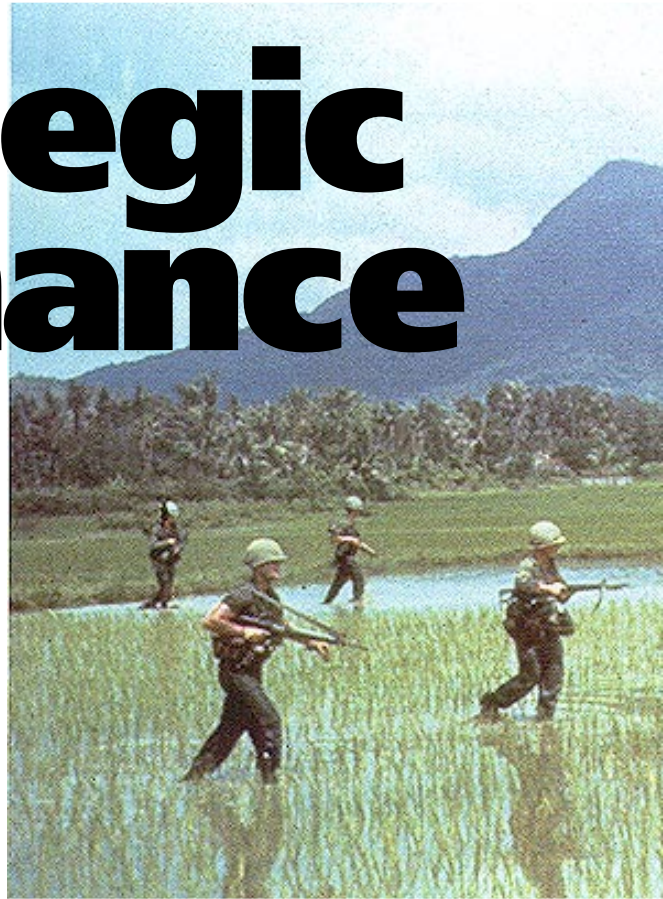


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# On Strategic Performance

By COLIN S. GRAY



It has become almost a commonplace to observe that in the two world wars of this century the Germans proved to be good at fighting but not very good at waging war.<sup>1</sup> A similar judgment applies to the French and American experiences in Indochina. One of the better works on the latter concluded that the plight of the United States “was a failure of understanding and imagination. American leaders did not see that what for them was a limited war for limited ends was, for the Vietnamese, an unlimited war of survival in which all the most basic values—loyalty to ancestors, love of country, resistance to foreigners—were involved.”<sup>2</sup>

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Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, and William Westmoreland—to name but three of the more culpable parties—neither read nor understood, let alone adhered to, the wisdom of that long dead Prussian soldier-theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote:

*The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test [of war as an instrument of policy] the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.*<sup>3</sup>

He also advised:

*No one starts a war—or, rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective.*

This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort required, and make its influence felt down to the smallest operational detail.<sup>4</sup>



Paddy fields of Vietnam.

### strategy is the meaning of what forces do for the course and outcome of a conflict

In the cases above, somewhat inchoate visions of what was politically desirable inspired scarcely more orderly sets of high policy goals which had to serve as dim and swaying guiding lights for military effort. In each, political ambition exceeded the military means and the strategic skill available. Germany, France, and the United States lacked the myriad assets necessary for an approximation of political success.

Whether or not a plausible facsimile of victory was attainable in any of these cases is distinctly debatable. What is not in question is that the countries involved all faltered strategically.

Each failed to wage war in such a manner or to such a degree that the more important of its policy goals were secured.

One should be sensitive to, but not cowed by, the charge that too much is revealed through hindsight. Also, it is not to be denied that much in the history of U.S. statecraft is strategically admirable. America's victory in the Cold War was a success for strategy of which any polity could be proud. Although there is usually more to be

learnt from failure than success, one should not be biased in favor of the study of failure. Moreover, even when failure dominates the page, one must seek empathy with the people and organizations committed to generate strategic effectiveness in the face of real-world friction. Indeed, it is the very difficulty of providing consistently high strategic performance that yields much of the interest in this subject. If scholars are to have anything to say that merits attention in the world of practice, they must understand the constraints of that world.<sup>5</sup>

### The Meaning of Strategy

The virtue of Clausewitz's definition of strategy is that it is crystal clear on the distinction between its subject and other matters. Specifically, strategy is "the use of engagements for the object of the war." Having defined tactics as "the use of armed forces in the engagement,"<sup>6</sup> the distinction could hardly be more clear. Without exception, well meaning attempts to improve upon Clausewitz's definition of strategy have not proved successful.

For example, a well regarded military theoretician, writing in a no less well regarded series of quasi-official textbooks, invites acceptance of "strategy as the planning for, coordination of, and concerted use of the multiple means and resources available to an alliance, a nation, a political group, or a commander, for the purpose of gaining advantage over a rival."<sup>7</sup> The theorist at fault here seems not to appreciate that there is merit in parsimony, that clarity in definition depends on an uncluttered identification of the claimed essence of the subject at issue, and that speculation on the purpose of the subject is irrelevant at best and misleading at worst. His definition is not without some merit, but quite needlessly it muddies water that was clear in its Clausewitzian formulation. Beyond argument, that definition is not an improvement on Clausewitz.

Nonetheless, that definition shines by comparison with one offered by Martin van Creveld which is rather casual and distinctly unhelpful. He speaks of "strategy, the method by which those armed forces [the military organization created by the state] wage war."<sup>8</sup> Lest there be confusion, "the method by which those armed forces wage war" is the realm of tactics or even of doctrine. Doctrine is guidance on how to fight, tactics is what forces do, and strategy is the meaning of what forces do for the course and outcome of a conflict.

What may be called the *strategy test* applied to behavior reduces usefully to the question "so what?" Tactical discussion should focus on what force, or the threat of force, did or might have done. Strategic discussion, by contrast, should consider what difference the use, or threat of use, of force would make to the course of events.

There is a sense in which all levels of conflict have strategic features, as Edward Luttwak states persuasively.<sup>9</sup> But the Clausewitzian approach is preferable. To avoid pedantry, the terms naval strategy, airpower strategy, space strategy, and even nuclear strategy may be tolerated, but only with particular and consistent meaning. For example, naval strategy refers to the use of naval engagements for the object of war at sea; that object has to be the right to use the sea at will, or the ability to deny its use to an enemy. Maritime strategy, by contrast, refers to the use of prowess at sea for the course of events in a conflict as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

Provided that the means-ends reasoning which is the core of the meaning of strategy is not forgotten, common sense and a little care preclude the need for undue precision of usage. Scholars are good at making distinctions. Indeed distinctions are crucial in generating theory that should help explain, even understand, events. But drawing distinctions must be complemented by the recognition of important connections.

### A Holistic Approach

Strategic theory, reasoning, or planning connects activities which otherwise are liable to be treated as autonomous realms.<sup>11</sup> Lacking a holistic approach to conflict assisted by the central idea of strategy, the universe of possible concern exhibits a series of often disconnected loose ends. In the absence of a strategic framework of instrumental thinking and planning, how should defense be governed? People fight on land, at sea, and in the air; they wage low-intensity, mid-intensity, and even high-intensity conflict; and, in geopolitical terms, they deter or fight in places such as Korea, Vietnam, the Falklands, the Persian Gulf, et al. Of these classifications, the first (the dimension) is inadequately exclusive, the second (the intensity of the conflict) is unhelpfully vague, and the third (the regional context) is perilously specific for planning purposes.

A strategic mindset accommodates hypothetical action or threat of action in all geographical environments, at all levels of intensity, and against all foes for all political purposes. As a practical matter, a defining aspect of strategy,<sup>12</sup> the strategist is anything but indifferent to the character and content of the policy in question. To harken back to Clausewitz yet again, if *the object of the war* is truly heroic politically, while friendly forces are able to perform only modestly in *engagements* that the strategist must *use*, then strategic failure is all but certain.<sup>13</sup>

Clausewitz exaggerates slightly, but only slightly, in observing, "The conduct of war, in its great outlines, is therefore policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own

laws."<sup>14</sup> Also he expresses the unexceptionable opinion that "a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy."<sup>15</sup> Given his continentalist Prussian strategic culture, it is not surprising that Clausewitz might err on the side of assuming a unity of purpose between policy and strategy. It might be more accurate to state that he elected not to dwell on the divergent paths that policy and strategy could pursue. As an interpreter of Napoleonic warfare and staff officer trained to revere Frederick the Great,<sup>16</sup> it was unlikely Clausewitz would be drawn to any friction that could imperil the subordinate relationship of strategy to high policy that was theoretically necessary. When the duties of head of state, head of government, and principal field commander all devolve on one person, prospects for harmony between policy and military action are maximized. Had Clausewitz been geostrategically broader in his education, he might have learnt from the British experience how a maritime polity can have difficulty coordinating political, economic, and military interests.<sup>17</sup>

A holistic approach does not require foolishly embracing a strictly nominal coordination of political intent and military action. It recognizes that political goals and military capabilities may be poorly matched. Clausewitz was constrained by prescribing what ought to be. A holistic approach is correct. A vision of a politically desirable condition should inspire policy choices supported by a strategy that makes good use of operational competence founded on tactical excellence. In practice, tactical performance will be less than excellent, operational skills may be slim, and strategic plans may lack political guidance worthy of the name.<sup>18</sup> As for the political vision that should propel the entire process, it may lack practical connection to behavior in the field (for example, in the case of a united Ireland for the Irish Republican Army). Holism captures the whole, but it does not assume a perfect coordination of the whole. Clausewitz's advice on the relation between political ends and military means was not invalidated by the events of 1914–18 which, to the contrary, demonstrated just how important it is for high policy and its military instrument to be mutually empathetic.

A holistic approach operates vertically and horizontally. Seen vertically, strategy includes all aspects of peace and security from political vision to tactical military performance. Horizontally considered, it includes the application of power on land, at sea, in the air, and in space, together with *strategic* nuclear and special operations forces. It is important that this dual-axis appreciation should be accepted before challenges in detail are offered.

Americans and  
Russians on the Elbe,  
April 1945.



U.S. Army

**one should not fear to assert  
the identity and strategic  
relevance of a key force**

Those who seek simple solutions to complex problems are pejoratively called reductionists. The advocates of various types of military power will argue that landpower, seapower, airpower, (would-be) nuclear deterrence, or special operations forces “can do it.” They reduce the strategic problem at hand to a task that their favored capability can purportedly fulfill. It is not necessarily reductionist in a pejorative sense to recognize that there are conflicts in which a geographically or functionally specific *key force* is strategically most appropriate. For example, Northern Ireland is as obviously a special ops, low-intensity conflict case as the Falklands was a maritime problem.<sup>19</sup>

Northern Ireland is *reduced* to a complex political problem as well as an irregular form of warfare, but it can be difficult to delineate between an analysis that penetrates to the heart of the problem (that is, the key elements) and one that reduces a complicated reality to an oversimplified, more manageable reality-as-task. One should

not fear to assert the identity and strategic relevance of a key force. Notwithstanding the complexity of an issue, there is likely to be a particular kind of power, probably military, most appropriate to a specific context.<sup>20</sup>

It is well to be suspicious of reductionism or essentialism.<sup>21</sup> Also it is well to be open to the suggestion that one or another kind of power should attempt to function as the cutting edge of policy. To say that airpower was the key force in the Gulf War of 1991 is not to be reductionist, it is to be sensible. Similarly, to claim that the threats implicit in U.S. nuclear forces were key to the frustration of Soviet policy over Germany in 1948–49 and 1958–61 again is not to be reductionist, but rather to be realistic. To recognize geographical and functional variety in strategic matters is (*ipso facto*) to recognize the possible variety of key elements.

**Why Strategy Is Difficult**

As the great man wrote, “Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy.”<sup>22</sup> Though it should be useful to recognize why strategy is difficult, it is

scarcely less useful to recognize why the explanation need not contribute to the practical solution. By analogy, the more mechanistic aspects of strategy, like art, can be taught, but people cannot be taught reliably how to be great strategists any more than great artists. There is latitude, indeed a need, for creativity in both professions that defies pedagogical programming. Intellectual mastery of purportedly permanent *principles of strategy* is probably helpful but no guarantee of success.<sup>23</sup>

Why is strategy difficult to achieve, let alone sustain? With some grateful borrowing and adaptation from Clausewitz, I find six connected reasons.

First, competence in strategy requires mastery of a challenging complexity. Strategy, after all, is the bridge connecting the threat and use of force with policy or politics. The strategist needs to understand what is tactically and operationally possible in all geographical environments, what success or failure in each environment (or functional dimension) contributes to performance in the other environments, what that means for military performance writ large, and what general military performance means for policy (and vice versa). Moreover, whereas strategists had only to master the combined meaning of surface forces on land and sea in 1900, their counterparts must master the synergistic meaning of land, sea, air, and space (and nuclear) forces today.

Although more complex than before, strategy has not altered at its core. It is still about “the uses of engagements for the object of the war,” or—if you prefer, for a modern translation—about the threat and use of force for political reasons. As the character of the possible uses of forces has diversified, so the task of the strategist has grown ever more difficult in practice.

Second, by its nature strategy is more demanding of the intellect and perhaps imagination than any structurally more simple activity—policy, operations, tactics, or logistics for prominent examples. Excellence in strategy requires the strategist to transcend simple categories of thought. The task is not to create wise policy or successful schemes of military action, but rather to build and repair the bridge connecting the two. On the one hand, policy will be wise only if it proves feasible (in this case, militarily). On the other, brilliant military schemes can be irrelevant or worse if they promise to achieve politically inappropriate objectives.

Third, it is extraordinarily difficult to train competent strategists, let alone outstanding ones. It is very well for Clausewitz to claim glibly and misleadingly that “war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means,”<sup>24</sup> or to argue that “in the highest realm of strategy . . . there is little or no difference between strategy, policy, and statesmanship.”<sup>25</sup>

Now, however, military and political careers tend to be very distinctive, even exclusive in many cultures. There is little in the training of soldiers or politicians to equip them for strategic responsibilities. Military professionals tend to learn how to fight and then, as they are promoted, how to organize others to fight in ever larger, militarily more inclusive formations. The soldier is not taught how engagements should be used “for the object of the war.” Similarly, rising politicians are promoted based on seniority and maturing political skills. At no point in an outstanding career is there likely to be anything resembling explicit training in strategy for the politician.

Fourth, strategy is extraordinarily difficult to conduct with consistent excellence because of the unique physical and moral burdens it puts on would-be strategists. The demands of command in crisis and war can age a person as surely as a disease. Comparing film footage of Adolf Hitler in 1939 with 1944 or of Jimmy Carter in 1976 with January 1981 illustrates this point. It was with good reason that Clausewitz emphasized impediments to strategic performance imposed by danger, fatigue, and anxiety born of uncertainty. The burden of command increases with the growing level of responsibility. As people are promoted from tactical, through operational, to strategic realms of responsibility, the potential physical and moral hindrances to sound performance increase as well.

Fifth, it is worth citing what Clausewitz termed *friction*, although the previous point can be seen as encompassing aspects of this phenomenon. He advised that “friction, as we choose to call it, is the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult”<sup>26</sup> and observes that “friction is the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper.”<sup>27</sup> Friction is not unique to the strategic realm, but it is likely to be uniquely pervasive and debilitating in its cumulative effect in that realm. As modern chaos theory suggests, initially small, unpredicted, and unwanted changes of state can have massive, non-linear consequences later.<sup>28</sup>

Clausewitz argues that “everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.”<sup>29</sup> So many and potentially synergistic are the sources of friction in war and preparation for war, that it is little short of amazing that great military enterprises can be organized and carried out at all.<sup>30</sup> One has to remember that friction impedes all parties in war.

**success in strategy calls for a quality of judgment that cannot be taught**

The fundamental reason why friction can be so damaging at the strategic level is because, by definition, that level must accommodate, integrate, and direct all the activities that comprise war. The strategist will encounter the effects of friction from the world of policy and the geographically and functionally specialized forces which perform tactically, logistically, and operationally. Stated bluntly, at the strategic level of performance there is more that can go wrong.

Finally, success in strategy calls for a quality of judgment that cannot be taught. Although there is certainly scope for individual *genius* at the tactical and operational levels of war, sound training for consistently superior military performance at those levels—friction permitting—can be provided. Strategic excellence cannot be taught the same way or to anything like the same degree. Strategy inherently requires understanding of the terms of the relationship between military power (perhaps *engagements*, after Clausewitz, or more loosely the use and threat of force) and political purpose (*the object of the war* or policy). In addition, strategy requires understanding of how very different kinds of force can generate the effectiveness to yield politically useful consequences. While these necessary truths about strategy are almost too easy to state, they can be abominably difficult to put into consistently successful practice.

Many apparently well educated officers have lacked the qualities needed for success in high command. There was General George McLellan in the Civil War and, in the British army, Field Marshal Ian Hamilton at Gallipoli in 1915 and General Archibald Wavell in the Western Desert in

1941.<sup>31</sup> As well as luck and bigger battalions, success in strategy typically requires, among other things, constitutional fortitude (physical and mental),<sup>32</sup> a sophisticated grasp of political essentials, and an ability to make and stick to judgments in the face of gross uncertainty. Education should help, but there is truth in the claim that strategists are born rather than made. Westmoreland could be trained to direct troops efficiently in the field but not to perform with strategic excellence in the wise conduct of an unusually difficult war.

Strategic performance is inescapable. The quip that “you may not be interested in strategy, but strategy is interested in you,” refers to an enduring truth. The only alternative to good strategic performance is fair or poor strategic performance, not no strategic performance. Engagements of all kinds, conducted by various types of forces, impact on the conduct and outcome of a conflict; that is, they have a strategic effect or generate some quantity of strategic effectiveness. That is how strategy works. Because some polities at certain times behave as if strategy and strategists were an option in fighting, and since strategy from its origins (the art of the general) implies purposeful and skillful direction, the true ubiquity of the phenomenon of strategic effect can evade notice.

Unplanned or ill-conducted engagements must have some influence on a general progress, or lack of progress, registered on behalf of the object of the war. Not only do the tactical and the operational levels of war implement strategy, but even when there is no strategic direction worthy of the name, tactical and operational behavior has strategic effect, albeit undirected centrally. This is not to downplay the significance of strategy, but to claim that strategic performance can only rest on tactical performance. One need not, indeed should not, endorse all of Clausewitz’s argument to accept the strength of his claim “that only great tactical successes can lead to great strategic ones,” or that “tactical successes are of paramount importance in war.”<sup>33</sup> Whether or not the enemy is actually destroyed or comprehensively defeated, indeed whether or not success attends our forces, tactical activity must have strategic effect. **JFQ**

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> For example, H.P. Willmott, *The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of the Second World War* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald D. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 314.

**Tank maneuvers in France, 1918.**



U.S. Army Military History Institute

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; first published 1832), pp. 88–89.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 579.

<sup>5</sup> See Colin S. Gray, “New Directions for Strategic Studies? How Can Theory Help Practice?” *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1992), pp. 610–35.

<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> John I. Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine of the Military Art Past and Present* (Wayne, N.J.: Avery Publishing, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> See Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988; first published 1911), pp. 10–11. Distinctions between naval and maritime strategy are exerted, developed, and exploited admirably in Jan S. Breemer, “Naval Strategy Is Dead,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 120, no. 2 (February 1994), pp. 49–53. Breemer argues that naval strategy is dead for the United States because for the next few years, at least, there is no other navy in the world capable of menacing American sea control.

<sup>11</sup> For an earlier raid on this topic, see Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), chapter 10, “Seeing the Problem Whole.”

<sup>12</sup> “Strategic thinking, or ‘they’ if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. Strategy is a ‘how to do it’ study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently. As in many other branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work? More important, will it be likely to work under the special circumstances under which it will next be tested?” Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 452.

<sup>13</sup> Consider France’s political goals in Indochina in relation to its political-military assets. The grim story may be approached most usefully via Bernard Fall: *Street Without Joy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 610.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 608.

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Like modern Israel, Prussia was awkwardly shaped and lacked robust natural frontiers. The influence of Prussia’s distinctly continentalist geostrategic situation on Clausewitz has yet to receive adequate recognition. For example, Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), is generally excellent but fails to consider the lack of a maritime dimension to his theorizing.

<sup>18</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Weapons Don’t Make War: Policy, Strategy, and Military Technology* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> The geography of the Falklands as a theater mandated a maritime strategy, but the style of the British reconquest had the general character of “a commando operation writ large.” Edward N. Luttwak, Steven L. Canby, and David L. Thomas, *A Systematic Review of “Commando” (Special) Operations, 1939–1980* (Potomac, Md.: C and L Associates, May 24, 1982), p. P–2.

<sup>20</sup> Acknowledging the need for jointness and capabilities in all geographical environments is not to be blind to a maritime or continental tilt in strategic culture. I developed these thoughts in *The Navy in the Post-Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> See Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory*, pp. 323–24; and David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 172–75.

<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Allegedly “immutable principles of strategy” are presented in Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1992, reprint of 1862 edition), pp. 327–35.

<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 605.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> See Alan Beyechen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992/93), pp. 59–90; and David Nicholls and Todor D. Tagarev, “What Does Chaos Theory Mean for Warfare?” *Airpower Journal*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 48–57.

<sup>29</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> For a wonderful case study of friction and overcoming it, see John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), who concludes that it was the “growth of the coherence and experience of the crusader host as a whole which was the key to their military success.”

<sup>31</sup> Unlike McClellan, who was in over his head, Hamilton and Wavell were able soldiers trapped in contexts unforgiving of error, weakness, and plain bad luck. On Hamilton, see E.K.G. Sixsmith, *British Generalship in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1970); and Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). Ian Beckett, “Wavell: Field-Marshal Earl Wavell,” in *Churchill’s Generals*, edited by John Keegan (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), is fair and persuasive.

<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz believed that the determination needed for success flows more from a strong than brilliant mind; intelligence, even knowledge, and strength of character are not synonymous.

<sup>33</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 228.