

Because strategy never stops...



STRATEGIC MISFORTUNES

IN THIS EDITION

Introduction by A.E. Stahl

Colin S. Gray | Antulio J. Echevarria, II | Eado Hecht
Gian P. Gentile | C. Dale Walton | Adam Elkus

SPECIAL EDITION

Infinity Journal
ISSN 2312-5888
All Rights Reserved ©

The IJ Infinity Group, Ltd.

Company number: 514895630

Ha'Neviim 26
Number 11
64071
Tel Aviv, Israel

Website: <http://www.infinityjournal.com>
Email: info@infinityjournalv.com

Publisher **A. E. Stahl**
aestahl@infinityjournal.com

Editor **William F. Owen**
william@infinityjournal.com

Special Advisory Group

David Betz

John Patch

Nathan Finney

Lukas Milevski

Contributor **Colin S. Gray**

Contributor **Antulio J. Echevarria II**

Contributor **Kobi Michael**

Contributor **Ron Tira**

Contributor **Eitan Shamir**

Contributor **Patrick Porter**

Contributor **Gur Laish**

Contributor **C. Dale Walton**

Contributor **Hugh Smith**

Assistant Editor **Jonathan Dowdall**

Assistant Editor **Tom Wein**

Assistant Editor **Marina Miron**

Subscribe For Free

Infinity Journal is distributed via
<http://www.infinityjournal.com>

Additional Information

If you'd like to contact an editor regarding submission of articles or Letters to the Editor, see our **contact page**.

If you're interested in advertising with Infinity Journal, email us at: **adverts@infinityjournal.com**

If you are experiencing any technical issues, contact technical support: **tech@infinityjournal.com**

If you'd like to submit a comment or question or any other query, send an email to customer service: **cs@infinityjournal.com**

Infinity Journal (IJ) is a privately funded strategy journalzine, founded in London and based out of Tel Aviv, Israel. If you have any questions regarding IJ, please contact us at:
info@infinityjournal.com

Infinity Journal is solely distributed through its official website. It may not be shared through other websites, by email or by other means, as a whole or in any part. Please refrain from sharing this document directly and instead recommend that your friends and colleagues subscribe for free at InfinityJournal.com. This is integral to maintaining Infinity Journal as a free journalzine.

Additionally, if quoting from an article in Infinity Journal, please ensure that Infinity Journal is properly sourced.

Any publication included in Infinity Journal and/or opinions expressed therein do not necessarily reflect the views of Infinity Journal or the IJ Group. Such publications and all information within the publications (e.g. titles, dates, statistics, conclusions, sources, opinions, etc) are solely the responsibility of the author of the article, not Infinity Journal or the IJ Group.

SPECIAL EDITION



Infinity Journal

An Introduction to “Strategic Misfortunes”

Strategy is a concept that is exceptionally easy to understand – on paper that is. In practice, it remains notoriously difficult to execute. We know this because of the wealth of knowledge contained within the history of warfare – or if one chooses, throughout strategic history. Yet, precisely what is this high concept? What does it mean and what is its role? After all, these are questions that must be answered, however briefly, before one can begin to understand any misfortune in the function of Strategy. If we turn to history’s greatest military theorist, the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, we understand that Strategy is the “use of the engagement for the purpose of the war”. [i] In Clausewitz’s definition, “engagement” ultimately implies violence and “purpose” denotes the political condition and/or political behavior being sought. Today, one may prefer to use a definition of Strategy proffered in more modern wording: “Strategy refers to the use made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy. It is the bridge that connects policy with military power.” [ii] Though separated by 175 years, ultimately both definitions speak to the very same meaning and role of Strategy: it is an activity, department, or even response concerned with the linkage of violence to political purpose.

The history of warfare has provided posterity with a treasure chest of examples where military leaders devised and executed Strategy with sheer excellence. For one example, we can turn to the Battle of Marathon, which, with great thanks to historians such as Hans Delbrück, we now have a clearer understanding of the events that took place in this ancient battle. It was in the Vrana Valley in 490 B.C.E. that Miltiades and his hoplite forces defeated the invading Persians. He was able to accomplish this through, among others, a combination of his brilliant understanding of the terrain; the force deployment of his Athenian hoplites aimed at opposing Persian cavalry and their formidable archers *prior* to the battle; and in how he managed to utilize his forces in order to counter attacks to their flanks once violence began. The purpose of the engagement was simple. Miltiades and his hoplites accepted battle with the Persians for the maintenance of the security of Athens, and arguably, Greece at large. This was a display of Strategy at its finest. Brilliant lessons in Strategy aside – let alone Strategy that has been executed “good enough” – arguably, they are not equivalent to the strategic misfortunes found throughout strategic history, including contemporary and current times.

The list of strategic misfortunes is long and bloody, too long to be listed even in a special edition dedicated to the subject. However, a few examples are necessary in order to bring forth a clear understanding of the purpose of this edition.

While historical accounts and records of wars may be incomplete and slanted, the end result of wars cannot be. We know who won and we know who lost. As concerns strategic history, it is chock full of strategic misfortunes found within the conduct of war. A strategic misfortune can imply anything from difficulty to outright failure in linking “ends” and “means” via “ways”. Moreover, failure in the function of Strategy need not occur within one instance of fighting – it can actually be a long and drawn out process. For example, and again turning to the chronicles of strategic history, in 216 B.C.E. General Hannibal of Carthage defeated one Roman army (possibly up to 50,000 dead Romans and Italians) at the Battle of Cannae within the space of a day. Yet, despite such a tactical achievement, Hannibal failed strategically. He subsequently occupied parts of Italy for over a dozen years and never succeeded in turning his battlefield achievements or military occupation of Italy into positive political effect for Carthage.

In contemporary historical times, Napoleon is a prime candidate for strategic misfortunes. Despite the French Emperor’s numerous tactical successes, Napoleon racked up an abundance of strategic failures spread across the European continent, and beyond, throughout his rule. Similar to Hannibal, he could never turn his bloody triumphs into positive political achievements for the French Empire. Such failures effectively ensured that every battle won ultimately mattered little, at least for the maintenance of the French Empire.

In World War I, volumes could be written on the strategic misfortunes that took place in Europe alone. In 1914, the German General Staff’s “Schlieffen Plan” quickly turned into a massive strategic failure for Germany, placing pressure on the entire German armed forces. As a result of, among others, amendments to the original German plan, the unexpected speed at which the Russians were able to organize and deploy, and the French ability to mount a counterattack, culminating in the Battle of the Marne, Germany’s initial political aims were quickly lost. In what was expected to be a rapid victory against France, events morphed into years of so-called trench warfare and ultimately, in the defeat of the German Empire.

At present, and despite knowledge that the history of warfare has provided, strategic failure continues unabated. Strategic misfortunes have permeated numerous conflicts since the 1980s – from the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Argentinians in the Falklands War, the US and French in Lebanon, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the US and international forces in Somalia in 1993, United Nations’ forces in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the Israel Defense Force in the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

So, how and what can we learn from both historical and current strategic failures that will assist in the future? Answering these questions through the examples provided in the following articles is the purpose of this Infinity Journal Special Edition. In this edition, six individuals have written on a wide range of topics that do not simply point out the strategic failures that have occurred, but perhaps more importantly, *why* they happened. It is from these writings that we must learn and subsequently apply lessons if one desires to avoid, as best as possible, future strategic misfortune.

Eminent strategic theorist Professor Colin S. Gray argues that the Luftwaffe’s failure in the summer of 1940 was the direct result

of the excellence of RAF Fighter Command, rather than because of its own mistakes, serious though these were. In this Infinity Journal Special Edition article, Gray explains the strategic nature of the German defeat.

Lt. Col. Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria, II, a world-renowned historian, Clausewitzian scholar, and Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College, argues that Erwin Rommel's generalship continuously pushed men and materiel to their limits, which precipitously wore down forces that were merely intended to provide security and stability along the flank of the main theater of operations against the Soviet Union. Rommel failed to appreciate the operational interplay between land power and air power – and his forces paid the price at El Alamein.

Defense analyst and lecturer at the Israeli Defense Force Command and General Staff College, Dr. Eado Hecht, holds that adaptation of Israel's successful strategy to quell Palestinian attacks emanating from neighbouring Arab states to the unique circumstances of Lebanon led to the First Lebanon War in 1982. However, after initial success, the strategy failed.

United States Army Colonel and Director of Military History at West Point, Gian P. Gentile, provides a self-critical assessment of how he came to violate the dictates of being a good historian: he began to think like a social scientist and embraced a model that placed the primacy of strategy over tactics in war. What he found, however, is that history does not always conform to that model.

Associate Professor and Senior Analyst, Dr. C. Dale Walton, examines US decisions regarding war and peace from the Vietnam War to the present. He finds a disturbing pattern of "anti-Clausewitzian" behavior. Walton argues that the US military is very good at fighting wars, but America's civilian leaders frequently have misused their military instrument, engaging in ill-conceived adventures without first carefully assessing likely human, financial, and other costs, establishing clear goals, and crafting a realistic roadmap for winning the conflict in a timely fashion.

Lastly, Adam Elkus, a defense and security analyst and doctoral student in international relations, writes that the sheer scale and complexity of the Chinese Civil War belies assertions that today's substate conflicts are uniquely challenging. Elkus looks at what lessons we can grasp from the complexity and contingency of Mao's victory and the Nationalists' strategic misfortune.

As a Co-Founder and the Publisher of Infinity Journal, it is my true pleasure to offer our readers this Infinity Journal Special Edition, "Strategic Misfortunes".

A.E. Stahl

Publisher, Infinity Journal
October 2012

[i] Strategy, as defined by Clausewitz, was well understood by many of contemporaries, such as August Wagner, August Otto Ruhle von Lilienstern, Gerhard Scharnohorst, among many others. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 177.

[ii] Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, (New York, Routledge 2007): 1, 284.

Contents

Clipping the Eagle's Wings: Explaining Failure and Success in the Battle of Britain, 1940 **5**

Colin S. Gray

The Luftwaffe's failure in the summer of 1940 was the direct result of the excellence of RAF Fighter Command, rather than because of its own mistakes, serious though these were. In this Infinity Journal Special Edition article, Colin Gray explains the strategic nature of the German defeat.

El Alamein, 1942: Rommel's Anti-Climax **12**

Antulio J. Echevarria, II

Antulio Echevarria argues that Rommel's generalship continuously pushed men and materiel to their limits, which precipitously wore down forces that were merely intended to provide security and stability along the flank of the main theater of operations against the Soviet Union. Rommel failed to appreciate the operational interplay between land power and air power – and his forces paid the price at El Alamein.

Israeli Strategy in the First Lebanon War, 1982-1985 **16**

Eado Hecht

Adaptation of Israel's successful strategy to quell Palestinian attacks emanating from neighbouring Arab states to the unique circumstances of Lebanon led to the First Lebanon War in 1982. However, after initial success, it failed.

The Accidental Coindinista: A Historian's Journey Back From the Dark Side of Social Science **21**

Gian P. Gentile

Gian Gentile provides a self-critical assessment of how he came to violate the dictates of being a good historian: he began to think like a social scientist and embraced a model that placed the primacy of strategy over tactics in war. What he found, however, is that history doesn't always conform to that model.

Vietnam and After: Failure in the Vietnam War and the Enduring Defects in US Strategic Culture **25**

C. Dale Walton

C. Dale Walton examines US decisions regarding war and peace from the Vietnam War to the present. He finds a disturbing pattern of "anti-Clausewitzian" behavior. Walton argues that the US military is very good at fighting wars, but America's civilian leaders frequently have misused their military instrument, engaging in ill-conceived adventures without first carefully assessing likely human, financial, and other costs, establishing clear goals, and crafting a realistic roadmap for winning the conflict in a timely fashion.

Strategy and the Chinese Civil War **29**

Adam Elkus

The sheer scale and complexity of the Chinese Civil War belies assertions that today's substate conflicts are uniquely challenging. Adam Elkus looks at what lessons we can grasp from the complexity and contingency of Mao's victory and the Nationalists' strategic misfortune.



Clipping the Eagle's Wings: Explaining Failure and Success in the Battle of Britain, 1940

Colin S. Gray

University of Reading
United Kingdom

Professor Colin S. Gray is a strategist, author and professor of international relations and strategic studies at the University of Reading, where he is also the Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies. Professor Gray served five years in the Reagan Administration on the President's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament, including studies of nuclear strategy, maritime strategy, space strategy, and Special Forces. He has written 25 books, most recently including *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (2010), *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (2nd Edition, 2012), and *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (2012). His next book to be published will be *Perspectives on Strategy* (forthcoming March 2013), and currently he is writing on "strategy and defence planning".

The most fundamental reason for the German defeat was a failure in strategy. Most of the decisions which determined the outcome of the Battle had been made before it began. Given the defence systems, the aircraft, the training and the plans, all put in place by the decisions of a few people in leadership positions on each side, the odds were stacked heavily against the Luftwaffe from the first.

Stephen Bungay[i]

Bungay is right in his unequivocal claim, quoted above. But, is it more correct to register the outcome of the Battle of Britain as a failure of strategy on the German part, rather than as a success for British strategy? When scholars and others choose to focus on the behaviour and misbehaviour of only one side to a conflict, balanced judgment is likely to fall victim as a consequence. Clausewitz insists that war is a duel and every PowerPoint presentation on strategy more or less faithfully restates the obvious important truth that the enemy votes on how well we need to do.[ii] And yet, somehow, the duelling nature of strategic affairs frequently escapes proper notice and attention.

If one asks 'why did the Luftwaffe lose the Battle of Britain?' the question encourages a biasing emphasis upon German performance that is anchored in the fact of defeat. Although the Luftwaffe made many mistakes in the summer of 1940, it would be a serious mistake to attribute its defeat to strategic misfortune – it was not bad luck. Similarly, it would not be useful or persuasive to argue that a different German choice here or there should have made all the difference between defeat and victory. The Luftwaffe failed strategically in summer 1940 because Britain, and especially its Fighter Command, was too good for it in the geostrategic context of the conflict at that time.

Undoubtedly, the Germans did not conduct a sufficiently effective campaign against Fighter Command, but it needs to be appreciated that the German weaknesses and errors were not, in the main, misfortunes (i.e. instances of bad luck), rather were they the products of a system that was not capable of fighting with strategic sense. The Battle of Britain in the summer and autumn of 1940 was a struggle that has to be understood as a unity, not only as a German defeat or a British victory (pick one). However, as an exemplary tale of strategy, or its absence, in action, the Battle is much better explained as a British victory than as a German defeat. History records many cases of 'fighting and winning ugly', but the evidence of 1940 shows unmistakably that the Luftwaffe, fighting ugly or not, was never likely to prevail. RAF Fighter Command strictly did not require good fortune in order to win, but one cannot deny that German folly certainly was welcome. The Battle of Britain serves as one of history's clearest examples of the rewards and the costs of both good and poor strategy.

Theory and Practice for 1940

There is an intellectual key to the understanding of strategy that is not difficult to present. Simply stated: a strategy should achieve desired political ends by using appropriate means in effective ways. There are usually good reasons why ends, ways, and means fail to mesh as cooperatively as one would like, but the practical ambition is only to function with strategic sense well enough, not to perform perfectly. In the military realm one has to expect to fight under less than perfect conditions, which is why one should strive to learn from unfolding experience, and be sufficiently flexible as to be

To cite this Article: Gray, Colin S., "Clipping the Eagle's Wings: Explaining Failure and Success in the Battle of Britain, 1940", *Infinity Journal*, IJ Special Edition, "Strategic Misfortunes", October 2012, pages 5-11.

able to adapt to unwelcome developments and yet survive and even succeed.[iii] Because of its super-reductionist simplicity, the ends, ways, and means formula enables us to test historical experience fairly reliably for strategic sense.[iv]

To the strategic trinity just cited one needs to add the intellectually and evidentially challenging factors of assumptions and also of context.[v] The people and the machines of 1940 had to perform in action then, but they were very substantially the products of the circumstances of a British context for homeland air defence that had form from 1916, and of a German context rooted only in 1933 (and then not for an air campaign against Britain at home). The rival air forces had to fight in 1940, but each was made in the preceding years. Most of the RAF's system and the Luftwaffe's advantages and disadvantages can be traced to pre-war circumstances and concerns. RAF Fighter Command in 1940 was the product of a fairly consistent focus on homeland air defence traceable back to 1915-16, while the Luftwaffe's close attention to Britain was a novel phenomenon in the summer of 1940. One side was long prepared for the battle of the day, the other was not.[vi] These are facts.

I do not wish to employ ends, ways, and means mechanistically in the analysis that follows, but readers are alerted to the value that of this gloriously inclusive yet still taut inherently holistic conceptual trinity. It permeates my argument. Although I will argue that RAF Fighter Command won a well merited strategic victory in 1940, it is necessary also that I explain why the Luftwaffe suffered strategic defeat. I must proceed thus, given the essential unity of strategic experience between rivals and enemies.

Preparation and Battle

Any military force can have a bad day or two, and the reasons for poor combat performance can be many and complex. That said, the history of military aviation shows that air forces tend to fail or succeed for reasons with paper trails over many years.[vii] The Battle of Britain was a struggle with two timelines. It mattered critically how effectively the rival air forces fought from July to October 1940, but that net effectiveness was influenced massively by the strategic events of the previous quarter-century. Typically, in popular histories and TV documentaries the strategic tale begins in Flanders in May-June 1940, and then proceeds at a galloping pace from the opening probing 'round' over the Channel in July, to the main event (in two or three 'rounds') in August and September. All too often, strategically vital differences between RAF Fighter Command and the Luftwaffe pass unflagged. Neglecting the contextual dimension to the air warfare of summer 1940 is probably the most punishing mistake one can make.

To explain, although now we know most everything that there is to be known about the air warfare of 1940, that very familiarity can function unhelpfully as a barrier to our understanding. We have knowledge, but we tend to lack empathy because we do not think about air warfare as people did in 1940. It would be hard to exaggerate the relevance of the strategic historical fact that the Battle of Britain was the first air battle in all of history effectively unconnected to on-going terrestrial warfare. This was an attempt to win well enough in and from

the sky, leading either to terrestrial success with brute force in combat, or to political victory as a result of coercion from altitude. Could it be done?[viii] More to the point, could the Luftwaffe do it in August-September 1940? No-one knew, and in part they did not know because it had never been tried before, anywhere by anyone. Theory was plentiful, if not abundant, but reliable evidence was lacking.

The reality of 1940 was that only one air force, the RAF, knew what it had to do and, in principle, how to do it. The Luftwaffe, in contrast, was committed to the world's first stand-alone air campaign. Moreover, the RAF, and the Royal Flying Corps before it, had been devoted to the strategic mission of homeland air defence since 1915 with some activity, and certainly since 1917 in the most careful detail.[ix] British air defence had a track record of considerable success in action in 1916-18, was reorganised twice in the inter-war years, albeit with large continuities, and it was always fit enough for its contemporary purpose – as far as one can judge for peacetime(!) – through the 1920s and 1930s. This is not to deny that there was a brief period in the very early 1920s when the air defence narrative seemed in peril, but this was fixed by 1924 (courtesy of anxiety occasioned by a perceived French air menace). More troubling was the delay in 1937-8 in reequipping with the new fast monoplane fighters, with the Luftwaffe's Bf109 acquisition being two years in advance of the Hurricane and Spitfire. The Hurricanes were delivered for squadron service in November 1937, Spitfires on 4 August 1938. The Bf109 first flew on 28 May 1935, the Spitfire on 5 March 1936. The new first-generation monoplane Bf109s were fed into the Condor Legion's war in Spain, but it was untried against a similarly equipped enemy until it met Spitfires over Dunkirk in late May 1940. The point of historical contextual significance, though, is that Britain had ready enough an organisation, peopled, trained, and equipped adequately for the task of the hour, homeland air defence – and Germany did not have sufficiently offsetting advantages on the offensive side.

British air defences had defeated three German air campaigns conducted from 1915 to 1918 (2 by Zeppelin airships and one by Gotha aircraft), and then had prepared for the threat that materialised by and in 1940. The Germans had to improvise most aspects of their air campaign against Britain in 1940; the British needed to improvise hardly anything. The Luftwaffe fought with the weapons it had, ones acquired and then employed briefly in relatively short-range continental warfare. This is not to suggest that the Germans could not succeed in the air in 1940, but it is to highlight the abundantly evidenced fact that only one belligerent in 1940 had prepared over time and in depth for an air battle across the Channel over Britain.

The literature on the Battle of Britain is abundant, vastly repetitive, and typically innocent of much strategic sense. There are, however, two exceptional readable yet scholarly studies which tell the story of 1940 as well as one needs to have it told. Without qualification, I recommend Richard Overy's *The Battle of Britain: Myth and Reality* (2010), and Stephen Bungay's *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* (2000). Because of the excellence of the granular histories of the Battle in 1940, I will not waste space with more than a summary of the story arc of the most relevant combat in 1940.

- **May – June:** German assault beginning on 10 May routs the French army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Most of the BEF (226,000) and some French soldiers (112,000) are evacuated from Dunkirk between 26 May and 4 June. The RAF in France is ineffective, but Fighter Command aircraft from British airfields provide a nasty shock to the Luftwaffe over Dunkirk. The 9 days of air combat associated directly with the Dunkirk operation cost the RAF 177 aircraft to 240 for the Luftwaffe.
- **10 July - 11 August:** The Luftwaffe tries to entice RAF Fighter Command into battle over the Channel. The Germans avoid crossing the Channel and instead probe British air defences by attacking shipping in a rather desultory fashion (the *kanalkampf*). 10 July – 11 August saw the RAF lose 115 fighters and 64 bombers, these 179 compare with Luftwaffe losses of 216. Both sides learnt from the fighting, but the Germans did not unravel the architecture and operational design of Fighter Command. In order to preserve assets and deny intelligence to the enemy, the Command deliberately limited its reactions to the German campaign against Channel shipping.
- **12/13 August – 6/7 September:** This brief period was the main event of the Battle, militarily considered (it included days when flying was either impossible or severely restricted by bad weather). Between these dates the Luftwaffe strove none too consistently to render RAF Fighter Command hors de combat. The Command was attacked directly on its principal airfields (the Luftwaffe was not well informed about dispersion to much rougher satellite fields), and in its specific industrial base (aircraft and engine manufacturing plants). The most vital target set, the coastal radar stations were attacked heavily on 12 August, but very little thereafter (the number of Chain Home and Chain Home Low radar stations grew from 51 in July 1940 to 76 by the end of September that year). The attritional combat was heavy, if somewhat episodic, but Fighter Command survived into early September, damaged but definitely not crippled. The operational air general, Keith Park commanding 11 Group (London and the South East), was not compelled to evacuate his airfields to the south and east of London.
- **7-15 September:** Desperate for a more speedy victory than they had achieved thus far, the Germans shifted strategy to bomb British urban targets (in daylight), especially London and its docks. The hope was that RAF Fighter Command would be obliged to ascend in the largest number it could still manage, where it could be attrited in greater numbers than before. This 'round' in the Battle, really the final one, concluded on 15 September, when the Luftwaffe sought to darken the sky over London with 965 aircraft (348 bombers and 617 fighters). The scale of the attacks, and the geographic depth of their necessary penetration, allowed Fighter Command the time to assemble a large enough near continuous defence as to inflict immensely demoralising damage on the German bomber crews in particular.
- **Late September – :** The daylight 'Blitz' principally against London of the 7-15 period, was succeeded by a largely nighttime 'Blitz' through the autumn and winter, a

campaign to which Fighter Command had no answers at that time (lacking airborne radar in 1940).

Hitler officially postponed *sine die* the planned invasion of Britain (*Seelowe*) on 17 September 1940.

Explaining the Defeat

Why did RAF Fighter Command win in 1940? The answer is only two-fold when stated bluntly and minimally: because of Britain's 25 year record of competent professional attention to homeland air defence, and because of the superior performance of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding as the strategic leader and military commander of British air defence. The whole story is of course complex and contains as much detail as anyone finds tolerable. However, these two reasons – 25 years of dedicated practice, and Dowding – comprise the heart of the matter. Because my argument is advanced so confidently in praise of the RAF and Dowding, it is only prudent to lead this part of the analysis with a summary of the reasons why Germany lost the Battle.

Germany's problems

1. **Comprehensive failure of strategy:** Germany's political ends did not sit comfortably well enough with its selected ways or its enabling means. In short, Germany needed its Luftwaffe either to assist its navy and army to win the war by a successful invasion, or to coerce the British government by air action alone into acquiescence in German political leadership (which may not have required many German boots on Britain's green and pleasant land). In failing to suppress the RAF the Luftwaffe effectively thwarted the political 'end' of a compliant, possibly even friendly, government in London. The political guidance to the Luftwaffe's operational level commanders (Generalfeldmarschall Alfred Kesselring – Luftflotte 2, Brussels; Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle – Luftflotte 3, Paris) was minimal. Indeed, Hitler showed little interest in the air campaign, while Hermann Goring did not function strategically in military perspective).
2. **Ignorance of the enemy:** Thinking in German terms of RAF Fighter Command as a target set, it would be difficult to improve on this judgment by Stephen Bungay: "The core problem for Kesselring and Sperrle was that they literally did not know what they were doing." [x] Luftwaffe intelligence, to ignore the glaring irony, correctly understood little that was vitally significant about Fighter Command. Oberst Beppo Schmid, the catastrophically incompetent head of Luftwaffe Intelligence, persistently underestimated RAF Fighter Command. This goes a long way towards explaining why Luftwaffe morale suffered heavily, following aircrew puzzlement, when their enemy continued resisting into September in numbers not visibly much if at all reduced, despite the cumulatively high 'kill' rates claimed. In every aspect of the Battle the Germans were hampered severely by acute, literally lethal, ignorance of the enemy. [xi] They knew about British radar, but they did not know how the RAF used it. In fact, Luftwaffe Intelligence had no comprehension of RAF Fighter Command as the world's first, and then only

integrated air defence system. Because the Luftwaffe in 1940 did not centralize its radar data and filtering, it did not occur to them that Fighter Command was truly a network, which is to say a system with integrated sub-systems (thanks to Post Office land lines). A key part of the German ignorance was their lack of comprehension of the existence and role of the 7 Sector Stations that Air Vice Marshal Keith Park was using as instruments of his operational air generalship. Naturally, since the Luftwaffe did not know of what Fighter Command consisted and how it functioned, bombardment for strategic effectiveness – identified by Giulio Douhet as the “most delicate and difficult task in aerial warfare ... defined as aerial strategy” – had to be a substantially haphazard affair.[xii]

3. Inadequate military means: The Luftwaffe of 1940 was the world-leading air force of the day – it was truly formidable. It had the finest medium, light and dive bombers, and arguably the finest single-seat fighter, the Bf109. However, the Luftwaffe was a relatively short-range force and it was always on the edge of crisis over spare parts and replacement aircrew and aircraft. The service was a near miracle of hasty construction, but it had been built as a Nazi political and cultural showcase, as a coercive instrument against those likely to be easily shaken, and if need be, as a force enhancer of swift terrestrial continental victory. It was not built to be able to sustain and recover from recurring heavy losses, or to fight across seas against an enemy over his home. Numbers are arguable because of the problems of dating the audit and selecting what really were the “serviceable” numbers. Nonetheless, a good enough count for the balance holds that RAF Fighter Command and the Luftwaffe joined serious combat in summer 1940 with orders of battle at approximately 754 Hurricanes and Spitfires in 48 squadrons versus 1,107 Bf109s. Single-seat fighters were the significant combatants. By and large, everything else in the air was only a potential ‘kill’. Fighting literally overseas, the Bf109s were too few, with their margins of numerical superiority inadequate. To illustrate: by my calculation between 1 June and 1 November 1940, Britain built 1,367 Hurricanes and 724 Spitfires (average per diem works out at 8.9 and 4.7 respectively). Compare those numbers with the total (operational) loss rate, which for the longer period 10 May to 4 November averaged 4.4 (Hurricanes) and 2.7 (Spitfires) per diem, and it is not hard to appreciate why the Luftwaffe failed to clear the air of annoying British aircraft. Among the many things that Oberst Schmid did not know was the non-trivial fact that in the summer and autumn of 1940 Britain was out-producing Germany in fighter aircraft (nor did he know about the superb RAF organisation for recovery and repair). Numbers abound in military aviation history and sometimes they are strategically meaningful. On the launch day for the great German air assault on Fighter Command, which is to say 13 August (to ignore the attacks on the radar system on 12 August), the Luftwaffe (Luffflotten 2 and 3) could commit only 871 Bf109s, against a Fighter Command total in the 640s. There were too few first-line operationally ready German single-seat fighters. As for the enemy, not only was Britain out-producing the Germans in fighters, but the relevant operationally available pilot numbers also tell the tale of strategic defeat for the Luftwaffe. On

6 July Fighter Command could call on 1,259 pilots, on 1 September 1,142 pilots and on 2 November, 1,797 pilots. This is the arithmetic of German strategic defeat. The dependable Bungay provides suitable closing metrics on the most relevant aircraft holdings. Apparently, on 17 August Schmid told Luftwaffe commanders that RAF Fighter Command had only 300 serviceable fighters in its active force. The real numbers for Fighter Command were “855 with operational squadrons, 209 at storage units, and another 84 at training units, a total of 1,438 twice as many as in the beginning of July.”[xiii]

4. Poor campaign adaptiveness: German aircrew and aircraft were excellent for their place and day, but that place and day was not over Britain in 1940. Error is inevitable and unavoidable in the practice of strategy, so the unarguable fact of German mistakes cannot itself be an issue of interest here. Rather, the question is ‘how did the Luftwaffe adapt to correct for the errors which experience was revealing?’ Could it be flexible and immediately find ways to fight more effectively against Britain? The short answer, and even a long answer, is simply ‘no’. Germany lacked intelligence on most vital aspects of British air defence, and it could not possibly correct for aircraft production rate mistakes in real-time in August and September 1940. One can identify many crucial errors that could have been avoided or mitigated, had only Nazi Germany in the mid to late 1930s known what historians today know. Hindsight is wonderful. The German political leadership was thoroughly disengaged from the Battle of Britain at all levels of performance: tactical, operational, and certainly strategic. Luftwaffe officers, high and low, were not formally educated at all in strategy. But, notwithstanding the many zones of German error, had the intelligence picture been far more accurate, even the physical inadequacies of the bomber force (range and/or payload) might not have been so constraining of achievement. For example, if the Luftwaffe had known what sector stations were and what they did, and if the medium bombers had attacked persistently even with their poor bomb sights, real damage with value might well have been done. Fortunately, the Luftwaffe in 1940 was not an organisation capable of improvised adaptations to the challenge from strategic hell that was the Fuhrer’s call about Britain.

Why did Britain win the Battle?

The reasons for Germany’s defeat are legion; indeed one is spoiled for choice. With respect to the RAF’s victory, it may be recalled that I staked a claim earlier for two essential, mutually complementary, explanations: the British air defence system which had a provenance of 25 years by 1940, and the performance of that system’s leader from 1936 until November 1940, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh ‘Stuffy’ Dowding. In 1940, the air defence system was Dowding’s. British air defence was a team effort, as it had to be, but Dowding’s contributions were by far the most significant to the team’s achievements.[xiv]

To summarise: in the early 1930s he had been the most important figure in decisions on research and development bearing upon air defence; his support was vital to the

breakthrough on radar on 26 February 1935; his voice was reflected in the aircraft and armament steps taken crucially in early and mid decade; and after air defence was re-branded as Fighter Command in July 1936, with himself as the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, his was the dominant role over the tactics, operations, and strategy of British homeland air defence.[xv] The integrated air defence system won a team battle over Germany in 1940, but the team had an outstanding leader. Dowding designed what Fighter Command became: he established its procedures; he decided how it would function as a seamless network; and last but not least he selected the operational concept for engagement that made most strategic sense. The victory in 1940 was a victory for the system, but it was the 'Dowding System'. The system was strong and had valuable redundancies, but had it been commanded by another brain and personality it might well have performed far less effectively. I conclude with an appraisal of Fighter Command's success.

1. Dowding's strategic sense: Dowding functioned persistently and consistently in strategic mode; he understood that as the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Command his responsibility was for the strategy of air defence, inclusively considered. He committed to ensuring that each of the classic constituents of strategy – ends, ways, and means, and their underpinning assumptions – had integrity both in and of themselves and, no less important, as vital enablers for the others. This claim is so familiar as to risk appearing banal, but its frequent neglect in practice highlights its fundamental importance. Dowding modernised the system of air defence and its supporting infrastructure so as to ensure that the ways and means were sufficiently adaptable to cope with unpredicted, even unanticipated, circumstances. Moreover, Dowding had to ensure that the fighting power of his command – with its physical, moral, and conceptual components – could succeed in combat against the enemy on the day, whenever that day should dawn and for as long as it might last. Dowding possessed and consistently exercised strategic sense.
2. Defence planning with 'minimum regrets': Dowding's major equipment and research decisions over a ten-year period, including his long term on the Air Council from 1930-36, proved 'right enough'. He passed the minimum regrets test. The strategist does not need to record flawless strategic performance, only one free of irrecoverable mistakes. Wherever one looks at the ends, ways, and means of British home air defence in the 1930s and into the 1940s, there is no serious room for doubt that Dowding was either right, or sufficiently correct, on the biggest decisions and in the ways in which they were to be implemented. His strategic sense enabled him to adapt to unanticipated circumstances.
3. Adaptability: British air defence and its victory in 1940 were the result of a quarter century of preparation that was nearly always paced well enough to be combat competitive with the extant or anticipated threat of the period and its near future. Even in the short lifetime of air power, Fighter Command in 1940 enjoyed a lengthy provenance. Dowding the strategist did not have to improvise on many significant aspects of his Command's

capability. Exceptions clearly included combat tactics, which in practice were adapted (away from the lethal 'vic' formation) at the squadron level, and with respect to night fighting which Dowding insisted correctly could be improved only when airborne radar was ready, and suitable two-seat aircraft to carry and employ it.

Dowding succeeded in preparing an architecture of air defence that could cope with a German air menace that evolved rapidly and altered markedly in quality and quantity of tactical and operational menace as a result of unpredicted, certainly unpredictable, geostrategic changes. Fighter Command was not created, developed, and then fine-tuned to deal with a Luftwaffe based in Northern France (meaning a radar assisted warning time cross Channel of 6 minutes!). RAF leaders had envisaged the German air threat in the 1930s primarily as a menace based in Germany, just possibly the Low Countries, and taking the form of medium bombers without single-seat fighter protection.

Some might argue that Fighter Command was always likely to win, almost regardless of German choices. With Germany and its Luftwaffe as they were in 1940, one can make a persuasive case to the effect that the Luftwaffe's campaign direction was not critically important. Given what the Luftwaffe did not know about Fighter Command, and what Clausewitz called the "grammar" of war (applied to 1940), one might argue that it did not much matter whether the Germans bombed airfields, cities, or both. Fighter Command was resilient against the kind of performance that the Luftwaffe was capable of imposing. In principle, Britain's aircraft manufacturing industry was highly vulnerable to attack, as also were the coastal facilities of the Chain Home radar system(s). But, principle and practice were far apart. And one should not be seduced either by common sense or by imagination into believing that the Luftwaffe might well have made a different operational choice here and there, and as a consequence won the campaign.

There were systemic reasons why the Luftwaffe of 1940 performed as it did in the way it did. Dowding was certainly fortunate in his enemy's incompetence, but that is not to argue that he succeeded because he was lucky. It was true that he was the fortunate command legatee of two decades of high British competence in air defence. It is also true to say, however, that Dowding personally contributed very significantly to the future strength of that air defence by virtue of his enthusiastic endorsement of vital technical developments both before and after he assumed command in July 1936. Of course, the successful defensive performance in 1940 was won by a team of outstanding contributors to Fighter Command's combat potency, but the overarching and most persuasive explanation for the victory was that the Command benefited from superior strategic leadership for long enough to give it decisive advantages over the Luftwaffe. It was not luck that in 1940 Fighter Command had excellent equipment when it mattered most, that it was settled in pursuit of the most prudent and effective master operational concept, that its battlespace general (Keith Park) truly was Dowding's alter ego in military grasp and strategic sense, and that scientific and technical challenges consistently were addressed competently by

the Command.

4. Command: Dowding persisted with what history demonstrated to be the correct command philosophy and broad guiding concept of operations (near continuous engagement with the minimum force necessary to disrupt him – to limit British losses). He reserved for himself the role of strategist, delegating operational command to his exceptionally capable subordinate, Keith Park, at 11 Group, who played the role of Sherman to Dowding's Grant. [xvii] Park, in his turn, delegated tactical command to his sector station controllers – up to the point of air-to-air contact, when squadron commanders aloft took charge. Because he adhered firmly to a strategic standard for his performance, Dowding selected a concept of operations for Park to follow that expressed the strategic purpose of the command at that time. Dowding never forgot that his goal was to deny the Germans a convincing narrative that would support the invasion option. He could not decide for Berlin how much damage his Command needed to inflict on the Luftwaffe. What he could do, however, was ensure that no rational, if optimistic, Luftwaffe briefing to the Fuhrer could claim credibly to have defeated the RAF. Overy is plausible when he writes: "It is evident that not a lot was needed to deter Hitler from the idea of invading Britain. Fighter Command tipped the balance." [xviii] Dowding could not have known this at the time. He needed both to be able to continue to hurt the Luftwaffe seriously, all the while, in the process, never ceasing to demonstrate

that Fighter Command remained alive and well enough. Dowding made his single greatest strategic contribution to British survival in 1940 in mid May over the burning issue of the immediate dispatch to France of many more Hurricanes from the home defence force. On 16 May Dowding wrote a 10 point memorandum to the War Cabinet, via the Undersecretary of State for Air, Harold Balfour, in which he explained the current strategic facts of life with characteristic exemplary bluntness. [xix] He wrote that if Fighter Command sent more planes to France (in a losing cause) they would not only fail to save the French, but their loss would all but guarantee the subsequent consequential defeat of Britain also. Dowding prevailed, Fighter Command (almost) ceased leaking Hurricanes to France, and the Command was not expended in a lost cause in May-June. Dowding was not afraid to tell Prime Minister Churchill what he did not want to hear – that we should not try to help the French anymore, even though they were still fighting.

One can summarise Dowding's concept of operations as minimum effective response, to deny the Luftwaffe even the possibility of a decisive victory in the air (or against airfields). Many of Dowding's critics could not understand why Fighter Command committed only a fraction of its total force, most especially of its best fighter aircraft, the Spitfire, to combat at any one time. His was not the most exciting of operational concepts, but it was far and away the most prudent, and it was a strategic victory by any plausible definition.

References

- [i] Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Aurum Press, 2000), p.379.
- [ii] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1832-4; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p.76.
- [iii] See Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- [iv] On the basics of strategy, see my "Strategy: Some Notes for a User's Guide": *Infinity Journal*, Vol.2, No.2 (Spring 2012), pp. 4-9.
- [v] I address the importance and challenge of assumptions in my *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2013), ch.1.
- [vi] The two most essential English language studies of the Luftwaffe are James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), and Williamson Murray, *Luftwaffe* (Baltimore, MD: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1985). For British air defence one is grateful to John Ferris who published an exhaustive series of studies on the subject: to select but two, see Ferris, "Achieving Air Ascendancy: Challenge and Response in British Strategic Air Defence, 1915-1940", in Sebastian Cox and Peter Gray, eds., *Air Power History: Turning Points from Kitty Hawk to Kosovo* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 21-50, and "Catching the Wave: The RAF pursues a RMA, 1918-39", in Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), pp.159-78. Also see the official history: T.C.G. James, *The Growth of Fighter Command, 1936-1940 (Restricted, 1942-3)* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).
- [vii] See Robin Higham and Stephen J. Harris, eds., *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), esp. p.355.
- [viii] Coercion from the air is discussed at length in Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). I do not find Pape entirely convincing. See Colin S. Gray: *Understanding Airpower: Bonfire of the Fallacies*, Research Paper 2009-3 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Force Research Institute, March 2009), pp.38-41, and *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012), pp. 296-8.
- [ix] John Ferris, "Airbandit: C31 and Strategic Air Defence during the First Battle of Britain, 1915-18", in Michael Dockrill and David French, eds., *Strategy and Intelligence: British Policy during the First World War* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), pp. 23-66.
- [x] Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, p.236.
- [xi] See Horst Boog "German Intelligence in the Second World War and Sebastian Cox "A Comparative Analysis of RAF and Luftwaffe Intelligence in the Battle of Britain, 1940", in Michael I. Handel, ed., *Intelligence and Military Operations* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), pp. 350-424, and 425-43 respectively. Also see Paul Kennedy, "British 'Net Assessment' and the Coming of the Second World War", and Williamson Murray, "Net Assessment in Nazi Germany in the 1930s", in Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 19-59, and 60-96.
- [xii] Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (1927, 1942; New York: Arno Press, 1972), p.50.
- [xiii] Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, p. 224.
- [xiv] In preparing this article, I have drawn upon my study written for the Office of Net Assessment (U.S. DoD, OSD) entitled "Dowding and the British Strategy of Air Defense, 1936-40".
- [xv] See Vincent Orange, *Dowding of Fighter Command: Victor of the Battle of Britain* (London: Grub Street, 2008). This is a useful biography that only strays occasionally into hagiography.
- [xvi] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 605.
- [xvii] Vincent Orange, *Park: The Biography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park* (London: Grub Street, 2001).
- [xviii] Overy, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 110.
- [xix] Dowding's famous memorandum is reprinted in James, *The Growth of Fighter Command, 1936-1940*, pp. 131-2.

IJ Exclusives

Strategic Perspectives on Current Events

IJ Exclusives are peer-reviewed articles that focus on strategic issues in current events that are published between each quarterly issue of IJ.

Read Them Now at
InfinityJournal.com



El Alamein, 1942: Rommel's Anti-Climax

Antulio J. Echevarria, II

U.S. Army War College
United States of America

Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II is the Director of Research at the U.S. Army War College. He has over 20 years of experience in the U.S. Army, having served in a number of command and staff assignments, and has held a NATO Fulbright. He is the author of *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, *Imagining Future War*, and *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers Before the Great War*, among many articles and monographs. Dr. Echevarria is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College. He has been a Visiting Fellow with Oxford University's Changing Character of War Programme. Dr. Echevarria holds a Master's and Doctorate in history from Princeton University.

Image source: Rommel, 1942, Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1982-0927-503 / Zwilling, Ernst A. / CC-BY-SA

Much has been written about Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, perhaps the most familiar of Hitler's lieutenants. Bashing the Rommel myth has become something of a pastime for historians—and why not?[i] The legend of the “Desert Fox” was deliberately and aggressively fashioned by Rommel himself—with the enthusiastic collaboration of the vast Nazi propaganda machine. Clearing away the underbrush of legend is one of the services that historians provide. And there is much to clear away in this case. To be sure, Rommel defeated a number of able French and British commanders before his string of successes was broken by General Bernard Law Montgomery in the autumn of 1942. The phrase “doing a Rommel” even became a catchword for outsmarting an opponent, whether on the battlefield or the game board. However, Rommel's string of victories also worked against him — concealing not only the extent to which the German way of war had become bifurcated, but also two elements that made the Wehrmacht's tactical successes possible in the first place, namely, logistical support and air cover. If, as Clausewitz said, war has its own grammar, but not its own

logic, then Rommel's military grammar detached itself from the war's political logic and attempted to follow its own path. That path put a premium on waging a fluid war of movement, and continually pushed men and material to their limits, regardless of logistical realities and the operational range of air power. It was also a method that ultimately ran counter to Hitler's larger strategic aims because it precipitously wore down the very fighting machine that was merely supposed to buy time and achieve some stability along the flank of the main theater of operations.

The North African theater was never more than a sideshow for Hitler, an effort to bolster a failing ally who was fast becoming a liability. After June 1941, the main effort for the Reich was the war against the Soviet Union, which by the autumn of that year had escalated from a supposedly swift campaign of occupation into a brutal struggle for existence between National Socialism and Stalinism. Rommel's theater would never enjoy anything more than a tertiary status — behind the campaign in the east and the war in the Atlantic — something he apparently understood, but refused to accept. Right or wrong, Hitler's political logic was clear. Yet, Rommel continually appealed to the High Command for more troops, as if taking Cairo and the Suez Canal could end the war in Germany's favor.

Nothing in Rommel's personal background suggests that he had the mettle to rise to high-level military command. As an officer candidate, he was rated above average, but definitely not exceptional.[ii] As a junior officer in the First World War, he proved to be intelligent, brave, and resourceful — but so were tens of thousands of other young men. Good fortune and his relentless self-promotion, perhaps driven by personal insecurities regarding his class and social standing (he was not Prussian), enabled him to make the most of his exploits: he was awarded the Iron Cross, first and second classes, as well as the *Pour le Merite*. [iii] His book, *Infantry Attacks* (1937), was little more than a collection of war stories posing as tactical lessons; yet, it added much to his personal image as a tactician. [iv] Rommel later wrote, “position warfare is always a struggle for the destruction of men—in contrast to mobile warfare, where everything turns on the destruction of enemy material.” [v] This is an ironic observation given that El Alamein was a classic example of position warfare. He clearly preferred a war of movement, captured rather adroitly with the phrase “Schlacht ohne Morgen” or battle without end,

To cite this Article: Echevarria II, Antulio J., “El Alamein, 1942: Rommel's Anti-Climax”, *Infinity Journal*, IJ Special Edition, “Strategic Misfortunes”, October 2012, pages 12-15.

and — almost to a fault — consistently placed himself at the point of attack.

Indeed, regardless of his rank, Rommel habitually exerted his personal influence at the decisive point. However, that habit reveals that he was a micromanager, a leader who was unwilling to trust his subordinates with important tasks. He often assumed command of his subordinates' units, a practice that ran contrary to the supposed German tradition of issuing broad orders of intent (*Auftragstaktik*) and giving one's subordinates the latitude to execute them according to the situation. One notable example is the 7th Panzer Division's attempt to cross the Meuse River on May 13, 1940, during the campaign in France. The attempt failed despite Rommel's personal intervention because, in his view, his subordinate officers "were appalled by their heavy losses and unwilling to press forward." [vi] Ironically, while he typically expected nothing short of instant obedience from his own officers and men, he frequently disregarded his superiors' orders, or creatively reinterpreted them so that they were less restrictive. Rommel's practice contradicts the received view regarding the importance of *Auftragstaktik* in German military practice, and this contradiction is an issue historians have yet to examine more closely. Moreover, he habitually disregarded the physical and psychological limits of the personnel under his command, and deftly shifted blame for failure onto them to preserve his image. This habit inhibited his ability to conduct an objective analysis of his own shortcomings and style of command so as to increase his chances of success in the long-term. The cultivation of his image not only required constant attention; it also meant suppressing inconvenient truths.

Rommel's skills seem to have peaked at the battle of Gazala in June 1942, about one week before the first battle of El Alamein. For purposes of this essay, the events around El Alamein that took place between July 1, 1942, and November 4, 1942, are considered as three distinct battles. [vii] Although the battle of Gazala would end successfully, Rommel actually followed what for him had become a predictable scheme of maneuver: a wide envelopment of the British left flank, followed by an attack in the rear across the British lines of communication. The scheme pushed the Afrikakorps' logistics to its extreme limit, and nearly caused a disaster. It is likely that Rommel's style of leading from the front saved him from defeat in this case, as it enabled him to issue orders, and counter-orders, faster than his opponents. He operated inside his enemy's decision cycle, to use one of today's popular military expressions.

However, most of the successes he enjoyed at Gazala and the subsequent assault on Tobruk were due to his foe's ineptitude. During the encounters that took place in and around the "Cauldron" or "Sausage Pot" (May 30 to June 1, 1942), for example, Rommel had rashly maneuvered himself into a difficult situation: to his west he had a series of extensive minefields with half dozen fortified "boxes," or strong points, occupied by dug-in infantry brigades, reinforced with tanks and artillery; while to his east he faced several British armored formations, some of which were equipped with the new American Grant tanks armed with powerful 75mm guns. A vigorous attack by the British commander, Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie, might have crushed the Afrikakorps, which by this time had lost a third of its tanks

and was desperately low on fuel. Instead, Ritchie threw his armor into the battle in piecemeal fashion, which enabled the Axis formations to fight and defeat them individually. To be saved from a desperate situation by the poor choices of one's opponent is not the same as winning by demonstrating consummate skill.

Tobruk fell in the summer of 1942, and during the pursuit and exploitation that followed Rommel should have pushed his air cover forward. Otherwise, he would have little real hope of taking Cairo, or of holding anything he had gained, since he would be exposed to Allied air attack. Some analysts have argued that he ought to have paused to take Malta and strengthen his logistical situation, after all Axis forces required roughly 100,000 tons of supplies per month during the late summer and early autumn of 1942; but were only receiving half that much on average. [ix] However, establishing forward air cover was actually more critical since his forces were already exposed, and because Allied ground forces essentially operated free of the threat of Axis air attack. Rommel could not win the race to build up materiel, whether or not Malta was taken, and thus — by his own formula — he was becoming less capable of winning a war of movement. His operational intelligence, ground movement, and logistics' flow suffered markedly due to the limited range of Axis air cover. Without forward air bases, he could not prevent his ground forces or their supply lines across Libya from being bombed.

To illustrate the point: as the Allies advanced into Italy in 1943, their air cover also leapfrogged to new bases and airfields in order to ensure adequate coverage for the next series of ground operations. The Allies' task was, obviously, made easier by the fact that more of the Luftwaffe's planes were being diverted to defend the German homeland from major bombing offensives. Still, modern warfare had evolved into a system by which the forward movement of ground forces was often driven by the need to capture another airfield, so that air cover could be extended to cover the next ground offensive, and so on. Fire and movement, always mutually reinforcing at the tactical level of war, had become similarly interdependent at the operational level of war as well. Rommel came to appreciate this fact far too late in the North African campaign (though he appears to have learned it by the battle for Normandy in 1944), and never took effective action to ensure his formations had adequate protection from Allied air forces.

During the pursuit after Gazala, Rommel attempted to avoid drifting into a war of position by getting ahead of the retreating British; however, his lack of fuel, the fatigue of his men, and the state of their equipment prevented him from doing so. His troops were all but spent, having fought hard across 500 miles of desert; his tanks were low in fuel and ammunition, and badly in need of refitting. [x] The Desert Fox, too, was mentally and physically drained, as were many of his subordinate commanders, notwithstanding the emotional boost that came from his promotion to *Generalfeldmarschall* in late June, and the Afrikakorps' stunning success at Gazala. Fatigue and perhaps a bit of overconfidence led to hasty command decisions and poor staff coordination as the first battle of El Alamein began on July 1, 1942. Once again, Rommel overestimated the capabilities of his troops, while at the same time underestimating those of his foes. After

three weeks of fighting, Rommel's forces had lost 70 percent of their manpower, 85 percent of their armor, 65 percent of their anti-tank weapons, and 50 percent of their heavy anti-aircraft guns.[xi] Rommel found himself forced to transition from a war of movement, where his tight decision-cycle and his penchant for pushing his forces to their limits gave him an advantage, to a war of position, where superiority in numbers would tell. The uniqueness of the terrain around El Alamein and the rapidity with which British strength could grow meant that he would gradually lose his room to maneuver, and, thus, his ability to create chaos for his adversary. In addition, the Allies enjoyed an intelligence advantage through ULTRA that enabled them to read the coded messages sent between Rommel's headquarters and Berlin.

Rommel renewed his offensive on August 30, 1942, which became known as the second battle of El Alamein, or Alam al-Halfa; but it was doomed from the start. Even though he allegedly scaled back his original objectives, he apparently retained high hopes of success. As he confided in his wife, Lucie: "I have worried so much about this day, but I am taking the risk because I will not have another chance, in terms of the moonlight and ratio of forces. So much is at stake. If I succeed, this may have a decisive effect on the course of the war." [xii] Yet, Rommel's plan of attack was very reminiscent of Gazala, so much so that the British did not need ULTRA to prepare for it. Rommel sent the Italian infantry in a pinning attack to the front, and directed the Afrikakorps to punch through a perceived 13-mile gap between the southern positions of the British forces and the Quattara Depression. They were then to attack across the coastal roads leading west into El Alamein, thereby severing British lines of communication.

However, the predictability of the plan and the Allies' advantages in strategic and operational intelligence, terrain, and materiel began to tell almost immediately. The attack bogged down, and Rommel called it off on September 4, 1942. General Montgomery received the credit for stopping the Axis advance; but his plan was essentially the same as that of his predecessor, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck. Montgomery's success was ensured, so long as he avoided committing a blunder, such as allowing himself to be baited into counterattacking prematurely. With materiel preponderance, he had the luxury of time and could afford not to chase imaginative solutions.

When Montgomery launched the final battle of El Alamein on October 23, 1942, Rommel was in Germany on much needed

sick leave. He returned to North Africa on the evening of the 25th; but the battle was all but lost by then. Montgomery enjoyed a 2:1 superiority in manpower, a 3:1 superiority in aircraft, and more than a 4:1 superiority in medium tanks. [xiii] The third clash at El Alamein was little more than a World War I battle of attrition; but it was one the Allies could afford to wage. To be sure, there were several crises that required Montgomery to exert his will over subordinate commanders who were not accustomed to pushing forward against enemy fire. However, the outcome of the battle was a matter of military science, the mathematics of attrition. Military art had little say, and could not change the result. The interdiction efforts of Allied air power had severely limited Rommel's flow of supplies. Although he attempted to launch a few counterattacks, the deficiencies in fuel and ammunition were crippling. His army was overextended and egregiously exposed, as it had been since the first battle of El Alamein, though he and many of those around him chose to ignore it.

On balance, Rommel's style of command, while often praised by military historians, was actually ill-suited to the conditions in which he found himself. It resembled the leadership style in vogue in the nineteenth century, where the timely appearance of the commander at the decisive point on the battlefield might tip the scales toward victory. However, in the twentieth century, command at higher levels required mastering and incorporating new dimensions, such as operational-level air support and theater-level intelligence, into one's scheme of maneuver. Rommel did not fully incorporate those dimensions into his planning. To draw an analogy, Rommel was like a chess player who used the same combination of moves again and again, while neglecting to appreciate that the rules of the game had changed. He repeatedly went on the offensive with his armor and, though enjoying many tactical successes, fatally overextended his logistics and exceeded the range of his air cover. Hitler, rightly or wrongly, desired that the campaign in North Africa should have only a tertiary priority. Rommel was unwilling, or possibly unable, to function under such an inconsequential status. His conduct of the campaign in North Africa, and in particular the battles of El Alamein, illustrate the principal flaw in a way of war predicated on the idea that wars are won from the ground up — through tactical victories. In such an approach, strategy matters little and the influence of policy even less, for the power of tactical success seemingly trumps all. However, as Rommel's example shows, his exquisite grammar had become detached from the larger logic of the war. His brilliant tactical successes failed to achieve anything of strategic value, and ultimately Hitler's policy trumped them all.

References

- [i] A recent example is Robert M. Citino, "Drive to Nowhere: The War in North Africa 1941-1943," *Military History Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 26-38; see also David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox: The Search for the True Field Marshal Rommel* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977).
- [ii] Dennis Showalter, *Patton and Rommel: Men of War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berkley, 2006), 31.
- [iii] Terry Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel: Masters of War* (New York: Crown, 2008).
- [iv] Oberstleutnant Rommel, *Infanterie Greift an: Erlebnis und Erfahrung* (Potsdam: Ludwig, 1937).
- [v] B.H. Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers*, trans. Paul Findlay, (New York: Da Capo, 1953), 133.
- [vi] Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Erwin Rommel: Leadership, Strategy, Conflict* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), 20.
- [vii] Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (New York: Overlook, 2005), xxxix-xl.
- [viii] Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War: Waging World War II in North Africa 1941-43* (New York: Cambridge, 2009), 218-38.
- [ix] Barr, *Pendulum of War*, 218-24.
- [x] Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, 262-64.
- [xi] Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, 291.
- [xii] Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel*, 128.
- [xiii] Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, 320-1; Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel*, 141. Numbers vary among the sources, but the ratios are consistent.

DISCUSSIONS ON THE CONDUCT OF WAR

THE JOURNAL OF
MILITARY OPERATIONS

Infinity Journal is pleased to announce the launch of our new sister publication.

Issue 1 is available now, featuring:

Sergio Miller
 Simon Anglim
 Doron Almog
 William F. Owen
 Adam Elkus
 David Benest

As with Infinity Journal, subscription is free.

Subscribe For Free

Military Operations is distributed via <http://www.tjomo.com>



Israeli Strategy in the First Lebanon War, 1982-1985

Eado Hecht

IDF Command and Staff College
Israel

Dr Eado Hecht is an independent defense analyst specializing in military doctrine and its interpretation. He teaches at Bar-Ilan University, Haifa University and at the Israeli Defense Force Command and General Staff College.

We are grateful for the use of this image of the IDF's 211th Armored Brigade moving towards Beirut, taken by Israel Defense Force Brigadier General Yossi Ben Hanan. It was also featured in Israel Defense's Special titled, "The First Lebanon War as Never Seen Before".

The last shots of Israel's War for Independence were fired in early 1949. From January to July 1949 Israel negotiated separately with each of its Arab neighbours – Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria – to work out a political arrangement and an official cessation of hostilities.[i] The first agreement was signed with Egypt in February 1949 and the last was signed with Syria in July of the same year. However, Israel's hope that these agreements would be peace treaties or would, at least, become the first step leading to such treaties was disappointed. Concluding that a rematch was inevitable, Israel's political and military leadership began to develop a grand-strategic doctrine and a strategic doctrine. These doctrines were not formulated in a single official document and did not develop in a single smooth trajectory. They developed in many debates, flashes of inspiration, and adapting in response to enemy activities. Different people had different ideas. Sometimes, it was who was sitting in which chair that was more important than the debates being conducted around the table. Changes in the manning of senior positions and lessons learned from specific events brought about changes in the concepts. However, it is not the purpose of the present article to describe all the twists and turns along the path, only to discuss a single event to which these doctrines were applied, achieved some success, but then failed – Israel's war with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, which culminated

in the all-out Israeli offensive into Lebanon in 1982. The seeds of the decision to undertake this offensive were sown over thirty years earlier in the formulation of the aforementioned doctrines, and so the relevant aspects will be described in brief.

Israel's first order of business after winning its War of Independence was not to prepare for future conflict, but rather to prepare for peace – building a society, an economy and a legal system, while simultaneously absorbing an enormous influx of immigrants from around the world[ii], speaking different languages and living according to different cultural norms. However, very quickly it became clear that the War of Independence might be over officially but not in fact. Palestinian Arabs who had fled into neighbouring countries began to conduct forays into Israel. Some were innocent – people trying to collect possessions left behind, and some were criminal – theft of Israeli property in order to facilitate life in the refugee camps. Gradually they began to be more and more political, aiming simply to kill Israelis and cause damage to property. The Arab armies also conducted cross-border intelligence raids or tried to nibble bits of land away from Israel.[iii] Israel's political and military leaders concluded that they were in fact facing two distinct threats, each of which required a different strategic approach:

- The Fundamental Threat – an all-out offensive by an Arab army or combination of Arab armies. This required Israel to build an army capable of defeating any combination of Arab armies, despite being numerically inferior, without bankrupting Israel's still fragile economy.
- The Routine Threat – the conduct of intermittent cross-border raids by small groups of guerrilla-style fighters or regular troops. These raids were not considered an existential threat in the sense of being able to physically destroy Israel, but Prime-Minister Ben-Gurion feared that they could destroy the self-confidence of the new immigrants, settling along the borders, and cause them to flee the country – thus achieving gradually what the Arab armies had failed to achieve in one fell swoop. Again, the solution had to be one that would not require massive expenditure of Israel's limited manpower and treasure.

The doctrine of Routine Security, developed through the

To cite this Article: Hecht, Eado, "Israeli Strategy and the First Lebanon War, 1982-1985", *Infinity Journal*, IJ Special Edition, "Strategic Misfortunes", October 2012, pages 16-20.

1950s, was the core of the decision to invade Lebanon in 1982. Israel's initial strategy was defensive – army units were deployed in ambushes and patrols along the borders. This failed – there were not enough troops to cover more than a fraction of the border at any one moment. The next strategy was aptly named 'An Eye For An Eye'. Following each Arab raid into Israel, the Israeli army conducted a raid aimed at causing similar casualties and damage across the border. This aroused an ethical argument in Israel, international condemnations, and failed to elicit the desired response – a reduction in Arab raids. So Israel's leadership upped the ante – it decided to change the targets and retaliate more massively. The new target was Arab property, not people, but *en masse*. If an Israeli village was attacked then an Arab village was captured, evacuated and the houses destroyed. However, Arab raids continued unabated and the ethical problem was not solved, as became clear after the botched Kibya operation in autumn 1953, in which the Israeli force ordered the population to evacuate but, contrary to orders, did not search the houses to ensure that all had actually done so. 63 civilians died. The result was uproar in Israel and around the world. It was clear that this strategy was neither effective nor sustainable.

To this point Israel had tried to achieve Routine Security by confronting the perpetrators (commonly known as *Fedayeen*) directly or by deterring them via retaliation raids. Both ways had failed. The Israelis could not find the *Fedayeen* in the field nor in their safe-havens, and the damage caused to the neighbouring Arab population did not really interest the *Fedayeen* because they were not from the same clans or families. The Israelis decided on a new strategy – they could not find the *Fedayeen*, but the governments of the host-states could. The new strategy was to compel the Arab governments to stop the attacks from their territory by retaliating for *Fedayeen* raids with counter-raids on the host-states' military. Hopefully, repeated expensive defeats of their troops would shame the Arab governments and they would prefer to prevent further provocation of Israel. It took time, but the new strategy worked – Egypt was the first to gradually suspend *Fedayeen* activity through its border with Israel from the mid-1950s; then Syria, which, from the mid-1960s, continued to support *Fedayeen* activity but only if the actual raid was conducted through Jordan or Lebanon; and finally Jordan forcibly evicted the PLO from its territory in September 1970. Only the Lebanese border remained open for the *Fedayeen* raids. Encouraged by Syria, the *Fedayeen* had begun to gradually intensify their operations from Lebanon from the late 1960s. To the cross-border raids they added two new operational modes:

- Stand-off fire – at first with short-range weapons and gradually with longer-ranged weapons culminating in the late 1970s with long-range field-guns and rockets.
- Overseas raids – attacking Israelis and non-Israeli Jews in locations around the world. The most notorious attacks were the hijacking of civilian aircraft and the massacre in the 1972 Olympic games in Munich.

By the late 1970s, fighting along Israel's border with Lebanon had become an almost daily affair. In theory Israel had a proven strategic solution. However, this solution was not suitable to the Lebanese theatre. It depended on the host-state having

a strong central government capable of imposing its political will, and if need be, military will on the *Fedayeen*. Lebanon did not have such a government. By the early 1970s Lebanon's society and political system had unraveled. Established by the French to provide the local Christian community a state of their own, in which they were a majority, its political system had been designed on a sectarian-religious basis. However, by 1970 the Christians were no longer the majority. They were still the largest religious group, but smaller than any other two groups combined.[iv] The arrival of the PLO's military forces in Lebanon had completely destroyed the last vestiges of Christian superiority over the other religious groups. Lebanon disintegrated into civil war. Each religious group battled the others for territory, political and economic benefits and clans within each group often battled each other for domination of the group. The Lebanese army disintegrated along religious lines. The strongest military force in Lebanon was the PLO – also divided into factions often battling each other. A new-old actor entered the Lebanese stage – Syria. Syria had always claimed that Lebanon was actually an integral part of Syria, illegitimately torn away by the departing French Empire. Covertly Syria had assisted the gradual dissolving of the Lebanese government's control. Another Syrian interest in Lebanon was money. Lebanese banks, the international port of Beirut, Lebanese agriculture and industry – all were important to the well-being of Syria's fragile agriculture-based economy. The civil war threatened Syria's economy and Syria reacted by invading Lebanon. At first, the Syrian invasion was aimed to assist the Christians because they dominated most of the areas important to Syria. However, gradually, the Syrians began to assert their domination against the Christians and fighting broke out between them – the ratio of power ensuring a Syrian victory.

Back to Israel in the early 1950s

Routine Security was an important issue, but Fundamental Security was considered more critical. It was clear that Israel could never match the size of her neighbours' military forces. Foreign powers refused to sell anything other than second-hand, mostly well-worn, World War Two vintage equipment to Israel, so it was also fairly clear that Israel could not achieve technological superiority. During 1950 – 1953 a series of tactical disasters in Routine Security operations seemed to show that even the Israel Defence Forces' superiority in tactics and fighting spirit no longer existed.[v] The Israel Defence Forces' senior command addressed the quality issue in various ways not relevant to this article. What is relevant is that during this period Prime Minister Ben-Gurion advanced the idea of an 'Alliance of Minorities'. The Jews were not the only ethnic minority struggling to float in the stormy sea of the Moslem Arab world: the Copts in Egypt, the Kurds and the Druze in Syria, the Kurds in Iraq and the Maronite Christians and the Druze in Lebanon. An 'Alliance of Minorities' would strengthen each separate minority in its own private struggle by splitting the attention and resources of the Moslem Arab states between a number of simultaneous conflicts. Israel's main benefit would be that the Arab states would be hard put to enact the worst nightmare of Israel's military leaders – called the 'Everybody Scenario', an organized alliance of all the Arab states conducting a simultaneous properly planned assault on Israel.[vi] As it turned out, the idea was stillborn. The Copts proved completely incapable of organizing effectively

to further their political agenda. The Kurds were similarly split into rival factions, though from the early 1960s until 1975 the Iraqi Kurds managed to conduct an insurgency that diverted most of Iraq's attention to them and away from Israel. [vii] The Druze and the Maronites were not interested. The Maronites were the only non-Jewish minority with a state of their own and saw no threat that required them to befriend Israel. However, as the situation in Lebanon gradually developed against them they turned to Israel for help. Though officially the idea of the 'Alliance of Minorities' had been shelved, the principle that helping another minority would help Israel remained – as in the case of the Iraqi Kurds.

The gradually worsening plight of the Maronites also triggered another Israeli ideological concept. One of the main complaints of the Jews following the Second World War was that they had been abandoned by the world to suffer the Holocaust. Even requests for small, relatively cheap actions that could have partially alleviated the plight of the Jews suffering Nazi persecution (such as the bombing of Auschwitz Extermination Camp which would have slowed the killing-machine) had been refused. [viii] When faced with cries for help from a religious minority, ostensibly about to suffer decimation and persecution, Israel's political leaders were incapable of denying assistance. Israel's foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad and the Israel Defence Forces were ordered to provide equipment and training and occasional military action to support the Maronites.

By 1980 some of Israel's political and military leaders were already beginning to formulate a new strategy for solving the Lebanese conundrum. The new strategy was based on a series of assumptions:

- The reason the Christians had lost power in Lebanon was the arrival of the PLO after it had been forcibly ejected from Jordan.
- Destruction of the PLO's military power and evicting its political infrastructure from Lebanon would enable the Christians to reassume their position as the dominant group in Lebanon.
- Evicting Syrian military forces out of Lebanon would also be required.
- The Christians would gratefully acknowledge Israel's assistance in achieving their political goals by signing a full peace treaty with Israel – the second Arab state to do so (after Egypt) – and prevent the return of the Palestinian political and military leaders to Lebanon, thus terminating the Routine Threat on this front too.

Israel's Minister of Defence at the time, Ariel Sharon, hoped that the successful result would also cascade into other theatres of conflict: removal of the PLO's political and military infrastructure from its last contact with Israel's border would fatally weaken its standing among the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states in general. This would also enable Jordan to sign a peace treaty with Israel, leaving only one Arab state on Israel's border, a defeated Syria, alone in its refusal to accept Israel but far too weak to do anything about it. However, implementing the new strategy required a particular set of political conditions that would legitimize such an offensive

in the eyes of the Israeli public and the world at large – especially Israel's only ally, the United States.

In January 1981, and again in March and in April, the PLO initiated a series of artillery attacks on northern Israel, each lasting a few days. In late April, following the indiscriminate bombardment by the Syrian army of the Lebanese Christian town of Zakhle, Israel threatened to intervene against Syria. [ix] To put the point across forcefully, the Israeli air force was ordered to shoot down two Syrian helicopters flying near Zakhle. The Syrians responded by violating a tacitly agreed 'red-line' – they deployed a number of Surface-to-Air Missile batteries in Lebanon. Only American diplomatic pressure stopped Israel from immediately attacking these missile batteries. Meanwhile, on June 7th, while the diplomatic exchange was still in progress and tensions high, Israel surprised the world by destroying Iraq's new nuclear reactor. On July 9th the Palestinians again fired a salvo of rockets into northern Israel. Over the next two weeks Israel and the PLO exchanged fire, and Israel prepared to conduct a large-scale strategic punitive raid into southern Lebanon. An attempt by the Syrian air force to intercept Israeli aircraft over Lebanon resulted in a Syrian aircraft being shot down. An Israeli air-strike on a Palestinian headquarters in Beirut accidentally killed and injured many civilians living around the target. This prompted American intervention, which brought about a ceasefire. However, the exact agreement was not clear. The Palestinians claimed the ceasefire was only for the Lebanese-Israeli border and they were free to attack everywhere else. This left Israel at a disadvantage since it could be attacked almost anywhere but could not respond because all of the Palestinian's political and military infrastructure was in Lebanon. From August 1981 to May 1982 the Palestinians conducted 248 attacks in Israel and overseas. [x] Israel responded with threats and troop deployments, but each time backed-off. In March 1982 and again in April Israel retaliated with air-strikes in Lebanon, and the Palestinians fired dozens of rockets from Lebanon into Israel, though aimed mostly at unpopulated areas so as not to over-antagonize Israel. On June 3, 1982 Palestinians shot the Israeli ambassador in Britain. Israel retaliated again with air-strikes in Beirut and the Palestinians again fired rockets into Israel. On June 5th, after two days of mutual firing, the Israeli government decided that it would not tolerate a repeat of the previous summer's artillery duel. The Israeli Defence Forces were ordered to invade Lebanon and capture all the terrain from the border to just beyond the extreme range of the Palestinian artillery – that is to say, to advance to a line that was nowhere closer than approximately 40 kilometers to the border. [xi]

Theoretically, the supporters of the new strategy described above had received the 'go ahead' to implement it. In fact, they had not. Implementation of the strategy required the Israeli army to reach and capture Beirut – that was where all of the political infrastructure and leadership and most of the military infrastructure were located. It also required the Syrians to be either maneuvered into withdrawing from Lebanon or defeated and forced out. Both were well beyond the objective defined by the government. Minister of Defence Sharon faced two tactical problems to implement the new strategy: the political problem of convincing the government to increase the scope of the operation and convincing the public to support this; and the military problem of conducting

the operation in disjointed phases as the government gradually allowed each extension of the operation, thus allowing the enemy time to recover, reorganize, reinforce and gradually comprehend the operational plan, making each succeeding phase harder to carry out.

The Israeli offensive began at noon on June 6th. Sharon gradually overcame both tactical problems but the price was that an operation planned to last a few days stretched to a number of weeks, then a few months. This stretching produced new problems. Politically, it allowed internal and foreign resistance to the operation to build up. As the war dragged on, parts of the Israeli public began to question the validity of the decision to initiate it and foreign powers began to intervene diplomatically. Militarily, the cost in casualties rose and further fueled the growing resistance in Israel to maintain the effort – the first mass Israeli demonstration against the war occurred on July 4th. However, despite all problems, the military objective was partially achieved towards the end of August – the PLO agreed to leave Lebanon and was shipped to Tunisia, and overt Syrian presence was removed from Beirut-proper.

The time had come to implement the second political phase – handing power back to a Christian-dominated government. The Israelis withdrew from parts of Beirut. The Lebanese conducted elections on August 23rd and Israel's ally Bashir Jumayel, head of the largest Christian party, was elected to be the President of Lebanon. Israel's strategy, as interpreted and implemented by Defence Minister Sharon, had prevailed. Then, suddenly, everything began to unravel. It quickly became clear that the Palestinians had covertly left a portion of their fighters in Beirut to conduct a guerrilla campaign against the Israelis. Having promised not to enter certain areas in Beirut, the Israelis demanded that the Lebanese government prove its ability to handle the common enemy on its own. However, on September 14th Syrian intelligence operatives assassinated President Jumayel. He was replaced by his brother Amin – who was understandably less willing to actually implement the agreements his dead brother had with Israel. Meanwhile, the Jumayel's private military militia, tasked with clearing Palestinian guerrillas from two Palestinian neighbourhoods in Beirut – Sabra and Shatilla[xii], avenged the death of their leader by massacring a few hundred Palestinians.[xiii] Though conducted by Lebanese Christians the massacre was blamed on Israel – not just around the world, but also inside Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis – nearly 10% of the Jewish population, gathered in the largest ever demonstration in Israel to protest the fact that the Israeli army had not prevented the massacre.[xiv] Lastly, Israel's outright support for the Maronite Christians reassuming full power in Lebanon did not sit well with the other ethnic groups – the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Druze. Initially many members of these groups had supported the Israeli invasion, greeting Israeli soldiers with flowers and rice. Now they began to attack the Israelis. Leading these attacks were two Shiite parties – Amal (the larger of the two) and Hizbullah.

The primary political and military objective of the war had been achieved – the PLO had been evicted from its last stronghold directly in contact with Israeli territory. It could no longer conduct cross-border attacks on Israel proper. However, the secondary political object, though seeming at first to be in hand, was lost. The single bomb that killed Bashir Jumayel proved to be more powerful than all the thousands of bombs and shells fired by the Israelis. The Syrians remained in control of Lebanon. An Israeli judicial committee sacked Sharon for failing to prevent the massacre in Sabra and Shatilla.[xv] The Israelis did not give up immediately. But gradually, as casualties mounted[xvi] and it became clear that their continued presence in Lebanon was not going to achieve their second political objective of obtaining a peace treaty with Lebanon[xvii], they decided to cut their losses and make do with a half-win. The withdrawal was gradual and completed in 1985. To secure their border, the Israelis organized a buffer-zone held by the South Lebanese Army – a militia manned by local volunteers from southern Lebanon, funded, equipped and trained by Israel.

Israel's withdrawal was accepted by all the Lebanese militias fighting against them as well as terminating the war – all except Hizbullah. For approximately 18 months the fighting subsided as Hizbullah grew from a small almost insignificant group into a major player, and then began a guerrilla-style offensive on the Israeli buffer-zone, forcing the Israelis to reinforce the South Lebanese Army with Israeli units. It seemed that Israel's decisive defeat of the PLO had only achieved a brief reprieve and simply replaced the enemy at the gates. Against this new enemy the Israelis had no clear policy and no clear strategy other than to stick it out at the least cost possible in blood and resources. They continued to do this until 2000, when they withdrew from the buffer-zone.[xviii]

To sum up, from the mid-1950s Israel's ultimate strategy against the Routine Threat was to punish the host-states until they prevented hostile actions from their territory. This strategy was not possible in Lebanon because the Lebanese government was too weak. In attempting to manufacture a strong Lebanese government Israel invaded Lebanon and evicted the PLO and then, in accordance with the concept of the 'Alliance of Minorities', tried to hand over power to the Lebanese Christians – thus alienating the other Lebanese religious groups. Moreover, the Israelis misjudged the Christians' political and military strength relative to these other Lebanese groups – even with Israeli backing the Christians were no longer capable of ruling Lebanon. Three years later – in 1985 – under continuous attack, hundreds of additional casualties, and billions of shekels worth of resources more than planned, the Israelis decided to cut their losses and they withdrew. Not properly adapted to Lebanon – Israel's strategy had failed to achieve more than a partial victory. This, it turned out, was just the beginning of a new war, with a new enemy (Hizbullah) upon the same turf.

References

[i] Iraq, which had no common border with Israel, had also sent forces to participate in the war, but refused to sign any treaty with the 'Zionist entity'. The Palestinian Arabs lacking any organized leadership did not participate in the negotiations as an independent party. Technically they were represented by Jordan (which controlled and intended to annex the area later to be known as The West Bank) and by Egypt (which controlled the Gaza Strip).

[ii] Within ten years of independence Israel's population almost tripled.

[iii] In one of these my father (then a teenager) and grandfather were captured by a Jordanian intelligence team and held tied to a tree for a whole day in an orchard near their home. Fortunately for them (and for the as yet unborn me) on completion of their mission the Jordanians preferred to withdraw without killing them.

[iv] The major ethnic groups were Christians (most of them Maronites, a few of other sects), Sunni Lebanese, Shiites, Druze and the mostly Sunni Palestinians.

[v] Of 85 cross-border raids conducted in this period only 38 were considered successful, 41 were considered total failures, and the remaining 6 were considered partial successes. There is no similar assessment available for defensive skirmishes, but anecdotal evidence shows a similar trend.

[vi] The Israelis had only just barely defeated the combined invasion of the Arab armies in May 1948, and that too only because the Arab leaders had deliberately sabotaged their own combined strategic plan, each one attempting to achieve his own goals at the expense of the others.

[vii] This insurgency received material support from Israel and Iran.

[viii] The Allies had claimed that they could not reach the camp, but bombed targets just as far and even in the vicinity of Auschwitz.

[ix] The Syrian assault on Zakhle was precipitated by the chief Christian militia trying to assert itself by claiming the town as belonging to it. The town is located on the highway leading from Beirut to Damascus, so the Syrians could not accept having it in hostile hands.

[x] 26 Israelis were killed and 264 wounded. 2 of the killed and a number of the wounded were along the Lebanese border.

[xi] The border is not straight, so that, for example, advancing along the coast from the northwestern tip of Israel approximately, 55 kilometers directly north actually brings one to only about 40 kilometers from the northeastern Israeli town of Metulla.

[xii] The usual term, "camps" regarding Sabra and Shatilla, is a misnomer – these were residential, albeit poor, multi-story, building city neighbourhoods.

[xiii] The exact number killed was debated vociferously – the Palestinians deliberately inflating the numbers to thousands in order to garner international support; the Lebanese Christians trying to reduce the number, claiming there was a two-sided battle, not a one-sided massacre and that many of the dead were in fact Palestinian combatants killed while fighting. 486 bodies were recovered, of whom 328 were Palestinian men (virtually all of military age), 142 were non-Palestinian men, 15 were women and 20 were children. A Lebanese committee of inquiry determined that the non-Palestinian men were killed mostly by Palestinians in order to steal and use their passports.

[xiv] According to the agreement signed prior to the Palestinian Liberation Organization's withdrawal Israeli units were stationed outside the camps and not allowed to enter them. They provided logistical support for the Christian forces and were slow to respond to the claims of fleeing Palestinians that a massacre was occurring.

[xv] In fact, from the moment the committee was set up the entire Israeli political and military leadership were constantly distracted from their actual jobs of running the conflict to preparing their testimonies with their lawyers. For all intents and purposes, even if it was not called that officially, they were on trial as possible accomplices to murder, and the pressure affected their activities.

[xvi] From 5 June 1982 until 5 September 1982 the Israelis suffered 349 killed – most of them in the first week while fighting the Syrians. From 6 September 1982 until the withdrawal in June 1985, another 187 Israelis were killed – most of them from Palestinian (not Lebanese) guerrillas.

[xvii] Officially a Peace Treaty was signed in May 1983, and Israel hoped to withdraw from Lebanon by August 1983. In fact, the Treaty was stillborn – attacks continued on Israeli troops, and so, fearing that the withdrawal would simply bring these attacks back to Israeli territory, Israeli troops were withdrawn only partially; in March 1984 the Lebanese government officially rescinded its signature on the Treaty.

[xviii] 313 Israelis were killed in action from June 1985 until the second withdrawal in May 2000. After the second withdrawal up to June 2006 Hizbullah conducted some 200 raids and stand-off fire attacks on Israel – killing 20 Israelis and wounding more. These finally brought about the Israeli response known as the Second Lebanon War. Following which the Israel-Lebanon border has become nearly dormant with only one or two stand-off fire attacks per year.

Subscribe For Free

Infinity Journal is available for free exclusively at InfinityJournal.com.

As a subscriber, you can receive a simple, non-intrusive email informing you of each new issue or article, as well as full access to all our issues and articles, past and present.

Subscribe Now: InfinityJournal.com

Infinity Journal is a free publication that is only available online.



The Accidental Coindinista: A Historian's Journey Back From the Dark Side of Social Science

Gian P. Gentile

The United States Military Academy at West Point
United States of America

Gian P. Gentile is a serving United States Army Colonel. He currently directs the military history program at West Point. He commanded a combat battalion in West Baghdad in 2006 and holds a PhD in history from Stanford University. His book, "Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace with Counterinsurgency" is due out by The New Press in April 2013. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government.

Over the last half decade since arriving at West Point to teach history after three years of Cavalry Squadron command (one of those years in combat in west Baghdad in 2006) I have made a sustained argument in many published works about the primacy of strategy over tactics in war. My argument has basically said that if a state gets its strategy right in war then the tactics of war will fall into place. However, I argued simplistically and wrongly, if a state fails at strategy, then no amount of tactical excellence can save a war fought under a botched strategy. I began to develop this argument in response to a certain narrative that had formed since the Surge of Troops in Iraq in 2007. That narrative offered the attractive proposition that the US Army had failed at the tactics of counterinsurgency in Iraq from 2003 to 2006 but then the army was saved by an enlightened general named David Petraeus who turned his army around, got it doing the tactics of counterinsurgency right, and Iraq was put on the path to success thus giving Iraqis, in Petraeus's own words, a "new hope."

I still believe the Iraq Surge triumph narrative is misleading. Petraeus as a general performed in essentially the same way as his predecessor General George Casey, and there was no radical shift in operational method between the Surge army and what came before. Instead, violence in Iraq dropped by the end of 2007 primarily for other reasons, such as the spread of the Anbar Awakening, the effects of the previous

two years of sectarian warfare, and the shia militia decision to stand down attacks. There is a growing body of analytical literature to support this explanation.[i]

Yet I also believe that I have become somewhat dogmatic in my sustained argument about the primacy of strategy over tactics. Last year while giving a lunchtime keynote address at a history conference at Columbia University in New York City where I made the argument of the primacy of strategy over tactics, Professor Anders Stephanson, a scholar of American diplomatic and political history at Columbia, pushed back in the 'question and answer' period by saying that my argument was "a-historical." In the weeks following my lecture I reflected on what he said and concluded that he was right. If by rule strategy is always more important than tactics, then the logic of that rule is that tactics in war simply don't matter. But they do. Any military historian worth his or her salt knows that sometimes in war tactics mean a lot, and wars can be lost by failing at tactics. Consider Louis XIV and the War of Spanish Succession from 1701 to 1713. Louis's aims in the Low Countries were not stymied by poor strategy but more so by generals who were unable to fight effectively with the emerging technologies and tactics of early modern linear warfare. In fact, if Louis had been asked which one was more important during the war of Spanish Succession he almost certainly would have said tactical competence.

Yet such a nuance of historical understanding was buried by my rule of the primacy of strategy over tactics. By establishing as a rule the primacy of strategy over tactics I have turned into what historians most often fear: the social scientist and the constructionist of models, which lead to the cherry picking of history to confirm the model. I found myself using historical examples that conformed to my rule. My favorite example to support the rule of the primacy of strategy over tactics was the German army in World War II. Probably one of the finest industrialized tactical fighting forces the world had ever seen, I argued, that all of their tactical excellence could not rescue Germany from a dysfunctional strategy and morally perverse policy under Nazism. True enough of course for Germany and World War II, but for the historian just because something is true in one part of history, does not mean it is true for it all. This is what historians call contingency and the uniqueness of historical events.

Being slaved to my model of the primacy of strategy over

To cite this Article: Gentile, Gian P., "The Accidental Coindinista: A Historian's Journey Back From the Dark Side of Social Science", Infinity Journal, IJ Special Edition, "Strategic Misfortunes", October 2012, pages 21-24.

tactics also caused me to fail at one of the hallmarks of good scholarly history: factual accuracy. Here is what happened to me. About three years ago when I was arguing forcefully that better tactics did not turn the war in Vietnam around under Abrams, nor in Iraq did enlightened counterinsurgency tactics under Petraeus turn that war around either, I came across a quote that was apparently made by Sun Tzu. "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." That reported Sun Tzu quote summed it all up for me in one short, clear, and brilliantly insightful phrase. Get your strategy right and the tactics will fall into place. Get your strategy wrong, however, and tactical excellence is only noise. But Sun Tzu never said it. To be sure it is an apocryphal quote where people believe Sun Tzu said it, though being apocryphal is different from established fact. I had become trapped by my model of the primacy of strategy over tactics and Sun Tzu's reported quote seemed to sum it up so nicely with the weight of history and the power of the philosophy of Sun Tzu behind it, that I failed as a historian to check the actual primary source, *The Art of War*, to see if he actually said it.

Such is the seductive power of social scientific models: they order and rationalize things so well and explain present day problems so neatly. For me, the principle of the primacy of strategy over tactics in war became an unalterable rule, which history and my own writings of it had to conform.

But I have seen the errors of my ways and am recovering from the addiction of a rule-bound model that overly simplifies the past. My recovery was aided, naturally, through the study of history and teaching it in the classroom. It is not that I have come to believe that tactics matter most in war, or that tactical excellence can save failed strategy. Instead, through the study and teaching of history I have come to see that tactics do matter, sometimes a lot, and battles matter too.

George Washington and the year 1776 in the American Revolution come to mind. It was a difficult year for the Continental Army, Washington, and the Revolution itself. The previous year saw a string of apparent American victories by militia forces at Lexington-Concord and at Bunker Hill. But in 1776 the British became focused and allocated resources toward crushing the rebellion. Thus, the Continental army under Washington felt the full weight of British imperial power at the Battle of Long Island, White Plains, and the embarrassing retreat of Washington and his Continentals across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania.

Washington's army was poor at tactics relative to British regulars, and the general knew it. Let's play with history here a bit. Let us say we went back in time, put ourselves down in Washington's headquarters in November 1776 – as his army was in tatters – and we told him of two famous aphorisms about counterinsurgency warfare from the modern world. First, that strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. Second, that in an insurgency (like the American Revolution) the insurgent wins if he doesn't lose. I think Washington would have laughed at those two aphorisms. He would have scratched his head and said my big problem right now at this point in time is not strategy, but the simple fact that my army can't fight effectively at the tactical level, and it has shown at such battles as Long Island in August 1776. He

would have also been puzzled by the concept of simply not losing, for Washington knew that to maintain the morale of his army and the citizenry, there came a time when he needed to win a battle or two. I think he would have also said that at least in his war bad tactics could lose the war for him, and conversely that tactical excellence was a key component to rebel victory.

But back to the present. If I had stuck with my model of the primacy of strategy over tactics it would have led me to a false understanding of Washington's situation in late 1776 and the criticality of tactical performance of his army. I would have concluded that for Washington tactics simply didn't matter, as long as he got his strategy right. In a sense this is what American counterinsurgency expert John Nagl, sometimes whimsically called a Coindinista by American investigative reporter Carl Prine, did in his 2005 book *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. He constructed a model that said if an army learns and adapts following a certain set of steps, and if it has as a certain end point of learning – call it the perfection of population centric counterinsurgency – then it can win.

With that model in hand Nagl undertook a study of the British in Malaya and the United States in Vietnam. Using his model of organizational learning as a template Nagl concluded that the British in Malaya followed his model and therefore they won, and the American's didn't follow his model and therefore they lost. It is a strikingly clever and seductive conclusion and one that led many to take that very template and apply it to Iraq and Afghanistan. But it is also a conclusion that horribly distorts the past and one fundamentally not supported by primary evidence. In so trying to make his model work Nagl severely misinterpreted Clausewitz and Jomini. He then went on to distort history by characterizing 18th Century warfare as made up of single battles "that often decided a war." Yet the historian is hard pressed to find even one example of such a battle that ended a war during that age. More importantly Nagl's apparent addiction to his model led him to misunderstand the two wars of Malaya and Vietnam. In the former the concern of senior British leaders was never really about the Army's performance but of the Malayan police. And in Vietnam, the primary evidence shows quite well that the American Army followed Nagl's learning model to a tee, but the US still lost the war.

Such are the perils of social scientific models when applied to the past in an attempt to explain it through history. In my journey back from the dark side and addiction of social scientific model through the study of history I believe that I have come to a more balanced understanding of the relationship between strategy and tactics in war. Generally speaking, history does show the importance of good strategy in war and that if it is not done right dubious results will often follow. But history also shows that bad tactics can cause a state to lose a war, or at least cause it to modify its original war aims. And I also think that in some historical cases one can find examples of where a war was fought with a faulty strategy but solid tactics from the start generated opportunities for strategy to reform itself.

Even though I have jettisoned my rule-bound model of the primacy of strategy over tactics in war, I still believe that the problems America faces in Afghanistan today are widely tied

to a broken strategy.

Washington Post reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran writes in his new book on Afghanistan, *Little America*, of a war fought by the United States that has seen buckets and buckets of wasted energy and effort, bungled military operations, dysfunctional command and organizational structures, and naïve, misguided priorities. To be sure the American war in Afghanistan has seen those things from the very start, just like in Iraq. But wars in general and the militaries that fight them are never models of efficiency – far from it. The Prussian philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz in his seminal book, *On War*, first published in 1832, introduced the idea of “friction” in war. Since wars are fought between peoples and militaries with opposing wills in the realm of death and destruction, friction has the effect of making seemingly smooth running military organizations quite imperfect, and at times, dysfunctional. The American military in Afghanistan in this regard is no different.

Consider some examples from military history. In the American Civil War the Union Army's command structure never produced efficient staffs at the higher levels to adequately convey orders and plans to subordinate units, and the Confederates were even worse. Nor did the Union Army prioritize its resources in the most efficient way throughout the war, as evident in its telegraph systems being concentrated solely at the highest levels of command and never really making their way down to where the telegraph could have assisted lower level commanders. Moreover, the Union Army, arguably, never really got its organizational structures for combat right. It never developed a powerful striking force of all arms that could exploit victories in battle to make them truly decisive. Union commanding General George Meade at Gettysburg had soundly defeated Lee's army but since he lacked a powerful counteroffensive force of cavalry and infantry and artillery he could not destroy Lee's Army through exploitation.

In World War II, prior to the Normandy invasion, the American Army under General Omar Bradley had badly conceived the use of airpower to destroy German defensive positions on the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach. There was an assumption that American high-flying strategic bombers would pulverize the beach defenses so that when the 29th and 1st Infantry Divisions landed they would easily move off of the beach and on to the high ground. But airpower did not have the assumed effect so that the plan that the assaulting divisions carried out went dreadfully wrong, and there was a high payment in blood as a result.

But in both cases — the Union Army in the Civil War and the American Army at the Normandy landings — the wars were fought under a broader strategic framework that made sense. When a state gets its strategy right in war, problems with tactics, organizational structures and procedures, and even problems with generalship tend to be subsumed and improved within a functioning and rational strategy. The Union Army in the American Civil War and the American Army in World War II, to be sure, had their fair share of “friction”

but good strategy smoothed those problems out in the end. What Chandrasekaran essentially exposes in his new book on the Americans in Afghanistan is nothing new in war: friction. But when a state fights a war under a botched strategy — as the United States is currently doing in Afghanistan — without that umbrella of a functioning strategy then such friction is exposed to, and laid bare with, nothing higher for cover. Without good strategy the flaws and dysfunction that Chandrasekaran exposes is seen as instrumental noise, but without the melody of music — good strategy — to make sense out of it and give it direction and purpose.

Although Sun Tzu never said “strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat,” he did actually say something similar in *The Art of War* about the meaning and relative worth of strategy and tactics in war: “All men can see the tactics whereby I conquer,” argued Sun Tzu, “but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved.” [ii]

The problem with American strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan is that everyone could see the tactics of counterinsurgency, but as they saw them they also saw the strategy. And therein ultimately rests a profound point of which history teaches, and that can't be reduced into a simplistic, social science rule. In some wars there may be times where tactics, in terms of relative importance, are more important than strategy. But as long as strategy is seen for what it is, and viewed in a separate light, then it can employ effectively tactical action. But let the two become one, as in Iraq and Afghanistan where it was not uncommon to hear pundits and generals referring to a “counterinsurgency strategy,” then we have lost the bubble on the proper relationship between tactics and strategy in war and the end result is nothing more than a hopeless strategic muddle that wastes blood and treasure.

Oh yes, Sun Tzu said another thing about the temporal aspect of war: “There is no instance of a country having been benefited from prolonged warfare.” [iii] By merging the tactics of American counterinsurgency with strategy in Afghanistan, the United States has allowed its military to adhere to a tactical imperative of counterinsurgency — that counterinsurgency campaigns take a long, long time.

Commenting in 2010 on how long the United States would be in Afghanistan, General Petraeus said, “this is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives.” [iv] With regard to his strategic assessment of Afghanistan relative to Sun Tzu's aphorism of the perils of protracted war for states, General Petraeus was wildly off the mark.

Time is a calculation of strategy, and good strategy in Afghanistan should have discerned long ago that such an investment of time combined with massive amounts of blood and treasure was simply not worth the cost.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government.

References

[i] For example see: Andrew W. Koloski and John S. Kolasheski, "Thickening the Lines: Sons of Iraq, a Combat Multiplier," *Military Review*, (January-February, 2009); Juan Cole, Shawn Brimley, Marina Ottaway, and Mathew Duss to "How Important was the Surge?" *American Prospect*, 25 July 2008, (<http://prospect.org/article/how-important-was-surge>); John Agnew, Thomas W. Gillespie, Jorge Gonzalez, and Brian Min, "Baghdad Nights: Evaluating the US Military Surge Using Nighttime Light Signatures," *Environment and Planning*, (October 2008); Patrick Cockburn, "Who is the Enemy?" *London Review of Books*, (March 2008); Joshua Thiel, "The Statistical Irrelevance of American SIGACT Data: Iraq Surge Analysis Reveals Reality," *Small Wars Journal*, 12 April 2011, (<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/732-thiel1.pdf>); also see Carl Prine "David Ucko is Wrong (Mostly)," *Line of Departure*, 30 November 2011, (<http://www.lineofdeparture.com/2011/11/30/ucko-is-wrong-mostly/>)

[ii] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Lionel Giles, (Harrisburg: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1944), 62.

[iii] *Ibid.*, 45.

[iv] Quoted in Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 332-33.

Subscribe For Free

Infinity Journal is available for free exclusively at InfinityJournal.com.


By subscribing you will get the following:

- A simple, non-intrusive email informing you of each new issue or article.
- A pdf version of each new issue, so that you can read Infinity Journal on all your devices, from your computer to your cell phone.
- An enhanced digital edition that provides the best reading experience and features. Now compatible with iPhone, iPad & Android.
- Access to every issue of Infinity Journal, Infinity Journal Exclusive articles, and Special Editions.
- Global networking to connect with anyone interested in strategy.

No cost, no hassles, nothing hidden. *It really is that simple.*

Subscribe Now: InfinityJournal.com

Infinity Journal is a free publication that is only available online.



Vietnam and After: Failure in the Vietnam War and the Enduring Defects in US Strategic Culture

C. Dale Walton

Lindenwood University
United States of America

Dr. C. Dale Walton is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, USA. He is a former lecturer at the University of Reading (UK) from 2007-12, serving on the faculty of the Defense and Strategic Studies Department at Missouri State University from 2001-07, and working as a Senior Analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy. Dr. Walton is the author of three books: *Grand Strategy and the Presidency: Foreign Policy, War, and the American Role in the World* (Routledge, 2012); *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and Revolution in Strategic Perspective* (Routledge, 2007); and *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (Frank Cass/Routledge, 2002); and is a co-author of *Understanding Modern Warfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The resources that the United States allocates to national security inspire awe. The precise amount spent annually is open to debate—among other things, the figure arrived at is impacted considerably by what percentage of national debt payments are counted (reflecting past spending) and how factors like equipment depreciation and pensions (which will impact future spending) are treated. In any case, however, the expenditures are staggering—sufficient, for example, to cover the entire cost of Alexander the Great’s bid for global hegemony many times over. Unlike Alexander’s Macedon, however, the United States does not typically win its wars anymore—the US military history of the past half century largely is a dismal tale of outright loss (the Vietnam War), *de facto* defeat (the Afghanistan War), and Pyrrhic-victory-at-best (the Iraq War). There are exceptions, of course—most notably, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, as well as are a variety of small wars against powers ranging from the minor to the microscopic; the latter category includes the Kosovo War, the invasions of Panama and Grenada, and similar operations. Nevertheless, the general arc is clear.

The US armed services are an extraordinary strategic

instrument, and have been throughout the period under discussion. The image of the US Army in Vietnam as a drug-addled rabble owes more to urban legends about the supposed ubiquity of officer “fraggings” and the script of the decidedly fictional *Apocalypse Now* than actual history. The US military, particularly the Army, did suffer discipline problems in the Vietnam era, mostly in the later years of the war with rear-echelon units and, especially, ones stationed outside of Vietnam itself. The services responded to this by implementing successful reforms that purged the ranks of troublemakers and reimposed discipline. Yet, the excellence of the US military itself does not guarantee strategic success; indeed, a paradox of the sort which Edward N. Luttwak described in his classic *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* bedevils Washington: because their military is such an impressive tool, American civilian leaders feel a great temptation to use it, and they do so too liberally, often without having carefully and realistically weighed the likely long-term consequences of military action.[i]

When fighting second and third-rate enemies, operational excellence generally is sufficient to avoid complete humiliation in the short-term; the US military is sufficiently competent that it has not allowed an enemy to win a major tactical victory since the Korean War. The Tet Offensive of 1968, though widely perceived as a defeat for the United States, in fact was perhaps its greatest battlefield victory of the conflict: the indigenous Viet Cong suffered a bloodletting from which it never recovered, and the revolution in the South effectively was crushed. From that point forward, keeping the war alive required ongoing very large-scale infiltration by North Vietnamese forces (People’s Army of Vietnam - PAVN). The Iraqi and Afghan enemies of the United States have failed even to win a dubious victory of the sort enjoyed by the Viet Cong: they have proven incapable of overwhelming all but the smallest US units. When they have attempted to do so, as the Taliban did in the early months of the Afghan conflict, they have suffered accordingly, as their efforts played directly to *the* defining US military strength from the Second World War onward: quickly bringing crippling firepower to bear against enemy targets. Thus, both Iraqi and Afghan insurgents had little choice but to rely on terroristic tactics, killing and wounding American troops through sniping, the planting of improvised explosive devices, and similar methods.

To cite this Article: Walton, C. Dale, “Vietnam and After: Failure in the Vietnam War and the Enduring Defects in US Strategic Culture”, *Infinity Journal*, IJ Special Edition, “Strategic Misfortunes”, October 2012, pages 25-28.

Ending Wars: Afghanistan and Iraq

The inability of these foes to win large-scale battlefield victories against US forces, however, did not make strategic success impossible for them. Indeed, it could even be said to have encouraged them to focus their efforts on a dimension of war in which they enjoyed a singular advantage over Washington: time.[ii] The Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars are dissimilar in many obvious respects, but alike insofar as both involve the United States fighting an expeditionary war on foreign territory against non-great power foes.[iii] These circumstances clearly are distinct from those facing Washington in many of its other conflicts; for instance, the Second World War provides a vivid contrast. From mid-December 1941 onward, it was entirely obvious even to the most politically disinterested American that a crushing military and political victory was the only acceptable outcome to the war in which the United States had finally become formally engaged. The precise character of that victory might be debatable — whether something less than unconditional Axis surrender might be contemplated, for instance — but, in any case, the war must not end with either the Japanese Empire in command of the Western Pacific and the Rimland of Asia or a hostile Nazi superpower consolidating its control over the bulk of the resources, industry, and population of the European continent.

The Vietnam War was a more vague endeavor. Certainly, the United States government was attempting to prevent South Vietnam (more formally, the Republic of Vietnam - RVN) from falling to communist control, and — aside from the more radical elements of the left and the tiny surviving remnants of the isolationist right — there was broad public agreement that the United States should resist the spread of communism in general and Soviet and Chinese power in particular. Whether it was especially important that the RVN survive was, however, a rather more difficult question — indeed, over time discussion increasingly shifted away from the importance of the country itself and focused on whether its collapse would damage US credibility as a protecting power more generally.

The motive for the US occupation of Afghanistan was plain — the Taliban's refusal to surrender Osama Bin Laden and his associates in a prompt and appropriately contrite manner — but what precisely the United States is attempting to accomplish now in that country is not altogether clear. The fantasy that Afghanistan could be turned into a stable democracy has long since evaporated. At this point, it seems that President Obama is repeating the experience of his predecessor Richard Nixon: saddled with a unpopular and apparently endless war which he did not begin, he is mainly trying to avoid national (and personal) disgrace and wind down US involvement on acceptable terms. President Nixon, however, was in a somewhat superior position for an ironic reason: he and his subordinate Henry Kissinger were negotiating the American exit from Vietnam with the icy leaders of a totalitarian enemy state.

Throughout most of the Vietnam conflict, the United States fought in a very constrained fashion. The Johnson Administration — deeply fearful of the possibility that China might enter the war and enamored of the notion that “graduated escalation” was the appropriate methodology for attaining US goals at minimal risk — always conducted

the war diffidently. The United States even left much of Hanoi, not only the capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) but also its most important industrial city, and the port of Haiphong, the key point of entry for the Soviet and Chinese war materiel that made the PAVN's expeditionary conflict possible, untouched by its bombing campaign, despite having the ability to devastate both cities at will. Throughout most of his first term, the Nixon Administration was more assertive than Johnson's in some respects — undertaking, for example, *Operation Menu*, the bombing of North Vietnamese troops and facilities in Cambodia in 1969-70; however, it largely continued the American policy of caution in the use of violence against the North. The results were as unimpressive as one might expect, but by early 1972, the Administration's successful efforts to effect a rapprochement with China had given the president the confidence to increase the military pressure on Hanoi through efforts such as the mining of Haiphong Harbor and initiation of the *Linebacker I* bombing campaign, which hit a range of previously excluded targets.

As a result, Hanoi's massive 1972 operational push (called the “Easter Offensive” by the Americans), was broken, with very heavy losses to the PAVN in both men and materiel. From August 1969 onward, Kissinger and his DRV counterpart, Le Duc Tho, had held secret negotiating sessions, but following the collapse of the offensive the prospects for a settled peace appeared especially promising. By October, the general outlines of a US-DRV peace agreement existed, but Hanoi remained cagey, still seeking favorable revisions and refusing to finalize an agreement.

In November 1972, Nixon won an impressive electoral victory over Democratic Party nominee George McGovern, but the president nevertheless was rightly concerned about the possibility that the incoming Congress, with Democratic majorities in both houses and a very strong Congressional “peace wing” which included many liberal Republicans, might undermine his efforts to achieve a favorable peace. At the same time, Saigon opposed any peace settlement that did not contain various concessions — such as the recognition of the South Vietnam as a separate, sovereign state by the DRV — that Hanoi certainly would not grant.

Given his temporarily strong but nonetheless precarious position, Nixon decided on the risky gambit of giving the DRV a very sharp shove — the massive *Linebacker II* bombing campaign. The campaign that occurred from 18-29 December (interrupted in the middle by a 36-hour stand-down for Christmas Day) was operationally devastating. The United States took significant losses — including the shooting down of fifteen B-52s and significant damage to several others — but North Vietnam was gravely wounded, its air defenses largely destroyed and its highly sophisticated logistics network (briefly) wrecked. Nixon's gamble succeeded: in January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed.

There is no Afghan equivalent of the government in Hanoi: the forces undermining Afghan stability are a motley collection of tribal warlords, religious fanatics, drug lords, kleptocrats, Pakistani intriguers, and generic thugs. Many individual actors fall into more than one of these categories. Moreover, unlike the leadership of the DRV, many of them lack the intellectual discipline necessary to make prudent strategic decisions; the generals running Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services

Intelligence (ISI) appear to have a special genius for devising elaborate plots, which invariably backfire and cause chaos in Pakistan itself. Given all this, even if Obama possessed the will to unleash violence on a Nixonian scale, it would make no difference.

The closest equivalent to the DRV perhaps is the government of Pakistan, but of course it formally is a US ally. The practical reality is considerably more complex — Islamabad is more enemy than ally — but, even leaving aside all considerations of global diplomacy and US domestic political opinion, violence directed against the Pakistani government would be deeply counterproductive. The simple truth is that Afghan stability is not especially important to the overall security of the United States; however, Pakistani stability *is* important, particularly insofar as that country possesses a sizable nuclear arsenal which might fall into very unsavory hands if Pakistan collapses into anarchy. Thus, it would be unwise to take any action that might fatally damage the chronically unhealthy government of Pakistan. Even if that worst-case scenario did not transpire, it would certainly be undesirable if one or more of the factions within Pakistan's military leadership — angry and humiliated by US action — decided to ramp up their efforts to undermine US interests. The apparent links between the ISI and the terrorists who conducted the 2008 Mumbai attacks serve as a stark illustration of how spectacularly imprudent many Pakistani policymakers are; if sufficiently motivated, they might even attempt to organize attacks on US embassies or other targets.

Aside from Pakistan, there is no potential negotiating partner remotely worthy of the name. The United States already has accepted the indignity of negotiating with the Taliban, but its efforts to negotiate an acceptable peace ultimately will prove futile. The Taliban is not a unified body, but rather a set of factions loosely united by ethnicity (as an instrument of Pashtun supremacism in Afghanistan), religious obscurantism, and a loathing of the West and its values. Even if a peace agreement is extracted from "the Taliban", factional rivalry soon will render it worthless. Thus far, both the Obama Administration and its Republican opponents apparently are unwilling to accept — regardless of precisely how the US ends the war — that it already has been lost. American withdrawal (correctly) will be perceived globally as an operational retreat reflecting a strategic (and policy) failure — the collapse of the US effort to craft even a modestly convincing imitation of a modern, democratic, and secure Afghan state.

It was possible to craft a better outcome to Vietnam, and the Nixon Administration did so. The Paris Peace Accords hardly reflected a stunning US victory and, indeed, were somewhat embarrassing — particularly the tacit acceptance of a permanent PAVN presence in South Vietnam and the refusal of the DRV to recognize that country's legitimacy — but their terms, if enforced, insured an (admittedly very imperfect) US strategic victory in Vietnam. The core US goal was the survival of a non-communist South Vietnam and the core DRV goal was the absorption of that country — therefore, at the time that the treaty was signed there was every reason to believe that the United States had won the Vietnam War, just as it had in essence won the Korean War. These were frustratingly incomplete victories, but ones that allowed for the survival of a weak post-colonial Asian ally confronted by a stronger

communist counterpart.

The Paris Peace Accords did not permit a continuing US military presence of the sort still ongoing in South Korea — but, given the US domestic political atmosphere of the time, the maintenance of a large US military force in South Vietnam would not have been feasible in any event. South Vietnam, however, was not without the ability to defend itself — the serious "Vietnamization" efforts of the Nixon era had shown considerable success. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) did not have the man-for-man fighting power of the US Army of the day, but neither did the PAVN. The question was whether it was *good enough* to insure the RVN's survival even against an invasion on the scale of the 1972 Easter Offensive. The answer almost surely was "yes," provided that two conditions were met: first, continued provision of ample financial and military aid to the South; second, direct US military intervention should the DRV ignore the Accords and mount a full-scale invasion.

South Vietnam, however, was then doomed by a bizarre series of events. The Nixon of January 1973 was a respected global statesman with a domestic stature sufficient to enforce the Accords militarily, if need be — but the Watergate scandal soon thereafter began to corrode his status radically. In June, a much-weakened Nixon was compelled to accept a (constitutionally very questionable, as it seriously constrained the president's authority as the commander-in-chief) ban on the expenditure of funds for military operations in Southeast Asia after 15 August 1973. The following year he resigned office, and the 1974 Congressional elections resulted in a Congressional majority strongly inclined to starve Saigon of aid. As the PAVN offensive gained momentum in early 1975, President Gerald Ford faced a bleak choice. He could have ordered the American military to intervene on behalf of the RVN, thus directly challenging Congress' attempt to hamstring the commander in chief. Doing so, however, would have caused the greatest US constitutional crisis since the Civil War. Alternately, he could observe helplessly as strategic gains made at the cost of tens of billions of dollars, and nearly 60,000 US (and hundreds of thousands of allied) lives were tossed away. When all factors, domestic and international, are considered, he probably was wise to choose the latter course. The fact that the US Congress obliged him to make the decision, however, was an act of shocking strategic irresponsibility.

The end game in Afghanistan of course will be radically different from that in Vietnam. Most likely, either the second Obama or first Romney Administration will continue the current policy of slowly winding down the war until, finally, it can quietly end US combat operations altogether (a concluding stage similar to the one in Iraq). Yet both conflicts reflect a central flaw running throughout US strategic culture: an unwillingness on the part of most US civilian policymakers to apply Clausewitzian analysis — applying military violence in a well-considered way and crafting an intelligent strategy that ultimately furthers US policy aims at an acceptable price.

Conclusion: American Anti-Clausewitzism

One might fairly describe US strategic culture as "Anti-Clausewitzian", not in the sense that it has consciously

rejected Clausewitz but that (aside from within the US military) there is very little appreciation of the need to apply force in a thoughtful manner, assessing the likely financial, diplomatic, and human costs of war and creating a strategy that *realistically* should result in desired ends being achieved at an acceptable price. This is what Colin S. Gray has dubbed “the Strategy Bridge”, and it is a calculation that has been critical to success in statecraft since before humans developed the written word.[iv]

Precisely why US strategic culture has developed this unhealthy characteristic is complex, reflecting both moral attitudes — most US policymakers find coldly rational discussions of warfare distasteful, preferring to couch discussions of interest in happy vagaries about “spreading democracy” and “American values” — and the tapestry of US history.[v] It is clear, however, that the United States has not, throughout most of its history, been incapable of rationally connecting political ends and military means. Small, weak republics on the Eastern Seaboard of North America do not become continental superstates if they are incapable of using violence ruthlessly and effectively against a variety of foes.

In 1975, a reasonable observer might argue that the outcome of the Vietnam War was an anomaly, the calamitous ultimate outcome of the strategic ineptitude of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara and a collective madness that descended upon Capitol Hill as a result of anger at Nixon for Watergate and longstanding frustration with Saigon as an ally. In 2012, however, it is obvious that there is a strong continuing pattern of poor US strategizing regarding the use of military power.

Not only was the strategy for Afghanistan unrealistic, but the planning for the invasion of Iraq also was deeply flawed.

Saddam Hussein was a long-standing irritant and the desire to see him removed from power altogether understandable. However, the fact that the Bush Administration believed that declaring Iraq a democracy would somehow prevent civil war and block Iran from having enormous influence in the country was as delusional as its belief that Afghanistan could be transformed into a functional state. When one also considers the examples of the US intervention in Lebanon in the 1980s and the US war in Libya — an adventure whose consequences are still playing out — as well as ill-considered uses of force in the Balkans that were at least nominally successful thanks to the weakness of Serbia and Slobodan Miloševi’s arrogance and strategic ineptitude, the flaws in US strategic culture are all too clear. Moreover, it should be noted that they are bipartisan.

In a Luttwakian paradox, it is a long record of US historical success that has encouraged this more recent pattern of failure. Because the United States succeeded so impressively overall in its grand strategy from the War of Independence to the end of the Cold War — and the Vietnam debacle did not completely destroy US containment, which proved a good enough strategy to bring the competition with the Soviet Union to a peaceful end — “victory disease” has taken deep root in US strategic culture. The aforementioned impressiveness of the military instrument and the fact that, even now, the United States is so much more powerful than any of its rivals blind policymakers to the limitations on their ability to impose their will on sentient enemies who react to the use of force, often in a creative and surprising manner. Victory disease is a self-correcting condition; eventually patterns of failure become so clear that policymakers are compelled to acknowledge them, whereupon they modify their strategic behavior. The questions that have yet to be answered are how much additional damage the United States will inflict on its interests and how much more it will pay in blood and dollars before it ceases to act in this dysfunctional manner.

References

- [i] See Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, rev. and expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).
- [ii] On the dimensions of warfare, see the influential discussion in Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 16-47.
- [iii] US strategic errors in the Vietnam War are discussed in much greater detail in C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass/Routledge, 2002). On the Afghanistan War, see Idem, “The US Failure in Afghanistan and Its Lessons,” *Infinity Journal* 2/1 (Winter 2011), pp. 9-12.
- [iv] See Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- [v] On the historical development of US strategic culture, see C. Dale Walton, *Grand Strategy and the Presidency: Foreign Policy, War, and the American Role in the World* (London: Routledge, 2011).



Strategy and the Chinese Civil War

Adam Elkus

American University
United States of America

Adam Elkus holds a Master's Degree from Georgetown University and he is a doctoral student in International Relations at American University.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Guomindang (GMD) in the Chinese Civil War of 1946-49 offers a powerful lesson in strategic misfortune. The GMD's decay, corruption, and failure to offer a persuasive hope for future prosperity in the aftermath of the horrors of the second Sino-Japanese War were certainly prominent factors in its defeat. But the GMD nonetheless had the military power and will to militarily crush the CCP, as it often did before the onset of sustained Japanese aggression in the late 1930s. Political failure may have weakened the GMD, but strategic failure in managing large land campaigns sealed its fate.

Strategy of Destruction

The Chinese Civil War is a powerful case study in the centrality of battle even in civil war. Ideology, popular mobilization, and governance were all important. But to heavily focus on these factors ignores Mao's oft quoted maxim that "power grows out of the barrel of a gun." European counterinsurgency theorists such as David Galula studied Mao, but rarely understood the centrality of battle to early 20th Century China's strategic history. Guerrilla operations and peasant revolts sat alongside large-scale operations waged by those with European military training and ideas. Mastery of continental land warfare as well as guerrilla operations proved key to victory.

China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War motivated the Qing leaders to create a powerful and bureaucratic military organized around European lines with the aid of German advisors.[i] The 1911 revolution was not won by mass mobilization; Sun Yat-Sen's GMD was a secret society that focused its efforts on winning over intellectuals, economic

elites, and soldiers in Qing military forces.[ii] Yuan Shikai, Marshal of the Qing's forces, defected with his elite Beiyang Army to Sun's side and tilted the military balance in favor of the rebels. A lack of political consensus over the structure and distribution of political power helped fragment the military balance and thus create the impetus for China's infamous 'warlord period'. [iii]

Both sides in the Chinese Civil War were also thoroughly familiar with European political-military ideas and training. German advisors instilled in warlord armies an appreciation of the importance of large infantry armies, artillery, and the necessity of controlling land forces with telegraphic communication and railroad transport. German influence may have been eventually eclipsed by the Soviets, but German ideas still figured strongly in GMD doctrine and operations.[iv] GMD and CCP political-military commanders both had military training in Europe and received training from Soviet advisors in the Whampoa Military Academy, before the White Terror suppression of CCP forces in Shanghai and beyond by the GMD that ended their putative alliance in the late 1920s. Both the GMD and the CCP adopted political commissar systems and were strongly influenced by the Soviet idea of the party army.[v]

From the beginning, the GMD understood that the CCP posed an existential threat and committed to its destruction. It engaged in encirclement operations to search and destroy CCP forces, the success of which was aided by the CCP's initial Leninist conception of a strategy of urban revolt. Mao and Zhu De worked in concert to develop an alternative strategy built around concepts of protracted war, guerrilla tactics, and political mobilization of the peasantry. The growth of base areas throughout China provided the impetus for the growth of the party army and the CCP's distinctive military tactics.[vi]

The GMD moved in the early 1930s to encircle and destroy the base areas, but were initially stymied. CCP forces responded by "luring the enemy into the deep," tricking the GMD forces into overextending their supply lines and destroying individual enemy units. However, the success of these tactics must be qualified. GMD units often consisted of former warlord troops of uneven quality, and local revolts and Japanese encroachments harmed overall GMD ability to coordinate operations. When the GMD devoted its full

To cite this Article: Elkus, Adam, "Strategy and the Chinese Civil War", *Infinity Journal*, IJ Special Edition, "Strategic Misfortunes", October 2012, pages 29-32.

attentions and resources to annihilating the CCP, it was remarkably successful.[vii]

GMD forces did not have to compete for the allegiance of the populace to defeat the CCP's base area strategy. Rather, the GMD starved the CCP base areas of resources and nullified Mao's famed tactics by refusing to be lured into the deep. Networks of blockhouses linked by communication nodes were constructed to exert GMD control, but this time GMD troops refused to overextend their lines. CCP guerrillas were starved of resources, and any CCP attempts to exert local control resulted in destruction by pinpoint artillery and aircraft bombing. The CCP found itself fighting offensively to survive, but doing so led to crushing military defeat in pitched battle.[viii]

The final encirclement campaign severely reduced the CCP base areas. The GMD's aggressive pursuit of the Communist remnants during the torturous Long March destroyed nine tenths of CCP military power. Were it not for the onset of Japanese aggression, it is quite likely that the GMD would have completely destroyed the weakened CCP forces.[ix] The Second Sino-Japanese War not only provided breathing room for the CCP, but also allowed the CCP the opportunity to finally compete for political authority on a national scale. CCP forces infiltrated behind Japanese lines to organize the masses against the Japanese and build up a power base.[x]

Strategy of Consolidation

The CCP modified its policies in order to make itself attractive to local economic elites while still seeking to lower the peasant's burden. This politically adroit compromise enabled the CCP to play to peasant sympathies while also plying local landlords that would have otherwise supported the GMD. The increasing formalization and sophistication of the CCP's command and control structure increased as it expanded rapidly in its base areas; it reached a peak strength of 1.27 million men under arms and 2.6 million militia members by the fall of 1945.[xi] The CCP, once regarded as yet another group of renegades with a propensity for redistributive violence, now became seen as patriots waging a virtuous struggle against the Japanese invader. The fact that the CCP's major military efforts were largely failures did not matter, as the Communists rose while the GMD was pushed to the brink of extinction by the pressure of tackling the Japanese head-on.[xii]

The GMD paid a high price for its efforts to maintain the prewar Chinese polity. It lost 2.4 million men, and some of its best officers perished in positional warfare against the Japanese onslaught.[xiii] At war's end, large pockets of territory remained under the control of Japanese troops, local puppet regimes, and the CCP. Even American aid was not enough to sustain the power of the sinking GMD state. The war destroyed 55 percent of industry and mining, 72 percent of shipping, and 96 percent of railway lines. Inflation in GMD territory rose to an annual average of 230 percent. The war shattered the GMD's prewar evolution into a Soviet-style hierarchal party and the political necessity of compromising with local elites during the war led to substantial corruption.[xiv]

The GMD's political failure to consolidate its control is heavily emphasized in the literature of the war, and for good reason. Years of warlordism, civil war, and the depredations of Japanese aggression had disrupted the political, social, and economic fabric of China. The GMD, challenged by the CCP's competing nationalism, would have to demonstrate its competence in order to regain political control and legitimacy. But the GMD entered the postwar situation with a substantial lack of revenue, and the wartime disruption of China's heavy industry resulted in substantial price increases. GMD reforms were crippled by a lack of understanding of modern monetary policy, though they were not totally without beneficial effect. Hyperinflation, unemployment, and indirect taxation all presented a dismal picture of government failure.[xv]

The GMD also failed to adapt to social changes, such as the rise of labor activism, autonomous peasant uprisings, revolts from traditionally oppressed groups, and the rise of a heavily nationalist and CCP-linked student movement. The war's destruction of traditional markers of social cohesion and class status helped create a large group of elites willing to entertain visions of a China ruled by a power other than the GMD.[xvi] The GMD found it initially easy to re-establish control in the countryside and handle peasant revolts with indirect rule through a combination of local elites and coercive law enforcement. But it did not understand the need to respond to the deepening social crisis in the countryside.[xvii]

The GMD strategy of attempting to gain control of large urban centers ran into severe difficulty as factional infighting, predatory local officials, and lack of governing capacity hindered efforts to rebuild.[xviii] By 1948, total economic collapse had devastated the middle class, bankrupted businessmen, and severely disrupted the GMD's elite power base. Once-tight party control eroded, and the circle of elites willing to fight for the GMD narrowed.[xix] The CCP deftly exploited these difficulties by mobilizing the urban middle class, students, and labor to frustrate the GMD's political control of the cities.[xx]

The CCP, however, could also be quite ruthless and at times equally inept at the task of extending its authority. The CCP's success at radical land reform among the peasantry can best be described as mixed. Land reform's quality varied, led to political conflicts, and most peasants simply sought to survive rather than take sides. Some even resisted the CCP's efforts to violently overturn the prewar political and social order. More important was the CCP's ability to create local order, manipulate local elites, and militarize its areas of operation. When it succeeded, the CCP did so by adapting to local conditions and promising all things to all men. When it failed, it was because of overzealous ideological mobilization and lack of attention to the needs of the locals. The CCP succeeded not necessarily in generating a giant peasant army, but in gaining a base for supply and support. It gained enough recruits to sustain its losses and wage a civil war on a continental scale.[xxi]

Strategy of Victory

Despite the GMD's manifold political failures, it held one crucial trump card: the power of battle. As in the encirclement

campaigns, the GMD had the raw military power to crush the CCP. Without eliminating the GMD's forces, including an elite group of American-trained units, the CCP could not win the civil war. Its liberated areas depended on military support to survive. In spite of its losses and economic mismanagement, the GMD's armed forces had grown larger and the party continued to hold international recognition. Crucially, the GMD military could also count on American and British assistance for air and naval transport. The CCP, in contrast, could count on sporadic support at best, from Moscow. [xxii] In 1945 the GMD, despite its setbacks, controlled three quarters of the country, 300 million people, all large cities, and transportation hubs. Its ranks boasted 4.3 million troops, including 2 million regulars. [xxiii]

The CCP was not prepared for Japan's sudden collapse in 1945, but the GMD could deftly exploit it. Japan's strategic defeat, and the subsequent power vacuum it created, complicated the CCP's slow efforts to create guerrilla bases in south and central China and develop a positional defense of the emerging CCP mini-state in the north. If successful, the plan would force the GMD into engaging in counterinsurgency in the south while contending with mobile warfare in the north. Japan's sudden collapse caught the CCP in the middle of the process, before either front was ready for battle. [xxiv] The GMD used Allied transport to rapidly move its forces into north China, prompting the CCP to engage in a mad dash to prevent GMD expansion. [xxv]

The strategic decision that helped save the CCP was actually made by Mao's subordinate, Liu Shaoqi. Abandoning the prewar plan, Liu shifted the CCP's best troops into the northeast, gaining Manchuria and shortening CCP lines in the south. As one group of forces moved to the northeast in Manchuria, CCP units once tasked to the south would abandon their bases and move north to Shandong, Jiangsu, and Hebei. [xxvi] These maneuvers established Manchuria as a logistical base that could supply the war effort nationally. [xxvii] Nevertheless, the plan also immediately ran into problems. Building a base of support in northeast China had proved more difficult than Liu expected. In addition to political problems with the area's populace, the GMD dispatched strong units to the area to contest the CCP's presence. [xxviii]

1946 found the CCP still struggling in Manchuria and thwarted in their quest to establish a safe rear area for the liberated areas in north China, along the Yellow River. [xxix] The GMD unleashed its American-trained elite units and succeeded in severely disrupting CCP military forces in Anhui, Jiangsu, and Shandong and trapping CCP armies in the east. [xxx] Meanwhile, offensives continued in the north and northeast. Yet at this point, the GMD, failing to notice the problems inherent in its failure to destroy Communist armies in the field, assumed that it had secured Shanxi, Suiyan, Chahar, Anhui, Rehe, and the Central Plains as well as the majority of Jiangsu, Hebei, and Manchuria.

Thus, the GMD decided to embark on the Strong Point offensive, an attempt to destroy the CCP's political apparatus to the west in Yan'an as well as the trapped CCP army in the east. [xxxi] The Strong Point offensive was based on the tenuous assumptions that the GMD had secured its conquered territory and could afford to shift its effort away from the northeast and northern theaters. It failed to finish off

the CCP, even though it came close enough that the party headquarters in Yan'an were evacuated. [xxxii] By the end of the Strong Point offensive in 1947, the CCP still had its strategic base in the northeast, and the GMD had failed to fully pacify a single region or completely destroy the Communist mobile armies. The GMD's strategic reserves were exhausted, and it lacked the resources to properly defend all of its gains. The GMD held the coastline and all of the major cities and railroads from Shaanxi to Shandong, but this counted for little as long as Communist armies remained intact. [xxxiii]

The GMD had failed to consolidate control over northeast and northern areas in Manchuria, Hebei, and Shanxi, while shifting the bulk of GMD forces to Shandong in the east and Shaanxi to the west. [xxxiv] Fatally overextended, the GMD's strength was primarily concentrated on the flanks and thus was ripe for an offensive in the center. [xxxv] With northeast and northern areas still in play and the bulk of GMD strength concentrated in Shandong and Shaanxi, the CCP successfully disrupted GMD defenses with its Central Plains offensives. The shock of watching a CCP army infiltrate deep behind enemy lines south of the Yellow River forced the GMD to strip Shandong, Manchuria, and north China of their defenses to shore up its center. [xxxvi] Decisive battles in the northeast and Central Plains were now possible for the CCP. [xxxvii]

By 1948, the GMD had failed to gain anything more than a foothold in Manchuria, was tied down in the center and was struggling to combat counteroffensive operations in both Manchuria and the north. [xxxviii] Meanwhile, military reorganization, improvements in weaponry, the mobilization of peasants and conscription of captured GMD soldiers allowed the CCP to transform itself into an organization truly capable of decisive mobile warfare. [xxxix] Collapse would come rapidly in three decisive campaigns in the northeast, north, and the Central Plains. [xl] These three campaigns would destroy GMD military power and allow the CCP to sweep over the rest of continental China. Perhaps the most notable was the Huai-Hai campaign, which stretched over 7,600 square miles and involved a million combatants. The CCP encircled and destroyed the bulk of the GMD forces in a single blow, triggering a political crisis that would mark the beginning of the end for the Republic of China. [xli]

A Strategic Misfortune?

The GMD's economic mismanagement, corruption, and various failures in the countryside certainly cost it heavily, but the CCP's social initiatives had mixed effects throughout its base areas and at most allowed it to stay in the game rather than win outright. [xlii] Failure to crush the CCP in the 1930s allowed it to survive and grow, and strategic failures in the mid-1940s squandered the GMD's superior position. The GMD's bad policies may have been synergistic with its military failures, but those military failures doomed it to strategic defeat.

The GMD proved incapable of managing a war fought on a truly continental scale, overextending its forces and exhausting its reserve. It could not hold the areas it took and failed to focus on the enemy armies rather than the territories they held. The center of gravity was not people or territory,

but the political power that grew out of Mao's guns. GMD strategic misfortune was the cause, not the consequence, of

the birth of the People's Republic of China.[xliii]

References

- [i] Richard S. Horowitz, "The Transformation of the Chinese Military 1850-1911," in David Graff and Robin Higham (ed), *A Military History of China*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2002, 163.
- [ii] Xiaobing Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009, 28-29.
- [iii] Edward A. McCord, "Warlordism in Early Republican China," in Graff and Higham, 178-179.
- [iv] Li, 36.
- [v] *Ibid.*, 38.
- [vi] *Ibid.*, 48-50.
- [vii] William Wei, "Mao and the Red Army," in Graff and Higham, 238.
- [viii] *Ibid.*, 238-243.
- [ix] *Ibid.*
- [x] *Ibid.*, 244-245.
- [xi] Li, 70.
- [xii] Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War 1936-1950*, 2003, 29-32.
- [xiii] Li, 70, and Chang Jui-Te, "The National Army from Whampoa to 1949," in Graff and Higham, 193-211.
- [xiv] Westad, 29.
- [xv] *Ibid.*, 86-89.
- [xvi] *Ibid.*, 81-103.
- [xvii] *Ibid.*, 80-81.
- [xviii] *Ibid.*, 69-81.
- [xix] *Ibid.*, 181.
- [xx] *Ibid.*, 143.
- [xxi] *Ibid.*, 107-146.
- [xxii] Christopher R. Lew, *The Third Chinese Revolutionary Civil War, 1945-49*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 2-5.
- [xxiii] Li, 71.
- [xxiv] Lew, 2-5.
- [xxv] *Ibid.*, 135.
- [xxvi] *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- [xxvii] *Ibid.*
- [xxviii] *Ibid.*, 38-39.
- [xxix] *Ibid.*, 39.
- [xxx] *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- [xxxi] *Ibid.*, 56-57.
- [xxxii] *Ibid.*, 50-55, 64-65.
- [xxxiii] *Ibid.*, 72-75.
- [xxxiv] *Ibid.*, 136-138.
- [xxxv] *Ibid.*, 77.
- [xxxvi] *Ibid.*, 138.
- [xxxvii] *Ibid.*, 138, 100-102.
- [xxxviii] *Ibid.*, 96-97.
- [xxxix] Li, 74-75.
- [xl] Lew, 139.
- [xli] Larry Wortzel, "The Beiping-Tianjin Campaign of 1948: The Strategic and Operational Thinking of the People's Liberation Army," in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, Armonk: NY, 1999.
- [xlii] Li, 77.
- [xliii] Edward Dreyer, *China at War: 1901-1949*, Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1995, 7, qtd in Li 77.

