

Received from Barry Watts
9 May 1981

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March 9, 1981

Patterns of Conflict in History

No other field of history is under such pressure as military history to provide "practical" answers to current problems. The specialist in Renaissance diplomacy is unlikely to be solicited for his views on the foreign policy of the Reagan administration, even though he may be an authority on the "Cold War with the Turks" in the 15th Century, and the scholar who has invested a career in the era of the French Revolution will probably be left alone when news breaks of still another revolution in some Latin American Banana Republic. But let a person prowl around some equally remote corner in the general field of military history and he is often tempted - or expected - to function as a military analyst or at least have the expertise of an Assistant Secretary of Defense.

Reasons for this vary. The military profession is a practical one, geared most of the time to problem solving, and soldiers - like engineers and scientists - are inclined to be pragmatic about what is meant by the word 'practical.' History is often taken to be practical if it yields 'lessons;' and especially exemplary lessons in strategy or tactics that can be directly applied to some current situation. And since the basis of all military theory is experience - our own individual experience or the experience of others, which of course is history - we are frequently inspired to make sortees into the past, seeking confirmation of our own ideas or some traditional pattern that may provide a clue as to the nature of the next war. Colonel Boyd has discovered a sure-fire formula for success that in his view brings into question the doctrine embodied in FM 100-5.

This is not a new approach, although not until the 19th century did soldiers actually come up with a rigid set of principles, even

though previous generations had suspected that war was a science as well as an art, with established rules that might not "teach men with mathematical precision what they should do in every possible case" but "will always point out the errors which should be avoided." Such rules "thus become, in the hands of skillful generals commanding brave troops, means of almost certain success."¹ Jomini's Art of War, which first appeared in 1838, and the books of disciples, like MacDougall's Theory of War (1856), Halleck's Elements of Military Art and Science (1846), Hamley's celebrated Operations of War (1866), which served the British army as a primer on tactics and strategy until the last edition was published in 1923, and even the writings of Admiral A. T. Mahan were all written on the assumption that "battles of the past succeeded or failed according as they were fought in conformity with the principles of war," the existence of which could be "detected by the study of the past" and confirmed by the "constant teachings of history."² Count von Schlieffen, the Chief of the German General Staff at the turn of the century, was inspired by the casual reading of the first volume of Delbruck's Geschichte der Kriegskunst (1900) to repeat Hannibal's tactics at Cannae through envelopment at the strategical as well as the tactical level. Having discovered this "key," Schlieffen then used it in his writings to unlock the secrets of more recent Great Captains. Frederick, Napoleon and Moltke, it turned out, had also always endeavored to envelope the enemy, although this knowledge would have come as something of a surprise to Frederick and, on occasion, even to Napoleon. In the next generation Captain B. H. Liddell Hart discovered from his research on the campaigns of Sherman that the key to success in war lay in a "strategy of indirect approach." More recent attempts to channel history into arbitrary patterns include General Andrew Willoughby's

Elements of Maneuver in War (1935), Lt. Gen. Sir Francis Taker, The Pattern of War (1948), and LTC D. K. Palit, The Essentials of Military Knowledge (1951).

It is probably significant that all the books listed above were written by professional military men: professional historians as a rule shy away from tidy formulas, whether in military history or the writings of Karl Marx, perhaps because they remember Henry Adams' cynical confession: "I have written too much history to believe in it. So if anyone wants to differ from me, I am prepared to agree with him."³ Even a recent "coffee-table" volume entitled Tactical Genius in Battle illustrates the historian's natural inclination to avoid rigid patterns in history. The emphasis is not on tactical schemes as such beyond "a steady flanking attack and a determined commander," but on the variations introduced by the individual commanders to organize and deploy their resources.⁴ It is an approach that would have ~~appealed~~ ^{appealed} to Napoleon, the practical practitioner, and Clausewitz, the philosophical theorist on war, both of whom focused attention ^{on} the commander rather than any fixed system of Military Commandments.

Boyd's explanation of how he came to seek the patterns of conflict in history bears some resemblance to the evolution of Liddell Hart's strategical thought in the 1920's. Boyd started from a basic tactical problem, that of the modern fighter pilot trying to get inside his opponent's maneuver space in order "to generate a mismatch between what the enemy perceives and reality."

As a member of the USAF Fighter Weapons School, he wrote of this aspect of fighter tactics in Aerial Attack Study (1960). Similarly Liddell Hart began his investigations in 1921 with his 'Man in the Dark Theory,' in which he endeavored to determine the correct principles of

How would he know

action which a man seeking to attack an enemy in the dark would naturally adopt." Boyd repeatedly used the analogy of dazzling one's opponent with one hand while delivering the knockout punch with the other, whereas Liddell Hart deduced five principles from his man grappling with an opponent that he would apply to infantry tactics - protective formation, reconnaissance, fixing, decisive maneuver and exploitation.⁵

Both men subsequently expanded their studies by a study of the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, although here Liddell Hart was by far the more scholarly and systematic of the two. He adapted Mongol tactics to mechanized warfare: the attack should be made of combined units of heavy and light horsemen, or tanks, with the tank attack being

an alternating process of movement and a compound process of fire. According to the hostile fire and the circumstances, the light tanks might either make direct for a chosen fire-position, or, like the Mongol horse archers, race closer to the enemy before wheeling about and retiring a short distance to their covering fire-position.⁶

No From the Mongols, these two writers turned to the Huns - or so they were viewed in the South in 1865 and France in 1940 - of more recent times, Sherman and the German Blitzkrieg of 1940. From his analysis of Sherman's campaigns, published in 1929 under the title Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American, Liddell Hart organized and blended Sherman's technique of what he called "alternative objectives," the "strategic net," and the "baited gambit," into a comprehensive doctrine adapted to mechanized war. And Boyd's exposure to blitzkrieg tactics helped him to formulate his Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action timecycle. The two men even resemble each other in their addiction to coining new words or phrases to explain their concepts, although here clearly Liddell Hart has the better of it. "A strategy of indirect approach" somehow goes down better than OODA Loop!

Both men next turned to history to verify their conclusions.

Liddell Hart scanned the decisive wars from the Greeks to World War I (subsequent expanded editions included World War II and the Arab-Israel wars) to 'discover' that nearly all successful generals in history, whether they knew it or not, had employed something akin to the "Strategy of Indirect approach."⁷ And Colonel Boyd discovered the battles of Leuctra (371 BC), Arbela (331 BC) Cannae (216 BC) and Leuthen (1757), where flanking attacks or envelopment had enabled Epaminondas, Alexander, Hannibal and Frederick to operate inside their opponents' OODA Loops! Neither man, curiously enough, was particularly enamored of Napoleon, especially in the last phase of his career, Liddell Hart because of tendencies to rely more on mass than mobility, and on strategic formation rather than on surprise; Boyd because of the increased use in battle of regular formations and massed artillery. Both men too, incidentally, were enamored of the writings of Sun Tzu, and both dwelt at length on the so-called Hutier or Infiltration tactics developed by the Germans in 1917-18. Both claimed that army doctrine was rigid and unimaginative - inadequate to meet present needs. "Rigid" and "unimaginative" are adjectives they also frequently applied to current military leadership.

There is no point in comparing Liddell Hart and Boyd from the standpoint of knowledge of military history based on a systematic reading, respect for the canons of historical scholarship, productivity or influence: one cannot compare a lifetime of study and writing with an intensified - but often indiscriminate - reading of history. Both, however, looked to history to confirm their respective theories, and especially in those books where the theorist overruled the historian,

He can't know the ideas I have collected yet!

Liddell Hart followed the same basic text as Boyd: "Seek and ye shall find." The Indirect Approach is present in all of his historical works after publication of Sherman, but in his studies of the two world wars, his biographies of Foch and T. E. Lawrence, and in his history of the Royal Tank Corps, his edition of the Rommel Papers and The German Generals Talk, the Strategy of Indirect Approach served primarily as the basis for making historical judgments, much as Jomini's maxims a century before had enabled military historians to judge a commander by his adherence to accepted principles.

The inherent weakness in Boyd's approach is his insistence on forcing history into convenient patterns. One wonders if he "discovered" anything that he did not want to find. Whether it is the fighter pilot applying the concept developed in Aerial Attack Study, or the likes of Epaminondas, Alexander, Hannibal or Frederick trying to operate inside an adversary's OODA Loop, or the so-called Hutier tactics of 1918, the German blitzkrieg in 1940, or guerilla warfare in America in 1776-83, all of the operations that he describes seem to suggest that his formula represents a sort of ^{low of} history ignored in FM 100-5.

The future Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell once hinted at this weakness in Liddell Hart's theoretical writings when he slyly suggested that "with your knowledge and brains and command of the pen, you could have written just as convincing a book called the 'Strategy of the Direct Approach.'" ⁸

Academic historians would be more skeptical still. "History can reach no unchallengeable conclusions," Professor Geyl wrote in his study of the various interpretations of Napoleon. "To expect from history those final conclusions, which may perhaps be obtained in other disciplines, is ... to misunderstand its nature." As soon as the historian

encounters issues that involve explanation, interpretation, and appreciation - three words that would apply to the Boyd presentation - "the personal element can no longer be ruled out, that point of view which is determined by the circumstances of his time and by his own preconceptions." "However solemnly some people may talk about the lessons of History," Professor Geyl concludes, "the historian is after all only a man sitting at his desk."⁹ And if that "historian" has a particular axe to grind, the "lessons" he expounds are more suspect still. "What is historical truth," Napoleon once asked, "the true truths are very difficult to ascertain in history ... There are so many truths ... There are facts that remain in eternal litigation."¹⁰ A German general of the 19th century asserted bluntly: "It is well known that military history, when superficially studied, will furnish arguments in support of any theory or opinion."¹¹

None other than Clausewitz points to a second weakness in Boyd's presentation: "historical examples are ... seldom used to ... good effect. On the contrary, the use made of them by theorists normally not only leaves the reader dissatisfied but even irritates his intelligence." Nothing, Clausewitz points out, is proven by citing examples from history. "If anyone lists a dozen defeats in which the losing side attacked with divided columns, I can list a dozen victories in which that very tactic was employed." Such "irresponsible handling of history leads to hundreds of wrong ideas and bogus theorizing."

As for the tendency of theorists "to refer to events in ancient history" (i.e. Luctra, Arbela or Cannae), Clausewitz dismisses such examples as "vanity and quackery," often destitute of "any honesty of purpose, any earnest attempt to instruct or convince," and therefore "sheer decoration, designed to cover gaps and blemishes." It would be

far better, he argued, to present one fully detailed case instead of being "content merely to touch on three or four which give the semblance of strong proof."¹²

This is not to suggest that Clausewitz would have described Colonel Boyd as destitute of "any honesty of purpose, any earnest attempt to instruct or convince." Nor did Clausewitz believe that historical examples could serve no useful purpose. Quite the contrary. "Historical examples clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical science," particularly the art of war. What he objected to was the faulty use of such examples, and the suggestion that merely to cite historical examples was to lend credence to theory. And the further back one goes, "the less useful military history becomes, growing poorer and barer at the same time." Since we know very little about some of Boyd's battles, including the intentions of the commanders, the actual numbers involved, or even the exact site of the battlefields, it is difficult to understand how theory is to be served by such examples.

How does he know he has rightly presented so far

A third weakness in Boyd's presentation is that his examples are taken out of context. Any battle or event once removed from its unique historical context ceases to be a meaningful lesson from history. In a study of World War II a German general pointed to mistakes that the Germans often made in deducing war experience. The first, he claimed, was a tendency to generalize from personal or limited experience. The second was to apply indiscriminately the experiences of one situation to entirely different circumstances. (In his presentation Boyd frequently was guilty on both counts.) Thus the German Supreme command "applied the experiences, acquired on the Western Front in 1940, unchanged to the war against Russia regardless of:

- 1) The greater tenacity of the adversary;

- 2) His insensibility against threatening the flanks;
- 3) The scarcity of roads;
- 4) The vastness of the space, giving to the opponent the possibility of avoiding decision."

"This did not only influence the operational plan against Russia, but contributed also to the final disappointment."¹³

In his treatment of Napoleon, Boyd likewise ignores - or is ignorant of - the underlying conditions, some of them unique, that contributed both to Napoleon's success and "also to the final disappointment." He seems to make a virtue of the fact that the Ordonnance of 1791, a drill manual that was not officially discarded for about 40 years, was not followed in all its details in the first years of the wars of the Revolution, and to equate the return of the authority of this drill manual with Napoleon's decline on the battlefield. This reveals ignorance of the facts of history and is logically absurd. General Colin, the foremost authority on tactics in the 18th century, concluded his section on this drill manual by saying: "For twenty five years, the Ordonnance of 1791 will be applied on the fields of battle and will make a substantial contribution to our victories there. No contemporary regulations had been written in such an eclectic spirit, none provided such an arsenal of formations and maneuvers."¹⁴ The most recent historian of tactics during this period, a professor at the Naval War College, stresses that Napoleon placed great emphasis upon conventional drill as early as 1801, at the same time retaining flexibility and using the Republican system "of merging close order and skirmish tactics. "Though thoroughly familiar with the '91 Reglement, Bonapart's generals never bound themselves rigidly to every detail." ¹⁶

Boyd fails to note even obvious differences between armies - between the French Republican armies and their conservative, hide-bound Austrian opponents, between the Prussians of 1792 and 1814, between the British Army in the Peninsula and the Mamelukes. Nor does he deal with relative numbers, the variation in terrain and the quality and availability of roads, the emergence of nationalism - which initially gave the French a distinct advantage and by the end of the Napoleonic wars had inspired the Spanish guerrilla, the Russian peasant, or the Prussian Landwehr - all of which contributed to the relative military decline of the French. One could similarly pick the flesh from the bones in other of his historical illustrations - his failure, for example, to distinguish between conventional guerrilla warfare and the more recent doctrine of Revolutionary warfare. But the purpose of this paper is not to sit in judgment about his historical facts per se, but to demonstrate that his presentation really has very little to do with history at all. His conclusions should be judged on other grounds.

History has much that it can teach. It can throw the present into an historical perspective, it can help to form sound judgment, it can even give practical guidance on specific problems. Napoleon himself learned a great deal from history. For example, when he assumed command of the Army of Italy in 1796 he had with him a history of the campaign fought over the same ground in 1745, and more than one authority has noted striking similarities between the two campaigns. "In both cases the object was to separate the allies and beat them in detail; in both cases the same passes through the Maritime Alps were utilized, and in both cases the initial objectives were the same."¹⁶

American military planners, wrestling with problems of legislating the draft in 1916, learned some of the pitfalls to be avoided from an

historical monograph on the Draft Riots of 1863, and the British experience in 1914-18 as analysed by General Frederick Maurice in Lessons of Allied Cooperation may well have contributed to the solution of at least some of the problems of coalition warfare in World War II. A recent study of Interoperability of Allied Forces by two historians at the U.S. Army Military History Institute is fertile in conclusions and lessons as they relate to training, doctrine, education, command and staff. One can learn from history, if only by becoming aware of the mistakes of the past.

General George Patton put his finger on perhaps the most important lesson of all. "The purpose of history," he wrote shortly before his death, "is to learn how human beings react when exposed to the danger of wounds or death, and how high ranking individuals react when submitted to the onerous responsibility of conducting war or the preparations for war."¹⁷

Wavell agreed. The real way to get value out of the study of military history, he told a class at the Staff College,

is to take particular situations, and as far as possible get inside the skin of the man who made a decision, realize the conditions in which the decision was made and then see in what way you could have improved on it. ... To learn that Napoleon in 1796 with 20,000 men beat combined forces of 30,000 by something called 'economy of force,' or 'operating on interior lines' is a mere waste of time. If you can understand how a young, unknown man inspired a half-starved, ragged, rather Bolshie crowd; how he filled their bellies, how he out-marched, outwitted, out-bluffed and defeated men who had studied war all their lives and waged it according to the textbooks of the time, you will have learnt something worth knowing.

As for the principles of war, Wavell advised his students not to treat these "as holy writ, like the Ten Commandments, to be learned by heart, and as having by their repetition some magic, like the incantations of savage priests."¹⁸ Such principles, he contended, were merely a set of

common sense maxims that are instinctive to the properly trained soldier. No two theorists could agree completely on the wording or even the number of so-called principles. (Wavell probably would have smiled at the mention of OODA: to him it might well have sounded like "the incantations" of a savage priest.)

Reactions to the Boyd presentation will differ sharply, depending upon the historical sophistication of the audience. A newspaper reporter, especially one with a bias against the military, might be impressed with the logical arrangement of historical facts to reach an obvious conclusion. Professional historians would dismiss it out of hand. Not all of them would be as charitable as Professor Geyl, who wrote in another connection:

Truth, though for God it may be One, assumes many shapes to men ... The study even of contradictory conceptions can be fruitful. Any one thesis or presentation may in itself be unacceptable, and yet, when it has been jettisoned, there remains something of value. Its very critics are that much richer.¹⁹

Most historians would probably write Boyd off as an over-enthusiastic amateur with no real understanding of history and its processes, a well-intended man who marshalled facts to suit his own beliefs. Academicians with an anti-military bias would find their worst fears confirmed in the performance in much the same way that Boyd found his thesis substantiated by history.

The question is, how are military men apt to react? Those familiar with the writings of Frederick or Napoleon might wonder what precisely is new about the OODA Loop concept - is it anything more than 20th century jargon to express the conviction of both Frederick and Napoleon that any successful general must put himself in the place of his opponent. In other words, is the 'loop' simply another term for the wheel that Boyd

has rediscovered? Clausewitz, Wavell, and probably even Patton would argue that history is about people rather than principles, that the most valuable lessons history can teach center on human nature. Liddell Hart would most certainly have been intrigued by the performance - impressed by the sense of order, perhaps amused at the thought that Boyd had just discovered concepts closely related to what he himself had preached for forty years, outraged at the several obvious attempts of Boyd to downplay his "debt" to him, and recalling his own experience, perhaps apprehensive about the ability of those responsible for military doctrine to respond positively to criticism or to new ideas. Certainly he would have had no difficulty with the notion that history should serve as the basis for theory, although this particular Captain would have sent this particular Colonel a 14 page memorandum drawing attention to his factual errors, gaps in analysis, and reasoning by false analogy.

But what about the soldier who knows nothing of the ways in which history can be used - or abused? If there exists a military audience who would nod affirmatively at the main points in Boyd's presentation and walk away convinced, then the army is susceptible to any argument, by any charlatan (which Boyd most certainly is not), and somebody had better consider anew the relative importance of training versus education.

Napoleon once advised his son to read and re-read the campaigns of the Great Captains: "it is the only way to learn the art of war."²⁰ A mandatory addendum for today's professional officer would appear to be: "Read and re-read what Clausewitz has to say in Book Two on the theory of war: it is the only way to learn about method, critical analysis, and the role of history in understanding the art of war."

1. Baron de Jomini, The Art of War (Philadelphia, 1862), p. 323.
2. Captain A. T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783 (London, 1890) p. 7
3. As quoted in B. H. Liddell Hart, Why Don't We Learn from History (New York, 1971, p. 22
4. Simon Goodenough, Tactical Genius in Battle, (London, 1979,) pp. 5-8.
5. Liddell Hart, The Framework of a Science of Infantry Tactics (London, 1921), pp. 5-27.
6. Liddell Hart, "Two Great Captains: Jenghiz Khan and Sabutai," Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine, CCXV (1924), 644-59; Thoughts on War (London, 1944), pp. 132, 267. Liddell Hart's suggestion for a pattern of mechanized warfare based upon the Mongol campaigns was first made in September, 1927.
7. See Liddell Hart, The Decisive Wars of History, (London, 1929); The Strategy of Indirect Approach (London, 1941), and Strategy: The Indirect Approach (London, 1954).
8. Wavell to Liddell Hart, March 15, 1934. Liddell Hart Papers. King's College, London.
9. Peter Geyl, Napoleon For and Against (New Haven, 1963), pp. 15-16.
10. As quoted in J. Christopher Herold, The Mind of Napoleon (New York, 1951), p. 50.
11. Bronsart von Schellendorf as quoted in Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, Letters on Artillery (2nd ed., London, 1890), p. 108.
12. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976, pp. 170, 172, 173.
13. Dr. Lothar Rendulic, Generaloberst, "Mistakes in Deducing War Experiences," (Historical Division, European Command, 1951), pp. 4
14. Le Commandant Colin, Infanterie au XVIIIe Siecle (Paris, 1907), p. 273.
15. Steven Ross, From Flintlock to Rifle: Infantry Tactics 1740-1866 (Madison, N.J., 1979).
16. J. Holland Rose, The Personality of Napoleon (New York, 1912) pp. 95-97.
17. Martin Blumenson, The Patton Papers (2 vols., 1972), II, 283, 571.
18. John Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier (London, 1964), pp. 161-62.
19. Geyl, Napoleon For and Against, p. 16.
20. Herold, The Mind of Napoleon, pp. 255-56.