

On Physical Effort in War

If no one had the right to give his views on military operations except when he is frozen, or faint from heat and thirst, or depressed from privation and fatigue, objective and accurate views would be even rarer than they are. But they would at least be subjectively valid, for the speaker's experience would precisely determine his judgment. This is clear enough when we observe in what a deprecatory, even mean and petty way men talk about the failure of some operation that they have witnessed, and even more if they actually took part. We consider that this indicates how much influence physical effort exerts, and shows how much allowance has to be made for it in all our assessments.

Among the many factors in war that cannot be measured, physical effort is the most important. Unless it is wasted, physical effort is a coefficient of all forces, and its exact limit cannot be determined. But it is significant that, just as it takes a powerful archer to bend the bow beyond the average, so it takes a powerful mind to drive his army to the limit. It is one thing for an army that has been badly defeated, is beset by danger on all sides, and is disintegrating like crumbling masonry, to seek its safety in utmost physical effort. It is altogether different when a victorious army, buoyed up by its own exhilaration, remains a willing instrument in the hands of its commander. The same effort, which in the former case can at most arouse sympathy, must be admired in the other, where it is much harder to maintain.

The inexperienced observer now comes to recognize one of the elements that seem to chain the spirit and secretly wear away men's energies.

Although we are dealing only with the efforts that a general can demand of his troops, a commander of his subordinates, in other words although we are concerned with the courage it takes to make the demand and the skill to keep up the response, we must not forget the physical exertion required of the commander himself. Since we have pursued our analysis of war conscientiously to this point, we must deal with this residue as well.

Our reason for dealing with physical effort here is that like danger it is one of the great sources of friction in war. Because its limits are uncertain, it resembles one of those substances whose elasticity makes the degree of its friction exceedingly hard to gauge.

To prevent these reflections, this assessment of the impeding conditions of war, from being misused, we have a natural guide in our sensibilities. No one can count on sympathy if he accepts an insult or mistreatment because he claims to be physically handicapped. But if he manages to defend or

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revenge himself, a reference to his handicap will be to his advantage. In the same way, a general and an army cannot remove the stain of defeat by explaining the dangers, hardships, and exertions that were endured; but to depict them adds immensely to the credit of a victory. We are prevented from making an apparently justified statement by *our feelings*, which themselves act as a higher judgment.