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Is Strategy an Illusion? | Richard K. Betts

Strategy is the essential ingredient for making war either politically effective or morally tenable. It is the link between military means and political ends, the scheme for how to make one produce the other. Without strategy, there is no rationale for how force will achieve purposes worth the price in blood and treasure. Without strategy, power is a loose cannon and war is mindless. Mindless killing can only be criminal. Politicians and soldiers may debate which strategic choice is best, but only pacifists can doubt that strategy is necessary.

Because strategy is necessary, however, does not mean that it is possible. Those who experience or study many wars find strong reasons to doubt that strategists can know enough about causes, effects, and intervening variables to make the operations planned produce the outcomes desired. To skeptics, effective strategy is often an illusion because what happens in the gap between policy objectives and war outcomes is too complex and unpredictable to be manipulated to a specified end. When this is true, war cannot be a legitimate instrument of policy.

This article surveys ten critiques that throw the practicability of strategy into question. It pulls together many arguments that emerge in bits and pieces from a variety of sources. Some are my own formulation of skepticism implicit but unformed in others' observations; few analysts have yet attacked the general viability of strategy head-on. The notion that effective strategy must be an illusion emerges cumulatively from arguments that: strategies cannot be evaluated because there are no agreed criteria for which are good or bad; there is little demonstrable relationship between strategies and outcomes in war; good strategies can seldom be formulated because of policymakers' biases; if good strategies are formulated, they cannot be executed because of organizations' limitations; and other points explored below. Unifying themes include the bar-

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riers to prediction and control imposed by political and military complexity; the pervasive undertow of goal displacement in the behavior of governments and militaries that reverses the canonical relationship between ends and means; and the greater difficulty of strategies of coercion, which aim to change adversaries' policies, as compared to strategies of control, which impose the objective by destroying capabilities to resist.

In this article strategy is defined as a plan for using military means to achieve political ends, or as Clausewitz put it, "the use of engagements for the object of the war."¹ If effective military strategy is to be real rather than illusory, one must be able to devise a rational scheme to achieve an objective through combat or the threat of it; implement the scheme with forces; keep the plan working in the face of enemy reactions (which should be anticipated in the plan); and achieve something close to the objective. Rational strategic behavior should be value maximizing, choosing appropriate means according to economistic calculations of cost and benefit.

These general descriptions leave room for confusions. Let me clarify two. First, this essay is most concerned with strategy as a cause of victory that can be distinguished from raw power. The distinction is blurred when the strategy is simple attrition, the direct application of superior resources to defeat the enemy by having the last man standing. Attrition meets the definition of strategy when it is used by a strong power against a weak one, and circumstances sometimes make it the right choice. In those cases, however, strategy is not interesting, because it does not tell us more than we could estimate from the distribution of power. Strategy is most important when it provides value added to resources, functions as a force multiplier, and offers a way to beat an adversary with equivalent resources or to minimize the cost of defeating an inferior.

Second, strategies are chains of relationships among means and ends that span several levels of analysis, from the maneuvers of units in specific engagements through larger campaigns, whole wars, grand strategies, and foreign policies. The reader is forewarned that this article blithely moves back and forth across these levels. Considering examples at different levels of analysis is reasonable as long as the focus remains on the *linkages* in the hierarchy of policy, strategy, and operations, where the logic at each level is supposed to govern the one below and serve the one above. A scheme for how to use a particular operation to achieve a larger *military* objective, or a foreign policy decision that requires certain military actions, are both strategic matters at dif-

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 128 (emphasis deleted) and p. 181.

ferent levels in the chain between means and ends. Strategy fails when some link in the planned chain of cause and effect from low-level tactics to high-level political outcomes is broken, when military objectives come to be pursued for their own sake without reference to their political effect, or when policy initiatives depend on military options that are infeasible. The issue for strategy is whether choices at any level do or do not maintain a logical consistency with levels above and below, and ultimately a consistency between political ends and military means.

Why is a long article on whether strategy is an illusion necessary? Because many are insensitive to the question, forgetting that strategy is a distinct plan *between* policy and operations, an idea for connecting the two rather than either of the two themselves. Among practitioners, politicians often conflate strategy with policy objectives (focusing on what the desired outcome should be, simply assuming that force will move the adversary toward it), while soldiers often conflate strategy with operations (focusing on how to destroy targets or defeat enemies tactically, assuming that positive military effects mean positive policy effects). Both policymakers and soldiers have more than they can handle, working around the clock, to deal with the demanding problems in their respective realms, with neither focusing intently on the linkage—the bridge between objectives and operations, the mechanism by which combat will achieve objectives. Strategy becomes whatever slogans and unexamined assumptions occur to them in the moments left over from coping with their main preoccupations.

Among academics, many do not take seriously the barriers to effective strategy. A generation ago students were more immersed in literature that emphasized nonrational patterns of decision, implementation, and outcome. The brief vogue of bureaucratic politics theory in the 1970s was fed by disillusionment over U.S. policy in Vietnam: It seemed impossible that the civilian and military leaders who produced that disaster could have known what they were doing. Soon, though, the pendulum swung back. Rationalist theories returned to the fore and have remained ascendant since. Political science no longer encourages operational analysis as a prime mission for ambitious scholars. Thus few of them anymore learn enough about the processes of decision-making or military operations to grasp how hard it is to implement strategic plans, and few focus on the conversion processes that open gaps between what government leaders decide to do and what government organizations implementing those decisions actually *do* do. Rationalist models provide the best normative standards for what strategists ought to try to do, but they are only heuristic beginnings for real strategies which, by definition, must be demon-

strably practical. “The question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work?” as Bernard Brodie writes. “In that respect it is like other branches of politics and like any of the applied sciences, and not at all like pure science, where the function of theory is to describe, organize, and explain and not to prescribe.”²

The article groups four sets of critiques. In the first set, Critique 1 argues that strategy cannot reasonably be judged in advance because anything goes: Virtually any choice—even one that later proves disastrous—can be justified before it is tried. Critique 2 is that we cannot use hindsight to select model strategies because experience shows that nothing goes: The record of strategies played out reveals so little correspondence between plans and outcomes that strategic choice proves to be seldom more than a shot in the dark. In the first criticism, strategy is no better than a crapshoot; in the second, it is not even that, but instead a “random walk.”

The rest of the article explores why it is so hard to use strategy to integrate ends and means: Critiques 3–5 discuss psychological barriers; 6–8 concern organizational processes and pathologies; and 9 and 10 are about political complications. Several cases are used recurrently as illustrations; using different facets of a single case underlines the multiplicity of barriers to strategic effectiveness.

Following each critique is a response that tries to refute or mitigate it. The aim of the responses is to salvage the practice of strategy against the cumulative weight of the criticisms. The article is not meant to be a screed against strategy, and I do not accept the pacifism that is the only legitimate alternative to belief in the possibility of strategy. The salvage mission succeeds, however, only in part. The essay concludes with reflections on the implications of a dismal view of the limits of strategy.

Risk or Uncertainty: Anything Goes in Foresight, Nothing Goes in Hindsight

Strategies can be judged looking backward, but they must be chosen looking forward. If any choice of action can be deemed strategically reasonable beforehand, or none can be afterward, strategy cannot be meaningful.

CRITIQUE 1: LUCK VERSUS GENIUS

Strategy is an illusion because it is impractical to judge in advance which risk is reasonable or which strategy is less justifiable than another. The illusion persists be-

2. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 452–453 (emphasis deleted).

cause observers confuse what they know about results of past strategic choices with what they can expect strategists to know before the choices are tested. Almost any strategy can be rationalized and no rationale falsified at the time that a strategy must be chosen.

If strategy is to be useful, there must be adequate criteria for judging between smart and stupid strategies and between reasonable and excessive risks. This must be done in terms of what decisionmakers know when they choose strategies, not what proves out after strategies are tried. Successful strategy must also achieve an objective at acceptable cost. The best strategy does so not just effectively but efficiently as well—at the lowest cost of any option. Acceptable cost cannot be determined easily or precisely, however, because there is no unit of account for weighing objectives and prices in the way that money provides for market exchange. Notions about acceptable cost may also prove very volatile, as political circumstances change or costs accumulate. (Economists know that sunk costs should not influence decisions, but psychologists know that they do.) There must be some judgment about acceptable cost, however imprecise it may be, or there is no basis on which to decide why some causes are worth fighting for and others not.

Because strategic choices depend on estimates about risks and subjective judgments about the value of the stakes, they are gambles. If there is scant danger of failure, counterproductive results, or excessive cost, the strategic problem is not challenging. If strategic decisions are gambles, however, it is hardly reasonable to judge one as foolish simply because hindsight shows that it failed. The wisdom of a choice of action also depends on the objective it is meant to serve. Strategy may be immune to criticism if the objective could not fail to be achieved. For example, U.S. spokesmen declared that the objective of Operation Desert Fox—the four-day bombing of Iraq in 1998—was to “degrade” Saddam Hussein’s capabilities. *Any* combat action would do that. Strategy cannot be faulted, however, just because the objective it serves is dubious to the observer, if it makes sense in terms of a different value of concern to the one making the decision. If the decisionmaker puts priority on a moral value that conflicts with material welfare (e.g., honor), even self-destructive behavior can be strategic. These qualifications put assessment on a slippery slope, where it becomes difficult to discredit *any* strategic choice, and the concept of strategic behavior degenerates into indeterminacy and nonfalsifiability.³

3. “If, on one hand, the investigator superimposes a clear and definite pattern of tastes on economic actors and assigns a clear and definite mode of rationality to them, then the possibility of determinate theoretical explanations is increased. If, on the other hand, tastes and modes of ratio-

What amount of risk is strategically sensible? Without hindsight, it proves hard to distinguish calculated risks from shots in the dark. Judgment is often contaminated by hindsight, as good fortune is mistaken for strategic foresight. Before the fact, what kind of a gambler should a respectable strategist be: a percentage player or a high roller?

It is not easy to prescribe the cautious percentage-player model even if we want to, because the odds of military success or failure are never as clear before the fact as they seem to be in hindsight. Success makes the estimable odds before the fact seem better than they were, and failure makes them seem worse. Even if odds are calculable in advance, what do we make of a strategist who has a 30 percent chance and wins, compared with one who has a 40 percent chance but loses? Can we call the first wise and the second wrong, or both wrong or right? By what standards can one say which choices are reasonable attempts that do not pan out and which are egregious miscalculations, which ones reflect strategic genius and which simply good luck? Among practitioners and observers of military affairs, there is no consensus whatever on the absolutely fundamental question of what degree of risk is acceptable.

Adolph Hitler, Winston Churchill, and Douglas MacArthur all gambled more than once, and all won some and lost some. Hitler rolled the dice several times against the advice of prudent generals, and won stunning victories from the 1930s until his two big mistakes in 1941: attacking the Soviet Union and declaring war on the United States. Churchill's inspiration contributed to the disaster of Gallipoli in 1915 but also to Britain's finest hour in 1940. In 1950 MacArthur overrode the fears of U.S. military leaders that a landing at Inchon would be a fiasco and he scored a stunning success, then took a similar gamble in splitting his force on the march to the Yalu and caused a calamity. In hindsight most judge Hitler to be strategically foolish, Churchill brilliant, and MacArthur either one, depending on the observer's political sympathies. Do the strategies chosen warrant such differing verdicts? Or are the prevalent judg-

nal action are regarded as idiosyncratic and variable from actor to actor, then theoretical determinacy is lost as analysis moves in the direction of relativism of tastes and a phenomenological conception of the actor." Neil J. Smelser, "The Rational Choice Perspective: A Theoretical Assessment," *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1992), p. 399; see also pp. 398, 400–401, 403. These problems apply to strategies for preventing wars as well as fighting them. "One disturbing possibility lies at the intersection of the nonfalsifiable character of the weak model [of deterrence] and the difficulty of testing any proposition about the nature of deterrence empirically. . . . history rarely presents evidence that unambiguously falsifies the weak version of rational deterrence theory." George W. Downs, "The Rational Deterrence Debate," *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (January 1989), p. 227.

ments really not about these leaders' strategic sense, but about the higher values for which they stood?

Consider Churchill more carefully, since Britain's resistance alone after the fall of France ranks among the epochal decisions of the past century. Only after the fact did it seem obvious that the British should have continued to fight after June 1940, risking invasion and occupation (or at least a draining war of attrition they could not win), rather than make peace when Hitler was willing to "partition the world" with them.⁴ The gamble made sense if there were good odds that the Soviet Union or the United States would save the day, but in 1940 either eventuality was a hope, not a probability. It was hardly terrible for Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax to say, as he did on May 26, that "if we could obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence, we would be foolish if we did not accept them."⁵

The rationales in 1940 for how Britain could win rested on underestimation of the German economy, ungrounded faith in strategic bombing, and overestimation of the U.S. propensity to intervene. Nor did most British leaders believe that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union until a few weeks before he did. Churchill's decision seems less risky if the British knew for sure that the Germans lacked the amphibious capability to invade, and would lose the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic. These are many ifs, and still would not offer a chance of *defeating* Germany—the only thing that would make continued combat and losses, as opposed to negotiated peace, worthwhile. Churchill's poor excuse for a victory strategy, apart from the hope of rescue by the Americans and the Russians, was to peck at the periphery of *Festung Europa*, foment insurrection in the occupied countries, and pray for a coup in Berlin. As David Reynolds concludes, "In 1940 Churchill and his colleagues made the right decision—but they did so for the wrong reasons."⁶ This is another way of saying, "Thank God for bad strategy."

4. The deal would have been to let Britain keep its empire while Germany kept Europe. Klaus Hildebrand, *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich*, trans. Anthony Fothergill (Berkeley: University of California Press, n.d.), pp. 93–94; Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims*, Vol. 1, *Ideology, the Nazi State, and the Course of Expansion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), pp. 157–158; and Wilhelm Deist, "The Road to Ideological War: Germany, 1918–1945," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 388.

5. Quoted in John Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 117.

6. David Reynolds, "Churchill and the British 'Decision' to Fight on in 1940," in Richard Langhorne, ed., *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War: Essays in Honour of F.H. Hinsley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 147, 154–155, 156–160, 163, 167. "A belief which is unjustified . . . may well be instrumentally useful, but it seems odd to call it rational. Ra-

None of this means that the British should not have made the gamble. Who can quarrel with the results? It does suggest, however, that the decision should be approved on grounds other than strategic logic. Churchill's odds were not clearly better than Hitler's. Hitler had rationales for invading the Soviet Union and declaring war on the United States: Attacking the Soviets was preventive, because their power was increasing; the British would not come to terms as long as they held out hope for Russian assistance; the Soviet Army was less formidable than the French; American entry into the war was inevitable, but it would take at least a year for American power to be applied, by which time the war would be over and the continent secured; declaring war on the United States kept faith with Axis treaty obligations and increased the chances that the Japanese would divert Soviet as well as American power. Hitler also had inadequate intelligence on the strength of Soviet forces, at the same time that the string of German victories in Poland, Norway, France, Greece, and Yugoslavia gave no reason to doubt Wehrmacht invincibility. Only in hindsight should those rationales seem wilder than Churchill's.⁷

Apart from the fact that it paid off, few are willing to challenge Churchill's gamble against the odds because of how crucial it was to the survival of liberalism in Europe and perhaps the world.⁸ That is, the ambit for functional rationality is widened by considerations of higher rationality. Many feel comfortable endorsing the risk because of a visceral conviction that a value higher than life was at stake. How else to justify Churchill's chilling declaration, "If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground"⁹? This was grisly, absolutist, nationalist idealism.

tionality . . . is a variety of intentionality. For something to be rational, it has to be within the scope of conscious, deliberate action or reflection. Useful false beliefs obtain by fluke, not by conscious reflection upon the evidence." Jon Elster, *Solomonic Judgments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 7. Churchill's rationale for confidence in the defensibility of England is set out in his June 18, 1940, speech in the House of Commons. See "Their Finest Hour," in Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, Vol. 6 (New York: Chelsea House, 1974), pp. 6231–6238.

7. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982), pp. 130–133.

8. In terms of imperial interests, which were a powerful motive at the time, the result is different. Churchill declared, "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire," but that is more or less what he did—a reason that reactionary revisionists criticize his failure to consider a deal with Berlin. John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), chaps. 37, 38 (quotation on p. 431); and Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), chaps. 5, 19–20.

9. Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Finest Hour: Winston S. Churchill, 1939–1941* (London: Heinemann, 1989), p. 420.

High risk does not in itself discredit a strategy. The logic of choice depends on expected utility. If the interest at stake is great enough and the anticipated costs of failure low enough, a gamble can be sensible even if its odds of success are low. In cases we have been discussing, the interests at stake were large but the prospective costs of failure were large as well. Moreover, there is little evidence that many decisionmakers think in terms of specific gradations of utility or likelihood. As the subsequent discussion of cognitive processes notes, they often think categorically rather than probabilistically, and see the interest at stake as close to absolute.

Can any values or interests be excluded as legitimate grounds for choice if we are considering the logic of strategy rather than judging the values themselves? If not, virtually any action can be rationalized, even suicide. Everything works for something. Once moral values like honor or ideology are allowed to trump material values of survival and prosperity, any long-shot scheme can be justified. There is always some preference function by which a choice seems valid—especially given that policymakers juggle numerous values and seldom make clear what their rank order is. If the strategist's logic proves faulty in selecting means appropriate to ends, the fault can usually be attributed to imperfect information. If the problem is that the ends are wrong, we are in the realm of policy and values, not strategy. As Gen. Henry Pownall confided to his diary in 1940, Churchill was useful, but "also a real danger, always tempted by the objective, never counting his resources to see if the objective is attainable."¹⁰

Churchill's willingness to have the English choke in their own blood was functionally rational as long as "death before dishonor" defined the rank order of values to be served by strategy. But this sentiment is not far from Hindenburg's comment that he preferred "an honorable end to a shameful peace," which most would see as evidence of "the mentality of a military caste that attached little importance to the nation's vital interests."¹¹ Only the difference in the moral background of these two invocations of honor, not the strategic logic attached to either, can account for why we endorse one and not the other.

Nor is Churchill's rationale that far from the willingness of Japan's leaders in 1941 to risk annihilation by attacking the United States. Some judge that decision to be rational even in standard terms of national security calculations, given the economic strangulation that Tokyo faced and the cabinet's hope that

10. Quoted in Lukacs, *Five Days in London*, pp. 23–24.

11. Wilhelm Deist, "The Road to Ideological War," in Murray, Knox, and Bernstein, *Making of Strategy*, p. 356.

limited war could end in negotiated peace (which before December 7 was a possibility envisioned by American military leaders as well).¹² Others reject this interpretation, seeing Japanese culture at the time as romantically anti-strategic, or decisionmakers as simply unthinking and unrealistic. “Japanese values appeared to decree the rejection not merely of mercantile rationality but of strategy itself,” writes MacGregor Knox, who goes on to quote accordingly from *The Way of the Warrior*, an eighteenth-century work of Samurai morality that was extremely popular just before World War II: “Calculating people are contemptible . . . common sense will not accomplish great things. Simply become desperate and ‘crazy to die.’”¹³ Churchill may have simply had better luck than Tojo.

RESPONSE 1

Issues entwined in assessing a strategic choice include chances of success, costs of failure, value of the objective, alternate strategic options, and acceptability of the consequences of not fighting. After assessing the value of the stakes, the fundamental question is the degree of acceptable risk in operations designed to secure them. It is more reasonable to gamble against high odds when the objective is truly vital—in the strictest sense (meaning literally necessary to life)—and there is no satisfactory alternative option, than it is if the interest is not absolute or another less risky course of action might suffice. Even if real strategists rarely reason carefully in all these terms, we can use them as a basis for judgments about strategy in principle. This is a defense against the notion that in strategy anything goes. Facing the full implications, however, will leave many uneasy.

These standards, together with the principle that we must judge according to what was reasonable before the fact rather than in light of what becomes known afterward, would require condemning some successes and excusing some failures. If we reject the advance to the Yalu, we may also have to reject the magnificent assault on Inchon. Apart from MacArthur, military leaders opposed the landing because an overwhelming number of factors made it appear foolhardy.¹⁴ One cannot say there was no choice. Other options offered less risk

12. Scott D. Sagan, “Origins of the Pacific War,” in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb, *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 345–347.

13. Quoted in MacGregor Knox, “Conclusion,” in Murray, Knox, and Bernstein, *Making of Strategy*, p. 634. See also Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 84–85, 95.

14. Richard K. Betts, “Strategic Surprise for War Termination: Inchon, Dienbienphu, and Tet,” in Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan, eds., *Strategic Military Surprise: Incentives and Opportunities* (New

of catastrophic failure. Army Chief of Staff Lawton Collins preferred to use the 70,000 men earmarked for Inchon to support the breakout from the Pusan perimeter or for an amphibious flanking operation closer to Pusan.¹⁵ These alternatives implied a more costly campaign of attrition back up the peninsula. The success of the long shot at Inchon averted these costs, and yielded one of the most impressive coups de main of the twentieth century. With the comfort of hindsight, one may celebrate that roll of the dice. To see it as strategic genius rather than a stroke of luck, however, or to see it as less reckless than the operations near the Yalu, requires that prop of hindsight which strategic planners do not have.

By criteria of forecasting rather than hindsight, it is also unreasonable to be more critical of Churchill's promotion of the Gallipoli campaign than of his persistence in 1940. There were errors at the highest level of command in 1915, but they did not doom the campaign. The critical mistakes were operational and tactical choices—failures to adapt—by the men on the spot.¹⁶ As to alternative options, the obstacles to strategic success in the Dardanelles were not overwhelming, and success might have yielded a decisive shift in the fortunes of war years earlier than 1918. Do we give better marks for 1940 because the stakes were so much higher, and thus deserving of absolute commitment? Yes, but because of the moral imperative behind the strategy, not the economic standards of strategy itself.

It is hard to keep clear the distinctions between material and moral standards for strategic choice, because in practice it is hard to have any but a seat-of-the-pants estimate of the odds for a strategy's success or its relative costs and benefits, or to know the counterfactual (what would happen if a different option is chosen). It is especially easy for many to endorse high-risk commitments on behalf of subjective values such as national honor because it is often unclear how the implications differ from a material standard of interest. Material standards are most often identified with realist theories of international politics, but while generally better than the alternatives for diagnosing prob-

Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1983), pp. 148–153. To be accurate, the advance to the Yalu was not MacArthur's decision alone.

15. Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War* (New York: Times Books, 1987), pp. 224–226.

16. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), chap. 6; and B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914–1918* (Boston: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1930), pp. 143–174. Churchill was also less responsible for the land operation at Gallipoli than for the naval attack in the Dardanelles. Alan Moorehead, *Gallipoli* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956), pp. 45–47; Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1923), chaps. 2, 7–8; Martin Gilbert, *In Search of Churchill: A Historian's Journal* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 56–58; and Robert Rhodes James, *Gallipoli* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1965), p. 41.

lems and constraints, realism is quite underdetermining. It prescribes objectives like security, wealth, and power, but does not prescribe what strategies work best to attain them.¹⁷ For insight into which strategies work, it is necessary to resort to hindsight.

CRITIQUE 2: RANDOMNESS VERSUS PREDICTION

Strategy is an illusion because results do not follow plans. Complexity and contingency preclude controlling causes well enough to produce desired effects. Hindsight reveals little connection between the design and denouement of strategies. The problem before the fact appears to be estimating risk (probability of failure), but the record after the fact suggests that the real problem is pure uncertainty (insufficient basis for estimating any odds).

To skeptics, the odds against a strategy working are very high. First, half of all strategies—the losers’—must fail by definition. Second, many strategies in the other half do not work either. Some win not because of their strategies, but because of their superior power; contending strategies may cancel each other’s effects more easily than an imbalance of capability can be overcome by strategy. Third, some win their wars but lose the peace, or they achieve acceptable outcomes, but not ones they set out to achieve through the war. Either case invalidates strategy, because the purpose of strategy is to achieve stipulated aims.

Without believing in some measure of predictability, one cannot believe in strategic calculation. For strategy to have hope of working better than a shot in the dark, it must be possible to analyze patterns of military and political cause and effect, identify which instruments produce which effects in which circumstances, and apply the lessons to future choices. Unless strategists can show that a particular choice in particular circumstances is likely to produce a particular outcome, they are out of business. Disenchantment with all prediction implies the darkest view—a strategic nihilism that should make war morally indefensible for any but powers so overwhelmingly superior that they could not lose even if they tried.

Historians suspicious of theory and generalization are more susceptible to skepticism about prediction and control than are social scientists. One example

17. “Defenders of realism might argue that the theory is intended to be probabilistic rather than determinative. . . . Nevertheless, when the range of possible outcomes extends from appeasement to preventive war, one is justified in asking whether alternative approaches might do better.” Matthew Evangelista, “Internal and External Constraints on Grand Strategy,” in Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 167.

is Tolstoy's sweeping view that individuals cannot control events, that history is "a succession of 'accidents' whose origins and consequences are, by and large, untraceable and unpredictable."¹⁸ Ronald Spector sees a dismal record in history:

Rulers and politicians have a difficult time in making war or preparation for war serve the ends of statecraft. For every case of England under Pitt or Germany under Bismarck where success is achieved through careful orchestration of military and political means, there are a dozen other cases of countries, such as Spain in the seventeenth century, Russia in 1904, and Austria-Hungary in 1914. . . . Even more common are those governments who find that having fought a harrowing and costly war, and having strained and distorted their economies to achieve a military success, they are scarcely better off than before. Spain and France in the sixteenth century, Britain and Holland in the seventeenth century, France and Britain in the eighteenth century.¹⁹

There are numerous variations on the theme. Thoughtful strategic initiatives sometimes fail, whereas thoughtless ones sometimes work. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were seen as consummate strategists, but the grand strategy of détente with Moscow that they crafted carefully crumbled within a few years and gave way to a reborn Cold War. Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, and Samuel Berger, on the other hand, were widely regarded as bunglers when they launched a limited air war against Serbia, with no strategic rationale supported by historical experience, and were enveloped in a catastrophe for which they were unprepared. Yet in the end, they did achieve their primary objective. Berger was even proud of his nonstrategic cast of mind.²⁰

Some strategies prove successful in the short term, only to prove counter-productive soon afterward. The United States armed and trained Afghan guerrillas fighting against Soviet forces in the 1980s, but after the Soviets withdrew, the Taliban took over and gave the country a government more oppressive and unfriendly to the West than the Marxists had been, and mujaheddin veterans such as Osama Bin Laden turned against the United States in acts of terrorism.

18. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: Clarion, 1970), pp. 18–19; see also pp. 13, 17. Tolstoy believed "there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than those of nature are determined; but that men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices, to fix responsibility for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices, and called by them 'great men'" (read, great strategists). *Ibid.*, p. 27.

19. Ronald Spector, "Discussion," in Richard Shultz, Roy Godson, and Ted Greenwood, eds., *Security Studies for the 1990s* (New York: Brassey's, 1993), p. 109.

20. "In 1991, he said . . . that most 'grand strategies' were after-the-fact rationales developed to explain successful ad hoc decisions. He said in a recent conversation that he prefers to 'worry about today today and tomorrow tomorrow.'" R.W. Apple, "A Domestic Sort with Global Worries," *New York Times*, August 25, 1999, p. A10.

The opposite sequence, losing the war but winning the peace, is also possible. In the 1970s U.S. strategy failed in Vietnam, and the long bloody war that had been fought in large part to contain China was lost. Yet soon after Saigon fell, Southeast Asia was more stable than it had been for half a century and Washington was in a cordial entente with Beijing.

In other cases, strategy has no certifiable impact independent of the prewar balance of power. One of Sun Tzu's alluring differences with Clausewitz is his relative emphasis on stratagem and strategy as substitutes for mass, frontal assault, and artless attrition. But how often in modern war is the outcome more attributable to strategic wizardry than to superiority in money, men, and matériel? The side with the big battalions usually wins.²¹ In the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln lost faith in ingenious strategy and won by letting grinding attrition take its toll. Generals and the public "have got the idea in their heads that we are going to get out of this fix, somehow, by strategy!" Lincoln fulminated. "That's the word—strategy! General McClellan thinks he is going to whip the rebels by strategy. . . . ' Lincoln had developed a contempt for what he scornfully called 'strategy.' What he thought was needed was not more maneuvering but assault after assault on the Confederate army."²² Ulysses S. Grant did not shrink from that conclusion and led the Union—enjoying more than a four-to-one superiority in manpower and industrial production over the Confederacy—to victory.

Doubts about governments' capacity to cause intended effects through strategy are reinforced by chaos theory, which emphasizes how small, untraceable events produce major changes. Weather forecasting captures this in the Butterfly Effect, the idea that a butterfly's flapping wings in Brazil can trigger a tornado in Texas.²³ Analysts typically look at war as a linear system and assume that outputs are proportional to inputs, the whole is the sum of the parts, and big questions can be solved by solving the component parts. Chaos theory, in contrast, sees war as a nonlinear system that produces "erratic behavior" through disproportionate relationships between inputs and outputs or syner-

21. Only at first glance do Vietnam and Afghanistan contradict this notion. The Vietnamese communists won only after American forces left the country and Saigon's forces were outnumbered. The Soviets never committed more than a tiny fraction of their army to Afghanistan, and withdrew without being defeated on the battlefield. Attrition worked for the victors in these cases, not tactically, but by sapping the will of the more powerful adversaries to persevere.

22. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 389, 499. In his docu-novel about Gettysburg, Michael Shaara has his favorite Confederate general put it this way: "God in heaven," Longstreet said . . . "there's no strategy to this bloody war. What it is is old Napoleon and a hell of a lot of chivalry." *The Killer Angels* (New York: McKay, 1974), p. 267.

23. Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), pp. 181–184. See also James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), pp. 8–31.

gies “in which the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts.”²⁴ In reality, most systems are nonlinear, but scientists have psychologically trained themselves “not to see nonlinearity in nature.”²⁵ Skeptics believe that a healthier appreciation of chaos reveals what Barry Watts sees as the “Laplacian” foolishness of trying to analyze war with enough mechanical precision to predict its course.²⁶ Robert Jervis emphasizes many other ways in which pervasive complexity and unintended consequences frustrate the purposeful use of action.²⁷

To some the connection between intended and actual outcomes over time seems nearly random. Experts’ predictions prove scarcely better than those of amateurs. (At the outset, how many strategists would have predicted better than non-experts the length of the Korean War, the outcomes of the wars in Vietnam or Kosovo, or the number of U.S. casualties in the Persian Gulf War?) Some strategies seem to “work” in some cases and not others; evidence about efficacy is too mixed to command enough consensus on a verdict to qualify as proof; or there are too few comparable cases to provide lessons applicable to future choices.

To some skeptics in this vein, the illusion of strategy is abetted by the tendency of observers to confuse acceptable results with intended results, and to overestimate the effect of deliberate strategy as opposed to luck. Wars considered successful may turn out in ways quite different from initial strategic expectations. War turned out better for Churchill than for Hitler not because Churchill’s strategic choices were wiser, but because of events and influences that neither understood better than the other and simply turned up on the roll of the dice. In this view, military strategy is like the “random walk” theory of the stock market: Despite mythology, and all the expertise and analysis brought to bear, those who pick stocks by strategy do no better on average than those who pick them randomly.²⁸ A few fund managers outperform the market consistently, but they present only the illusion of brilliance and control because statistically their streaks are really luck as well; when thousands of players continually spin a roulette wheel, a few of them will win a dozen times

24. Alan Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992/93), p. 62.

25. James Gleick and J. Franks, quoted in Stephen H. Kellert, *In the Wake of Chaos: Unpredictable Order in Dynamical Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 138.

26. Barry D. Watts, “Ignoring Reality: Problems of Theory and Evidence in Security Studies,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter 1997/98), pp. 119–122, 125–127. See also Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, McNair Paper No. 52 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996), chap. 10; and Roger Beaumont, *War, Chaos, and History* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994).

27. Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

28. Burton G. Malkiel, *A Random Walk Down Wall Street* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods* (New York: Wiley, 1996), pp. 144–150.

in a row. With such statistical knowledge in mind, the best investment strategy is no active strategy, rather it is an index fund.

RESPONSE 2

Chaotic nonlinearity is common, but neither absolute nor pervasive. Sometimes there can be enough method in the madness to make resort to force a means likely—in some measure—to achieve a given goal. If chaos theory really meant that no prediction is possible, there would be no point in any analysis of the conduct of war. Those who criticize social science approaches to strategy for false confidence in predictability cannot rest on a rejection of prediction altogether without negating all rationale for strategy. Yet critics such as Watts do not reject the possibility of strategy. Any assumption that some knowledge, whether intuitive or explicitly formalized, provides guidance about what should be done is a presumption that there is reason to believe the choice will produce a satisfactory outcome—that is, it is a prediction, however rough it may be. If there is no hope of discerning and manipulating causes to produce intended effects, analysts as well as politicians and generals should all quit and go fishing.²⁹

Jervis mitigates the thrust of his own argument against prediction by noting, “As Albert Hirschman has stressed, straightforward effects are common and often dominate perverse ones. If this were not the case, it would be hard to see how society, progress, or any stable human interaction could develop.”³⁰ No model succeeds in forecasting weather two weeks ahead, but near-term forecasting can often work.³¹ Some phenomena are linear, but predictability declines with complexity and time. So effective strategy is not impossible, but complex strategies with close tolerances are riskier than simple ones with few moving parts, and strategies that project far ahead and depend on several phases of interaction are riskier than ones with short time horizons. This limited confidence comports with the tension in Clausewitz between his emphasis on the prevalence of chance and unpredictability and the folly of faith in calcu-

29. “Watts asserts . . . that there are no meaningful regularities in social events. If this were true, it would render all efforts to study social events—including war—futile. . . . if we really had no ability to predict consequences of our actions with some degree of confidence better than mere chance, then no intelligent choices could be made in any realm of social behavior. . . . there would be no point in studying history, and there could be no such thing as meaningful expertise, including military expertise.” Robert A. Pape, “The Air Force Strikes Back,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter 1997/98), pp. 196–197.

30. Jervis says of his own work, “Books like this select a biased sample of cases; when things work out, we do not study or even notice them.” *System Effects*, p. 68.

31. Lorenz, *Essence of Chaos*, p. 183.

lation in war, on one hand, and on the other, his stern warning of how imperative is “the need not to take the first step without considering the last.”³² Clausewitz recognized nonlinearity, but he still believed in strategy.

Attrition is comparatively simple in concept, so if simplicity is important, its status as strategy should not be brushed aside. How attrition is accomplished matters. First, the actions needed to get an inferior force to expose itself to attrition are not artless. Grant did it by initiatives such as threatening Richmond. Commanders facing agile guerrilla forces are sometimes never able to do it. Second, even when clear superiority in the balance of forces foreordains victory, efficient exploitation conserves lives and resources.

In many wars, it is not clear before the fact that one side has superiority. Indeed, if it were, there would be fewer wars, because the weaker would more often capitulate without a fight.³³ Where capabilities are nearly even, strategy provides the only alternative to stalemate. There are cases in which countries that lack clear superiority do use strategy to gain the edge; for example: Israel against the Arabs in 1967; Arabs against Israel in 1973; Britain against Argentina in 1982; North Vietnam against the United States, 1965–75. And although Northern mass did wear down the Confederacy, the South held out and actively threatened the North for several years. Had higher political and diplomatic components of Southern grand strategy worked (the hope to induce war weariness in the North and British intervention), Southern military strategy would look brilliant.

The “random walk” analogy is limited as well. In one sense it misrepresents the structure of the problem. The evidence supporting the random walk view comes from interactions in a market price system, where sellers and buyers naturally converge toward an equilibrium. Military strategy, in contrast, seeks *disequilibrium*, a way to defeat the enemy rather than to find a mutually acceptable price for exchange. War is more like the contest of two firms to dominate sales. One cannot invest in war, or dominate a particular market, without any strategy. For combat, in this sense, there is no counterpart to an index fund.

In a different sense, as a general view of how to cope with risk or uncertainty when strategizing, the random walk notion suggests that attrition may be the analogue to an index fund. Complex strategizing is like active stock picking: It

32. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 584.

33. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), pp. 109–114; and James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.

is risky, offers high potential return, but requires exceptional people—a Warren Buffet or a Bismarck—to work. Attrition is like indexing: It works slowly but surely if the underlying trend—a rising market, or a superior military power position—is favorable. Avoiding war, in turn, is like staying out of the market: the right decision if one is not a Buffet or Bismarck, *and* the underlying trend is adverse.

Deflecting Calculation

The conventional Western standard of rationality is a universal economic calculus based on conscious maximization of benefit relative to cost. Military strategy does not operate with a single currency of exchange to make goods and prices clear to all parties of a bargain. Unconscious emotions and unclear motives, cognitive problems, and cultural biases prevent strategy from integrating means and ends.

CRITIQUE 3: PSYCHOANALYSIS VERSUS CONSCIOUS CHOICE

Strategy is an illusion because leaders do not understand what motives drive them, and delude themselves about what they are really trying to do. They use war not for manifest political purposes but for subliminal personal ones, so the link between political ends and military means is missing at the outset.

The rational standard assumes that the strategist at least *tries* to select instruments and plans that will work toward a selected goal, that logic will drive choice. To keep the logic disciplined, assumptions of rationality apply “the criterion of consciousness,” whereby “a non-logical influence is any influence acting upon the decision-maker of which he is unaware and which he would not consider a legitimate influence on his decision if he were aware of it.”³⁴ In real life, strategic decisions are awash in nonlogical influences.

The deepest of these is the individual’s emotional unconscious. To psychoanalysts who emphasize mental displacement of motives, strategic analysis cannot even get off the ground in applying military means toward higher political ends because statesmen deceive themselves about what their real goals are. Military grammar cannot be summoned by political logic because policymakers start from pseudologic. Not realizing that they are really driven by subliminal concerns of personal security, they pretend to be grappling with

34. Sidney Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality in Models of the International System,” in Klaus Knorr and Verba, eds., *The International System* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 108, 94.

national security. Their emotional imperatives are psychically displaced into war, and consciously articulated national aims are but a metaphor for personal urges. From this perspective, strategy can be the opposite of economic rationalism. Franco Fornari presents an extreme version of this argument:

[War] serves to defend ourselves against the “Terrifier” as an internal, absolute enemy similar to a nightmare, through a maneuver which transforms this terrifying but ultimately unaffrontable and invulnerable entity into an external, flesh-and-blood adversary who can be faced and killed. . . . [War’s] most important security function is not to defend ourselves from an external enemy, but to find a real enemy. . . . outward deflection of the death instinct. . . . war could be seen as an attempt at therapy. . . . Conflicts connected with specific historical situations reactivate the more serious conflicts which each of us has experienced in infancy, in the form of fantasies, in our affective relationships to our parents.³⁵

Fornari’s explanation of the origins of war verges on a caricature of Freudian interpretation, but Fornari is no fringe figure (he was president of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society and director of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Milan). Although it seems ridiculous to most political scientists, and psychoanalysis is out of favor within psychology, this sort of approach persistently resonates with intellectuals. One recent popular example traces the origins of war to primordial ritual sacrifices reenacting “the human transition from prey to predator.”³⁶ Even some sober observers of military affairs take highly subjective explanations seriously. Bernard Brodie wrote respectfully of the Freudian notion of “filicide”: “the reciprocal of the well-known Oedipus complex. . . . the unconscious hatred of the father for the son. . . . And what better way . . . of finding expression for filicide than by sending the youth out to die in a war?”³⁷ John Keegan embraced anthropological interpretations of primitive war as ritual, the continuation of sport by other means, or symbolic activity rather than a political phenomenon. If war serves latent psychic functions rather than manifest policy, strategic rationalizations must be phony.³⁸

Psychoanalytical interpretations support the critical view of Churchill’s strategic thinking. Anthony Storr diagnoses Churchill as clinically depressed dur-

35. Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War*, trans. Alenka Pfeifer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. xvi, xvii, xxvi (emphasis in original).

36. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 22. See also Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1988); and Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Machine Age* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), chap. 15.

37. Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 311.

38. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), especially chaps. 1–2.

ing much of his public life, an “extraverted intuitive,” a “cyclothymic temperament” with extreme mood swings, suffering from compensatory aggressiveness and a compulsive sense of mission caused by being deprived of love in childhood. “Although he had brilliant ideas, he was hardly susceptible to reason and could not follow a consecutive argument when presented to him by others. . . . He was never good at looking at all the implications of any course he favoured.”³⁹ After the fall of France, Churchill could hope that something would turn up to let England prevail, but there was no solid reason to bet the country’s survival on such hope. He did so, in Storr’s view, because of an irrational optimistic streak: “When all the odds were against Britain, a leader of sober judgment might well have concluded that we were finished. . . . in 1940, [Churchill’s] inner world of make-believe coincided with the facts of external reality in a way which very rarely happens to any man. . . . In that dark time, what England needed was not a shrewd, equable, balanced leader. She needed a prophet. . . . his inspirational quality owed its dynamic force to the romantic world of phantasy in which he had his true being. . . . England owed her survival in 1940 to. . . . an irrational conviction independent of factual reality.”⁴⁰

RESPONSE 3

Much in this critique is simply wrong because of naïve psychologism—a common but erroneous assumption that politics is nothing more than individual impulses writ large.⁴¹ Because strategy is made by humans, psychology cannot help but affect it. It is hard to know, however, whether this happens in ways more often deranging than constructive because it is difficult to pin down evidence of the independent effect of subjective factors on decisions or interactions.

There is also confusion of psychological expertise and political opinion in many diagnoses. Much psychological literature on war betrays a bias about policy that depreciates the significance of conflict of interest in international relations.⁴² (In a 1932 letter to Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud admitted the

39. Anthony Storr, “The Man,” in A.J.P. Taylor, ed., *Churchill Revised* (New York: Dial Press, 1969), pp. 231, 234–235, 240, 247, 250, 239.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 230, 274, 251.

41. On deficiencies in psychological explanations, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), chaps. 2–3.

42. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 4.

pacifist bias in his own thinking.)⁴³ The resilience of psychoanalytic interpretations reflects more than anything the premise that war itself must be irrational, so strategy must be rationalization rather than rationalism. Few analysts can bring themselves to differentiate what *they* consider foolish political stances from irrationality, or correct political views from psychic health and logical calculation. Consider John Foster Dulles. Was he the rigid, ideologically blinded, obtuse Calvinist moralist portrayed by Townsend Hoopes, or as Michael Guhin argued with comparably respectable evidence, a flexible, crafty realist who only pretended to be unsubtle and who posed U.S. policy in deliberately simplified terms precisely because he feared subtlety could cause misperception in Moscow and Beijing?⁴⁴ Either diagnosis would be more persuasive if it did not happen to coincide with the biographer's partisan identity (Hoopes being a Democrat, Guhin a Republican). How easy is it to know when we see evidence of psychology rather than ideology?

Keegan's dismissal of Clausewitzian rationality falls of its own weight. It simply confuses what politics, the proper driver of strategy, is. Consider his astounding statements that "politics played no part in the conduct of the First World War worth mentioning," or that although Balkan wars "seem to have as their object that 'territorial displacement' familiar to anthropologists. . . . they are apolitical."⁴⁵ Keegan is a respectable historian of military operations, but a naïf about politics, so he cannot render a verdict on the strategy that connects them.

CRITIQUE 4: COGNITION VERSUS COMPLEX CHOICE

Cognitive constraints on individual thought processes limit strategists' ability to see linkages between means and ends, or to calculate comprehensively.

Psychoanalytic psychology suggests that leaders do not know what urges really drive their choices. Cognitive psychology suggests that even if they do, conscious calculation can be nonrational. Even if aims are not displaced within the mind, strategic selection of appropriate means is still deformed by the physiology of perception. Normal mental functions cause false rationalization, because the mind imposes consistency on observations to maintain the stability of existing belief structures. The mind resists facing trade-offs among conflicting values by convincing itself that the values really go together. (In this view,

43. Sigmund Freud, "Why War?" in Freud, *Civilization, War, and Death*, ed. John Rickman (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), p. 97.

44. Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1973); and Michael Guhin, *John Foster Dulles* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

45. Keegan, *History of Warfare*, pp. 21, 58.

even detached analysts observing irrational decision processes convince themselves that they are not.)⁴⁶ Cognitive biases also predispose strategists to see their adversaries' behavior as "more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is," and to assume that their own benign intentions are obvious to the adversary.⁴⁷

Whereas the rational model of calculation implies that "complexity should breed indecisiveness," cognitive mechanisms allow confidence by filtering complexity out of perception. Whereas the rational model handles unknowns by probabilistic inference, cognitive processes respond to uncertainty with firm, categorical, either-or beliefs. Thus the Hitlers, Churchills, and Mac-Arthurs do not explicitly estimate odds, but simply forge ahead with confidence once they have decided what should be done. The refraction of observed information through cognitive biases allows it to be seen as consistent with expectations even when it is not.⁴⁸ In short, strategists tend to see what they expect to see.

RESPONSE 4

Cognitive theory runs into problems outside of laboratory experiments. As with other psychological explanations, it proves hard to distinguish cognitive pathologies from differences of political opinion. Whereas psychoanalyst critics may confuse their professional diagnosis with their normative political views, cognitive critics may confuse the psychological diagnosis with their empirical analysis of strategic logic. Analysts who attribute errors in calculation to misperception necessarily use a standard of objectivity against which to measure the deviation. In politics, however, it is seldom possible to differentiate

46. Critics charge that rationalist theorists "lapse into tautology to prevent this everyday experience [of irrationality] from becoming compelling evidence *against* the notions. The result is to identify the fact of adaptation with the notion of rationality and to further anchor that notion in our habits of mind. The only evidence against rationality thus becomes behavior which seems obviously maladaptive. Since adaptation is so closely related to survival itself, maladaptive behavior is *perforce* a rare event." John Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 50, n. 5 (emphasis in original). Rationalists argue that critics rely on simplistic or dated conceptions of rationality, and that Graham Allison's model is now "seriously out of date." Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 302–307, 319. A revised edition has updated the model since Bendor and Hammond wrote, but does not address criticisms in recent literature of rational choice theory head-on. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

47. Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April 1968), p. 475; and Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, chap. 4.

48. Steinbruner, *Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, p. 89 and chap. 4.

such a standard from what analysts themselves consider to be the real logic of value trade-offs.

For example, John Steinbruner illustrates his models with a case study of policy on nuclear sharing in NATO, arguing that the strategy promulgated ignored the contradiction between the values of alliance solidarity and deterrence. This apparently assumes, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara did, that deterrence required centralizing control of nuclear release in the hands of the American president, but this assumption was not universally shared. The civilian leadership of the Defense Department in the early 1960s was promoting a doctrine of graduated escalation, which theoretically required carefully orchestrated control of nuclear strikes, rather than independent capabilities to launch nuclear forces. That doctrinal ambition of a coterie of theorists was never fully accepted within the American government, less so by other NATO countries, and was soon even rejected by McNamara himself. Indeed, many believed that diffusing the option to initiate escalation would be more logical for deterrence, because it coped with the danger that a rational Washington would renege on the commitment to escalate if conventional defense failed, and thus raised the credibility of the principle that escalation would occur one way or another if a Soviet attack on Western Europe succeeded. Were proposals on nuclear sharing evidence of cognitive distortion in handling a “two-value problem”? Or normal political compromises in a situation where interests and beliefs diverge? Or the least irrational strategic choices available for a problem that had no attractive rational solution? The real “two-value problem” was the combined U.S. and West European interest in deterrence as an end, and their divergent interests in using conventional, tactical nuclear, and intercontinental nuclear forces as means—divergence imposed by the geography that protected only the United States from the consequences of conventional or tactical nuclear war.⁴⁹

That case study does not necessarily validate a diagnosis of psychological dysfunction in policymaking more distinctly than it reflects the author’s own particular strategic judgment. If a policymaker resists the logic and supporting evidence of the argument that forms the analyst’s standard of rational strategy, is she evincing cognitive dissonance, or is the analyst suffering from hubris about his own logic? What should give analysts confidence that they can assess value trade-offs more objectively than the officials whose cognitive facility they are judging? As Sidney Verba says, “When faced with a decision made by

49. Richard K. Betts, “Compound Deterrence vs. No-First-Use: What’s Wrong Is What’s Right,” *Orbis*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter 1985), pp. 697–718.

an individual or group as highly trained and sophisticated as he is, the outside observer is probably no more able to judge whether the resulting decision meets the criteria of rationality than are the actual decision-makers. Their frailty is his frailty too.”⁵⁰

CRITIQUE 5: CULTURE VERSUS COERCION

Coercive strategies aimed at an adversary's will depend on communication. Cultural blinders prevent the common frames of reference necessary to ensure that the receiver hears the message that the signaler intends to send.

Even if psychology does not prevent leaders from understanding themselves, the collective personality traits of a culture may prevent them from understanding their adversaries. Strategic calculations can be logical within their own cultural context, but founder on the difference in the opponent's mind-set. Thus even if both parties are rational in their own terms, strategic interaction becomes a dialogue of the deaf.

Soon after U.S. bombing of North Vietnam began in 1965, Thomas Schelling discussed its logic in terms not of effects on North Vietnamese capability but on Chinese perceptions: “America's reputation around the world . . . for resolve and initiative, was at stake. . . . the military action was an expressive bit of repartee. The text of President Johnson's address [to the nation] was not nearly as precise and explicit as the selection of targets and timing of attack.”⁵¹ Schelling said nothing, however, about whether or why the Chinese should assess the signals the way he did. Indeed, the foundation of his thinking on strategy was that “the assumption of rational behavior is a productive one” because “it permits us to identify our own analytical processes with those of the hypothetical participants in a conflict.”⁵² Since then research by a bicultural scholar has shown how American and Chinese statesmen utterly misread each others' aims, calculations, and tactics in Cold War confrontations because of societal differences in values and axioms. The American concept of crisis saw it only as a danger, which led to methods of crisis management aimed only at resolving crises rather than exploiting them, while the Chinese concept empha-

50. Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality,” pp. 109–110. Verba does nevertheless argue that detached research is more objective. For a good example of psychological interpretation that recognizes the difference between political judgment and mental dysfunction, see Barbara Rearden Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

51. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 142, 171ff., 186–188.

52. T.C. Schelling, “The Retarded Science of International Strategy,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May 1960), p. 108.

sized that crises are also opportunities; U.S. officials considered “military killing capacity as the key to deterrence,” while the Chinese emphasized the masses who operate the weapons, and social cohesion rather than weapons themselves; and American leaders saw the prospect of human casualties as inherently negative, while the Chinese saw the sacrifice of lives as a necessary price for progress and evidence that political gains were being achieved.⁵³

RESPONSE 5

This critique of cultural biases effectively indicts sophisticated signaling strategies meant to induce compliance without forcing it. The response does not contest that indictment. The argument against subtle signaling, however, does not necessarily negate strategies aimed at destroying enemy capabilities to resist. Nor does it preclude all effective signaling between adversaries. Many messages can be transmitted and understood across cultures, especially if they are stark rather than subtle—for example, “Surrender or die.”

Culture, like psychology, can matter in strategy without discrediting it. Iain Johnston defines strategic culture as “historically imposed inertia on choice that makes strategy less responsive to specific contingencies.”⁵⁴ This represents an impediment to efficiency, not a denial of efficacy.

Deflecting Implementation

Critiques 3–5 are about how individuals misunderstand what is at issue in a war—what their own or their adversaries’ objectives are—and thus cannot choose strategies that optimize their aims. The three critiques in this section are about barriers to applying means effectively even when policymakers are clear about what is at issue. Critique 6 concerns constraints on coercive communication imposed by operational problems in coordinating decisions and implementation. These problems can block timely orchestration of signals even if the executing organizations are attuned to higher strategy. Critique 7 concerns constraints that emerge from preoccupations and professional interests within those organizations. Critique 8 adds to the mix the effects of feedback from war, the interactive dimension of strategy after plans are put in motion and the adversary counters them.

53. Shu Guang Zhu, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949–1958* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 279–282.

54. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 2.

The critiques in this vein complement Critique 5 to argue against subtlety or sophistication in strategy, making game-theoretic schemes designed to influence an opponent's will seem inevitably too clever. In this view, because subordinate organizations prove unable or unwilling to do what strategists at the top direct, and schemes for affecting the adversary's calculations go awry because the variables in play are more complex than those in the strategists' model, the only strategies that work are unsubtle and blunt ones that conform to the traditional military KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid). But while simplicity may increase the controllability of a strategy's execution, simple strategies will be no more effective in achieving an objective if the objective or the target is not simple.

CRITIQUE 6: FRICTION VERSUS FINE-TUNING

Even if cultural blinders do not foreordain a dialogue of the deaf when coercive signals are sent, normal operational friction delays execution of plans and decouples signals from the events to which they are meant to respond. Strategy that depends on coupling then collapses.

Consider again the bombing of North Vietnam. Even if different mind-sets would not have prevented mutual understanding, limitations of organizational agility did. Actual as opposed to intended coupling of events in the theater made U.S. policy seem more provocative than political leaders meant it to be at some times, and more timid than intended at others. In the 1964 Tonkin Gulf crisis, the patrol in which the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* was attacked while collecting electronic intelligence coincided by happenstance with an attack on two North Vietnamese villages by Laotian aircraft and covert paramilitary operations against North Vietnamese territory in the vicinity of the *Maddox*; when there was a strategic interest in *not* having the North Vietnamese believe these actions were coordinated, they probably believed they were. Later in the year, in contrast, intended links were obscured. Washington warned Hanoi against provocation but then did not respond to an attack on Bien Hoa air base (indeed, the B-57 aircraft that had made Bien Hoa a target were withdrawn), and after that did not retaliate for the bombing of the Brink officer quarters.

Meanwhile, interagency contingency planning in 1964 pitted the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Air Force against the State Department and the Pentagon's Office of International Security Affairs. The military favored a quick, massive bombing campaign (the "94 Target Plan") aimed at capitalizing on simultaneity to smash North Vietnamese capabilities. The civilians favored a "slow squeeze" approach that sounded as if it was plagiarized from an early draft of *Arms and Influence*. Abstemious bombing was to signal U.S. resolve, remind the

North Vietnamese of what they had left to lose from further attacks, and induce them to desist and negotiate. Bombing began in February 1965 with the “Flaming Dart” raids, conceived as tit-for-tat reprisals for communist attacks in South Vietnam.⁵⁵

Careful correlation of events in Hanoi, Washington, and South Vietnam demonstrates how the rationale for “Flaming Dart” was negated by its implementation. Timing problems, prior context, and technical complications in the theater made it impossible to convey the message that U.S. policymakers had in mind. If any message was read in Hanoi, it was probably the opposite of what Washington intended. When threatened retaliation did occur after the February 1965 raid on Pleiku, it was weak: “The mildest attack option (three targets) was selected, but bad weather forced many sorties to abort, with the result that only one target . . . was struck in force.” Later U.S. strikes in the “Flaming Dart” raids were not coordinated with the provocations to which policymakers in Washington meant to respond, thus vitiating the intended signal. “In situations in which members of the target state’s government have been arguing that the coercer will not intervene in strength, a coercive strategy based upon ‘graduated pressures’ may serve only to ‘convince’ the opponent that low-level pressures are all that will be attempted.”⁵⁶ Wallace Thies’s reconstruction discredits elaborate signaling strategies by showing that “there may be significant discrepancies both between the actions intended by senior officials on Side A and the actions undertaken by A and between the message intended for transmission to B by A’s leaders and the message read into A’s actions by senior officials on Side B.”⁵⁷

RESPONSE 6

There is no good counter to this critique. Cultural and operational complications simply compound each other in raising the odds against tacit bargaining through symbolic combat. One might conclude simply that policymakers chose the wrong bombing strategy in 1965. There is no reason to believe, however, that the Air Force’s preferred 94 Target Plan, aimed at capabilities rather than will, would have fared better in inducing North Vietnam to stop support-

55. *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 106–115, 269–271, 299–306, 315, 342, 628.

56. Wallace Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 42–44, 56–57, 77–82, 85–89, 124–127, 144, 265. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), extends this criticism to discredit nearly all attempts to use strategic bombing for political coercion.

57. Thies, *When Governments Collide*, p. 392 (emphasis deleted).

ing the ground war in the South. Heavy bombing in the 1972 “Linebacker” campaigns, often credited with making Hanoi accept the Paris peace accords, did not do that either; those accords permitted the North Vietnamese Army to remain in South Vietnam.

CRITIQUE 7: GOAL DISPLACEMENT VERSUS POLICY CONTROL

Organizational processes deflect attention from policymakers’ priorities to implementing organizations’ habits of operation and institutional interests. Means may be applied effectively toward goals, but to instrumental goals of the operators rather than the higher ends meant to govern strategy.

Critique 6 showed why organizations trying to implement strategy may fail because of problems in the operating environment (such as weather delays). Professional guilds also have built-in tendencies to resist direction from political leaders, and thus in effect not even to try to implement chosen strategies. Cybernetic and organizational process models liken behavior to working according to a recipe. Decisionmakers operate from a limited repertoire, in a prescribed sequence of previously rehearsed actions, and monitor only a few reactions. In contrast to the rationalist model, which assumes that actors face constraints but try within them to optimize results with explicit calculations, cybernetic and organizational theories presume that decision processes simplify the problem to make it amenable to the repertoire and avoid dealing with unfamiliar aspects on their merits. Organizations become oriented not to the larger political aims they are enlisted to pursue, but to their own stability. Instead of engaging in comprehensive search, weighing of alternatives, and analytical selection, they pay attention to a few variables and shunt most incoming information aside.⁵⁸

The chronic result is goal displacement: “Rules originally devised to achieve organizational goals assume a positive value that is independent of the organizational goals.”⁵⁹ Organizations shift attention from original missions to internal methods and instruments developed as means to pursue those missions. The means become the organization’s ends, even when they cease to be consistent with the larger purposes of the political leadership.⁶⁰ Individual military

58. Steinbruner, *Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, pp. 55–56, 64–66, 74–75; and Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, chaps. 3–4.

59. James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, with collaboration of Harold Guetzkow, *Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1958), p. 38.

60. Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 12, 74–76; Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 19, 100; and Perry McCoy Smith, *The Air Force Plans for Peace: 1943–1945* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970). See also Robert Merton, “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality,” in Robert K. Merton, Ailsa P. Gray,

services, which normally provide components for a transservice combined arms strategy, tend to identify their own instruments and priorities with strategy as a whole, and identify whatever military task they can accomplish as the achievement of strategic goals.

Elements of the military may in effect subvert overall military strategy to maximize their parochial priorities. For example, in the Persian Gulf War the allocation of air power assets was centralized in the daily Air Tasking Order (ATO) of the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC), Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Horner. The ATO allocated Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft to various missions in accord with an overall strategic plan. This created tensions between JFACC and the service components, who worried about covering targets of special concern to their forces. "Some Marines would later say that their planners 'gamed' the ATO by overbooking it with sorties to give them flexibility."⁶¹ The effect of overbooking would be to reduce resources available for higher strategic purposes in order to increase them for lower tactical purposes.

Civilian strategists may take a nonpartisan approach to integrating service priorities for a combined strategy, but very few know enough about operations and logistics to be as informed about the underpinnings of strategy as military professionals. When civilians override service objections, they risk promoting strategies that prove tactically insupportable. If not thus made militarily unrealistic, national strategy remains hobbled by organizational parochialism, inflexibility, and incremental change. Leaders can disturb organizational behavior but can rarely control it.⁶²

The ground war in Vietnam illustrates the problem. U.S. Army operations were never as encumbered with civilian tinkering for purposes of diplomatic signaling as were Air Force and Navy air operations. In the Harry Summers view popular within the postwar U.S. Army, however, strategy failed because ground forces concentrated on the wrong operations—counterinsurgency—rather than conventional warfare against North Vietnamese regular units.⁶³ More convincing is Andrew Krepinevich's opposite argument: Strategy was

Barbara Hockey, and Hanan C. Selvin, eds., *Reader in Bureaucracy* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952); Herbert Simon, "Bounded Rationality and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (February 1991); and Charles Perrow, "Goals in Complex Organizations," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (December 1961), pp. 854–866.

61. Lt. Gen. Royal Moore, cited in Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), p. 131.

62. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, p. 143.

63. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 85.

too conventional, as the Army hewed to institutionally preferred operational concepts designed for its primary mission in Europe. This approach unleashed punishing firepower against the very South Vietnamese population whose loyalty was what was mainly at stake in the war.⁶⁴ The operational standard of advantageous attrition ratios substituted for strategy, despite the fact that communist Vietnamese demography allowed them to keep replacing losses and stay in the field, while the asymmetry of interests ensured that they would be willing to keep bleeding longer than the United States would.

RESPONSE 7

Cognitive, cybernetic, and organizational barriers to rational plans imply that wise strategists should limit their choices to options provided by predictable standard operating procedures (SOPs). This would let the tail wag the dog. Such extreme conclusions are unnecessary, however, where the strategy's subtlety and built-in potential for faulty implementation and misperception are less extreme than in the air war against North Vietnam, or where the obstacles to success of *any* plausible strategy are lower than in the ground war in South Vietnam.

Organization theory points in more than one direction. Bureaucracies are not always as irresponsible as implied by literature that assumes "institutions to be dumber than their members"; indeed, they can be smarter. Even a rational individual free of cognitive blinders can focus on only one thing at a time, whereas organizations can multiply centers of attention, focus on numerous parts of a problem at once, and alleviate the limitations on information processing that cognitive theory cites as blocking rationality in a single mind.⁶⁵ Division of labor fosters deeper expertise. Critics worry about parochialism, but compared to high-level decisionmakers who discipline them, experts can rely "less on ordinary folk heuristics, with their attendant biases, and more on scientifically based inferences, with their lower rates of error."⁶⁶

This more positive Weberian view of bureaucracy as a rationalizing force is consistent with the erosion of data that used to be cited from the Cuban missile crisis to support the more negative view. Several of the examples that originally illustrated the antistrategic impact of organizational processes have not held up. Subsequent research does not support suggestions in the first edition

64. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). See also Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 65, 80–87, 218–230, 251, 270–273, 277–278.

65. Bendor and Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," pp. 309, 312.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 312 (quoting Robin Hogarth).

of Graham Allison's classic that: the U.S. Navy disobeyed orders to tighten the blockade line and delay interception of Soviet ships; aggressive antisubmarine warfare was undertaken without the knowledge of the secretary of defense (indeed, it turns out that McNamara himself directed the Navy to implement new tactics, ad hoc, that were *more* aggressive than normal procedures); the Tactical Air Command deceived the president in arguing that a "surgical" air strike was infeasible; or the bureaucracy failed to implement an earlier presidential order to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey.⁶⁷ (These points, however, do not mean that SOPs produced no dangerous events in the crisis—other chilling examples have turned up.)⁶⁸

Trying to make strategy realistic by gearing it to predictable SOPs that limit organizational actions in cybernetic fashion could be as wrongheaded as assuming frictionless implementation of subtle schemes. The internal logic of Allison's organizational process model does not lend itself to predicting military interactions, because chaos theory demonstrates how a handful of simple rules can yield a pattern of behavior "so complex as to appear random, even though the rule itself is completely deterministic." Allison likens the constraints on leaders' choice of options to working within the limited rules of a chess game, but "chess is a paradigmatic example of a choice situation that involves only a handful of basic rules yet exhibits truly Byzantine strategic complexity. . . . when we compare chess to the strategic maneuverings of two real military forces . . . the odds are that chess is *simpler*."⁶⁹

Another limitation of cybernetic and organization theories is that they help to explain continuity, but not innovation. Yet strategic innovations do occur. They may happen despite the conservatism of professional organizations, in which case the organizations' constraining effect is not determinative, or they may happen because organizations are more adaptable than the negative strands of organization theory imply.⁷⁰

67. Joseph F. Bouchard, *Command in Crisis: Four Case Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 111–112, 120ff.; Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 99–139; Dan Caldwell, "A Research Note on the Quarantine of Cuba, October 1962," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (December 1978), pp. 625–633; Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 155–156; and Donald Hafner, "Bureaucratic Politics and 'Those Frigging Missiles,'" *Orbis*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer 1977).

68. Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), chaps. 2–3.

69. Bendor and Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," p. 310 (emphasis in original). Although final outcomes may not be predicted, there are many ways to predict next moves in chess.

70. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; and Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Organizational goal displacement or concentration on the wrong strategy are not the main reasons that the United States lost in Vietnam. Neither the Summers nor Krepinevich views provide enough of the answer. Although Krepinevich is right about Army goal displacement, conventional operations ultimately determined the end of the war (in 1975, as Summers noted, “it was four North Vietnamese Army corps, not ‘dialectical materialism,’ that ultimately conquered South Vietnam”),⁷¹ and much effort *was* invested in counterinsurgency along the way. The United States pushed *both* conventional and counterinsurgency strategies (and not entirely at cross-purposes), but both were not enough to win. A string of American tactical victories failed to serve policy because Saigon could not survive the withdrawal of American force, even after seven years of devastating U.S. combat against its enemy. U.S. strategies never came to terms with the inability of the South Vietnamese political leadership to overcome the fundamental asymmetry in the war. The center of gravity throughout was the political loyalty of the Vietnamese population—in *both* South and North. This contest was always uneven, fought only within South Vietnam. The North was pounded by bombs, but not by political competition. If the Saigon government had been able to match Hanoi in mobilizing and controlling population, the ocean of material resources supplied by the United States would have carried the day in the conventional war, Saigon would have been no more dependent on allies to provide combat troops than Hanoi was, and Hanoi would have been as vulnerable to anticommunist insurgency within North Vietnam as the Saigon government’s control of its villages was to the Vietcong.

The asymmetry of social mobilization and political control capacity within Vietnam as a whole was the crucial factor. The Thieu government did not capitalize on the tremendous destruction of communist forces after the 1968 Tet Offensive by creating its own disciplined political organization in the countryside, never eliminated the communist infrastructure in the South, and never mounted any comparable challenge to the rear security of the Hanoi regime.⁷² The main problem was not that U.S. strategy was too conventional or not conventional enough, but that no U.S. effort could make up for the asymmetry in

71. Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 85.

72. Summers denies that the war was a civil war, thus doing what his idol Clausewitz warns against: losing sight of what the war was about. It was about which Vietnamese political group would govern South Vietnam. Summers focuses on the disjunction between politics and strategy in *American* policy—the failure of President Johnson to mobilize the public for a real war—but not on the political essence of the war in the country about which it was fought. As Samuel Huntington pointed out before the commitment of U.S. combat troops, “As a result of the weakness of the defense in revolutionary war, the security of the target group can be protected only by the mobili-

political motivation, mobilization, and organization between the Vietnamese communists and noncommunists. That difference meant that the war could not be won by any primarily *American* strategy at an acceptable price. Sensible strategies are available for some problems but not all.

CRITIQUE 8: WAR VERSUS STRATEGY

Strategy is an illusion because practice reverses theory. In theory, strategy shapes the course of war to suit policy. In actual war, the target resists strategy and counters it, confounding plans, and remolding strategy and policy to suit the unanticipated requirements for operational success. This puts the cart before the horse and negates the rational basis for strategy.

A proper sequence for relating means to ends is commonly assumed: First, political objectives are determined; second, the optimal military strategy for achieving the objectives is deduced; third, the forces and operating doctrines necessary to implement the strategy are fielded. But war rarely unfolds according to expectations because the target of strategy—which has as much ingenuity as those applying the strategy—finds ways to frustrate it, and forces revisions that ramify upward to alter policy itself. Policy is not a tyrant, and “must adapt itself to its chosen means . . . yet the political aim remains the first consideration.”⁷³ If the strategist does not keep control throughout, however, the second half of that point is lost—means take on life of their own and change initial objectives. To paraphrase Clausewitz, the *purpose* of war is to serve policy, but the *nature* of war is to serve itself.⁷⁴ In the absence of great wisdom and firmness at the top, military grammar overwhelms political logic. Russell Weigley concludes darkly that “war in the twentieth century is no longer the extension of politics,” and war works “not as the servant but as the master of politics.”⁷⁵

zation of the group itself.” “Patterns of Violence in World Politics,” in Huntington, ed., *Changing Patterns of Military Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 29; see also pp. 19–21, 24.

73. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87.

74. This is what he means by his discussion of “absolute” war, which so many of his critics misread. The political object comes to the fore as the tendency to extremes wanes. “Were it a complete, untrammelled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy had brought it into being; it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature.” *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 87. The apt paraphrase that the nature of war is to serve itself is from Richard Henrick, *Crimson Tide* (New York: Avon, 1995), p. 75.

75. Russell Weigley, “Political and Strategic Dimensions of Military Effectiveness,” in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. 3, *The Second World War* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988), p. 341.

In the professional military establishments entrusted to execute strategy, many officers claim to crave policy guidance, yet prove utterly hostile to it when it is serious enough to impinge on operational autonomy.⁷⁶ Military professionals often accept the primacy of political objectives in principle and then cast it aside in practice, with Helmuth von Moltke's rationale that politics reigns *until* war but not *during* it, when military necessity takes over.⁷⁷ The operational imperative becomes the driver, strategy the rider.⁷⁸ Then there is nothing to prevent operational genius from serving strategic stupidity, as "the understanding of war is displaced by the competitive management of military action."⁷⁹

The premier example is Germany after Bismarck. The Schlieffen Plan designed an operational success that required unprovoked attack on Belgium, which in turn helped bring Britain into the war in 1914. To deal with Britain the Germans launched unrestricted submarine warfare, which further expanded the coalition against them by bringing in the United States. To cope with declining prospects on the battlefield, Ludendorff and Hindenburg introduced tactical reforms that required high social mobilization, which in turn spurred the escalation of war aims. Strategy came to shape politics, and strategy "no longer calculated instrumentally, but sought to inspire and direct people in an unlimited war effort. . . . Escalatory strategy thrived on ideology rather than on instrumental rationality. . . . mobilization of means began to determine the goals of the war."⁸⁰

In the interwar period, a realistic Gen. Ludwig Beck was isolated by younger officers. "He complained that they had never learned to evaluate operations within the context of a coherent strategy. . . . They were technocrats rather than

76. See Bernard Brodie on "The Traditional Military Depreciation of Strategy" in his *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 11–19.

77. Helmuth von Moltke, "Doctrines of War," in Lawrence Freedman, ed., *War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 218–220.

78. Michael Howard, "War as an Instrument of National Policy," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 198; Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 11; Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, "Introduction," in Murray, Knox, and Bernstein, *Making of Strategy*, p. 3; and Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 219–294.

79. Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 591.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 548–549; see also pp. 531–547, 550. Of course decisions to antagonize third parties may sometimes be a necessary choice—for example, the British attack on the French fleet at Oran after Paris surrendered in 1940, or the Anglo-American invasion of Vichy territory in North Africa two years later. These initiatives, however, did not seem likely to move France into full combatant alignment with Germany.

strategists." The blitzkrieg doctrine that matured in 1940 produced stunning tactical success—and strategic success as well until the invasion of the Soviet Union—but “the very means of achieving victory rendered German military and political leaders unable to gauge the limits of success,” and increasing conquests again increased the countering coalition. “Every operational success, for military commanders rewarding and a goal in itself, raised the odds for the strategist.”⁸¹

Strategy may also be revised not because it fails in the face of resistance, but because it works too easily. In early 1942 the Japanese succumbed to “victory disease,” and undertook more ambitious conquests in the Pacific that over-extended them and made it easier for the Americans to strike back.⁸² Thus either failure or success may derange strategy.

RESPONSE 8

The ideal sequence of policy, strategy, and operations is not sacrosanct. Rather, it should be conceived not as a sequence but as an organic interrelationship. There are many good reasons for feedback from the lower levels to adjust the higher ones, most notably the simple fact that means are more unwieldy than ends. Lead times for change in military capabilities are long, while political objectives can change quickly. Most modern wars can only be fought with forces of size and type decided years in advance, when economic, political, and technological expectations may have been very different. Strategy or even policy then have to adjust to bring capability and objective into alignment.⁸³

Nor is goal displacement, the tyranny of means, all that deranges strategy. Letting policy be the tyrant may have the same effect. Because strategy mediates between ends and means, obsessive concentration on either one without constraint by the other can prevent rational integration of the two. Means should be subordinate to ends, but rational strategy requires that ends that cannot be achieved by available means must be changed. This is when the stra-

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 572, 581–582, 575.

82. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Strategy and Compromise* (Boston: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1958), pp. 71–74.

83. “What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means. War . . . is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means. That, of course, is no small demand; but however much it may affect political aims in a given case, it will never do more than modify them.” Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87. Nor is Michael Howard rejecting strategy when he notes that “the strategy adopted is almost always more likely to be dictated rather by the availability of means than by the nature of ends.” Howard, “British Grand Strategy in World War I,” in Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 32. See also Selznick, *Leadership in Administration*, pp. 77–78.

tegitally responsible military experts must insist not, "Let us do it our way," but instead, "We can't get there from here."

That the German military substituted operational excellence for strategy was only half of its problem. The other half was the political objective that force was called on to serve. Hitler was utterly clear in his own mind about the linkage of means and ends. Everything he did was focused on making Germany the dominant power in Europe and conquering territory for *Lebensraum* in the East. It was its unlimited, millennialist quality that made Nazi ideology do itself in. It led Hitler to take high risks and its Social Darwinist logic led him to sacrifice his country. "For someone with such a mentality, strategy was a concept from a bygone age."⁸⁴

Political Competition and Strategic Coherence

Although there is no consistent evidence that autocracies do better in making strategy, many skeptics believe that democratic pluralism—in either the body politic or the competition of organizational interests within government—fosters incoherence in strategy. The essential logic of democracy is compromise, but compromise often undermines strategic logic.

CRITIQUE 9: DEMOCRACY VERSUS CONSISTENCY

The logic of strategy depends on clarity of preferences, explicitness of calculation, and consistency of choice. Democratic competition and consensus building work against all of these.

Rational strategic calculation implies that if values conflict, they are ranked, and ones of higher priority take precedence. For governments, especially democracies, this is an unnatural act. Governments are groups, not individual calculators. As two rational choice theorists argue, "individuals are rational, but a group is not, since it may not even have transitively ordered preferences."⁸⁵ Democracies serve disparate constituencies with competing objectives. Decisions to rank values are not only hard to make, but politically dysfunctional if they are made. The model of rationality that dominates theory about strategy assumes the maximization of economic gain, but in politics the issue is "maximization of any and all values held by the individual or the group." The more rigorously straightforward a proposal is in terms of means-

84. Deist, "The Road to Ideological War," p. 380.

85. Kenneth A. Shepsle and Mark S. Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 71.

ends rationality, the less likely it is to be accepted in policy because it will provoke “opposition among members of the foreign policy coalition whose value preferences are different.”⁸⁶ In particular, signaling strategies based on models of individual rationality and interpersonal relations founder on the collective character of politics. Governments attempting coercion speak “with many voices at once.” In the target government, officials who have to decide to concede to the enemy may destroy their careers, something not captured in “dispassionate references to ‘affecting the enemy’s will.’”⁸⁷

To some critics this pluralism is what blocks rationality, and what must be overcome by forceful political leadership. The crucial problem is not figuring out military strategy against the country’s adversaries, but internal political strategy to control fractious groups with their own agendas and special interests. “What percentage of the work of achieving a desired governmental action is done when the preferred analytic alternative has been identified?” Graham Allison once asked. He answered, “My estimate is about 10 percent in the normal case.”⁸⁸ Thinking up the right national security strategy is comparatively easy, but making it come out at the other end of the pipeline is awesomely hard. By the standard of coherent, consistent, individualistic value maximization enshrined in the ideal type of strategic rationality, political pluralism is pathological.

RESPONSE 9

One may accept that decentralization, separation of powers, and checks and balances make democracy constitutionally antistrategic. But one may also assume that the procedural norms of constitutional democracy are, at least for the United States, the highest national security value, ranking above particular substantive values that come and go in policy. In that case, it is possible to hold

86. “This may also explain why rationality models have been used in international relations largely in connection with the problems of nuclear deterrence. . . . the relevant goals within this limited sphere are less ambiguous . . . and easier to place in a hierarchy.” Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality,” pp. 110–111 n. 13, 115–116.

87. Thies, *When Governments Collide*, pp. 13–14, 355.

88. This appeared in the first edition of Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 267. For other reductions of national strategy to bureaucratic politics, see Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); and Morton Halperin, with assistance of Priscilla Clapp and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1974), pp. 101–102, which says, “Conventional analyses of foreign policy usually assume that the actions of other nations are the major stimuli for foreign policy decisions. . . . they are only one source of stimulation, and not even the most frequent source. Most decisions are responses to domestic pressures, and the actions of other nations often figure merely as devices for argument.”

out a different standard of collective rationality by which muddled decisions and strategies meet the test. This standard assumes that the pulling and hauling that bureaucratic politics literature of the 1970s saw as dysfunctional for rational strategy is a wise constraint on the naïve arrogance of anyone who presumes to know what is good for everyone; a little incoherence is a good thing. Exemplars of this view, in contrast to the negative view of Richard Neustadt, Graham Allison, and Morton Halperin toward bureaucratic politics, would be Charles Lindblom and Samuel Huntington.

To Lindblom, an attempt to impose the ideal type of rational strategy on a complex political system is wrongheaded in practice, because it will not work, and in principle, because it risks big mistakes. In public policy, means and ends are too complex for values to be ranked consistently, or for the relations between choices and outcomes to be predicted accurately. Limited search, blurring of distinctions between means and ends, and incremental change are desirable because they are safer, more manageable, and more effective. If they yield policy that is suboptimal for all particular substantive values and interest groups, that is still the best way to match ends and means if the alternative is not efficient application of means to one end, but large mistakes caused by the impossibility of comprehensive calculation.⁸⁹ In this sense, strategy is a metaprocess that links ends and means effectively but not efficiently. Huntington supports this view when he discusses “executive legislation” of strategy: “the major problem is not to discover rationally what is required to bring forth the ‘desired result’ but rather to reconcile conflicting views of what results are desirable.”⁹⁰

This political logic can also be summoned to depreciate the danger of organizational goal displacement. Competing organizational interests may compensate for each others’ mistakes. For example, Critique 7 presented the Marines’ “gaming” of the ATO in the war against Iraq as subverting higher-level air strategy. For those who lacked faith in the strategic wisdom of the Air Force—which controlled the ATO—subverting that strategy was the right thing to do. The ground forces believed that the ATO was shortchanging the

89. Charles E. Lindblom, “The Science of ‘Muddling Through,’” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 19 (Spring 1959).

90. “Criticism of strategy-making. . . is directed at the appearance in the strategy-making process of characteristics pervasive in American government. . . dispersion of power and authority in American government insures the representation of all claims but the priority of none.” Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 169, 173. The benign view of pluralism was a theme in Robert Art’s review of the bureaucratic politics literature that came after Huntington. Art, “Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique,” *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 1973).

targets they needed to be attacked in preparation for the ground war. (Two weeks into the air war, only 17 percent of the targets nominated by the Army had been included in the ATO, and only 12 percent struck.) When the Marines stopped cooperating with the Air Force planners, they were supporting a sensible ground strategy.⁹¹

CRITIQUE 10: COMPROMISE VERSUS EFFECTIVENESS

Compromise between opposing preferences is the key to success in politics but to failure in military strategy. Political leaders have the last word on strategy in a democracy, so they tend to resolve political debates about whether to use force massively or not at all by choosing military half-measures, which serve no strategic objectives at all.

In the optimistic view, pluralist political competition produces equilibrium as the marketplace of ideas winnows out bad calculations and weak strategies. Consensus is forged by combining second-choice strategies that produce a “good enough” result—ideal for none but acceptable to all. The underside of pluralism, however, is that when applied to grappling with an external adversary it can produce compromise that vitiates the logic of both opposed alternatives, leaving a military action that is less costly than the more ambitious option, but still quite costly, yet not costly enough to buy peace. This is the kind of compromise that kills for no good purpose.

Vietnam exemplified Lindblom’s logic and the bad form of compromise. Half-measures and incrementalism yielded disaster. Later examples were interventions by the United States in Beirut in 1982–83, and by the United Nations in Bosnia until mid-1995 (this holds in abeyance how NATO strategy in Bosnia should be judged after the Dayton agreement). In both cases, the main problem was unsettled objectives and deep confusion about how military means could help. Compromise was the middle ground between doing nothing and doing something effective. In Beirut, Marines were deployed to signal U.S. involvement, but not to impose control in the city. Their mission became just to be there and draw fire. After taking hundreds of casualties, the Marines were withdrawn having achieved no worthwhile strategic objective. In Bosnia, the UN mandated itself to defend Bosnia’s sovereignty, but would not ally itself with the Bosnian government and engage its enemy in combat. UN troops on the ground then became part of the problem instead of the solution, as their vulnerability made them hostages and inhibited military action against the Serbs. In 1995 diplomatic compromises led the UN to declare “safe areas”

91. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 319–320.

without the intent to defend them, only with the hope that rhetoric and symbolic presence would deter Serb attacks. Then as a Dutch UN contingent exercising presence stood by, Serb forces overran the phony safe area of Srebrenica, rounded up thousands of Muslims, and butchered them.

In both Beirut and Bosnia, military forces were committed because of a conviction that it was necessary to “do something,” but without a sensible strategic notion of how, or of what costs were acceptable. The argument that *either* doing nothing or doing much more would be a lesser evil than doing something in between did not register. These cases resembled the logic of compromise in the apocryphal decision in Ruritania to switch from driving on the left side of the road to the right. Fearful of too radical a change overnight, the transportation minister decreed that it would be done gradually: Trucks would switch to driving on the right in the first week, and cars would switch over the following week. When politicians feel compelled to do something, without being willing to do anything decisive, strategy goes out the window. Policy-makers overlook the gap between moral imperatives and material action, confuse the difference between policy and strategy, and take military half-measures that yield costs without benefits.

RESPONSE 10

A different kind of compromise can be strategically functional. An example of what works was the strategy of the grand alliance in World War II. Western strategy proved a great success even though it emerged from compromises that left many less than fully pleased, and was later roundly criticized from both the right and the left.⁹² Moreover, with the exception of the invasion of North Africa, political considerations almost always gave way to military expediency. At first glance this seems anti-Clausewitzian, but it actually represented “the height of political wisdom.” This was because the one objective

92. See Morison, *Strategy and Compromise*. Revisionists on the right criticized the strategy for allowing Soviet power into the heart of Europe and preventing the reestablishment of a traditional balance of power. (See, for example, Hanson W. Baldwin, *Great Mistakes of the War* [New York: Harper, 1950], parts 1, 2.) This assumes a dubious counterfactual case for the success of either an earlier cross-channel invasion or a Balkan campaign. Moreover, it would have cost the Western Allies far more casualties to beat the Russians into Eastern Europe (ironically, it was Moscow and left-wing revisionists who charged Western strategy with cynically delaying a second front in order to bleed the Russians dry), unless the critics’ preferred strategy included a separate peace that allowed the Germans to keep fighting the Soviets. In that case one of the greatest achievements of the unconditional surrender policy, the democratization of most of Germany, would have been lost. By the same token, there is no reason to assume that reestablishing a multipolar balance in Europe would have produced a safer postwar world than the bipolar Cold War standoff did.

that would not shatter the solidarity of Washington, London, and Moscow was the total defeat of the enemy; it was “the only ground on which a coalition with disparate political interests could be held together.”⁹³

The compromises in World War II worked as strategy because they were mainly about where and when offensive campaigns would occur, not about how much of an effort to make or the ultimate objective of unconditional surrender. In the later U.S. wars over Korea, Kuwait, and Kosovo the scale of effort was limited, but still sufficient to achieve primary American objectives, which were also limited. One may criticize the policy, and doubt whether the main objectives were worth the price, or argue that the objectives should have been more ambitious, but those objectives were achieved—the criterion for success of strategy. It is also not inevitable that success defeats itself by generating “victory disease.” The Bush administration resisted this temptation in 1991, settling for a stunning partial victory that liberated Kuwait at low cost but did not move on to Baghdad to unseat Saddam Hussein (which might have raised costs exponentially even if it succeeded).

If there is virtue in the benign notion of pluralist rationality and the wisdom of compromise in strategy, it depends on clear delineation of which type of compromise is at issue. Compromise is more likely to work where objectives are relative or continuous and can be achieved partially—where if you only end up half as far as you wanted to get, you are still ahead of the game. Compromise is likely to spend lives for no good purpose where the stakes are absolute or dichotomous, matters of all or nothing—where getting halfway to the goal is no better than getting nowhere. For example, control of territory is a relative objective (borders can be pushed incrementally in one direction or another by conventional military action, as in the Korean War), whereas control of a regime is more often absolute (one party in a civil war gets to constitute the government throughout the country, as in Vietnam).

Strategy that follows from compromise of the ends may also be more often likely to work than one that compromises the means. Reducing an objective raises the odds that a constrained effort can achieve it. Reducing the means used to pursue an uncompromised objective raises the risk of failing to achieve it at all; that sort of compromise drops strategy between two stools, inaction and effective action. Compromising the ends sets sights lower; compromising

93. Kent Roberts Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), pp. 14, 16, 23.

the means fires short. Too often the drawbacks of the former seem clearer to political leaders than the risks of the latter.

Strategy without Confidence

Strategy is not always an illusion, but it often is. The defenses of strategy offered in the responses to each critique above are valid but wobbly. A few of the critiques are weaker than their popularity would suggest (e.g., the Freudian view in Critique 3), but most are stronger than generally realized. All the critiques are valid in some cases, to some degree, yet strategy does sometimes work. It would take a massive project of systematic investigation to begin to determine how often and how much effective strategy is an illusion or a reality. The answers about strategy that politicians and generals have to find lie in the gray area between confidence and nihilism. How much do the problems of strategy matter? How can effective strategy be practical more often?

In some cases, the weakness of strategy may not matter much; an artless use of force may be effective nonetheless. This happens most easily for a superior power that confronts an enemy too weak to counter that superiority. Uninventive assault and attrition may suffice. The United States can find itself in that position often; it could hardly have failed against Grenada or Panama however it chose to apply its military capacity. In recent cases of conventional war, the United States also enjoyed technological advantages so great that, even more than European colonial expeditions whose Maxim guns made native resistance futile, U.S. forces could engage in one-sided attrition campaigns against Iraqis and Serbs, using invulnerable air power and uniquely skilled armored forces to whittle them down with impunity.

Even for a superior power, however, simple attrition does not guarantee success at acceptable cost. Reliance on attrition may still pose high costs if the opponent, though weaker, is not helpless. The United States proved willing to bear very high costs to subdue the Confederacy, Germany, and Japan, because the objectives at stake were very high in value. It proved willing to bear moderate costs against Korean and Vietnamese communists when they appeared to be the wedge for worldwide Leninism, and was *prepared* to take thousands of casualties against Iraq when it threatened Western oil supplies. Few causes after the Cold War, however, will present stakes that seem important enough to accept much two-sided attrition. The United States was not willing to bear even low costs against barracks bombers in Beirut or a Somali warlord. Effective exploitation of an advantage in attrition also requires the ability to find, fix, and target the adversary. This is easier in a conventional

engagement than in irregular warfare, where the weaker enemy can use strategy to raid, evade, and subvert. Irregular combat is more typical of contemporary conflict than are set-piece conventional battles.

Except for the least difficult military challenges, there is no alternative but to engage in strategy unless one is willing to give up the use of force as an instrument of policy. To develop strategy, despite the many obstacles surveyed, requires care in assuming the links between the ultimate political objectives sought and the military objectives set out in a campaign plan. In this it matters a great deal whether political objectives are absolute—achieved wholly or not at all—or can be achieved by degree, in proportion to effort. Another important general distinction is between types of strategy: those whose aim is to control an outcome, by conquest, or to coerce the adversary to capitulate, by torture.⁹⁴ Objectives that can be achieved partially or by coercion sometimes tempt policymakers because they seem susceptible to limited investment of force; those that are absolute or achieved by elimination of enemy capability are often preferred by military officers, because they leave fewer ambiguities about results and do not depend on changes in enemy will. But it is hard to eliminate an enemy's capability to resist without waging total war, and most wars by far are limited.

The challenge is particularly great when a government pursues an absolute objective with a limited coercive strategy. An assumption that simply hurting an adversary will achieve a desired result is sure to fill the bill only if the objective is to punish past behavior rather than control future behavior. Pain does not automatically lead to submission, and the mechanisms by which force influences the will of its targets are poorly understood.⁹⁵ Contrasting examples include the American bombing of North Vietnam and of Serbia. These campaigns aimed to induce Hanoi and Belgrade to cease military action against South Vietnam and Kosovo, by inflicting pain on their home territories without invading and subduing them. The result in Kosovo surprised most observers of military strategy because it did not repeat the failures to compel surrender of most past cases of coercive bombing. Figuring out precisely why Slobodan Milošević surrendered when he did will preoccupy strategic analysts seeking

94. Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 126. The problem with coercive strategy based on a model of torture ("Do what I demand and the pain will stop") is that the target government is not a person; political authorities are not on the rack themselves. They can persevere, secure in bunkers with caches of caviar, while the population bears the pain of losing homes and lives.

95. Pape, *Bombing to Win*, pp. 329–330.

to specify mechanisms by which bombing does coerce successfully and does not.

Sensible strategy is not impossible, but it is usually difficult and risky, and what works in one case may not in another that seems similar. All this indeterminacy suggests some cautions.

First, given the big obstacles to manipulating military causes to produce political effects, resort to force should be rare in cases where the estimated balance between benefits and costs is close. (That balance was not close for Britain in 1940, for example, but it was for the United States in Vietnam in the 1960s.) This does not mean that force should necessarily be the last resort, as the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine of the 1980s maintained. Nor does it mean that passivity is the natural default option; whenever a situation is bad enough that combat comes into consideration, there will be costs from inaction. (The Clinton administration erred disgracefully, for example, in refraining from intervention in Rwanda in 1994. Even if action could have saved only a bare tenth of the Tutsis who were murdered, that benefit would have been 50,000–80,000 lives, while the limited armament and organization of the Hutu killers suggest that the cost in U.S. casualties would have been low.) But when deliberate killing is at issue—as it is in any decision to use military force of any consequence—it is important to have some well-founded reason to believe that the plan for killing will achieve results worth the lives. The one thing worse than doing nothing is doing the wrong thing. Action is preferable to inaction only where policymakers think seriously beyond the objective and to the logic by which military means will take them there. Whatever the costs of refraining from war may be, they can seldom be greater than those from killing without strategy.

This is not just a pious truism. In periods when past military disasters fade into distant memory, reliance on force becomes more popular in the United States. This has happened as the twentieth century passes, Vietnam is forgotten and Munich remembered, pseudopristine air power is idealized, and Americans seek once again to make the world safe for democracy. With low confidence in capacity to control outcomes, force should be used only where the interests at stake are high or the costs of combat are low.

Second, while analyses of cause and effect should become more careful, strategies should be kept simple. Simplicity does not guarantee success, but complexity begs for failure. There is a chain of causes and effects among policy, strategy, and operations, to political outcomes. Because a chain is as strong as its weakest link, the more links in the chain, the higher the odds that some-

thing will go wrong. Large-scale force is seldom more than a blunt instrument. That is apparent to most experienced military professionals, but is obscured for some in the emerging generation of policymakers whose image of war has been formed by videotapes of bombs riding laser beams smartly down Iraqi and Serbian air shafts. Any policymaker who hears a suggestion for “surgical” military action needs a second opinion. In the age of enthusiasm for a revolution in military affairs, it will become harder to suppress faith in precision, flexibility, and mastery by remote control.

Third, civilian policymakers need more understanding of military operations. For strategy to bridge policy and operations, civilian and military professionals on either side of the divide need more empathy with the priorities and limitations that those on the other side face. If the professional military take on the main responsibility for bridging the gap, they trigger concern with military usurpation of political functions.⁹⁶ If civilians take on more of the bridging function, they trigger resentment among the military about meddling, but this is a more manageable tension because all accept the principle of civilian supremacy. Civilians cannot do this responsibly, however, unless they acquire much more empirical knowledge of tactics, logistics, and operational doctrines than is normal for top-level staff these days.

Fourth, the objectives by which strategic logic is measured should be limited as far as possible to material interests. If the prospective ratio between costs and benefits is low enough, this can include the interests of foreigners. (Humanitarian intervention is a moral interest for the United States but a material interest for the beneficiaries.) Subjective values like “credibility” lend themselves too easily to visceral commitments that elude discipline by calculation. There are few clear standards to prevent credibility from becoming an excuse for showing who’s boss in any and every conflict of interest, and this makes the defense of credibility a recipe for overextension. Credibility is most impressive when power is husbanded and used undiluted.

Credibility is the modern antiseptic buzzword now often used to cloak the ancient enthusiasm for honor. But honor’s importance is always more real and demanding to national elites and people on home fronts than it is to the nineteen-year-olds put into the point of the spear to die for it. In rare cases, a threat to national honor may also be a threat to national survival. Perhaps Churchill understood this better in 1940 than critics who would have made the

96. Consider the criticism of Gen. Colin Powell in Richard Kohn, “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” *National Interest*, No. 35 (Spring 1994), pp. 9–12.

case for negotiated peace. Great powers do not find themselves in this position often.

Strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends. This can happen because the wrong means are chosen or because the ends are too ambitious or slippery. Strategy can be salvaged more often if peacetime planning gives as much consideration to limiting the range of ends as to expanding the menu of means.