

Book Reviews

EXPLORING STRATEGY

Strategy: A History

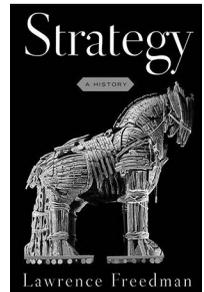
By Lawrence Freedman

Reviewed by James MacDougall, Ph.D, Chairman, Department of National Security and Strategy, US Army War College, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Eurasia.

Encyclopedic in scope and inductive in method, Sir Lawrence Freedman's grand volume: *Strategy: A History*, presents the fruits of a life-long exploration into the meaning and utility of the concept of strategy. In many respects an intellectual voyage of discovery, Freedman begins by describing the evolution of strategy through its pre-Napoleonic history and then, in turns, explores its development and use in three distinct provinces: military, revolutionary-political, and business-corporate. In the grand tradition of his British predecessors who wrote during the age of exploration, Freedman casts a perceptive and discerning eye on the territory he surveys. The result is a trove of keen observations and insights owing much for its success to Freedman's lucid and engaging prose.

While acknowledging the word "strategy" did not come into common usage until the early part of the nineteenth century, Freedman takes the view that strategy in the sense of "practical problem-solving" is as old as history (72). He thus begins his excursion (Part I) with observations on the interrelationships bordering communities of chimpanzees; proceeds to review examples of strategy in the Hebrew Bible and the world of Classical Greece; reviews the canonical texts of Sun Tzu and Machiavelli and completes his examination of the origins of strategy with a review of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A clear dichotomy emphasized throughout this opening section and one reappraised to good effect in other sections of the book is the difference between strategies based on force and strategies based on guile; in other words – strategies of strength or strategies of cunning.¹ Subsequently, however, particularly after considering the advent of the *levee en masse*, Freedman concludes "[o]nce warfare moved to mass armies with complex organizations, there would be limits to what could be achieved by means of guile. The emphasis would be on force" (65).

And so in Part II, "Strategies of Force," the modern history of military strategy is charted beyond way-points recognized by students: decisive battle; wars of annihilation or attrition; maneuver; the indirect approach; deterrence; guerilla warfare; counterinsurgency and a myriad of others. Here, as well, broader concepts such as geopolitics; continental, maritime, naval and air power; and game theory with its special relationship to nuclear strategy, are also analyzed. Although the main contours are familiar terrain, the history and theory covered in this section are viewed frequently from a unique vantage point revealing fresh insights. An example is the observation that, while Clausewitz recognized the



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¹ This dichotomy also is highlighted in Charles Hill, *Grand Strategy: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

subordination of war to policy, the prevailing assumption at that time was “a political victory would naturally follow a military victory” and further “[i]f the assumption was wrong, then strategy’s focus on military affairs was insufficient” (94). The point is prescient with a continuing relevance to modern day strategic challenges.

In Part III, “Strategies from Below,” Freedman chronicles in detail the political strategies of radicals and revolutionaries including Marx, Gandhi, Che Guevara and others. In the American domestic political context he surveys the political strategies of Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights movement, as well as other individuals and causes over the last several decades. While decidedly underdogs in the political process, each individual or group struggled to mobilize political forces in efforts to cause radical change or overthrow existing political elites and make a claim on political power. For most national security professionals, this section represents less familiar terrain made more challenging by the surfeit of biographical detail that at times clouds more salient perspectives on strategy. Nevertheless, some essential points relevant to strategy in any context may be gleaned. Among them is the significance of marshaling popular opinion in support of an ideological or political strategy, by means of, as Freedman notes (quoting Harold Lasswell) “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” (339). This point has modern echoes in discussions over “strategic narratives.” Freedman ends this section with some poignant observations about electoral politics in the United States and the party strategies related to the “permanent campaign.”

In the final section of field observations Part IV “Strategy from Above” Freedman surveys the extensive literature on business strategy noting the volume of this literature now exceeds that on military strategy. The search for strategy in business, based on the developing “science of management” throughout the 1950s and 1960s, led to the relentless pursuit of optimal solutions based on mathematical precision and calculation. Strategic planning became paramount in large corporations. Later, when results based on strict rationality proved less satisfactory than expected, a backlash against rigid planning models ensued. In a vignette reflecting this changed view, Freedman cites former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, who cited approvingly a letter to the editor in *Fortune* magazine condemning strategic planning as an “endless quest by managers for a paint-by-numbers approach, which would automatically give them answers” (504). Subsequent popular approaches to applying the strategic lessons of history’s great military commanders to the business environment (*The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, for example) also seemed to deliver less than advertised as the basis for sound business strategies.

It is in the final chapter of this section where we begin to see, having explored the nature of strategy in three distinct areas, the process of induction moving us from observation to generalization. Referring to an article by Henry Mintzberg and James Waters, Freedman identifies a major dichotomy in the field of business strategy as that “between deliberate or emergent strategies” (554).² Is strategy a rationally calcu-

2 Henry Mintzberg and James A. Waters, “Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent,” *Strategic Management Journal* 6, no. 3 (July-September 1985): 257-272.

lated plan, developed at higher echelons and provided to subunits for implementation, or, rather, a product of fluid decision-making described by Mintzberg and Waters as “a pattern in a stream of decisions[?]” Freedman’s answer to this question is one of the central themes of the book and is therefore worth tracking in some detail.

As early as the book’s opening epigram, the offhandish quote from the heavyweight prize-fighter Michael Tyson: “Everyone has a plan ‘till they get punched in the mouth” (ix), the reader is aware of the author’s skepticism for likening strategy to a calculated plan. This theme winds throughout the main sections of the book - throughout the fields of military, political and business strategy. From von Moltke’s famous dictum, “no plan survives contact with the enemy” (104) to Jack Welch’s dismissal (noted above) of efforts to fashion a “paint-by-number” approach to strategy, Sir Lawrence Freedman casts doubt on the idea of strategy as the prescriptive result of a rational calculation and direction. Indeed, titles of several of the book’s chapters: “The False Science”; “The Myth of the Master Strategist”; and “Formulas, Myths and Propaganda”, indicate a central objective of Freedman’s book: to de-mythologize the idea of strategy as a master plan. By the end of the book, having observed this to be the case in those domains visited, Freedman concludes: “The various strands of literature examined in this book all began confidently with a belief that given the right measures demanding objectives could be achieved on a regular basis. [...] In all three cases, experience undermined the foundations of this confidence” (608).

Sir Lawrence Freedman identifies two basic obstacles to strategy as a rational progression of deliberate steps: the essentially conflictual nature of the strategic environment, and the role of chance and unpredictability. On the first point, given that strategy typically involves interaction with willful opponents or competitors, predicting how they will act/react introduces a significant element of uncertainty into strategic calculation. Further, as the second point suggests, chance and unpredictability bedevil any future-oriented efforts to plan and act. Taken together, these points call into question the very nature of strategic planning and strategy making.

Is strategy then an illusion, “not worth an empty eggshell,” as suggested by the ant-strategist Leo Tolstoy (98)? Counseling skepticism, but not fatalism, Freedman’s answer seems to be “not necessarily.” Although difficult, and demonstrably not the result of a perfectly rational process, strategy, Freedman concludes, is still important and necessary. He counsels: “...we have little choice but to identify a way forward dependent on human agency which might lead to a good outcome. It is as well to avoid illusions of control, but in the end all we can do is act as if we can influence events. To do otherwise is to succumb to fatalism” (622). In this respect, Freedman’s answer to the question of whether strategy is a deliberate or emergent process reflects Mintzberg’s view: “strategy formation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent” (555). Seen in this light, the simple shorthand of strategists: the ends-ways-means construct, appears too linear and must be grounded in a broader understanding of chance, contingency, and uncertainty. We are reminded of Murray and Grimsley’s observation on Clausewitz’s remarkable trinity (emotion, chance, and reason). “Although Clausewitz

intended this trinity to describe the nature of armed conflict, it applies with equal relevance to the conduct of strategy in peace as well as war.”³ The creative strategist is thus free to roam throughout the realms of chance and probability, all the while focused on strategy as an instrument of policy.

Like any good volume on exploration, Freedman’s *Strategy* is full of suggestions for profitable follow-on voyages. One such potentially productive route for exploration is Freedman’s association of strategy and power. In the book’s preface he provides a brief definition of strategy as a political art: “the art of creating power” (xii). In political science, “power” is a fundamentally contested concept with understandings ranging from “power over resources” to “power over outcomes.” Freedman recognizes this essential distinction in a discussion of revolutionary politics (372-373) but a more detailed discussion of power, and strategy as the art of creating power, could have been beneficial. Indeed, in previous work, Freedman focused on the relationship of power and strategy to good effect.⁴ Tellingly, in this work, in addition to examining the concept of power, Freedman defined strategy as “the art of creating power to obtain the maximum political objectives using available military means.”⁵ Given the scope of the book under review, a working definition of strategy as “the art of creating power to obtain the maximum _____ objectives,” where the blank might be filled in alternately with the words military, political, or economic, would seem fitting. Adding the concept of objectives to the definition precludes criticism that strategy as simply “creating power” would amount to no more than a purposeless accumulation of resources. Recognizing at an early point the conception of strategy in this book is “governed by the starting point, and not the end point” (xi), it nevertheless seems that strategy requires both. In fact, Freedman concludes as much later in the book when discussing strategy as a process of managing emerging variables: “[t]his does not mean that it is easy to manage without a view of a desired end state. Without some sense of where the journey should be leading it will be difficult to evaluate alternative outcomes” (611). The central idea of strategy that emerges from the book is one that is part plan, part process - a combination of rational calculation and adaptation to evolving conditions. This notion is summarized agreeably in the letter to *Fortune* magazine quoted by Jack Welch and noted by Freedman: “Strategy was not a lengthy action plan. It was the evolution of a central idea through continually changing circumstances” (504).

Strategy: A History, is a grand exploration and at times takes the reader through uncharted terrain. The book’s concluding chapters (Part V, “Theories of Strategy”) offer not so much theories of strategy making derived through inductive observation, but rather thoughts on how recent scholarship in cognitive psychology and philosophy might help frame scripts or strategic narratives useful in advancing the process of making strategy. Here, as throughout, the observations are keen and suggest many areas for potentially productive follow-up. Early in the book,

3 Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, eds, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

4 Lawrence Freedman, “Strategic Studies and the Problem of Power,” in *War, Strategy and International Politics: Essays in Honor of Sir Michael Howard*, eds. Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes and Robert O’Neill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 279-294.

5 *Ibid.*, 283.

observing that “apes were astute when it came to working out power balances” (8), Freedman suggests forming coalitions is a time-honored and effective strategic approach. Given his focus on the relationship between strategy and power, additional work on the concept of balance of power, and its importance in strategy particularly, would be useful.

For the arm-chair traveler (or arm-chair strategist, as the case may be) Sir Lawrence Freedman’s voyage of discovery through the world of strategy is enriching and thought-provoking. One hopes he remains intrepid and continues to help fill the “blank spots” on our mental maps. One such important spot that receives increased attention is the province of “grand strategy.” Should Freedman embark to explore this domain one would be tempted to sign on as a deckhand.

The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective

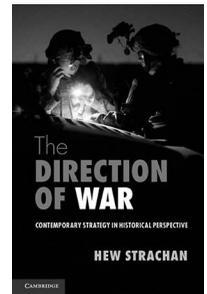
By Hew Strachan

Reviewed by Dr. Richard Swain, COL US Army Retired, Lawton, OK

This book, a collection of papers composed over a ten-year period, is subject to multiple legitimate readings. Some British reviewers have seen it simply as a critique of contemporary British and American military policy. However, the theme announced by the author, the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford, is an exploration of “strategy, what we understand by it, and how that understanding has changed” (4). That seems to be the proper basis for evaluation.

Strachan indicts Huntington’s *Soldier and the State* with corrupting professional-political dialog in both the United States, where he acknowledges it may reflect Constitutional norms, and in the United Kingdom, where he argues it does not (76-77). Indeed, much of the book is engaged with criticism of institutional arrangements for strategy formulation in the United Kingdom and United States. Not surprisingly, the author is better informed about the complexities of the former than the latter; he probably overstates the influence of the Weinberger and Powell doctrines, while understating the role of the National Security Council system and the effects of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. He undergirds his arguments with what he sees as a corrective to an overly Anglophone reading of Clausewitz (5) and Thucydides (257).

The most prominent idea in the *Direction of War* is the argument that the understandings of policy and strategy have become so confused the distinction between them has been lost, largely to the detriment of strategic practice. In part, this confusion has been the result of the intensification of wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, critically in the First World War, when the higher direction of war in the form of *grand* strategy came to comprehend the mobilization of all national (and allied) means in pursuit of military victory. This result was compounded after the Second World War by the speculative theoretical flights of deterrence theorists, mostly American academics.



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