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False Dichotomies in the Defense Debate

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The catalogue of military strategists, planners, and operators has recently grown at a rate that far exceeds that of the national debt. Gideon, Sun Tzu, Caesar, Frederick, Vauban, Napoleon, Jomini, Clausewitz, Mahan, Douhet, and Mitchell have now been joined by Luttwak, Boyd, Canby, Record, Hart, Lind, Gabriel, Gingrich, Savage, a born-again Cincinnatus, and Packard. The contribution of these so-called reformers to the depth and increasing decibel level of the defense debate is not only relevant, it could be important. In a real sense, the growing awareness of shortcomings in US military capability—men, materiel, and method—is the essential prerequisite for developing and deploying those ever more scarce resources, tangible and intangible, needed to restore the military balance and ensure both liberty and peace. There are, however, inherent dangers in this “new discussion.”

The nation’s security depends on initiative and clear thinking. We need new ideas on the application of force and we need to revisit some old ones. But we don’t need creative bookkeeping or superficial historical single-factor analyses clothed in innovative semantics. The greatest weight, at least in terms of pounds, of the new discussion bears on a contrived and artificial distinction between attrition and maneuver. But the only doctrinaire advocacy of “pure attrition” or “pure maneuver” to be found anywhere is contained in the strawman constructed by the new discussants themselves. Maneuver and attrition are not and cannot be made to be contradictory opposites. They are complementary principles—principles like liberty and equality or free speech and national security. They require not a choice, but a balance.

The semantic games do not end here, however. The major challenge facing US policy is deterring Soviet attack. Our current military strategy requires that we accomplish this by deploying a ready, visible, and credible capability to defeat any such attack promptly and decisively. This is a dirty, dangerous, and dynamic task. Maintaining the synergistic interaction of mass, attrition, maneuver, and the other multiple, complex, and interrelated principles is the most dynamic aspect of the task. It is not made easier by postulating artificial distinctions among tactics, operational art, strategy, and grand strategy, then wasting time and talent fine-tuning the distinctions. We are seeing too much of this. In reality, the distinctions among the levels of war are far more apparent than real. They do not form a continuum, broken by clear lines to set off the levels. Rather, they interrelate like the five rings of the Olympic logo; each influences, is influenced by, and interlocks with the other.

The nature of the political objectives assigned NATO forces in Europe places limitations on military operational concepts. They are not to be deplored; they result from legitimate political objectives. Thus, regardless of what the armchair fellows would have us do, there will be no lightning thrust into the soft underbelly of Europe to separate industrial Russia from Georgia and the Ukraine. No sharp preemptive jab to pierce the iron curtain and free the Baltic states. No grandiose strategic withdrawal west of the Rhine. The task is to defend, *and to defend forward*. This provides the strategic envelope in which we must conduct operations. There is, from the Elbe to the Rhine, little space to trade for time. Thus the defense must be both visionary and constrained. It is silly to view it otherwise. To re-coin a phrase, we cannot destroy Europe in order to defend it.

Thus we must be prepared materially and doctrinally to see the whole battlefield; to concentrate at critical times and places; to shock, overwhelm, and destroy the enemy. We envision the battlefield to be an arena of hyperactive defense, displaying the characteristics of both attrition and maneuver. We strive to maintain highly favorable force attrition ratios. And we must use firepower, maneuver, mass, and, when possible, surprise

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and deception to achieve them. We have as a matter of alliance strategic policy conceded to the potential aggressor a choice of time and place; we cannot as a matter of technology or doctrine concede him anything else.

Even a cursory study of military history reveals that a willingness to accept constructive and calculated risks distinguishes the bold success from the timid failure. Our doctrine, nominally defensive and admitting of penetrations (risky, yes), is actually offensive if not explosive in character because it generates opportunities for striking the enemy's flanks. This principle is the essence of relational maneuver. But, to paraphrase Napoleon, in war, as in love, contact is required for conquest. One does not maneuver for maneuver's sake. One maneuvers for the same reason that a naval fleet crosses the T—to put maximum destructive fire on the enemy while minimizing one's own vulnerability.

We should not forget that maneuver carries potential deficits. Targets are acquired on the battlefield in many ways—sight, sound, smell, radar emissions, radio transmissions, heat, or movement. Remember how when Mauldin's Willy, in commenting to Joe about a tank, noted that a moving foxhole attracts the eye. Such is far truer today than then. Over-the-horizon radars and indirect fire weapons are drawn to maneuvering forces like flies to a dungheap. Although the numbers-versus-quality argument goes on, and discussions of tradeoffs to achieve the next technological step in marginal improvement are valid, it remains clear and non-controversial—Observation-Oriented-Decision-Action loops, beltloops, and defensive rings to the contrary notwithstanding—that technology-enhanced firepower does make a difference. We cannot replace the big guns associated with St. Barbara with the movement associated with St. Vitus.

It has been more than four decades since comparable forces belonging to major powers have engaged in combat. Thus, in spite of the prognosis made by strong-minded professionals and talented amateurs, we can draw only one dominant conclusion concerning the future battlefield: we cannot be certain what it will be like. The battlefield may well be very lethal. We know that in World War II in a tank-to-tank battle it took approximately 13 rounds to have a 50-50 chance of hitting a standing tank at 1500 meters. In Korea this was reduced to three rounds, and today we project that the single-shot kill probability will approach unity. On the other hand, it is conceivable that the Soviet Eighth Guards Army will electrocute itself, the US Third Infantry Division blow a fuse and go blind, and the British Army of the Rhine grind to a halt because someone pulled the plug. If all the counter-counter-countermeasures work, and they may, the force best able to employ observed artillery fire will have the advantage. In any event, the extension of technology and lethality to the battlefield is ignored at one's peril. They will affect our capacity for maneuver. Doctrine must optimize forces in being and those reasonably achievable. Vague lessons

from history concerning maneuver cannot be used to obscure the fact that changes in weaponry dictate changes in employment and manner of fighting. Such changes are slow because, as Mahan said, they have to overcome the inertia of a very conservative military caste. We cannot be ready to fight all kinds of wars every place, but we had best be prepared to fight most kinds, most places, or the sure result will be the failure of deterrence.

Concepts are not a substitute for capabilities and we cannot delude ourselves into believing they are. We must develop and deploy our defense weaponry using the Army Materiel Command, Air Force Systems Command, and Defense Logistics Agency, which are already in being. We cannot wait for high-powered groups such as Mr. Packard's Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management to create a new system. Defense is neither cheap nor cheerful. Defending the country on the cheap is fine if it works, but doing more with less could lead eventually to the theory that you can do everything with nothing. Even with the best of concepts, war for many is a series of catastrophes that somehow result in victory. Strategic thought and doctrine are, in part, designed to reduce the impact of the fog, complexities, frictions, and unknowns on the outcome of the battle. Of course, surprise is a force multiplier—the first blow is worth at least two. Yes, deception is of central importance and can be achieved by doing the unexpected. But maxims, regardless of how old or how honored, cannot replace the tough thinking and hard choices involved. Barbara Tuchman lamented the fact that nothing so comforts the military mind as the maxim of a great but dead general. But it is the military subject apparently, not the military mind, which induces this affinity for maxims, since it is the civilian reformers who find them most appealing. Catchwords, even great ones like maneuver, don't defend Europe or preserve the peace.

The US Army today is, for the most part, led by combat-seasoned officers from the brigade level up. They have been educated and tested in combat, the roughest school of all. They nonetheless share with Sir Charles Napier the knowledge that "the soldier who bears the risk of the lives of men entrusted to his charge without making a study for his own education of the experience of the past, is a criminal more dangerous to his country than any murderer." And this study is assisted, despite popular dilettantist assertions, at every level of the Army education system, including the Army War College. Maybe not enough for everybody, but as the old sailor used to say, "You don't have to teach your grandmother how to suck eggs." History and tradition are not just important, they are indispensable. But that means holding the late lamp aloft and not worshipping the ashes.

Another falsely dichotomous issue that, like attrition and maneuver, requires a balance instead of a choice is leadership and management. One set of critics paints a disturbing picture of an Army

totally fascinated with management techniques. They ask, "Where have the warriors gone?" Another set points to the disappointments of the Army's weapons procurement process and wonders why our first-class people don't go into the acquisition field. The present system gave us the late Sergeant York air defense gun and the Bradley fighting vehicle. Wags tell us the former knew its job, but wouldn't work, and the latter has no job, but does it slowly. We must provide weapons developed, designed, and manufactured for soldiers, not for engineers or bureaucrats. But again the answer is not that simple. Combat leadership and management techniques are but two sides of the same coin. Clausewitz said,

We see clearly that the activities characteristic of war may be split into two main categories: those that are preparation for war, and war proper The knowledge and skills involved in the preparation will be concerned with the creation, training, and maintenance of the fighting forces The theory of war proper, on the other hand, is concerned with the use of these means, once they have been developed, for the purpose of the war.

To ignore either of these categories is to court disaster. Just such a disaster occurred in the Spanish-American War, when our Army, lacking proper management techniques, was so ill-prepared for war that soldiers suffered for want of food, clothing, and shelter. One of the reasons the Army War College was founded shortly thereafter was to reconcile techniques for the preparation for war with techniques for the conduct of war itself. This reconciliation is more difficult today than it was at the turn of the century. Regardless, the needs and requirements of the user must become paramount. The GS-14 paper-shuffling, hammer-school dropout must be replaced by a high-level procurement professional with judgment who knows why we have procurement and cares.

Good men can be attached to bad principles; decent men may become trapped in brilliant misconceptions. This may stem, in many ways, from the difference between the real world of responsibility and the fanciful world of the onlookers. But the idea that you can merchandise strategic concepts or management policies like breakfast cereals, that you can create a deterrent force out of mirrors, is the ultimate indignity to thought, especially to professional military thought. A cheap solution to the military balance is like a declaration of love without a promise of marriage—it has great attractions in the short run, but far greater limitations in the long run, and represents a prescription for defeat—defeat in detail.

The defense debate is healthy. It is open to professionals, uniformed and civilian, dedicated dilettantes (they come in both suits too), and talented amateurs. It is open to all. Without it, we risk losing our awareness. With it we risk losing our azimuth. But nobody promised that making national security policy in a democracy was a rose garden.