

# ON WAR, POLITICAL OBJECTIVES, AND MILITARY STRATEGY

by

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There is a historic tendency of the American military professional to remain outside the process of developing political objectives to be served by military strategy. The very word "political" seems to ring of actions on behalf of results in the Wisconsin primary and is seen as antithetical to the perceived role of the military in our society. Even General Marshall, certainly one of the finest men to serve our nation, reflected this aversion to political factors. In responding to proposals to liberate Prague and much of Czechoslovakia, he commented, "I would be loath to hazard American lives for purely political purposes."<sup>1</sup>

This historic apolitical approach to conflict has presented the risk, or the fact, of a separation between the purposes of a war, which are necessarily political, and the conduct of the war by our military professionals. Brodie, it seems, would find such a separation to be functional, for he found that "soldiers are close students of tactics, but only rarely of strategy and practically never of war."<sup>2</sup> Such a separation is not consistent with Clausewitz's view that it is not sensible "to summon soldiers, as many governments do when they are planning a war, and ask them for *purely military advice*."<sup>3</sup> Among the greatest problems we have confronted in war have been errors of omission or commission in the formulation of the purposes of the war and inconsistencies between these purposes and the conduct of the war. If professional soldiers are to fulfill their responsibilities for military strategy, they must play a useful role in the formulation of the political objectives of the military strategy.

Even if one stipulates the utility of military involvement in developing political objectives, it may be difficult to have the opportunity to do so. As one example, in World War II President Roosevelt did not task the JCS to study the proposal that unconditional surrender be established as the political objective of that war.<sup>4</sup> Obtaining a military role in the development of political objectives is made difficult by both military- and civilian-related factors.

The factors that bear on the military are related to the nature of military force and the characteristics of those who occupy positions of military leadership. The object of applying military force is to bring the adversary to accept our political objectives. The nature of military force makes it difficult, even in retrospect, to establish a cause and effect relationship between the specific force applied and the political objectives achieved. Political leaders are solely concerned with political objectives as they understand them. They wish to know why and how an application of force will advance these objectives. Clausewitz noted the difficulty in responding to such questions: "The true causes may be quite unknown. Nowhere in life is this so common as in war, where facts are seldom fully known and the underlying motives even less so. . . . [E]ffects in war seldom result from a single cause: there are usually several concurrent causes."<sup>5</sup> It is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to predict a cause and effect relationship between military means and an observed effect. It is uncommon even to find critical retrospective analyses of cause and effect. The US Strategic Bombing Survey may have

been the most exhaustive such analysis, and its results say different things to different people. Even when such analysis is performed it may find effects quite different from those sought by the application of military force.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the difficulty, or impossibility, of establishing cause and effect relationships, military officers tend to express objectives and results in military terms. We tend to speak in terms of ground occupied, targets destroyed, and casualties inflicted. The successful application of means, by our criteria of success, is offered as a proxy for the successful advancement of the political objective, and the application of means becomes an end in itself. The political leadership tends to view these prospective and retrospective results from their political perspective. They may ask "So what?" They seek measurable progress toward political objectives. Military professionals are often ill prepared to establish the nature and magnitude of this progress, or lack thereof.

In addition, those who occupy positions of military leadership may lack certain personal attributes valued by civilian leadership. Brodie notes that "the whole training of the military is toward a set of values that finds in battle and in victory a vindication. The skills developed in the soldier are those of a fighter, and not of the reflector on ultimate purposes."<sup>7</sup> These leaders find themselves advising civilians "on matters having to do with the goals and ends of peace and war. For this [they have] certainly not been trained."<sup>8</sup> "The services are normally not strategy minded but rather means minded."<sup>9</sup> The product of these factors is that strategically astute generals are extremely rare.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time there are factors which bear on the civilian leadership that make it difficult for the military to acquire a role in the development of political objectives. Our civilian leaders are routinely individuals of great personal accomplishment. They have succeeded in civilian pursuits and bring with them the confidence that they can succeed in their new responsibilities; indeed, they often act with the conviction that they can effect major improvements in the areas for which

they are responsible. Implicitly, or in fact, they hold the view that

No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you should never trust the experts. If you believe the doctors nothing is wholesome: if you believe the theologians nothing is innocent: if you believe the soldiers nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wine diluted by a very large admixture of insipid common sense.<sup>11</sup>

McGeorge Bundy once wrote, "Nothing is less reliable . . . than the unsupported position of men who are urging the value of their own chosen instrument . . . . We must not be surprised, and still less persuaded, when generals and admirals recommend additional military action—what do we expect them to recommend?"<sup>12</sup> Robert Kennedy made the following observation about the Cuban missile crisis:

[President Kennedy] was distressed that the [military] representatives with whom he met, with the notable exception of General Taylor, seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of the steps they suggested. . . . [T]his experience pointed out for us all the importance of civilian direction and control and the importance of raising probing questions to military recommendations.<sup>13</sup>

President Johnson raised a perhaps more basic problem. "All he heard from his generals, President Johnson said, was 'Bomb, bomb, bomb . . . . Well I want to know why there's nothing else. You generals have all been educated at the taxpayer's expense, and you're not giving me any ideas. . . . I want some solutions. I want some answers.'<sup>14</sup> Kissinger expressed a similar frustration: "For years, the military had been complaining about being held on a leash by the civilian leadership. But when Nixon pressed them for new strategies, all they could think of was resuming the bombing of the north."<sup>15</sup>

It may not be easy and, in fact, it may be extremely difficult for the military to obtain a role in the formulation of the political purposes of a war. There may be some officers who will actually try to avoid such a role. I assert that our military responsibilities demand that professional military officers seek this role.

Clausewitz had the commonsense view that “no one starts a war—or rather no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective.”<sup>16</sup> Brodie refers to “the single most important idea in all strategy . . . . What is it all about?”<sup>17</sup> Crowl finds this as “the first and most fundamental question to be asked of any prospective war or other military action. . . . [P]olitical and military leaders must ask this question. . . . Because they often don’t, and when they don’t, the end result can be disastrous.” He uses Imperial Germany in 1914 as an example of such a disaster and concludes that “the Kaiser and his entourage and especially his military advisors were stupid.” He does not apply this word to our leaders in the Vietnam era, but rather regards their behavior as “a failure of the intellect, a failure to give sufficient attention to the question ‘What is it about?’ ”<sup>18</sup>

Clausewitz provides a framework for the definition of political objectives. He wrote,

War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy*—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent . . . or to *merely occupy some of his frontier districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations . . . . The fact that the aims of the two types are quite different must be clear at all times, and their points of irreconcilability brought out.<sup>19</sup>

The objective “overthrow the enemy” is consistent with the view that “there is no substitute for victory.” The objective of seizing territory for bargaining is closer to the

objectives of a limited war. I think of these two objectives in slightly different terms. The first objective, to overthrow, seeks to end the conflict without the consent of our adversary. We intend to dictate, not negotiate, the terms of the surrender to parties probably other than those in charge when the war began. The product is almost necessarily a political objective to displace the existing government. Clausewitz’s second objective seeks advantage for bargaining at the peace negotiations. Explicit in this objective is that one seeks to end the conflict with the consent of the adversary.

Let me illustrate the difference with a simple example, the hostages in Iran. For a period of time we sought to obtain their release with the consent of the Iranians. We took a series of actions to obtain sufficient moral or economic advantage to lead the Iranians to the view that their interests were better served by hostage release than by hostage retention. When we judged that consent was unlikely, we sought hostage release without their consent—the rescue attempt. Another simple example: the search for deterrence is inherently a search for the other party’s consent to avoid the actions we seek to deter.

Let’s say that we accept the premise that we cannot expect to obtain our adversary’s consent to our political objectives. The

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remaining alternatives are fairly stark: abandon our objectives; reach our objectives without their consent; or act to get a new government which we expect will consent. We do not often, or openly, select the third alternative. As an aside, it was Clausewitz's view that "Russia is not a country that can be formally conquered. . . . [O]nly the working of disunity can bring a country like that to ruin. To strike at these weaknesses in its political life it is necessary to thrust into the heart of the state."<sup>20</sup> Sir John Hackett in *The Third World War* brings the conflict to an end through changes in the heart of the state through the workings of disunity. Governments may be changed or brought to disunity, either through internal action, as Hackett theorized, or external action, or a combination of the two.

Prior to World War II the Germans effected change in the Austrian government by threats and placing forces on the border. These actions led the Austrian Chancellor to conclude that it was to his advantage, and his nation's, to make internal change in his government.<sup>21</sup>

During World War II there were several factions in Germany that sought to effect an internal change in government. We could have structured our strategy to permit that to occur. In point of fact, we took the opposite position, unconditional surrender. Our own policy made it difficult for these factions to change their government.<sup>22</sup>

The other alternative suggested for change was one external to the existing governmental structure. In World War I the Germans took action to facilitate the movement of Lenin from Switzerland to Russia.<sup>23</sup> They wished to generate internal dissention which would weaken the government and lead to its consent to German terms for peace or displacement by another government more likely to do so.

The Bay of Pigs was an example of an action on our part to introduce external factors. We sought to introduce revolutionaries who would effect change.

I suggest that the first question to ask in developing political objectives is "Do we wish to end this conflict with or without the

consent of our adversary?" If, as in World War II, the political objective demands displacement of the existing government, then the military objectives become clear, make the adversary politically helpless or militarily impotent. If the political objective countenances ending the conflict with the consent of the adversary, we must then, in logic, have an understanding of the terms we would find acceptable. Again, in logic, there is no better, no more appropriate, time to write the peace treaty than before the war starts. What do we want our adversary to do?

It is easier to state that logic demands action than it is to have the desired action taken. On occasion the military has sought to obtain a specification of political objectives only to be met with a counter question asking what were our military capabilities.<sup>24</sup> The connotation of such a question is that political objectives were unbounded except by the capability of the military to obtain them. The counter question also implies that one can establish a cause and effect relationship between military means and discrete political effect.

The purpose of seeking political objectives, however, is not merely to satisfy procedural logic patterns. The objective for the military is first to make a judgment on whether the objectives should be pursued by military means and then, if so, how. Betts found that "no President in the cold war ever ordered an intervention when at least one top military official recommended strongly against it."<sup>25</sup> This precedent places a tremendous responsibility on our military leadership. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, "Here surely lies a major cause of our imperial drift: the incessant pressure of the professional military . . . constantly demands . . . more military involvement, more military intervention."<sup>26</sup> The facts counter this argument. Betts found that in their recommendations on intervention decisions the individual members of the JCS were less aggressive than civilian advisors about as often as they were more aggressive.<sup>27</sup> The members of the JCS criticized themselves for their actions regarding the Bay of Pigs. The Chief of Naval Operations commented, "Our

big fault was standing in awe of the Presidency instead of pounding the table . . . . We set down our case and then shut up and that was a mistake.”<sup>28</sup> “Another service chief told his successor that his greatest mistake during his tenure on the JCS had been failing to convey his opposition to the Bay of Pigs to the President.”<sup>29</sup>

**G**iven political objectives and the responsibility to make judgments on their pursuit, we need a strategist’s estimate of the situation. This estimate would be the basis of a recommendation to pursue the objectives or to make a case that they should not be pursued. Michael Howard has identified four dimensions of war which need to be recognized in developing such an estimate: the technological, the social, the logistical, and the operational.<sup>30</sup>

Howard notes the magnitude of change in the role of technology in strategy. “The possibility of decisive *technological* superiority on one side or the other was so inconceivable that Clausewitz and his contemporaries had discounted it.”<sup>31</sup> He then notes,

Works about nuclear war and deterrence normally treat their topic as activity taking place almost entirely in the technological dimension . . . . Every one of the three elements that Clausewitz defined as being intrinsic to war—political motivation, operational activity and social participation—are completely absent from their calculations.<sup>32</sup>

A consideration of technology in strategy should not be limited to considerations of relative advantages and disadvantages. I suggest that we need to be equally concerned with the things we don’t know about technology and with those that we don’t know that we don’t know—the unknowns and the unknown unknowns. As an example, we are placing increasing reliance on advances in microelectronics. The modern battlefield will be saturated with emitters, receivers, and electronic countermeasures operating across the electromagnetic

spectrum. Microelectronics will detect and attack targets and provide, for better or worse, a level of command and control beyond any prior experience. What will be the net effect and effectiveness of thousands of simultaneous emissions across this spectrum? We don’t know and, by and large, we can’t find out. How will our strategy deal with this major unknown? The unknown unknowns are even more worrisome, including things that we falsely believe to be true. Prior to World War II the Germans determined the combat effectiveness of their anti-aircraft artillery by actual tests at their proving ground. Wartime experience demonstrated that they had overestimated effectiveness by a factor of one thousand. Air raids on Berlin were excluded from their strategic calculations.<sup>33</sup> Prior to Vietnam, proving-ground tests established that the air-to-air missile had displaced the gun. We knew things that were not true.

We are now all painfully aware of the significance of the social factor in warfare and perhaps regard it as a factor unique to contemporary limited war. Clausewitz’s description of the social factor sounds almost contemporary. At the end of the 17th century, he wrote, “War became solely the concern of the government to the extent that governments parted company with their peoples and behaved as if they themselves were the state.” The scope of the war was constrained by the money available; the concept of deficit financing was to come later. “In effect [the conduct of the war] was a somewhat stronger form of diplomacy, a more forceful method of negotiation.”<sup>34</sup> This sounds very much like a contemporary limited war. The French Revolution brought the *levee en masse*:

The people became a participant in war . . . [and] the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance . . . . The sole aim of war was to overthrow the opponent . . . . The resources available for use surpassed all conventional limits; nothing now impeded the vigor with which war could be waged . . . . War, untrammelled by any conventional constraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury.<sup>35</sup>

Later he commented, "As policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous so will war, and this may reach the point where war attains its absolute form."<sup>36</sup> This seems worth remembering as we construct strategies in the era of nuclear weapons.

Betts may be correct in his assertion that "it is only realistic to recognize that domestic politics determines military options far more than expert strategic analysis does."<sup>37</sup> If so we have reason to concern ourselves with what may be NATO's greatest vulnerability, timely mobilization. As Mearsheimer notes, "The real danger is that NATO's leaders will not agree to mobilize in a crisis for fear that such a move might provoke a Soviet attack . . . . [If] NATO does not mobilize, the capability to defend against a Pact attack will be lost."<sup>38</sup>

Michael Howard finds the social factor to be particularly crucial, and unrecognized, in nuclear deterrence and notes,

The growing political self-awareness of those societies and, in the west at least, their insistence on political participation have made the social element too significant to be ignored . . . . If we do not take account of the social dimension of strategy in the nuclear age we are likely to conclude that Western leaders might find it more difficult to initiate nuclear war than would their Soviet counterparts—and, more important, would be perceived by their adversaries as finding it more difficult.<sup>39</sup>

There is an old saying that amateurs talk strategy and professionals talk logistics. If the saying is true, then the American military has a tradition of professionalism. Gray notes that "it is the American style to devote more attention to the management of large defense programs than to operational issues."<sup>40</sup> "Questions pertaining to the actual employment of force, and particularly of limited force, have been deemed secondary to the marshalling of muscle . . . . The political fact of victory, achieved through brute force of sheer quantity of military/civilian assets, tended to subsume issues of strategy."<sup>41</sup> Betts notes that "logistics is more central to

American strategy than to that of most other great powers in history."<sup>42</sup>

Clausewitz offers a guide for the logistic planner, and for the strategist.

To discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy. We must gauge the strength and situation of the opposing state. We must gauge the character and abilities of its government and people and do the same in regard to our own. Finally, we must evaluate the political sympathies of other states and the effect the war may have on them. To assess these things in all their ramifications and diversity is plainly a colossal task . . . . Bonaparte was quite right when he said that Newton would quail before the algebraic problems it could pose.<sup>43</sup>

While accepting the difficulty of this assessment, I suggest that it calls for no more than one should ask of the strategist's estimate of the situation. Each of Clausewitz's points deserves at least a brief comment.

What are the respective political aims of the parties involved? By the time the strategist gets to this point he has an understanding, one would hope, of his own nation's political aims; the issue is, therefore, the aims of the other parties and the similarities and differences between the aims of the opposing parties. For example, one party may view the aim as national survival and the other party may view the aim as national pride. With such a difference in political objectives, it is clear that there will be a difference in the nations' relative allocation of resources and relative commitment to the conflict. We must seek to understand and weigh the political aims of both parties.

An assessment of relative strength is a routine part of any estimate of the situation. It should include not only the military balance but also other factors that might bear, for example, economic and political strength.

What is the character of the parties? This is a question either routinely ignored or inexpertly answered. Howard believes

It was the inadequacy of the sociopolitical analysis of the societies with which we were dealing that lay at the root of the failure of the Western powers to cope more effectively with the revolutionary and insurgency movements that characterized the postwar era, from China in the 1940s to Vietnam in the 1960s.<sup>44</sup>

Prior to World War II, our ambassador in Tokyo kept telling Washington that we could not judge the Japanese by the American temperament or by American standards of logic.<sup>45</sup> We did and we were wrong. When we went far north in Korea, it is clear that we did not understand, or chose to ignore, the frame of reference of the PRC with respect to that particular action.<sup>46</sup> The Cuban missile crisis may have been the product of Khrushchev's misjudgment of the mettle of President Kennedy.<sup>47</sup> A misunderstanding of the other party is a common and serious problem in any sort of conflict.

The evaluation of political sympathies is an important part of any analysis. For example, if we had invaded North Vietnam, would this action have brought into effect treaties between North Vietnam and China or the Soviet Union? We did not know and perhaps were restrained in our actions because of this ignorance. One of the political sympathies of interest in NATO is that of the Germans with respect to strategy. "They have continually emphasized that 'there can be no alternative to forward defense . . . [that] any conceptual model of defense involving the surrender of territory is unacceptable.'"<sup>48</sup> This is a political strategy from a nation which declined the option of an elastic defense in World War II to its great net disadvantage.<sup>49</sup> Our evaluation of the character and abilities of the government and its people must, of course, include an evaluation of ourselves. We have learned this lesson twice at enormous cost; we must profit from lessons painfully learned.

Howard's fourth dimension of strategy is the operational one, the dimension with which we are most familiar. The other three dimensions—technological, social, and logistical—all affect the operational. It is, however, the successful operational strategy

that realizes the political objective. The other three dimensions can limit the operational, but only the operational dimension can cause the effect sought.

There is general recognition that the operational dimension of strategy is now, and will be, much more important than it has been in the past. As Gray notes, "The side inferior in material and human assets needs to seek compensation in the quality of its tactics and strategy."<sup>50</sup>

My comments on the operational dimension are limited to those on behalf of the retention and exploitation of the initiative rather than accommodating to the threat posed by an adversary. It seems to me that if our adversary has planned well he is almost certain to succeed if we accommodate to the threat he has chosen to present. I suggest that we might give particular attention to meeting a threat by choosing the best means for a response and selecting for attack that interest to which the adversary is most vulnerable. Let me give a few examples.

When the North Koreans seized the *Pueblo*, we could have responded to their naval attack with naval forces, the same military means. We could have used a different military means, airpower rather than naval power. Alternatively, we could have used nonmilitary means. For example, we could have communicated to North Korea that if they did not release the crew we would massively, threateningly, increase military aid to South Korea, a totally different means to obtain consent.

We can be similarly selective in choosing the interest to be attacked. When we bombed North Vietnam they responded with military means—antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles—against our military means. They also responded with propaganda against a nonmilitary interest, domestic opinion. Consciously or unconsciously, they may have thus struck at the center of gravity in this conflict. They responded to military means by attacking a different interest. We need to seek similar flexibility in our strategies.

I have suggested that we pursue this strategist's estimate of the situation so that we can make a recommendation on whether

the political objectives should be pursued by military means and, if so, how. As Betts notes, a recommendation that the objectives not be pursued by military means has been decisive in recent years. Such a recommendation could be based on the judgment that the pursuit of the objectives was either imprudent or impractical. We could judge that the specified objective could be achieved, but only at the cost of a compromise in the achievement of other objectives considered to be more important than those presented by the issue at hand. Pursuit of the instant objectives would be imprudent. Alternatively, we could judge that the instant objectives could not be advanced through military means or that our means were inadequate to achieve the objective. It would be impractical to pursue these objectives with military means.

On the other hand, we could recommend that the political objectives be pursued. This recommendation should address not only the military means required but also, as appropriate, other factors, which might even be largely political. For example, we might judge that the military means recommended required a level of congressional support or the reinstatement of the draft.

**L**et me summarize the message I have sought to convey. I believe that the military must seek to obtain a role in the formulation of political objectives, though it may be difficult to do so. As a minimum we should seek to understand whether the political objective is to be achieved with or without the consent of the adversary. Given these objectives we have the responsibility to make recommendations on whether the objectives are to be pursued and, if so, how. Perhaps the most influential recommendations from the members of the JCS have been those not to intervene, not to pursue the objectives stipulated. Negative recommendations, vigorously presented, have always prevailed since World War II. There are structures which can be used as checklists to assure that we ask the right questions in constructing the strategist's estimate of the situation.

It is clear that I have been presenting theory. I believe theory has a role in leading to understanding and insight; however, professional military officers must demonstrate mastery of real war in the real world. If history is any guide, one of our greatest concerns will be with inconsistencies between political objectives and the politically acceptable means to achieve these objectives. In part, the source of such inconsistencies may lie at our doorstep. General Weyand's words about Vietnam are apt: "The major military error was a failure to communicate to the civilian decision makers the capabilities and limitations of American military power."<sup>51</sup>

Once the decision has been made to intervene, it is likely that our recommendations to escalate the use of means in the conflict will be more aggressive than those of civilian advisors. That has been the normal case in the post-World War II period.<sup>52</sup> We cannot be confident that our recommendations will be accepted. This situation leaves us with unpleasant alternatives.

As a first step, we might focus on the relationship between the political objectives and acceptable military means. If, in our judgment, the means authorized are inadequate to achieve the stated political objective, then we are forced into the examination of alternatives. In this circumstance we could press upon our superiors a reformulation of the political objective to be consistent with the authorized military means. Or, we could recommend a reduction in military means and the political objectives that we find to be consistent with this reduction in means.

As a second alternative we might conclude that we, as individuals, cannot loyally remain in a position in which we are committed to pursue objectives that exceed the military capabilities provided.

A third alternative would be to remain in position despite the possibly wrong military judgment that objectives exceed capabilities. Betts, no Vietnam advocate but one often sympathetic with military leadership, views this alternative harshly with the following observation.



Ridgway, a model professional, had warned unequivocally of the price of intervention in Indochina in 1954 and indicated that he would resign if the administration decided to commit American combat troops. A decade later when military planners were similarly pessimistic, estimating a need for up to 1.2 million American troops in South Vietnam if the country were to be pacified, they supported the administration, settling for limited measures. Although they protested, they remained loyal. A mass resignation might have served the nation better. The costs of insufficient professionalism and insufficient insistence on their own autonomous judgement by the Chiefs may have been as great as the costs of excessive demands for autonomy by MacArthur in 1951.<sup>53</sup>

#### NOTES

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