
Conclusion

“War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.”¹

—Sun Tzu

“As in a building, which, however fair and beautiful the superstructure, is radically marred and imperfect if the foundation be insecure—so, if the strategy be wrong, the skill of the general on the battlefield, the valor of the soldier, the brilliancy of victory, however otherwise decisive, fail of their effect.”²

—A. T. Mahan

We have explored the nature of politics, policy, and the political entities that wage wars. We have examined the most fundamental aspects of national and military strategy and have identified the basic questions we must answer when considering the use of military means to gain political goals. We have examined some basic types of military strategies and the ways in which those strategies relate to political objectives. We have also considered some of the problems in translating our understanding of these strategic fundamentals into practical military action. Now we must ask, *What does this mean for us as Marines?*

The modern strategic environment poses a significant challenge for the United States and its armed forces. The collapse of the Soviet Union has changed the existing strategic environment from one dominated by bipolar considerations to one that is in transition. Long-suppressed ethnic, religious, and even personal hatreds have spawned an increase in local and interstate violence. Terrorism, civil wars, and secessions threaten to fracture existing states and break down regional order. The strategist can no longer be guided by the Cold War's overarching strategic concept of containment. That said, strategic thinking must adjust to the evolving strategic environment.

The Department of Defense 1997 Joint Strategy Review concludes that the 21st century security environment will be characterized by chaos, crisis, and conflict. Global instability will continue to arise from the world's littorals, where well over half of the world's population resides. Thus, naval

expeditionary forces will remain one of the U.S.'s most reliable and flexible tools of global influence both for today and into tomorrow. The Marine Corps will be at the center of our national security and military strategies for addressing these challenges. Therefore, Marines must possess the strategic skills and understanding necessary to participate effectively in this environment.

As we noted at the beginning, the United States Marine Corps does not make national strategy, nor even the military strategy for fighting a particular war. However, individual Marines may well play a role in the making of strategy. Moreover, the Marine Corps is often intimately involved in the execution of strategy, and its effective execution requires an understanding of both the intent and the context behind the strategy. Strategic execution is not simply carrying out a fixed plan. Rather, it is a complex matter of both initiating action and effectively responding to events as they unfold. Without proper grounding in the strategic situation, the political and military objectives of the strategy, and the strategic concept, Marines will not be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances.

The individual Marine must appreciate the complexities and difficulties of strategy. Few Marines will be in a position to fully grasp the larger strategic picture, especially while in the field executing a mission. Nonetheless, a fundamental understanding of the problems of strategy will help Marines to appreciate the importance of their role and their unit's role. It will help Marines to understand the significance of constraints like

rules of engagement and to understand why policy guidance is sometimes unclear or often fluctuates. In the increasingly complex operations of the post-Cold War era, an awareness of the short distance between tactical action and its strategic impact may help individual Marines or Marine leaders to avoid actions that damage the United States' interests or image. This awareness should not impede action, but instead assist Marines in the evaluation of their situation and provide the basis for an intelligent response.

Marines will also serve on staffs or in commands where strategic decisions are made. They must be prepared to participate intelligently, tactfully, and energetically in the strategy-making process. They must be prepared to ask tough questions concerning both political and military objectives and to advise our political leaders on the capabilities and limitations in the use of the military instrument.

There is no shortcut to strategic wisdom. While some have predicted that the United States will be able to control the course of future conflicts through "information dominance" or a "system of systems," Marines continue to believe that people, not systems or machines, define success in war. Success in military action whether at the strategic, operational, or tactical level will continue to depend greatly upon the judgment, experience, and education of our Marines. The concepts of this publication cannot be mastered without serious and ongoing contemplation. Neither can they be turned into a strategic template to be laboriously worked through on every occasion. We

must think about these concepts, internalize them, and constantly seek to improve our understanding of the strategic environment. Such an understanding, based on a professional approach to the complexities of war and politics, is the essence of “fighting smart.”

[T]here is no substitute for the judgment and intuition of experienced and properly educated commanders.

Our goal is to equip every Marine with the thinking ability to win on the battlefields of the 21st century.³