

OPERATIONAL BRILLIANCE, STRATEGIC INCOMPETENCE:

THE MILITARY REFORMERS AND THE GERMAN MODEL

by

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Among the many lessons to be drawn from a proper study of military history is that winning battles and even campaigns is not the same as winning wars. Strategy and the operational art are two separate and quite different things, and understanding the distinction between the two is critical to both the study and the waging of war.

The operational level of war relates to the employment of specific military forces in pursuit of specific military objectives within a specific theater of operations. Strategy addresses the broader challenge of maintaining a proper relationship between the military means available to the state and the political objectives on behalf of which those means are employed. The late Sir Basil Liddell Hart defined military strategy as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy,"¹ going on to say that "strategy depends for success, first and most, on a sound *calculation and coordination of the ends and the means.*"²

Or, to put it another way, whereas the operational art is the art of winning campaigns (and tactics the art of winning battles), strategy is the art of winning wars. Strategy is the calculated relationship between a state's political purpose and military power. Its formulation involves choices within a framework of finite resources and an ability

to distinguish between the desirable and the possible, the essential and the expendable. A sound sense of priorities and a willingness to make difficult choices among them are the essence of a sound strategy. Though it was Japan that brought the United States into the Second World War, the United States pursued a "Germany-first" strategy, concentrating the main weight of its military effort—its strategic *schwerpunkt*—against the most powerful and dangerous member of the Axis, while initially remaining on the strategic defensive against Japan in the Pacific. History has confirmed the wisdom of that choice, although it entailed some tough decisions early on in the war against Japan, including the decision to write off the Philippines.

It ought to go without saying that a strategy whose political aims far exceed the military resources available for their implementation is a standing invitation to disaster. In this regard, our own country's continuing and often casual accumulation of military obligations overseas unattended by the appropriate increases in military means necessary to fulfill those obligations ought to be of profound concern.³ Also in this regard, and as the 40th anniversary of Germany's defeat in World War II recedes, it is important to remember why Germany lost. The causes of Germany's defeat not just in World

War II but also in World War I are of more than passing interest.

Present-day military reformers in the United States, all of whom stress the importance of studying military history, repeatedly hold up the pre-1945 German military as a model of military excellence (as indeed it was), and they would have our own armed forces emulate that model. The extensive literature on military reform bulges with admiring references to Clausewitz, Gneisenau, and Scharnhorst; to the *Generalstab* and its success in institutionalizing military excellence; and to the spectacular performances of the German army from the time of Moltke to Manstein. Deemed especially instructive by the reformers are the German army's campaigns during the periods 1917-1918 and 1940-1942, with the 1940 campaign against France and the Low Countries topping the list.

Yet, it may be asked, how is it that this repository of military excellence was twice defeated in this century? In perusing the military reform literature one is struck by the dearth of attention to the causes of Germany's defeat—in sharp contrast to the reformers' extensive treatment, at times bordering on the rhapsodical, of the German army's many operational triumphs.

Might there be a connection between the causes of Germany's defeat and the relative inattention paid to them by the reformers? I believe there is, and I believe that it lies in the realm of strategy. To be more specific, the reason that the German military was beaten in 1918 and in 1945—and the reason, it can be argued, that our own military reformers do not seem to care much why—is that neither the German military nor the American military reform movement has ever paid much attention to strategy. Both have concentrated almost exclusively on the operational level of war rather than (and, some would say, at the expense of) strategy.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest intellectual infirmity of the otherwise refreshing and long-overdue military reform movement in the United States is its seemingly profound indifference to the strategic level of war. While reform theorists have delved ex-

tensively and imaginatively into matters of weaponry, operational doctrine, and military organization, few have addressed the overarching questions of strategy. Fewer still have tackled nuclear conflict or even the relation of conventional military operations to the presence of nuclear weapons, something that never confronted the pre-1945 German military. And as for the German military model itself, though reformers concede the existence of different "styles of warfare" derived from unique national experiences, few have recognized much less discussed the vastly different historical and geostrategic conditions governing pre-1945 Germany and post-1945 America—differences that impede the US military, even should it wish to do so, from a wholesale adoption of the German model. Some reformers, for example, would abolish the Joint Chiefs of Staff organization and replace it with an American copy of the *Generalstab*. To be sure, there is little to be said for the JCS as it is now structured; but it is unwise to ignore Americans' historic and deep-seated aversion to any military instrument perceived, rightly or wrongly, to threaten the supremacy of civilian authority. Nor is any purpose served by ignoring the fact that the *Generalstab* arose much more easily in Germany than it could in the United States for the simple reason that the German military in the 19th century was a one-service organization.

What accounts for the reformers' inattention to strategy and to things nuclear? In their recently published book, *America Can Win, The Case for Military Reform*, Senator Gary Hart and William S. Lind state,

Military reform does not seek to define a new national or military strategy. Rather, its concern is to make the military instruments of strategy, the armed forces, effective. Why do we draw this distinction? In our fast-changing world, strategy may change quickly. Just a decade ago, the People's Republic of China was a strategic opponent; today it is a strategic friend. In this century,

Russia has twice been an ally; now it is an opponent. Germany, now an ally, was twice an enemy.

In contrast, changes in military doctrine and tactics, in style of warfare, in the institutional culture of the armed services, and even in military equipment are slower

Many a freshman congressman has tried to sound knowledgeable on defense by saying, "You must tell us what the strategy is before we can decide on anything else." This is not a useful approach to the problem. Of course we need a sound, clear strategy But most of the issues that affect whether or not our forces can win in combat on the tactical and operational levels must be independent of strategy, because strategy is likely to change more rapidly than we can change our policies and practices in these other areas.⁴

Such reasoning is at best incomplete and at worst misleading. Admittedly, the ingredients of success at the tactical and operational levels of war do not derive directly from strategy and from strategic decisions. Yet, isn't the purpose of gaining tactical and operational successes to achieve favorable strategic outcomes? And doesn't Germany's record in this century, as well as our own in Vietnam, show that tactical and operational victories are irrelevant if they are not attended and informed by a sound and coherent strategy?

With respect to nuclear war, Hart and Lind argue that

military reform does not directly apply [to] nuclear war [for] two obvious reasons. First, it makes no sense to speak of winning a nuclear war. A nuclear conflict would be a cataclysm for all those it touched. There would be nothing to distinguish victors from vanquished among the corpses. Second, and obvious after a moment's reflection, is the fact that there is no such thing as a nuclear war except as a hypothesized form of combat. We know the power of nuclear weapons, so we know their use would be a catastrophe. But beyond that, we know nothing. There is no combat experience in

nuclear war, so all thinking is pure speculation. The basis for military reform-type analysis does not exist.⁵

The reformers' rejection of nuclear war as suitable for "reform-type" analysis is more convincing than their rejection of strategy. Yet in a war with the Soviet Union, which remains the central focus of US defense planning, the mere presence of nuclear weapons, even if not a single one was fired, may be expected to exert an enormous influence on the conduct of conventional force operations. For example, otherwise desirable force concentrations are likely to be assiduously avoided for fear of providing lucrative targets for nuclear fire; and in the event of a NATO-Warsaw Pact war, the Soviets might well go for a "city-hugging" advance to preclude NATO from using nuclear weapons on its own territory. Nuclear "strategy" is predominantly theological in character, but the reformers would do well to explore the effect of the presence of nuclear weapons on non-nuclear operations.

None of this is to argue that the reformers' focus on the operational level of war is misplaced—only that it is insufficient. The reformers seek to instill in the American military the keys to operational success which they correctly assert were manifest in the pre-1945 German army: maneuver doctrine, mission-type orders, subordinate commander independence and initiative, seemingly indestructible small-unit cohesion on the battlefield, and weapons driven not by

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pursuit of technology for its own sake but crafted to accommodate real tactical experience and the rigors of actual combat.

The reformers also rightly posit the need for substantial improvement in the US military's operational performance, and they have contributed much to the doctrinal and force-structural renaissance now underway in the US Army, if not the other services. The operational performance of American arms since MacArthur's brilliant stroke at Inchon has been, to put it mildly, less than impressive. The history of the US military during the past 35 years has been a history largely of defeats, miscarriages, and flawed victories, running from the rout of US forces along the Yalu through Vietnam and down to the bungled Iranian hostage rescue mission and the decimation of a Marine contingent in Beirut at the hands of a lone terrorist.⁶ The reformers are also on solid ground in claiming that this dismal record admits of no convincing explanation other than the presence within the US military of profound institutional deformities and doctrinal deficiencies.

The Pentagon *has* become little more than just another giant government bureaucracy; many extant service personnel and promotion policies *do* corrode unit cohesion under fire; reliance on a firepower-attrition doctrine *is* a recipe for defeat against a firepower-superior opponent; and infatuation with technology *does* breed an insensitivity to alternative and often better tactical and operational solutions to military problems.

The reformers are no less right in pointing to the German army as an inspiring model of operational effectiveness. From Königgrätz to the Kiev cauldron, the German army routinely outperformed its opponents on the battlefield. And whereas Germany's enemies occasionally produced a brilliant field commander—an Allenby, a Brusilov, a Zhukov, a Patton, a MacArthur, or an O'Connor—the *Generalstab* system yielded an assemblage of operational talent unparalleled in any other modern military.

Notwithstanding their operational brilliance, however, the Germans were beaten in

1918 and crushed in 1945. And it is here that the risks of indiscriminate reliance on the German model, and the potential penalties of the reformers' obsession with the operational level of war, become glaringly apparent.

The pre-1945 German military paid even less attention to strategy than have the reformers, apparently assuming, as do some of the reformers by implication, mastery of the operational art to be sufficient in and of itself to guarantee favorable strategic outcomes. This is not only to misunderstand the essence of strategy but also to ignore the critical distinction between strategy and operations. One is reminded of the remark made to Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., in 1975 by a North Vietnamese colonel. When Summers averred that "you never defeated us on the battlefield," the North Vietnamese colonel replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."⁷

The Germans, in spite of their stunning operational triumphs, were defeated in World Wars I and II because they were strategically incompetent: they lacked the military means, in quantity and in kind, to fulfill the political ends for which they waged war. Germany's political reach consistently exceeded her military grasp. If there is one lesson to be drawn from Germany's military fate in this century, it is that operational competence, while indispensable to victory, is no substitute for a sound and coherent strategy. The capacity of operational mastery to offset strategic disadvantages (e.g. resource inferiority, vulnerable borders, constrained access to the high seas, lack of allies, lack of internal political cohesion) is inherently limited. Having plenty of Mansteins and Guderians or Lees and Jacksons at one's disposal counts for little in the absence of a Bismarck, a George Marshall, or a U. S. Grant. For it is the latter types who provide a clear appreciation not just of the operationally desirable but of the strategically possible.

In retrospect the mind boggles at the magnitude of Germany's strategic incompetence, though in all fairness it is to be recognized that this condition afflicted

Germany's civilian leadership as much as it did the *Generalstab*. Take, for example, the vaunted Schlieffen Plan, which governed the German army's opening moves in 1914. Leaving aside its faulty premises,⁸ its rigidity and complexity, and its utter incompatibility with contemporary technological limitations on tactical mobility,⁹ the Schlieffen Plan was a strategic disaster. Why? Because it violated Belgium's neutrality, and in so doing made Great Britain's entry into the war inevitable—Britain, a country not only invulnerable to direct attack but also capable, thanks to her control of the seas, of suffocating the economic wellsprings of German military power.

Germany's casual willingness to court strategic disaster for the sake of immediate operational gain was repeated, this time with fatal results, in early 1917, when the *Generalstab* prevailed upon a reluctant Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in the North Atlantic. This decision sealed Germany's military fate by adding the United States and its vast human and industrial resources to Berlin's already burgeoning list of enemies.

Germany's lack of strategic common sense was no less manifest in World War II. Although the German military entered the war as the only one to have adapted its force structure and doctrine effectively to the opportunities afforded by the internal combustion engine, and though the German army campaigns of 1940-1941 were operational masterpieces, the *Generalstab* again proved unable to convert operational victories into a favorable strategic decision. As in 1914-1918, the problem in 1939-1945 was not the quality of Germany's military power but the lack of enough of it. Nazi Germany's strategic objectives were defined by Adolf Hitler and entailed nothing less than the conquest of Europe. As such, they far exceeded Germany's military means, as a number of general officers, including Ludwig Beck and Franz Halder, attempted unsuccessfully to point out to Hitler.¹⁰ Inability to relate ends to means was evident in Hitler's decision to invade Russia, especially before Great Britain had been driven out of the war,

and even more so in the Third Reich's incredible indifference to the fatal strategic consequences of attempting to make war simultaneously against Russia, Great Britain, and the United States. The latter two countries were maritime powers beyond the reach of Germany's almost exclusively land-oriented military, which had no experience or interest in amphibious operations.¹¹ Indeed, Germany's utterly gratuitous declaration of war on the United States following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor must go down as one of the most strategically irresponsible actions ever taken by a nation-state.

To be sure, imperial Japan, Germany's only militarily impressive ally in either world war, did possess a formidable army and navy that succeeded in tying down sizable US military resources that otherwise would have been directed against Germany. But Japan's decision to make war on the United States was if anything even more mindless than Germany's. In December 1941 Japan's gross national product was but ten percent that of the United States, and the bulk of the Japanese army was entangled in an unwinnable war in China's vast interior.

No less fatal, if perhaps more remarkable, was Germany's failure to marshal the human, industrial, and scientific bases of modern military power to a degree even remotely approaching that of her main enemies. In contrast to Ludendorff's total mobilization of Germany's resources during the last year of World War I, the German economy under Hitler was a disjointed, ramshackle affair. It lacked centralized direction and was constantly plagued by the military's insatiable demand for skilled manpower, by the uneconomic dictates of Nazi ideology, and by the Nazi leadership's need to maintain a high level of domestic political popularity. Thus a number of army divisions actually were demobilized following the fall of France in 1940, even though Germany was still at war with Great Britain and Hitler was planning soon to invade the largest land power in the world. Thus German women were never effectively mobilized for war work because their role under Nazi ideology was to stay at home and breed future

Nazis. Thus in 1941 Hitler refused to issue antifreeze and winter clothing to army units poised to invade Russia for fear that to do so would demoralize them by implying a campaign lasting more than a few weeks. Thus German war production, which remained on a single-shift basis until 1942 with other industries continuing to spew out consumer goods, lagged behind that of Britain alone, to say nothing of American and Russian production. Thus, while the United States was investing vast amounts of money and scientific talent in the Manhattan Project, the Nazi regime, which regarded nuclear physics as "Jewish" physics (because of its association with Einstein and other prominent Jewish scientists), continued to conscript students of nuclear physics into the army. Is it any wonder that most of the war's great technological innovations, including radar, the proximity fuse, and the atomic bomb, were the products not of German science but of American and British science? Even Germany's lead in rocketry and jet propulsion counted for nothing in the end because Germany never fully mastered the philosophy and techniques of mass production.

No less a testimony to Germany's strategic incompetence was her failure, before both world wars, to attract allies in quantity or in quality that might have eliminated or at least reduced the fatal imbalance between her military means and her political ambitions in Europe. In his *Mein Kampf*, Hitler excoriated pre-1914 German diplomacy's failure to acquire powerful allies for the Second Reich; Germany's only notable European ally in World War I was Austro-Hungary, a militarily ineffectual and politically decayed state that by the end of 1917 had become a decided strategic liability to Germany. It was Hitler's view (at least in 1925) that Germany's proper place in Europe could be attained only in alliance with Great Britain and fascist Italy.¹² Yet Hitler ended up, as had the Kaiser before him, going to war *against* England and without a single European ally (with the temporary exception of the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1941) even remotely comparable in size and strength to

the major partners of the coalition arrayed against Germany. If Germany's feckless challenge to British naval supremacy and her subsequent violation of Belgium's neutrality made Britain's entry into the war against Germany in 1914 inevitable, so too did Hitler's brutal ideology, his unlimited ambitions, and his lies, deceit, and broken promises rule out any prospect of an Anglo-German alliance in the 1930s. Moreover, if Germany's World War I alliance with Vienna was the equivalent of being shackled to a corpse, Hitler's long and ultimately successful courtship of Mussolini's Italy admits of no strategic logic whatsoever. Strategically, it probably cost Germany more to have Italy as an ally than simply to have fought her as an enemy. From the Balkans to North Africa to the Italian peninsula itself, the repeated failures of Italian arms compelled Germany to divert substantial and irreplaceable military resources to what were, for Germany, secondary theaters of operations.

In short, Germany, having failed to create enough military power on her own, also failed to acquire allies of sufficient weight to bring Germany's military means and political ends into reasonable harmony. Parenthetically, it might be added that the greatest strategic advantage the United States still enjoys over the Soviet Union today, and one not likely to disappear, is that the United States is surrounded by economically robust, militarily powerful, and politically reliable allies (including Germany), whereas the Soviet Union has but a few small and relatively weak military partners, most of them of questionable loyalty and all of them a drain on the Soviet exchequer.

What is amazing is not that Germany was beaten in 1918 and 1945, but that she managed to fight so well for so long. That she did so is a tribute to the German military's exceptional operational brilliance.

Yet to conclude that Germany's defeat lay in the realm of strategy, and that operational excellence is no substitute for a sound and coherent strategy, is not to conclude that operational excellence is dispensable or that good strategy alone is

sufficient to guarantee a decisive victory. Operational incompetence has ruined many an imaginative and potentially war-winning move, such as the Army of the Potomac's peninsular campaign of 1862 and the Anglo-French campaign of 1915 in the Dardanelles. Nor is it to argue that the focus of American military reformers on the operational level of war is misplaced, or that there is no room for improvement in the US military's record in this regard.

It is simply to recognize that the operational art cannot be divorced from an informative strategy, and that battles and campaigns, if they are to yield termination of war on favorable strategic terms, must be guided by a sound coordination of ends and means; by an ability to distinguish between the desirable and the possible, the indispensable and the expendable; and above all, by a capacity and willingness to make hard choices. Because the Confederacy had no coherent strategy, Jackson's masterful Valley Campaign, Forrest's spectacular raids, and Lee's brilliant strokes at Chancellorsville all counted for nothing in the end. For the same reason, Manstein and Guderian ended their careers in prisoner-of-war cages. And it might be added that for the United States nothing can unravel a sound strategy more quickly than permitting a theater commander's predictable demands for evermore resources and operational authority to take precedence over strategic considerations beyond that theater. This was the nub of the Truman-MacArthur controversy of 1951.

It is to be hoped that someday the reformers will bring to bear on the strategic level of war the same kind of intellectual firepower they have directed at the operational level. Such attention is sorely needed. What has passed for strategy in the United States during the past forty years all too often has been little more than aggregations of service budget requests undisciplined either by an appreciation of the limitations of US military power or by a willingness to make unpleasant choices. The United States had no strategy in Vietnam, and is today, like Germany past, plagued by a disparity between military means and political ends

abroad of such enormity as to cast serious doubt upon America's ability to avoid sharing Germany's fate in the event of a major conflict.

NOTES

1. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 335.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 336 (italics original).
3. The Carter Doctrine of 1980 imposed upon an already thinly stretched US military a set of demanding new military obligations in the Middle East—a vast and logistically remote region of the world. The doctrine has yet to be attended by the creation of additional military power commensurate with the fulfillment of those obligations; most of the forces “assigned” to the US Central Command, the instrument of US military intervention in Southwest Asia, are also committed to the defense of Europe and Northeast Asia.
4. Gary Hart with William S. Lind, *America Can Win, The Case for Military Reform* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler and Adler, 1986), pp. 16-17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
6. Nor was the 1983 US invasion of Grenada really an exception. It certainly was not a meaningful test of American military competence. Grenada was a military success simply because it could have been nothing else, given our crushing numerical preponderance over the island's few, poorly armed, and badly trained defenders. Operation Urgent Fury was nonetheless marred by serious flaws in organization, planning, and execution which against a less ragtag enemy could have proved disabling.
7. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy, A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 1.
8. Among the Schlieffen Plan's erroneous premises were (1) that the Belgian government and army would at best offer only token resistance to the German army's violation of its territory; (2) that the Russian army would not be in a position to launch an offensive in the direction of East Prussia until a decision had been reached in the West; and (3) that the French would remain wedded to their idiotic Plan XVII until it was too late to make the necessary force redistributions to deal with the Germans' intended envelopment of Paris from the city's western and southwestern approaches.
9. See chapter four in Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War, Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).
10. See chapters 11 and 12 in Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985); and William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), pp. 366-72.
11. In his monumental *On War*, Clausewitz devotes only a few paragraphs to sea power and naval warfare, which is testimony to Prussia's exclusive historical concentration upon continental warfare. This concentration remained unshaken down through the middle of the 20th Century. Although Tirpitz built a magnificent surface fleet for Germany in the decades preceding 1914, when war came neither he nor anyone else in Germany could quite figure out what to do with it. Nor did the German navy or the *Generalstab* ever address the challenge of amphibious warfare, despite German diplomacy's failure to keep Great Britain out of either world war.
12. *Mein Kampf*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971), pp. 665-66.