-era strategist and his own most worthy confrere, whom he chided for appearing to mistake strategy for a branch of philosophy concerned with ultimate truth. In the more exalted role of critic Brodie has done again what he did so successfully in his *Strategy in the Missile Age*, in which he mingled intellectual history, strategic analysis, and a biting critique of contemporary Air Force priorities. He has intermixed brilliant reflections on the neglected teaching of Clausewitz, the history of changing attitudes toward war, and past and contemporary theories of war's causation with trenchant comment on exaggerated claims for the efficacy of strategic bombing in World War II, on Korea as "the first modern limited war"—and on Douglas MacArthur as the general in whose hands that particular war was left much too long—finally, and above all, on Vietnam, that exterior infection from whose poisons the American body politic is now hopefully beginning to recover. The perspective is historical, political, psychological, and moral as well as strategic (in the narrower sense that indicates the orderly subordination of military means to political ends). Evidently this is what Brodie means by the domination of strategy by the political purpose after the Clausewitzian model—it seems to this reviewer also to be very close to what Beaufre has in mind when he places strategy in its "philosophical" context. But whatever it is, its critical fruits are rich, and not least, on the Vietnam war, by which

doubtless most of his readers will be attracted to this memorable work.

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Dennis, Peter. *Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defense 1919-39*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972. 244p.

In April 1939, Britain adopted peacetime conscription for the first time. This step was obviously taken as a response to Hitler's swallowing of the rump of Czechoslovakia in violation of the Munich agreement of September 1938. With admirable scholarship, Peter Dennis has examined the course of British defense policy from the end of World War I to the adoption of peacetime conscription.

This period is particularly important for the professional military officer because it tends to prove Murphy's law: if anything can go wrong, it will. In this period the original failure was one of political analysis and acumen. It was compounded by a failure to understand and to apply elementary strategic thinking.

At the highest political level the British Government failed to recognize that Britain had very real interests on the Continent in maintaining the political order established by the Treaty of Versailles. The basis of this order was the prevention of German hegemony, which required a strong British ally on the Continent. The French, understandably paranoid about a German resurgence, sought assurances from both the British and the Americans. In both cases they were disappointed.

British policy until almost the eve of World War II eschewed a continental role for the British Army. The reasons were twofold. First, an understandable desire to avoid the slaughter of World War I trench warfare, coupled with strong pacifist influence. Second, the traditionalists urged reliance on sea-