

The Perils of Amateur Strategy as Exemplified by the Attack on the Dardanelles Fortress in 1915 by Lt-Gen Sir Gerald Ellison, K.C.B., K.C.M.G. Longmans, Green and Co., 1926, 145 pp.

It is not every day an obscure, out-of-print book makes national headlines, but when the most avid reader of military history in the United States House of Representatives speaks, the Washington beltway defense establishment rightfully takes notice. Rep. Ike Skelton, the 15-term Democrat from Missouri, assumed the chairmanship of the House Armed Services Committee with the opening of the 110th United States Congress in January 2007. Three months earlier, in the waning days of his eight-year tenure as the committee's ranking minority member just before the November 2006 congressional elections, Skelton wrote an opinion-editorial piece for *The* (Independence, Missouri) *Examiner*, a small daily in his west-central Missouri congressional district. In it, he referenced Sir Gerald Ellison's remarkably crisp and readable 1926 work, *The Perils of Amateur Strategy*, a book about the British decision in 1915 to conduct the disastrous Gallipoli campaign during World War I, and asserted bluntly, "In 2006, we find that the Bush Administration's strategic mistakes during the opening years of our misadventure in Iraq have provided ample material for its sequel, 'The Perils of Amateur Strategy II.'" Skelton used this stinging phrase later in a congressional press release and again during a brief National Public Radio interview, both in late October 2006.

Bound for a return to obscurity save for the attention of avid military historians, Ellison's book reemerged following the midterm elections when control of the House of Representatives shifted back to the Democrats after 12 years under the Republicans. Soon thereafter, following *Washington Post*, *Associated Press*, and *Congress Daily* in-depth profiles of the incoming House Armed Services Committee chairman from Missouri, the book received renewed national media attention.

Given Skelton's remarks, one could not help but ask what a book written over 80 years ago about the flawed British decision to undertake operations in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and on Gallipoli in 1915, collectively known as the Dardanelles campaign, had to do with the American decision to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. What began as an interesting, rare book title that Skelton then turned into a catchy sound byte for the national media merits further examination. As opportunity would have it, one of the few available public copies in the nation was here at Stanford in the Hoover Institution archives. After reading it, I discovered that the parallels between Gallipoli in 1915 and Iraq today are both uncanny from a historical perspective and could not be more relevant given current war strategy debates. Without question, Ellison's book is well worth a closer look by inquiring "historical minds."¹ As Ellison himself rightly reminds us, in both chess and war strategy "skill comes only as the result of much thought and prolonged study."

A career infantry officer, Sir Ellison (1861–1947) received the Queen's Medal for his service during the Boer War. In 1906, he served as personal secretary to the Secretary of State for War, Lord Haldane. A personal friend of General Sir Ian

Hamilton, the Allied commander-in-chief at Gallipoli, he was the deputy inspector general for communications on his Mediterranean force headquarters (GHQ) staff in 1915. Without question, Ellison's "little volume" was influenced by this friendship but no more than one would expect, as he was the beneficiary of a by-name-request wartime staff hire and a loyal subordinate. After the war, Ellison served as the secretary to the War Office Reconstitution Committee. He also served as the first Gallipoli official historian for the Committee of Imperial Defence before being replaced by Brig-Gen C. F. Aspinall-Oglander, another former GHQ staff officer during the campaign, for unknown reasons.

At only 145 pages, Ellison's book embodies the British tradition of concise historical prose as seen most recently in the writings of Sir Michael Howard, proving there is no direct correlation between the quality of a book and the number of pages in it.² Fundamentally, Ellison seeks an answer to one basic question, what is the most efficient method of conducting operations of war under a democratic form of government? This book is not a battle history of the conduct of a specific military campaign but rather a critique of the decision process to undertake it. In modern terms, the book is an examination of grand strategy and civil-military relations during wartime. The Dardanelles campaign is Ellison's definitive and only case study. Like a well-schooled local beat newspaper reporter, he does not bury the lead. The book's first epigram tells readers clearly where the author wants to take them. Ellison cites Walter H. Page, United States ambassador to Great Britain, "The horrible tragedy of Gallipoli [was] where the best soldiers in the world were sacrificed to politicians' policies."

The book uses three primary sources exclusively: Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis: 1915*, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher's *Memories*, and the British government's official *Final Report of the Dardanelles Commission*, all published no earlier than four years after the Dardanelles campaign ended and two years after the conclusion of World War I. Unlike the present-day genre of journalistic books about the US decision to go to war in Iraq and the war strategy itself, to include post-combat stability operations, *Perils* is not history or commentary written in *medio bello*. It contains no pseudo-footnotes of anonymous sources or former unnamed senior British War Council officials.³ Rather, *Perils* is the kind of well-sourced, definitive assessment that one would expect to be written after a failed military campaign by a military officer who participated in the misfortune. With the failure of the Dardanelles campaign conclusive historically and with primary sources readily at hand, Ellison asks and answers three questions: What went wrong strategically? Why? What are the remedies to prevent similar military failures in the future? The book addresses these questions in order.

In the first four chapters of *Perils*—"Expert Plans," "Turkey," "The Valour of Ignorance," and "The Short Cut to Victory"—Ellison moves swiftly from August 1914 to the British War Council meeting that took place on 28 January 1915, when the final "unsound to the last degree" decision to launch the Dardanelles campaign was made. His narratives of key world events in the first four months of World War I, the military situation on the Gallipoli peninsula, ongoing British

war-planning efforts, and the competing grand-strategy debates at the time are succinct and accurate. Here, two important themes emerge. They constitute the strength of the book for scholars today.

First, “amateur strategy triumphed,” and the British War Council ordered the commencement of the Dardanelles campaign without giving due consideration to strategic intelligence and other viable grand-strategy alternatives available to them. One option supported the main effort on the western front. The other addressed Russian pleas for substantial Allied military operations in the East. When he returned as First Sea Lord and Admiral of the Fleet for the second time in October 1914, Lord Fisher advocated a naval strategy concentrating on Germany’s north-western sea flank. His plan sought to deny the Germans use of the Baltic Sea that remained, according to Ellison, a “German lake” throughout the war. Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener championed his “Alexandretta Project,” a detailed plan whereby an amphibious force landed in the lightly defended Gulf of Alexandretta would capture the Baghdad railway and cut the Ottoman Empire in two. Neither plan was ever adopted.

For Ellison, the Dardanelles campaign was never “a feasible operation of war,” and the “abrupt and all-embracing change of strategic conception” from West to East was a tragic mistake. The greatest lesson of the whole war was that “amateur civilians” reached conclusions and made “monstrous decisions” while neglecting “expert military advice.” On 28 January 1915, “political considerations” overruled the “acquired instincts” of senior military officers. In the end, Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith chose the Dardanelles course of action “to solve a variety of diplomatic and strategic problems”⁴ under a miasma that, according to Lord Fisher, “like a deadly, invisible poisonous gas . . . floated down on [the British War Council] with rare subtle dialectical skill and proved so incontestably to them that cutting off the enemy’s big toe in the East was better than stabbing him in the heart in the West.”⁵

Second, when ordered to conduct a campaign they believed “a pure gamble” and doomed to failure, most senior military officers chose silence over resignation. The one notable exception was Lord Fisher. The First Sea Lord, however, despite tremendous misgivings, did not resign in protest over the decision to launch the campaign in January 1915. Rather, he resigned 19 days after the British army first landed on the Gallipoli peninsula four months later. For Lord Fisher, the commitment of ground forces in the Dardanelles neglected grossly and was absolutely counter to “the decisive theatre of the War.”

When Ellison turns to the question of why the Dardanelles campaign decision was made, his chapter titles, “The Catspaw,” “Sanhedrim Control,” and “Past Warnings” are telling, but his arguments become weaker and not without flaw or bias. First, his “catspaw” is simply the failure of the British navy and army establishments to view warfare jointly. The campaign was disjointed from the start and was a case “of one service being dragged by the action of another service into an operation which proved its undoing.” Therefore, it should never have been undertaken in the first place. In hindsight, his point is well taken, but, previously, Ellison

did not highlight the lack of jointness in either the Fisher or Kitchener plans he advocated as viable alternatives.

Second, Ellison returns to the British War Council and castigates its civilian members for acting like a blind Sanhedrim. Here, he uses limited pages to present his one-sided view of civilian control of the military in a democracy.⁶ Ellison disagrees vehemently with Winston Churchill on this issue. For Churchill, who as the First Lord of the Admiralty was a member of the council, “the distinction between politics and strategy diminishes as the point of view is raised. At the summit, true politics and strategy are one.”⁷ Ellison counters, “Politics and strategy are radically and fundamentally things apart from one another. Strategy begins where politics end.” War is a most serious matter in a democracy, and the relationship between civilian leaders and senior military officers is not as simple as Ellison would have us believe. At the highest levels of government, there is no sacrosanct division of labor when it comes to administration and command functions. In deciding grand strategy, the “purely military domain” Ellison champions is nonexistent.

The final reason why Ellison believed the Dardanelles campaign was launched was historical neglect. He describes specific reforms taken within the British government after their Boer War experience. Between 1903 and 1914, these reforms included the stand-up of a general staff, the appointment of the First Sea Lord and Chief of the General Staff as the “recognised experts of the fighting services,” and the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence whereby senior military officers could meet alone with the prime minister to “express their opinions freely, unhampered by the presence of numerous cabinet ministers.” By November 1914 and the stalemate on the western front, all these reforms were set aside, and the British War Council became the sole deliberative body for grand-strategy decisions. Ellison is confounded as to why the Committee of Imperial Defence was disbanded and replaced by a much larger war council dominated by civilians. He believed strongly had the reforms put in place prior to the war been adhered to, the conduct of the Dardanelles campaign “would assuredly have been avoided.”

In his two concluding chapters, Ellison makes three specific recommendations on reforms he deemed essential to avoiding future military failures like Gallipoli. First, a ministry of defence led by a defence minister must be created. Second and equally as important, a joint general staff led by a single military officer had to be instituted. Finally, the chartering of a joint staff college for professional military education across service lines would begin to break down interservice misgivings and competition. Eventually, these reforms were instituted in Britain, but, in 1926, Ellison’s advocacy for them is shallow beyond his three declarative “ought to” statements. He deserves credit for introducing the specific reform proposals into the postwar debate, but he left the specifics for others to refine into policy.

Many years after the Dardanelles campaign, Churchill was asked to recount the details of the original concept of operations he advocated so strongly on 28 January 1915 and to which the senior military officers acquiesced. Churchill replied, “Force a passage through the Dardanelles and either with or without army occupation of the Gallipoli peninsula, to insert a fleet into the Sea of Marmora, which

could then advance to the Golden Horn, intimidate Constantinople and induce the Turkish government to sue for peace.”⁸ Ellison described the plan this way: “Sail in the fleet, start a revolution and the Ottoman Empire would sue for peace . . . utopian in the extreme.” Seen either way, the plan failed. However, Churchill and Ellison differ on the reasons why. The former saw it as a failure of execution and a “short cut to victory” wasted.⁹ The latter believed it a failure of conception embodied by amateur strategy. Within military history circles, the debate about the Dardanelles campaign continues.

With regard to the current Iraq War, the scholarly debate is just in its infancy. While refusing to characterize the war in Iraq as a failure as of this writing, questions of its conception versus execution are valid. Like Gallipoli during World War I, Operation Iraqi Freedom is part of a larger war and its original concept of operations was shortsighted at best and amateur at worst. Historians will have much to say on this matter.

Additionally, civil-military relations in the United States have moved beyond both Georges Clemenceau’s famous dictum, “War is too important to be left to the generals,” and Ellison’s emphatic claim that politicians are not capable of dealing with military strategy. The command relationships and decision-making structures mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 have been and are being presently tested in war. The great utility of Ellison’s book today is that it demonstrates the importance of reexamining these structures as we learn both from our successes and our failures.

All students of civil-military relations must also find value in Ellison’s descriptions of Lord Fisher and the role he played in the British World War I grand-strategy debate. He understood there were overwhelming political reasons for the conduct of the Dardanelles campaign, hence his original silent support for the strategy. “It was my duty,” he wrote later, “to acquiesce cheerfully and do my best, but when the moment came that there was jeopardy to the Nation, I resigned.” His was a Madisonian view of civil-military relations that serves as an example for senior military officers today at the national security decision-making level. Fisher believed rightly that “Sea Lords are the servants of the Government. Having given their advice, then it’s their duty to carry out the commands of the political party in power until the moment comes when they feel they can no longer support a policy which they are convinced is disastrous.”¹⁰ Congressman Skelton’s statement, “Sadly, the eruptive situation in Iraq reflects that we are reaping the ultimate results of perils of the amateur strategy formulated by our civilian leaders in the early phases of this conflict,” may be premature.¹¹ In the absence of any senior military officer resignations since the beginning of the war in Iraq, their culpability in the Bush administration’s grand strategy remains unknown.

Suffice it to say, Ellison’s book falls short of answering definitively his self-stated central question: what is the most efficient method of conducting operations of war under a democratic form of government? But 80 years of history with democracies at war on many levels have yet to yield the definitive answer. However, his insightful discussions of grand-strategy formulation and civil-military

relations in wartime are very well worth reading. Ellison's book is to the Dardanelles campaign as H. R. McMaster's book, *Dereliction of Duty*, is to the Vietnam War.¹² For now, we wait for a similar scholarly examination of the war in Iraq. In this time of war, all credit is due Congressman Skelton for rediscovering Ellison's *Perils* and injecting it into the ongoing national security and military strategy debates. At the same time, caution is advised. Congressman Skelton would certainly not advocate a national security policy-making process dominated by the military vice Ellison, who certainly does.

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Notes

1. Eliot A. Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 575–88.
2. See Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
3. See Victor Davis Hanson, "Whose Fiasco?" *Policy Review* 140 (December 2006/January 2007), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/4884441.html>, for an excellent critique of the current genre of the Iraqi exposé, to include Thomas E. Ricks' *Fiasco*, Bernard Trainor and Michael Gordon's *Cobra II*, George Packer's *The Assassin's Gate*, and Bob Woodward's *State of Denial*, and the obligation to use verifiable sources when writing history.
4. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 134.
5. Lord Fisher, *Memories* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 50–52.
6. For an excellent overview of twentieth-century civil-military relations scholarship, see Dale R. Herspring, *The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations from FDR to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2005).
7. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 6.
8. Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 255.
9. Churchill, *World Crisis*, 36.
10. Fisher, *Memories*, 70.
11. "Skelton Statement Regarding Violence in Amara, Iraq," Press Statement, Office of Cong. Ike Skelton (D-MO), 20 October 2006.
12. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997).