



THE MISUSES OF STRATEGY

Sir Robert Fry


Call me a military pedant, but the habitual misuse of the word strategy seems to me to be a standing provocation to clarity of thought, in both government and in business. Government has strategies to tackle education, public health, pensions and inner-city housing. Advertising wonks will have strategies to sell clothes and cosmetics; no self respecting MBA thesis is complete without the recurring use of the S word and no airport bookstall can be regarded as fit for purpose if it does not contain a summary of Sun Tzu's strategic aphorisms for aspiring businessmen. I suspect some companies have a strategy for the location of the coffee machine. How did we get here, how did a science so tightly applied by Clausewitz and his heirs become shorthand for intellectual flaccidity? months.

Maybe we need to start with an historical view in order to find an adequate explanation. For the Ancient Greeks strategos was the art of the general and was confined to the battlefield rather than the theatre of war, what today we would refer to as tactics. Much later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, strategy began to cover a far wider landscape and the Napoleonic Wars confirmed the conceptual distinction between tactics and strategy, what happened on the battlefield and off it. During this period strategy also, to some extent, replaced policy when, in the case of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, policy and strategy were united in one man. Where no towering genius of Napoleonic scale existed the creation of strategy then became the business of the newly formed General Staffs, first in mid nineteenth century Prussia and later in all mature nations.

The twentieth century then brought new challenges to strategic thought, the first being the development of the doctrine of Der totale Krieg – total war - from 1916 onwards, a process led intellectually by Erich von Ludendorff and which required the entire resources of the nation to be brought to the prosecution of war. This may not seem remarkable now and after a century in which we fought two wars of national survival, but for the first time it inverted the role of the politician and the soldier. Most of us are familiar with the Clausewitzian dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means, what Ludendorff wanted in contrast was politics to be the instrument of war and it is no surprise that the Nazi Party rose to power less than 20 years later against this background.

The second strategic shock of the twentieth century was the creation of nuclear weapons. The capacity to blow up the world meant military professionals alone could no longer be trusted with such apocalyptic power and the rise of civilian theorists like Kahn, Schelling and Brodie dominated strategic thought in the early nuclear era. It's easy, and rather amusing, to imagine the tensions this created as hard bitten military men like the US Air Force commander Curtis Le May looked on askance while a bunch of scruffy civvies led the nuclear debate while drinking beer on the beach at Santa Monica, then the headquarters of the Rand Corporation. The Cold War required strategies to prevent war rather than to prosecute it; successful strategy was identified by the absence of violence and not its application and so the doctrine of deterrence was born.





Then, after 9/11, we entered the new era of the Global War on Terror, but how could we declare war on a tactic rather than an enemy state, a means rather than an end?

So I guess it's always been a challenge to lay down an adequate and sufficient use of the term strategy, but what is clear is that it must perform two tasks: identify the nature of the war at hand and then manage and direct it. What's good enough for warfare is also good enough for business, which is why I find the McKinney Rogers approach so refreshing in its clarity and focus. As Michael Syrett recently outlined in these pages, drawing on the MR model, it is clear command intent – the place where the CEO earns his bonus – which provides the first function and then allocates the responsibility and resources (the two can never be separated and must always be equally balanced) to an empowered management team to execute the second. As Syrett, quoting Hewlett-Packard's Mark Hurd, also observed “vision is nothing without execution”, and I completely agree: the two functions of strategy are indivisible and without a plan to operationalize the vision, strategy is no more than a bumper sticker.

And this is why the McKinney Rogers approach is so novel and effective. The techniques of Mission Leadership and Mission Analysis exactly correspond to the two functions of military strategy and connect them intimately, while the Mission Leadership Dashboard is the regulatory mechanism which measures effect and keeps the process honest: a degree of end to end sophistication which no military planning process I know has successfully emulated. Military campaign planners would immediately recognize the approach but also concede that it has created commercial tools more acute and responsive than anything in the military inventory. The triumph of the McKinney Rogers approach is that while it has adapted military techniques it has refined and improved them, giving the international business community an unparalleled capacity to define, prosecute and measure its strategies. In effect, Damian and his team have created a commercial General Staff, using and improving techniques which Clausewitz and Moltke would instantly recognize.

No, don't call me a military pedant; call me a business enthusiast.

