



## **‘We Band of Brothers...’: Military decision, strategic success, and the Revolution in Military Affairs**

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Throughout time, strategic thought has, - with the exception of guerrilla or insurgency theory – sought the Holy Grail of warfare: quick, clean, efficient methods of waging war leading to strategic success in war. Strategic success here refers to the ability of one side to impose its political will on its opponent in war.

From Sunzi and Kautilya, to Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Liddell Hart and, more recently, John Warden and John Boyd, strategists have sought the so-called ‘silver bullet’ or the ‘assassin’s mace’: the one weapon or strategy that trumps all other military endeavours and brings the opponent to his knees quickly and with minimum loss of life. The idea here is shaped by the desire to bypass the imprecise, messy and bloody business of war where battles were fought with the hope that winning these battles would lead to one side eventually prevail over the other.

The present revolution in military affairs – RMA for short – has reinvigorated expectations of realising this Holy Grail of strategic thought. It does so in two ways. One, increasingly reliable precision munitions almost guarantee single-shot kills even at long ranges. Two, new concepts such as network-centric operations, effects-based operations, and the luridly named ‘shock and awe’ portend an almost omniscient and omnipotent vision of warfare. One side sees all, knows all, makes no mistakes, and attacks the right targets to create shockwaves that permeate through the opposition and lead ultimately to their capitulation.

### **Military Operations and Strategic Success**

The traditional model of strategy and war lies in the relationship between tactics, operational/campaign planning, and strategy. Tactics concerns itself with the actual fighting; it determines how we fight. Operational or campaign planning sets the wider geographical context; it shapes where the fight is to be. Strategy is typically understood as the rationalization process that matches military power with political purpose; it tells us why we fight where we fight.

One reason why wars are so difficult lies in the symbiotic relationship between all three levels. The correct strategy is useless if paired with the wrong tactics, and vice versa. In World War Two, the United States adopted the correct strategy in the Pacific, but until it found a tactical solution to superior Japanese carrier-based airpower it continued to lose naval battle after naval battle.

The war in the Pacific during World War Two was a slow and costly affair. Despite the overwhelming naval victory at Midway where the first-line of Japanese naval power was defeated heralding Japan’s ultimate defeat, the United States and its allies still required three

more years and thousands of lost lives before Japan eventually succumbed. The RMA promises to put an end to such long-drawn and bloody wars. The idea is to precisely attack the correct target to arrive at a cataclysmic and total collapse of the opponent's ability to continue to resist.

### **Holy Grail or Pipe Dream?**

The question is whether or not such a vision is at all plausible. Once upon a time, it was. Wars in medieval Europe were often decided by a single pitched battle between the opposing sides. A single battle, at Hastings in 1066, decided the succession dispute between Harold of England and William of Normandy.

However, there have been marked exceptions in history. During the Hundred Year's War between England and France, decisive English victories at Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt did not translate to ultimate victory. Despite significantly decimating the heavy cavalry which was the backbone of French military power in each of the three battles, England was eventually defeated in the war. How does one explain these differences? More importantly, do these examples provide us with clues as to how the RMA can regain this vision of quick victory and strategic success?

The Battle of Hastings was decided after Harold was killed. So perhaps the answer lies in the ability to kill the opponent's leadership – the so-called counter-leadership strategies, currently manifested today in the attempts to capture or assassinate Osama bin Laden. There is a critical difference between killing Harold and killing bin Laden however. The English fought at Hastings to preserve Harold as King of England – once Harold was killed, the *raison d'être* of the English soldiers disappeared. Whereas it is difficult to see how bin Laden's capture or assassination can end the struggle against al Qaeda, since presumably al Qaeda's recruits are motivated as much by its ideology as bin Laden's personal charisma. Modern wars are not fought for king and country, but for vague political ideals such as nationalism or ideology that can transcend the single leader. Many German commanders were sceptical of Hitler's leadership, but that did not stop them from turning out one of the most tactically astute and effective fighting forces ever seen. Then there is the chain of command – from the political leaders through to the military commanders – which means that killing the top leaders does not necessarily bring an end to the war.

A second explanation can be found in the normative conditions of war. It was not uncommon in pre-Napoleonic European warfare for opposing commanders, once battle was met and decisions reached, to sit down together, share a drink together, and review the conduct of operations with the loser congratulating the winner. All in all, a vision of a more genteel and chivalrous time; quite different from the blood and gore that visited the battlefields of Europe between 1914 and 1918. Somehow, Napoleonic warfare seems to have removed those older norms which made it acceptable for the defeated commander to graciously accept defeat, the victorious commander to graciously accept the surrender of his opponent.

A third plausible explanation lies in the emergence of nationalism that created the nation-at-arms. Perhaps pre-Napoleonic commanders had to accept defeat, because military resources were much more scarce as the bulk of fighting forces were drawn from mercenaries who were less amenable to death on the battlefield (as opposed to citizen soldiers prepared to fight to the death for their political ideals). Napoleon amazed his opponents not just by the size of his armies and how quickly he was able to replace losses with fresh manpower but also the ferocity with which his armies fought.

## The Elusiveness of Decision

All this may lead to one unpalatable argument. Perhaps the nature of war in the context of nation-states has to be long drawn-out, bloody, and expensive. Maybe wars between nation-states have to be attritional. The RMA should have pointed to one conclusion of the war in Iraq – once Iraqi military forces were crushed on the battlefield the post-war reconstruction of Iraq should have been much easier than it currently is. Instead, Coalition forces had to deal with a fairly drawn-out insurgency that has since morphed into civil unrest and violence. This was not the strategic outcome that the RMA promised.

Or perhaps it is a result of the moral element of war itself. Shakespeare hints at this moral element of war in the words he gives to Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech. Facing overwhelming numerical odds, it would have been easy for English soldiers to capitulate and run; but it was the power of the moral element – 'we band of brothers', uniting the archer with the king himself – that steeled English hearts and won for them a famous (but ultimately futile) victory.

In other words, when soldiers are absolutely convinced of the rightness of their cause, they will endure any hardship, overcome all odds, to ensure strategic success. That was the lesson of the Vietnam war. Technological superiority may therefore count for less than the RMA expected. The RMA may only result in an armed forces that is a much more efficient killing machine without making it more strategically effective; that may well be the lesson from Iraq today.

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