

## INTRODUCTION

Many world events, however much they are dwelt on by the media, have no direct effects on us as individuals. Watching television, we see the lives of others thrown into chaos, while our own continue their even tenor. However, very occasionally something occurs which is both shocking in its own right and also personally destabilising. Of such (very rare) occasions, we recall where we were, what we were doing and how we heard the news. Those who were alive when the First World War broke out nearly always recalled the event not just in terms of its global significance but also in its personal context. City-dwellers were on the streets, in a café or buying the latest edition of a newspaper; peasants working in the fields were surprised when they heard the church bell ringing for no obvious reason.

In our own era, the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 provoke similar connotations of the massive with the microscopic: they too were one of those defining moments in world history which we understand not just in international terms but also in personal. Each of us tends to recall the circumstances in which we first saw the television images of the jets crashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Unlike the beginning of the First World War, the events in New York – and to a lesser extent in Washington – had an immediate global audience. They were communicated with images in real time, not in words after a lapse of time. They reached an audience so stunned that at first it suspended belief, unsure whether it was watching fact or fiction. Those who were stopped in the street by the screens in television shop windows or who were alerted by their friends to turn on their radios were

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more than observers; they also became participants. It was precisely the attacks' capacity to acquire a global audience within minutes of their initiation that gave them their strategic effect. Each of us who recalls the circumstances in which we first heard and saw the news is to some extent an involuntary partner in terrorism.

I may be an exception to these generalisations. I am not claiming exemption from the lure and even voyeurism of genuinely shocking news: I still remember the circumstances in which as a fourteen-year-old I heard of President Kennedy's assassination on 22 November 1963. But on 11 September 2001, I had escaped my study at home, given that we had a house full of guests, for the relative tranquillity of my office in the History Department of Glasgow University. The vacation still had some weeks to run and the silence provided ideal conditions in which to work (on the First World War, as it happened). My wife knew better than to tell the Scottish press where I was when our telephone at home began to ring and I was asked to comment. So rather than look at the present and its implications for the future, my day was spent considering the past. By the time I returned home in the evening most of the world had known of the attacks for several hours and the images from the Twin Towers, seemingly filmed in slow motion, had been replayed many times over.

One of my pet refrains as a historian is that the end of the Cold War has had a far more profound long-term effect on the shape of international relations since 1945 than have the 9/11 attacks. In part that assertion, which may or may not be true, does no more than reflect my desire for context and my determination not to privilege the significance of the present just because it is bound up with our personal experience. This is particularly important when speaking to service personnel, who naturally see 'their' war as the embodiment of all war, or to politicians, who seem only to live in the present without anything more than a romanticised and self-serving sense of the past. But in the case of the 9/11 attacks, the effects have proved much more decisive for my own intellectual trajectory than I anticipated in 2001.

I am not an expert in terrorism, nor did the events of 9/11 prompt me to join the flood of academics who then decided to become one. For those who worked in strategic studies, left beached by the end of the Cold War and the seeming end of the threat of major conflict, terrorism became the new nuclear deterrence: a vehicle to secure research grants and to promote careers. I am a historian, albeit one who has

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taught contemporary war studies and who even as Professor of Modern History at the University of Glasgow had retained a more than passing interest in current conflict. However, in September 2001 I was due to leave Glasgow to become Professor of the History of War at Oxford. During my interview I had said that I was determined to develop military history at Oxford, rather than to build on what was already in place in strategic studies. Intellectually and increasingly the two disciplines, even if united by the study of war, have pulled in divergent directions, the first locating itself more firmly in what it has called ‘total history’, and the second moving away from history towards political science. In this respect the Oxford chair is an anomaly, a survivor from the study of history as it was practised and taught before the First World War. In 1909, when Spenser Wilkinson was appointed to be the first Professor of Military History (as it was then called), the Oxford Faculty of Modern History saw history as a discipline appropriate for those who planned careers in public life. Wilkinson interpreted his subject matter in terms which embraced what today would be called war studies as much as military history, and his colleagues in history, not least Sir Charles Firth, then the Regius Professor of Modern History and no mean military historian himself, expected him to do so.

Wilkinson spent the First World War consumed by frustration: few in government turned to his strategic expertise, despite his public role before the war and despite *Punch*, the once famous but now defunct London weekly, calling him ‘the British Clausewitz’ as the war neared its close in 1918. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the Oxford chair had just become vacant and the decision to fill it was postponed for the duration of hostilities. So, while Britain fought, the university was home neither to strategic thought nor to public commentary on the war’s conduct. With Sir Michael Howard’s return to Oxford in 1968, and his election first to the Professorship of the History of War in 1977 and then to the Regius Professorship of Modern History in 1980, the university resumed both functions. As well as being a historian, Michael Howard promoted strategic studies and he pronounced on public policy. The growth in demand for an academic input in both areas was stoked by the Cold War. Indeed so dominant was the threat of nuclear weapons and so potentially catastrophic the consequences of their use that they shaped debate in ways that now – in hindsight – can seem disproportionate, even if that could hardly have been evident at the time. The result was that by the early 1960s, once the contours of nuclear

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deterrence had been put in place, the debate on strategy had assumed a static and repetitious quality. It was also relatively untouched by actual war, since those wars which were being waged were deemed to be less significant than the major war which might eventuate. For Britain in particular the wars of counter-insurgency were shaped by the end of empire, not by the beginning of something new. And the fact that Britain remained aloof from the Vietnam War meant that the conflict which marked the United States, and in which Michael Howard's successor as Chichele Professor, Robert O'Neill, served as an officer of the Australian army, had less impact on the British debate than it might otherwise have done.

So, when I arrived in Oxford in January 2002, I did so at a point when – although I had not yet realised it – the position of the Professor of the History of War was going to be put in a context whose only previous parallel was that enjoyed – or suffered – by Spenser Wilkinson in the First World War. What were intended to be short, sharp conflicts which delivered on their policy objectives, as the Falklands War in 1982 or the first Gulf War in 1990–1 had done, became protracted and messy. Over the ensuing decade Britain's armed forces were to find themselves exposed to more sustained overseas conflict than the Strategic Defence Review of 1997–8 had anticipated, and than they themselves had experienced for several generations. As a result the wars in which Britain has been engaged since 2003 have shaped my time in the professorship. My ambition to develop the study of military history, and my personal commitment to the history of the First World War, have frequently had to play second fiddle to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the impact of those wars on the British armed forces and on their relationship to British society, and to understandings of strategy. None of these were issues in which I was not engaged or interested before 2002, but they had been secondary concerns, fitted in when I had a moment. The terms of my Oxford appointment required me to teach modern strategic studies as well as military history. They also required an engagement with public policy, as the Ministry of Defence is represented on the board of electors.

The theme which holds this book together is strategy, what we understand by it, and how that understanding has changed. It rests on the presumption that strategy is useful, and even necessary, if states are to exercise military power. Since 9/11 I have written more than twenty articles shaped by current conflicts, even if they have been refracted through the prism of history, and thirteen of them provide the basis for

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this book. All have been revised and some considerably so. At least a third of the total content has not been published before and, when allowance is made for matter first published in French, about half should be new to an English readership.

The book opens with a scene-setting chapter, which considers developments in war since the beginning of the millennium. The real departure point, both chronologically in terms of my own thinking and in publishing terms, is Chapter 2, which appears here under the title I used when I delivered it as my inaugural lecture in Oxford, but was called ‘The lost meaning of strategy’ when it was printed in *Survival*. It uses a historical approach to the evolution of the word ‘strategy’ and the ideas which underpin it to argue that we have so stretched our understanding of the term that it is in danger of losing its usefulness. In particular, we have conflated it with policy. The chapter sees the manifestations of this ambiguity in the decisions and – above all – in the rhetoric of George W. Bush and Tony Blair in 2002–3. However, the causes of the confusion are deeper and lie in the legacy of the Second World War.

The thinking which underpins this chapter, and the approach of the whole book to understanding war, has been profoundly shaped by Carl von Clausewitz’s *On war*. There ought not to be much new there and yet in the 1990s many criticised Clausewitz, who served in the Napoleonic Wars and died in 1831, for being focused solely on certain forms of war which now belonged in the past. Chapter 3 makes the case for valuing Clausewitz when we think about strategy today. His critics have rested their interpretations on a selective and Anglophone reading of the text of *On war*, divorced from the context of Clausewitz’s other writings and insufficiently mindful of his determination to use history to develop a trans-historical understanding of the phenomenon of war.

One modern misreading of Clausewitz, evident in particular in Samuel Huntington’s *The soldier and the state*, published in 1957, is that *On war* stresses the need for the constitutional subordination of the general to the politician and hence to civilian control. This effort to apply a norm developed in the context of the United States’s constitution to the circumstances of nineteenth-century Prussia is more than historically illiterate. It is also pregnant with consequences for the making of strategy today. It simplifies the need for much more complex and iterative institutional arrangements in order to enable the integration of professional military opinion with political direction. The Huntingtonian norm, whose antiquity rests on a deliberately selective reading of history,

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certainly has very slender foundations in the United Kingdom. It draws its inspiration from a ‘Whig’ view of history and the perceived legacy of the 1688 ‘glorious revolution’ in Britain – to which the United States became heir. The more firmly founded it has become, the more difficult has been the challenge of coherent strategy-making. This is the theme of Chapter 4, which explores its consequences for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A central theme in the rest of the book, and especially of Chapters 5 and 6, is the need for a conceptual vocabulary which better captures the limited ways in which western powers want to use military force. Chapter 5 argues that the long shadow of the Second World War, reinforced by the subsequent threat of an all-out nuclear exchange during the Cold War, divorced our ideas about war from their practice. Theory has rested disproportionately on the concept of total war and has denigrated efforts to come to grips with post-1945 realities, in which wars have been more limited. One reason (of many) for this development is that politicians, who in practice exercise strategic responsibility, have been persuaded by neo-Clausewitzians that war really is the continuation of policy by other means. This is to elevate theory over actuality. Of course, ideally war and policy must relate to each other, but they are – as Clausewitz recognised – very different in their natures, to the point at times of being antithetical. The Clausewitzian norm has at times led politicians to see even armed conflict itself as little more than a form of enhanced diplomatic signalling, separated from its destructive effects. That tendency has produced confusion since the 9/11 attacks. While continuing to want to wage war in limited ways, national leaders have applied to it slogans which suggest the opposite. First ‘the global war on terror’ and then ‘the long war’ have not helped address the need to sort out ground truth from verbal inflation. Chapter 6 continues the examination of these themes by considering the historical antecedents of limited war theory provided by Clausewitz and the British naval historian, Julian Corbett (1854–1922). The progressive abandonment of conscription, either formally through legislation or informally through a more self-selecting form of call-up, has unfitted western armies for major war. All war ought by definition to be necessary, in that it should be seen as a last resort, only exercised when all other options have failed. However, we have further confused our thinking about when war is required, and whether it is a major war or not, by adopting as a generic title, ‘wars of choice’. This suggests that we are fighting wars which are neither necessary nor – by implication – worth the candle of being ‘major’.

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Limited war is also a sub-theme of Chapter 7, and again Clausewitz and Corbett are among its exemplars. But the personality on whom the chapter principally focuses is Basil Liddell Hart, the British strategic thinker who between the two world wars rejected Clausewitz with so much vehemence and so little insight, while at the same time embracing Corbett without acknowledgement. However, the target is not Liddell Hart himself, but more the current enthusiasm within political science for ‘strategic culture’. Although strategic culture uses history to shape its understanding of strategic practice, it is insufficiently attentive to change and contingency, while at the same time being in danger of not fully acknowledging the true source of the continuities which underpin its propositions: that is, geography more than culture.

Chapter 8 tackles the geographical point head on. The populations of two states with traditional maritime strengths, the United Kingdom and the United States, have become remarkably complacent about their reliance on the sea, in terms both of their security narrowly defined and of their economic needs. However, ‘sea blindness’ is not simply to be blamed on the usual suspects, a triumvirate of press, people and politicians. It is also self-generated, with navies themselves too often addressing maritime strategy in terms that are platitudinous or which duck the big issues, including the strategic function of the sea-borne nuclear deterrent.

Navies, like air forces, define themselves in terms of their equipment. Their people achieve strategic effect by serving their weapons and the platforms on which those weapons are mounted. Chapter 9 argues that both services have therefore been more disposed to interpret technological innovations – the steamship or the fixed-wing aircraft – as such massive and revolutionary effects that they can be called strategic. Here they contrast with armies, which have tended to see technology as changing tactics, but less often strategy, where they have more often found continuity. In the second half of the twentieth century nuclear weapons have provided the clearest example of a new weapons system seeming to revolutionise strategy. Their effect was so discontinuous as to lead strategic thought to distance itself from one of its core disciplines – if not *the* core discipline of classical strategy – that of history.

Chapters 10 and 11 address the consequences of the current tendency to elevate counter-insurgency to the status of a ‘strategy’, rather than seeing it in more restricted and operational terms. The first of the two argues that all war has certain generic qualities, and that an

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adaptable understanding of war may not be helped by attempts to disaggregate it into separate categories. It uses the tension for the pre-1914 British empire between the experience of colonial warfare and the theory of European warfare to illustrate the point. Before 2003 most western armies drew a sharp distinction between ‘conventional’ war and counter-insurgency; today they are less certain and many of their leaders and thinkers are seeking a synthesis.

Chapter 11 moves on to the displacement effect of elevating an operational method, and specifically of counter-insurgency, to the level of strategy. Its departure point is the strategy which President Obama sought to impose on Afghanistan in 2009–10. Its lack of clarity and the push-back from the military, who wanted a fully resourced counter-insurgency campaign, culminated in the president’s decision to dismiss General Stanley McChrystal in 2010. At the time the tendency of the press was to place this episode in the context of the classical theory on civil–military relations as discussed in Chapter 4, and so to see McChrystal as violating the norms laid down by Huntington in 1957. Chapter 11 argues that in practice counter-insurgency requires generals to be ‘political’ if it is to be effective, and so the problem is less that of military subordination to political control and more the imperative to develop policies which convert into effective strategy and contain the operational framework set by the professional military.

The last two chapters point towards the future. Chapter 12 addresses the failure of strategy to be an effective predictive tool, and so meets the criticism that its application robs the politician of the flexibility which he or she needs when confronting a crisis. It makes the case for the primacy of contingency in strategic thought. Grand strategy as articulated in national defence policies aspires to meet requirements twenty or thirty years out, despite its uncertainty as to what will happen between now and then. Traditional definitions of strategy, with their focus on the operational level of war, have been more focused on the present and the immediate future, particularly in wartime. They have used planning to mediate between the present and the future – and often are informed by the past in the choices they exercise. Plans need constant adaptation, particularly in a resistant and hostile environment like war, and they are therefore acutely susceptible to continuous adaptation. The strategist has to acknowledge this while not losing contact with his overall intent. So, just as events can determine policy, so they can also affect strategy. Chapter 13 accordingly considers the likely changes as



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well as continuities in the mid-term future. It makes its peace with those anxious to replace strategic studies with security studies by considering the challenges for the former raised by the imminent dangers to human security. Climate change, the exhaustion of fossil fuels, the possibility of pandemics and so on could – but don't have to – cause armed conflict. The chapter's tone may be too panglossian for some; and I have my own doubts about the argument. While it accepts that the competition for resources could cause war, as it did even in the twentieth century as well as in the more distant past, it sees the potential to limit war geographically. Resource wars are more likely to be regional, and therefore have the potential to be stripped of the ideological and global vocabulary of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This book is rooted in the experiences of the west since the beginning of the new century (and the new millennium). Its geographical focus is the Atlantic, although not exclusively so: its attention is on the United States, the United Kingdom and western Europe – the old world not the new. Not only does it neglect Asia and the rise of China, it also ignores Africa and Latin America. But while acknowledging these limitations, it uses history to try to escape them. Its approach to events that are current or lie in the very recent past is informed by a historical awareness that reaches further back. While it resists using history to 'tell you so', it does employ it to give context. Its aim is not to deny change, but to identify what is really changing as opposed to what only seems to be changing.

# 1 WAR AND STRATEGY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Over the past decade the armed forces of the western world, and particularly those of the United States and the United Kingdom, have been involved in waging a war for major objectives – or so at least the rhetoric of that war’s principal advocates, George Bush and Tony Blair, had us believe. It is a war to establish the values of the free world – democracy, religious toleration and liberalism – across the rest of the globe. In his speech on 11 September 2006, delivered to mark the fifth anniversary of the attacks in 2001, President Bush, showing a prescience denied to the rest of us, declared that it is ‘the decisive ideological struggle of the twenty-first century. It is a struggle for civilisation.’ This war may have its principal focus in the Middle East and Central Asia, but it is also being waged within Europe, with the supporting evidence provided by the bomb attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and in London on 7 July 2005.

Bush and Blair called this war ‘the global war on terror’. In February 2006 US Central Command, based at Tampa in Florida but with responsibilities which span the Middle East and south-west Asia, recognised the conceptual difficulties posed by the ‘global war on terror’ and rebranded it the ‘long war’. Both titles treated the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as subordinate elements of the grand design. Moreover, the design was so grand that it was one on to which other conflicts could be grafted, even when the United States was not a direct participant. The prime minister of Australia, John Howard, used his country’s peace-keeping commitments in East Timor in 1999, and his wider concerns about Indonesia more generally, not least after the Bali bomb attack of 12 October 2002, to sign up to the war on terror (with some reason). In