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978-1-107-64555-4 - The Lees Knowles Lectures on Military History for 1947:

The Influence of Sea Power on the History of the British People

Admiral Sir W. M. James

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

### SEA POWER

In past years the purpose and value of lectures on the history and art of war have been unquestioned.

Knowledge of their rich war history and the achievements of their forebears on the battlefield has fortified the British people in times of adversity, and has often inspired men and women to acts of superb heroism. Until recently, the method of conducting war had been systematically developed to accord with the development of war weapons. The principles remained unchanged, and therefore the study of the methods employed in earlier wars was profitable and indeed essential, if on the outbreak of war our forces were to be deployed to the best advantage, and if the battle tactics employed by the force-commanders on land, sea and in the air were to be not just the fruit of sudden inspiration, but of knowledge of the tactics employed by the great commanders in the past.

But with the explosion of the first atom bomb over Hiroshima we seem to have come to the end of a chapter in the history of war. It is not the value of a general knowledge of our past history which is put in doubt. But of what value to-day is a detailed study of past wars, of what use a knowledge of the strategy and tactics employed for weapons of such comparatively insignificant striking power as armies, fleets and air

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forces, when the issue will be decided by the discharge of a few atom bombs?

To-day the value of lectures on war depends on the answer to that question. Obviously a study of past methods is of no practical value if, following a period of strained relations, those living far from our principal cities are awakened one morning by distant rumbling, and hear later in the day that London, Liverpool, Newcastle and Cardiff have been laid in ruins. But to say this is to assume that with the appearance of the atom bomb a chapter in the history of war weapons came to an end, and that for the first time in history the brain that conceived a new weapon could not conceive a counter-weapon.

In effect the history of weapon and counter-weapon began when a very ingenious prehistoric man stretched a skin on a forked branch to ward off the blows of his enemy. And in modern times the battle between shell and armour has been waged for over a hundred years; for periods the armour-makers produced armour which broke up shells on impact, and these periods have always been followed by periods when the shell has dominated. The advent of a new weapon has usually led to the belief that all other weapons are obsolete or obsolescent, but that belief has been short-lived. Once the enthusiasts have overcome the opposition of the scoffers and the wilfully blind, a new weapon has been rapidly developed and has acquired a dominating position, only to be overtaken in its turn by counter-weapons, and forced back into its proper place in the armoury.

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NEW WEAPONS

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In recent times the torpedo-boat, the submarine, the aeroplane and the tank have all been acclaimed as dominant weapons, against which older weapons were powerless. Yet each in turn has eventually been fitted into its proper place in the weapon-mosaic. No weapon has so far been forced out of the mosaic by a new weapon. The infantry soldier in Burma was sometimes fighting with the same weapons, and using the same tactics, as his predecessor of a thousand years ago.

There is, therefore, no proof that the brains which invented these new and terrible weapons are for the first time incapable of inventing a means of exploding them before they arrive at their objective. Let us remember that the fast-moving aeroplane was almost invulnerable to the anti-aircraft gun, but to-day the scientists are very nearly in sight of a projectile which will chase the plane, and when this is achieved the once dominant bombing plane will occupy a smaller portion of the mosaic. But if the belief that the atom bomb is the first completely dominant weapon is to prove ill-founded, then here is another reason for not abandoning the study of past wars.

Until the happy day when the peace of the world will be assured by a United Nations Organization, and until the existing weapons of war—armies, fleets, air forces—disappear, we of all nations cannot afford to scrap existing weapons, or be ignorant of how to use them if we are attacked. Our life-lines are the ocean trade-routes. If no ships arrive at our discharging ports for three weeks we cannot continue to live, let alone wage

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war. We are the most vulnerable country in the world. If, therefore, a nation bent on our destruction deploys existing weapons—ships, planes—on our trade-routes, and if we have no means of driving off those ships and planes, then we will be on our knees asking for terms three weeks after the declaration of war. A few warships disposed off the St Lawrence, the Plate, and at some focal points on the main sea-routes could arrest all our shipping. Why blacken and destroy your enemy's country when abject surrender can be extracted without firing a shot? There is here an unanswerable argument for maintaining defence forces composed of weapons which seem to be out-dated by the atom bomb, and concurrently an unanswerable argument that there is still value in studying the methods of conducting past wars.

We have always been an unwarlike nation of warriors. We have always hated war and resented its wastefulness in life and wealth. To drag money from Elizabeth to pay for the fleet was like getting blood from a stone. And if for Pitt's name you substitute that of Neville Chamberlain in the pages of Arthur Bryant's *Years of Endurance* describing the political manoeuvres prior to the outbreak of the French Revolutionary War, you can fancy you are reading about the months before the outbreak of the Second World War.

We have only once been fully prepared for war—for the First World War—and that was because every man, woman and child in this country could understand our danger when the Germans announced their intention of building a fleet to challenge our maritime supremacy.

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STUDY OF PAST WARS

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We have usually begun a war ill-equipped and only able to deploy forces in strength much inferior to our enemy; but we have usually emerged victorious because our officers and men have been imbued with the warrior spirit, have endured what Kipling aptly called ‘the sodden years of heaped up weariness’ with greater fortitude than the enemy and never lost their battle efficiency, and because leaders of vision, skilled strategists and tacticians have never failed to appear sooner or later. It is because we have always been an unwarlike nation that we do not think or talk about war until war is upon us—and thereby we have often courted disaster.

During the First World War Lord Esher wrote:

Why do we worry about history? Julian Corbett writes one of the best books in our language upon political and military strategy. All sorts of lessons, some of inestimable value, may be gleaned from it. No one, except perhaps Winston, who matters just now has ever read it. Obviously history is written for schoolmasters and armchair strategists. Statesmen and warriors pick their way in the dark.

It is noteworthy that the most brilliant and important strategic decision of the Second World War—the decision to accept great risks to build up a strong defence in Egypt—is ascribed to Mr Churchill and to his lifelong study of war. In contrast, this is what Lloyd George wrote:

After the Battle of Jutland Admiral Jellicoe came to the conclusion it was not safe for his imposing Armada of enormous Dreadnoughts to undertake prolonged operations to the South of the Dogger Bank, as the risk of mines and

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SEA POWER

submarines was too formidable. They were not to enter the North Sea unless they were forced to do so by direct challenge from the German High Sea Fleet. Meanwhile the Flagship must be interned in safe creeks, and the flag had to be carried on small craft, the nimbler destroyers and the weather-beaten trawlers. Here is the 'Nelson Touch' up-to-date. There was an atmosphere of crouching nervousness.

No one who had made a rudimentary study of past maritime wars could have written that. There was no 'crouching nervousness'. Jellicoe was acting exactly as Nelson would have acted. The 'Nelson Touch' does not connote foolish haphazard operations with no object. Nelson would never have attempted a close blockade if his enemy could use some weapon which would steadily reduce the strength of a blockading fleet. Like Jellicoe he, too, would have relied on a distant blockade, the only disadvantage being less certainty of knowing when the enemy sailed.

We should never forget that if pressure on the Admiralty to reduce the strength of the Grand Fleet, in order to free potential for other services, had succeeded, we might have lost the war. A defeat of our main fleet would have been followed by the collapse of the whole system of seaborne trade defence. But it is not only statesmen and leaders who can profit from some knowledge of past wars and the influence of sea power on our history; our people would not have been so vulnerable to propaganda if they had had even an elementary knowledge. An example is the campaign between the two World Wars to convince the people that the aero-

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## PRINCIPLES

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plane had rendered obsolete all other weapons; if the Cabinet Committee set up to examine the claims had not kept their heads and recommended a continuance of shipbuilding we would have been able to hold out only about as long as Poland did. Other Powers were astonished at the success of this campaign; their response was to speed up their shipbuilding. Another example was the claim that all that was necessary to win the war was to bomb Germany: millions were convinced that the Army would never have to land on the Continent. We ran dangerously close to *losing* the war because priority was not given to the defence of the trade-routes. How foolish we would have looked if our planes had all been grounded for want of petrol which failed to arrive because there were insufficient planes to counter the activities of the submarines. It seems strange now that anyone should have thought that the mere lengthening of the reach and raising of the destructive power of weapons had altered the whole process of making war. It should surely have been obvious that the last stage would necessarily be the landing of an army which would eventually occupy and police Germany, and that that army would have to land under the cover of bombardment. The bombardment of back areas had been immensely stepped up by air-bombing, but the principles had not altered.

To sum up this preamble. The time has not yet come either when war is unthinkable or when victory will go to the nation that is first off the mark with atom bombs. A study of past wars is not a sterile occupation, and a people who have even a rudimentary knowledge of war

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are less vulnerable to propaganda about armaments. They are better able to appreciate the necessity for devoting some of the nation's income to defence, they understand the reasons for the allocation to various defence services, and above all they are aware that our sea-lines of communication are our life-lines: sever them, and we are sunk.

Sea power can be very simply defined. It is the power that enables its possessor to send his troops and trade across the water which lies between nations and the objects of their desires, and to prevent his opponent from doing so.

More simply still—control of the sea. Four elements confer this power—fighting instruments, bases, merchant shipping, competent seamen. These were the elements 2500 years ago. Whenever one of these elements has been lacking, attempts to exercise sea power have failed. Failure to recognize that inexorable fact has on more than one occasion jeopardized our prospects of gaining the victory, and has frequently brought defeat to our enemies even when in one element—in fighting instruments—they have been far stronger.

In olden times the Athenians were well aware of the importance of sea power. The Athenian army was not as strong as some of the neighbouring armies; but embarked in ships and striking where and when it chose it was a powerful instrument of war. And Athens, thanks to her command of the sea, was able to draw from overseas—iron, hemp, wax, copper, flax and timber—and to



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## THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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prevent her enemies from obtaining these essential commodities. Athens exercised sea power because she had good fighting ships propelled by oars, a large number of merchant ships, good bases and seamen. This was, of course, not organized war at sea, which is of comparatively modern origin. The method of conducting sea war in ancient days has been aptly described as ‘cross-ravaging’. It was centuries later, when the sailing ship replaced the oared galley, that the increase in radius of action extended the influence of sea power—and sea power became of interest to our Lancastrian kings.

They had few opportunities of exercising sea power, and a Navy List of 1417 gives the British fleet as three great ships—*Jesu*, *Trinity Royal*, *Holigost*, six carracks—*Peter*, *Paul*, *Andrew*, etc., and six smaller ships. Judging from pictures they must have been very unhandy and difficult to manœuvre. They mounted only small guns, but were probably as efficient as contemporary warships built in Europe.

Even in those early days the habit of forgetting the importance of sea power to an island state as soon as danger passed (that habit which has so often nearly caused our elimination as a great Power) had become a settled one, and by 1452 the only ships in the Royal Navy were the *Trinity* and *Holigost*, both rotting and useless. But in the next century the spirit of adventure which stirred the English people under the Tudor kings brought with it an awakening to the importance of sea power. Merchant adventurers were seeking fresh markets in Russia, Persia, the west coast of Africa and the West

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Indies. At the same time Spain was acquiring a monopoly in the West Indies, and the Portuguese and Dutch were concentrating their energies on the East Indies and South America.

It was Henry VIII, in a preamble to the many Acts of navigation which were passed at that period to foster the building of ships, who said that an island environed by the sea 'could conduct its trade by no other road but the sea and that ships and seamen were a great defence and surety of the Realm in time of war'.

On 13 June 1514, the sum of 6s. 8d. was paid for the hallowing of a ship launched at Erith. She was called *Henry Grace à Dieu*. She was far more powerful than any other ship in existence, being between 1000 and 1500 tons and mounting twenty-one guns—cannon, demi-cannon, culverins, sakers and falcons.

One of the best-known drawings is, I believe, here at Cambridge in the Pepysian collection. Though previous to this launch small navies had been built and then allowed to fade away, the launching of that ship heralded a new era. The Tudors understood sea power. To-day it seems just common sense that Drake should be sent to attack the shipping in Spanish ports which it was known was being prepared for the invasion of England, but at that date such a lengthening of the striking power of the Navy was a new departure. Then again the operations of Hawkins and Frobisher on the Spanish sea-lines of communication to the Indies was also a new use for the fleet; we see in it the seeds of blockade, with ships remaining at sea and cruising in strategic positions. Command of the