

The Strategist's Short Catechism: Six Questions Without Answers

by

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FIRST, let me bring greetings from the nation's oldest service college to the nation's youngest service academy. The US Naval War College, which it is my honor to represent before this distinguished audience, was founded in the year 1884—93 years ago. Now, before you dismiss this fact as mere "ancient history," let me remind you of something that may have escaped your attention. And that is this. On the date when this institution—the US Air Force Academy—celebrates its 93rd anniversary some of you will still be around. On that date, which I calculate to be the year 2047, some of you will be here—decrepit but still alive, and no doubt full of tiresome tales of the good old days when the Air Force Academy was young and in its prime.

I mention this only to call to your attention one fact that may have escaped you; *i.e.*, that much of what passes as history today falls within the memory of living men and women. The past is not nearly as remote as it sometimes seems. Much of it unfolded—as you will some day realize—only yesterday.

At this point you are probably expecting me to launch into a fervent defense of the teaching and study of history, its relevance, and its utility to you as citizens and as future officers in the US Air Force. Professional historians like myself are likely to get quite exercised over this subject, especially as we inspect the figures on declining enrollments in college history courses and the declining market for historical monographs. You will no doubt be relieved to hear that tonight I intend not to enter into any argument about the relevance of history—largely because I think it is a non-issue. The utility of history is, it seems to me, self-evident, and I do not feel called upon to defend it. History is simply recorded memory. People without memory are mentally sick. So too

are nations or societies or institutions that reject or deny the relevance of their collective past.

The question then is not whether history is useful, but rather how is it used. Here there is room for honest argument, and argument there has been. And since we are concerned tonight with the formulation of military strategy, let us explore for a moment how strategists of past generations have in fact used history for their own very practical purposes.

A hundred years ago, no serious student of the art of war would have dreamed of challenging the proposition that history taught useful lessons to military practitioners. In those confident times, when the dogmas of theology were giving way to the certainties of science, it was held as axiomatic that history provided the raw data from which could be deduced the "scientific laws of war." These laws could be expressed as "the principles of war." And the search for these principles was, in the words of Maurice Matloff, the US Army's Chief Historian, an effort "to distill from the great mass of military experience over the centuries simple but fundamental truths to guide commanders through the fog of war."¹

This was the basic assumption of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, who came to the Naval War College shortly after its establishment to teach naval history. Like most so-called scientific historians of the 19th century, Mahan firmly believed that a study of history would permit the discovery of certain immutable principles in the field of human affairs comparable to the laws of science governing the physical universe. Specifically he believed that from the study of naval history would emerge certain principles of maritime strategy, certain permanent truths of equal applicability today as yesterday, and tomorrow as today. Or, to quote from Mahan's first great work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*

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1660–1783: "... while many of the conditions of war vary from age to age with the progress of weapons, there are certain teachings in the school of history which remain constant, and can be elevated to the rank of general principles. For the same reason the study of the sea history of the past will be found instructive, by its illustration of the general principles of maritime war."²

Now if Mahan was ardent in his search for the general principles of war to guide naval strategists, Army strategists throughout the western world were even more so. At the *Kriegsakademie* in Berlin, the *École Supérieure de Guerre* in Paris, and the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, great effort was made to develop a body of general principles that presumably governed the conduct of war on land. But if these military analysts agreed that history taught clear and useful lessons, and that these lessons could be expressed in terms of scientific laws or "principles," they did not necessarily agree as to what these principles were, or even how many there were. The Swiss General Jomini and the French Marshal Foch, for example, each enumerated four, but their separate lists bore very little resemblance to each other.³ US Army field manuals over the years have added to, or subtracted from, the official list of principles, and in 1968 settled down to the figure of nine—nine "fundamental truths governing the prosecution of war." These are, in order: Objective, Offensive, Mass, Economy of Force, Maneuver, Unity of Command, Security, Surprise, and Simplicity—all duly inscribed in Army Field Manual 100–5 in capital letters, as eternal verities should be. But, as the Field Manual itself pointed out, these principles "may tend to reinforce one another or to be in conflict." And, as the official Army historians admitted, the violation of these principles has brought as frequent success on the battlefield as has their observance.⁴ Small wonder then that in the most recent (1976) version of FM 100–5, specific reference to the "principles of war" was omitted altogether.

One is driven to ask therefore: "What good are they? or were they? Are these indeed to be looked on as 'fundamental truths' or are they mere truisms, tautologies, empty and meaningless platitudes?" Is the old Army Field Manual's solemn pronouncement that "every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive, and obtainable objective" really much more helpful than Calvin Coolidge's famous statement that "when many men are out of work,

unemployment results?" If this is to be the end product of years of intensive study of several centuries of warfare, then what indeed are the uses of history? What practical value, if any, can military or civilian leaders derive from the historical study of war, or its causes or consequences?

The truth of the matter is, I am afraid, that scientific laws of war cannot be precisely deduced from history for the obvious reason that history never exactly repeats itself. The present is never exactly analogous to the past, and those who would draw simple analogies between past and present are doomed to failure. Even Mahan, for all his dedication to the search for fundamental truths, was aware of the dangers of historic analogies. Although he believed that there were "certain teachings in the school of history which remain constant," he also warned that because of rapid technological change, "theories about the naval warfare of the future are almost thoroughly presumptive." He warned of the "tendency not only to overlook points of difference, but to exaggerate points of likeness" between the past and the present.⁵ In short, Mahan, for all his efforts to deduce principles of war from the study of naval history, was at least aware that the past could not be used as a precise predictive instrument.

Then why do we who are concerned with the great issues of war and peace, of strategy and policy, of statesmanship and generalship continue to study it? My answer is *not* that we can predict the future on the basis of the past, because for the most part we cannot. My answer is simply that the study of history will help us to ask the right questions so that we can define the problem—whatever it is.

So this evening, what I propose to do is to outline some of the questions history suggests that strategists must ask before they commence a war, or before they take actions which might lead to war, or before they undertake a wartime campaign, or before they end a war in which they are already engaged. By strategists I mean both the civilian and military leaders in whom this and other nations have entrusted major responsibility for decision-making in these matters, and on their advisors, which no doubt some day will include some of you. I shall specify six such questions, with several variations on each. The number is arbitrary and could no doubt be easily expanded, though perhaps not so easily contracted. All of these questions are suggested by the history of war and diplomacy in the Western world over the past century and a half.

The first and most fundamental question to be asked of any prospective war or other military action is: "What is it about?" Or in the words of Marshal Foch, "*De quoi s'agit il?*"⁶ What specific national interests and policy objectives are to be served by the proposed military action? How great is the value attached to those interests and objectives, and what is their fair price?

It is of course, to the great German strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, that we owe the first precise formulation of the concept that lies behind this question. "War is no pastime," wrote Clausewitz, "it is a serious means to a serious end ... War ... is an act of policy ... War ... is a continuation of political activity by other means. ... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it. ... War should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy. ... War is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. ... Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic. ..."⁷

So, when the possibility of war presents itself, political and military leaders must ask themselves, "What specific policy objectives will be served by going to war, what specific national interests require these objectives to be pursued, and are these objectives and interests worth the price that war more often than not demands?" I have said that political and military leaders must ask this question. A more appropriate word would be "should." Because often they don't, and when they don't, the end result can be disastrous.

Let us take for example Imperial Germany in 1914. Why did the Kaiser and his advisors opt for war on two fronts against both France and Russia? Though they claimed to be victims of encirclement, the Germans stood in no clear and present danger of attack from any of their neighbors when the July crisis erupted. Their dominance in Central Europe was unchallenged; they were in essence a "satiated power."

Yet they gave their Austrian allies a "blank check" to make outrageous demands on Serbia which could only provoke Serbia's ally Russia into military action which would almost inevitably escalate into general war. Why? The final answer has eluded historians for 60 years and more. Were the Germans powerless to hold Austria in check? Not really. Compromises over the ticklish Balkan question had been reached before and could have been reached again. Were they covetous of French and British overseas empires? Yes, but not enough to go to war over a

few remote colonies in Africa and Asia. Was internal domestic discontent so worrisome to German leadership that they welcomed a war as a device to short-circuit social unrest? Some historians have suggested this as an answer, but not altogether convincingly. The answer, I am afraid, is simply that the Kaiser and his entourage and especially his military advisors were stupid. They lacked the intelligence to analyze the costs and benefits of the war on which they so blithely embarked. They neglected seriously to ask the fundamental question: "What is the objective, and is it worth it?"

"Stupid" is not the word one would apply to our own leaders and their advisors who presided over the drift into a full-scale war in Vietnam. They were, in the ironical words of David Halberstam, "the best and the brightest" of their generation.⁸ But certainly theirs too was a failure of the intellect, a failure to give sufficient attention to the question: "What's it about?" What were our national objectives and what national interests were at stake? This was never made very clear at the time and is not clear today. Was it primarily to contain the spread of monolithic Sino-Soviet Communism whose puppet was Ho Chi Minh? This was certainly the most widely advertised of our objectives. But was Ho Chi Minh really a puppet of Moscow or Peking? Possible, but not proved. As for monolithic Communism, by the early 1960s it was already becoming evident that the Sino-Soviet bloc was splitting apart. Were we under treaty obligation to intervene massively in Vietnam? Not at all. Neither our membership in the United Nations organization nor in SEATO required us to do so. Did the United States have any vital interests in Southeast Asia as a region? It was not apparent, either from a strategic or an economic point of view. Certainly we had no historic involvement there. The French had abandoned the area; why should we have moved in? President Eisenhower had warned that if Vietnam fell to the Communists so might the other nations of Southeast Asia, like "a row of dominos." The trouble with the domino theory is that at best it was highly conjectural, and at worst it begged the question—the question being, "What are the vital US national interests that need protection from falling dominos?" In the end, defenders of our military involvement in Vietnam had to fall back on the argument that national credibility and honor were at stake; that, having created the Republic of Vietnam we were morally obligated to preserve it; that, having spent so much blood

and treasure in Vietnam, we were honor bound to make good the losses. These may have been legitimate reasons for fighting it out in Vietnam once we were deeply involved. Indeed, they are the reasons that persuaded me, for one, to support the continuation of the war to an acceptable conclusion. But they are not valid reasons for our initial involvement. Our national honor and credibility were not at stake until we had put them at stake. There was no essential need to have done so. Had either President Kennedy or President Johnson or their advisors thought through the probable costs and benefits of our initial military involvement in Vietnam, it seems highly doubtful that they would have acted as they did. They neglected to ask the right questions.

The second question for strategists concerns not the decision to go to war, but the proper methods of fighting the war once it starts. Assuming that a nation at war has some rational objectives, the next question is: "Is the national military strategy tailored to meet the national political objectives?" What this question suggests is that there be a close correlation between the political ends of war and the military means employed to achieve those ends.

One of the great masters at achieving such correlation was certainly Count Otto von Bismarck. Take the Austro-Prussian war as a case in point. Bismarck's purpose in provoking a war with Austria was to consolidate the many separate sovereign states of Germany into one empire under Prussian domination. To do this Austria's ancient pretensions to leadership among the German-speaking peoples had to be eliminated. One decisive military defeat would be enough to lower Austrian prestige to the point where Prussia could easily establish her preeminence. And when in fact the Prussians did soundly beat the Austrian army at Koniggratz, Bismarck simply called off the war. The Prussian generals wanted to follow up their victory, march on Vienna, and humiliate the Austrians and their Emperor. But Bismarck vetoed the proposal for the simple reason that it was redundant. The object of the war had been achieved, and it was now more useful to cultivate Austrian good will than to prolong hostilities. Bismarck realized full well that today's enemies can become tomorrow's friends, and vice versa.

The same cannot be said for Franklin Roosevelt in 1945 as the victorious campaign against Hitler's Germany was drawing to a close. Certainly, Eisenhower's armies were capable of pushing

farther east into Germany and Czechoslovakia than in fact they did. But neither Roosevelt nor his successor, Harry Truman, would order the General to do so. In the absence of political direction to the contrary, Eisenhower stopped at the Elbe River and refused to allow Patton to drive on to Prague. He felt fully justified in this decision on purely military grounds, and on those grounds alone he was probably right. Yet by that time it was clear to many that there were good political reasons for preventing the Soviet armies from overrunning any more of central Europe than was absolutely necessary. As Churchill put it, "I deem it highly important that we should shake hands with the Russians as far to the east as possible."⁹ Yet Washington refused to acknowledge the idea that policy should dominate strategy, and General Marshall went so far as to oppose the liberation of Prague by the Western Allies on the grounds that he "would be loath to hazard American lives for purely political purposes."¹⁰ Here is a curious statement indeed from such an experienced soldier/statesman as George C. Marshall. One could reasonably ask: "Why else was the war fought at all if not for political purposes?" The confusion between ends and means that Marshall's statement implies can probably be laid at the door of Roosevelt himself and his public declaration that the sole object of the war was "unconditional surrender." He made that announcement at Casablanca in January 1943. Thereafter he gave little serious thought to the post-war balance of power in Europe. The "unconditional surrender" doctrine tended to blind Washington to the probability that the total removal of the German threat to the balance would automatically raise another threat from the Soviet Union. It was an error that Bismarck would never have made.

A third and most difficult question that strategists must ask is: "What are the limits of military power?" This one more than any other sticks in the craw—especially in the craw of us Americans whose major national sin is grandiosity, and even more of American military officers whose professional creed is best expressed in two words: "Can do." Yet there are many things that armed forces, no matter how powerful, cannot do. Field Marshal Montgomery once said that "the first principle of war is not to try to walk to Moscow."¹¹ Napoleon and Hitler both tried—and couldn't. They miscalculated the terrain, the weather, and the will of the Russian people. So the first requirement for answering this question is a careful cal-

culatation of one's own resources, including those of one's allies, and of the resources of the enemy and his allies. Accuracy in these matters is hard to come by and the chances of error are great. Simple prudence therefore is the watchword.

But even beyond the demands of prudent calculation, wise strategists will recognize that there are limits to what mere military force can accomplish. The object of war, said Clausewitz, is "to impose our will on the enemy" and physical force is the means thereto.¹² But it does not follow that the enemy's will to resist is going to be in exact inverse ratio to the quantity of physical force applied. Between the two world wars some advocates of strategic air power were convinced that the massive bombing of enemy cities would terrorize the target populations into quick surrender. Events proved them wrong. The Blitz on London did not persuade Churchill's government to capitulate, nor did the massive bombing of Berlin, by itself, induce the Germans to surrender. In Vietnam, our overwhelming air superiority produced results that were even more disappointing. By the close of the year 1971, six million tons of bombs and other munitions had been dropped from the air on Indo China, yet the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong kept on fighting. Here indeed was a costly lesson in the limits of military power.

Question number four is simply: "What are the alternatives?" What are the alternatives to war? What are the alternative campaign strategies, especially if the preferred one fails? How is the war to be terminated gracefully if the odds against victory become too high?

Of the four elements that make up the climate of war, according to Clausewitz, one is "uncertainty" and another "chance."¹³ Now, chance and uncertainty are the natural enemies of the "military planning process." Operation plans, staff studies, war game scenarios and their solutions—all suffer from the same inherent weakness; *i.e.*, they are all minutely conjectural. They must assume an exact sequence of future events that may never, indeed probably will never, take place. Yet on those shaky assumptions, precise blueprints are drawn up, stipulating in detail the location, movement, and preferred courses of action for vast numbers of men, ships, planes, tanks, guns, and supplies. What happens then if events unroll differently than expected? The wise strategist will of course have prepared contingency plans. But even these may not exactly suit the case. Here, as Clausewitz says, is where mili-

tary genius may enter the picture. The really superior strategist will above all else be flexible, will adapt quickly to changed circumstances, will turn chance or even misfortune to his own advantage.

Two historical examples suggest themselves—one bad, one good.

On 1 August 1914, the great German Army commenced its mobilization against France and Russia, in accordance with the detailed logistic plans that had long since been drawn up in anticipation of this contingency. Late that afternoon came a telegram to the Foreign Office in Berlin suggesting that if Germany mobilized on its eastern front only and called off its movement against France, England would remain neutral. The Kaiser was intrigued with the prospect of fighting only a one-front war. He called into his presence his chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke, nephew to the late great General Moltke, Bismarck's colleague and rival. The Kaiser urged that the entire mobilization effort now be shifted to the eastern front. Moltke replied simply: "Your Majesty, it cannot be done." To turn around the deployment of a million men from west to east was beyond the imagination of this very able, but very rigid, Prussian general. "Your uncle," said the Kaiser bitterly, "would have given me a different answer."¹⁴ And so the machine ground on—and in the end the German Empire was destroyed and the Kaiser lost his throne.

Yet the military mind has not always been so inflexible. A case in point would be the non-invasion of Yap in World War II. At the Quebec conference in September 1944, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered General MacArthur to take Morotai that month, Nimitz to take Peleliu and, a month later, the island of Yap in the Carolines. Both were then to converge on Leyte in the Philippines in December. In the Pacific Fleet, detailed plans were drawn up accordingly and in September a task force bound for Yap sailed from Pearl Harbor. By the time these ships arrived at their staging area in the Admiralty Islands, the plan had been changed. Yap was to be bypassed and the task force would invade Leyte in October, two months ahead of schedule. So, new logistic plans were cranked up, new charts were issued, operation orders were revised; and off we sailed to return MacArthur to the Philippines. Here I say *we* advisedly since my own ship was one of those involved. Even at that tender age, I was astonished at the speed and efficiency with which this massive shifting of gears took place. I still am. It was a model of military flexibility.

Let us turn now to another aspect of military strategy often overlooked by Pentagon planners and arm-chair strategists alike. My fifth question is: "How strong is the home front?" Does public opinion support the war and the military strategy employed to fight it? What are the attitudes of influential elites both inside and outside the government in office? How much stress can civilian society endure under the pressures of the wartime sacrifices demanded? Is the war morally acceptable? Can it plausibly be explained as a "just war?"

Today the point is so obvious that it hardly needs elaboration. None of us who has lived through the Vietnam war is likely to forget the impact of public opinion on military strategy. The student revolts, Kent State, the defection of the intellectuals, the assaults on the military establishment—all these are of too recent memory to be easily set aside. If the Vietnam war taught us anything, it is that, in the United States at least, no government can wage a protracted war successfully without strong domestic support. Dictatorships might be able to pull it off; but not democracies.

Yet before we leave the Vietnam war, let me make one further point about it. It may be that we have learned its lessons too well. Vietnam will never happen again exactly as it happened once. And if this nation should respond to every future international crisis with the simple bromide of "No more Vietnams!," then we are in serious trouble.

This brings me back full cycle to my earlier remark that history never exactly repeats itself, that simple historical analogies are therefore very dangerous. It also brings me to the sixth and final question for strategists, which is a paraphrase of Mahan's warning already noted. "Does today's strategy overlook points of difference and exaggerate points of likeness between past and present?" Has concern over past successes and failures developed into a neurotic fixation that blinds the strategist to changed circumstances requiring new and different responses?

Generals and admirals are constantly being accused of fighting the last war or of preparing to fight the war just finished. And sometimes the accusation is just. Let us look briefly at the French Army of 1914–1915. Dazzled by the quick success that had attended German operations in the Franco-Prussian War, and recalling the splendid victories of Napoleon's dashing columns of infantrymen, the French General Staff had become

infatuated with the "principle" of the offensive. Relying too heavily on these two historical models, the French developed a theory of combat that equated the will to win with victory. Their simple formula for military success was "Attack, attack, attack!" What this formula overlooked of course was the machine gun. And thousands and thousands of French *poilus* went to their deaths in the first two years of the war because of this oversight. The machine gun, plus improvements in the art of entrenchment unknown to Napoleon or even to the Prussian troops of 1870, had vastly enhanced the advantage of the tactical defense over the offense. By the end of the war, the French had learned that lesson. But perhaps they learned it too well. Underestimating the great new offensive power of tanks and planes, they devoted too much of their resources to the Maginot line and relied too heavily on the defensive strategy that ended in their defeat in 1940. History did not repeat itself.

On this unhappy note I come to the end of my disquisition. Let me assure you, however, that I am not a Spenglerian pessimist. I do not believe that in war and diplomacy, in strategy and policy, man is forever condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past or to overcompensate for those mistakes. Most of the mistakes that I have recounted here have been, at root, failures of the imagination, failures of the intellect. The strategic problem is essentially an intellectual problem. And before it can be addressed, it must be defined. And to define the problem, one starts with questions: What is the object? What are the means to achieve it? Are they available? What are the costs? The benefits? What are the hazards? What are the limitations? How will the public react? Are the proposed actions morally justifiable? What are the lessons of experience? How does the present differ from the past?

And one final warning to those of you who are on the threshold of your careers as strategic planners. After all your plans have been perfected, all avenues explored, all contingencies thought through, then ask yourself one final question: "What have I overlooked?" Then say your prayers and go to sleep—with the certain knowledge that tomorrow too will bring its share of nasty surprises.

Notes

1. Maurice Matloff, ed., *American Military History*, Washington DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969, p. 5.

2. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, New York, Sagamore Press, 1957, p. 2.

3. Cyril Falls, *The Art of War from the Age of Napoleon to the Present Day*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 9.

4. Matloff, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

5. Mahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–6.

6. Quoted aptly as the title of Chapter I in Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics*, New York, Macmillan, 1973.

7. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton NJ., Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 86, 87, 88, 605.

8. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, Greenwich, CT, Fawcett Crest Publications, Inc., 1973.

9. Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower*, Garden City NY, Doubleday and Co., 1970, p. 639.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 653–654.

11. Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

12. Howard and Paret, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

13. Howard and Paret, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

14. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, New York, Macmillan, 1962, pp. 79–80.