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The Strategist's Adviser

FOR ANYONE reading this book, the chances are good that you live in a country that is currently at war, or has been at war, or is closely affected by war. And it is a near certainty that you live in a country whose borders have been shaped by war, and quite probably one whose form of government has resulted from war. For that reason, if no other, you have an interest in strategy, the ways in which military means have been and can be used to pursue political ends.

This book is a primer on strategy, defined as the preparation and the real or threatened use of armed force to achieve the ends of policy. In examining the nexus between war and politics, it is intended to inform citizens as well as soldiers, officials, and politicians. It deliberately takes a narrow view of what strategy is and in so doing runs counter to today's fashion of defining strategy as everything from ways of getting ahead in the world to a technique for succeeding in love, or more seriously to match, in a general way, limited means to the pursuit of larger ambitions. This book's focus on the relationship between policy and military force follows the greatest writer on war, Carl von Clausewitz, but reverence for a long-departed Prussian general is not the primary reason for this choice. Rather, the narrower

definition is intended to enable the reader to grasp what the subject is all about, and to avoid the many confusions (definitional, logical, and practical) that broader definitions entail. This narrower focus will, I hope, restore to readers the importance of the core elements of strategy—fighting and the preparation for it—that often become submerged in more diffuse definitions of the topic.

The author of a book like this one must answer three questions: why now, why this approach, and why me?

The Strategic Moment

This book was conceived as a war raged in the eastern part of Europe that has killed or wounded close to two million men and women. There, as in the Middle East, war has turned millions into refugees, left cities smoking ruins, and overthrown governments. Meanwhile, lower-level conflicts have seethed in Africa and Asia, while the possibility of even larger and potentially cataclysmic war between the world's two great powers—the United States and China—and their allies and partners looms as a real possibility. This was not the world many imagined in, say, 1990, as the Soviet empire and then the Soviet Union itself dissolved, Asian countries embarked on an extraordinary period of economic growth, and the future of free governments and open markets seemed so secure that distinguished scholars could fret about the boredom that awaited at the impending end of history.

The unfortunate fact is that war is with us and will remain so for the foreseeable future. This is still a controversial idea. At least four times in the last century thoughtful observers, particularly in the developed world, concluded that large-scale war was a thing of the past. There might be insurrections and

guerrilla conflicts, which of course require strategic frameworks of their own, but big wars with invasions, destruction of large numbers of lives both military and civilian seemed to many not merely cruel or avoidable, but pointless if not impossible.

Before the First World War, it appeared to writers like Norman Angell that the interconnected economies of Europe would cause any war to end within months as organized social and economic life became impossible.[1] After 1945, in the words of Bernard Brodie, an eminent strategic thinker, "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. It can have almost no other useful purpose."[2] Not only the advent of the atomic bomb, but the sheer destructiveness of modern warfare meant that the next conflict would bring civilization to an end. In the wake of the Vietnam War, other American writers suggested that the spectacle of a small country stymieing the greatest power on earth indicated that effective war was no longer possible, at least for the United States. And in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, still others concluded that war had had its day.[3]

Experience delivered painful rebuttals to these hopes. The war that broke out in August 1914 lasted four years, not four weeks or four months; the atom bomb may have precluded a superpower war, but it did not prevent many others, including attacks on nuclear powers like Great Britain (Falklands War) and Israel (Yom Kippur War and others), and has not prevented nonnuclear states and organizations from successfully battling much larger ones armed with these weapons, including the United States and the Soviet Union and its successor state, Russia. The Vietnam War was one in a string of defeats suffered by Western powers in the aftermath of decolonization, but, as wars in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Asia subsequently

proved, that did not mean that others judged war unusable as a tool of policy, from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 to the Azerbaijani overrunning of the Armenian-held enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 to the Russian conquest of Crimea and a large part of the Ukrainian Donbas in 2014–2015—not to mention the United States' successful overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime in 2003.

As the military historian Cyril Falls put it, "War is a feature of human behaviour."[4] But repeated assertions to the contrary have nonetheless had a real and deleterious effect on our ability to think straight about strategy. The slaughter of the First World War, the unthinkability of nuclear conflict, the frustrations and defeats of the wars of decolonization, and the now-closing window of optimism about a free and prosperous world in which rule of law and liberty gradually and peacefully displaced tyranny have had an effect on strategic thought, and almost entirely for the worse. Intellectual energies turned from thinking about how to wage war to how to avoid it by deterrence or peacemaking. Those who hold that war is fundamentally futile, even if inevitable, will find no use for strategy. And the lingering optimists hope that after the current dictator (Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping) passes from the scene peaceful normalcy can return. Even those experts and practitioners who recognize the return of war may acknowledge that reality—and immediately return to thinking about deterrence, which is not at the heart of what strategy is about.[5] This book seeks to redress the balance, rejecting as it does all of those propositions.

Human beings and states seem to be hardwired for war. Predictions that economic interdependence, the progress of science and technology, or evolving values would bring it to an end have consistently proven wrong. In Europe, the continent

in which many countries from the 1990s to the early 2020s were most prone to believe in the end of war, we see the prospect of numerous states rearming, reintroducing conscription, building civil-defense shelters, and desperately mobilizing defense industries. Nor is this phenomenon isolated to Europe. Japan, which since the trauma of World War II has minimized its defense spending and sheltered under the American nuclear umbrella, is rearming quietly but decisively. With a navy more than twice as large as the Royal Navy and having reluctantly decided to purchase weapons capable of long-range strikes, it is a major Asian power once again.

If anything, war is a more pervasive phenomenon in recent years,[6] and not just in the Russia-Ukraine war, and in Israel's wars with Iran and proxy forces like Hezbollah in Lebanon and allies like Hamas in Gaza. The United States wages war against Islamist terrorist groups every day and intermittently bombs Yemeni sectarians (the Houthis) who persistently attack international shipping not with pirate skiffs but with accurate, long-range cruise missiles. It has fought three or, depending on how one counts, four wars in Iraq in the space of a generation. In 2026, it launched an intense and sustained bombing campaign against Iran. There are civil wars in Burma that have cost seventy-thousand lives and in Sudan more than twice as many, as well as population displacements numbering in the millions. The borders of African states like Ethiopia and Somalia are being reshaped by war, even as this book is being written.

The world of the Cold War—ominous as it was with the threat of nuclear devastation and dangerous as it was with a series of proxy conflicts—has passed. So too have the wars of decolonization and state formation that pervaded the middle of the last century. In its place is a world in which the United

States, for the first time, faces an international challenger whose economy is comparable to its own in size, possibly larger, nearly equal in technological sophistication, and more capable in large-scale manufacture of certain war-critical materials. In this world, new technologies, from the materials sciences to artificial intelligence, have reshaped the techniques of war; new domains of war from space to cyberspace have opened; new political currents and some revived old ones have changed some of the underlying motivations for war. Alliance structures such as NATO, which seemed shatterproof, have fractured; new coalitions, particularly among America's adversaries, have formed; nuclear proliferation on a scale feared in the 1950s and 1960s but not actually experienced at that time seems not only possible, but likely. War is very much with us, and in many forms.

These circumstances alone would warrant a new look at the problem of strategic thought and action. The inadequacy of our strategic literature reinforces that need, not because there is too little of it but because, in some ways, there is too much.

There are many books on strategy, but few of recent vintage that can be read in a few sittings. The great textbook on the subject for over half a century has been *Makers of Modern Strategy*, first published in 1943 under the editorship of Edward Meade Earle. It was 553 pages long; the second edition, published in 1986, at 941 pages was not quite double the length. The third edition (2023) is 1,158 pages. The changing subtitles capture the ever-widening aperture of students of the subject: *Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, *From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, *From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*. These are multiauthored works, but even those composed by a single author, such as Lawrence Freedman's *Strategy: A History*, are long (some 750 pages in that case).

These are all valuable, and indeed, invaluable works, but for most readers in this era too much to digest as a whole. And there is a further problem: as strategy gets defined more broadly, it becomes less useful as a concept. Is a strategy for economic development really the same thing as a strategy to dismantle a state or liberate one by force? What precisely is the difference between policy and strategy? To add to the muddle, many authors have introduced the concept of grand strategy, defined originally by Earle as "the science and art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation, including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests . . . shall be effectively promoted and secured against all enemies."[7]

Contemporary definitions have more or less followed this line of thinking, representing grand strategy as a kind of architectonic unification of all the instruments of national power in pursuit of national interests.[8] Here, too, there is a problem: such unification is not often found in practice, and when it is, it seldom lasts. It is rarely found in the written documentation of political leaders or bureaucracies. In its war-college version, moreover, the notion of grand strategy is conducive to a kind of dream of seamless bureaucratic organization of a kind that rarely exists, or to a hodgepodge of words more likely to bewilder than inform. Thus:

> The [Combatant Command] Strategy is an overarching construct outlining a combatant commander's vision for integrating and synchronizing military activities and operations with the other instruments of national power to achieve national strategic objectives. Combatant commanders develop theater/functional strategies. Unlike their [Combatant Command] campaign plans, these strategies are not tasked by national leadership. Rather, they are descriptions of

theater or function area challenges and opportunities with aspirational descriptions of how the combatant command intends to respond.[9]

The consequence of definitional bloat has been such a promiscuous use of the words "strategy" and "strategist" that they have become meaningless. Every village lost to Russian advances in Ukraine in 2024 and 2025 has had the adjective "strategic" attached to it by journalists who merely mean to say "important"; every commentator on television or a podcast, including those most powerless to affect events, is described as a "strategist"; every tactical scheme to cross a river or seize a town is a "strategy." Words matter, and the word "strategy" is in danger of losing its meaning. Indeed, it is striking that while there is an *Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, the comparable works on strategy alone are all about business, not war.[10]

A further problem with the current use of the word "strategy" is its interpretation as being more or less equivalent to the word "plan." But as we shall see, planning is only one part of strategy and sometimes not the most important part. Strategy incorporates execution, the practical work of weaving together military action and politics. More deeply, it embodies a mode of thinking, a kind of logic of force, that goes well beyond planning.

This book is concise, focusing on the use or threatened or attempted use of military force to serve political ends. The omnipresence of real or potential violence makes strategy in this sense different from its corporate or electoral counterparts. Death and destruction elicit reactions from human beings that even the biggest merger negotiations or most closely run political races do not. Clausewitz was right: "if war is an act of force, the emotions cannot fail to be involved."[11]

Is Strategy Possible?

At the heart of strategy is a paradox: "war is the least rational of human projects," in the words of one contemporary sociologist.[12] This is clearly true: threats of war, and above all war itself, are about hatred and enmity, fantasy and paranoia, and spasms of violence. It is often counterproductive and almost always has consequences unimagined by those who launch it. Even the preparation for war often yields results that no statesman or general desires or anticipates.

Indeed, many argue that effective strategy is a chimera. Richard K. Betts has summarized and partially rebutted ten arguments that strategy is an illusion. These range from the impossibility of linking chosen means to actual outcomes, to the ways in which organizational preferences undermine the larger schemes of political and military leaders. His somber conclusion is that "strategy is not always an illusion, but it often is."[13]

Betts is a pessimist about the possibility of strategy.[14] Others go considerably further, insisting that strategy is a conceit of politicians and generals, a dangerous delusion because it never works. Such nihilism about strategy, however, like all forms of nihilism, is a dead end. For one thing, periodically effective strategy happens. Anwar Sadat unleashing the 1973 Yom Kippur War was an effective use of force to achieve a political objective—the dislodging of a frozen conflict with Israel, culminating in the 1979 peace treaty between the two countries. Vladimir Putin, until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, used force effectively. He crushed Chechen rebels in a near decade-long war in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2008, he used military power to cripple a hostile neighboring state, Georgia; in 2014, he seized Crimea from Ukraine, and in 2015 successfully intervened in Syria to keep a friendly dictator

in power. Even the United States, which for decades has witnessed severe internal criticism of its own military enterprises in the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, achieved certain objectives, among them the destruction of Al Qaeda's base in Afghanistan, the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, and the containing of radical Islamist movements seeking to strike America.

Anglo-American strategy during World War II was successful: it took cognizance of the global nature of the conflict; it understood that Germany was the more dangerous opponent than Japan; it reflected an understanding of the enemy (up to a point) and self-knowledge about the material and human resources available to the alliance. Its main objective (although not the subsidiary ones) was clear and achieved: the unconditional surrender of both of its main enemies. It selected appropriate means in appropriate proportions in terms of sea, air, and land power, and set priorities for action—chiefly in its decision to emphasize the defeat of Germany over that of Japan, a decision that influenced American behavior before the war if not always during it. It plotted out a sequence of campaigns that did just that, and it had a theory of victory that worked, in the form of overwhelming sea and air power backed by amphibious assaults and a conclusive land campaign in Europe. One may question many aspects of these choices, but they were coherent and successful, addressing cogently the questions we will examine in chapter 2 of this book, and making the choices described in chapter 3.

By contrast, Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany failed to provide plausible answers to most of those same questions. They misjudged the potential for a much larger and longer war than the ones they had already embarked on in the late 1930s. They profoundly underestimated not only the resources but the will

and capacity of their enemies. They set objectives of winning vast empires in Asia and continental Europe (and beyond) that were beyond their resources and abilities. They chose some of their means poorly (in the case of Japan, underinvesting in in antisubmarine warfare and the fortification of island strongholds; in the case of Germany, overinvesting in exotic "revenge weapons"); they struggled with prioritizing different theaters for action, and found themselves hard-pressed to sequence their campaigns after the opening years of the global war. Their theory of victory, finally, depended on a collapse of will on the part of their opponents that did not occur and was probably never in the cards.

Furthermore, strategic nihilism, while not entirely groundless, is a perspective that can only exist when divorced from responsibility. Leaders, particularly of a country that has been attacked and has no choice but to fight, *must* make choices about how to use force. Strategy is above all a practical art, and, imperfect as it is, one that political leaders cannot shrug off as too difficult.

One of the misconceptions of strategic nihilists lies in the implicit proposition that because no strategist ever accomplishes all of their purposes they have accomplished none. This is to misunderstand not so much the nature of war, as the nature of politics. Maurice Druon was a novelist, the author of a series of historical novels *Les rois maudits*, or in English, *The Accursed Kings*. Before that, he served in the French army during the debacle of 1940, following which he participated in the resistance and eventual liberation of France. He captured the reality of strategy this way:

> The baker who has done his baking, the woodman before the oak he has felled, the judge who has delivered his judgment,

> the architect who has seen the last pinnacle in place, the painter once he has finished his picture, may all, for a night at least, know the relative relaxation which follows the satisfactory conclusion of a job. He who governs can never know it. Hardly has one political hurdle been surmounted than another, which was in course of formation while the first was being dealt with, demands immediate attention. The victorious general enjoys the honors of his victory for a long while; but a prime minister has to face the new situation born of that very victory itself. No problem can remain unresolved for long, for that which appears relatively unimportant today assumes tragic proportions tomorrow.[15]

Druon concludes, "The statesman's only moments of rest are in defeat, with all its bitterness and the anxious recapitulation of accomplished fact, often of a threatening future." The relevant question for the strategist is whether the new problems are worse than the old or merely different in kind.

Clausewitz and Beyond

One figure towers over all writers on strategy, Carl von Clausewitz. Much that is in this book uses Clausewitz and his masterwork, *On War,* as a point of departure, and this requires some explanation. He was not the first to see the relationship between war and politics, but there are fewer articulations clearer than his of the notion that strategy is the discipline of using force to serve the ends of policy, or his deeper awareness that politics in other senses, including domestic politics and regime type, shape strategic decisions. After saying that war has its own grammar but not its own logic, he insists that "war cannot be divorced from political life; and whenever this occurs in our

thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense."[16] He is adamant, particularly in the concluding section of *On War,* that there is one and only one sound viewpoint from which to study war, that of its political nature.

Particularly after the publication of the currently dominant English translation by military historians Michael Howard and Peter Paret in 1976 (revised in 1984), it has become virtually impossible to write seriously on the topic without reference to the Prussian general. His key terms—friction, the fog of war, the culminating point of the attack, center of gravity—have become part of American military jargon and that of many allied militaries. Well before this he exercised a powerful influence on military thought not only in Germany but on Russia as well, as seen in the writings of Aleksandr A. Svechin, the deepest twentieth-century Russian thinker on these matters.[17]

Clausewitz's *On War,* however, is of value chiefly as a study of how to think about war, not a set of dogmas: "Theory cannot equip the mind with formulas for solving problems, nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side. But it can give the mind insight into the great mass phenomena and of their relationships, then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action."[18] He can be obscure enough in the original German; the act of translation, even by such accomplished historians as Howard and Paret (a native German speaker), can introduce new elements of ambiguity. Scholarly arguments continue about the extent to which the book was ever really finished, and if so, which parts and when.[19] Unquestionably, his thinking about war, shaped in part by personal experience in the wars of the French Revolution and Empire as well as

philosophical reflection along Hegelian lines, continued to evolve until his untimely death in 1831.

These ambiguities, however, reinforce rather than weaken his value. Clausewitzian thought incorporates both theoretical propositions and empirical observations; it understands the need for generalization and its limits; it incorporates both the material and the intangible elements of war; it is dialectical and holistic rather than linear and schematic. Above all, more than any other work on war, Clausewitz's text explains and insists on the centrality of politics in understanding war. *On War* is the one, truly indispensable book to read for the student of strategy.

And yet it is insufficient because of the limits of Clausewitz's interest and foresight. He exhibited no interest in naval operations, for example, and although some of his concepts apply to war at sea, the means are so different—in particular, the nature of battle is so remote from that on land—that the application is limited. For Clausewitz, the logic of war is its subordination to politics; the grammar is the art of military operations and battle. But in effect, he limited his interest to one of multiple grammars, even in his own day.

The same is even more true today as we contemplate war in air, space, and cyberspace. Clausewitz lived and wrote about a period in which European armies (the only ones he cared about) were equipped and even organized on generally similar lines, which is no longer the case. Technology was not a topic of interest because although changes were occurring during his lifetime, such as improvements in cartography, mass production, and even small-arms development, they did not appear significant to him. The pace at which these technical changes occurred was slow. For these and other reasons, he says, rather dismissively, of preparations for war that they are "about as

relevant to combat as the craft of the swordsmith to the art of fencing."[20] Such a view is no longer sustainable.

The framing political event of Clausewitz's time was the French Revolution, and although he explored the way in which that upheaval remade armies and strategy, today there are many other political developments, including the advent of social democracy, nondemocratic revolutionary ideologies, and limited government that powerfully shape strategy, as well as the development of durable international organizations. He could not, of course, foresee the advent of nuclear weapons. Although he was familiar with and wrote about irregular warfare, he considered the chief means of strategy the large Napoleonic battle, in which hundreds of thousands of men might engage in combat for a couple of days, rather than more prolonged and complex fighting. Thus, although much of his writing is timeless, it is limited by the world with which he was familiar and in which he was interested. Where Clausewitz remains invaluable, however, is in the questions he asks. This book follows his lead in many ways. Its answers—which, like his, are almost always provisional and qualified—of necessity go in different directions.

There is one other way in which our world differs from that of Clausewitz. One feature of strategy at all times has been secrecy, but in this respect too strategy today occurs in a different set of circumstances than the past. This book is written in an era of astonishing transparency. Large-scale troop movements may be detected not only by spy satellites or secret intercepts, but by commercially accessible imagery, and more importantly by the large numbers of highly competent analysts available to understand it. The ubiquity of social media and the difficulty even repressive regimes have in controlling their soldiers' use of them mean that open-source analysts can piece together much of what transpires on the battlefield. The very fact of abundant real-time

imagery, including video, shapes military behavior, which, like all behavior, can be purely performative—everything from the raising of flags over conquered villages to the recorded and published slitting of throats to terrify an enemy.

With access to a good library's subscriptions, moreover, analysts can uncover a wealth of data about weapons systems, organization, and training. The Institute for the Study of War, the Royal United Services Institute, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, not to mention commercial organizations like Jane's and more focused organizations like the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, do deep, reliable, and extensive research. While truly sensitive information may be withheld for a time—the precise parameters of weapons systems, for example, or covert deployments of small units, or sabotage operations, or even a secret weapon or two—most of it comes out sooner or later, as anyone in government service discovers. Daniel Ellsberg, an analyst turned anti–Vietnam War activist, describes this in a lecture he reports having delivered to Henry Kissinger: "You'll eventually become aware of the limitations of this information. There is a great deal that it doesn't tell you, it's often inaccurate, and it can lead you astray just as much as the *New York Times* can. But that takes a while to learn."[21]

Clausewitz tells us that "war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."[22] This is the case in the most confusing kind of combat, a close-quarters firefight with bullets hissing past those making snap decisions under acute pressure. It is also, however, the case at every level in any war. This fog swirls around the council table as on the battlefield as the result of the pressures created by fear, responsibility, and hope among other emotional forces. They are

innate not just to the uncertainty of information flowing to those who make decisions, but to human psychology. It is one of the reasons why war is pervaded by surprise.

Surprises in war have always occurred and will continue to do so. Indeed, the ubiquity of surprise is a central theme of this book. Surprise does not result solely from the failure of intelligence organizations, but from the ways in which politicians, armed forces, and indeed societies as a whole understand war and its prospects. Surprise is innate to war itself and is only partly related to the quantity of reliable information leaders have at their disposal.

That fact—the ubiquity of surprise, and its roots in individual and social psychology and culture—animates this book's discussion of strategy. Strategy is paradoxical: it attempts to relate military means to political ends. It is rational in that way, and some of the most gifted writers choose to approach it in that way exclusively, as an exercise in rational choice-making.[23] But the effort to do so invariably runs into the nonrational elements of human nature. Human chess players, even the best, have eventually found themselves bested by machines, and not only because machines can calculate more rapidly and more extensively, but because human beings get tired, feel stress, and make unaccountable slips. In chess, moreover, it is wooden pieces on a board, not human beings engaged in battle, and although certain weapon systems have already taken human beings out of the loop of decision-making, so long as political entities exist, human beings will engage in making strategic decisions and implementing them.

Students of strategy can hope to understand the fundamentals of strategic decision-making. They may better understand when and how there is more success in strategy and less. They can even aspire to make themselves and others better at making

strategic decisions or at least avoiding certain common mistakes. This book treats all these matters but is always informed by the way in which strategy as a rational exercise often fails, partially or completely, and not as a result of mere stupidity.

The Dangerous Gift

I have experienced more than a little fog of war. Those experiences, as well as academic study, have helped shaped this book. As an academic, I have studied and taught strategy and military history at a variety of institutions—Harvard, the U.S. Naval War College, and Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Some of my students ended up as three- or four-star generals and admirals, ambassadors, senior intelligence officers, and bureaucrats. Along the way, I had my own opportunities for public service, in the intelligence community, Department of Defense, and Department of State. As an official and private citizen, I have visited war zones (Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Israel, Ukraine), spoken with ministers and secretaries of defense, presidents and prime ministers, as well as generals and spymasters. During more than thirty-five years in Washington I have watched the United States enter three or four wars in Iraq, one in Afghanistan, a protracted set of engagements against Iran, minor scrapes in the Balkans and North Africa, as well as preparing for something much larger in the Pacific. Throughout this time, I have known many of the key strategic decision-makers (some very well) and have had the opportunity to speak with them while and after they did what they did. Along the way, I had the unique opportunity to learn from, and occasionally work for, some of the most powerful intellects in the field of strategic studies in the last century—political

scientists like Samuel Huntington, government thinkers like Andrew Marshall, and historians like Michael Howard, among others.

I have not conducted a war and do not consider myself a strategist but rather a student and teacher of the subject. I have, however, most certainly advised political and military leaders about strategy, sometimes in private, sometimes in small conferences, sometimes through articles in newspapers and magazines or on television. After four decades of this, I am often reminded of the words of one of the figures in J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The frightened hobbit Frodo has fled his insular but threatened home of the Shire and is pursued by mysterious black riders. He is rescued from them by a band of elves led by an elvish chieftain, Gildor, whom he asks for advice. Gildor is reluctant, saying, "Elves seldom give unguarded advice, for advice is a dangerous gift, even from the wise to the wise, and all courses may run ill."[24]

That is so. My firsthand experience of the murkiness and uncertainty of strategic choice has fostered the wish to explore their consequences. One advantage of writing a work like this at my stage in life is that one has seen and studied, to use another phrase from *Lord of the Rings*, "defeats and fruitless victories," but also some successes.[25] At times I think I have given advice that was proven sound, and at other times not so, and both cases will figure in what follows. The personal experience of strategy has unquestionably enriched my study of it.

Simple Questions, Difficult Answers

The central argument of this book is that effective strategy is possible, but extremely difficult, and that it rests on seven seemingly simple questions and an equally simple-seeming set of

choices. Unfortunately, the answers and the decisions prove to be anything but simple and straightforward, and the tension between the simplicity of the questions and the complexity of the answers is a large part of this book.

After describing those questions and choices in chapters 2 and 3 respectively, I will examine the obstacles to addressing them adequately. Some of these are uncertainties innate to the nature of war and the variety of ways in which surprise permeates it (chapter 4); others are a result of individual and collective pathologies, from illness to heuristics that serve us ill, to failures of analysis and understanding (chapter 5). The question then becomes, what can mitigate those limitations and barriers? The possibly surprising answer lies not in bureaucratic contrivances or template-driven decision-making, but in what I describe in chapter 6 as the strategic virtues—habits of thought and qualities of character and judgment that enable a strategist to make sound decisions.

In order to illustrate how those virtues apply in practice, I will focus on one episode, albeit a consequential one, in the life of one of the great strategists—Winston Churchill (chapter 7). Crossing the Atlantic for his first wartime meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt after the United States entered the war, he sought not only to devise a strategy for the middle phase of World War II, but to convince an audience that included deeply skeptical American generals that his judgment was correct. This case study involves burrowing into the memoranda he composed and takes the form of a detailed gloss on them. It shows both what is possible and the mistakes that even the best informed and most experienced and brilliant strategists can make.

The final chapter of this book offers speculation about the future of strategy in a world in which politics, social order, and

technology are in flux. Strategy is, as Andrew W. Marshall, the founder of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment once put it, a discipline for future generations. After a lifetime of teaching those who must answer those questions and make those choices, that seems to me a fitting conclusion for this book.

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