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INTRODUCTION

The Theoretical Study of War – Its Use and Limitations

At first sight nothing can appear more unpractical, less promising of useful result, than to approach the study of war with a theory. There seems indeed to be something essentially antagonistic between the habit of mind that seeks theoretical guidance and that which makes for the successful conduct of war. The conduct of war is so much a question of personality, of character, of common-sense, of rapid decision upon complex and ever-shifting factors, and those factors themselves are so varied, so intangible, so dependent upon unstable moral and physical conditions, that it seems incapable of being reduced to anything like true scientific analysis. At the bare idea of a theory or "science" of war the mind recurs uneasily to well-known cases where highly "scientific" officers failed as leaders. Yet, on the other hand, no one will deny that since the great theorists of the early nineteenth century attempted to produce a reasoned theory of war, its planning and conduct have acquired a method, a precision, and a certainty of grasp which were unknown before. Still less will any one deny the value which the shrewdest and most successful leaders in war have placed upon the work of the classical strategical writers.

The truth is that the mistrust of theory arises from a misconception of what it is that theory claims to do. It does not [pg 4] pretend to give the power of conduct in the field; it claims no more than to increase the effective power of conduct. Its main practical value is that it can assist a capable man to acquire a broad outlook whereby he may be the surer his plan shall cover all the ground, and whereby he may with greater rapidity and certainty seize all the factors of a sudden situation. The greatest of the theorists himself puts the matter quite frankly. Of theoretical study he says, "It should educate the mind of the man who is to lead in war, or rather guide him to self-education, but it should not accompany him on the field of battle."

Its practical utility, however, is not by any means confined to its effects upon the powers of a leader. It is not enough that a leader should have the ability to decide rightly; his subordinates must seize at once the full meaning of his decision and be able to express it with certainty in well-adjusted action. For this every man concerned must have been trained to think in the same plane; the chief's order must awake in every brain the same process of thought; his words must have the same meaning for all. If a theory of tactics had existed in 1780, and if Captain Carkett had had a sound training in [pg 5] such a theory, he could not possibly have misunderstood Rodney's signal. As it was, the real intention of the signal was obscure, and Rodney's neglect to explain the tactical device it indicated robbed his country of a victory at an hour of the direst need. There had been no previous theoretical training to supply the omission, and Rodney's fine conception was unintelligible to anybody but himself.

Nor is it only for the sake of mental solidarity between a chief and his subordinates that theory is indispensable. It is of still higher value for producing a similar solidarity between him and his superiors at the Council table at home. How often have officers dumbly acquiesced in ill-advised operations simply for lack of the mental power and verbal apparatus to convince an impatient Minister where the errors of his plan lay? How often, moreover, have statesmen and officers, even in the most harmonious conference, been unable to decide on a coherent plan of war from inability to analyse scientifically the situation they had to face, and to recognise the general character of the struggle in which they were about [pg 6] to engage. That the true nature of a war should be realised by contemporaries as clearly as it comes to be seen afterwards in the fuller light of history is seldom to be expected. At close range accidental factors will force themselves into undue prominence and tend to obscure the true horizon. Such error can scarcely ever be eliminated, but by theoretical study we can reduce it, nor by any other means can we hope to approach the clearness of vision with which posterity will read our mistakes. Theory is, in fact, a question of education and deliberation, and not of execution at all. That depends on the combination of intangible human qualities which we call executive ability.

This, then, is all the great authorities ever claimed for theory, but to this claim the chief of them at least, after years of active service on the Staff, attached the highest importance. "In actual operations," he wrote in one of his latest memoranda, "men are guided solely by their judgment, and it will hit the mark more or less accurately according as they possess more or less genius. This is the way all great generals have acted.... Thus it will always be in action, and so far judgment will suffice. But when it is a question not of taking action yourself, but of convincing others at the Council table, then everything depends on clear conceptions and the exposition of the inherent relations of things. So little progress has been made in this respect that most deliberations are merely verbal contentions which rest on no firm foundation, and end either in every one retaining his own opinion, or in a compromise from considerations of mutual respect—a middle course of no actual value."¹

The writer's experience of such discussions was rich and at [pg 7] first hand. Clear conceptions of the ideas and factors involved in a war problem, and a definite exposition of the relations between them, were in his eyes the remedy for loose and purposeless discussion; and such conceptions and expositions are all we mean by the theory or the science of war. It is a process by which we co-ordinate our ideas, define the meaning of the words we use, grasp the difference between essential and unessential factors, and fix and expose the fundamental data on which every one is agreed. In this way we prepare the apparatus of practical discussion; we secure the means of arranging the factors in manageable shape, and of deducing from them with precision and rapidity a practical course of action. Without such an apparatus no two men can even think on the same line; much less can they ever hope to detach the real point of difference that divides them and isolate it for quiet solution.

In our own case this view of the value of strategical theory has a special significance, and one far wider than its continental enunciators contemplated. For a world-wide maritime Empire the successful conduct of war will often turn not only on the decisions of the Council chamber at home, but on the outcome of conferences in all parts of the world between [pg 8] squadronal commanders and the local authorities, both civil and military, and even between commanders-in-chief of adjacent stations. In time of war or of prepara-

tion for war, in which the Empire is concerned, arrangements must always be based to an exceptional degree on the mutual relation of naval, military, and political considerations. The line of mean efficiency, though indicated from home, must be worked out locally, and worked out on factors of which no one service is master. Conference is always necessary, and for conference to succeed there must be a common vehicle of expression and a common plane of thought. It is for this essential preparation that theoretical study alone can provide; and herein lies its practical value for all who aspire to the higher responsibilities of the Imperial service.

So great indeed is the value of abstract strategical study from this point of view, that it is necessary to guard ourselves against over-valuation. So far from claiming for their so-called science more than the possibilities we have indicated, the classical strategists insist again and again on the danger of seeking from it what it cannot give. They even repudiate the very name of "Science." They prefer the older term "Art." They will permit no laws or rules. Such laws, they say, can only mislead in practice, for the friction to which they are subject from the incalculable human factors alone is such that the friction is stronger than the law. It is an old adage of lawyers that nothing is so misleading as a legal maxim, but a strategical maxim is undoubtedly and in every way less to be trusted in action.

What then, it will be asked, are the tangible results which we can hope to attain from theory? If all on which we have to build is so indeterminate, how are any practical conclusions to be reached? That the factors are infinitely varied and difficult to determine is true, but that, it must be remembered, is just what emphasises the necessity of reaching such firm standpoints as are attainable. The vaguer the problem to be [pg 9] solved, the more resolute must we be in seeking points of departure from which we can begin to lay a course, keeping always an eye open for the accidents that will beset us, and being always alive to their deflecting influences. And this is just what the theoretical study of strategy can do. It can at least determine the normal. By careful collation of past events it becomes clear that certain lines of conduct tend normally to produce certain effects; that wars tend to take certain forms each with a marked idiosyncrasy; that these forms are normally related to the object of the war and to its value to one or both belligerents; that a system of

operations which suits one form may not be that best suited to another. We can even go further. By pursuing an historical and comparative method we can detect that even the human factor is not quite indeterminable. We can assert that certain situations will normally produce, whether in ourselves or in our adversaries, certain moral states on which we may calculate.

Having determined the normal, we are at once in a stronger position. Any proposal can be compared with it, and we can proceed to discuss clearly the weight of the factors which prompt us to depart from the normal. Every case must be judged on its merits, but without a normal to work from we cannot form any real judgment at all; we can only guess. Every case will assuredly depart from the normal to a greater or less extent, and it is equally certain that the greatest successes in war have been the boldest departures from the normal. But for the most part they have been departures made with open eyes by geniuses who could perceive in the accidents of the case a just reason for the departure.

Take an analogous example, and the province of strategical theory becomes clear at once. Navigation and the parts of seamanship that belong to it have to deal with phenomena as varied and unreliable as those of the conduct of war. Together they form an art which depends quite as much as generalship on the judgment of individuals. The law of [pg 10] storms and tides, of winds and currents, and the whole of meteorology are subject to infinite and incalculable deflections, and yet who will deny nowadays that by the theoretical study of such things the seaman's art has gained in coherence and strength? Such study will not by itself make a seaman or a navigator, but without it no seaman or navigator can nowadays pretend to the name. Because storms do not always behave in the same way, because currents are erratic, will the most practical seaman deny that the study of the normal conditions are useless to him in his practical decisions?

If, then, the theoretical study of strategy be approached in this way – if, that is, it be regarded not as a substitute for judgment and experience, but as a means of fertilising both, it can do no man harm. Individual thought and common-sense will remain the masters and remain the guides to point the general direction when the

mass of facts begins to grow bewildering. Theory will warn us the moment we begin to leave the beaten track, and enable us to decide with open eyes whether the divergence is necessary or justifiable. Above all, when men assemble in Council it will hold discussion to the essential lines, and help to keep side issues in their place.

But beyond all this there lies in the theory of war yet another element of peculiar value to a maritime Empire. We are accustomed, partly for convenience and partly from lack of a scientific habit of thought, to speak of naval strategy and military strategy as though they were distinct branches of knowledge which had no common ground. It is the theory of war which brings out their intimate relation. It reveals that embracing them both is a larger strategy which regards the fleet and army as one weapon, which co-ordinates their action, and indicates the lines on which each must move to realise the full power of both. It will direct us to assign to each its proper function in a plan of war; it will enable each service to realise the better the limitations and the possibilities of the function with which it is charged, and how and [pg 11] when its own necessities must give way to a higher or more pressing need of the other. It discloses, in short, that naval strategy is not a thing by itself, that its problems can seldom or never be solved on naval considerations alone, but that it is only a part of maritime strategy—the higher learning which teaches us that for a maritime State to make successful war and to realise her special strength, army and navy must be used and thought of as instruments no less intimately connected than are the three arms ashore.

It is for these reasons that it is of little use to approach naval strategy except through the theory of war. Without such theory we can never really understand its scope or meaning, nor can we hope to grasp the forces which most profoundly affect its conclusions.

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