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## Some Principles of Maritime Strategy

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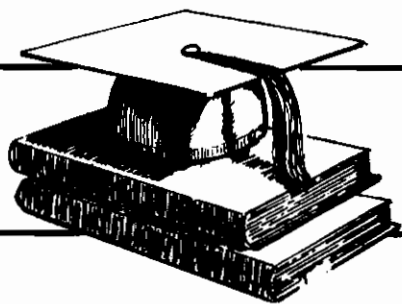
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## PROFESSIONAL READING

Corbett, Sir Julian S. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972. 310p.

Why study strategy? Students frequently ask this question at the Naval War College.

Corbett argues strongly for a study of strategy for descriptive purposes. That is to say, such study should be for the purpose of ordering data by providing a framework for reference. As an example he cites the study of meteorology and navigation. No one would suggest that a study of weather and currents would provide a prescription of how they will behave at a given time and place, but an understanding of how they generally behave is indispensable to a mariner. To Corbett this justification for a theoretical study of strategy is "not a substitute for judgement and experience, but as a means of fertilizing both." For this reason it can do no man harm.

Corbett points out that a study of strategy is not a "how to" activity directed toward learning how to conduct wars. In other words, the study of strategy should not be used for prescriptive purposes. The reason for this is that such prescriptions will inevitably lead to dogma. The unique characteristics of each war fought on the basis of dogma prescribed from the study of previous wars will result in much mischief by way of impractical or unrealistic war plans.

The payoff ultimately is to be found  
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in conceptual unity, first of all between a commander and his subordinates, so they can understand the objectives to be achieved, all the better to accomplish them. Secondly, conceptual unity is necessary between a commander and his civilian masters so that both will know what precisely is the desired result or strategic effect of military or naval operations.

The first part of the book is an excellent exposition of a theory of war, based to a large extent on the writings of Karl von Clausewitz, who saw "that real war was in fact an international relation which differed from other international relations only in the method we adopted to achieve the objective of our policy." This is rather an elegant way of restating Clausewitz' dictum that war is a continuation of policy by other means.

It follows that in considering any military or naval operation the first question to be determined is simply: what is the war about? When the object of the war is clear, the next question is: how much value do we and the enemy attach to it?

At this point Corbett makes a distinction between limited and unlimited wars. This distinction rests on "the intensity with which the spirit of the Nation" is absorbed in the attainment of the objective of the war. He also notes that wars may be limited by geographical factors, especially "the strategical isolation of the object." His

conclusion is that maritime powers are best suited to conduct limited wars, primarily because such wars tend to be located in remote or easily isolated areas. Corbett's conclusion logically follows, which is, simply, that military and naval operations are the means to achieve the goals of policy. He notes, "the means adopted must conflict as little as possible with the political conditions from which the war springs."

The second portion of the book is concerned with the theory of naval war. The object of naval warfare is command of the sea or, at least, the prevention of the enemy from securing it. Corbett is careful to point out that command of the sea means control of maritime communications and not the conquering or occupation of the seas, which is physically impossible. Corbett also points out that if one belligerent loses command of the sea, it does not automatically pass to the other belligerent.

Corbett expounds the concept of a "fleet in being." This is essentially a fleet which is ready to engage or, at the very least, to harass an enemy. Even a fleet inferior in size and in strength can be used defensively to prevent an enemy with superior force from exercising command of the sea. This is the reason that if one belligerent loses command of the sea, the other automatically does not gain it.

The third portion of the book discusses the conduct of naval war. In it Corbett analyzes the methods of securing command, the methods of disputing command, and the methods of exercising command. His analysis is based on an extensive and thorough knowledge of British maritime history from the English-Dutch wars of the mid-17th century through the English-French wars of the 18th century, including the extensive maritime and naval operations of the Napoleonic wars. Examples are also drawn from the Russo-Japanese and the Spanish-American wars.

Advances in naval technology from sail to steam to nuclear power have not rendered obsolete the fundamentals of war or of maritime strategy. Only the means have changed. The British triumph over Napoleon brought an era of extensive fleet operations to a close. With only a few exceptions, the next major fleet operations occurred during the Second World War. For this reason, a student of naval strategy must go back to the age of sail for a thorough understanding of the employment of naval forces.

Corbett is as relevant for the naval officer in the electronic age as he was for the officers in the Royal Naval College who attended his lectures in the early years of this century. The theoretical study of strategy is not only useful, but necessary, because it can determine the normal, to use Corbett's phrase, by collating past events to ascertain what lines of action tended to produce what effects. The idiosyncrasies of war militate against similar lines of action necessarily producing similar effects in subsequent situations. Ultimately, a commander must exercise his own judgment and rely on his own experience, however conditioned, to determine specific courses of action to follow in each situation as it arises.

Clausewitz pointed out that the study of strategy should educate the mind of the military commander, but it should not accompany him on to the battlefield. Corbett wholeheartedly agrees.

The Naval Institute Press has performed a great service to naval officers and students of strategy by publishing a 1972 edition of this 1911 classic. Unfortunately, the price of \$14 will inevitably discourage many otherwise interested readers. Regrettably, a less expensive paperback edition was not published.

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