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Admiral Richard L. Conolly: A Perspective on His Notions of Strategy

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Many of the presidents of the Naval War College have made important contributions to both the War College itself and to the Navy. One of these was Admiral Richard L. Conolly, whose lucid and rational views on strategy were acquired as a student at the War College and in the course of his highly successful wartime assignments.

ADMIRAL RICHARD L. CONOLLY:

A PERSPECTIVE ON HIS NOTIONS OF STRATEGY

An article prepared

by

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Since its founding in 1884, the Naval War College has had numerous presidents who have contributed much to the development and evolution of this unique professional institution. One of these was Adm. Richard L. Conolly, who was President of the Naval War College from December 1950 to November 1953. His service in this position was the culmination of a long and productive naval career- one in which he was to distinguish himself as an operational commander in World War II and in very senior positions of responsibility in the postwar era.

Graduating from the Naval Academy in 1914, Richard L. Conolly's early professional development was centered in destroyers and battleships. Additionally, he earned a master's degree from Columbia University in engineering. The outset of World War II found him as a destroyer division commander, providing screening for Admiral Halsey's carrier force. Returning from the Pacific, he served on Adm. Ernest J. King's staff before becoming Commander of Landing Craft and Bases, Northwest Africa (1943), commanding a major task force in the Sicilian campaign, and later in this same year he was transferred to the Pacific where he participated in most of the amphibious operations through 1945. It was in these operations that Samuel Eliot Morison characterized Rear Admiral Conolly as "robust and genial, thorough and methodical, he loved planning as well as fighting, and did a great deal of the planning himself . . . "[1]

Admiral Conolly's formal exposure to the military planning process took place as a student at the Naval War College in 1930. Besides professional

military studies, students were required to research problem areas dealing with national security and defense policy, and for his research and writing he chose as his subject "A Study of Conditions Which Affect Certain Fundamental Policies of the United States in Central America and the Caribbean Area." This thoughtful paper delineated the resentment felt by many Latin American States toward the United States in light of its interventions in the Caribbean in the early years of the 20th century. He related the circumstances surrounding the independence of Panama and the role of the United States in encouraging and supporting the revolution which led up to it. He also narrated the interventions and occupations which were undertaken by the United States in the Caribbean area in the years from 1900 to 1930. While admitting that the debts, disorder, and recalcitrance of the native governments justified international action, he doubted that the immediate benefits of unilateral action by the United States fully counterbalanced the long-term ill feeling against the "Colossus of the North" which such precipitant action generated. In speaking of the U.S. role in the Panamanian revolution he concluded

> Expediency was the excuse advanced and only time will judge whether the immediate results obtained justified the loss of friendship and reputation, however unmerited the incurrence. We are even now engaged in competing for the economic favor of Latin American countries. This ancient wrong can still be cast in the balance against us.[2]

This evaluation of U.S. activities in the Caribbean preceded by 2 years the enunciation of the Good Neighbor Policy by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In this same paper he also examined the strategic importance of the Panama Canal in an analysis which exhibited his knowledge of not only military affairs, but economic matters as well. After noting briefly the obvious advantages of the Canal Zone as a naval base and as a shorter route between the Pacific and the Atlantic, he then discussed the canal in terms of logistics. Visualizing a campaign in the Western Pacific, Admiral Conolly pointed out that the military supplies for such an operation would have to come from the industrial centers of the Northeastern United States via ship through the Panama Canal. Also, many of the raw materials which would be used in producing this hardware would also have to be transported to the Northeast through the canal in the opposite direction. This heavy traffic would and later did strain the capacity of the canal, a situation which he foresaw in his prewar study.

> After considering the enormous amount of shipping necessary to place our AEF in France, the much shorter routes used, and the great assistance in the problem of supply which we received from the Allies, it would seem imperative that this matter be thoroughly investigated. It is very probable that the capacity of the Canal plus the transcontinental railway constitutes the limit to our armed efforts in the western Pacific. . . . It may be that the building of the Nicaraguan Canal is an urgent strategic measure. . . . Only facts and figures would furnish the necessary reassurance.[3]

On the completion of his tour as a student at the Naval War College, Admiral Conolly remained at the college for 1 year, only to return as its president nearly 30 years later.

His work as an amphibious commander in the Pacific was followed by assignment as DCNO (Operations), thence DCNO (Administration), and in September 1946 he was ordered to

command the U.S. Naval Forces, Europe, which in 1947 was changed to Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean. In December 1950 Admiral Conolly became President of the Naval War College, serving in that capacity until his retirement in November 1953.

Not merely content to be the college's chief executive, he worked at developing and articulating his concepts of strategy and leadership. Perhaps his best thoughts on the former were expressed in an address he gave at the college titled "Seapower" in which he highlighted his views on the role of seapower in national strategy. He perceived the strategic importance of the sea as not just a medium for transportation, but also as an avenue of offensive action. Before World War II the naval forces of the world were narrowly limited in their amphibious capabilities, lacking the technical means of landing large numbers of troops quickly upon an unfavorably configured shoreline. The lack of such a capability contributed to the failure of the Dardanelles expedition in 1915 and made the planning of large amphibious operations an unrealistic undertaking until World War II. The late thirties and early forties saw the development of landing craft which made it possible to transport troops and supplies over coral reefs and other unfavorable shoreline obstacles and witnessed the development of naval aviation to provide air cover for such an operation. These two developments, plus the fleet train, made possible the island hopping campaigns of World War II.

Admiral Conolly believed that seapower was best employed by initiating sudden and sharp amphibious thrusts along the enemy's shoreline, thus disorienting his military preparations and forcing him to allocate large forces for defense. He disapproved of a strategy which tied down naval strike forces to the support of a static land operation. In describing seapower he said:

> After we have contained the enemy in his initial advances it gives us the opportunity and the possibility of exercising the strategic initiative. We need not be mousetrapped in any one particular part of the world, but by using the mobility afforded by seapower and by the Navy, utilized for the benefit of the other services, all three of us acting in conjunction, we can develop an offensive strategy of our own choosing against objectives anywhere in the world. . . .
>
> . . . the offensive mobile striking forces of the Navy should not be divided into "penny-packets" and thus limited either in the range of their operations or the scope of their action. To too severely straightjacket naval or air forces by allocating them all to land theaters would be to hobble their effectiveness.[4]

Although he considered the Navy's attack and amphibious forces to be an important strategic tool, Admiral Conolly did not ignore the value of the sea as a transportation medium. By 1952 the United States was rapidly becoming an "island economy," and, like Britain since the 1850's, its high standard of living and industrial output required importing ever increasing quantities of raw materials as well as exporting equally great quantities of manufactured goods. Any interruption of this traffic would produce a progressive economic and military paralysis in the United States similar to that suffered by Japan in the spring of 1945. In noting this economic reality, Admiral Conolly also pointed out the weaknesses of air transport, which even then was seen by some as the answer to the logistics problem. He noted that such transport is dependent upon fuel and other materials brought to the airbases by ships. This and other factors indicated to him

that air transport would not be economical in the foreseeable future for anything but high priority items of modest weight.

He also criticized the then emerging massive retaliation policy. This concept relied upon nuclear weapons and their delivery systems as the most economical means of preventing incursions by the Soviet Union into Western Europe or Asia. Such a perspective invited, by implication, severe cutbacks in conventional forces, and had the disadvantage that the credibility of massive retaliation might someday be tested by a determined foe. He decried reliance upon "any single weapon or any single weapons system" and called for a balanced military force capable of something less than total devastation. The creation of such a balanced force later became one of the foremost accomplishments of the Kennedy administration.

In December 1952, a few months after his address at the Naval War College, Admiral Conolly delivered another address before the Naval Order of the United States at the New York Yacht Club entitled "Lessons Learned from Naval Operations in World War II." In it he delineated some of the strategic lessons of that conflict as he perceived them.

One of these lessons was that the United States must maintain a military organization and reserve potential which is strong enough to fulfill the requirements of national policy. At the beginning of World War II, the military establishment of the United States was small, reflecting the isolationist outlook of the thirties. When national policy goals then expanded to include the unconditional defeat of Germany and Japan, a long and costly mobilization was necessary to produce the hardware and trained manpower necessary to accomplish the task. While this mobilization was accomplished successfully, future emergencies may not allow such an extensive leadtime. Therefore, he supported the maintenance of a strong Military Establishment, backed by an equally strong Reserve Establishment. He felt that the extensive commitments of the United States to maintain world peace and liberal democratic forms of government in states of the free world required compulsory military service to augment the military manpower pool and to instill in the young a willingness to endure the sacrifices and rigors necessary if the United States were to maintain its postwar stature in the world. In short, foreign policy goals and military capabilities must be synchronized to avoid either unnecessary expenditures or a national incapacity to implement policy objectives.

Another factor in the success of U.S. arms in World War II which is often overlooked by military writers was the great success of U.S. military training facilities. Admiral Conolly described this success in his lecture, indicating how favorably it compared with the training programs of other nations. As the Second World War progressed, the German and Japanese aviators, for example, deteriorated in quality, due partly to a shortage of fuel for training but even more to an organizational failure to produce both the quantities of trained personnel required and the quality necessary to perform capably with increasingly sophisticated equipment. U.S. aviators, on the other hand, increased in both numbers and skill despite the losses incurred in the early months of the war. This training made the difference in such engagements as the Marianas "Turkey Shoot," in which Japanese naval aviation was thoroughly outclassed. He fully appreciated the importance of effective and expeditious naval training facilities as an essential part of logistics.

Perhaps the most comprehensive of Admiral Conolly's writings on naval strategy, while he served as President of the Naval War College, appeared in the *Naval Institute Proceedings* in January

of 1953. In this issue he discussed naval strategy from the standpoint of the principles of war, and the work revealed much about Admiral Conolly's philosophy on strategic theory.

Although he sought to redefine these principles in terms of the military situation in 1953, he was well aware of their limitations as aids for thought and analysis. He saw them as " . . . the titles of principles and not the principles themselves." He also noted that, "The predilection for reliance upon simple adages as a substitute for thinking is a very common human failing. It has led many a commander to defeat and disaster."[5] Nevertheless, such a collection of principles offered the commander a useful index around which to organize the results of his own experience.

In dealing with each of these principles individually, Admiral Conolly pointed out their relevance to naval and maritime operations. The overall objective of military operations, for example, is to make the enemy amenable to accepting one's own terms of peace. Overly zealous students of Clausewitz had assumed this meant, without exception, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and the occupation of his territory. Such an ambitious method, however, may not be required in every case. Frederick the Great in the Seven Years' War obtained his political objective, the annexation of Silesia, by successfully defending his country against all attackers until his enemies grew weary of the war. In the Korean war the United States obtained its political objective, the preservation of a democratic South Korea, by containing the Chinese Army until a compromise peace was arranged. Both the Dutch in 1654 and the Japanese in 1945 were forced to accept harsh terms because of their defeat at sea. Both of the nations, cut off from their vital sources of trade, made peace, even though their armies remained intact on their own soil. Admiral Conolly illustrated by these examples the fact that political objectives could be achieved by a variety of means, one of which was command of the sea and its trade routes.

His first principle, i.e. simplicity, should be applied to much more than tactics and grand strategy. An effective force must have simplicity in armament. The weapons it employs should not be more complex technologically than the mission requires nor should they proliferate unnecessarily in type or function. The organization for a military operation, also, should not contain unnecessary complications. Command relationships should be definite and clear, especially in intraservice operations.

The principle of maneuver or mobility he considered to be the special forte of naval and amphibious forces. With the development of tracked landing vehicles, carrier strike forces, and the fleet train in World War II, the naval forces of the Western Powers possessed the technological capability of launching an amphibious assault in virtually any area of the world. Naval forces thus possessed far greater mobility than land forces and could make their presence

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

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felt along any coastline in the world. This great potential for strategic maneuver and flanking operations increases the ability of naval forces to influence events on the great landmasses.

A third principle of war which was effectively illustrated in World War II is surprise. As a veteran of the north African and Pacific campaigns, he knew the important role that surprise had played there. The tactical surprise achieved by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor enabled them to win a temporary naval superiority in the Western Pacific. The surprise which resulted in the presence of U.S. carriers at Midway in 1942 ended in the sinking of four Japanese carriers, the backbone of their naval aviation. The unexpected appearance of new weapons and techniques constantly introduces new possibilities for surprise in strategic planning.

Although he was aware of the benefits to be gained from the successful use of surprise, he also recognized the limitations of this concept. He spoke of these limitations as follows:

> Surprize [sic] is a principle that must be handled carefully. There seems to be something intoxicating about it. Unless the user is particularly well balanced, . . . any attempt to overemphasize this principle may lead to weaknesses in his plan that an alert opponent will seize upon. The single track mind has its limitations. . . .[6]

Not content to merely comment upon a list of the principles of war drawn up by others, he added one more of his own, readiness. Readiness to him implied preparation in several areas: personnel, intelligence, command organization, and logistics. Personnel must possess physical stamina and be given the proper moral indoctrination. Intelligence organs must take care to collect and evaluate all available information before the curtain of war falls. Staffs must be well trained and accustomed to operating as a team. Material support for contingency plans must be provided, and the national economy must be able to be readily adapted to a quick mobilization.

After delineating his views on the principles of war, he cautioned his readers to temper them with the wisdom of experience. Quoting General Sir Frederick Maurice, he said that these principles " . . . will not help a soldier to solve a problem of war any more than a knowledge of the principles of painting will, without steady practice and natural aptitude, enable an artist to paint a picture."[7]

Admiral Conolly retired from the Navy on 2 November 1953, and on the following day he assumed the presidency of Long Island University.

Some 9 years later, on the verge of retirement from Long Island University, he and his wife died in an airplane crash at New York City. This tragic event denied him the rewards of leisure which he was anticipating in the twilight of his life. In a January 1962 letter to Rear Adm. Richard W. Bates, USN, (Ret.), Admiral Conolly summed up his work at Long Island University by observing,

> I am a builder and the fun has been building, not the operation of the institution. . . . I am fully convinced that I have made my contribution and that a different kind of guy is now needed to take it from here. . . . My principal job now is to find a suitable successor to do a different kind of job than I had to do.

This self-assessment would appear to confirm Morison's earlier observation that "he loved planning." However, it also confirms his reputation as being an outstanding leader, in that he recognized the changes that had taken place in managing the affairs of Long Island University and realized that the time had come for he himself to step aside for that "different kind of guy." What

better measure can be made of a man who so distinguished himself as a naval officer and as president of a major U.S. university.

FOOTNOTES

1. Samuel E. Morison, *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944-August 1944* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953) v. VIII.
2. Richard L. Conolly, "A Study of Conditions Which Affect Certain Fundamental Policies of the United States in Central America and the Caribbean Area," Unpublished Thesis, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I.: 1930, p. 10.
3. Conolly, p. 14.
4. Richard L. Conolly, "Sea Power," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I.: 20 May 1952.
5. Richard L. Conolly, "The Principles of War," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 1953, p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

It is the possession of high resolution plus a mental equipment capable of quick and correct decisions that distinguishes the great military leader from the mediocre.

Bernard Brodie, A Guide to Naval Strategy