

AN EVALUATION OF THE TACTICAL SCHOOL

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A WAR MINISTER is reported to have said that he had to deal with generals who had spent their time "preparing not for the next war, but for the last or the last but one." I am not without sympathy for his rueful complaint.

Every war of magnitude leaves dissimilar impressions on the contending sides, on the observers, and on those who read and try to profit by its lessons. It is inevitable that successful practices should be looked upon as guides for future preparations; but it is a singular fact how little these administrative and tactical preparations contemplate any changes in the locations and causes of the wars that are being prepared for. There is no valid reason to anticipate that any "next war" will be like any "last war," except in cases of hereditary enemies fighting on fixed terrain. This situation is found as between Germany and France, and their respective anticipations can follow their respective experiences, thus governing their respective preparations. In our efforts to learn from the experiences of the past we gravely set up rules, doctrines, and principles derived therefrom, all of which we teach without analysis as to their causes, and the conditions and pressures that made them applicable when they were originally enunciated by some forward thinker. Why do we persist in forgetting that the genius himself was an innovator, who discarded precedents and rules in order to insert an original conception that was itself to be followed later by others? This all but universal habit has resulted in shackling the military mind to the principles and pronouncements of a few military leaders who possessed originality, energy, and force enough to break away from other principles and pronouncements upon which they, themselves, had been brought up. It has systematically

taught the military mind to place an all but universal faith in the efficacy of judgments that were once successful, but without reasoning whether they are equally applicable at a later date, under changed conditions, in other parts of the world, and among other races who are fighting for other reasons. In other words, we are trained to copy, to repeat a lesson, and to follow blindly, but without the original thought that we would devote to a technical development.

Tactics is an art, but technique is a trade. We develop a fire-control system, a plan of communications, a type of long-range gun, and we accompany these mechanical advancements with an appropriate technique; but at the same time the tactical and organizational factors remain unchanged, while strategy continues to be an occult subject that is sometimes mentioned for the look of the thing, but never practiced. This condition is natural because we are not so geographically located as to throw us into strategical pressures. Nevertheless, we Americans should realize that strategy means more in the life of the world than a casual mentioning of the word. We need to develop our strategical consciousness a little bit, by applying to it a thought equal to that which we would devote to an improved carburetor, or a change in fuselage design, or a system of record keeping and accounting.

I have just said that Americans should develop their strategical sense, and I would emphasize that we need to cultivate the power of original thinking outside the realms of administration, technique, and mechanics. Our military scholars and writings of worth are strangely few. The tactical and historical texts that we read were not written by Americans. They were written by men of more scholarly and ver-

satile minds than we have shown ourselves to have. We will name a few of the master writers on war: Boguslawski, a Pole, 1759-1829; Clausewitz, a Prussian, 1780-1831; Jomini, a Swiss, 1799-1869; von der Goltz and von Bernhardi, Germans. These are some of the classics. Among the easier and more popular writers are Creesy, Hillaire Belloc, Harold Lamb, Liddell Hart, Ian Hamilton, Blease, Chatterton, and Corbin, all Englishmen. When we want a standard work on one of our own great leaders we turn to Henderson, another Englishman. There is one exception who illuminates this depressing picture. During the eclipse of the American Navy there emerged a man who was never noted for leadership or technical ability, but who developed an intellect sufficient to place him on a pedestal of solitary eminence as a thinker on naval strategy. Admiral Mahan was so far the greatest of all writers in this field that we may consider him supreme. As he originated and developed his subject it is certain that he did not copy anybody. His work was purely his own, and he reached a height of statesmanlike envisagement as surely as Pitt, Bismarck, Bonaparte, or Washington although, unlike the others, he was not destined to give factual demonstration of his abilities.

At most periods of nations' crises some great figure has arisen to lead and dominate; more often than not it has been that figure himself who has caused the crises; such was Peter the Great, Cromwell, Bonaparte, and the military statesman, Robert Clive. These types are originals, wholly unstereotyped by the compulsory imprint of others. We can well ruminare why the greatest of all crises, involving more men, nations, races, and interests, than ever before, failed utterly to provide a single dominating personality who could impose his power of thought and will upon others. Hindenburg, Ludendorf, and Mackensen, great smiters that they were, succeeded in winning battles, capturing cities, occupy-

ing areas, and changing frontiers, only to be beaten down in the end. Grand Duke Nicholas, devastator of provinces, heedless of human life, saw his country the first to collapse. Joffre, Foch, French, and Haig, having been mercilessly beaten, emerged victorious through capacity to survive punishment, and by virtue of increasing transfusions from the United States of America. But over all the spirit of Bonaparte, Bismarck, and the Great Frederick was lacking in state and military craft on shore; while the spirit of Nelson and Togo was lacking in tactical effort, even if that of Mahan was present in statecraft, on the sea. No side produced a leader comparable in war to Wallenstein and Gustavus Adolphus who, to the sorrow of history, were pitted destructively against each other instead of uniting their great abilities and high characters for the common good of mankind.

Let us detach our minds for a few moments from the Juggernauts of history, so we may appreciate some of the lesser individualists who evinced so much innate common sense in solving their problems as to compel our passing admiration. Marshal Foch is credited with the story of one Verdy du Vernois who, at the battle of Nachod, vainly sought for some maxim or precedent to guide him through a difficult situation, until exasperated he exclaimed: "To the devil with history and principles! After all, what is the problem?" That is the spirit of independent self-confidence that I like. Here is a situation: now solve it from an abundance of confidence born of experience, much reading, and a mind in athletic thinking condition.

General Wolfe, who began his military career in his father's regiment of marines, died at the age of thirty-two after one year of meteoric brilliance in amphibious warfare. During years of garrison duty he made vain efforts to improve his mind by means other than self-imposed study. He complained thus:

... did what?

There will be difficulties in everything that contradicts a principle of settled opinion, entertained among us, that an officer neither can, nor ought ever to be, otherwise employed than in his particular military functions. If they could beat men's capacities down or confine their genius to that rule—no man would ever be fitted for higher command than he is in. 'Tis unaccountable that one who wishes to see a good Army can oppose men's enlarging their notions.

He had been declined leave to go to Metz to study artillery and engineering and recalled from leave when it was learned that he intended to forsake the social life of Paris for the more plebeian occupation of studying camps and armies. "I am, nevertheless," he wrote, "determined to devote some few years of my life to the real business of a soldier, and not sacrifice all my time to idling, as are (our) trifling soldier-ships." This does not sound so very inappropriate even now in the United States. One historian writes:

He foreshadowed Napoleon's maxim to "read and reread." His determination to study infected others, until he gathered around him a band of young disciples to whom he acted as guide in the paths of knowledge.

It is noted that he was impatient of obstruction and incompetence, on one occasion writing:

We are lazy in time of peace, and of course want vigilance and activity in war. Our military education is by far the worst in Europe. I am tired of proposing anything to the officers who command our regiments; they are in general so lazy and bigoted to old habits.

And he continues again:

La critique est la vie de la science is a greater truth than the idea prevalent among weak superiors that it is a breach of discipline,

and again this seems to strike a sympathetic note in our day and generation.

It might have been expected that a man so caustic, so filled with critical analysis, should sooner or later be stigmatized as of unsound mind, and Wolfe was reported by his seniors as being mad. This news having reached King George II, he exclaimed:

"Mad is he? Then all I can say is I hope he'll bite some of my other generals." Following that, Wolfe was given supreme command over all forces waging the amphibious war in Canada, where he captured Quebec and lost his life. He was thirty-two years of age and a purely self-developed individual, unhampered by restrictions of what he had stigmatized as the "worst military education in Europe."

Is Wolfe alone among the originals? We shall see. Does Gustavus Adolphus (Swede, 1594–1632) belong among the military immortals? We cannot answer that without the proviso—not unless Wallenstein (German, 1583–1634) also belongs among them. In this case we will answer "yes" for both of them, although each was too much of a statesman to be a soldier and too much of a soldier to be a statesman. It was the irony of historic fate that these two men should have pitted their talents against each other in military combat when each was so pre-eminently a creative genius. As secular enemies they fought to a draw. As political allies they could have stabilized Europe for years to come. But we are not now concerned with the Renaissance or the Reformation. We are interested in the military character of two great enemies. Gustavus was an originator of tactics and formations to meet changing conditions in war. Wallenstein was a statesman who looked upon war and battle as ancillary to political ends they were fought to attain. Gustavus was possibly a better combat commander. Wallenstein was probably a more discerning political visionary. Our immediate interest focuses more on Gustavus because, like Wolfe, he waged an over-seas war. Wolfe transported first to Flanders and then to Canada. Gustavus transported from Sweden, across the southern reaches of the Baltic, to the island of Usedom, north of Stettin, in Germany. There he laid his base and pushed his operations to the Danube; while behind him lay his sea-borne service

a studying what?

of supply, in spite of the neutral Danish fleet that Wallenstein saw the need of trying to ally with himself. Each saw the strategic significance of that fleet and strove to neutralize or profit by it.

Gustavus, the invader, suffered from lack of maps and terrain information. At the siege of Demmin he made a personal reconnaissance and nearly lost his life in a bog. Upon being reproached by one of his officers he replied: "It is my nature not to believe well done except what I do myself; it is also necessary that I see everything with my own eyes." This does not indicate a strong confidence in his staff; but it does indicate a personal individualism that was markedly successful in solving the problems that confronted him. Later on Napoleon Bonaparte himself indicated similar tendencies.

The attitude of Marshal de Saxe was the exact opposite of this. He lived from 1696 to 1750, and solved his military problems in his own personal way, just as Gustavus and Wallenstein did. None followed rules or principles or precedents established by others. Each was an individualist, and all were notably successful. What said Verdy du Vernois? "To the devil with history and principles! What is the problem?" Said de Saxe: "If he (the general in command) takes it upon himself to do the duty of a sergeant in the battle, to be everywhere in person, he will resemble the fly in the fable, which had the vanity to consider itself capable of driving a coach." And again:

I have seen very good colonels become very bad generals. Many commanders are not otherwise employed in a day of action than in making their troops march in a straight line, in seeing that they keep their proper distances, and in running about constantly. The reason for this defect is that very few officers study the grand detail, but spend all their time in exercising the troops from a weak conception that the military art consists only in that branch; when, therefore, they arrive at the command of armies they are totally perplexed, and from their ignorance of how to do what they ought, are very naturally led to do what they know.

De Saxe evidently refers to the emphasis laid upon technique, which is a trade, and the limitations restricting tactics, which is an art. As the two were welded together in his own mind they became a science. His conceptions were the opposite of those of Gustavus Adolphus, but the two were equally successful. Which was right? De Saxe was a nobleman, and Gustavus was a King; but Wallenstein was a commoner and had to exercise his native ingenuity in order to rise.

[Wallenstein] realized that the easiest and quickest path into the esteem of the royal amateurs of war and traditional military authorities is by the appeal to the eye rather than to the mind. The "polish and pipe clay" school is not yet extinct, and it is easier for the mediocre intelligence to become an authority on buttons than on tactics.

As this is a verbatim quotation anybody who desires to smile may do so without lèse majesté.

No one who believes in studying the unorthodox should overlook Suvarov, a Russian who lived from 1729 to 1800. The military eccentricity of this man has never been fairly evaluated by English-speaking officers. He was commissioned by the route prescribed by Peter the Great, who ordered that all his officers should enlist and pass through the grades. Suvarov put on his private's uniform at the age of fifteen, when he already "knew more about the history and art of war than most of the carpet officers to whom he had to present arms." The historian observes that his life was one of reading and meditation. He studied Plutarch and Caesar, Turenne, Prince Eugene of Savoy, and Marshal de Saxe. He read general history and geography; and from Vauban learned artillery and fortifications. Yet he persistently defied every military principle as Americans teach principles, and displayed a highly successful contempt for all orthodox theories of war; and in this he reaped a harvest of victories that has seldom been equalled by any

of which he did much

commander. In February, 1799, he was loaned to the Emperor of Austria, together with a Russian force that was to invade north Italy and campaign in Switzerland. Upon arrival in Vienna he was "provided with an efficient staff," from which we may infer that he had not seen fit to provide one for himself. Four members of the High War Council waited on him with a request for his opinion on a plan of campaign as far as the Adda River. Across this paper Suvarov drew a large cross mark and on the bottom he wrote: "The plan will begin with the passage of the Adda, and end as God pleases." Later, when General Korsakof had been defeated at Zurich, and his plans to overthrow the French in Switzerland went awry, Suvarov expressed himself thus as to the orthodox officers and their methods:

Parades, drills, great respect for one's self, defend one's self, hats off, merciful Lord! Aye, it must be,—and in time,—but needs more to know how to wage war, know the lie of the land,—be able to calculate, not allow one's self to be deceived, understand how to beat. But to be beaten is easy—throw away so many thousands, and such men! In one day! Merciful Lord!

Bagration, who was later to retire before Napoleon along the road to Moscow, heard these ejaculations and considered it expedient to withdraw.

So much has been said about military leaders who have expressed or implied their contempt for the orthodox profession that I must point out this is not my professional attitude. I am not hostile to military tactical schools or to their orthodox teachings; but I do wish to locate them definitely in their proper place in the scheme of military life, to the end that their importance will not be overrated, or their teachings accepted too seriously. At their very best these schools (I am speaking of tactical schools and not technical schools) can only elevate the officer personnel to a high degree of mediocrity. At their very worst they can suppress or deflect the develop-

ment of any who could rise above mediocrity and approach the superlative. James Truslow Adams does not name the president of the great American university whom he quotes as saying ". . . as far as he could see the university turned out a standardized low grade mental product, much like an intellectual Ford factory." It is in much this way that I look upon the military tactical schools. I have already ventured the observation that the greatest war, participated in by more international school products than any other war, was the only great war that did not produce more than a locally and temporarily dominant personality, and not one genius. With the single exception of von Hindenburg, every nationally dominant character fell either during or immediately after the war. Those who succeeded to power of position had no war reputations to back them. Mussolini, Riza Kahn Pehlive, Kemal Pasha, Lenin, all were eccentrics and originals. Ramsay MacDonald was a pacifist and a socialist. None of them was the product of any school of molded and arbitrary thought or of assertive teachings. The procession of premiers and governments in France and Germany indicates no war-born genius there. The only bright flame in the United States was extinguished by his fellow countrymen, lost power, and died without influence. Von Hindenburg alone in all the world retained, and even increased, his war prestige. But he lost his war and saw his country ignominiously stripped of power and dignity.

Curiously enough von Hindenburg was orthodox of the orthodox, the pure product of an orthodox system of life and schooling. This leads me to believe that he would have been substantially what he was no matter what his background had been. Like Gustavus Adolphus, Wallenstein, de Saxe, Peter the Great, Suvarov, even Genghis Kahn and Tamerlane if we care to go so far back, he was an individualist of such intense character that he would

have imposed himself on those who surrounded him in spite of all opposition, even the smothering influence of a purely military educational routine. But von Hindenburg himself had been looked upon as an eccentric, a curious old man who was hipped on the subject of some lakes in East Prussia where he liked to go hunting. He had a hobby that these selfsame lakes might some day be useful, just in case the Russians should ever consider crossing their frontiers, and provided somebody knew the country thereabouts so well as to make strategic use of it to repel invasion. The old man lived in quiet retirement until just that circumstance arose, when he was unceremoniously and hurriedly called back into service and sent to the east front, eccentricity, hobby, and all. We know the rest. In spite of orthodoxy he was an individualist of such determined character that even military scholastic routine could not suppress him.

Therefore, in reading of what others have done in the past, we do no more than acquire a military background, add a little to our professional culture, from which to

extend our horizon and stimulate our originality. Attending classes will not of itself educate an officer; and any officer desiring to educate himself can do so even if he never attends a class. The way opens before the will, and when an officer attending classes happens to want to benefit from that circumstance, then the will and way are coincident; but military education is never completed with or by the termination of classes, and the receipt of a bit of paper saying that the bearer has "satisfactorily completed the course." The man who then thinks he is educated would do well to ponder the alternative of being "slightly trained," and realize that his education begins when he graduates. It has been my observation that the majority of officers are indifferent as to education, but aspire to sufficient training to enable them to "get by" an examination of sorts. The self-confident man will not look for a book to find out what somebody else did, somewhere else, at some other time in history. He will say with Verdy du Vernois: "To the devil with history and principles! After all, what is the problem?"



"WAR IS AN ACT of violence to compel our opponents to do our will." Consequently, the first desideratum of a war plan is that the means adopted must conflict as little as possible with the political conditions from which the war springs. In practice, of course, as in all human relations, there will be a compromise between the means and the end, between the political and the military exigencies. But Clausewitz held that policy must always be the master. The officer charged with the conduct of war may, of course, demand that the tendencies and views of policy shall not be incompatible with the military means which are placed at his disposal; but however strongly this demand may react on policy, in particular cases, military action must still be regarded only as a manifestation of policy. It must never supersede policy. The policy is always the object; war is only the means by which we obtain the object, and the means must always keep the end in view.—

CORBETT.

COMMERCE DESTRUCTION—PAST AND FUTURE.....	1513
<i>By Fletcher Pratt</i>	
CHINESE LINES OF COMMUNICATION AND THEIR EFFECT ON STRATEGY....	1519
<i>By Lieutenant Forrest H. Wells, U. S. Navy</i>	
HIGH QUALITY OF OUR RESERVE.....	1526
<i>By Colonel Harold C. Reisinger, U. S. Marine Corps</i>	
AN EVALUATION OF THE TACTICAL SCHOOL.....	1537
<i>By Brigadier General J. C. Breckinridge, U. S. Marine Corps</i>	
HISTORIC SHIPS OF THE NAVY, CRICKET.....	1543
<i>By Robert W. Neeser</i>	
THE FLYING DECK CRUISER.....	1545
<i>By Lieutenant (J.G.) John A. Collett, U. S. Navy</i>	
THE BEAUFORT WIND SCALE.....	1546
<i>By Lieutenant Frederick J. Nelson, U. S. Navy</i>	
NATIVE CRAFT OF SAMOA.....	1549
<i>By Lieutenant Commander Arthur T. Emerson, U. S. Navy</i>	
ACCURACY IN AÉRIAL DEAD RECKONING.....	1561
<i>By Harold Gatty</i>	
DIESEL-DRIVEN SURFACE CRAFT.....	1564
<i>By Lieutenant Commander John O. Huse, U. S. Navy</i>	
AIR BOMBARDMENT REGULATION.....	1577
<i>By Ensign William Campbell Chambliss, U. S. Naval Reserve</i>	
SUBMARINE MINING, ORPHAN CHILD OF THE SERVICE.....	1582
<i>By Wayne Francis Palmer</i>	
DISCUSSIONS.....	1601
NOTES ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS.....	1609
BOOK REVIEWS.....	1614
PROFESSIONAL NOTES.....	1617
SECRETARY'S NOTES.....	1649

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