

Theory of Victory

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The United States is developing a reputation much like Germany had in the twentieth century of being tactically and operationally superb but strategically inept. Often stated as a tendency to win the war but lose the peace, this problem has a huge theoretical component that the national security community has only recently begun to address. In fact, the concept of victory is the biggest theoretical challenge facing security professionals today.

The security profession needs a basic theoretical construct within which to think about winning wars. Gallons of ink have been expended over the centuries on how to win wars, but that effort has largely been uninformed by even a rudimentary theory of victory. Many existing theories pay little attention to what victory is and why one wins, going instead to the more difficult issue of how one wins. When theorists do address winning, it is usually in passing, as an assumption, or as an excursion from their primary topic. Clausewitz is an exception to this assertion, but his musings on winning are scattered and incomplete. There is a school of thought that claims theory is not necessary for competent performance.¹ While that might explain how mankind has gone without a theory of victory for so long, it does not negate the utility of theory. Existing theories of war are not necessarily wrong; they simply might benefit from some supplemental thought specifically devoted to victory. Fortunately, the extant theoretical literature contains enough material to begin constructing a theory of victory.²

The author is not alone in believing a theory of victory is needed. Colin S. Gray wrote a monograph on the possibility of decisive victory that addresses the concept of winning, although his primary focus is on the concept of decisiveness.³ William Martel published a book on the theory of victory in 2007.⁴ Martel acknowledges his is not a complete theory of victory, but he offers an excellent start. This article is not a comprehensive theory of victory either, but is presented in an attempt to continue the discussion.

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What is Winning and Victory?

Victory in war is at the most basic level an assessment, not a fact or condition. It is someone's opinion or an amalgamation of opinions. Victory in war may or may not have anything to do with objective criteria such as casualties or territory taken or lost. In winning a war, those things matter—at least at some level and always in terms of their effect on perception—but what matters most is the ultimate perception of the situation, not the facts. Different people, depending on their perspective, can legitimately differ in their assessment. The assessment aspect complicates the issue of winning exponentially since it introduces the uncontrolled variables of whose assessment takes precedence, for how much, and based on what criteria.

Several points flow from this assertion. Results from any direct interaction of two bodies will be closely related and interdependent. This is especially true when there is a contest between them, but because winning is an assessment and not a proven conclusion, the results of wars are independent for each side and may vary by participant. That is, the fact that one side won big does not necessarily mean its opponent lost big. It may not even mean that the other side lost at all.

Second, winning a war (as opposed to a battle or campaign) is a political condition. If war is a political act, victory at the highest levels is correspondingly defined in political terms. The implication is that tactical or operational victory without favorable political outcomes is sterile, and by any reasonable assessment that is true. But knowing that strategic victory is a political condition is not a sufficient understanding of victory.

Next, because it is a perception or assessment, victory is heavily dependent on perspective. In a military sense, this translates into being sensitive to the level of war. It is possible to have a smashing tactical victory that does not produce operational or strategic results. Is that really a win? It certainly is from the point of view of the tactical commander; the view from the perspective of the operational or strategic commander might be quite different. It is this characteristic that allowed Saddam Hussein to claim victory after the First Gulf War. He suffered a huge tactical and operational loss, but his regime had survived (his strategic objective after the Coalition intervened). The war was thus a strategic win for him, at least in his eyes and from his perspective.

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The characteristic of perspective allows observers to think of victory in war as three-tiered: tactical, operational, and strategic. Because winning tactically is a fairly straightforward and almost exclusively military activity, it is best understood and generally assessed using reasonably quantifiable criteria. Measures of effectiveness such as comparative casualty ratios, ground taken or lost, and prisoners captured all have weight and can produce a reasonable estimate of victory or defeat that is likely to be widely accepted. Operational victory is similarly transparent at least in its purest form; the campaign succeeds or fails based on criteria that are usually well understood and quantifiable. Strategic victory, however, is a more complicated issue.

Which level is most important? It is tempting to respond that all are equally important, but that would be incorrect. What counts in the end is the strategic outcome. The story comes to mind of Colonel Harry Summers talking to a North Vietnamese officer after the Vietnam War. Summers commented that the United States had won all the battles, and the North Vietnamese replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."⁵ Tactical and operational successes may set the stage for strategic victory, but they are not sufficient in themselves.

Finally, as Colin Gray and William Martel point out, victory occurs on multiple sliding scales. Victory and defeat, although polar opposites, are not binary. There are thousands of points along the scale that delineate degrees of success. Winning may or may not be decisive in the sense of settling the underlying political issues, again across a whole range of degrees.⁶ Gray uses separate scales for achievement and decisiveness.⁷ In a sense the two are so closely related that decisiveness might be considered part of the definition of winning. It is, however, a separate and useful concept, especially since the important interaction is the effect between levels (not to discount the fact that one might win on one level and still not produce decisive results). So a great battlefield victory may not decide anything either militarily in terms of the campaign or politically in terms of the war. Just as one can succeed to varying degrees, one can fail to varying degrees. Thus, the achievement scale has a negative component.



Figure 1. Scale of Success

A conceptual scale of success runs from defeat through losing, not winning, tying, not losing, winning, and victory with shades and gradations between each point (Figure 1). Victory is completely fulfilling while defeat is catastrophic, but the other possible results contain aspects of both winning and losing to some extent. Note that this model draws distinctions between winning

and victory and losing and defeat. While the words are often used interchangeably, they offer a unique opportunity to distinguish important gradations that exist in the condition of success in war. The assertion here is that victory will be essentially total and probably final; that it will resolve the underlying political issues. It is certainly possible, however, to succeed in a war without achieving everything one sought or resolving all the extant issues. Winning implies achieving success on the battlefield and in securing some political goals, but not, for whatever reason, reaching total political success (victory). Lesser levels of success reflect lesser degrees of battlefield achievement or lesser degrees of decisiveness in solving or resolving underlying issues. On the losing end, defeat is also a total concept. It implies failure to achieve battlefield success or to attain political goals and simultaneously not only not resolving underlying issues but actually exacerbating them. Thus, the two components of success in war are portrayed here as the scales of achievement and decisiveness. These are related yet independent variables.

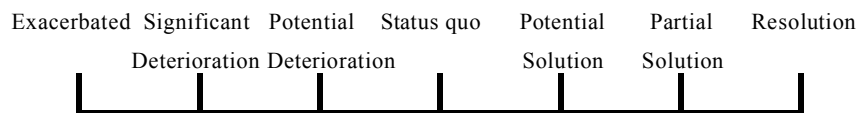


Figure 2. Scale of Decisiveness

Decisiveness also reflects a range of potential outcomes. The decisiveness scale (Figure 2) shows potential outcomes varying from completely resolving the political issues at stake through various degrees of partial resolution to no effect (or status quo), worsened or deteriorated political conditions, to the final potential outcome that the war does not solve the problems for which it was fought, but actually exacerbates them. Decisiveness assesses the effect on the political issues.

Achievement considers how well one executes his strategy—in a sense, how well he did on the battlefield or campaign and in the immediate political realm. Achievement (Figure 3) can range from accomplishing nothing through increasing degrees of success until one is completely successful.

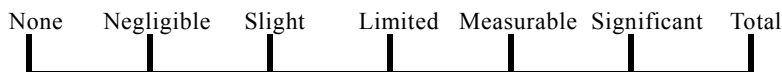


Figure 3. Scale of Achievement

The achievement scale is by far the primary scale used in tactical and operational assessments of victory and is often confused with the success scale. The two scales are closely related, particularly since at the operational and strategic levels the achievement scale encompasses political issues as well as

military. The distinction is that one may accomplish political goals without necessarily resolving the political issues.

Characteristics of Winning

One author has postulated that winning is simply achieving an outcome you like or at least prefer compared to alternatives. The same author later writes, “‘Victory’ is an all-purpose word used to describe imprecisely the concept of success in war.”⁸ That descriptor has merit, but it is a fairly low bar, and only a part of what winning really is. Achieving a preferred outcome or a success is perhaps the most basic element of conflict termination; theoretically one fights to achieve a favorable state of affairs or at least an outcome that is preferable to accepting the alternatives or continuing the war. That does not equate to victory. One can postulate a desirable political or military condition that would be better than losing yet less than victory—for example, a tie or stalemate.

It is clear that fighting will not stop unless the combatants see peace as more desirable than a continuation of conflict. In Clausewitzian terms, if the effort required exceeds the value of the political objective, the fighting has to stop.⁹ Achieving a desired or acceptable outcome may be a precondition for conflict termination, but the end of fighting does not necessarily signify victory. In fact, victory and conflict termination are two distinct and sometimes mutually antagonistic concepts. It is possible and sometimes desirable to terminate conflicts without producing a winner. Conversely, it is also possible to continue a war unnecessarily in hopes of achieving victory or avoiding defeat. Winning a war, however, almost certainly implies that a state of peace exists even if the existence of peace does not necessarily imply victory.

Winning is no different if your goal is positive or negative, that is if you are trying to accomplish or prevent something. The same is true for limited or total goals. It really makes no difference if the goal is something existential such as continuing to exist as a nation or something less vital, for example, “signaling.” Total wars or wars for some concrete object such as possession of territory are much more likely to be judged by concrete criteria—did you achieve or prevent the occupation of the territory; who was still standing at the end? There are also no absolute criteria that ensure victory.

Can both sides win a war? If so, why fight? It would seem that reasonable men could discover a political solution that probably would be the result of war, without the necessity of all the killing. That, however, has never been the case, and it is so because of both the nature of war and the nature of victory. War is a dynamic process. As it progresses the political objectives can change. Thus, the peace settlement upon which the assessment of victory and defeat

will be made may have little relation to the initial political issues. The issues that provoked World War I (at least the most immediate political issues) could have been resolved short of four years of total war. Instead, ends grew as the military effort escalated, and the final peace settlement had almost nothing to do with the original issues. Conversely, unexpectedly stiff resistance can force politicians to scale back on initial political objectives. The point is that it is impossible to decipher in advance the likely postwar political settlement.

Additionally, if the presumptive loser's political goals are very limited, such as demonstrating capability, showing resolve, or sending messages, he may be able to correctly claim he accomplished the objectives and thus won. At the conclusion of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War the Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal, still had forces on the eastern side, and had stood up to the Israelis. Politically, they could overlook the fact that the Israelis were conducting a counterattack, had isolated one of the two attacking Egyptian armies, and were in position to complete its destruction. The Egyptians were in a difficult military situation, but President Anwar Sadat was able to negotiate and accept the Camp David peace accord precisely because he could persuasively (at least to the Egyptian people) claim victory in the war. Thus, one side can win big without the other side necessarily losing big, or even at all.

It is equally possible for neither side to win. Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart wrote, "Peace through stalemate, based on a coincident recognition by each side of the opponent's strength, is at least preferable to peace through common exhaustion—and has often provided a better foundation for lasting peace."¹⁰ Liddell Hart was implying that not achieving victory is sometimes a win. Does that mean that not losing can be the same as winning? Why not if that is the political goal? If one begins a war in an underdog or even a hopeless military position, then isn't surviving that war a form of victory? While ethicists might question a decision to undertake a war without true hope of victory, politicians have frequently found doing so is necessary.

Is there a temporal aspect to winning a war either in terms of achieving it or in terms of sustaining the assessment over time? Obviously winning takes some amount of time, and equally obviously the amount of time and effort expended will influence assessments of the postwar political situation. A strategic victory must also have some temporal permanence; rational assessments of victory will never concede success if a winning status is only sustainable for a matter of weeks or months. Because winning at the strategic level is an assessment of political results, it is subject to revision. Victory can be reevaluated either in terms of achievement or decisiveness, and is therefore not necessarily permanent. The degree of impermanence relates directly to the magnitude of the achievement and its decisiveness. World War I looked like an Anglo-French-American victory in 1918. Over time the degree of de-

cisiveness has been reevaluated. Now the result is generally considered to be a military success that did not resolve and in some cases aggravated underlying geopolitical issues.

Tactical and operational victories, because of their firmer basis of judgment, tend to remain fixed. Only very marginal victories at those levels are subject to reinterpretation. That is also true of significant, very decisive strategic wins. It is much more difficult to reevaluate a total victory that decisively settles the political issues involved than to reevaluate a situation that is positioned lower on the sliding scales.

Does or should the cost affect victory? Of course it does. Liddell Hart pointed out that a victory is useless if it breaks the winner's economy, military, or society.¹¹ Cost will certainly factor in to the equation of winning or losing. This statement returns to the point that it is possible to win tactically at such an expense in men and materiel that a strategic defeat is the final result. The classic encapsulation of this possibility was by King Pyrrhus of Epirus who in 279 B.C. was alleged to have replied to congratulations on a bloody victory over the Romans that one more such victory would undo him.¹²

Who Decides?

Because of the reasonably measurable victory conditions at the tactical and much of the operational levels, who decides the winner or loser at those levels is not especially controversial. That is not true, however, at the strategic level, and the operational level can also get contentious as it merges with the strategic. If victory at the strategic level is an assessment of the post-war political conditions, then who does the assessment is critical. Does the victor decide whether he won or lost? The vanquished? Both? Neither? What about a "disinterested" or uninvolved party? Can the decider be multiple people? If the decider can be multiple, could several different (and equally valid) decisions be made? The issues here are endless, and that is just to decide who makes the assessment. There is a second set of issues related to the question of what criteria should be used. Is there an objective set of criteria? Are the criteria culturally based? Are the criteria different for different kinds of war (total or limited)? Do the criteria vary over time?

Despite its complexity the question of who decides has a simple answer. This narrative has defined ultimate victory as an assessment of the post-war political condition; therefore it is a political issue, and everyone gets an opinion. Then the problem becomes not who decides but whose opinion matters, and that is a much more manageable issue. For Americans the opinions that matter are in order of priority: (1) the American people; (2) American political and military elites (1 and 2 together might be thought of as American public opinion on military issues); (3) the opinion of friends and allies; and

(4) world opinion—essentially everybody else. As the issue fades from the immediate political forum, the interested audience declines precipitously until eventually only historians debate the issue. By then the base assessment of winning and losing has already been established, and historical debates are adjustments based on new evidence or consequences revealed by the passage of time.

How does one determine American public opinion? The determination results from the confluence of two processes. First, political leaders try to convince the public. That attempt is successful or not based on the facts of the particular circumstances, the persuasiveness of the message, and the perceived legitimacy and veracity of the messenger. Credible politicians backed by convincing evidence of military achievement and political profit can proclaim victory and simply establish the fact. The second process is more like the obscenity test articulated by a US Supreme Court justice in 1964—people recognize victory when they see it. They make up their own minds using whatever evidence is available. This is a much more subjective process that quickly escapes political control or is controlled by atypical political forces. As a result, at the strategic level victory and defeat can be as much issues of public perception and even partisan politics as they are of battlefield achievement or diplomatic negotiations.

Of course, an analogue of this process occurs in the enemy country or organization (if a nonstate actor). Who decides in the enemy camp and how is a critical but very situationally dependent fact. It should be considered in the strategic estimate process, although this article cannot attempt to speculate on how that might work.

There is another key point to consider. Clausewitz said victory was tripartite. “If in conclusion we consider the total concept of a victory, we find it consists of three elements: the enemy’s greater loss of material strength, his loss of morale, and his open admission of the above by giving up his intentions.”¹³ This highlights one significant fact regarding who decides and how: to be effective, both sides have to acknowledge its correctness. Clausewitz was addressing tactical victory where his three points are usually apparent. At the strategic level the assessment is much more difficult and debatable. The admission of loss, however, is an important caveat for all levels, and at all levels it intertwines with the issue of who decides. This distinction is particularly evident at the tactical level, but there are times when one side or the other refuses to accept obvious defeat for whatever reason and continues the fight. Acceptance of defeat makes moot the issue of who decides who won. Both sides acknowledge the outcome, and it is difficult for even the most radical re-interpretation to contest the basic decision.

Traditionally, governments indicate they are beaten by signing some form of peace accord or treaty, while armies acknowledge defeat by formally surrendering or perhaps agreeing to an armistice. Those are highly important symbolic acts as an acknowledgement of victory and defeat; they are an integral and perhaps essential part of the political and social mythology of victory. Formal ceremonies acknowledging victory and defeat are extremely important and significant. Such ceremonies should be authentic to be useful, however. Contrived ceremonies for the sake of having a formal surrender do not convince the target audience.

Current thinking supports the belief that there will not be such a ceremony at the conclusion of the war on terrorism and is probably correct. The difference in the war on terrorism is that the enemy is a nonstate actor. There are no internationally recognized procedures for accepting the surrender of nonstate actors, and if there were, no state could risk legitimizing such an actor by formally accepting its surrender. If nonstate actors mimic in some ways the trinitarian characteristics of states, the impact of formal surrender might be similar, but the extent of such similarity is at present unclear.

So, what conclusions can be drawn regarding winning in warfare so far? It is an assessment of two variables, achievement and decisiveness, at three levels: tactical, operational, and strategic. At the tactical and in most cases the operational level winning is a military condition, and the assessment rests on reasonably well-understood military criteria. At the strategic level (and the portions of the operational that directly overlap the strategic), public opinion decides who wins and loses and to what extent based on an assessment of the postwar political conditions. The military situation as the public understands or interprets it will, of course, play a huge role in the assessment, but the overriding criteria will be political. To be effective, a victory needs to be recognized and accepted by the opponent and sustained over time. Thus, strategic victory in war is a positive assessment of the postwar political situation in terms of achievement and decisiveness that is acknowledged, sustainable, and resolves underlying political issues. Similarly, tactical victories are battlefield military outcomes that achieve their purpose and give one side a significant, acknowledged advantage over its opponent. Substituting “operational” for “tactical” and eliminating “battlefield” in this definition yields a satisfactory definition of operational victory.

How Does One Win?

Theoretically, how one wins a war is fairly straightforward—achieving it is difficult. Clausewitz pointed out that war is both a physical and moral struggle. His recipe for victory was simple: “If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your efforts against his power of resistance, which can be expressed

as the product of two inseparable factors; the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will.”¹⁴ One can express that as a mathematical formula:

$$R = M \times W$$

R represents the power of resistance, M is the total means available, and W is the strength of will. Victory is achieved as R approaches zero; that is, as the power of resistance drops to an ineffective level. An opponent can push R toward zero by reducing either M or W (or both).

The traditional concept of winning a war is based on reducing the enemy’s means of resistance. That usually is done through destroying or neutralizing the enemy’s military or at least attriting it to the point of ineffectiveness. The underlying purpose is to negate the enemy’s capability to resist so one might impose his will without resistance. The trick has always been how one goes about destroying or attriting the enemy. Another physical approach attempts to use paralysis to avoid the issues of destruction or attrition. The concept is that one paralyzes vital enemy systems, especially command and control, to make resistance ineffective.¹⁵ The mechanism for achieving victory is still placing the enemy in a situation where your armed forces can directly impose their will.

Attacking psychologically to reduce the enemy’s will to resist works differently. The intent of all action is not to place oneself in position to impose one’s will but to cause the enemy to lose his will and quit. If there is truth in Clausewitz’s description of the forces interacting in war as the people, the government, and the military, then it is possible to ascribe a will to each.¹⁶ Whose will counts most? The French general and theorist André Beaufre wrote:

Whom do we wish to convince? Ultimately it must be the enemy government but in some cases it may be easier to work on leading personalities (e.g., Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg or Munich), choosing arguments to which they are most susceptible. Alternatively it may be best to work directly on a certain section of public opinion which has some hold over the government or an influential allied government or through UNO [the United Nations].¹⁷

Regardless of the route he followed, Beaufre was focused on breaking the will of the enemy government. Counterinsurgency (COIN) theory provides a different perspective. In COIN the people’s support is the object of the war. Thus, the people’s will counts most—controlling it is how one wins. Restated in terms of a theory of victory, the population is the strategic objective in COIN because winning the population equates almost directly to winning the conflict.

These examples raise the possibility that whose will counts most may be largely an issue of the type of war one is fighting. This situation re-

flects Clausewitz's dictum that the first and greatest act of a commander and statesman is to understand the nature of the war in which he is about to engage.¹⁸ In a total war, one probably has to break at least the government's and the people's will. You may have to break all three elements, and certainly are required to do so to achieve a lasting settlement. In limited wars, one may only have to break the will of the government, assuming sufficient governmental control exists to enforce its decision. As a caveat, there is no guarantee that breaking the will of one of the trinitarian legs will produce victory or that both sides will be contesting over the same will. A second caveat is that the model may not fit nonstate actors well.

In will-oriented approaches, physical effects are also important and are typically a primary method. The distinction is in intent. The desired result of a psychological approach is the collapse of will rather than rendering the enemy incapable of resistance. For example, the Italian airpower theorist Giulio Douhet wanted to use strategic bombing to attack the will of the enemy people and government. The bomber could fly over fielded forces and directly attack enemy cities. The intent was to break morale.¹⁹ This theory, which is the heart of all strategic bombing theory, has yet to work unambiguously. The one proven way to break will is to convince the enemy that resistance is futile; the cost of resistance exceeds the potential gain.

The only method currently available to directly attack will is information operations; all other options attack indirectly through some other aspect presumed to influence will. Information operations, however, are very blunt instruments whose impact is difficult to predict or target. Conversely, if victory is an assessment, information operations are strategically critical in deciding the winner. America's inability to come to grips intellectually, physically, or psychologically with this aspect of war in an age where control of information is impossible is a huge part of our current perceived inability to achieve positive strategic results in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What is the bottom line? Victory in war is about breaking will. Completely eliminating means of resistance is impossible. Theoretically there will always be one enemy soldier armed with a knife who is willing to give their life to continue the fight. Destroying the enemy's means without breaking his will leaves you with a less capable but still hostile foe. Conversely, breaking the will to resist ends the war regardless of the enemy's remaining combat capability. The issue then becomes much more practical: How does one break an enemy's will? This question is where the argument loops back. Will is a difficult concept to define, much less attack directly, so militaries invariably attack the enemy military as a method not to reduce his power of resistance to zero, but as a means to destroy his will thereby achieving victory.

The Implications for War

War is about winning. This is not a new concept. Sun Tzu expressed it—“Victory is the main object in war”—thousands of years ago.²⁰ Even fighting in an impossible situation is done in the hope of victory, if only by miracle or if only defined as surviving the contest.

The fact that war is about winning does not mean it is about victory. One can win a war, especially a limited war, without achieving victory; here the distinction in words becomes significant. Military force can legitimately be used to obtain goals short of total victory or for immediate political advantage with no intent of resolving the underlying issues. The point is that war is about politics, and consequently victory in the end is a political matter.

Has this analysis answered (or even asked) all the relevant questions? Certainly not. There is much work remaining in this arena. The hope is that these thoughts can advance the discussion. If not, nations may end the twenty-first century still bemoaning their inability to turn spectacular tactical victories into decisive strategic results.

NOTES

1. See for example Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

2. Bradford Lee at the Naval War College has been working on a concept he calls a theory of victory that is very interesting; however, it is more a theory of winning specific contests against specific enemies in the terms developed in this article.

3. Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2002).

4. William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Military Policy* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

5. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1981, fifth printing 1989), 1.

6. Martel, 94-95; Gray, 9-10.

7. Gray, *ibid.*

8. Martel, 2, 87.

9. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 92.

10. Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1954, reprint 1967), 370.

11. *Ibid.*, 366-70.

12. Plutarch, “Pyrrhus,” John Dryden, trans., <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pyrrhus.html>.

13. Clausewitz, 233-34.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

15. John A. Warden III, “The Enemy as a System,” *Airpower Journal*, 9 (Spring 1995), 41-55.

16. Clausewitz, 89.

17. André Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy, with Particular Reference to Problems of Defense, Politics, Economics, and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age*, R. H. Barry, trans. (London: Farber and Farber, 1965), 24.

18. Clausewitz, 88-89.

19. David Jablonsky, “Editor’s Introduction” in David Jablonsky, ed., *Roots of Strategy, Book 4: 4 Military Classics* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1999), 270-1; Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 577-81.

20. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963, 1973), 73.