Introduction

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> Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy. Once it has been determined . . . it is easy to chart its course. But great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind, is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course by thousands of diversions.[1]

In my career as a military historian, the subject of strategy has come to play an increasingly important role in the topics that I have examined.[2] This has to a considerable extent been the result of the realization expressed by my colleague Allan Millett and myself in an article dealing with the lessons from our study on military effectiveness in the first half of the twentieth century:

> Whether policy shaped strategy or strategic imperatives drove policy was irrelevant. Miscalculations in both led to defeat, and any combination of politico-strategic error had disastrous results even for some nations that ended the war as members of the victorious coalition . . . This is because it is more important to make correct decisions at the political and strategic level than it is at the operational and tactical level. Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever.[3]

Not surprisingly, then, this is a book about strategy. Unlike its most recent predecessor, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy*, it addresses strategy in the widest sense: grand strategy in peacetime as well as in war, theater strategy, military strategy, and political strategy. In most of these case studies, the key players in success have been the statesmen and military leaders at the center of events, who not only crafted and guided the approach to a knotty and inevitably complex environment but also had the strength of character to pursue their perceptions through to successful conclusion. But this study is more

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 178.
[2] For two of the works that have resulted from this interest, see Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, 1992); and Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy, Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge, 2011).
[3] Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, "Lessons of War," *The National Interest*, Winter 1988–1989.

than just an examination of how a few exceptional individuals shaped and molded strategy. There are also several examples of how organizational culture or groups succeeded in setting the parameters for strategic success. Since statesmen and military leaders will make strategy in the future, the authors of these essays believe it is of crucial importance that America's political and military leaders understand how their historical predecessors have developed and executed approaches to successful strategy.

In particular, these essays do not confine themselves to examinations of the employment of military forces in war to achieve political aims, although any volume that discusses strategic performance in the realm of relations between states must devote much of its space to the use of military power in achieving political aims, the only reason for waging war. Inevitably, the conduct of strategy in the international environment is intertwined with force and the threat of its employment. As that much quoted, but little understood statement of Clausewitz underlines: "we see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."[4]

This collection is about approaches to the guiding of polities and military organizations into the future. Its case studies focus on individuals or corporate bodies that have developed, then prosecuted successful strategies. It does not examine strategies that have failed. Why not? Largely because history is replete with examples of states, statesmen, and military leaders who failed ignominiously in pursuit of flawed strategy or strategies or who possessed no discernible strategy. In fact, the failures throughout history in strategic decision making have been legion. They litter the landscape with broken armies, collapsed economic systems, and the wreckage of states and empires. The simple truth is that statesmen and military leaders throughout history have embarked on military ventures or attempted to manipulate the international arena with an enthusiastic disregard for reality. Clausewitz, with enormous irony, notes that "no one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."[5] But, of course, too many have done so in the past and will continue to do so in the future.[6]

[4] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87. For the obdurate, and disastrous unwillingness of Germany's military leaders to recognize the wisdom of Clausewitz's observation, see particularly Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2006).

[5] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579.

[6] One might cynically note that in the case of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the senior policy makers simply wished away the possibility that there might be an insurgent conflict after the conventional conflict in spite of everything that history suggested about the political and religious milieu of Mesopotamia. They might even have read the memoirs of the British general who put down the uprising of the Iraqi tribes against British rule in 1920, but they did not. See Lieutenant General Aylmer L. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia, 1920* (London, 1922). Not surprisingly it was reissued in 2005 – a bit late in the game.

Monday-morning quarterbacking of this wreckage, of course, has provided royalties for innumerable historians, some with useful insights, but most without.[7] The reasons and factors that have produced successful strategies, however, have received either less attention than they deserve or overly critical analysis that set standards of strategic behavior that would have been impossible to meet in the past, and probably so in the future.[8] Much of the inadequacy of such accounts reflects the fact that most historians have never had the opportunity to serve in the highest levels of government, where they could observe how strategy is made or not made as the case may be.[9] Nevertheless, experience does have its limits.[10]

Thus, this volume focuses specifically on those few areas where states, or military organizations, or individuals crafted strategies that led to success in the international arena in peacetime, the conduct of complex military operations, or the projection of military forces to achieve a successful end state. The purpose has been to suggest those attributes that might be of use to those charged with thinking about, developing, articulating, and then conducting strategy for the United States in the twenty-first century.[11] Underlying our effort has also been a belief that history can provide insights and perceptions that are germane to any understanding of the strategic challenges that will confront the nation in the future.

Moreover, it is our sense that simply achieving success in the short term, a period of say five to ten years, represents a considerable success at the strategic level, while successes that last for several decades represent strategic genius. Beyond several decades, it is almost impossible for statesmen and military leaders to plan, and those who believe that leaders can articulate strategies that will reach out far into the future are naïve and disregard the complexities that human interactions inevitably involve.[12] The proof lies in the fact that

[7] For some of the factors that have lain behind and contributed to strategic and military disasters, see Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York, 1990).

[8] Moreover, historians have a tendency to minimize the difficulties and uncertainties that are intimately intertwined with the development, articulation, and execution of successful strategic approaches.

[9] Maurice Ashley, one of the great historians of Oliver Cromwell and who served Winston Churchill as a research assistant on the writing of the great man's biography of the Duke of Marlborough, noted that Churchill's work would stand as a great work of history well into the future particularly because he knew how great men interacted and talked with each other. See Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (London, 1966).

[10] One is reminded of Frederick the Great's comment that the most experienced individual in his army was a mule who had participated in every campaign, but was none the wiser for that experience.

[11] There is, of course, a caveat. One could argue that in some of the cases in this volume, strategic success largely resulted from the incompetence of the losers.

[12] There are exceptions. The policy of containment that was developed in the late 1940s (see the chapters by Brad Lee and Thomas Mahnken later in this collection) certainly formed the basis for American strategy for most of the remainder of the Cold War, but it is doubtful that George Kennan and Paul Nitze foresaw a strategy that would have to last for over 40 years,

successful strategies that last for a decade or more are so extraordinarily rare. Their rarity suggests the extent of the fog that enshrouds decision making in human affairs. Uncertainty and ambiguity as well as incomplete information dominate the strategist's world.

So what is strategy? Simply put, one can argue that it is a matter of connecting available means to a political goal or goals. But, of course, it is much more. As Sun Tzu suggests, not only a deep understanding of oneself, but an equally sophisticated understanding of one's opponents distinguish the great strategist from the herd. Moreover, strategy demands constant adaptation to ever changing political and military environments. And that is where history proves to be the crucial enabler. Those who have developed and conducted successful strategic approaches have in almost every case possessed a sophisticated understanding of history and historical precedents. Moreover, the most sophisticated theorists of war and strategy, namely Thucydides and Clausewitz, immersed their examination of those topics in a deep understanding of history. As the ancient Greek historian explained, his reason for writing his history lay in his hope that "these words of mine [will be] judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways be repeated in the future."[13]

For the Prussian theorist of war, the value of history lay in its ability to educate the mind of the future strategist or commander, not to provide answers. As he suggests, in a comment about war, but which is equally applicable to strategy:

> [A theory] is an analytical investigation leading to a close *acquaintance* with the subject; applied to experience – in our case, to history – it leads to thorough *familiarity* with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill, the more effective it will prove in areas where the nature of the case admits no arbiter but talent.[14]

Historical knowledge provides the opening through which one can frame the right question or questions, and if strategists ask the right question, they have the chance of discovering answers of some utility. On the other hand, the wrong question, no matter how brilliantly articulated or phrased, will always provide an irrelevant answer.

In the Washington of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the concept of strategy has generated considerable interest with innumerable

or which would have to wind its way through so many twists and turns, in some cases involving even major limited wars, before reaching its end in the late 1980s and early 1990s – that end which virtually no one saw until after the Soviet collapse came. For the best overall summary of the Cold War, the reader might want to consult John Gaddis, *Now We Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1998).

[13] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London, 1956), p. 48.

[14] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141.

"strategic" products. Proliferating like tasteless mushrooms in an overheated dark room, they include the "National Strategy for Maritime Security," the "National Strategy for Homeland Security," the "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," and the "National Military Strategy," among others. The list seems to stretch on forever, but these efforts are useless. A perceptive examination of the military balance in Asia has noted: "Recent national security strategies – as well as the Obama administration's recent defense guidance white paper – tend to speak in general terms. Rather than outlining a limited and prioritized set of objectives, they often contain undifferentiated lists of desirable ends ... [T]hey tend to speak of challenges in only the vaguest terms."[15]

A senior officer once commented to this author about a draft of the "National Military Strategy" that, if one were to take every place where US or American or United States appeared and replace those adjectives and nouns with Icelandic and Iceland, the document would be equably applicable to that tiny island nation. The problem lies in the fact that these so-called strategic documents are the products of bureaucratic processes that aim to remove contentious issues, while insuring that those issues near and dear to the hearts of the participants receive the highlighting.[16] Written by groups of the unimaginative, they pass up the chain of command to insure there is nothing daring or controversial that might upset the conventional wisdom with its comfortable assumptions.

In his own day Clausewitz accurately portrayed a similar array of theories about the nature of war:

> It is only analytically that these attempts at theory can be called advances in the realm of truth; synthetically in the rules and regulations they offer, they are absolutely useless.
>
> They aim at fixed values; but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities.
>
> They direct the inquiry exclusively towards physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.
>
> They consider only unilateral action, whereas war consists of a continuous interaction of opponents.[17]

Each statement applies equally to strategy. Thus, as in so many human endeavors, "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* [the more things change, the more they stay the same]."[18]

[15] Thomas G. Mahnken with Dan Blumenthal, Thomas Donnelly, Michael Mazza, Gary J. Schmitt, and Andrew Shearer, "Asia in the Balance, Transforming US Military Strategy in Asia," American Enterprise Institute, June 2012.

[16] This is true of virtually all government documents, the one exception being the *9/11 Report*, a report much of bureaucratic Washington attempted to strangle before it even got started.

[17] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 136.

[18] A French proverb – one that goes well with the comment about the Bourbons on their return to France in 1815 – "they have learned nothing, and forgotten everything" is equally applicable to those most responsible for making strategy.

Paralleling the search in Washington for the elixir of strategic success has been an equal effort by so-called business strategists to unlock strategy, or more specifically strategic concepts to repair and guide corporations to success. Virtually all of those efforts over which business consultants spend endless hours – at great cost, one might add, to those who employ them – are useless. As one of the few perceptive theorists of business strategy has noted: "Bad strategy is long on goals and short on policy or action." Like most of those interested in strategy in Washington, "It puts forward strategic objectives that are incoherent and, sometimes, totally impracticable. It uses high sounding words and phrases to hide these failings."[19]

The same must be said of most of what passes for strategy in the policy and military realms – as well as in the academic world. Again, Clausewitz's analysis is equally applicable to our current world of governmental and business strategy making: "Thus, it has come about that our theoretical and critical literature, instead of giving plain, straightforward arguments in which the author at least always knows what he is saying and the reader what he is reading, is crammed with jargon, ending at obscure crossroads where the author loses his reader."[20]

The importance of history to strategic success

From the enemy's character, from his institutions, the state of his affairs and his general situation, each side, using the *laws of probability*, forms an estimate of its opponent's likely course and acts accordingly.[21]

Why then is history so important to the strategist? Just as laying a course to a destination requires a point of departure, in thinking about the future the strategist must understand the present. But the only way to understand our own circumstances, as well as those of our allies and opponents, demands an understanding of how we and they have reached the present. And that demands historical knowledge. Absent such knowledge, we are like the English tourists who, having asked an Irish farmer how they might get to Dublin, were told: "If I were going to Dublin, I would not start from here."[22] With no knowledge of the past, any road into the future will do, and it will inevitably prove the wrong road. Simply put, "a perceptive understanding of the present based on historical knowledge is the essential first step for thinking about the future."[23]

[19] Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters* (New York, 2011), pp. 36–37.
[20] Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 169. [21] Ibid., p. 80.
[22] I am indebted to Sir Michael Howard for this story. Unfortunately most of those who have practiced strategy throughout history have had little or no understanding of where they stand.
[23] Williamson Murray, "History and the Future," in Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 16.

The question then arises as to why so few statesmen, diplomats, and military leaders have been willing to examine strategic problems and issues through the lens of historical analysis. The unfortunate answer is that complexities of history demand time, effort, and guidance to grasp to the point where they are useful to the strategist. To be of any real utility in dealing with the complex problems and uncertainty of strategy, their study must be a lifetime avocation involving real commitment, not just an occasional reading or briefing.[24] As Henry Kissinger notes, "the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as they continue in office."[25] Without that commitment, history becomes no more than a dumping ground from which one can salvage irrelevant ideas to justify preconceived notions. Where the statesman has prepared herself or himself by lifelong study, history becomes an important tool to compare, contrast, and evaluate the present against the past. As Bismarck once noted, he preferred to learn from the mistakes of others.[26]

What then might history suggest about the fundamental requirements involved in the developing and conduct of successful strategy? First, it might suggest that even when a strategic course of action has some connection with reality and the means available, more often than not it will involve complex and difficult choices, annoying setbacks, and constant surprises. Those choices in turn will demand adaptation to a constantly shifting environment that changes in response to one's actions. Those who make strategy confront the fact that the world is in constant flux. Not only are their opponents making every effort to frustrate their moves, but unexpected and unpredictable events buffet strategists like waves pounding on a shore.

> Constant change and adaptation must be ... the companions of grand strategy if it is to succeed. Not only does it find itself under the pressures and strains of the politics and processes of decision making, but the fact that the external environment can and often does adapt will inevitably affect the calculations of those who attempt to chart its course. The goals may be clear, but the means available and the paths are uncertain. Exacerbating such difficulties is the reality that ... strategy demands intuitive as much as calculated judgment.[27]

[24] I addressed this problem in an earlier essay: See Williamson Murray, "Thoughts on Military History and the Profession of Arms," in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge, 2006).

[25] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York, 1979), p. 561.

[26] One must also underline that great literature as well as history can be of enormous utility in preparing the statesman or military leader to grapple with the strategic and political problems of the present. Bismarck, not surprisingly, was a great fan of Shakespeare.

[27] Murray, Sinnreich, and Lacey, *The Shaping of Grand Strategy*, p. 11.

A table in *The Joint Operational Environment* of 2008 suggests the extent of the political, diplomatic, economic, and ideological changes over the course of the last century:

1900: If you are a strategic analyst for the world's leading power, you are British, looking warily at Britain's age-old enemy France.

1910: You are allied with France [and Russia], and your enemy is Germany. [Nevertheless, Britain's chief trading partner is Germany. The world's first period of globalization is reaching its peak.]

1920: Britain and its allies have won World War I, but now the British find themselves engaged in a naval race with their former allies, the United States and Japan. [The Great War has ended the first period of globalization, while the United States has emerged as the world's dominant economic and industrial power.]

1930: For the British, the naval limitation treaties are in place, the Great Depression has started, and defense planning for the next five years assumes a ten-year rule with no war in ten years. British planners posit the main threats to the Empire as the Soviet Union and Japan, while Germany and Italy are either friendly or no threat.

1935: A British planner now posits three great threats: Italy, Japan, and the worst a resurgent Germany, while little help can be expected from the United States.

1940: The collapse of France in June leaves Britain alone in a seemingly hopeless war with Germany and Italy, with a Japanese threat looming in the Pacific. The United States has only recently begun to rearm its military forces.

1950: The United States is now the world's greatest power, the atomic age has dawned, and a "police action" begins in June in Korea that will kill over 30,000 Americans, 58,000 South Koreans, nearly 3,000 allied soldiers, 215,000 North Koreans, 400,000 Chinese, and 2,000,000 Korean civilians before a cease-fire brings an end to the fighting in 1953. The main [American] opponent is China, America's ally in the war against Japan.

1960: Politicians in the United States are focusing on a missile gap that does not genuinely exist; [the policy of] massive retaliation will soon give way to flexible response, while a small insurgency in South Vietnam hardly draws American attention.

1970: The United States is beginning to withdraw from Vietnam, its military forces in shambles. The Soviet Union has just crushed incipient rebellion in the Warsaw Pact. Détente between the Soviets and the Americans has begun, while the Chinese are waiting in the wings to create an informal alliance with the United States.

1980: The Soviets have just invaded Afghanistan, while a theocratic revolution in Iran has overthrown the Shah's regime. "Desert One" – an attempt to free American hostages in Iran – ends in a humiliating failure, another indication of what pundits were calling the "hollow force." America is the greatest creditor nation the world has ever seen.

1990: The Soviet Union collapses. The once hollow force shreds the vaunted Iraqi Army in less than 100 hours. The United States has become the world's greatest debtor nation. Few outside of the Department of Defense and the academic community use the internet.

2000: Warsaw is the capital of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member. Terrorism is emerging as America's greatest threat. Biotechnology, robotics, nanotechnology, HD energy, etc. are advancing so fast they are beyond forecasting.[28]

Perhaps the most difficult problems that any strategist confronts are those involved in securing the peace after a war.[29] What many now call conflict termination represents a host of intractable problems. In some cases, the making of peace confronts a "wicked problem," one where there are no satisfactory solutions. Historians and pundits often criticize the Treaty of Versailles as not only unfair, but also an incompetent treaty that made the Second World War inevitable.[30] Yet, what other avenues were open to peace makers at Versailles? A harsher peace would have made a future conflict impossible, but that path required the continuation of military operations, as the American General John J. Pershing urged, and the imposition of peace terms in Berlin. However, there was no willingness among the French and British after four years of slaughter to continue the fighting. The other option would have been to grant the Germans an easy peace, but such a peace would have made Germany the dominant power in Europe – in other words the victor, a conclusion that was absolutely unacceptable, given the atrocities the Germans had committed in France and Belgium throughout the war.[31]

[28] Joint Forces Command, *The Joint Operational Environment* (Norfolk, 2008). Jim Lacey and the author of this essay were the authors of this document.

[29] For a wider discussion of the issues involved in the aftermath of war, see Williamson Murray and James Lacey, eds., *The Making of Peace: Rulers, States, and the Aftermath of War* (Cambridge, 2008).

[30] The magazine, *The Economist*, commented in January 2000 the "The final crime [was] the Treaty of Versailles, whose harsh terms would ensure a second [world] war." For an examination of the complexities of peace making in 1919 see my piece, "Versailles: the Peace without a Chance," in *The Making of Peace*.

[31] Not only had the Germans slaughtered approximately 6,000 civilians as hostages in response to supposed guerilla activities (most of which had not occurred), but thereafter they had come close to starving the Belgians and French in the areas they had occupied, and then during their retreat back toward the German frontier in the war's last months they had destroyed everything that could be destroyed. Among the more recent examinations of the

Similarly, the great strategist Otto von Bismarck confronted the wicked problem of war termination in making peace with France in 1871. In Prussia's victory over Austria in the Seven Weeks' War in 1866, the Iron Chancellor had finessed the problem of making peace by imposing a peace in which the Austrians lost nothing, while the Prussians made their gains entirely at the expense of the other German states. However, in the case of France, Bismarck confronted the difficulty that the French empire of Napoleon III had collapsed to be replaced by an intransigent republic that had declared a *levée en masse*. Moreover, having let loose German nationalism to cement the south German states to his new creation, Bismarck discovered he was now leading an aroused populace that demanded its pound of flesh, while the army leaders were urging an extension of the new German Empire to the west for purposes of strategic security.

As a result Bismarck imposed a peace treaty on the French that saw the inclusion of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine within the borders of the new German Empire – an inclusion that poisoned Franco-German relations for the next 43 years. Bismarck recognized that the French Republic would never have reconciled to the appearance of a powerful German state on its western frontier. Thus, whatever the nature of the peace, it contained the seeds of future conflict. In every respect the peace of 1871 represented an unsatisfactory alternative to the war, but in the real world of politics and rabid nationalism was there a viable alternative?

The problems involved in the making of peace reflect the inherent difficulties in all strategic decision making. Inevitably, unpredictable and unforeseen second and third order effects arise to plague strategic decisions. The problem that confronts most flawed strategies is that in a non-linear world of complexity and uncertainty, most policy makers and military leaders follow a linear course which fails to consider three fundamental drivers in international relations. The first is the nature of the human condition. No matter how clever and sophisticated the policy, it will in the end be executed by individuals who are often less than competent as well as those who obstruct clear thinking with obfuscations.[32] The second lies in the fact that chance and the unforeseen will inevitably interfere with whatever path is chosen. And the third lies in the fact that one's opponent always has a vote and will more often than not choose the unexpected.[33]

extent of German atrocities in 1914, see John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT, 2001).

[32] For the role of incompetence in human affairs, see the concluding chapter in Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, NJ, 1984).

[33] This is particularly the case because estimates of how an opponent might react are so often cast with little knowledge of his history, his culture, and his Weltanschauung that he is fundamentally at odds with what we would like to believe.