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THE CALCULATED RISK IN STRATEGY

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
25 August 1960

by

Dr. R. Gordon Hoxie

1. *Introduction*

Officers and students of the Naval War College, it was with especial pleasure and interest that I accepted the invitation from the Chief of Staff to address you on the arresting subject, "The Calculated Risk in Strategy." From a personal point of view there was the interest in visiting the Head of the Naval Warfare Department, my good friend, Captain Brown Taylor, with whom it was my pleasure to participate in a seminar at the National War College a year ago. There was, moreover, for me a particular interest in the Naval War College itself since my own immediate superior, Admiral Richard Lansing Conolly, U.S.N. (Ret.) President of Long Island University, is, as you all know, one of the distinguished graduates and former president of the Naval War College. As a student of the history of higher education as well as a student of the history of military affairs, I deemed it a very real privilege to come to your illustrious institution, with its nearly fourscore of years of noteworthy service to education, to the science of warfare, and to statesmanship.

At the highest levels the science of warfare and statesmanship have always been inseparable. So, likewise, political and military strategy cannot be dissociated, particularly in the challenges we face and will continue to face with Communism. This, I regret to say, has been better realized by the Communists than by ourselves. In the course of this

paper both political and military strategies will be considered as they apply to the problem of a forward, positive strategy. It is the thesis of this paper that the calculated risk is essential to, a *sine qua non* for, a victorious strategy in the challenge we face with Communism and the Soviet Union. By calculated risk, however, the emphasis is on calculation, on decisions based upon logic, with substantial data for the presupposition of probabilities of success. The calculated risk is a far different thing than the educated guess. It calls not upon hunches but upon the logical reasoning from known phenomena.

During this unique and interesting course in which you have been and are engaged in the fundamentals of logical analysis you have already become acquainted with a number of the methodologies and terms and seen a comparison with the scientific method in the physical as contrasted with the social sciences. In political and military strategy we are dealing with elements of both the physical and social sciences. The fact that with all the logic and all the scientific data there remain vagaries of political life, of technological breakthroughs and other possible contingencies, means that we are dealing with phenomena which cannot always be predicted. In brief, the element of risk is present. But by the historical examples contained in this paper and by an analysis of the situation which we face, the lesson can be clearly drawn as to the consequence of taking—or not taking the calculated risk.

Time is itself an element in decision as to whether the risk should be taken. Timely action, Shakespeare so well reminds us, leads on to fortune and success; failure to so act, to misfortune and, indeed, disaster:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

So also time, the strategic situation, and the climate of opinion itself—be it optimism or pessimism—together have profound influence as to whether or not the risk is—and should be—taken. As British Field Marshal, Sir Douglas Haig expressed it on August 12, 1918, when, after four years of deadlock, the tide of victory had begun to move measurably for the Allies. "Risks which a month ago would have been criminal to incur," Haig declared, "ought now to be incurred as a duty."

2. Historical Examples of the Calculated Risk in Political and Military Strategy

The United States was founded and successfully brought into being on one of the most significant calculated risks in history. When John Hancock affixed his signature to the Declaration of Independence so boldly that King George III could not mistake it, his was the risk, along with that of his fellow compatriots who signed the declaration, of literally placing his neck in a hangman's noose.

A statistical comparison of the resources of Great Britain as compared with the thirteen colonies gave the colonies but slight chance of a successful military and political revolt. Britain was the foremost industrial and naval power in the world. But the astute authors of the Declaration of Independence reckoned with other factors—the unpopularity of the war in England and the possibilities of gaining aid from other nations. It was precisely for these reasons that the Declaration was so written with its statements of justification on the one hand and its creation of the image of a personal tyrant in George III on the other.

The political and military strategies of the American Revolution were carried through with both reason and daring. The final military campaign culminating at Yorktown, for example, contained the bold ruse of a feint against New York, reinforced by false dispatches, to hold Clinton's forces there. The temporary ascendancy of French sea power necessary for this combined operation likewise involved the calculated risk. The political strategy of a separate peace with Britain apart from France involved careful consideration as well as firm decision. Such decision was dramatized by John Jay smashing his clay pipe against the fireplace as token of smashing the agreement with the French, in view of the political intelligence as regards British desires and French designs.

The American Civil War was marked by less of the calculated risk. Indeed, the failure to take it in military strategy prolonged this tragic conflict. The South had taken what it considered a calculated risk in its very act of secession. Based upon past action, particularly of the weak Buchanan government, the North would not strongly contest secession. Moreover, the South counted upon substantial aid from abroad. Here again the reasoning of the South was wrong. The reasoning completely underestimated the skill and leadership of Lincoln. Based upon past knowledge of Lincoln there was little to suggest he would or could rally the disunited North to fight the South in a long, severe struggle. There was no evidence to indicate he could so skillfully deal with Britain and France as to keep their neutrality. The South's political and military judgment simply could not assess President Lincoln. Here were the imponderables of human personality, and the South failed to recognize them.

On the other hand southern military successes, like those of Stonewall Jackson, were characterized by the calculated risk, something lacking in the strategy of most of the northern generals. The failure of Meade

to pursue and destroy Lee's army which huddled for several days along the flooded Potomac, prolonged the war by more than a year. Why did Meade, a good general but not a great one, fail to follow up? On the one hand his troops were weary after three days of desperate fighting. But on the other the awe in which Lee was viewed by the northern commanders here saved the Army of Northern Virginia. The risk existed not in actuality but in Meade's mind. Weary and lacking in the vigor, spirit, *elan* of the truly great, Meade did not follow up his advantage. The simultaneous bold strategy of Grant in the Vicksburg campaign was much in contrast, as he cut himself off from his own supply lines, divided and defeated his enemy.

World War II is replete with examples of and also failures to take the calculated risk. On the political side, Franklin D. Roosevelt took the educated guess rather than the calculated risk in his estimates of Stalin as an ally. Roosevelt's last months were marked by misgiving as the accumulated evidence indicated Stalin's duplicity. A more astute student of *real politik*, Winston Churchill, viewed the war in terms of political as well as military objectives and registered his distrust of the Russian bear.

On the military side the study of World War II command decisions is in large measure a study of taking or not taking the calculated risk. Hitler took it in the invasion of Norway—the French and British by contrast delayed and failed to act until it was too late. The boldness Hitler showed here was itself in contrast to his later indecision and, indeed, panic under stress. The German army opposed the invasion, having just had what it considered a narrow escape in Poland. Indeed, the German general staff was trying to talk Hitler out of opening an offensive against the allies in France and was in no mood to contemplate additional risks in Scandinavia. This fearfulness—as Hitler viewed it—caused him to lose confidence in the Army leadership—if he ever had it, by contrast to his

own personal egotism. He excluded the Army High Command almost entirely in the planning of the Norway invasion. On the other hand, after the allies had begun to land in the Narvik area, Hitler lost his nerve and was on the verge of ordering the German regiment there to withdraw into Sweden and there be interned. The combined persuasion of the Army and Armed Forces High Command finally dissuaded him. Thereafter the stubborn German defense combined with allied disasters in France saved the day, and the allies withdrew.

As an isolated military operation the German occupation of Norway was an outstanding success. Carried out despite vastly superior British sea power, it was, as Hitler expressed it, "not only bold, but one of the sauciest undertakings in the history of modern warfare." It showed, and this is why I take the time for detail upon it, the elements both of German success and of subsequent defeat. Its success depended upon daring and surprise combined with indecision and lack of preparedness on the part of the enemy—elements that won campaigns but *not* the war. The Norway campaign also revealed two principal defects of Hitler's personal leadership—his persistent meddling in operational details and his losing his nerve in a crisis. Hitler could scarcely understand—let alone pass—a course in logic.

The other principal enemy in World War II, Japan, took its greatest calculated risk by its very decision to go to war against the United States. At first blush the Japanese action might appear as supreme folly. Indeed, as Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison (USNR Ret.), spoke of the Pearl Harbor attack, "One can search military history in vain for an operation more fatal to the aggressor." Fatal as was the action triggered by Pearl Harbor, there was reason, there was calculated risk, in the Japanese decision for war. They believed they could fight a *limited* war and then negotiate with the United States. Of course, their

major error was to attack the United States at all since their strategic objectives were in Southeast Asia. The question might be asked, had they limited their attack to British and Dutch territory in that sector would the United States have intervened? The Japanese believed so. They based much of their hope for success on the situation in Europe. They believed the United States would be unwilling to concentrate substantial forces in the Pacific as long as the European war was in doubt. Their plan failed to estimate American reaction to Pearl Harbor, America's refusal to fight a limited war—or Japan's inability to limit it. In the final analysis Japan's decision for war resulted from the conviction—based upon United States' China policy and United States' economic measures—that we were determined to reduce Japan to a position of secondary importance. Granting this premise, the calculated risk, tantamount in this instance to sheer desperation, was justified. The fault was in their false premise.

If time permitted—and perhaps some of these may be referred to in the question period—we might trace many other examples of the calculated risk in World War II. Permit me to at least mention some of these. One such instance was General MacArthur's decision to withdraw to Bataan. One error—one bridge not blown or blown too soon, one road left unguarded—might have imperiled the entire campaign. Yet we know that this difficult maneuver proved worth-while. It gave us four months of precious time, for it cost the Japanese a campaign of that duration in a battle they thought already won.

In general, so far as the war in Europe was concerned, the British seemed more bold and opportunistic than we, more willing to take the calculated risk. This was especially true after the North African campaign. By September 1944, however, following the dramatic August victories, American optimism was so high as almost to throw caution to the wind. The G-2

of SHAEF then declared that "the end of the war in Europe (was) within sight, almost within reach."

In the race across France, however, the military machine had suffered wear. Should the allies stop for repairs or should they go for the Rhine and apparent victory? Based upon the optimistic decision, Operation Market-Garden, the largest airborne attack of World War II, was launched. The failure of this daring, strategic maneuver did not arouse the controversy of other command decisions. It was not like southern France where one ally wanted and another opposed invasion; it was not like Argentan-Falaise where either ally could accuse the other of not closing the trap. The optimistic climate on the eve of the operation was one in which commanders were given far greater latitude. That, plus the narrow margin of failure of an operation which might have shortened the war by six months, contributed to this mutual allied understanding rather than rancor in failure.

Certainly the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes was no calculated risk. It was rather Hitler's desperate gamble in the West which invited disaster in the East and hastened Germany's inevitable defeat. By contrast to the calculated risk based upon logic it showed a fanatic whose intuition bolstered by egotism had long since triumphed over sound reasoning.

Finally, as regards World War II, something should be said of the decision to use the atomic bomb. In this decision the President had the considered judgment of competent advisors. Aside from humanitarian considerations and the unveiling of atomic power as a military force, controversy as regards its use centers about whether it was needed to force the Japanese to surrender, without further prolonged fighting. This question, What finally forced the Japanese to surrender? points up the hazards in our best reasoning. Was it, as Admiral Nimitz declared, naval

power? Or air bombardments, as General Arnold declared? Or Soviet entry, as Claire L. Chenault viewed it? Or was it, as Dr. Compton contended, the bomb?

Regardless of our ability or inability to clearly answer the foregoing question by logical means, we can see from the command decisions of World War II the role of logical thinking. The processes of thinking and methodology of decision-making varied from "by guess and by God" to infinitely detailed analysis and calculation calling upon the principles and tools of logic you have surveyed in the foregoing lectures. Certainly we can conclude this, that grand strategy in modern war—at least in democratic states and democratic alliances, as contrasted to totalitarian states and totalitarian-dominated alliances—is the product of *many minds* and of *logical thinking processes*. One man decisions, though still a factor, are far less important than in less sophisticated periods of war.

War today is a management process involving principles of effective management; in getting the job done. Decisions emerge from thorough research and from group or committee discussions or consultations. Alas, Napoleon could not today thrust his hand in his coat, survey the field of battle, and then choose the moment for the cavalry charge.

If, however, the first lesson is the involvement of many minds in logical thinking processes, the second is seemingly contradictory. Individual man, the commander, is still the ultimate arbiter of battle. Again and again in World War II, as in all past conflicts, the course of history was changed by the thinking and the action of one strong man, by his conviction, his will, his elan, his willingness to take the calculated risk.

Finally, there is the lesson from the fact that grand strategy represents the enduring marriage of

military and political factors. The calculated risk, based upon logical and not just intuitive factors, must consider both the military and political factors.

3. *The Role of Logic in the Design of Strategy*

What is the role of logic in the design of strategy? Just as logic is indispensable in the formation of scientific hypothesis, so also it is indispensable to the formulation of policy, and the design of strategy. Formulation of policy, or the design of strategy, involves the making of assumptions, and valid assumptions can only be made on the basis of what has occurred in the past and exists in the present. Here then is the basis of *probability*.

In previous lectures you have heard of the pitfalls in gathering data and in false concepts in statistical methodology. Yet, if a phenomena occurs often enough we are justified, even compelled, to assume that the phenomenon will occur as often as the circumstances occur. There may be a *possibility* that the phenomenon will not occur, but the principle of probability, based upon previous recurrences and present realities, provides grounds for assuming that it will occur.

Although the military and political affairs of nations cannot be predicted and regulated as precisely as a scientific experiment, we must, if we are to have a forward, winning strategy, use the principles of logic, including probability, in formulating policy.

As regards the Soviet Union, two questions must be asked: (1) Do we have reason to assume, in reference to past events and present realities, that the objectives of this nation, if they are hostile, will be replaced with friendly objectives? (2) Do we have reason to assume in view of the accumulated data of past actions and present conditions, that this nation's ability to realize those objectives will be less in the future than they are at present?

Certainly logic causes us to conclude that Soviet objectives were and are hostile to the United States. Yet much of our policy towards the Soviet Union has been based upon wishful thinking rather than logic—wishful thinking either that Soviet objectives would be modified or that Soviet abilities to achieve those objectives would never become sufficiently strong. Sadly we recall the assumptions and hopes about the Russian people revolting, about education changing the Soviet views, about settlements at the Summit. All such wishful thinking is dashed by past events, existing realities, by the principles of logic.

Equally fallacious and even more dangerous than our wishful thinking is the Bertrand Russell brand of logic. Mr. Russell argues that the Soviets know that the West will not retaliate yet he argues that the Soviet government is fundamentally peaceful and its policy is governed solely by fear and suspicion. If this be the case why should the Soviets follow a strike-first policy? The end of Russell's reasoning is that other nations should adopt a neutralist position so as not to be in the way when the shooting starts. Even a first student of logic can see that his conclusion does not follow his proposition.

Far more logical is the so-called balance of terror theory—of two opposing powers fearful of striking the first blow because of the retaliatory consequences. And here I must emphasize, as we come to an analysis of a positive policy, it is not necessary that the leaders in the Kremlin be absolutely convinced that the West would retaliate but only that there is *considerable risk* that they would do so. The Soviet Union has in fact been proven exceedingly cautious in action if there is *real* danger of war.

Finally, I should like to emphasize in our consideration of principles for policy that stalemate is a fundamentally erroneous description of the present power equation. It does not allow for the importance

of delivery systems and interception, of swift technological change, of changes in *force levels* and/or *moral climate* that would change the quasi-stalemate so that one or the other power might attack. So also these factors can modify or nullify the balance of terror theory.

Diplomacy, propaganda, economic pressures, limited war—all these are tactics within total Communist strategy. In the final analysis they are designed, with their confusing admixture of hate and love, to arrive at a position either where the Communists may risk the attack, or preferably, issue the surrender ultimatum. The cold logic of it all is as simple as that. Logic must be our basis for strategy.

4. *The Problem and a Rational Solution*

Finally we turn to a definition of the present problem and to a logical, rational solution, to a forward strategy, designed for victory. We are engaged with the Soviet Union and her Communist satellites in a conflict of indefinite duration. It is multi-dimensional and dialectic.

Until now we have pitted a narrow, primarily military strategy against a much broader, much more total strategy developed by Lenin and Stalin, Khrushchev and Mao. The Communists have used ideological, economic, political, psychological, cultural, technical, and military weapons. They have grasped more fully than we the meaning of time as a fourth dimension. Timing has been a key in their strategy. By clever timing, by relentless pressure against the West, they have moved toward their goal of world domination, taking calculated risks, yet careful not to present the ultimate challenge—the *casus belli*. For our part, when we have been bold, when we have taken the calculated risk—as in Berlin, in Lebanon, in the Chinese off-shore islands—we have won.

Of late you have heard much of the term *protracted conflict*, or prolonged struggle. In this course in logic I should like to emphasize the dialect, the logical relationship, of protracted to contracted conflict, of limited to total war. Since there is a constant possibility of total war, the *logic* of total war must predominate.

The dialectical relationship between limited and total warfare may be expressed in the following propositions:

- (1) Technology has so advanced that a power with vastly superior and more versatile weapons and weapon systems could conquer any combination of opposing inferior powers.
- (2) While nuclear weapons and global delivery systems effect they do not of themselves negate protracted conflict—which seeks either to prepare for or render superfluous the decisive battle.
- (3) It is not probable that the United States could be eliminated as a major world power by means short of total military annihilation.

Out of the foregoing propositions we can see the *reversability of defeat*. In brief, by the overwhelming power of nuclear weapons defeat could be turned into victory at the eleventh hour. It is this factor which can and must make the calculated risk ominous for the men in the Kremlin. They have had the overwhelming advantage in the Cold War through the option of surprise attack—which America had for its part ruled out for moral considerations. But the Communist piecemeal, nibbling strategy can be negated by an America with overwhelming, versatile fire power that will make clear to the Communists that they dare not push

America too far. Realizing this, the Communists cannot rely exclusively on the strategy of piecemeal expansion. The equation then becomes that of the inevitable destruction of one of the participants. Here is the classic Rome-Carthage situation—one or the other must be destroyed.

It is extremely difficult for us to face up to the cold realities of this equation—and this because of the weaknesses in our challenge and response processes. Social psychologists tell us that the dominant traits in a people's character are acquired by environmental stimuli, notably by significant challenges. They further point out that these traits and their attendant response mechanisms remain dominant until a new and different challenge compels their modification or replacement.

Now our response mechanism has been one of humanitarian morality. Well intentioned that it is, it leads to fuzzy, illogical, wishful thinking. We must get back to logic and the national interest which the founding fathers could so clearly see. We must see to the practical matter of survival and then to a forward strategy beyond survival—involving logic and the calculated risk.

In conclusion let me ask what are the bases for a blueprint for such future policy? Let me remind you of the two fundamental questions we must ask as regards a rival power: (1) What are the ultimate objectives of that power? (2) To what extent can that power realize its objectives? By the logical answer to these problems we can build our counter, or forward strategy. We have the capabilities of building and carrying out that strategy even in its most drastic phases if, for survival, they become necessary. Popular misimpression notwithstanding, the kind of conflict a democracy can best wage is war itself—it rallies the discipline and sacrifice a dictator can demand in the less violent forms of strategy.

I have not here argued preventive war or other illogical antidotes. What I have said is that our policy must be guided by logical thinking. To have a dynamic, successful, forward policy we must clearly analyze the situation; we must stand by our friends, assert authority, enhance prestige, use force when force is needed. We must be prepared to counter force with force.

Compassion and generosity are not alternatives for resolution in taking the risks and bearing the sacrifices of forward strategy. We court defeat if we are not prepared to use force whenever the nature of the challenge leaves no alternative.

We must grasp the meaning of the conflict. We must view it with logic. We must assess the laws of probability. As we look to the dynamics of the systemic revolution and of nuclear power itself, as we view a relentless foe operating in a fourth dimension of time, we see that survival as well as the morality of mankind is dependent upon the seizure of initiative—we must take the calculated risk.

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