The Art of Avoiding Strategic Miscalculation

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ABSTRACT: This examination of British War Secretary George Cornewall Lewis and the gold standard memorandum he penned in 1862 (that proved instrumental in preventing British intervention in the American Civil War) offers insights for modern leaders on how to avoid institutional barriers to effective strategic thinking and political-strategic miscalculation through insightful analysis of potential liabilities and policy assumptions. It shows how outstanding strategic thinkers possess an informed and reflective filter to evaluate past, present, and anticipated events—developed through a good education, diverse practical experience, lifelong intellectual curiosity, empowerment, and access to senior leadership.

Keywords: George Cornewall Lewis, Anglo-American relations, strategic thinking, denial systems, Abraham Lincoln

During the fall of 1862, British Secretary of State for War Sir George Cornewall Lewis recognized strategic vulnerability. Competing political leaders vied for control of his nation’s foreign policy governing American relations; Prime Minister Palmerston had backed away from potential recognition of the Confederate States of America following the publication of President Abraham Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Yet, influential members of the British cabinet continued to maneuver politically to reverse Palmerston’s preference for neutrality. In order to assist the prime minister in resisting these machinations, Lewis penned a confidential memorandum for distribution to the entire cabinet. A combination of legal opinion and summary of historical precedents, the document proved most influential in its analysis of British interests and potential liabilities from proposed mediation initiatives and/or recognition of the Confederacy. His strategic observations and uncomfortable queries highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in impulsive actions taken in the absence of informed reflection. In short, Lewis employed a strategic thinking solution to forestall policy miscalculations he viewed rife with unanticipated and problematic consequences, and the success of his initiative is most evident in the results. As a leading historian of Anglo-American diplomacy during the American Civil War concluded, Lewis’s memorandum “injected the voice of reason” at the most opportune time and “predetermined the final [cabinet] decision against intervention.”

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Although a nineteenth-century example, Lewis’s story remains germane to modern leaders because strategic thinking is not common and, when available to decisionmakers, often fails to influence political-strategic effect. A recent study published in the Harvard Business Review reveals that only one in five senior corporate executives can think strategically.\(^2\) Another prominent researcher at the Strategic Thinking Institute reports that senior business leaders routinely conflate strategic thinking with planning and adds that 90 percent of directors and vice presidents have received no education in strategic thinking.\(^3\) Comparable statistics for military cohorts are not available, but the likelihood of finding a greater percentage of strategic thinkers is higher, given the educational opportunities available at the senior service colleges and special programs (such as the Army Strategic Education Program at the US Army War College). Despite limited access to military strategic studies, elected and government Senior Executive Service leaders likely score similarly to corporate executives due to commensurate deficiencies in appropriate education. Regrettably, on the infrequent occasions when sound strategic thinking analysis is available to decisionmakers, the advantage of such insights is often forfeited or ignored due to “systems of denial.”

*Systems of denial*, a concept coined by organizational and behavioral specialists Andrew Hill and Stephen Gerras, describes a prevailing tendency in high-performing leadership teams to “focus organizational energy and attention on refining their dominant theories of competition, often resulting in dysfunctional organizational responses . . . to strategic anomalies—convenient information—that contradict assumptions.” Although these anomalies can include emerging strategic vulnerabilities or opportunities, establishment decisionmakers prefer to rely on well-practiced core capabilities and proven operating methods when confronted with new facts in the competitive environment. In doing so, they often choose obsolete ways and means no longer relevant to the circumstances, while simultaneously acting to discredit or minimize the inconvenient anomaly instead of working to devise appropriate responses.\(^4\)

Traditionalists have three denial systems available to make the anomalous information go away. The first targets the legitimacy of the source by questioning subject matter expertise or, less frequently, by impugning credibility or simply resorting to ad hominem attacks. The second denial system assails the validity of the data by questioning the applicability or procedural methodology and orchestrating in-house testing that deliberately fails to replicate the anomalous findings. The final option entails revising the legacy operating theory to make it more difficult to test against new data.
This last way is accomplished by adding intangible variables or replacing the theory with a similar but more malleable substitute. Senior leaders who cling to outmoded “theories of competition” and defend them with systems of denial risk making strategic miscalculations with the attendant potential for disadvantage or danger. Hill and Gerras examine denial systems as impediments to military innovation, but these institutional barriers similarly negate the influence of strategic thinkers in formulating sound national security policy.

Definitions of strategic thinking range from verbose to pithy and populate a diverse selection of national security, business management, and leadership development publications. Despite this abundance of choice, a tailored definition can better aid an examination of the enduring relevance of Lewis’s memorandum. For this purpose, strategic thinking is defined as the intuitive ability to recognize opportunity and vulnerability within the political-strategic competitive environment. This intellectual process also integrates and synthesizes critical, systems, historical, ethical, and creative thinking competencies to create a mental lens through which past, present, and potential events are evaluated. Of course, strategic opportunity and vulnerability can exist simultaneously, but one or the other will typically predominate within a given set of circumstances. Since strategic vulnerability often leads to dire consequences of national significance, a more robust analysis of Lewis’s actions in 1862 is warranted. A review of key Anglo-American events precipitating the secretary’s concerns will lead to an exploration of strategic thinking insights from his cautionary missive and will instruct readers about effective ways to avoid traditional systems of denial employed against strategic thinkers.

Lincoln and Emancipation

The culmination of Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s first campaign north of the Potomac River at the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 provided Lincoln the first real prospect to forestall the potential intervention of Great Britain in the Civil War. If war can be succinctly described as the transformation of blood into political-strategic effect, then the sanguinary expenditure of Union lives at Antietam delivered a valuable bequeathment—opportunity. Leaders on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, and in Europe, realized the easiest path to Confederate independence entailed great-power recognition and succor, a familiar and proven model well demonstrated during the American Revolution. Persuaded by US Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and New York attorney Francis B. Cutting that widespread public abhorrence of slavery
in Europe could be used to block British intercession in American affairs, Lincoln became convinced that emancipation represented a potent tool in his struggle to save the Republic. The president pursued a clearly stated priority of preserving the Union while seeking an opportunity to end slavery in the United States. These twin goals, however, appeared mutually exclusive during the first 15 months of the war. Lincoln, therefore, directed his considerable intellect toward crafting policy that harmonized these disparate ends, though he struggled at times to find the appropriate mix to satisfy the divided views on emancipation within the larger domestic political environment.

The US Congress provided the first step toward emancipation by passing the second Confiscation Act, which the president signed into law on July 17, 1862. The act codified the existing practice of emancipating slaves that came within the control of Union military forces in the seceded states, neutralized the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and repealed the ban on recruitment of African American soldiers into federal service. Moreover, Section 2 proclaimed that any person who engaged in “rebellion or insurrection” would be punished with imprisonment, fines, or “liberation of all his slaves.” Section 6 proved unprecedented and announced a forthcoming presidential proclamation warning those pursuing “armed rebellion” that the failure to suspend military resistance and proclaim allegiance to the United States would result in the direct seizure of all property on the sole authority of the commander in chief. The combination of Sections 2 and 6 constituted the legal underpinning for an emancipation proclamation via executive order. Unsurprisingly, Lincoln penned the first draft of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation within days of the second Confiscation Act, though he elected to defer publication for over two months.

Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued on September 22, 1862, declared the enslaved people in coerced service of the Confederacy “thenceforward, and forever free” should the states in rebellion not return to federal authority by January 1, 1863. Originally crafted in July 1862 “as a fit and necessary military measure” to deny practical benefit to the enemy, the executive order expanded well beyond a domestic context in the wake of Antietam to provide Lincoln with the means to influence the direction of British foreign policy. The proclamation deftly exempted the four slave-holding border states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri) from forfeiture of slave property because Lincoln, having issued the order as military commander in chief, did not acknowledge presidential authority to confiscate property beyond the seceded states due to constitutional
protections regarding property rights. It is also obvious he wished to avoid antagonizing the border states for fear of driving them into the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{12} The new policy furthermore promised those citizens residing within the Confederacy who remained loyal would “be compensated for all losses by acts of the United States including the loss of slaves.”\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, Lincoln fully realized the Emancipation Proclamation could only be enforced in territory occupied by federal troops, so he admitted the inherent limitation of “a document that the whole world will see must necessarily be inoperative, like the Pope’s bull against the comet,” to alter the immediate circumstances of enslaved African Americans held within the Confederate states.\textsuperscript{14} While the realm of the possible in 1862 dictated that he act by executive order, the president never lost sight of the more ambitious goal of amending the Constitution to assure the permanent destruction of American slavery.\textsuperscript{15}

Lincoln intended to publish the preliminary proclamation in the wake of the second Confiscation Act, but the war intervened. Federal battlefield reverses outside of Richmond, Virginia, during the Peninsular Campaign in early July—compounded by wholesale rout at the Second Battle of Bull Run near Washington in August—delivered strategic circumstances unfavorable to such a consequential policy announcement. Sensing the president’s impatience, Secretary of State William H. Seward advised Lincoln against hasty emancipation, asserting that it would be perceived as the desperate “last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help [and] our last shriek on the retreat.”\textsuperscript{16} Consequently, Lincoln waited until Union forces thwarted General Robert E. Lee at Antietam on September 17 to issue the proclamation. The political instincts of Seward and Lincoln proved correct; despite federal successes in Maryland and Kentucky in the fall of 1862, key British leaders still viewed the proclamation of emancipation as a Hail Mary to stymie inevitable defeat by instigating a slave uprising in the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{17}

**Palmerston and Potential British Intervention**

The political, social, and economic landscape in Great Britain during the Civil War is best characterized as paradoxical. Wealthy investors and working-class laborers with shared interests in the textile industry remained sympathetic to the Confederacy, while those unconcerned with access to Southern cotton and who recognized the amorality of slavery favored the North. Parliament had outlawed slavery in 1833, so the American “Peculiar Institution” created a schism in English society that inevitably spilled over into economic, domestic, and foreign policy making.
Palmerston, therefore, navigated the ship of state through a decidedly narrow political strait, constrained between the turbulent shoal waters of antislavery sentiment on one side and the clamor for cotton on the other.\textsuperscript{18} Southerners confidently began to refer to the crop as “King Cotton” because the Confederate states produced 75 percent of the world’s supply and the British textile industry obtained nearly 80 percent of its imports from them.\textsuperscript{19} More significantly, cotton fueled the dominant economic engine in Great Britain; nearly one in four citizens secured their livelihood from textile production or related industries, two-thirds of the world’s mechanical spindles resided in domestically owned and operated factories, one-half of all exports consisted of finished cotton goods, and one-tenth of all capital investment went to the textile enterprise.\textsuperscript{20} Consequently, the Southern monopoly in cotton production dictated that the Palmerston government could not eschew interest in the American war.

Unprecedented cotton crop yields in 1859 and 1860 worked against Confederate interests at the outset of hostilities because the British purchased the surplus as a hedge against future uncertainty.\textsuperscript{21} While this stockpile permitted Palmerston to wait out a Confederate cotton embargo in 1861, economic and social conditions eroded the following year as cotton availability diminished. Lancashire, at the epicenter of the textile industry, tallied a quarter million unemployed workers and another half million dependent on government relief by the summer of 1862.\textsuperscript{22} The ensuing potential for calamitous civil strife dramatically altered the political and strategic calculus for Palmerston. By September 14, 1862, the prime minister favored a plan proposed by Foreign Secretary John Russell to intervene in the Civil War and communicated his shift in policy following news of the Southern victory at the Second Battle of Bull Run:

\ldots [T]he battles of August 29 and 30 between the Confederates and the Federals show that the latter got a very complete smashing; and it seems not altogether unlikely that still greater disasters await them.\ldots If this should happen, would it not be time for us to consider whether in such a state of things England and France might not address the contending parties and recommend an arrangement upon the basis of separation?\textsuperscript{23}

Russell’s plan entailed brokering first an armistice between North and South, then introducing great-power mediation to resolve the sectional American conflict permanently and restore the antebellum cotton supply to Europe. Moreover, Russell intended to recognize the Confederacy immediately
should Lincoln and Seward reject foreign mediation. The prime minister expected to present Russell’s plan to his cabinet advisers at a meeting scheduled for October, little anticipating that Antietam and emancipation would preempt this initiative with mere weeks to spare.24

Lincoln intentionally targeted English societal division over slavery with the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, asserting days before its publication, “No other step would be so potent to prevent foreign intervention.”25 He remained convinced that emancipation alone would tie Palmerston’s hands diplomatically and prevent British recognition of the Confederacy. Based on intelligence provided by American Minister to Great Britain Charles Francis Adams, the president believed Palmerston would face domestic political complications if London assisted the Southern states due to newly energized antislavery constituencies. As Lincoln calculated, the prime minister retreated from potential intervention following the release of the proclamation on September 22. Palmerston, admitting that the British mediation initiative “has been lately checked” by word of federal success at Antietam and the resulting emancipation, felt compelled to return to a policy of neutrality.26

Nevertheless, Lincoln failed to anticipate the subsequent outrage among many governing elites and newspaper editors in England when news of the proclamation reached London. Fearing the president’s “escalation” would increase sectional enmities to the point of no return and generate a servile uprising with attendant atrocities, this bloc of British leaders considered a speedy resolution to the war of utmost urgency. Russell and Chancellor of the Exchequer William Ewart Gladstone concurred with like-minded pundits who declared that Lincoln obviously sought to “render intervention impossible.” Many also predicted the dire outcome of the “cold, vindictive, and entirely political” Emancipation Proclamation would be civilian bloodshed on the scale of the French Revolution. The two cabinet members, therefore, moved with alacrity to influence Palmerston (and their cabinet peers) to adopt Russell’s mediation and recognition plan immediately. In an attempted ambush, Russell and Gladstone planned to force the prime minister’s hand at the cabinet meeting on October 23. Palmerston avoided their scheme by absenting himself from the gathering, thereby forcing a postponement so no official decision could be reached.27 All these political maneuvers would soon be rendered obsolete by a confidential memorandum that would deliver a mortal blow to potential British intervention in the Civil War.
Lewis's Confidential Memorandum

To bolster Palmerston’s preference for continued neutrality, Lewis prepared a thorough legal examination of the merits regarding recognition of Confederate sovereignty based on precedents found in international law. As a leading authority on the subject, few in Great Britain were more qualified to produce such a document. Lewis graduated from Oxford University in 1828 with degrees in classical studies and mathematics, pursued higher education in jurisprudence philosophy, and passed the bar in 1831. He entered government service two years later as a commissioner assigned to evaluate policies regarding the treatment of Irish residents in the United Kingdom; his findings contributed to the establishment of a new system of national poverty relief for over two million destitute citizens. A subsequent two-year commission in Malta beginning in 1836 earned Lewis notoriety within Liberal Party circles when he drafted a new legal code that improved colonial administration, increased local participation, and reduced civil restraints imposed by the governor. In the 1840s and early 1850s, he served as a member of parliament, Under-Secretary of State for Home Affairs, financial secretary to the treasury, city commissioner in London, and editor of a prestigious national magazine.\textsuperscript{28}

Following succession to his father’s baronetcy in 1855, Lewis’s keen legal mind and reputation as a problem-solver resulted in serial cabinet appointments as chancellor of the Exchequer, home secretary, and secretary of state for war. During his tenure at the helm of national finances, he burnished his standing in London by devising successive budgets that employed a creative amalgam of loans and income taxation to pay for the Crimean War. His success at the Exchequer ensured a permanent place on Palmerston’s cabinet, though his declining health retarded his effectiveness as home secretary, a post he assumed in 1859. Nevertheless, the prime minister asked Lewis to assume the duties as war secretary in 1861, a role he judged “distasteful” due to his lack of experience or knowledge of military matters.\textsuperscript{29}

Lewis distributed his memorandum to every member of the cabinet in early November 1862. The document, “Recognition of the Independence of the Southern States of the North American Union,” reviewed the impact of the overseas conflict on British interests, defined the prerequisites for establishment of an independent state, analyzed seven analogous historical precedents detailing recognition by a “third State,” and then offered some unsolicited strategic observations.\textsuperscript{30}
The opening paragraphs of his memorandum highlight the unprecedented cost of the American war on the British economy, noting that the first 18 months of the conflict had already exceeded the exorbitant cost of the 15-year struggle against Napoleon. Lewis further asserted that the Union blockade of Southern ports and interdiction of the cotton supply to England had resulted in “greater loss, privation, and suffering” than heretofore imposed on any neutral nation, even surpassing the deleterious effects of the Napoleonic Continental System. He also acknowledged, despite the “distress” imposed on the British economy, general “sympathy with the weaker [Southern] party, which is resisting the coercion of a powerful Government” and recognized “the humanity of all disinterested observers has been shocked at the sanguinary, and, at the same time, indecisive character of the war.”

Lewis concluded his introductory summary by repeating a common assumption among the governing elites, most notably Russell, that the war would end promptly upon the establishment of Confederate independence. Lewis, dubious regarding any supposition that recognition of the Confederacy by Great Britain would “induce the North to desist from the contest,” cautioned that foreign attempts to “accelerate this consummation” might equate to “playing with edge tools” and result in unintended consequences leading to the suspension of diplomatic relations or armed conflict with the United States.

Legal Grounds for Recognition

Lewis then executed a deliberate and thorough examination of the legalities governing the formal recognition of independence of “revolted subjects” by a neutral state. Noting that a nation cannot recognize the independence of a newly formed state until it is “virtually an independent community according to the principles of international law,” he asserted that such recognition must occur only after the independence of the new country is an undisputed fact. Simply, “if that independence be a fact, the act of the recognizing State is justifiable, and affords no just ground of offense” by the previously sovereign power. Lewis emphasized, however, that “insurgent subjects, who resist, even for a considerable time, the authority of their Government, do not form an independent State.”

Instead, two conditions must exist to determine undisputed independence; first, the community claiming independence must have its own government, and second, the “habit of obedience” to the former sovereign government must have irrevocably ceased, and any preexisting governing relationship must have been “entirely broken and destroyed.” Lewis concluded that
the Confederacy had undoubtedly met the first prerequisite, but the second requirement remained more difficult to gauge. To aid Palmerston and the cabinet members in determining if the Southern states had met the second condition of independence, Lewis provided seven historical precedents in international law for their edification: independence of the Netherlands from Spain (1648), Portugal from Spain (1668), the American colonies from England (1783), the American colonies (Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru) from Spain (1825), Brazil from Portugal (1825), Belgium from the Netherlands (1831), and Greece from Turkey (1832). The inclusion of American independence from Great Britain demonstrates the professional objectivity with which Lewis crafted his legal opinion.34

Following his examination of the historical precedents, Lewis returned to the current “American question” and the opposing arguments. The case in favor of recognizing Confederate independence, proposed by Russell and Gladstone, rested on two points; first, “the immediate recognition of the independence of the Southern States [was] consistent with international law,” and second, such recognition would present a fait accompli to the Lincoln administration and “bring on a settlement between the North and South, and to induce the North to recognise the independence of the South.” Lewis countered the pro-recognition argument by declaring that “we may observe that (except in the case of Portugal, which was the recognition of a restored independence) this country has never recognized the independence of revolting subjects, while a boná fide struggle with the legitimate sovereign was pending.” Moreover, he directly challenged the prevailing assumption that the United States would quit the contest in the wake of British recognition of Confederate independence with a salient question:

Can it be reasonably expected that the President [Lincoln] and his Ministers, who are deeply pledged to a war policy, who have carried on the war from the beginning, and who have repeatedly staked their credit upon its success, will, upon the simple bidding of the European Powers, and without fear of ulterior consequences, consent to surrender the object for which such vast exertions and sacrifices have been made and incurred?

It was more likely, he argued, that even “amicable interference” would “give umbrage” and lead to a break in diplomatic relations or to war between the United States and Great Britain. The obvious conclusion, Lewis asserted, revealed that the second prerequisite for establishing independence—
the dissolution of any preexisting governing relationship between sovereign authority and insurgent community—had not been met.\textsuperscript{35}

**Strategic Analysis**

While Lewis’s legal examination consumes most of the memorandum, his strategic analysis in the final four paragraphs likely altered the direction of British affairs in late 1862. He realized that determining if the “habit of obedience” between the Southern states and Washington had been severed irrevocably would prove subjective, and much like “in other cases of difference of degree, there is much difficulty in applying the test to cases lying upon the confines. It is easy to distinguish between day and night; but it is impossible to fix the precise moment when day ends and night begins.” Therefore, he may have recognized that his findings would be insufficient to dissuade Russell and Gladstone.\textsuperscript{36}

Perhaps due to such concerns, or just confident that intervention by London in the American Civil War would constitute a grave strategic miscalculation, Lewis appended some inconvenient observations and sharp-edged queries to the end of his legal conclusion—the content of which reveals a purpose as obvious today as it was effective then. First, he highlighted some inherent problems associated with great-power involvement: military projection across the Atlantic Ocean would prove costly and time-consuming and, he added sardonically, “the intervention of European fleets and armies on the Potomac is very different from their intervention at Navarino or Antwerp.” Lewis further reminded the cabinet ministers that the United States had become a respectable power and cautioned them against underestimating the danger American ironclad warships posed to their wooden naval vessels in littoral waters. Moreover, if the other four great powers (Austria, France, Prussia, and Russia) joined Great Britain, competing national interests might confound consensus on many issues: “A single intervening Power may possibly contrive to satisfy both the adverse parties, but five intervening Powers have first to satisfy one another.” The distance involved would also complicate communications with the respective European capitals and result in “interminable delays”—especially on unforeseen issues—and frustrate unified action.\textsuperscript{37}

Second, Lewis raised several thought-provoking questions that exposed significant vulnerabilities associated with intervention, such as: “What would an eminent diplomatist from Vienna, or Berlin, or St. Petersburg, know of the Chicago platform or the Crittenden compromise?” His point being that Europeans would be “ignorant” concerning
the intricacies of American domestic politics, even on recent high-profile issues such as the Republican Party Chicago platform of 1860, which limited the expansion of slavery and precipitated the initial secession of several Confederate states, and the failed Crittenden Compromise, which proposed six constitutional amendments to remedy the secession crisis by making slavery permanent in the lower half of the United States. Furthermore, how would the mediators solve disputes relating to boundaries and territories? How would they determine policy governing internal navigation on the Mississippi River and sectional debt resolution? And “of peculiar difficulty,” how might the great powers settle the question of slavery and policies relating to the Western territories? Lewis concluded these several queries with an unmistakable point of emphasis: “These and other thorny questions would have to be settled by a Conference of five foreigners, acting under the daily fire of the American press.”

The Palmerston cabinet finally convened on November 11 to discuss Russell’s plan, days after the distribution of Lewis’s memorandum. Describing the proceedings, Lewis reported to a former colleague that the foreign secretary’s “proposal was now thrown before the Cabinet, who proceeded to pick it to pieces. Everybody present threw a stone at it of greater or less size, except Gladstone, who supported it.” The cabinet voted overwhelmingly against proffered mediation, recognition of the Confederacy, or any other interventionist gambit.

A despondent Gladstone wrote his wife that Russell “turned tail” and capitulated too easily, admitting “the United States affair has ended and not well.” Historian Howard Jones concludes Russell’s speedy surrender resulted because “no argument could surmount the obstacles set forth by Lewis.” Thereafter, the likelihood of any realistic future discussion of direct British involvement in United States affairs waned irrevocably. The Earl of Clarendon, who served as foreign secretary during the Crimean War, received an early copy of Lewis’s manuscript and declared to the author: “You have made so clear the idiotic position we should occupy, either in having presented our face gratuitously to the Yankee slap we should receive, or in being asked what practical solution we had to propose after an armistice had been agreed to at our suggestion.” Clarendon asserted further that Lewis’s efforts proved “effective . . . in smashing the Foreign Secretary’s proposed intervention” and added sardonically that “Johnny [Russell] always loves to do something when to do nothing is prudent.”

Indeed, inaction can constitute sound strategic policy. The Earl of Donoughmore, a former president of the Board of Trade, proclaimed to Confederate envoy James Mason in 1865 that when General Robert E. Lee
“was at the very gates of Washington” following his decisive victory at the Second Battle of Bull Run in August 1862, British recognition would have followed “but for slavery,” suggesting Confederate advantage in the absence of Antietam and emancipation. It is intriguing to contemplate this possibility; had Lee resisted the impulse to order his army north of the Potomac River, perhaps the political-strategic opportunity afforded by Antietam would have been supplanted in historic significance by Second Bull Run. Nonetheless, Lee did carry the war into Maryland, the Confederates did suffer a strategic setback at Antietam, Lincoln did issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and Lewis did pen his confidential memorandum. The role played by Lewis in forestalling European intercession favoring the Confederacy proved to be his final act on the British political stage, and his contributions to final Union victory remain regrettably little known. He died prematurely the following year, and his lifetime of public service to the British crown was memorialized in print and bronze statuary. An obituary in the Standard lauded Lewis’s success as chancellor of the Exchequer but also declared that during his short tenure “as Minister of War he had less opportunity to distinguish himself.” Lincoln would certainly have disagreed.

The Art of Avoiding Strategic Miscalculation

While an exceptional lesson in the virtues of strategic thinking and the critical evaluation of policy assumptions, what can Lewis’s experience tell us about the successful avoidance of institutional “systems of denial?” Hill and Gerras offer six recommendations for leaders to employ in overcoming denial systems and adapting to evolving competitive circumstances, asserting that “effective military leaders must create an environment in which organizations identify anomalies in the external environment . . . and revise their strategic assumptions (theories of competition) to make them more testable or replace them with alternatives.” Their solutions include conducting thought experiments designed to anticipate strategic anomalies, avoiding tyrannies of expertise ensconced within the system, creating space for “planned and unplanned variance,” seeking out unanticipated experimental results, revising or supplanting existing orthodoxy, and transforming the organizational culture to embrace change to established methodologies. These solutions all constitute effective tools available to senior decisionmakers. Lewis and his memorandum offer another lens to view this topic—instead of the leader or organizational perspective, we can examine how strategic thinkers can avoid denial systems or similar institutional barriers.
As previously noted, strategic thinkers are uncommon. They must first be identified, empowered, and then placed in appropriate advisory positions to influence senior leaders. Lewis’s career demonstrates the most dependable way to identify true strategic thinkers is by observing documented performance over time. Lewis was a recognized and effective problem-solver, which led to high-profile assignments developing solutions to wicked strategic problems, exemplified by his reforms to reverse rising civil tensions in Malta and by how he devised financial policies to pay for the Crimean War. His demonstrated success, in turn, ensured sequential cabinet appointments with direct access to the prime minister. Modern diagnostic evaluation tools or specialized educational programs can also be effective ways to identify strategic thinking talent, but they remain an inferior substitute for performance in real-world scenarios. Once recognized, strategic thinkers must be institutionally acknowledged and cultivated. In ever-expanding and complex modern bureaucracies, formal management systems are indispensable to document and track these vital assets to ensure more effective placement and utilization.

Following identification, empowerment and access to senior leaders become crucial—strategic thinkers without influence are akin to elite opera singers performing without an audience. Lewis enjoyed status and direct access to the prime minister, cabinet members, national media, and other leading influencers in Great Britain. Such personal and professional associations ensured the ability to engage decisionmakers when seeking to deliver inconvenient information involving potential strategic vulnerabilities. The advantages of Lewis’s access can be well illustrated by a more recent, yet negative, example. In June 1999, United States Central Command hosted a team of more than 70 analysts from several interagency departments to conduct a war game (“scenario”) and assess the “risks, threats, opportunities, and challenges that are likely to be present” in a post-Saddam Iraq. This collection of representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense, National Security Council, CIA, and other organizations produced a credible strategic thinking product not unlike Lewis’s memorandum.46

Their observations and conclusions, published in the Desert Crossing Seminar After Action Report, anticipated postwar vulnerabilities of national consequence should military action be taken to defeat Iraqi forces and oust Saddam Hussein’s government. The most significant findings predicted Iranian intervention in Iraq ranging from “harassment of U.S. forces to terrorist attacks,” the emergence of internal Iraqi opposition groups, divergence of regional interests among Arab coalition partners, exacerbation of relations with many coalition partners due to a prolonged Western
occupation of Iraq, and an anticipated US occupation period likely to exceed ten years. The *Desert Crossing* report also envisioned the requirement for 400,000 troops and infeasibility of a viable democratic government in Iraq. Although the war game and assessment described accurately the actual post-conflict environment and vulnerabilities confronted in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the strategic thinking effort resulted in no benefit due to insufficient access to President George W. Bush and his senior national security team in 2003. In fact, General Anthony Zinni, the United States Central Command commander who initiated the war game “Desert Crossing,” asserted in 2004 that the study had been forgotten within three years due to inadequate “corporate memory.”

Even if available to senior leaders, strategic thinking assessments are often discounted because these inconvenient observations contradict orthodoxy. Lewis's example demonstrates an effective way to increase the probability that valuable strategic insights will gain traction despite institutional barriers. A detailed description and thorough analysis of anticipated vulnerability is far more persuasive—and more difficult to discount or rationalize away—than incomplete, cursory assumptions. For example, stating that the light at the end of the tunnel may not be the exit but an oncoming train is less attention provoking than proclaiming the light is three 200-ton locomotives pulling 125 tanker cars filled with chlorine and sulfuric acid. Detail matters when attempting to persuade decisionmakers and counter denial systems because analytic and descriptive detail is the by-product of intellectual rigor. Lewis's influence on Palmerston and a majority of his cabinet members in their policy deliberations no doubt hinged a great deal on the detailed presentation and thoughtful conclusions Lewis provided. Granted, the modern information environment dominated by electronic communications, PowerPoint briefings, and white papers makes the ability to convey strategic thinking insights in appropriate detail more difficult. Empowerment, access, and reputation, therefore, remain essential to overcome the trend toward superficiality—otherwise, strategic vulnerabilities of the scope and scale Lewis identified risk being ignored today.

Subject matter expertise alone is insufficient to be an effective strategic thinker. Lewis, readily acknowledged as a leading authority on international law, certainly possessed the expertise to author “Recognition of the Independence of the Southern States of the North American Union.” Exceptional professional knowledge alone proved inadequate to make the memorandum an insightful strategic-level analysis. The compelling insights required are generated instead by combining subject expertise with critical, systems, historical, ethical, and creative thinking competencies. The resulting amalgam produces
diversity of perspective, unfettered imagination, and rare strategic vision. Lewis achieved these attributes through an exceptional education, diverse practical experience, and lifelong devotion to intellectual curiosity. Perhaps best described as a Renaissance man, he studied extensively and wrote prolifically on a variety of topics, including government, political theory, philosophy, economics, horticulture, astronomy, languages, ancient history, and even etymology. The resulting synthesis and cultivated intellect allowed Lewis to develop an informed and reflective filter through which he evaluated past, present, and anticipated events, thus transcending subject matter expertise to intuit strategic anomalies and challenge orthodoxy.

Lewis provided invaluable service to Great Britain, and his November 1862 memorandum represents the gold standard in strategic thinking and critical evaluation of political-strategic assumptions. Not only did he summarize the domestic costs borne of shortfalls in American cotton supply and review in detail several historical precedents germane to potential recognition of the Confederacy, but through ensuing legal analysis concerning the merits of British intervention—punctuated by his final inconvenient queries—Lewis also illustrated the enduring verity that the questions asked can often be more important than knowing the answers.

Moreover, Lewis shows the best ways to avoid institutional barriers to effective strategic thinking. Strategic thinkers must be recognized and empowered, possess true access to senior decisionmakers, and communicate potential vulnerabilities or opportunities within the competitive environment in persuasive detail. Much more than subject matter experts, they must be multifaceted thinkers imbued with diversity of perspective and intuitive sagacity. To be otherwise risks losing sight of the most important contribution of strategic thinking: the intellectual means to avoid Thomas Carlyle’s admonition that “nothing is more terrible than activity without insight.” The inevitable alternative leads to “playing with edge tools” in unfortunate scenarios rife with Gordian vulnerabilities.

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Endnotes


23. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy*, 337–42. Return to text.


32. Lewis, “Independence of the Southern States,” 2. Return to text.


44. Fenn, *A Randorshire Gentleman*, 305. Return to text.


47. USCENTCOM, *Desert Crossing Seminar*, 4–7. Return to text.


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