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INTRODUCTION

The Western Way of War

Geoffrey Parker

Every culture develops its own way of war. Societies where land is plentiful but manpower scarce tend to favour a ritualized conflict in which only a few ‘champions’ actually fight but their fate decides that of everyone. The ‘flower wars’ of the Aztecs and the ‘amok’ combats of the Indonesian islanders caused relatively little bloodshed because they aimed to seize people rather than territory, to increase each warlord’s available manpower rather than waste it in bloody battles. In China too, strategy aimed to achieve victory without battle: according to the most revered military theorist, Sun-Tzu (writing in the fourth century BC), ‘To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill’ (although the rest of his book in fact deals with how to win by fighting). Many non-western military traditions have displayed great continuity over time: thus even in the 1960s anthropologists could study the wars of the highland peoples of Irian Jaya in Indonesia who still settled their disputes in the same ritualized way as their ancestors. By then, however, most other military cultures had been transformed by that of the West – of Europe and the former European colonies in the Americas.

The western way of war, which also boasts great antiquity, rests upon five principal foundations. First, the armed forces of the West have always placed heavy reliance on superior technology, usually to compensate for inferior numbers. That is not to say that the West enjoyed *universal* technological superiority – until the advent of musketry volleys and field artillery in the early seventeenth century, the recurved bow used by horse archers all over Asia proved far more effective than any western weaponry – but, with few exceptions, the

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horse archers of Asia did not directly threaten the West and, when they did, the threat was not sustained. Nor did all the advanced technology originate in the West: many vital innovations, including the stirrup and gunpowder, came from eastern adversaries.

Normally, military technology is the first to be borrowed by every society, because the penalty for failing to do so can be immediate and fatal; but the West seems to have been preternaturally receptive to new technology, whether from its own inventors or from outside. Technological innovation, and the equally vital ability to respond to it, soon became an established feature of western warfare. Indeed, since the Persian wars in the fifth century BC, few periods can be found during which the West proved unable to muster forces with a fighting potential superior to that of its immediate adversaries.

The Primacy of Technology and Discipline

A 'technological edge', however, has rarely been sufficient in itself to ensure victory. As the Swiss military writer Antoine-Henri Jomini wrote in the early nineteenth century: 'The superiority of armament may increase the chances of success in war, but it does not of itself win battles.' Even in the twentieth century, the outcome of wars has been determined less by technology than by better war plans, the achievement of surprise, greater economic strength and, above all, superior discipline. Western military practice has always exalted discipline – rather than kinship, religion or patriotism – as the primary instrument that turns bands of men fighting as individuals into soldiers fighting as part of organized units. Naturally the other factors play their part: many military formations, even in the eighteenth century, came from the same area and served under their local leaders almost as an extended family; the 'Protestant cause' proved a potent rallying cry for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in northern Europe; and 'Your country needs you', and similar slogans, have assisted recruiting down to our own days. Nevertheless, these elements have always been eclipsed in the West by the primacy of discipline, in the twin forms of drill and long-term service.

Even the hoplites of fifth-century Greece, who were farmers first and soldiers second, turned out so regularly for battle in their phalanxes that they perfected a high degree of combat effectiveness.

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For the critical element of discipline is the ability of a formation to stand fast in the face of the enemy, whether attacking or being attacked, without giving way to the natural impulses of fear and panic. Repeated group activities, whether directly related to combat (firing practice) or not (drill), all have the effect of creating artificial kinship groups – some of them, like the cohort, the company and the platoon, further reinforced by the creation of small fellowships within the unit in order to increase cohesion and therefore combat efficiency even further.

Once again, the crucial advantage lay in the ability to compensate for numerical inferiority, for whether defending Europe from invasion (as at Plataea in 479 BC, at the Lechfeld in AD 955 and at Vienna in AD 1683), or in subduing the Aztec, Inca and Mughal empires, the western forces have always been outnumbered by at least two to one and often by far more. Without superb discipline as well as advanced technology, these odds would have proved overwhelming. Even Alexander the Great and his 60,000 Greek and Macedonian troops could scarcely have destroyed the forces of the Persian empire in the fourth century BC without superior discipline, since his adversaries probably numbered more Greek soldiers (fighting with much the same equipment) in their own armies!

Discipline proved particularly important for western armies in another way because, with surprisingly few exceptions, their wars were normally won by infantry. The long reign of the hoplites and the legionaries was followed by a millennium in which men fighting on foot won most of the battles (and of course bore the brunt of the more numerous sieges). The rise of missile weapons – first bows and then firearms – only served to reinforce the trend. However, withstanding a full cavalry charge without flinching always required arduous training, strong unit cohesion, and superb self-control. The same was true of war at sea: whether resisting boarding parties on a galley or enduring a cannonade aboard a ship-of-the-line, discipline and training proved essential.

Continuity of the Western Military Tradition

Reinforcing these elements, and indeed refining them, is a remarkable continuity in military theory. The history of *Concerning*

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Military Matters, a compendium of Roman military practice first composed by Flavius Renatus Vegetius around the year AD 390 (and revised into its final form about fifty years later), offers perhaps the most remarkable example. In the early eighth century the Northumbrian scholar Bede, on the north-western fringe of the former Roman world, possessed a copy; in the ninth, the Carolingian ruler Lothar I commissioned an abridgement of the work to help him devise a successful strategy for resisting the Scandinavian invasions; while in 1147, when Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou was engaged in a siege, an incendiary device was constructed and used thanks to a reading of Vegetius, Translated into many vernacular languages (French, Italian, English, German, Spanish, and perhaps even Hebrew) between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, the sustained popularity of *Concerning Military Matters* is further attested by the number of surviving medieval manuscripts, some of them reduced to pocket size for use in the field. Even in the middle of the eighteenth century, the young George Washington possessed and annotated his own copy.

Other classical works on military affairs also enjoyed continuing popularity and influence. In AD 1594 Maurice of Nassau and his cousins in the Netherlands devised the crucial innovation of volley fire for muskets after reading the account in Aelian's *Tactics* (written c.AD 100) of the techniques employed by the javelin- and sling-shot throwers of the Roman army, and spent the next decade introducing to their troops the drills practised by the legions. In the nineteenth century Napoleon III and Helmut von Moltke both translated the campaign histories of Julius Caesar, written almost 2,000 years earlier, while Count Alfred von Schlieffen and his successors in the Prussian general staff expressly modelled their strategy for destroying France in the 'next war' upon the stunningly successful tactic of encirclement attributed by Roman writers to Hannibal at the battle of Cannae in 216 BC. In AD 1914 it came within an ace of success. More recently still, General George C. Marshall argued that a soldier should begin his military education by reading Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written almost 2,500 years before.

These striking continuities derive from the fact that ancient theorists and modern practitioners of war shared not only a love of

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precedent, and a conviction that past examples could and should influence present practice, but also a willingness to accept ideas from all quarters. Religious and ideological constraints have seldom interfered with either the discussion or the conduct of war in the West. On the one hand, the 'laws of war' have (until the nineteenth century) been couched in the most general terms and normally lacked any effective machinery of enforcement. On the other hand, from Plato's Academy down to the modern war colleges, censorship – both religious and secular – has been generally absent, allowing the full systematization of knowledge. Certain core ideas have therefore remained remarkably constant. These include not only the constant emphasis on the need for superior technology and discipline, but also a vision of war centred on winning a decisive victory that brought about the enemy's unconditional surrender. As Carl von Clausewitz put it in his early nineteenth-century treatise *On War*: 'The direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration' because 'Destruction of the enemy forces is the overriding principle of war.' Other theorists, however, stressed an alternative strategy for achieving total victory, attrition, of which the military history of the West also offers abundant examples: Fabius Cunctator ('the Delayer') of Rome, whose reliance on time, the 'friction' of campaigning and the superior marshalling of resources eventually reversed the verdict of Cannae; the duke of Alba in the service of sixteenth-century Spain; even Ulysses S. Grant against Robert E. Lee during the last phase of the American Civil War (1864–65).

Yet the overall aim of western strategy, whether by battle, siege or attrition, almost always remained the total defeat and destruction of the enemy, and this contrasted starkly with the military practice of many other societies. Many classical writers commented on the utter ruthlessness of hoplites and legionaries, and in the early modern period the phrase *bellum romanum* acquired the sense of 'war without mercy' and became the standard military technique of Europeans abroad. Thus the Naragansetts of southern New England strongly disapproved of the western way of war: 'It was too furious,' one brave told an English captain in 1638, 'and [it] slays too many men.' The captain did not deny it: the Indians, he speculated, 'might fight seven years and not kill seven men.' In 1788, warfare

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in West Africa seemed much the same to European observers and the local warlords confirmed that ‘the sole object of their wars was to procure slaves, as they could not obtain European goods without slaves, and they could not get slaves without fighting for them.’ Clearly peoples who fought to enslave rather than to exterminate their enemies would, like the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, Southeast Asia, and Siberia before them, prove ill-prepared to withstand the unfamiliar tactics of destruction employed against them by the Europeans.

The Challenge-and-Response Dynamic

But the steady spread of western military power rested on far more than the triad of technology, discipline and an aggressive military tradition. Many other military cultures (such as those of China and Japan) also placed a high premium on technology and discipline, and the teachings of Sun Tzu strikingly anticipated many positions later developed by Clausewitz and Jomini. However, the West differed in two crucial respects: first, in its unique ability to change as well as to conserve its military practices as need arose; second, in its power to finance those changes.

Areas dominated by a single hegemonic power, such as Tokugawa Japan or Mughal India, faced relatively few life-threatening challenges and so military traditions changed slowly if at all; but in areas contested by multiple polities the need for military innovation could become extremely strong. Admittedly, when the states remained relatively underdeveloped, with backward political and economic institutions and infrastructures, the tension between challenge and response seldom resulted in rapid and significant change. But where the major competing states were both numerous and institutionally strong, the challenge and response dynamic could become self-sustaining, with growth (in effect) begetting growth.

This mechanism has been compared to the biological model known as ‘punctuated equilibrium’, in which development proceeds by short bursts of rapid change interspersed with longer periods of slower, incremental alteration. Thus, in the fourteenth century, after a long period in which infantry had slowly but steadily increased in importance, Swiss pikemen and English archers suddenly and

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dramatically enhanced its role; then, after about a century of experiment, gunpowder artillery began in the 1430s to revolutionize siegecraft; and about a century after that, following constant (and extremely expensive) experiment, a new defensive technique known as the artillery fortress brought positional warfare back into balance. Each innovation broke the prevailing equilibrium and provoked a phase of rapid transformation and adjustment.

However, the ability to reproduce unfamiliar military techniques and strategies required more than changes in the art of war. Above all, a military system based on maintaining a technological edge is, by definition, expensive: *labour*-intensive systems, which rely for their impact upon concentrating an overwhelming number of men, may only require a society to mobilize its adult males – probably only for a brief period – equipped with traditional weapons (sometimes, as in the case of Japanese or early medieval European swords, weapons of considerable antiquity that could, like Excalibur, be re-used). The financial burden of fighting may therefore be spread over a wide social group and even over several generations. A *capital*-intensive military system, by contrast, requires the stockpiling of a wide panoply of weapons that, although extremely expensive, may soon become outdated. Its attraction, however, lay precisely in the combination of high initial cost with low maintenance: thus Harlech castle, one of Edward I's magnificent fortifications in Wales, cost almost an entire year's revenue to build, but in 1294 its garrison of only thirty-seven soldiers successfully defended it against attack. The king's strategic vision anticipated that of the 'Manhattan Project', which spent millions of dollars on the production of nuclear devices which, delivered on two August mornings in 1945 by just two air-planes, precipitated the unconditional surrender of Imperial Japan and the millions of her troops still in arms all over southeast Asia.

After the introduction of gunpowder weapons and defences, the cost of each war proved significantly higher than that of the last, while the cost of military hardware rose to such a degree that only a centralized state could afford to buy. Creating the means to fund such an expensive form of warfare clearly served to enhance the power of the state in the West, with each change in the size or equipment of armed forces requiring both new efforts to extract resources

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from the subject population and an expanded bureaucratic structure to handle them. Naturally, prolonged financial pressure often provoked opposition among those required to pay; but that, too, could lead to increased control – and therefore increased internal power – by the state over its subjects, making possible further military innovations and developments. This proved particularly true of wars waged to gain or extend hegemony, which required the steady transfer of centrally raised money and munitions to distant theatres, since this simultaneously promoted higher taxes, greater borrowing and increased integration. Military activity and state formation in the West therefore became inextricably linked: states made war but wars also made states. To use another biological analogy, one is reminded of the ‘double helix’ structure of the DNA molecule, with two complex spirals interacting at various discrete points.

The complexity of this image serves as a reminder that imitating the western way of war involved adaptation at many levels. Simply copying weapons picked up on the battlefield could never suffice; it also required the ‘replication’ of the whole social and economic structure that underpinned the capacity to innovate and respond swiftly. ‘Westernizing war’ depended upon the ability of warriors, traditionally one of the most conservative groups, to accept both the need for change and the need for instruction from ‘inventors’ from a different (and normally inferior) social background. It also presupposed an ability on the part of the state to mobilize resources rapidly, in large quantities, and often for long periods so that any technological inferiorities revealed in the course of a conflict could be remedied swiftly. Naturally, the less developed the economy, the less easily the cost of military preparedness could be absorbed – even within the West. Thus in 1904, France spent 36 per cent of her budget on the army whereas Germany spent only 20 per cent; however, in real terms this meant that France spent only thirty-eight million francs as against ninety-nine million by Germany. Thus France devoted twice as much of her budget in order to spend only half as much as her major rival. The continuation of this pattern for much of the next decade helps to explain why France found herself at such a disadvantage, especially in artillery, when war broke out in 1914.

However, the introduction of ingenious new taxes and other means of ‘instant’ wealth extraction proved far less important for

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feeding Mars than the development, from the sixteenth century onwards, of new techniques for mobilizing credit – such as national banks, banknotes, letters of credit and bonds – because few states ever manage to finance a major war out of current income. But creating and (even more) conserving an adequate credit base proved highly elusive. In the evocative phrase of the eighteenth-century English political economist, Charles Davenant:

Of all beings that have existence only in the minds of men, nothing is more fantastical and nice than credit. It is never to be forced; it hangs upon mere opinion. It depends upon our passions of hope and fear; it comes many times unsought for, and often goes away without reason; and when once lost, is hardly to be quite recovered.

Nevertheless, in eighteenth-century England at least, credit seemed to exist everywhere. Contemporaries estimated that two-thirds of all commercial transactions involved credit rather than cash and by 1782 the Bank of England alone handled bills of exchange worth a total of over £2 million annually – a stunning extension of the available monetary stock.

However, borrowing to finance wars depends not only upon the existence of extensive private credit, but also upon a convergence of interest between those who make money and those who make war, for public loans depend both on finding borrowers willing to lend as well as taxpayers able to provide ultimate repayment. In England, tax revenues increased sixfold in the century following 1689. As an alarmed member of parliament exclaimed:

Let any gentleman but look into the statute books lying upon our table, he will there see to what a vast bulk, to what a number of volumes, our statutes relating to taxes have swelled . . . It is monstrous, it is even frightful to look into the Indexes, where for several columns together we see nothing but Taxes, Taxes, Taxes.

And yet most Members, who paid the taxes themselves, accepted their necessity; and so did the majority of the political nation. By 1783, when the unsuccessful American War came to an end, Great Britain's national debt stood at £245 million, equivalent to more than twenty years' revenue; yet many of the loans had been contracted at just 3 per cent interest. 'Who pays and why' is as important, in the western way of war, as 'Who fights and why', and the

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ability to organize long-term credit (and therefore the existence of a secure and sophisticated capital market) to fund public borrowing in wartime represented a crucial ‘secret weapon’ of the West.

It also served to define which states could adopt the ‘western way of war’. Mainly because of the cost of keeping abreast of changing technology and of maintaining the resources to deploy it effectively, relatively few states proved able to remain in the race for long. Some (like Denmark after 1660) proved too small or (like Poland after 1667) too fragmented; others (like Sweden, Switzerland or – with less success – Belgium) chose neutrality. Others still, particularly in regions with less developed economies, directed the energies of their armed forces towards containing and combating internal threats. Conversely, although not all western states proved able to fight in the western way, certain other countries did. Japan offers the classic example, thanks to the vital combination of discipline, doctrinal flexibility and a sophisticated financial structure which, in the sixteenth and again in the nineteenth century, permitted both the acquisition of expensive military technology and the equally expensive successive adaptations required in order to keep abreast if not ahead of all rivals.

The Dominant Military Tradition

These various developments possessed a significance far beyond the region of their origin, because aggression – the ‘export of violence’ – played a central role in the ‘rise of the West’. For most of the past 2,500 years, military and naval superiority rather than better resources, greater moral rectitude, irresistible commercial acumen or, until the nineteenth century, advanced economic organization under-pinned western expansion. This military edge meant that the West seldom suffered successful invasion itself. Armies from Asia and Africa rarely marched into Europe and many of the exceptions – Xerxes, Hannibal, Attila, the Arabs and the Turks – achieved only limited success. None encompassed the total destruction of their foe. Conversely, western forces, although numerically inferior, not only defeated the Persian and Carthaginian invaders but managed to extirpate the states that sent them. Even the forces of Islam never succeeded in partitioning Europe into ‘spheres of influence’ in the