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Characteristics of a Sound Strategy

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A SOUND STRATEGY

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Admiral Conolly, Gentlemen:

The lecture title assigned to me is at once convenient and embarrasing — convenient, because it gives me a very wide latitude indeed; and embarrassing, because it implies on my part pretentions to oracular wisdom. I don't think I can describe the characteristics of a sound strategy except, perhaps, in the most general and abstract terms. I think I can, however, occasionally recognize an unsound strategy when I see one, as I believe I sometimes do. I shall, therefore, for the legitimate purpose of being specific rather than abstract, talk more about *unsound* strategies than about sound ones. In other words, I shall take a leaf from the revivalist preacher and point the way to the good life by preaching against sin.

The title of the seminar in which I am to participate this afternoon intrigues me even more — "Validity of the Principles of War in the Formulation of Strategy" — and since that subject is most intimately related to the one that I am to discuss this morning, I trust you will be indulgent enough to permit me now a few general observations on that subject.

Unfortunately, my views here, too, tend to be somewhat negative. My views may perhaps conflict with those current here, but that is all to the good in an academic institution, for argument is after all the stuff of learning. If we all thought alike we should all be infinitely wise or, more likely, very stupid.

Now, if by Principles of War we mean that group of maxims or axioms which are usually presented in a list of 7 to 10 or more numbered items and which are supposed to be unchanging despite the most fantastic changes in everything else, then my feeling about them is not that they are wrong or useless but that we tend to be altogether too respectful of them. And if our respect becomes so extreme that we enshrine them as dogmas, as sometimes happens, then I think they become positively dangerous.

You have, no doubt, heard or will hear references to bad strategies of the past where the badness is summed up in terms of its being a violation of this or that Principle of War. I think it is equally true that one could point to the most egregious blunders of past actions (and I fear also of present planning) which have been committed in the name of this or that Principle of War and in so far as my samples may be safely drawn from past actions, I shall perhaps have occasion to refer to one or two.

The first thing that can be said about the so-called "principles of war," which I think were first formulated systematically by Jomini and developed later by subsequent writers, is that they are essentially common sense propositions. They have all the virtues of common sense propositions, which means, among other things, that it is generally useful to remain aware of them. But they also have the limitation of common sense propositions, including the limitation that occasionally a strict adherence to them will be extremely offensive to common sense.

Now let me give you an example of what I mean by common sense propositions. We will all agree, I think, that in the great majority of instances if you want to influence a man in a particular direction you don't insult him. You try to instill in him an attitude towards yourself of confidence and sympathy — and then you try

to persuade. That is common sense. But we also know that in many instances, and with assorted odd characters, that won't work. In some cases the best way to influence a man to action in the direction you desire is by insulting him. The latter procedure is usually more hazardous and is often prohibited by adverse differences in rank and the like, but, where possible, it is sometimes effective. Incidentally, this example is not as farfetched from the principles of war as one might think. I have seen lists which included, for example, the principle of cooperation — which is exactly what my example is about.

Now, because the principles of war are really common sense propositions, most of them apply equally to other pursuits in life — including some which at first glance seem to be pretty far removed from war. For instance, if a man wishes to win a fair and virtuous maiden and if he is not too well endowed with looks or money, it is necessary for him to clarify in his mind exactly what he wants of this girl — that is, the principle of the objective; and then to practice rigorously the principles of concentration of force, of the offensive, of economy of forces, and certainly of deception.

The same is true of a good number of other pursuits, like pursuit of higher income, of status, and the like; and even of disinterested objectives like pursuit of the national welfare or security. Now, one might argue that I am simply stretching some analogies, but I really don't know why war has a prior claim over these other pursuits to those principles which are common to all. Nor is it necessarily damning to the principles of war that they also apply to other pursuits. But it does begin to suggest (and this is the main thesis of my argument) that these principles are perhaps too abstract and too general to be very meaningful in themselves — too devoid of content to have any very specific application.

To return to my analogy of the way of a man with a maid, he may know that he has to concentrate all his available resources on achieving his objective. In fact he is automatically driven to do so by a deep impulse of nature, but he needs deeper intuitions to tell him just how to apply those resources. He may take her to symphony concerts—when she is not that kind of a girl at all.

Now let me give you an example from an actual statement on principles of war — and I choose this one merely for convenience; it happened to be at hand — a recent list of ten principles of war adopted by the Canadian Chiefs of Staff Committee for the use and guidance of the Canadian Armed Forces. In reading this particular principle, which is No. 7 and called "Economy of Effort," I am going to emphasize certain words which are not in fact italicized in the text:

> "Economy of effort implies a *balanced* employment of forces and a *judicious* expenditure of all resources with the objective of achieving an *effective* concentration at the *decisive* time and place."

Now I submit, gentlemen, that if we had the wisdom to know what a *balanced* force should properly be in the present day with all the new weapons and techniques that are crowding upon us; if we really knew what was meant by judicious expenditure of resources for the sake of achieving an *effective* concentration; and, if we knew what a *decisive* time and place was — how to recognize one and choose one — then, I should say people endowed with that wisdom would more or less intuitively know how to put those factors together in the way suggested here. Mind you, I'm not saying this particular idea is unimportant — one can point to instances in the past where it has been overlooked, to the sorrow of those who did so.

Take that business of balanced employment of forces. Admiral Doenitz, as you know, has, since becoming a captive of the Allies, written an essay on "The War at Sea" from the German point of view of World War II. He points out that the German submarines in the first year of the war were ten times as effective per day at sea as they were in the second year of the war. One therefore gathers (though he doesn't make this point) that if Germany had started the war with some 300 submarines instead of 60, they would have stood a very good chance of winning the war at sea, and therefore the whole war—and relatively early. Now, why didn't they have those 300 submarines? Well, one reason is that they were enamored of the idea of a balanced force and devoted a good deal of their naval resources (which had to be limited in view of their ground and air force needs) to surface vessels, including battleships. That gave them what according to a static conception was a balanced force. The trouble was that it was highly unbalanced for a war with Great Britian. This is only one example of where the word "balance" denotes no ready answer. The balance must always be thought of in terms of *strategic* needs against the particular prospective enemy.

What is balanced force in an atomic age? If you think that I am going to give you the answer, I'm sorry to disappoint you. It is certainly the great problem of our time.

Incidentally, the statement that I have read presents the principle of economy of force (which is here called the "economy of effort") in the classic sense. I will re-read that second clause:

> "..... a judicious expenditure of all resources with the object of achieving an effective concentration at the decisive time and place."

Now notice that does not mean economizing on forces — it

means utilizing all the forces one has. The significant thing about that is that certain recent military writers have altered the meaning of the phrase "economy of forces" without being aware that they have done so; that is, here we have the word "economy" in its 19th Century connotation, while more recent writers have used it in the 20th Century connotation, which means "to hold back; to economize." To me the significant thing about it is that where the thought can change while the phrase remains the same, maybe the formula was not too important in the first place.

I promised an example where a strict adherence to the principles of war resulted in a grave blunder. Since this is the Naval War College, I shall choose one from recent naval actions, and, with deep sorrow, from an American mistake. The memoirs of the Commander of the Third Fleet at Leyte Gulf tell us how he arrived at his main decision in the battle of October, 1944, which in terms of the ships engaged was not only the greatest naval battle of that war but of all time. He tells us that after the three enemy forces had been located, he drew up for himself three alternatives (I don't remember whether I am giving them in the proper order, but these were the alternatives): (1) he could keep his entire force concentrated off the mouth of San Bernadino Strait; (2) he could divide his forces, keeping one portion off San Bernadino Straight and sending the remaining portion north to counter Admiral Ozawa's fleet; and (3) he could send his entire force northward against Ozawa. He tells us he rejected the first of these alternatives (for reasons which I shall mention shortly), and then he rejected the second one because it conflicted with the principle of concentration of force. So he chose the third alternative and threw his entire force against Admiral Ozawa, 300 miles away to the north. That meant sending 90 ships against 16, those 16 being individually much inferior to their counterparts among our 90. As you know, two were hermaphrodite battleships, and of the four carriers three were jeeps, and so on.

We now know that Admiral Ozawa's mission was to lure the Third Fleet northward, but that he himself felt that his forces were not strong enough to serve that mission. And, logically he was right — but he did succeed.

The American commander finally did break with the principle of concentration of force. You remember after he had sent his force northward and when his six battleships were within 45 miles from his target force, he was finally induced to turn them around and send them south again and, after stopping to refuel his destroyers, he rushed on ahead with the faster IOWA and NEW JERSEY. The force that he was sending ahead at this time was inferior to that which he hoped to catch.

The purpose of the principle of concentration of force is to suggest that one should so allocate one's forces that one can hope to be superior to the enemy somewhere, preferably in the most important place, or at least minimize one's inferiority in the decisive place. I submit that the Commander of the Third Fleet had forces so overwhelmingly superior to those of the enemy that he could have divided his forces between San Bernardino Strait and the north and have remained overwhelmingly superior locally to each enemy force. And when you are overwhelmingly superior — how much more superior do you want to get?

So much for the principles of war which, to repeat, are useful as far as they go — but which simply don't go very far at all. The real military problems facing us today are problems for which the principles of war not only offer little or no guidance but in some instances are positively misleading. Nevertheless, I urge you to learn them — it will not take you very long.

Now I want to talk about another kind of axiom or maxim which differs from the Principle with a capital "*p*" in that it is less

systematized and less hoary with tradition. It is also less likely to have the virtues of common sense about it. This I shall call the "slogan." The slogan may originate in experience or in fancy; it may enthrall a particular service or the whole profession of arms — but in any case it tends to become dogma and, therefore, to provide at the moment of its ascendancy the key to the basic decisions. Again to give a naval example, throughout the whole latter half of the 19th Century a very common axiom in manuals of tactics was, "The ram is the most formidable of all the weapons of the ship." How did that ever start?

Well, you remember the famous VIRGINIA or MERRIMAC of our own Civil War. The first day she came out at Hampton Roads she rammed and sank a Federal frigate—I believe it was the Congress — and that started it. Throughout the remainder of the Civil War numerous attempts were made at ramming — none of them succeeded.

Throughout the remainder of the 19th Century, in the rather numerous engagements that occured, almost all of them were characterized by attempts of ramming and, so far as I know, only one succeeded — namely at the Battle of Lissa in 1866. Some warships were actually built as rams without armament — not many, to be sure, as it was an experimental venture — but certainly all battleships did carry a huge projection at the bow which was intended to be a ram and which always affected adversely the handling qualities of the ship. Even now there is floating in the East River in New York an old battleship, which has been converted to an armory, which has this huge ram bow. Here is a dogma which prevailed for half a century and which never had any real substance in fact.

Take the slogan by du Picq, prior to World War I: "He will win who has the resolution to advance" — the slogan which en-

couraged the school of the offensive a outrance in France, which cost the French so very dearly in the first weeks of World War I. That slogan might have better survived the battles of 1914 had not those battles inspired in Marshal Joffre a slogan even more terse and homely, "Fire kills!" Those two words, "fire kills" had more to do with determining Allied strategy in World War I than any number of volumes could have done.

To give you an instance from more recent times, let me return to my example of Leyte Gulf. Why did the American commander reject his first alternative? Because of the slogan — the slogan which was relatively new, but which had certainly become firmly fixed — "The enemy's main force is where his carriers are."

If you read that excellent little book of Professor van Woodward's called *The Battle for Leyte Gulf*, you get the feeling of tenseness within the fleet after the first two enemy detachments have been discovered — the one below Surigao Strait, the other in the Sibuyan Sea and subsequently in San Bernardino Strait. But the question asked was, "Where are the enemy's carriers? That is where his main force must be." I submit that was true for the preceding two years of the war, but at the time of Leyte Gulf it was no longer true, and I submit also that the intelligence was available to the fleet which should have indicated that it was no longer true. The remaining enemy carriers, the characteristics of which we well knew, were much too puny to be an effective force. We could not, of course, know that they weren't even carrying airplanes, but what we should have known was that the most planes they could have flown was far too small to be decisive in any sense of the word, even to be significant. We also at that time had plenty of reason to believe that what the Japanese naval air forces amounted to then were nothing like what they had amounted to in

the first year of the war; it was not their first team, but something from away down deep in the barrel. In that battle the enemy's main force comprised in fact his battleships. That would have been clear except for the existence of the slogan.

The slogan is objectionable for the same reason that an undue deference to the principles of war is objectionable — it acts as a substitute for thinking, and any substitute for thinking is usually a bad substitute. Worse still, it introduces a rigidity of thought which is, after all, its purpose. This may prevent the realization of the absurdly obvious. This applies to all walks and professions of life and not simply to the military. The academicians, of which I have for a long time been one, certainly have their own slogans — so does the medical profession, and so on. The existence of prepossessions, of biases, and the like, are the chief reasons why the obvious is so often overlooked. But the military, I think, have to be specially careful, because a military service is a tightly-knit institution, closely bound up with the hierarchy of rank, the members of which generally share a common education, common traditions, and mutual life-long associations.

The slogan may represent a brilliant insight of the past, but as a rule only at its first utterance. When it becomes common currency, it is likely already to be counterfeit. I submit, therefore, that one of the first tests for a sound strategy is freedom from the dominance of slogans—I would offer that as the fifth freedom. This is a negative statement, but to my mind enormously important. If our strategic plans could be devised in relative freedom from the dominance of slogans that would be a great and refreshing advance.

What, then, should an intelligent strategy be based on? I should say first of all on the sound appreciation of existing realities, which will then enable us to make predictions which have real plann-

ing values — and that is easier said than done. It is a very big order. To arrange matters pertinent to strategic decisions, as Admiral Conolly just pointed out to you, covers a major portion of the entire field of human knowledge. If this field were really to be covered by those responsible for strategic decisions, the military profession would have to be far and away the most learned of all professions. Yet, other characteristics are desired in a commander — ability to lead, forthrightness, and ability to make decisions. Many characteristics and qualities demanded in a commander are in fact incompatible with the contemplative way of life.

Now this dilemma of scope is only partially and very unsatisfactorily served by specialization. Nevertheless, we are enforced to rely upon it to a very great extent. It is incumbent upon the military to be professional in their own field—in what is peculiarly their own field—which means what other disciplines have left to them in all those matters relating to war, even though it may require relative neglect of fields which are also quite closely related.

When I was at the National War College in 1946, I must confess I had some misgivings at the very great amount of time, relatively, which was being spent on what one might call the social sciences. I am myself a social scientist. It seemed to me that we were living in an age when there are such pressing problems of facing up to changing weapon and military techniques that this time could ill be afforded. And, yet, as Admiral Conolly suggested, our strategy is intimately bound up with our alliances, the NATO alliance above all, and certainly adjustment to existing realities requires that people responsible for military decisions know what they can expect of and what the political problems are in the NATO alliance.

But who is going to do the intensive study which the situation requires in matters concerning the proper utilization of new weapons,

the changes in techniques indicated by those new weapons, the problem of proper targetting for strategic bombing, and the like? Who is going to straighten out the numerous grave problems which the social scientist as well as the physical scientist and the diplomatist are leaving exclusively to the military?

My feeling is that the handling of foreign affairs must, for better or for worse, be left primarily to our State Department (after all, our constitutional framework requires that that be done), and that the military have good answers to what are peculiarly military problems, and as you well know, those will not be easy.

As I said before, the problem is that more and more fields of knowledge are becoming more and more intimately related to strategic decisions. For example, we are becoming aware of the fact that the use of weapons in war can be manipulated to have greater or less psychological effect. I'm now talking about psychological warfare in the larger sense—not simply the use of words over the radio, but rather the use of fire power to maximize the psychological effects of that firepower on the enemy. This is obviously a requirement for military intelligence, for military analysis.

I've given you an example where the field of knowledge itself happens to be quite poorly developed. There is a vast universe of things we don't know about the psychological effects of weapons. Nevertheless, our first priority problem is not our deficiencies in knowledge (which we can leave to the researchers), but rather the intelligent, imaginative and comprehensive application of the knowledge we do have. What we need is a steady awareness of what we know and, more important perhaps, a steady awareness of what we do not know. Above all, we need that simple but rare and indispensable thing called "logical reasoning."

Now, what do I mean by logical reasoning? I shall be referring indirectly to staff studies which I have seen, upon which war plans were supposed to be built. I say that the first point about logical reasoning is that the premise should have some influence on the conclusions presumably derived from it. It is a commonplace in staff studies that assumptions are no sooner stated than they are forgotten.

Secondly, if we must say that we do not know whether a certain proposition is true—that does not mean that we know the opposite to be true. I refer here to some different schools of thought on strategic bombing. One of the things that we don't know about strategic bombing is whether it is politically and militarily desirable to maximize human casualties, to minimize them, or to choose targets which show indifference to casualties. We don't know that it is a bad thing to maximize casualties, but that is not the same as saying we know it to be a good thing to maximize casualties.

Thirdly, the wish may be a legitimate father to the thought, but he is an over-indulgent parent and his status of paternity must be kept constantly in mind. I am referring now to what I call the "gleam in the eye" strategy. I have seen studies of a hypothetical ground war in Europe which certainly deserve that description.

I would say, fourthly, first things come first. The winning of a war (and I would add of the subsequent peace) is more important than that some doctrine should be realized in practice, such as the doctrine of balanced force or the doctrine of strategic bombing, or whatever doctrine you like—good, bad, or indifferent.

Fifthly, I would suggest that if all one's assets are to be committed to a particular plan, I should expect that one would

have a reasonable prognosis of the military and political consequences of executing that plan. That, I have found, is a most unreasonable expectation. I have seen studies which thought they were attempts at war plans, but which ended simply with putting bombs on targets.

Sixth, war is a very complex thing indeed and interpretations of past wars, upon which our planning for future wars have to be in some part based, is not easy. And I would say that any monistic interpretation, any interpretation which finds the answer in one particular thing, is likely to be wrong simply because it is monistic.

Finally, I humbly suggest that easily available knowledge which is relevant should be absorbed. It sometimes is. I noticed in glancing over your bibliography this morning there was an article by Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby of the Royal Air Force. I happen to remember that article very well. That article was an answer to an article in the previous issue of the *Royal Air Force Quarterly*, in which a Wing Commander Whitworth had said that the success of strategic bombing depends very heavily on a shrewd selection of targets. And Saundby's reply in effect was: that's nonsense—what you have to do is pound the country first and after you have done a lot of pounding, then perhaps particular kinds of targets begin to emerge. Now, the answer Air Marshal Saundy made may prove in the end to be correct, but it will take colossal new weapons to prove him so. And he was not thinking about those possible new weapons when he wrote that article. I submit that all the experience of World War II, as written up in both the American and in the British strategic bombing surveys, proves him wrong. He has not done his home work.

Now, if our staff planners diligently follow the few precepts I have mentioned, we would have fewer of those studies which so

beautifully bear out the words of our great and good friend, Uncle Joe Stalin, and I quote:

> "Paper will put up with anything that is written on it."

Now, what are some of the touchstones for finding a plan wrong? How does a senior officer know that a study which is presented to him for his decision is right or wrong? Certainly one can not characterize the plan as wrong simply because one entertains a contrary opinion. The fact of the matter is that all too often the senior officer does not entertain the contrary opinion—the reason is that his staff has anticipated his opinion and perhaps subconsciously has adjusted to it.

Now I would say one touchstone is that if the assumptions are clearly unrealistic, or at least unstudied, we can suspect a poor foundation for the study. As I said before, the assumption should be more than a *pro forma* consideration.

Secondly, there may be many important assumptions which are implicit in the plan but which are not recognized as such by the authors. The authors will at first state their assumptions and then go on to reason from those assumptions, but the process of reasoning will introduce as facts what are in reality more assumptions, only they haven't been examined as critically as the stated assumptions.

Thirdly, there may be internal contradictions of a significant character in a plan or a study. Now, I agree with Emerson that "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," but after all Emerson wasn't talking about war plans.

Finally, factual data presented may be susceptible of being proven incorrect, and when that is done of course you know the study itself is suspect.

I see I am approaching the end of my time and I should like to talk briefly about two somewhat unrelated things, but both are related to this main topic. First, secrecy. Secrecy is a necessary evil, but not all the evils stemming from it are necessary. Notice that our war planning is the only important function of government —perhaps the most important function of government—which is carried on entirely without benefit of criticism from the outside, of criticism from the public. Now I grant you that much of the criticism from the public that is thrown at various governmental decisions and practices is malicious and ill informed. But, in the net, the criticism is an enormous contribution to good government. I think it is that which makes democratic government feasible and which in fact makes it, at least in my view, certainly the best form of government as well as the most tolerable.

With regard to war planning, on the other hand, it is a tight and closed organization which has cognizance of these things. Originality is at best a very rare thing under the sun. The people who might apply fresh ideas and insights are usually not aware of what is going on. In some instances the security is excessive —which means that a price is being paid for it which is unnecessary. But even where it is necessary (and I want to stress that I think it *is* in most instances essential) the planners ought to remain aware of the price they are paying and in so far as possible avail themselves of the insights and novel points of view of persons who would not ordinarily be drawn into the planning process.

I want, finally at the end, to say a few words about national objectives—particularly in view of the age in which we live. We are

living in an age in which atomic weapons already exist in substantial numbers, in which the numbers are steadily and rapidly growing, and which may at some future time include new and even more deadly weapons. If we look ahead only five years from now, we see a world in which war—if it comes—must mean a devastation (assuming that present principles are carried into practice) such as the world has never seen to any degree of approximation. As you all know, Clausewitz somewhat over a hundred years ago made a statement in his famous book which has since been very often quoted, namely: "War is a continuation of policy by other means." I confess that for a very long time I was convinced that that statement had no meaning. To me, modern war was so different, so much more violent than diplomacy, that I could not conceive of it in terms of its being a continuation of diplomacy. To a degree that is true, but I have now become convinced that what Clausewitz said has profound meaning. What he was saying by implication was that war should follow a planned procedure for the sake of securing certain political and social objectives. By implication, too, the procedures and the objectives should be rational and to some degree at least appropriate to each other.

Now, the political objectives of war can not be consonant with national suicide and there is no use talking about large-scale reciprocal use of atomic weapons (including those of the future) as being anything other than national suicide for both sides. I would ask, then, is it enough to say that our armed forces exist to prevent war if possible, and to win the war if it comes? In the future it will be difficult indeed to define what you mean by winning a war and in any case the winning of a war is not an end in itself, but a necessary means to an end. We also have to ask ourselves, "To win for what purpose?" And that will oblige us to ask, "To win how?"

Our national aims are a defense of the free world in order to

enable it to remain free. Those objectives can be defended only by methods which include a readiness to wage war when the aggressor presents a military challenge. That proposition is well known and really provides the present basis for American foreign policy. But deterrents do not always deter. What, then? Are we obliged to commit ourselves to techniques of waging war which, if they provoke in the enemy (as they must) an equal and opposite reaction, will effectively destroy what they are designed to protect? Perhaps the chief problem of the future is to find some means of controlling events even after hostilities begin—not to let them get out of hand. The price of control, if it is possible to achieve it at all, must clearly include not only limitations in the means of waging war—but also limitations upon war objectives. Total victory, like total war, may well become an obsolete concept.

It seems to me that with these new mass destruction weapons, the science of war ceases to be such. Destruction becomes all too efficient, all too easy. But there is an enormous area for wisdom and science in determining what *not* to hit as well as what to hit: in determining what can be achieved by war, and in what way, other than by unloosing destruction on an unlimited basis.

Thank you very much!

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF LECTURER

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