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Julian Stafford Corbett

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ENGLAND IN THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY—THE FUNCTION OF THE FLEET IN WAR

To those who seek insight into the higher principles of the Art of War there is no contest more full of matter—at least for a maritime power—than that in which, under the guidance of the elder Pitt, the expansion of England made its most commanding stride. Opinions, it is true, will always differ as to how far history can be of practical value for such a purpose at all. It can be argued, with at least some show of reason, that the revolution which has taken place in naval material during recent years has put the old wars out of court. Yet, no matter to what greater or less extent that view may be tenable, there must still remain one part of the subject that such changes can never affect; and it is here the Seven Years' War stands in our history without a rival.

Reaching higher and wider than what is usually understood by naval strategy, it is a branch of the art as vital for statesmen as it is for sailors, for diplomatists as it is for soldiers, and by history alone can it be mastered. We may term it the function of the fleet in war. Marshalled in its place in the art of war, it will be seen to form, together with the functions of

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the army and diplomacy, a part of what is called the higher or major strategy, and to bear much the same relation to naval strategy as minor strategy does to tactics. For naval strategy, which is commonly and conveniently confined to the movements of the fleet in a theatre of war, is really a form of minor strategy; and while tactics are concerned with the arena of a battle, and minor strategy with the arena of a campaign, so the study of the functions of the fleet is concerned with the whole arena of an international struggle.

How widely it differs from simple naval strategy a practical illustration will show. Naval strategy is studied on a chart. To solve its problems we note the conformation of coast-lines, we note the lie of strategical positions, of naval bases, of the courses and converging points of trade routes; we measure sea distances and add up naval units, and eliminating moral frictions the factors of our problems are complete. But in the study of the functions of a fleet a chart is useless. It cuts off our vision just where the most obscure and difficult part of the study begins. For it is behind the coast-line that are at work the dominant factors by which the functions of a fleet are determined. The whole study of them is based on the relations of the coast-lines to the lines of land communication, to the diplomatic tensions and the political centres of the struggle, to the lines and theatres of military operations ashore. For the study, therefore, of the functions of a fleet, charts will not suffice. It is a map we want, upon which both land and sea are shown, a map in which the political features are at least as prominently marked as the physical.

The difference and relation between the two studies may be stated in yet another way. Naval strategy studied on a chart is comparable to pure mathematics.

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MILITARY AND POLITICAL DEFLECTIONS 3

It sets itself as it were upon a clean slate to solve certain problems of naval warfare, without regard to the deflecting influences of military or diplomatic considerations. The usual definitions display it as concerned with obtaining command of the sea, with combinations for overpowering the enemy's main fleet and the like. All this is right enough on occasions, but only on occasions, and the occasions are rare. It is very seldom we have had a clean slate to work on—never indeed for long except in purely maritime wars, waged for a purely maritime object, such as were our wars in the seventeenth century with the Dutch. As an episode the clean slate may also occur in mixed wars, but only as a passing episode: that is, there may be moments in the most complex war when the destruction of the enemy's main fleet and the securing of the command of a certain sea may be of an importance so great and pressing that naval action may rightly be left free to concern itself with nothing else, and every consideration of diplomatic and military operations must rest subservient to naval strategy. When such rare moments occur, they are invariably so dazzling in their dramatic intensity as to dull our vision of what they really mean and how they were brought about. The imagination comes naturally to concentrate itself upon such supreme catastrophes and to forget that war is not made up of them. Historians, greedy of dramatic effect, encourage such concentrations of attention, and the result is that the current conception of the functions of a fleet is dangerously narrowed, and our best minds cramp their strategical view by assuming unconsciously that the sole function of a fleet is to win battles at sea. That this is the supreme function of a fleet is certain, and it must never be lost sight of; but on the other hand it must not be forgotten that convenient

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opportunities of winning a battle do not always occur when they are wanted. The great dramatic moments of naval strategy have to be worked for, and the first preoccupation of the fleet will almost always be to bring them about by interference with the enemy's military and diplomatic arrangements.

An illustration will serve best to exhibit the matter more clearly. The War of the Spanish Succession, as it was regarded at the time, was a war to decide whether or not the Mediterranean was to be a Bourbon lake under the control of France. At first sight it would appear that such a war was peculiarly the province of naval strategy—in other words, that it was a question of securing the command of the sea by the destruction of the enemy's fleets. But William the Third, with his remarkable grasp of the higher strategy, saw further. He saw that the permanent control of that sea was a question of naval and military positions, and that the first and most pressing function of the fleet was, not to defeat the enemy's fleet, but to secure the adhesion of Savoy and Portugal to the Grand Alliance. Both objects would, of course, have been obtained by a decisive naval victory. But France, being inferior in naval force, was careful to give no opportunity for such a victory. She assumed a strict defensive which placed her fleets beyond our reach, and we were forced to secure the vital positions in the face of her undefeated navy. No sooner was this done than France found herself forced to break her defensive, and the battle of Malaga was the result. Tactically it was indecisive, but it was enough to show France that she was powerless to recover the ground she had lost, and it caused her to abandon all serious naval effort. Here, then, was a case where all the advantages of the command of the sea were gained by a bold move

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LIMITATIONS OF NAVAL ACTION 5

in the face of a fleet in being, and retained without ever defeating that fleet. The defeat of the enemy's fleet was clearly not the first object of our naval activity. The function which the fleet was sent out to discharge was primarily diplomatic, and the enemy's fleet was to be ignored so long as it did not interfere.

From such instances as these, and they are many, it is evident that we require for the guidance of our naval policy and naval action something of wider vision than the current conception of naval strategy, something that will keep before our eyes not merely the enemy's fleets or the great routes of commerce, or the command of the sea, but also the relations of naval policy and action to the whole area of diplomatic and military effort. Of late years the world has become so deeply impressed with the efficacy of sea power that we are inclined to forget how impotent it is of itself to decide a war against great Continental states, how tedious is the pressure of naval action unless it be nicely co-ordinated with military and diplomatic pressure. It was fifteen years after the defeat of the Armada before we could obtain peace with Spain, even on the *status quo ante bellum*. It was ten years after Trafalgar before revolutionary France accepted defeat. "We English," wrote Nelson in the Gulf of Genoa, where he was first brought face to face with the ultimate problems of his art, "we English have to regret that we cannot always decide the fate of Empires on the sea."¹

Certainly it is still a fact to be regretted, and for that reason also a fact never to be forgotten in naval policy. Nor need we ever lose hold of so vital a truth if, instead of endeavouring to find our formula for naval strategy deductively, we turn to history, that is, to past

¹ To the Hon. John Trevor, April 28, 1796 (Nicolas, vii. lx.).

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experience of great wars, and find out what actually happened. Instead of cramping our outlook by well-turned definitions, let us inquire of history what in past wars the functions of the fleet have actually been, what the actual objects for which it has been employed. For all that long series of wars which gave Great Britain first her position in Europe, and then in the world, the answer is simple and constant. The function of the fleet, the object for which it was always employed, has been threefold: firstly, to support or obstruct diplomatic effort; secondly, to protect or destroy commerce; and thirdly, to further or hinder military operations ashore. Here, then, we get a formula widely different from the current definitions of naval strategy. The distorting influence of the enemy's main fleet is reduced as it becomes obvious that we have to think of many things beyond securing the command of the sea. We begin to distinguish more clearly between the means and the end of naval policy. In most cases it is true that to secure the command of the sea by destroying the enemy's fleets is the best way of ensuring that your own fleet will be in a position to discharge its threefold functions. But the historical method reveals at once that the command of the sea is only a means to an end. It never has been, and never can be, the end itself. Yet obvious as this is, it is constantly lost sight of in naval policy. We forget what really happened in the old wars; we blind ourselves by looking only on the dramatic moments of naval history; we come unconsciously to assume that the defeat of the enemy's fleets solves all problems, and that we are always free and able to apply this apparently simple solution. Thus, until quite recent years, naval thought had tended to confine itself to the perfection of the weapon and to neglect the art of using it. Or, in other words, it had

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CO-ORDINATION OF FORCE

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come to feel its sole concern was fighting, and had forgotten the art of making war.

Now, as Nelson lamented, where great empires are concerned, wars cannot be concluded upon the sea. Such wars cannot be made by fleets alone. But just as land operations demand the co-operation and just co-ordination of horse, foot, and artillery, and as sea operations demand the co-operation and just co-ordination of battleships, cruisers, and flotillas, so are great wars conducted by the ordered combination of naval, military, and diplomatic force. Thus naval strategy, so long as it merely contemplates bringing the enemy's fleet to successful action and securing the command of the sea, may often miss its most potent line of energy, and operating as it were single-handed, it may fail to achieve a point in the war which combined or co-ordinated action would have given it. An admiral with no wider outlook than to regard the enemy's fleet as his primary objective will miss his true relation to the other forces which are working for a successful issue of the war; he will be unable to see all the conditions of the problem before him in their true proportions; and will be unable to construe his orders or to decide in an unforeseen situation with a thorough grasp of the common object. Hence the importance of approaching the study of maritime warfare not from the point of view of what is usually understood by naval strategy, but from the wider standpoint of the functions of the fleet.

It is for this purpose that the Seven Years' War has so high a value. During the world-wide struggle in which the main lines of the British Empire were finally laid down, we were from first to last in marked superiority at sea to our enemy. From first to last we were more or less free to use the fleet directly upon the ulterior

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objects of the war, and throughout the struggle what are called the primary functions—that is, the domination of the enemy's main fleet—scarcely ever rose above the level of containing operations. Thus, at least from the time when Pitt obtained control of the war, its conduct exhibits the diverse functions of the fleet in full or co-ordinated activity. He was a true War Minister with almost undisturbed control of army, navy, and diplomacy, and in his hands we see the fleet slipping neatly into its place, shoulder to shoulder with its comrades. It is never used without some close relation to a military or diplomatic end, and conversely the army and diplomacy are always being worked to secure some point which will either strengthen the naval position or relieve the fleet of some irksome preoccupation. Here lay the pith of what Pitt called his "system." Assured of his practical superiority at sea, he permitted no pedantic insistence on the primary naval objective. There was no waiting till the enemy's mobile sea forces were absolutely disposed of before the army was put in action. For Pitt army and navy were the blade and hilt of one weapon, and from the moment the weapon was in his grip he began to demonstrate the force and reach of his method. Not only was he able without destroying the enemy's naval force to strike beyond the ocean at the ulterior object, but at home he was able to break down the time-honoured strategy of France, and force her, by goading her into a desperate attempt at invasion, to deliver her main fleets into his hands.

It is all a most brilliant lesson of the way in which the weak army of a strong naval power can be used, of how great Continental armies may be made to feel the shock of fleets, and of how mere superiority at sea may be made to thwart Continental cabinets, to tangle their

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THE AMPHIBIOUS INSTINCT

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strategy and upset their moral balance. It was a lesson all too soon forgotten. In the last great struggle with revolutionary France and Napoleon, nothing is more exasperating than the way in which Ministers let slip and misused opportunities such as were the very breath of Pitt's system. Yet that oblivion is scarcely surprising when we think with what violence Pitt had to force his views on his colleagues and his King. Indeed it would seem that it was only the instinct of the people for amphibious warfare that enabled him to carry his point. That instinct was behind him, and possibly it was that which at first set in motion his opposition to what was called the Continental school rather than any well-reasoned strategical convictions. But it is abundantly clear from the despatches of the time that he very soon came to see clearly how true the instinct was, and upon what sound strategical reasons it was based. And so it came about that of all our wars there is none beside Pitt's war which is so radiant with the genius of a maritime state, and none which was so uniformly successful.

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CHAPTER II

NATURE AND OBJECT OF THE WAR

“A MOST ill-judged advertisement from the War Office has set all the ministers on fire and made them believe we are going to war, which is, I hope, the furthest from our thoughts.” So on October 10, 1754, the Duke of Newcastle, First Lord of the Treasury to King George the Second, wrote to the Earl of Albemarle, his ambassador in Paris. The latest news from America had been so serious that the Government had resolved secretly to reinforce the Colonial garrisons, and the War Office had let the secret out. So Albemarle was urged to represent the measures that were being taken as purely defensive, and to do all he could to preserve the peace, consistently with the necessary measures for securing our position in North America. “Excuse this free letter,” Newcastle concluded in apology for disturbing the suavity of diplomatic intercourse with so much earnestness, “but we are on a precipice. I am sure you will keep us out if you can, and I think you may.”

How far Newcastle saw into the precipice that yawned at his feet, it is difficult to say, but in its depths lay that mighty drama, which George Washington had already opened in the obscurity of the Ohio solitudes, and which he was to end in triumph before all the world with his Declaration of Independence. What Newcastle saw was much less. For him the last news meant that the violence of the English and French Colonial authorities