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Beyond Surprise Attack

Lawrence Freedman

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the use and value of surprise attacks in modern warfare.

A surprise attack, conceived with cunning, prepared with duplicity, and executed with ruthlessness, provides international history with its most melodramatic moments. A state believes itself to be at peace then suddenly finds itself at war, in agony and embarrassed that it failed to pick up the enemy plot and will now suffer the consequences of blows from which recovery will be hard. Melodramas along these lines play out not only in the worst-case scenarios of military planners and alarmist commentators but also in movies and novels. They offer a compelling narrative: the most powerful states are humiliated and the course of history altered as one power sees possibilities for action that its victim misses completely. It is also a credible narrative as surprise attacks have been regular occurrences throughout history. They make military sense as defeating a strong opponent is always going to be difficult unless the first blows really count. Maximizing operational secrecy is essential to maximizing operational success.

Surprise makes the most sense when battles are decisive. Otherwise, the effect will be to start a war—with all the pain, risk, and uncertainty—without ensuring victory. A decisive victory forces the enemy hand. An important legacy of the Napoleonic Wars was the conviction that such a victory depended on the effective elimination of the enemy army. At some point surprise could make the critical difference when two essentially symmetrical armies, relying on superior tactics, organization and armaments, faced each other. Catching an unprepared enemy with an early blow from which it could never really recover, even if it tried to fight on, should allow the whole business of war to be concluded quickly.

The Franco-Prussian War underscored the importance of early battlefield success. The Prussians were astonished when the French, having declared war, were slow to mobilize. They did not make the same mistake. The efficiency of their mobilization, along with the innovative tactics of Helmuth von Moltke, caught France unaware, leading to its defeat at the Battle of Sedan at the start of September 1870. Germany executed the ideal campaign, quick and truly decisive, spoiled only by the refusal of the French population to accept the verdict of battle until their unexpected resistance was crushed. Moltke showed how to surprise the enemy, and his successors in the German general staff took note: To win a war, mobilize early and strike hard and fast.

The German victory also led to speculation about how other powers might be caught out by a ruthless and resourceful enemy, including books imagining how other great powers might also suffer

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sudden and catastrophic defeats. An early example of this genre was *The Battle of Dorking*, written by a British Army officer. Appearing in 1871 just after von Moltke's victory, *Dorking* described a German invasion from across the channel in which telegraph cables were cut to prevent advance warning. The Royal Navy, which had allowed itself to become overextended because of colonial commitments, lost its warships to "fatal engines which sent our ships, one after the other, to the bottom." The drama concluded with a last stand on a ridge near Dorking in southern England, where a brave combination of regulars and reserves were let down by the army's miserable organization. And so, the accumulated prosperity and strength of centuries was lost in days. A once-proud nation was stripped of its colonies, "its trade gone, its factories silent, its harbours empty, a prey to pauperism and decay."¹

As with so much writing about the future of war, this example essentially made a point about the present, in this case the need for army reform, a statement about what might happen if sensible measures were not taken urgently. Other books followed with similar themes about the dangers of spies or readying young men for the demands and sacrifices of war, or sometimes in counternarratives to the gloom, demonstrating how a brave nation could cope with all challenges. By the start of the twentieth century, writers were exploring the military possibilities opening up with new technologies such as heavier-than-air flying machines.² The imagination of the British novelist H. G. Wells even stretched to atom bombs.³ A regular theme in all this literature was the importance of surprise and the first blow. The key to victory was seizing the initiative.

There were those, such as the Polish banker Ivan Bloch, who understood that even the cleverest plans might fail, that defenses might cope better than expected with dashing attacks, and that a defiant population might resist foreign occupation.⁴ Still, the Germans opened the First World War with an ambitious offensive designed, once again, to defeat France quickly. But this time they failed. Instead of a decisive victory, they got caught up in a long attritional slog, in which they struggled to cope with the superior economic and demographic strengths of their enemies.

After 1918, alternative routes to a quick victory were sought. One possibility was to use tanks to wage a rapid offensive. But there was another alternative that dispensed with forcing an enemy land invasion. Instead of pressuring the enemy government to capitulate as a result of the annihilation of its army, it would have to surrender because of the demands of a desperate population unable to cope with a succession of massive air raids and being hit by high explosives, incendiaries, and poison gas. A new dystopian literature quickly developed, telling of the trials of ordinary people as they fled their burning cities or of the hopelessness of governments in the face of weapons they were unable

1 George Chesney, "The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer," *Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1871), <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0602091h.html>.

2 See the two novels about Robur, with his heavier-than-air flying machine, by Jules Verne, *The Clipper of the Clouds* (London: Sampson Low, 1887); and Jules Verne, *Master of the World* (London: Sampson Low, 1904).

3 H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free, a Story of Mankind* (London: Macmillan, 1914).

4 Ivan Stanislavovich Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible? Being an Abridgment of the War of the Future in Its Technical Economic and Political Relations* (London: Grant Richard, 1899).

to counter. The theme comes through in some of the titles: *The Poison War*, *The Black Death*, *Menace*, *Empty Victory*, *Invasion from the Air*, *War upon Women*, *Chaos*, and *Air Reprisal*.⁵

Air raids did not provide the opening shots of the Second World War, but they soon came, becoming regular and progressively more destructive. Although their effects were certainly terrible, they were not decisive.⁶ The resilience of ordinary people and of modern societies had been underestimated. Only with the war's finale and the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the deadly promise of air power realized. Previous air raids had killed as many people, but this time the devastation required only single weapons and the impact was emphasized by the surrender of an already beleaguered Japan.

The prospect that the next war could soon “go nuclear” inevitably dominated strategic debates after 1945. But, the trauma of the two surprise attacks that brought the Soviet Union and then the United States into the Second World War shaped considerations of what that might mean. Pushing the logic of seizing the initiative to the extreme, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against Russia in June 1941 while the British were still fighting; the Japanese attacked the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, despite failing to pacify China. Both efforts were enormous gambles, bold in their execution and complete in their surprise. Both offensives were characterized by arrogance, for their leaders were convinced their nations were superior in spirit and in discipline, but also in recklessness, taking on much larger powers before defeating the existing enemies.

Both gambles failed. The Soviet Union was rocked; at one point it looked like it would succumb, but it held on. Gradually, the size of the country, its harsh climate, reserves of strength, and Nazi mistakes turned the tide of war.⁷ There was never much chance that Japan would conquer the United States—the objective was to get in the best position for what was assumed to be an inevitable war. The result was a terrible conflict with great suffering, ending with Japan under American occupation.⁸

The most important lesson was that getting in the first blow, however well designed and executed, did not guarantee victory. Yet for the victims of 1941, the basic lesson was that great power did not provide immunity from surprise attack. The United States and the Soviet Union won in the end, but their fights were long and painful, and the results were not preordained. The shock effect was substantial, and it left a legacy in the way both thought about war thereafter. In 1958, when experts from both superpowers met briefly to discuss their fears of surprise attacks, the Soviets were fixated on yet another large offensive set in motion by Germany, this time backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while the Americans were focused on another Pearl Harbor-type “bolt from the blue” this time with nuclear missiles.⁹

5 I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763–3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 169–70.

6 Richard J. Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

7 Christian Hartmann, *Operation Barbarossa: Nazi Germany's War in the East, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8 Jeffrey Record, *A War It Was Always Going to Lose: Why Japan Attacked America in 1941* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2011).

9 Jeremi Suri, “America's Search for a Technological Solution to the Arms Race: The Surprise Attack Conference of 1958 and a Challenge for 'Eisenhower Revisionists',” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1997).

The impact of these shocks could be seen during the Cold War, especially in regard to nuclear strategy. In Washington the dominant fear was that Soviet leadership might become convinced that a well-crafted first strike would put it in a position where it need not fear retaliation. Starting numbers were irrelevant if the United States could be disarmed by a surprise Soviet attack directed against its bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and missile-carrying submarines.¹⁰ In the 1960s, the Pentagon set a test for the US nuclear arsenal: could it “assure destruction” of the Soviet Union? In other words, could America maintain “at all times a clear and unmistakable ability to inflict an unacceptable degree of damage upon any aggressor, or combination of aggressors—even after absorbing a surprise first strike.” This damage was quantified at 33–20 percent of the Soviet population and 75–50 percent of the Soviet industrial capacity. These criteria assumed a pain threshold well above the losses experienced in World War II, which were hardly willingly accepted. Then, the highest possible intelligence assessments about future Soviet capabilities were considered to see whether any extra capabilities were required to ensure that the assured destruction criteria could be met. The answer was not a lot was needed beyond existing plans.

This effort was not a prediction of the course of a future war, or of the American government’s reaction to a complete failure of deterrence. The aim was to leave no doubt in the minds of Soviet leadership that aggression carried an unavoidable risk of nuclear devastation. An American response could not be guaranteed because the Soviet Union could also, even after absorbing a first strike, ensure similar levels of destruction of the United States. Hence “mutual assured destruction,” naturally known as MAD, came to describe the standoff between the nuclear powers during the Cold War. How much the capability contributed to preventing a hot war remains a matter for conjecture. There were many reasons why political leaders would have been desperate to avoid a Third World War, but the possibility of mutual destruction was hardly irrelevant. It was not necessary to gaze for long into a crystal ball to see the awful devastation with which a future war might end.¹¹ Would the Germans and Japanese in 1941 have really been so ready to launch their wars if their crystal balls had shown them how bad things might turn out? The point of deterrence was to persuade a potential adversary not to bank on the first move being decisive, and to think through the consequences of an enemy still capable of fighting back.

Establishing there was no sure way to win a nuclear war did not end all fears. The Soviet Union kept building up its own arsenal, suggesting it had a different view of how deterrence might work, which might even include some plan for a nuclear victory. Even if MAD meant the nuclear arsenals neutralized each other, the Soviet strength in conventional capabilities provided them with other options for mischief. This capacity left plenty of scope for inventiveness when it came to imagining how Moscow might take an initiative that would catch Washington unaware and so allow stealing some geopolitical advantage. One scenario actively debated in the 1970s was the possibility of a sudden and vast Warsaw

10 Albert Wohlstetter, “The Delicate Balance of Terror,” *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 2 (January 1959).

11 Albert Carnesale et al., *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Pact offensive into West Germany that required little prior mobilization, and so, no practical warning to NATO about the attack.¹² This worst-case scenario assumed everything worked perfectly for the enemy while NATO was left flat-footed, overwhelmed before it could even consider escalation to nuclear force.

Yet, even when contemporary wars have opened with surprise attacks, the results have not been encouraging. Israel's demolition of Egypt's air force on the first day of the Six-Day War (1967) is one example where the enemy was left helpless by a well-executed attack. Although, this war also demonstrates how conquering and occupying another's territory might also lead to persistent terrorism and insurgency. Two prime examples of surprise attacks that failed to deliver early victories are North Korea's move against South Korea in 1950 and Iraq's contest with Iran three decades later. The North might have succeeded if an international coalition had not managed to aid South Korea before it was completely overrun. Iraq found itself struggling to cope with Iran's counterinvasion in 1980 and became caught in a war lasting until 1988. Its resultant indebtedness to those who helped it fund its defense, was one reason for its next surprise attack—Kuwait in August 1990. The occupation was easily accomplished, but it barely lasted six months. Kuwait was liberated under an American-led coalition in early 1991.

The most striking feature of modern wars is not how quickly they can be concluded but how long they last.¹³ The United States achieved quick victories in Iraq and Afghanistan against regular forces but then got bogged down dealing with insurgencies. Russian aggression against Ukraine has left it bogged down in an inconclusive struggle. Syria has become an arena in which a whole series of regional conflicts are played out without an identified route to anything resembling peace being identified. With civil wars, the typical conflict now lasts years, long after the economy, society, and political system have been broken, with the violence sustained by criminals as well as zealots, warlords, and neighboring states.

Major powers now often appear tentative and unsure. Even when, as with Russia, they seem to be taking bold steps, their objectives turn out to be limited. Grand victories are no longer in mind. Instead of audacious moves geared to a quick victory, a probing, patient alternative approach is even seen in China's disputes in the South China Sea.

Yet, none of this has erased concerns about surprise attacks. One reason is the recollection of al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, after which commentary soon turned again to Pearl Harbor. The lesson lay not in the revenge taken against al-Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors in Afghanistan but the shock of discovering the vulnerability of modern, open societies to a malicious attack. The aim seemed simply to cause maximum pain, and that goal soon led to speculation about the many ways that pain might be inflicted.

12 A "standing start" attack was a theme in an influential report by Senators Sam Nunn and Dewey F. Bartlett, *NATO and the New Soviet Threat*, US Senate, Armed Services Committee, 95th Congress, First Session (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977). See also Robert Close, *Europe without Defence? 48 Hours that Could Change the Face of the World* (Brussels: Editions Arts and Voyages, 1976).

13 Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Scenarios in which small terrorist cells or even “lone wolves” could cause harm using basic weapons such as guns, knives, highly explosive materials, aircraft or motor vehicles turned into lethal weapons were constructed. Attacks of this sort could not bring a modern western state to “its knees.”¹⁴ The surprise they achieved was essentially tactical in its effects. At most, strategically they were part of an ongoing and largely uncoordinated global insurgency. Despite the obvious differences in scale and impact, the outcome of a Taliban ambush in Kabul or of a shooting in Paris were part of a campaign that began before 9/11 and appears to be of indefinite duration.

All of this needs to be kept in mind when addressing claims that future surprise attacks will come out of cyberspace and have effects tantamount to defeat in war. As early as the 1990s, the growing dependence of vital services on digital networks led to warnings of an “electronic Pearl Harbor” directed against the critical infrastructure supporting energy, transport, banking, and so on.¹⁵ Instead of trying to get quick victories by taking out enemy forces, why not instead take out the enemy society? While the technical issues are quite different from more classical forms of military attack, and the practice would be far less violent, there are similarities to the post-1918 claims about strategic air bombardment providing a more satisfactory route to victory than attritional fights between armies.¹⁶ As with a nuclear first strike, the best case for the perpetrator requires confidence that preparations for an attack are not detected, that the appropriate networks are properly identified and could be attacked, and that the cyberattacks will work as planned. And then, as with Operation Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor, there is the question of what happens after the first blow. How would this turn into a lasting political gain? A cyberattack does not lead to territory being occupied. The victims would be expected to respond, even as they struggled to get the lights back on and systems working. An attack that produced drastic effects could be considered a *casus belli*, and classical military responses might be considered legitimate.¹⁷

The issue is not whether critical infrastructure can be vulnerable and lead to major upset if taken down. Hostile activity in the cyberdomain, represented by a continuing offense-defense duel, is now constant and ubiquitous. It involves activists, terrorist and criminal organizations and poses constant trouble for those trying to preserve the integrity and the effectiveness of vital networks. The danger, however, is not so much of some one-off catastrophic surprise attack but a series of events in line with modern conflict, reflecting the blurring of the military and civilian spheres, efforts to weaken and subvert opponents without attacking them head on. These are wars with occasional military strikes and battles, often vicious but still short of being truly decisive. Cyberattacks

14 The most alarming prospect was a terrorist nuclear weapon. Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books / Henry Holt, 2004).

15 The first to refer to the possibility of an “electronic Pearl Harbor” was Winn Schwartau, *Terminal Compromise* (Old Hickory, TN: Interpact Press, 1991), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/79/79.txt>.

16 See John Arquilla, “The Computer Mouse that Roared: Cyberwar in the Twenty-First Century,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2011): 39–48.

17 George Lucas, *Ethics and Cyber Warfare: The Quest for Responsible Security in the Age of Digital Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

represent another way to cause injury and irritation short of obvious acts of war, as well as serving as natural accompaniments to acts of war.

There is, therefore, a disconnect between the continuing search for a route to a decisive victory and the contemporary experience of warfare, which once started, is hard to stop. Even if enemy regulars are overwhelmed, the result is as likely to be insurgency, especially directed against foreign forces. This tends to be reflected in more recent future war fiction, such as *Ghost Fleet* by Peter Singer and August Cole. This story opens with a surprise attack of impressive complexity, cunning and duplicity, which almost succeeds but fails in the end.¹⁸

There will always be arguments for testing the resilience of systems against the worst case. If they can cope with the most severe threats then lesser cases should be manageable. The worst case may depend on the aggressor being foolish and futile, but stupidity is one of the hardest things for any intelligence agency to predict. At the same time, when planning an offensive, every effort must be made to make the first blows count. The key point, however, is that even with surprise and maximum effort, these first blows are unlikely to be decisive on their own, especially against an opponent with any reserves of strength. This depth is why states must look beyond surprise attacks to what follows, to the second and third blows, and also to those much further down the line, perhaps delivered by irregulars who have taken over the struggle after the defeat of the regulars. The surprises of war do not just come at the start.

¹⁸ P. W. Singer and August Cole, *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2015).

