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USAFA Harmon Memorial Lecture #9
"Strategy and Policy in Twentieth-Century Warfare"
Michael Howard, 1967

My pleasure in accepting the very great honour which you have done me in inviting me to be the first foreign scholar to deliver the Harmon Memorial Lecture in Military History was tempered only by the uncertainty which I always feel as to what "military history" is, if indeed it exists at all as an independent category of historical studies and whether, if it does, I am a military scholar.

Fifty years ago neither in the United States nor in the United Kingdom would anybody have seriously raised the question. Everyone knew what military history was. It was the history of the armed forces and of military operations. Its subject matter occupied an insulated arena, with little if any political or social context. The military historian, like the military man himself, moved in a closed, orderly hierarchical society with inflexible standards, deep if narrow loyalties, recondite skills and lavish documentation. He chronicled the splendours and the miseries of man fighting at the behest of authorities and in the service of causes which it was no business of his to analyse or of theirs to question.

This kind of combat and unit history still serves a most valuable function both in training the professional officer and in providing essential raw material for the more general historian. To write it effectively calls for exceptional experience and skills. But it is not surprising that so limited a function attracted very few historians of the first rank. It is more surprising that so many historians of the first rank, for so many years, thought it possible to describe the evolution of society without making any serious study of the part played in it by the incidence of international conflict and the influence of armed forces. So long as military history was regarded as a thing apart, it could not itself creatively develop, and general historical studies remained that much the poorer. The credit for ending this unhealthy separation was due very largely to scholars of the United States, particularly the group which Professor Quincy Wright collected round him at the University of Chicago and those who gathered under Edward Mead Earle at Princeton. But it was due also to the foresight of the United States Armed Services themselves in enlisting, to write and organise their histories of the Second World War, such outstanding scholars as Dr. Kent Greenfield, Dr. Maurice Matloff, Dr. W. Frank Craven and Professor Samuel E. Monson, to name only the leaders in this gigantic enterprise. The work which they produced is likely to rank as one of the great historiographical series in the world, and its influence on military history has been profound. Today, the history of war is generally seen as an intrinsic part of the history of society. The armed forces are studied in the context of the communities to which they belong, on which they react, and of which so formidable a share of budgets they absorb. And their combat activities are considered, not as manoeuvres isolated from their environment as much as those of a football game but as methods of implementing national policy, to be assessed in the light of the political purpose which they are intended to serve.

The number of wars in modern history in which a narrow study of combat operations can provide a full explanation of the course and the outcome of the conflict is very limited indeed. In Europe from the end of the Middle Ages up till the end of the eighteenth century, the performance of armed forces was so far restricted by difficulties of communications and supply, by the limited capabilities of weapons, by the appalling incidence of sickness, and above all by the exigencies of public finance and administration, that warfare, although almost continuous as a form of international intercourse, was seldom decisive in its effects. When states tried to support military establishments capable of sustaining a hegemony in Europe, as Spain did in the sixteenth century and as France did in the

seventeenth, their undeveloped economies collapsed under the strain. More prudent powers kept their campaigns within limits set by a calculation of their financial capacity. Military operations thus came to be regarded as part of a complicated international bargaining process in which commercial pressures, exchanges of territory, and the conclusion of profitable dynastic marriages were equally important elements. The results of the most successful campaign could be neutralised by the loss of a distant colony, by a court intrigue, by the death of a sovereign, by a well-timed shift in alliances, or by the exhaustion of financial credit. There are few more tedious and less profitable occupations than to study the campaigns of the great European masters of war in isolation- Maurice of Orange, Gustavus Adolphus, Threnne, Montecuccoli, Saxe, even Marlborough and Frederick the Great unless one first understands the diplomatic, the social and the economic context which gives them significance and to which they contribute a necessary counterpoint. Any serious student of American history knows how widely he must read not only in his own historical studies but in the political and economic history of Britain and of France before he is to understand how and why the United States won its independence and the part which was played in that struggle by force of arms. A study of the campaigns of Washington, Cornwallis, and Burgoyne really tells us very little.

This was the situation up till the end of the eighteenth century; with the advent of Napoleonic warfare, the situation changed radically. During the last few years in the eighteenth century both political conditions and military techniques developed to such an extent that now unprecedented proportions of the manpower of the nation could be called up and incorporated into armies of equally unprecedented size. These armies could be controlled and manoeuvred so as to meet in a single battle, or series of battles, which would decisively settle the outcome of the war. With national resources thus concentrated and at the disposal of a single commander, the destiny of the state hung on the skill and judgement with which he deployed his forces during a few vital days. The campaigns of Marengo and Austerlitz, of Jena and Wagram, of Leipzig and Waterloo possessed all the dramatic unities. Forces well matched in size and exactly matched in weapons, operating within rigid boundaries of time and space, could by the skill of their commanders and the endurance and courage of their troops settle the fate of nations in a matter of hours. Military operations were no longer one part in a complex counterpoint of international negotiation: they played a dominant solo role, with diplomacy providing only a faint apologetic obligato in the background. There were of course many other factors involved, other than the purely military, in the growth of the Napoleonic Empire and, even more, in its ultimate collapse; but the fact remained that Napoleon had lived by the sword and he perished by the sword. The study of swordsmanship thus acquired a heightened significance in the eyes of posterity.

Nothing that happened in Europe during the next hundred years was to undermine the view that war now meant the interruption of political intercourse and the commitment of national destinies to huge armies whose function it was to seek each other out and clash in brief, sanguinary and decisive battles. At Magenta and Solferino in 1859 the new Kingdom of Italy was established. At Konniggratz in 1866 Prussia asserted her predominance in Germany, and by the battle of Sedan four years later a new German Empire was established which was to exercise a comparable predominance in Europe. Operational histories of these campaigns can be written- indeed they have been written in quite unnecessarily large numbers- which, with little reference to diplomatic, economic, political or social factors, contain in themselves all necessary explanation of what happened and why the war was won. Operational history, therefore, in the nineteenth century, became synonymous with the history of war. It is not surprising that the soldiers and statesmen brought up on works of this kind should in 1914 have expected the new European war to take a similar course: the breach of political intercourse; the rapid mobilization and deployment of resources; a few gigantic battles; and then the troops, vanquished or victorious as the case might be, would be home by Christmas while statesmen redrew the frontiers of their nations to correspond to the new balance of military profit and loss. The experience of the American Civil War where large amateur armies had fought in totally different conditions of terrain, or the Russo-Japanese War which had been conducted by both belligerents at the

end of the slenderest lines of communications, seemed irrelevant to warfare conducted in Europe by highly trained professional forces fighting over limited terrain plentifully provided with roads and railways.

The disillusioning experience of the next few years did not at first lead to any major reappraisal of strategic doctrine by the military authorities of any of the belligerent powers. The German High Command still sought after decisive battles in the East while it encouraged its adversaries to bleed themselves to death against their western defences. The powers of the Western Entente still regarded their offensives on the Western Front as Napoleonic battles writ large: prolonged tests of endurance and willpower which would culminate in one side or the other, once its reserves were exhausted, collapsing at its weakest point and allowing the victorious cavalry of the opponent to flood through in glorious pursuit. From this view the United States Army, when it entered the war in 1917, did not basically dissent. The object of strategy remained, in spite of all changes in weapons and tactics, to concentrate all available resources at the decisive point, compelling the adversary to do the same, and there slug it out until a decision was reached. To this object all other considerations, diplomatic, economic and political, had to be subordinated.

But paradoxically, although military developments over the past hundred years had established the principle, indeed the dogma, of the "decisive battle" as the focus of all military (and civil) activity, parallel political and social development had been making it increasingly difficult to achieve this kind of "decision." On the Napoleonic battlefield the decision had to be taken by a single commander, to capitulate or to flee. It was taken in a discrete situation, when his reserves were exhausted or the cohesion of his forces was broken beyond repair. He could see that he had staked all and lost. And since the commander was often the political chief as well, such a military capitulation normally involved also a political surrender. If it did not, then the victor's path lay open to the victim's capital, where peace could be dictated on his own terms. But by 1914 armies were no longer self sufficient entities at the disposal of a single commander. Railways provided conduits along which reserves and supplies could come as fast as they could be produced. Telegraph and telephone linked commanders in the field to centres of political and military control where a different perspective obtained over what was going on at the battlefield. If by some masterpiece of tactical deployment an army in the field could be totally annihilated, as was the French at Sedan or the Russian at Tannenberg, a government with sufficiently strong nerves and untapped resources could set about raising others. Armies could be kept on foot and committed to action so long as manpower and material lasted and national morale remained intact. Battles no longer provided clear decisions. They were trials of strength, competitions in mutual attrition in which the strength being eroded had to be measured in terms not simply of military units but of national manpower, economic productivity, and ultimately the social stability of the belligerent powers. That was the lesson, if anybody had cared to learn it, of the American Civil War. European strategists had studied and praised the elegant manoeuvres of Jackson and Lee, but it was the remorseless attrition of Grant and the punitive destruction of Sherman which had ultimately decided the war. And once war became a matter of competing economic resources, social stability and popular morale, it became too serious a business to be left to the generals. Operations again became only one factor out of many in international struggle, and a "military" history or a combat history of the First World War can give only a very inadequate account indeed of that huge and complicated conflict.

For with the increasing participation of the community at large in the war there went the broadening of the political basis of society. The necessary efforts would not be made, and the necessary sacrifices would not be endured, by populations which were merely servile or indifferent: that had been the lesson Napoleon had taught the Prussians in 1806, and they had learned it well. Popular enthusiasm had to be evoked and sustained. A struggle in which every member of society feels himself involved brings about a heightening of national consciousness, an acceptance of hardship, a heroic mood in which sufferings inflicted by the adversary are almost welcomed and certainly stoically

endured. If more men are needed for the armies, they will be found, if necessary from among 15-16 year olds. Rationing is accepted without complaint. Sacrifice and ingenuity will produce astonishing quantities of war material from the most unpromising economic and industrial base. Necessity and scientific expertise will combine to produce ingenious new weapons systems. And as the long process of attrition continues, at what point can it be "decided" that the war is lost?

By whom, moreover, is the decision to be made? The situation may deteriorate. The army may fight with flagging zeal; statistics of self mutilation and desertion may show a shocking increase; but the army does not break and run. Factories may work spasmodically and slowly, turning out increasingly inferior products, but they do not close their doors. The population grows undernourished and indifferent, absenting itself from work whenever it can safely do so, but it does not revolt. A staunch government can endure all this and still carry on, so long as its police and its military remain loyal. Open dissent is, after all, treasonable. The emotional pressures no less than the political necessities of a wartime society create an environment in which moderation, balance, and far-sighted judgement are at a discount. Few men were more unpopular and ineffective in France, Britain, and Germany during the First World War than those courageous souls who pressed for a compromise peace. Resolution and ruthlessness are the qualities which bring men to the front as leaders in wartime, and if they weaken there will be others to take their place. Ultimately nothing short of physical occupation and subjugation may prove adequate to end the war. That was what we found with Germany in 1945, and so I suspect the Germans would have found with Britain five years earlier. One of the most distinctive and disagreeable characteristics of twentieth-century warfare is the enormous difficulty of bringing it to an end.

After the First World War, the classical strategic thinking came under attack from several quarters. There were the thinkers, in Britain and Germany, who hoped to replace the brutal slaughter of mutual attrition by new tactics based on mobility and surprise, which, by using armoured and mechanized forces instead of the old mass armies, would obtain on the battlefield results as decisive as those of Napoleon's campaigns. In the blitzkrieg of 1939 and 1940 it looked as if they had succeeded. The armies of Poland and France- not to mention those of Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and Great Britain- were destroyed or disrupted so rapidly that the political authorities were left literally defenceless and could only capitulate or flee. But this proved a passing phase in warfare, applicable only under temporary conditions of technical disequilibrium and effective only in the limited terrain of Western Europe. When the German armed forces met, in the Russians, adversaries who could trade space for time and who had developed their own techniques of armoured defence and offense, battles became as strenuous, and losses as severe, as any in the First World War.

Then there were the prophets who believed that it might be possible so to undermine the morale and the political stability of the adversary with propaganda and subversion that when battle was actually joined he would never have the moral strength to sustain it. This doctrine was based on a grotesque overestimate of the contribution which Allied propaganda had made to the collapse of the Central Powers in 1918. It appeared justified by the rapidity with which the French armies collapsed in 1940 and the apparent equanimity with which France concluded peace with her conqueror and her hereditary foe. But propaganda and subversion, although very valuable auxiliaries to orthodox military action, cannot serve as a substitute for it. The British were to rely very heavily on these methods to try to undermine the Nazi Empire when they confronted it on their own in 1940 and 1941; but it was only when the United States entered the war, when Allied armed forces were deployed in strength in the Mediterranean and when the Russians were beginning to beat the Germans back from Stalingrad that these political manoeuvres began to show any signs of success.

Finally there were the prophets of air power, of whom the most articulate was the Italian Giulio Douhet, who believed that surface operations could be eliminated altogether by attacks aimed directly at the morale of the civilian population, a population who would, if its cities were destroyed around it, rise up and compel its governments to bring the war to an end. This doctrine, as we now know,

overestimated both the destructiveness of high-explosive bombs and the capacity of aircraft to deliver them accurately and in adequate numbers to their targets in the technological conditions then obtaining, while it equally underestimated the capacity of civilian populations to survive prolonged ordeals which previously might have been considered unendurable. Bombing, in its early stages, in fact did a great deal to improve civilian morale. It gave a sense of exhilaration, of shared sacrifices, a determination not to yield to an overt form of terror. It engendered hatred, and hatred is good for morale. In its later stages, bombing did indeed result in increasing apathy and war weariness among the civilian populations of Germany and Japan; but it produced from them no effective and concerted demand that the war should be brought to an end. It was only one form, if the most immediate and terrifying, of the pressures being brought to bear on their societies to force a decision which their leaders stubbornly refused to take.

So the Second World War, like the First, was a conflict of attrition between highly organised and politically sophisticated societies, in which economic capacity, scientific and technological expertise, social cohesion and civilian morale proved to be factors of no less significance than the operations of armed forces in the field. The disagreements between British and American military leaders over Grand Strategy arose primarily from the British belief that much attrition could be to a great extent achieved by indirect means-by bombing, by blockade, by propaganda, by subversion whereas the United States Army believed that there could be no substitute for the classical strategic doctrine of bringing the enemy army to battle and defeating him at the decisive point, and that could only be as it had been thirty years earlier, on the plains of Northwest Europe, in the kind of prolonged slugging match which Grant had taught it to endure but which Britain, after the Somme and Passchendaele, had learned, with some reason, to dread. The Americans had their way. Yet in the battles in France there was no clear decision; there was only a slow ebbing of moral and material forces from the German armies until retreat imperceptibly became rout and military advance became political occupation. Then it was seen that the strength of the German nation had been drained into its armed forces- much as that of the Confederacy had been eighty years before; and the destruction of those armed forces meant the disappearance of the German State.

When the object in war is the destruction of the adversary's political independence and social fabric, the question of persuading him to acknowledge defeat does not arise. But the States of the modern world- certainly those of modern Europe- have seldom gone to war with so drastic an objective in mind. They have been concerned more frequently with preventing one another from pursuing policies contrary to their interests and compelling them to accept ones in conformity with them. Wars are not simply acts of violence. They are acts of persuasion or of dissuasion; and although the threat of destruction is normally a necessary part of the persuading process, such destruction is only exceptionally regarded as an end in itself. To put it at its lowest, the total elimination of an adversary as an organised political entity, the destruction of him as an advanced working society, normally creates a dangerously infectious condition of social and economic chaos- as the Germans found with the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is likely to increase the postwar political and economic troubles of the victorious side- as the Allies found after 1945. Normally, it makes better sense to leave one's adversary chastened and submissive, in control of his own political and social fabric, and sufficiently balanced economically, if not to pay an indemnity in the good old style, then at least not to be a burden on the victors and force them to pay an indemnity to him. This means that, although the threat of destruction must be convincing, it is in one's interest to persuade the adversary to acknowledge defeat before that threat has to be carried out- a truism which loses none of its force in the nuclear age. In making war, in short, it is necessary constantly to be thinking how to make peace. The two activities can never properly be separated.

What is making peace? It means persuading one's adversary to accept, or to offer, reasonable terms- terms in conformity with one's own overall policy. Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which this persuasion can be carried out. First it can be directed to the enemy government or regime

itself, as is normally the case in so-called “limited wars.” In such wars it is not part of one’s policy to disrupt the social or political order in the enemy country. The existing regime, misguided as its policy may be, is probably the best that can be expected in the circumstances, and one does not want to see it replaced by wilder men or crumble into total anarchy. Alternatively, one may despair of men in power ever being brought to acknowledge defeat, as we despaired of Hitler, and even if they were to acknowledge defeat, of being relied on to abide by any agreement thereafter. Then one must seek to replace them by a more pliable regime. This can consist either of members of the same governing group seizing power by coup d’etat, as the Italian Army did in 1943 and the Anti-Nazi conspirators tried to do in July 1944. Or one may aim at a fundamental social and political revolution- or counterrevolution- which will sweep away the old order altogether and install a government which is ideologically sympathetic to one’s own.

Any one of these methods involves persuading significant individuals or significant groups in the opposing community, either those who already possess power or those who are capable of achieving power, that they have nothing to gain from further resistance and a great deal to lose. In achieving such persuasion, there is, to borrow a famous phrase, no substitute for victory. It was not until defeat stared them in the face that substantial groups, in the Central Powers in the First World War or the Axis Powers in the Second, began to take effective measures to bring the war to an end. But the victor must still realise the enormous difficulties which will confront these groups in wartime from within their own society- in democracies from public opinion, in totalitarian societies from the secret police. If they are to carry public opinion with them- or opinion within their own elites- it may be necessary for the victor to make concessions to provide them with incentives as well as threats. It may be clear to them that peace at any price is better than continued and inescapable destruction, but peace with some semblance of honour provides a better basis for postwar stability, both on an international basis and within the domestic framework of the defeated power. Strategy and policy have to work hand in hand to provide inducements as well as threats to secure a lasting settlement.

Everything that I have said so far applies to wars between States- organised communities fighting over incompatible goals. But most of the conflicts which have occurred since 1945 have not been of this kind at all. One can call them wars of liberation, guerrilla, insurgency or partisan wars, revolutionary wars, or, to use the rather charming British understatement, "emergencies.” In all of them, the object on both sides has been the same. It is, by the judicious use of force or violence, to compel the other side to admit defeat and abandon his attempt to control certain contested territories. In this conflict the traditional method of destroying the armed power of the enemy is not sufficient, or sometimes even necessary: of yet greater importance is the maintenance, or the acquisition, of the positive support of the population in the contested area. The capacity to exercise military control and to prevent one’s opponent from doing the same is clearly a major and probably a decisive factor in gaining such support; yet if a guerrilla movement, in spite of repeated defeats and heavy losses, can still rely on a sympathetic population among whom its survivors can recuperate and hide, then all the numerical and technical superiority of its opponents may ultimately count for nothing.

In this kind of struggle for loyalties, military operations and political action are inseparable. In a more real sense than ever before, one is making war and peace simultaneously. The guerrilla organization is a civil administration as much as a fighting mechanism. It acquires increasing political responsibilities with its increasing military success until ultimately its leaders emerge from hiding as fully fledged Heads of State and take their place among the great ones of the world. The established regime, on the other side, is concerned to keep operations within the category of policing, to maintain law and order, and to preserve the image of legitimate power which gains it the support of the uncommitted part of the population. In this struggle schools and hospitals are weapons as important as military units. Defeat is acknowledged not when one side or the other recognizes that the destruction of its armed forces is inescapable but when it abandons all hope of winning the sympathy of the population over to its side. In such a struggle it must be admitted that a foreign power fights

indigenous guerrillas under disadvantages so great that even the most overwhelming preponderance in military force and weapons may be insufficient to make up for them. In such wars, as in those of an earlier age, military operations are therefore only one tool of national policy, and not necessarily the most important. They have to be coordinated with others by a master hand.

In Viet Nam today, the United States faces two tasks. It has to help the government of South Viet Nam to attract that measure of popular support which alone will signify victory and guarantee lasting peace; and it has to persuade the government of North Viet Nam to abandon- and to abandon for good- its interference in the affairs of its neighbor. In tackling the first of these tasks it has to solve the difficulties with which both the French and the British wrestled in their colonial territories, with varying degrees of success, for the past twenty odd years. In carrying out the second it faces what one can now call the traditional problem of twentieth century warfare: how to persuade the adversary to come to terms without inflicting on him such severe damage as to prejudice all chances of subsequent stability and peace. In my personal judgement the Government of the United States in tackling these tasks has so far shown a far greater insight into their implications than it is given credit for by its critics, either of the Right or of the Left. It has understood that although armed force is, regrettably, a necessary element in its policy, force must be exercised with precision and restraint and that its exercise, however massive, will be not only useless but counterproductive if it is not integrated in a policy based on a thorough comprehension of the societies with which it is dealing and a clear perception of the settlement at which it aims.

Operational histories of the Viet Nam campaign will one day be produced, and we can be sure that, in the tradition of American official histories, they will be full, frank, informative and just. But they will be only a part of the history of that war. The full story will have to spell out, in all its complexity, how the struggle has been waged, for more than twenty years, and between many participants, for the loyalties of the Vietnamese peoples. Such a study will show how policy and strategy have or have not been related. It is unlikely to distinguish clearly between military history on the one hand and social, political and economic history on the other. But it will shed much light on the problem which is of central concern to all mankind in the twentieth century, and to whose study the military historian- however we may define him-must try to make some contribution: Under what circumstances can armed force be used, in the only way in which it can be legitimate to use it, to ensure a lasting and stable peace?

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