

THE CONCENTRATED ESSENCE OF  
STRATEGY AND TACTICS

**T**his brief chapter is an attempt to epitomize, from the history of war, a few truths of experience which seem so universal, and so fundamental, as to be termed axioms.

They are practical guides, not abstract principles. Napoleon realized that only the practical is useful when he gave us his maxims. But the modern tendency has been to search for principles which can each be expressed in a single word—and then need several thousand words to explain them. Even so, these 'principles' are so abstract that they mean different things to different men, and for any value, depend on the individual's own understanding of war. The longer one continues the search for such omnipotent abstractions, the more do they appear a mirage, neither attainable nor useful—except as an intellectual exercise.

The principles of war, not merely one principle, can be condensed into a single word—'concentration'. But for truth this needs to be amplified as the 'concentration of strength against weakness'. And for any real value it needs to be explained that the concentration of strength against weakness depends on the dispersion of your opponent's strength, which in turn is produced by a distribution of your own that gives the appearance, and partial effect of dispersion. Your dispersion, his dispersion, your concentration—such is the sequence, and each is a sequel. True concentration is the fruit of calculated dispersion.

Here we have a fundamental principle whose understanding may prevent a fundamental error (and the most common)—that of giving your opponent freedom and time to concentrate to meet your concentration. But to state the principle is not of much practical aid for execution.

The above-mentioned axioms (here expressed as maxims) cannot be condensed into a single word; but they can be put

into the fewest words necessary to be practical. Eight in all, so far—six are positive and two negative. They apply to tactics as well as strategy, unless otherwise indicated.

### *Positive*

1. *Adjust your end to your means.* In determining your object, clear sight and cool calculation should prevail. It is folly 'to bite off more than you can chew', and the beginning of military wisdom is a sense of what is possible. So learn to face facts while still preserving faith: there will be ample need for faith—the faith that can achieve the apparently impossible—when action begins. Confidence is like the current in a battery: avoid exhausting it in vain effort—and remember that your own continued confidence will be of no avail if the cells of your battery, the men upon whom you depend, have been run down.

2. *Keep your object always in mind,* while adapting your plan to circumstances. Realize that there are more ways than one of gaining an object, but take heed that every objective should bear on the object. And in considering possible objectives weigh their possibility of attainment with their service to the object if attained—to wander down a side-track is bad, but to reach a dead end is worse.

3. *Choose the line (or course) of least expectation.* Try to put yourself in the enemy's shoes, and think what course it is least probable he will foresee or forestall.

4. *Exploit the line of least resistance*—so long as it can lead you to any objective which would contribute to your underlying object. (In tactics this maxim applies to the use of your reserves; and in strategy, to the exploitation of any tactical success.)

5. *Take a line of operation which offers alternative objectives.* For you will thus put your opponent on the horns of a dilemma, which goes far to assure the chance of gaining one objective at least—whichever he guards least—and may enable you to gain one after the other.

Alternative objectives allow you to keep the opportunity of gaining an objective; whereas a single objective, unless the enemy is helplessly inferior, means the certainty that you will not gain it—once the enemy is no longer uncertain as to your aim. There is no more common mistake than to confuse a

single line of operation, which is usually wise, with a single objective, which is usually futile. (If this maxim applies mainly to strategy, it should be applied where possible to tactics, and does, in effect, form the basis of infiltration tactics.)

6. *Ensure that both plan and dispositions are flexible—adaptable to circumstances.* Your plan should foresee and provide for a next step in case of success or failure, or partial success—which is the most common case in war. Your dispositions (or formation) should be such as to allow this exploitation or adaptation in the shortest possible time.

### *Negative*

7. *Do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard*—whilst he is well placed to parry or evade it. The experience of history shows that, save against a much inferior opponent, no effective stroke is possible until his power of resistance or evasion is paralysed. Hence no commander should launch a real attack upon an enemy in position until satisfied that such paralysis has developed. It is produced by *disorganization*, and its moral equivalent, *demoralization*, of the enemy.

8. *Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed.* A mere reinforcement of weight is not sufficient change, for it is probable that the enemy also will have strengthened himself in the interval. It is even more probable that his success in repulsing you will have strengthened him morally.

The essential truth underlying these maxims is that, for success, two major problems must be solved—*dislocation* and *exploitation*. One precedes and one follows the actual blow—which in comparison is a simple act. You cannot hit the enemy with effect unless you have first created the opportunity; you cannot make that effect decisive unless you exploit the second opportunity that comes before he can recover.

The importance of these two problems has never been adequately recognized—a fact which goes far to explain the common indecisiveness of warfare. The training of armies is primarily devoted to developing efficiency in the detailed execution of the *attack*. This concentration on tactical technique tends to obscure the psychological element. It fosters a

cult of soundness rather than of surprise. It breeds commanders who are so intent not to do anything wrong, according to 'the book', that they forget the necessity of making the enemy do something wrong. The result is that their plans have no result. For, in war, it is by compelling mistakes that the scales are most often turned.

Here and there a commander has eschewed the obvious, and has found in the unexpected the key to a decision—unless fortune has proved foul. For luck can never be divorced from war, since war is part of life. Hence the unexpected cannot guarantee success. But it guarantees the best chance of success.