12

The future of strategic studies: Lessons from the last ‘golden age’

Hew Strachan

In 1945, as World War II ended, Bernard Brodie was aged 35, a young scholar newly employed at Yale’s Institute of International Studies. He had completed a doctorate at Chicago, published *Sea Power in the Machine Age* in 1941, and in the following year followed it with a brief introduction to the subject: *A Layman’s Guide to Naval Strategy*. Brodie prefaced his second book with a combative introduction:

We are being told on every hand that we must repudiate all the ideas of the past and develop a whole new strategy overnight ... But what is required is an attitude of fine discrimination and adjustment, not nihilism. The war of to-day is being fought with new weapons, but so was the war of yesterday and the day before. Drastic change in weapons has been so persistent in the last hundred years that the presence of that factor might be considered one of the constants of strategy. Only those to whom the study of war is novel permit themselves to be swept away by novel elements in the present war.

He went on to refer to the titans in the field of maritime strategy: Alfred Thayer Mahan, Julian Corbett and Raoul Castex, 'the underlying value' of whose teachings 'is still largely intact'.¹ In this approach, Brodie followed that adopted by Edward Mead Earle of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study under whose tutelage he had adapted his thesis for publication and to whose wartime seminar series on the making of modern strategy Brodie contributed. In 1943, those seminars (albeit not Brodie's) were published by Earle in *The Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*.² Earle's book remained the standard text on the evolution of strategic thought well into the 1970s, and was finally supplanted only in 1986 when Peter Paret published a new and updated version.³ So pervasive was Earle's influence that he has recently been credited with the establishment of security studies in the United States, and by implication with being present at (and possibly even the author of) the dawn of the 'last golden age' in the study of strategy.⁴ Yet, like Brodie's own works on maritime strategy, the content of *The Makers of Modern Strategy* is overwhelmingly historical, and indeed it looks the more dated (and often simply wrong) the closer it gets to its own times.⁵ In other words, Earle, like Brodie, looked backwards to think forwards.

On 6 August 1945, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The next day, Brodie tells us, he was travelling in a car with his wife when he stopped to buy a copy of the *New York Times*. He read the report of the attack and then turned to his wife to say, 'Everything I have ever written is obsolete.'⁶ Like so many renderings of damascene moments, Brodie's story probably improved with the telling. Any student of Brodie's subsequent writings on strategy has little difficulty in tracing the continuing influence of his early education beyond 1945, not least in

1 Bernard Brodie, *A Layman's Guide to Naval Strategy*, Oxford University Press, London, 1943 (first published Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1942), pp. viii–ix. This essay develops themes that will be familiar to readers who have read my book, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013. I am arrogant enough to believe that they need repetition but modest enough to recognise that they also need development.

2 Edward Mead Earle, Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, New York, Atheneum, 1967.

3 Peter Paret, with Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.

4 David Ekbladh, 'Present at the creation: Edward Mead Earle and the depression-era origins of security studies', *International Security* 36, no. 3, 2011–12, pp. 107–41.

5 Michael P.M. Finch, 'Edward Mead Earle and the unfinished Makers of Modern Strategy', *Journal of Military History* 80, no. 3, 2016, pp. 781–814.

6 Barry Scott Zellen, *State of Doom: Bernard Brodie, the Bomb, and the Birth of the Bipolar World*, Continuum, London, 2012, pp. 24, 27–30.

his last published work, the guide to reading Clausewitz's *On War*, which appeared as an appendix to Michael Howard and Peter Paret's translation in 1976 and which too many harassed students have used as a substitute for reading the real thing.⁷

In the short term, however, Brodie followed his shocked response to the advent of nuclear weapons by unravelling the reasons for his instinctive reaction. The result, published in 1946, was *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Peace and World Order*, which declared, 'Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars: from now on its chief purpose must be to avert them'.⁸ For most students of strategy, *The Absolute Weapon* is a better marker than Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy* for the arrival of the 'golden age', the moment when civilians began to take over the study of strategy and when its purpose became the avoidance of war through deterrence, not its conduct through fighting.

It would be patently absurd to argue that the 'golden age' was constructed without a backward glance to history. When the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki broke, Basil Liddell Hart was reflecting on the experiences of World War II for a book that was already called *The Revolution in Warfare*. He did not jettison his conclusions, which he had already written and which began by stating that 'the future is moulded by the past', and averred that 'the best promise for the future lies in understanding, and applying, the lessons of the past'. Liddell Hart added an epilogue on the atomic bomb after the book's completion, but it did not lead him to withdraw this statement. Instead of becoming a summons to avoid all war, *The Revolution in Warfare* reasserted the need to understand and apply the principles that would limit it.⁹

Over the next decade, both currents would develop in strategic thought—one seeking to prevent war and one seeking to recognise wars would happen but had to be contained. However, neither current rejected the idea that 1945 was a caesura: as the Cold War took hold, that seemed to apply to the international system as a whole, and it was easy, if lazy, to relate it to strategic studies specifically.

7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, commentary Bernard Brodie, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984.

8 Bernard Brodie, 'The absolute weapon', in Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (eds), *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, Routledge, London, 2008.

9 B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare*, Faber, London, 1946, p. 76. For a revised attempt at the same points, see the US edition, published by Yale University Press in 1947.

The study of strategy was presented with a disciplinary crisis. It no longer rested primarily on the history of war. Brodie's supervisor at Chicago, Jacob Viner, was an economist, not a historian, and that was before the bomb was dropped. The strategist of the nuclear age whose influence has been most persistent, particularly when judged from a post-Cold War vantage point, is probably another economist, Thomas Schelling. Schelling brought to strategy the perspectives of social science, game theory and mathematics.¹⁰ The study of strategy moved from being heavily experiential (meaning based on experience rather than on scientific experiment) to being heavily theoretical. From having turned overwhelmingly to the past for its inspiration, it turned disproportionately to the future. These new trajectories were entirely positive in themselves, but they had a displacement effect. History was dismissed too readily and completely from the study of strategy in the 'golden age', and that provides an object lesson as we address lessons for the study of strategy in the future.

Strategic thought until 1945 had sought continuities. It was a dialogue between the present and the past. It gave context to current conflicts by setting them against those that had gone before. It assumed, as Clausewitz did, that war had a universal nature and that, while its study was informed by current experience, the immediacy of the present could be given meaning only by comparing it with the past. Moreover, when handled well, it did not stop at demonstrating continuity. It recognised that any soldier is powerfully shaped by his own experience. War is intense, demanding and potentially overwhelming. However, one person's adventures are not necessarily typical, although of course they can be, and so individual experience, however formative, is not in itself sufficient for the making of strategy. History is required in order to understand what is really new, what has changed and what seems to be new but might not be. History enables us to discriminate between what might be exceptional and unique in personal experience, what might be fundamentally new and perhaps lasting, and what is already familiar.

This was exactly how Jomini and Clausewitz had approached the study of Napoleonic strategy. They used the Seven Years War as a benchmark against which to comprehend better the wars of their own times, and it was how Mahan and Corbett used Britain's 18th-century conflicts the

10 See Robert Ayson, *Thomas Schelling and the Nuclear Age: Strategy as Social Science*, Frank Cass, London, 2004.

better to understand naval war at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The dramatic and seemingly 'revolutionary' changes of World War I might have been expected to rupture strategy's relationship with history. Giulio Douhet certainly said as much in *Command of the Air* in 1921, but in practice he referred back to the war to make his argument and so made his case for change by using the past. As others reflected on World War I, J.F.C. Fuller and Liddell Hart in Britain, Raoul Castex and Henri Mordacq in France, and A.A. Svechin and V.K. Triandafillov in the Soviet Union all used history to show what was typical and what was new as they framed their analyses.

This is not to deny that the use of history in these ways was not challenged, even before 1914. Mahan and Corbett—although better known today than their rivals (and that itself makes the point)—were locked in deep debate with a materialist school that pointed to the dramatic change in sea warfare effected by steam and armour. From the mid-19th century, history's primacy was under challenge because technological innovation presented war with perpetual innovation from the ground up. This was why so many of the strategic thinkers who followed Jomini and Clausewitz had to defend the role of history in the study of strategy, as Brodie himself was to do in 1942. In land warfare, industrialisation did more than shape battlefield tactics; through the railway, the internal combustion engine and the aircraft, it changed the core relationship in the conduct of operations: that between time and space.

Strategy as defined by Clausewitz and his generation was about the use of the battle for the purposes of the war: manoeuvre brought about battle, and exploitation used its outcome for strategic effects. The use of the nuclear weapon in 1945 elevated the impact of technology to a yet higher level, away from tactics and even from strategy in its operational setting, to its ability to change the relationship between war and policy itself. That, after all, was Brodie's fundamental insight on 7 August 1945.

In the 'golden age' of the 1950s and 1960s, history was relegated for three reasons of which the first was the most blatant and understandable. Strategy is a pragmatic business orientated towards future action. In order to do that, it begins, in its more grandiose moments, not with the present but with some point 30 or 40 years hence and then reverse-engineers back to the present, using this imagined future to shape current policy. For those who think historically, this is not unlike the use of counter-factual narratives: the 'virtual' histories that imagine events that did not

happen or forks in the road that were not taken. So Niall Ferguson can imagine that if Britain had not entered World War I in 1914, Germany would have won the war, and the result would have been a more benign European Union than the New Order imposed by the Nazis, and one delivered sooner and at less cost than that put in place since World War II. The trouble with this sort of speculation is that once one brick in the structure is moved, another shifts. It does not follow that if Britain had not entered the war in August 1914 it would have stayed out thereafter. It could have been forced in later and on even less advantageous terms, especially if France had been overrun.¹¹ Better to have entered the war in 1914 with a ready-made continental foothold than to have entered a year later.

Strategic thought that is solely projected on some future scenario has to be similarly selective, or is normally so, not least in its need to attract the attention of politicians whose outlooks are naturally framed by present concerns or, at best, by election cycles. In the Cold War, this single scenario focused—for understandable reasons—on an all-out nuclear exchange. The Cold War did not end in a hot war conflagration. Today's technological equivalents are cyber war or unmanned conflict, both driven by the advent of fresh technologies, but both tending to privilege the game-changing and unique features of those technologies by dismissing others and by divorcing them from war's contingent and political contexts.¹² Those that do make allowance for political change are similarly monocausal in their predictions, albeit for different reasons. They do at least start from the present, but then they project forward from those trends, making insufficient allowance for contingency or shock. So today debates revolve around continuing US global dominance or its alternative: the continuation of China's rise to the point where it supplants the United States. Both are feasible, and both have current political traction and importance. But those who use them think selectively to show how they can come about. History has no obvious role in any of this.

11 Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counter-factuals*, Picador, London, 1997. The argument about 1914 is made in Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, Allen Lane, London, 1998. Richard J. Evans, in *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (Little, Brown & Company, London, 2016), attacks Ferguson's approach.

12 For example, P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Penguin, London, 2009.

The second reason for history's relegation has been a direct result of the growth of university departments of politics and international relations. In the 1920s and 1930s, departments of international politics flourished on the back of World War I and the sense that it might have been avoidable. They often (as at Oxford) ousted history degrees as the choice for putative or aspirant statesmen, but they still used history as a core discipline; today they do not. Theory dominates in most, and often theory so abstract that at times its proliferation can seem to be in inverse ratio to its capacity to contribute to public policy.

For the historically trained, this puts the cart before the horse. History can be the basis for theory, not least in relation to war and strategy, as Clausewitz above all demonstrated. But now theory is dominant to the extent that history is either regarded as a quaint form of storytelling, or—when used—becomes self-selecting to prove the theory. For much political thought, history appears as a single and particular case study and is treated as though that is adequate to sustain a more general and universal argument. It is also frequently presented in forms that are unrecognisable to historians, relying solely on secondary sources and often on ones that historians would regard as out of date.

The origins of World War I as used by political science present instances of such selectivity. Historians' criticisms of Fritz Fischer's interpretation of Germany's responsibility for the war's outbreak, adumbrated in the 1960s, began immediately with fierce opposition in Germany itself. Ultimately—say, by 1990—Fischer came out on top within his own country, but by then scholars outside Germany were using Fischer's arguments to re-examine the responsibility of other powers. What emerged was a more nuanced and complex story than that of simple German guilt. For several decades, international relations theory paid no attention to such doubters despite using World War I as an exemplar for the outbreak of major war. It took the success of Christopher Clark's book, *The Sleepwalkers* (2012), to popularise such approaches and for any modification to occur. Even then the challenge of dispensing with well-embedded theory could prove greater than that of coming to terms with history itself.¹³

13 See, for example, Richard Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller (eds), *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of US–China Conflict*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

Totally unaffected by recent thinking has been the role accorded to general staffs and military thought in the war's outbreak. Most historians today—and both Clark's and Margaret MacMillan's books are cases in point—pay much less attention to their part in the war's immediate origins as opposed to its conduct in the opening weeks.¹⁴ The reverence accorded to an important book in its day (and important for historians as well as for political scientists), Jack Snyder's *Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision-Making and the Disasters of 1914*,¹⁵ continues unabated in the international relations literature despite the revisionist scholarship on the subject since. A book conceived in the context of the Cold War, it fails to distinguish between the advocacy of the offensive at the tactical level and its place at the strategic or political (if any), and as a result simplifies a much more complex story.¹⁶

Third, and most insidious of all, there are those students of strategy who stress the value of history but do so in ways that misunderstand the business of history. Those who have vaunted history have too often worked on the basis of a one-sided premise: that its use is to explain continuity. Lawrence Freedman begins his history of strategy with the proposition 'that there are elemental features of human strategy that are common across time and space'.¹⁷ Colin Gray has been particularly vociferous on this point: '*There is an essential unity to all strategic experience in all periods of history because nothing vital to the nature and function of war and strategy changes*'.¹⁸ He is not alone among professors of Reading University. Another, Beatrice Heuser, begins her history of the evolution of strategy with a section on the ancient and early modern worlds called 'long-term constants', even if she concedes in her conclusion that 'the broad picture that emerges is one of fluctuations, not constants'.¹⁹

14 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Allen Lane, London, 2012; Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War*, Profile, London, 2013.

15 Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1984.

16 For example, Dimitry Queloz, *De la manoeuvre napoléonienne à l'offensive à outrance: La tactique générale de l'armée française 1871–1914*, Economica, Paris, 2009; Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning 1871–1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002; and for the debate that Zuber generated, not least in *War in History*, see Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans and Gerhard Gross, *Der Schlieffenplan: Analysen und Dokumente*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2006.

17 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 3.

18 Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 1 (emphasis in the original).

19 Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 504.

A pioneering case study in this approach was Edward Luttwak's *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976). At the time, Luttwak was director of the Center for Foreign Policy Research at Johns Hopkins University and a consultant to the US Secretary of Defense. The book, very largely based on secondary sources, advanced the argument that Rome held its empire through what he called 'defensive imperialism'. This concept had current application in a United States recovering from the Vietnam War. 'We, like the Romans, face the prospect not of decisive conflict, but of a permanent state of war, albeit it limited', Luttwak wrote in his introduction. He went on: 'Above all, the nature of modern weapons requires that we avoid their use while nevertheless striving to exploit their full diplomatic potential.' He found similar attributes in the Romans, who possessed, 'whether by intellect or traditional institutions, an understanding of all the principles of deterrence'.²⁰ In 1976, this made little sense to ancient historians, although today, in an example of a reverse flow, they are more accommodating of the incursion of what were effectively 20th-century ideas into the conceptual framework of the Roman empire. A similar point might be made of Christopher Clark, who also admitted the influence of international relations theory in *The Sleepwalkers*. In 2009, Luttwak followed his book on Rome with *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, which was less focused on its contemporary resonances and more circumspect in its claims for its implicit assumption: that grand strategy was a concept consciously articulated in Byzantium.

Even more revealing is the love affair between contemporary strategic studies and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The use of classical authors in the study of war has a distinguished pedigree. Machiavelli took the Roman republic (not the empire) as a departure point, and it is his *Discourses on Livy* that contain the bulk of his military thinking. During the Enlightenment, the bedrock of professional military education was provided by the classics, including especially Caesar, Polybius and Xenophon.²¹ Thucydides was there but not in the front rank, although that might have been because the focus was on tactics, on the debate between the line and the column, rather than on strategy.²²

20 Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, pp. xii, 3.

21 Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 7.

22 Robert S. Quimby, *The Background of Napoleonic Warfare: The Theory of Military Tactics in Eighteenth-century France*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1957.

In the 1890s, Hans Delbrück, as professor of world history at Berlin University and the founding father of academic military history, raised the level of the debate on strategy. Although the argument between him and the historians of the Prussian general staff focused on whether Frederick the Great had preferred a strategy of attrition or a strategy of annihilation, for Delbrück himself its origins were Thucydidean, as he made clear both in his preliminary essay on the subject in 1890 and in his *magnum opus*, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (1900–04).²³ In 1926, following World War I, Basil Liddell Hart wrote on Scipio Africanus both because ‘the art of generalship does not age’ and because Scipio was strategically ‘modern’: the servant of a republic who had ‘to study and understand the interplay of the military, economic, and political forces, which are inseparable in strategy’.²⁴ And after World War II, J.F.C. Fuller, who throughout his career had stressed the didactic purpose of military history for the contemporary soldier, wrote one of his last books—on the generalship of Alexander the Great in 1960—precisely because he believed that ‘war is an art which, whatever be the period in question, is based on the same principles’.²⁵

All the major US war colleges today, led by that of the US Navy, begin their study of strategy with Thucydides. The association of Athens in the Peloponnesian War with the United States of today is easy, if superficial: the latter is, as the former once was, both a naval empire and a democracy. It is wonderful that senior officers are receiving a rounded education, and that the complaints of classicists about the decline of their subject are answered by such a response. In 2006, two Greek political scientists, Athanassios G. Platias and Constantios Koliopoulos, wrote a book, *Thucydides on Strategy: Athenian and Spartan Grand Strategies and Their Relevance Today*, which rested on their belief that ‘the writings of Thucydides and the grand strategies contained therein are as relevant today as they were in the past and there is no reason to believe that their relevance shall diminish with time’. They quote with approval the statement of Louis Halle, that:

23 Hans Delbrück, *Die Strategie des Perikles erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrichs des Grossen*, Reimer, Berlin, 1890. A French translation by Joël Mouric is available: *La stratégie oubliée: Périclès, Frédéric le Grand, Thucydide et Cléon*, Economica, Paris, 2015.

24 B.H. Liddell Hart, *A Greater than Napoleon: Scipio Africanus*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1926, pp. vii–viii.

25 J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1960, p. 306.

Thucydides, as he himself anticipated, wrote not only the history of the Peloponnesian War. He wrote the history of the Napoleonian [sic] Wars, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.²⁶

This sort of hyperbole is catching. Williamson Murray, a military historian primarily of the 20th century whose career has embraced a deep commitment to professional military education, has studied his recent history of the American Civil War with Thucydidean references, describing their author as 'that greatest of all strategic and military historians'.²⁷ In an essay on the value of studying the past, he used what he acknowledged to be an anachronism, describing Thucydides as 'the Clausewitzian historian'.²⁸

As with the Luttwak example, reverse-engineering is also going on here as paid-up historians reflect on to the past the thoughts planted by modern strategic thinkers. A great ancient historian, Donald Kagan of Yale, has deployed his expertise on the Peloponnesian War for contemporary and trans-historical effect, especially in *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (1995). Kagan contributed the chapter on Thucydides to *Makers of Ancient Strategy* (2010), edited by another ancient historian, Victor Davis Hanson. Compiled in deliberate emulation of Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy* and its 1986 successor edited by Peter Paret, Hanson's introduction to the book makes clear that his aim is to stress continuity and the enduring relevance of classical thought to strategy.

Many (probably most) of those who use Thucydides as a way into current strategy read the English translation by Richard Crawley. *The Landmark Thucydides*,²⁹ the text most used in the war colleges and edited by Robert Strassler, still uses the Crawley translation. First published in 1876, it is couched in the language of the late 19th century, when the use of the word 'strategy' had become current. That had not been true, either a century earlier in English or in Greek in the 5th century BC. The standard Greek dictionary, that by Liddell and Scott, dates the first use of the abstract

26 Athanassios G. Platias and Constantios Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy: Athenian and Spartan Grand Strategies and Their Relevance Today*, Eurasia, Athens, 2006, p. 12.

27 Williamson Murray and Wayne Wet-siang Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016, p. 3, and see p. 1 for the point about an underlying continuity.

28 Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy and Military Effectiveness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 52.

29 Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler with introduction by Victor David Hanson, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1998.

noun for generalship, στρατηγία, to the 6th century AD, a millennium and more later. This begs the question of whether Thucydides had a concept of strategy at all and, if he did, what he thought it meant. Clausewitz defined strategy as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war, a definition too narrow and operational for those who would use Thucydides to elucidate ‘grand strategy’.³⁰

Ironically, therefore, if we follow the proponents of continuity, what we would now see as a dated and overly restrictive view of strategy as used in the early 19th century, that of Clausewitz, could be of more recent coinage than understandings of grand strategy, whose origins the above authors implicitly attribute to the ancient world. However, it required the impact of World War I to give currency to the concept and to the phrase ‘grand strategy’ in the modern world, and the experience of World War II and the Cold War to embed it. Are we in danger of reading into Thucydides an idea he did not have, or should we use his vocabulary rather than ours, the better to capture his concerns? In trying to understand our own times, are we wilfully misinterpreting his? Even if we are not, will we not deepen our understanding of the use of military power if we refuse to gloss over etymological and conceptual distinctions and differences, which might be awkward and complicated, but which could serve to deepen our understanding? Paul Rahe, in an essay on Thucydides as educator, eschews any reference to strategy or grand strategy but concludes—when addressing his current relevance—that ‘there is no substitute for what Thucydides instills: the capacity to reflect, to deliberate, and, more generally, to think’.³¹

None of these observations is designed to contradict the case for continuity in itself or to deny the value of engaging with history the better to understand present predicaments, but continuity is only half the historian’s task, and the easier half. The other half is to understand change; in other words, to grapple with contingency and shock, those very phenomena against whose comprehension the stress on continuity in strategic thought militates.

30 Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 128.

31 In Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (eds), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 95–110. Rahe has used the phrase ‘grand strategy’ himself in the title of his book, *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2015), but without any attempt to explain or justify the term.

Marc Bloch, the great French economic and social historian and co-founder of the Annales school, was also a soldier who fought in two world wars, both in the successful defence of France in 1914 and in its humiliating defeat in 1940. In 1942, Bloch, a Jew from Alsace, joined the Resistance and was captured and executed by the Gestapo in 1944. He left behind his explanation for this turn-around in France's military fortunes, *L'étrange défaite: Témoignage écrit en 1940*, posthumously published in 1946. Focusing his attention on the army in which he had twice served, Bloch accepted that the Ecole de Guerre had to use military history to teach what he called the 'military art'. But Bloch knew, as all professional historians know, that history does not repeat itself, and that to defend its study on those grounds is both superficial and stupid: 'It [history] knows and it teaches that it is impossible to find two events that are ever exactly alike, because the conditions from which they spring are never exactly alike.' Bloch, like the strategic thinkers referred to above, was deeply interested in the *longue durée* of history; indeed, it was his calling card.

But the lesson it teaches is not that what happened yesterday will necessarily happen tomorrow, or that the past will go on repeating itself. By examining how and why yesterday differed from the day before, it can reach conclusions which will enable it to foresee how tomorrow will differ from yesterday.³²

During the 'golden age' the stress on theory, perhaps precisely because it disregarded history, had the effect of de-emphasising change, of privileging the present as though it was the future. As the Cold War lengthened, deepened and stabilised, it became dangerously radical to suggest that its foundations might shift, and when they did many strategists were keener to embed the past than to embrace the new. Even in the late 2010s, new circumstances prompted by the behaviour of Putin's Russia were put into old bottles as a 'second' Cold War. Commentators are fond of quoting the opening line of *The Go-Between*, L.P. Hartley's novel set in rural England before 1914 and published in 1953: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' But they rarely act on Hartley's observation. The outbreak of World War I represented profound change for Hartley. That is why historians still feel the urge to account for it and why they also cluster around the other great divisions in historical narratives: 1789,

32 Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1999, pp. 117–18.

1917, 1933, 1989. They might end up explaining even dramatic change by reference to continuity, but they are still grappling with what Bloch called difference.

Strategists in the ‘golden age’ faced a particular challenge because Brodie was—broadly speaking—proved right: strategic studies were no longer focused on the waging of war but on its avoidance. War has an enormous capacity to effect change, including revolution; by contrast, peace—and especially the peace after 1945, which was characterised as liberal, democratic and capitalist—sanctifies stability and order. Strategy came to be about the avoidance of threat and risk, not about their exploitation. Strategic thought’s neglect of war itself meant that those who had to address its conduct, the armed forces, turned to the operational level of war to do so. In the 1980s and 1990s, doctrine became the vehicle for lessons drawn from history, some of them almost contemporary, such as the 1973 Yom Kippur War, but most derived from the ‘last’ great war, that of 1939–45. Partly because Germany was now an ally, partly because the putative enemy—the Soviet Union—had been Germany’s actual enemy, and partly because the potential theatre of war remained a European one, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) doctrines at the operational level focused on the Wehrmacht of 1939–41. This trend ignored the fact that although the German army had proved extraordinarily successful in individual campaigns, it had lost the war. Staff colleges revived the post-1945 memoirs of generals who had an axe to grind, like Heinz Guderian, Hans von Luck, Erich von Manstein and Friedrich von Mellenthin, just at the point when scholars in Germany were exploring the role of the German army in the atrocities that those same officers had attributed to the regime. The writings of Basil Liddell Hart, discredited in part precisely because he manipulated those same generals in order to revive his career, found fresh readers.³³ And operational thought constructed a link between pre-war German military thought and initial success in 1939–40 in a figment of the historical imagination called *Blitzkrieg*.³⁴

If the Wehrmacht ever planned a *Blitzkrieg* campaign, it was Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Based on hope and hubris, as well as strategic incoherence at the institutional level (between Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH), Oberkommando der Wehrmacht

33 John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Brassey’s, London, 1988), stated the case for the prosecution most explicitly.

34 Standard works here are James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*, Kansas University Press, Lawrence, 1992; Robert M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920–39*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1999.

(OKW) and Hitler himself), it failed. Instead, military thought looked to the fall of France in 1940, neglecting the facts that Germany's success was improvised and that the campaign's outcome was as much of a surprise to the victors as it was to Frenchmen like Bloch.³⁵ Thus, 'manoeuvre warfare', the central pillar of operational thought in the 1980s, established its own historical pedigree—its own continuity.³⁶

Operational thought used history in the same way as strategic thought did: as a source for arguing about continuity more than about addressing the problems of change. The effects survived the end of the Cold War. From the 1990s, actual war (as opposed to deterrence) forced its way back up the agenda. One effect by the early 2000s was to expose how impoverished strategic thought had become and how inadequately it had failed to adapt to post-Cold War circumstances. Operational thought remained the prism through which actual war was addressed, and those who did so to best effect did not vaunt the revolutionary effects of technological change but stressed continuity. When General James Mattis dismissed so-called effects-based warfare in 2008, he called for a 'return to time-honored principles and terminology that our forces have tested in the crucible of battle and that are well grounded in the theory and nature of war'.³⁷ A year later, in 2009, General Vincent Desportes expressed similar frustrations:

For centuries we have had the feeling that we are fighting new wars, unrelated to previous conflicts, [but] with the benefit of hindsight it is surprising to see the stability of the general characteristic of conflicts, their unchanging logic and the error that could have been avoided if the 'trendsetters' of the period had simply had longer memories.³⁸

So history returned to strategic thought through the operational level of war. The rediscovery of counter-insurgency warfare provided its principal engine. France, prompted partly by Desportes, rediscovered the colonial legacy of Gallieni and Lyautey and read the work of another Frenchman,

35 Follow the sequence of orders in Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (ed.), *Dokumente zum Westfeldzug*, Musterschmidt, Göttingen, 1966. The book that makes these points most forcefully is Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940*, Oldenbourg, Munich, 1996.

36 Richard D. Hooker (ed.), *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (Presidio Press, Novato, 1993), provides examples.

37 James Mattis, 'US JFCOM's guidance for effects-based operations', *Parameters* 38, no. 3, 2008, p. 18, www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA490619 (retrieved 1 February 2018).

38 Vincent Desportes, *Tomorrow's War: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Economica, Paris, 2007 (English edition, 2009), p. 115.

David Galula, published in English in 1963–64, but not translated into his native language until 2008.³⁹ In 2006, the US Army Field Manual 3-24 on counter-insurgency cited Galula and drew on the examples of the French in Algeria and the British in Malaya to make its points. In seeking principles, counter-insurgency stressed continuity, and it did so in ways that could prove doubly counter-productive.

First operational thought, like Clausewitz's definition of strategy, links back to tactics: it sees strategy as lying within war more than as a link to policy. So it resurrects an older body of thought about strategy without making that reversion obvious. Over the decade from about 2005, operational thought in the shape of counter-insurgency doctrine became a substitute for it, although it was not strategy in the sense used in the 'golden age'. The stress on continuity impeded the need to recognise change at the economic, social and political levels. A body of military thought that had been developed in the era of empires, whether to aid conquest or to facilitate withdrawal, was not necessarily suitable to coalition interventions in others' sovereign territories unless it was subject to major adaptation driven by fresh strategic—not operational—thought.

This difference—both in Bloch's sense of change over time and between operations and strategy—produced a major divergence in practice. Operational success failed to deliver good strategy or recognisable political success in Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya. Generals reported constant 'progress' and used the metrics of towns secured or insurgents killed to prove it. They railed at politicians who would not give them the tools to finish the job, and the politicians increasingly lost faith in their soldiers. The consequence was strategic failure and a reluctance to see war as having political utility even when faced with a humanitarian disaster in Syria or when confronted with unfinished wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. The ends of these conflicts were defined as 'exits', not as victories, and the latter word was effectively driven from military vocabulary.

The point here is the need for a much more creative engagement with the past, to recognise that the function of history in strategic studies is to encourage understanding, not to stress continuity or to show that

39 David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958*, Santa Monica, California, RAND, 1963; David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Security International, 1964.

history repeats itself (which it does not). This chapter has already quoted Paul Rahe to make that point in relation to Thucydides, so let it end by reverting to Clausewitz.

On War, especially in the translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, gained purchase in the later Cold War precisely because it was rendered in fluent contemporary English with military terminology that possessed contemporary resonance. It spoke of 'operations' and 'total war' when the German did not, and many read and valued it for those very reasons. But the success of the Howard and Paret translation in the 1980s rebounded after the end of the Cold War, when the 'golden age' of strategic studies waned. Clausewitz was attacked in the early 1990s not least because those efforts to make him relevant in 1976 looked dated two decades later. It required a return to the historical Clausewitz to liberate him from Cold War captivity and war college dogma. The result has been a more subtle and differentiated reading that is both located in Clausewitz's own times and—ironically—more flexible in relation to his current applicability. *On War* achieves this for two reasons, both of which have the capacity to frustrate the very students of strategy who profess the value they derive from both Clausewitz and history.

First, Clausewitz uses history to show differences and contradictions, to show that what is generally true in war is not universally so. He explains that, because war is a reciprocal business that rests on a clash of wills, a strategic plan is not the same as strategy. A plan does not, as Moltke the Elder pointed out, survive the first contact with the enemy. In other words, strategy must adapt and change.⁴⁰

Second, Clausewitz says almost nothing about the future and so offers no hostages to fortune. Instead of trying to link the present to what might happen through speculations on coming technologies or generalisations about the pace of change, *On War* remains firmly preoccupied with the relationship between the present and the past. It is engaged in a constant debate at the theoretical level, but the debate is secured by more certain foundations than studies of strategy, which address the relationship between the present and the future. The latter immediately inject disproportionate uncertainty into the equation, thereby expanding theory beyond the bounds of what it can deliver. Of course, the study of history also carries a risk: that we shall be captured by the past, not liberated by it.

40 von Moltke, Helmuth, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Einzelschriften*, Grosser Generalstab, Prussian Armee, 1880.

It was precisely because of that danger, that of imprisonment in our own myths, that in the 1820s Clausewitz repeatedly turned back from theory to history the better to test his own hypotheses.

This text is taken from *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0:
ANU Strategic & Defence Studies Centre's Golden Anniversary
Conference Proceedings*, edited by Dr Russell W. Glenn, published 2018
by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/NDST.07.2018.12