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TO PROVIDE FOR THE COMMON DEFENSE

by

HARRY G. SUMMERS, JR.

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It was significant . . . that [the] metaphoric use of 'picture' [as in 'The Big Picture'] had come into vogue at the time when all the painters of the world had finally abandoned lucidity.

Evelyn Waugh
Officers and Gentlemen (1955)¹

Waugh's observation, based on his World War II experience, gives us an insight to the Vietnam War. Vietnam was not a canvas by Daumier or even by Degas. It was more an abstract by Dali or De Kooning. Yet, as art critics would tell us, even abstracts follow certain truths of color and composition. The same is true in war.

If we are to profit from our failure in Vietnam, we must understand that it was a violation of these truths, not evil or wicked leaders, that was the cause of our undoing. As David Halberstam pointed out in *The Best and the Brightest*,² one of the saddest aspects of the war is that it was waged by well-meaning and intelligent men doing what they thought best. The tendency to find devils, however, is still with us. A recent CBS television special³ would have us believe that it was General Westmoreland's deliberate underestimation of enemy strength that did us in. But as General Eisenhower found out at the Battle of the Bulge, estimation of enemy strength is always obscured by the fog of war. In fact, the usual tendency is to overestimate. For example, during the Civil War, President Lincoln sarcastically told a

visitor that the rebels had "1,200,000 troops in the field according to the best authority. You see," he went on,

all of my generals, when they get whipped, say the enemy outnumbers them from three to five to one and I must believe them. We have 400,000 men in the field, and three times four makes twelve. Do you see it?⁴

From another perspective, Clausewitz warned:

A critic should . . . not check a great commander's solution to a problem as if it were a sum in arithmetic. To judge . . . it is necessary for a critic to take a more comprehensive point of view.

If a critic points out that a Frederick or a Bonaparte made mistakes, it does not mean that he would not have made them too. He may even admit that in the general's place he might have made far greater errors. What it does mean is that he can recognize these mistakes . . . based on the pattern of events and therefore also *on their outcome*.⁵

“The pattern of events and . . . their outcome” make it obvious that the problem in Vietnam, as in the early days of the Civil War, was not evil leaders or faulty arithmetic as much as it was a lack of strategic thinking. As George Allen, one of the CIA’s primary Vietnam analysts put it, it wasn’t so much the numbers, “it was a fundamental question of the soundness of our policy, of our whole approach to the war.”⁶

This lack of understanding of the “Big Picture” was not peculiar to Vietnam. It is a common failing. Writing about 14th-century warfare, Barbara Tuchman observed that

what moved knights to war was desire to do deeds of valor . . . not the gaining of a political end by force of arms. They were concerned with action, not the goal—which was why the goal was so rarely attained.⁷

Fifty years before Clausewitz, Marshal Maurice de Saxe observed,

Very few men occupy themselves with the higher problems of war. They pass their lives drilling troops [an essential skill, by the way, for 18th century *tactical* success] and believe that this is the only branch of the military art. When they arrive at the command of armies they are totally ignorant, and in default of knowing what should be done, they do what they know.⁸

In Vietnam we also did what we knew. In logistics and in tactics we succeeded in everything we set out to do, but our failure in strategy made these deeds and skills irrelevant. This is the lesson we must keep in mind as we look to the future. While we will still need “deeds of valor” and proficiency in logistics and tactics, we must insure that such deeds and skills are applied in pursuit of a sound strategy.

As we devise a strategy for the future, we must begin with a mission analysis of the tasks assigned us by the American people through their elected representatives in the Congress. The National Security Act of 1947, as amended, specifies three primary missions for the armed forces of the United States:

defend the American homeland from external attack; safeguard our internal security; and uphold and advance the national policies and interests of the United States, to include insuring the security of areas vital to those interests.

Although our military policies are often justified in terms of the first mission—protection of the homeland—it is the third mission—protection of American worldwide interests—that has most often led to the commitment of American armed forces. It was easier to say, “Fight them in Vietnam or fight them in the streets of San Francisco,” than it was to attempt to explain the complex network of interests behind our Vietnam policy, and “protection” is much less open to argumentation than “interests” over which one may or may not agree. But this divergence between what we were doing and what we said we were doing led to such serious problems as the “credibility gap” and the subsequent loss of public support. As Senator Jacob Javits observed,

We . . . failed to perceive that people will probably respond to arguments made on the basis of enlightened self-interest The apocalyptic language . . . tended to deceive those who used it as well as those who got the message.⁹

In the future we must take care to avoid jeopardizing the public support of Americans

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for their military with misstatements of what we are about.

Another fact we must remember is that we are not very good at predicting future events. For example, as we emerged from World War II the locality of our next conflict—Korea—could not even be found on world maps. It was still labeled by its Japanese name, Chosen. By the same token, as we emerged from the Korean War, the maps of the world did not show Vietnam. It was still part of French Indochina. It is as true now as it was then that we cannot know the future. While scenarios of likely conflict areas are of some utility in contingency planning, we must not become so fixated by such scenarios that we lose our flexibility to cope with real conflicts.¹⁰

We must also understand the nature of military forces themselves. They are designed, equipped and trained for a specific task: to fight and win on the battlefield. They are, in effect, a battle-ax. In the past we have tried to use them to accomplish tasks for which they were not designed—nation building in Vietnam being the most recent case in point. Perhaps the most dangerous misuse of military forces is in the attempt to bluff a potential adversary when those forces do not have the necessary combat power (the combination of both materiel and moral strength) to carry out the threat if the bluff is called. If we are to use our armed forces to deter a potential adversary, we must remember Clausewitz's warning:

Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy's forces as a means to a further end. *That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed.*¹¹

With this background we can now examine the tools with which we can apply our military judgment to national security issues. The principles of war are tools well suited to this purpose. As Professor Peter Paret emphasized in his translation of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*,

such principles are not designed to serve as immutable rules but instead give "points of reference and standards of evaluation . . . with the ultimate purpose not of telling [us] how to act but of developing [our] judgment."¹² In other words, as Colonel Charles Hines puts it, they provide "military planning interrogatories," a series of questions that provide a framework for analysis. The first question, "What are we trying to accomplish with the use of military force?" is contained in the principle of *The Objective*. The second principle, *The Offensive*, helps us with the next question, "How are we going to do it?" The principles of *Mass*, *Maneuver*, *Economy of Force*, *Security*, and *Surprise* refine the question of the means to be applied. "Who is going to control it?" is covered by *Unity of Command*. Finally, the principle of *Simplicity* serves as a check on the clarity of our thinking.

The first principle of war is the principle of *The Objective*. It is the first principle because all else flows from it. It is the strategic equivalent of the mission statement in tactics, and we must subject it to the same rigorous analysis as we do the tactical mission. How to determine military objectives that will achieve or assist in achieving the political objectives of the United States is the primary task of the military strategist, thus the relationship between military and political objectives is critical. Prior to any future commitment of US military forces, our military leaders must insist that the civilian leadership provide tangible, obtainable political goals. The political objective cannot be merely a platitude, but must be stated in concrete terms. While such an objective may very well change during the course of the war, it is essential that we begin with an understanding of where we intend to go. As Clausewitz said, we should not "take the first step without considering the last."¹³

For example, it is not good enough to say that our armed forces are to protect access to vital raw materials. General Sir John Hackett pointed out in a recent article on the military requirements for protecting oil supplies how complex the application of the principle of

The Objective can become. First, he said, we have to determine our objective *area*:

In choosing an area of operations it would first be necessary very clearly to specify the requirement. This can be identified in four degrees:

- to supply US needs alone;
- to supply US needs plus those of Japan;
- to supply US needs plus those of NATO allies;
- to supply US needs plus those of NATO allies *and* Japan.

Once the objective *area* has been determined, we must then decide the actual objective of the operation. Hackett goes on to say:

Such operations could only be said to have succeeded if they satisfied five requirements.

- to seize the vital oil installations virtually intact;
- to secure them for weeks, months and even years;
- to restore wrecked resources rapidly;
- to operate installations with little or no cooperation from the owners;
- to guarantee the safe passage of petroleum products from the area and supplies to it.

As Hackett concludes, "It would be idle to pretend that there are not truly formidable difficulties to be faced here."¹⁴

It can be seen that the selection of an objective is not an easy task. Even the seemingly simple matter of "protecting access to vital raw materials" becomes complicated when applied to a specific situation. Yet, if we don't have a firm and sharply defined objective, if we don't know where we are going, it is impossible to determine when we get there. That was one of the major problems of Vietnam and it will continue to be a problem in the future if we do not determine precisely what we are attempting to achieve with the use of military force. In other words, we (and, perhaps what is more important, the American people)

need to have a definition of "victory." Victory need not be the total destruction of an enemy or the complete conquest of his territory. It need only be the attainment of a political goal that prompted our involvement, such as the restoration of the status quo in the Korean War. It also should be recognized that in the very pursuit of a precise definition of the objective, the military will invariably be working at cross-purposes with its civilian leaders. For both domestic and international political purposes the civilian leaders want maximum flexibility and maneuverability and are hesitant to fix firm objectives. The military, on the other hand, need just such firm objectives as early as possible in order to plan and conduct military operations.

What we are faced with is the obverse of the problem President Kennedy faced when he issued an order in 1961 directing the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be "more than military men."¹⁵ Just as the military need to be aware of political, economic, and social issues, so our civilian leadership must be aware of the imperatives of military operations. They need to understand that national policy affects not only the selection of a military objective but also the very way that war is conducted. As Clausewitz put it, the primacy of policy in war rests on the assumption that "policy knows the instrument it means to use A certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy."¹⁶

Carrying the war to the enemy through the strategic offensive and destroying his armed forces and his will to fight is the classic way wars are fought and won, hence the second principle of war is labeled *The Offensive*. For the past generation, however, US national policy vis-à-vis our major adversary has rejected the strategic offensive (roll-back or liberation) in favor of the strategic defensive (containment). While it might appear on the surface that *The Offensive* is no longer valid, the essence of this principle is primarily concerned with maintaining initiative and freedom of action in the face of the enemy. Maintaining initiative and freedom of action is easiest on the strategic offensive, but it can also be done

on the strategic defensive. It is instructive to remember that Waterloo, one of the most decisive battles in history, was won on the strategic defensive. Recently some critics of our NATO strategy have argued for a declaratory posture of the strategic offensive rather than the strategic defensive in the event of war in Europe. They need to understand, however, that such a change requires not only a change in military strategy but, more important, a change in national policy, for army strategies must, at all times, be in consonance with national policy, as must the doctrines and tactics that flow from these strategies.

Redefining this principle in terms of *initiative* rather than purely in terms of offensive action highlights yet another dimension. In order to maintain initiative, commanders at all levels must be allowed, within the constraints of national policy, maximum freedom of action. Such freedom of action at the strategic level appears to have suffered a lasting blow during the Truman-MacArthur controversy, when General MacArthur's actions (in then Secretary of Defense George Marshall's words) raised "grave doubt as to whether he could any longer be permitted to exercise the authority in making decisions that normal command functions would assign to a theater commander."¹⁷ If we are to operate at full efficiency, the military must regain the trust of their civilian leaders, for, even with instantaneous modern communications, only the commander on the ground can react to the rapidly changing situations of the modern battlefield. One of the beneficial contributions of such critics as John Boyd and Edward Luttwak has been the public resurfacing of the military importance of delegation of authority and mutual trust as means of promoting initiative and freedom of action. Growing out of the reforms of the German Army of the 19th century by Field Marshal von Moltke and others, such trust is exemplified by what the German Army calls *Auftragstaktik*, i.e., the promotion of harmonious thinking at all echelons of command that enables subordinates to both understand and carry out the mission concept of their

superiors. Such initiative thus promotes the use at every echelon of the best means available to accomplish the mission.

These means are encompassed in the principles of *Mass*, *Maneuver*, and *Economy of Force*, which together describe the application of combat power (a combination of physical means and moral strength) against the enemy. The three principles, grouped together in the single principle of *Concentration* until publication of the 1949 version of the *Field Service Regulations*, are focused in their application against the enemy's center of gravity.

Clausewitz defines "center of gravity" for us as follows:

Out of [the enemy's dominant] characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.¹⁸

Although Clausewitz goes on to say that "the defeat and destruction of [the enemy's] fighting force remains the best way," our Vietnam War experience has proved the truth of his observation that there could be other valid centers of gravity, including the army of the protector of a small country, the community of interests of an alliance, the personality of a leader, and public opinion.¹⁹

Keeping in mind their kinship, we can now examine these three principles in more detail. *Mass* and *Economy of Force* (considered in tandem since they are often the reciprocal of each other) are critical principles for the United States. As we look at the world, it is likely that we will take note of two intertwined phenomena: a continued bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, the only other worldwide military power and the only nation capable of destroying us; and, at the same time, threats to our interests from heavily armed Soviet surrogates and independent, militarily sophisticated Third World nations. This combination has caused us serious difficulty in the past. In both Korea and Vietnam we became involved to

blunt what we saw as an attempt by the Soviet Union and China to expand communism by force of arms. But the fear of becoming involved in a war with the Soviet Union and China inhibited our efforts. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put the problem succinctly: "Our perception of the global challenge at the same time tempted us to distant enterprises and prevented us from meeting them conclusively."²⁰ We were constantly plagued during the Vietnam War with the dilemma over whether to mass to fight the war in Vietnam and employ an economy of force in Europe or whether to attempt to commit finite resources to both places simultaneously. This problem has not gone away. As Army Chief of Staff Edward C. Meyer said in his *White Paper 1980*:

The most demanding challenge confronting the US military in the decade of the 1980s is to develop and demonstrate the capability to successfully meet threats to vital US interests outside of Europe, without compromising the decisive theater in Central Europe.²¹

Maneuver is another strategic complicating factor for the American military. Although the Mackinder theory of the heartland is supposedly out of date, the facts of geography remain. Our major adversary, the Soviet Union, is a continental power. The USSR can influence events in Western Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia merely by massing troops within her own borders. The United States by comparison is an insular power. In order to influence events to the same extent, we must deploy troops overseas. This places a premium on strategic sealift and airlift, as well as on base rights in strategic areas of the world. Although lift is a priority requirement for the Army, since our land forces must be moved to the point of decision, it is of lesser importance to the Navy, whose first priority is control of the sea, and to the Air Force, whose prime attention is directed toward air control. In a time of constrained budgets these services can be expected to emphasize their higher priorities. One of the ways that we have attempted to alleviate this problem is through

POMCUS—positioning of military equipment in strategic overseas locations, primarily in NATO. But this solution has been at the price of our worldwide flexibility and of the readiness of our forces here at home, since prepositioned equipment is not available for training. As the Army *White Paper 1980* puts it:

Our capabilities to project combat power worldwide must be improved. We are approaching the upper limits of feasibility in the POMCUS programmed for Europe. Further improvements must come from improved strategic mobility (particularly fast sealift), force structure changes, Host Nation Support, and, where possible, lighter more capable forces.²²

Turning from the problem of *how* we are to wage war, we must also address the issue of *who* will insure the unity of our efforts. *Unity of Command* has plagued the American military for many years. The Department of Defense is charged with two distinct tasks. One is the normal peacetime task of preparation for war. The other is the task of conducting war itself. These divergent tasks would be automatically reconciled in the event of total war, but, as the Vietnam War made obvious, they can work against each other during limited war. It would appear that this deficiency could be eliminated through minor modifications to the existing command structure. In future contingency operations the Secretary of Defense could designate a specific element to deal with the task of maintaining our deterrence through preparation for war and another separate element to conduct concurrently a limited war in which the United States is already involved.

With the next two principles, *Security* and *Surprise*, we run into a fundamental problem in the conduct of US military strategy options. That problem is the inherent conflict between a free and democratic American society and the need for security in the conduct of US military operations. Short of total war it is unlikely

that the United States would impose total censorship over military operations. Our experiences in Vietnam demonstrate what a serious problem this can become. Although there was no instance in which the news media jeopardized *tactical* security and surprise, the very nature of their craft makes it almost impossible for them to preserve *strategic* security and surprise. The American people rightly demand to know what their government is doing, and it is the responsibility of the news media to supply that information. In so doing, however, they also supply such information to our enemies. North Vietnamese accounts of the war showed how closely the North Vietnamese monitored the American media. There is no doubt that this virtual inability of the United States to preserve strategic security causes us great problems. But the alternatives are even worse. The US military belongs to the American people, who take a proprietary interest in its commitment. Imposition of total censorship would not only jeopardize the very basis of American society but would also sever the link between the American people and their military. The ultimate price could well be higher than any advantages that might accrue through improved US strategic security. It is also interesting to recall a paradox of the Vietnam War in that we were able to achieve strategic surprise with our initial ground force intervention and again with the 1972 "Christmas bombing" because the free and open American media acted as a kind of inadvertent deception device.

That paradox illustrates another aspect of security and surprise that is an important part of American strategic decision-making. During a briefing by the Army's Strategic Assessment Group in 1974, Lieutenant General Vernon Walters, then Deputy Director of the CIA, commented that if on 26 June 1950 a Russian spy had been able to break into the Pentagon and the State Department and steal our most sensitive Top Secret plans on Korea, he would have found that we had no strategic interest whatsoever in that country. "But," General Walters went on, "the one place he couldn't break into was the mind of President Truman, and on 27

June 1950 we went to war over Korea."²³ American vital interests are determined in large measure by the President alone when he makes the decision to commit American forces to their defense. The resulting volatility and unpredictability of American action promote both strategic surprise and strategic security, and in so doing give us a major advantage. At the same time they impose an enormous burden on the armed forces, which must maintain the flexibility to be able to respond immediately to such decisions.

Such high-level strategic decision-making can have yet another effect. Especially in recent years, the prevalence of "leaks" within the federal government has made decision-makers reluctant to commit sensitive planning and operational details to paper, and to provide those in the planning and operational chain with all the relevant data. This practice can have disastrous results. As Austrian World War I General Alfred Krauss once pointed out,

Secrecy cannot be maintained by hiding one's intentions from subordinates. One should not believe that secrecy can be maintained if only a handful of superior officers know of the battle plan. Such secrecy is not desirable, because any operation must be thoroughly trained and rehearsed if it is to be successful.²⁴

The solution to the problem of intra-government security is beyond the purview of the Army, but it is a problem that must be taken into account in future crises.

The last principle of war, *Simplicity*, has application both in generating public support and in the conduct of war itself. On the one hand, the American people must understand what we are about and why their sacrifices are necessary. On the other hand, we ourselves must understand what we are trying to achieve with the use of military force. Overly complex and convoluted plans and operations should in themselves be a danger signal. As the 1949 version of the *Field Service Regulations* warned,

Simplicity of plans must be emphasized, for in operations even the most simple plan is usually difficult to execute. The final test of a plan is its execution; this must be borne constantly in mind during planning.²⁵

Siegfried Sassoon, wounded in action and decorated for bravery as a British infantry lieutenant in the trenches in Flanders, put the awesome responsibility of the military planner succinctly in his 1917 poem, *The General*:

“Good morning; good morning!” the general said
When we met him last week on our way to the Line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ‘em dead.
And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.

“He’s a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both with his plan of attack.²⁶

How to avoid doing our country and our soldiers in with the “plan of attack” has been the prime concern of military tacticians and strategists since long before Vietnam. In 1935, then Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, also drawing from his World War I experiences, discussed how this could be done:

The military student does not seek to learn from history the minutiae of method and technique. In every age these are decisively influenced by the characteristics of weapons currently available and by means at hand for maneuvering, supplying and controlling combat forces. But research does bring to light those fundamental principles, and their combinations and applications, which, in the past, have been productive of success. These principles know no limitation of time. Consequently, the army extends its

analytical interest to the dust-buried accounts of wars long past as well as those still reeking with the scent of battle.²⁷

It is one of the anomalies of Vietnam that accounts of our experience there are more “dust-buried” than “reeking with the scent of battle.” Yet research on that war has “brought to light those fundamental principles, and the combinations and applications which . . . have been productive of success.” That it was not *our* success makes it even more imperative that we learn from that experience. The quintessential “strategic lesson learned” from the Vietnam War is that we must once again become masters of the profession of arms. The American people deserve, demand, and expect nothing less of their Army.

NOTES

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3. CBS Reports, *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*, 23 January 1982.
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6. “Replaying an Old War Game,” *Newsweek*, 8 February 1982, p. 95.
7. Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 502.
8. Marshal Maurice de Saxe, “My Reveries Upon the Art of War” (1757), in Major Thomas R. Phillips’ *Roots of Strategy* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Service Publishing Company, 1940), pp. 296-97.
9. Jacob Javits with Don Kellermann, *Who Makes War: The President versus Congress* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 265.
10. In 1964 the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command rejected a proposal from his State Department political adviser that US forces isolate the battlefield in South Vietnam by taking up defensive positions to guard the frontier against North Vietnamese infiltration. The reason given for rejection was that the proposal “would get our forces committed out of synchronization with our contingency plans.”
11. Clausewitz, p. 97. (Emphasis added.)
12. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 584.
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19. *Ibid.*
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23. Author's personal notes.
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This article is a slightly edited version of the Epilogue from the June 1982 edition of the author's book *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio Press, 31 Pamaron Way, Novato, Calif. 94947. \$12.95).

