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**A CLASH OF VISIONARIES KING CHARLES XXII
OF SWEDEN AND TSAR PETER I OF MUSCOVY AND
THE GREAT NORTHERN WAR, 1700-1721**

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A CLASH OF VISIONARIES
KING CHARLES XII OF SWEDEN AND TSAR PETER I OF MUSCOVY
AND THE GREAT NORTHERN WAR, 1700-1721

by

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: A Clash of Visionaries: King Charles XII of Sweden,
TSAR Peter I of Russia and the Great Northern War

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 15 April 1996

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Europe witnessed the phenomenon of the absolute monarch in full stride. Legitimized and by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, the institution of the all-powerful monarch dictated the course of events that drove nation-states. The Second or Great Northern War, 1700-1721, pitting Sweden against Russia, witnessed a clash representing a collision of monarchical obsessions, those harbored by Charles XII and Peter the I. This study critically examines two very different strategic leaders; their visions for the future stood in diametric opposition; their legacies endure to a remarkable degree to the extent that their successes and failures significantly color the contemporary world's political landscape. Scrutinized IAW draft FM 22-103, Strategic Leadership, this research project assesses the absolute monarchs' strategic visions and effectiveness in accordance with the USAWC's strategic leader criteria.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the first of the protagonists. With a sword in hand and outnumbered by his assailants, our hard-pressed hero persevered from door to door, through window openings and hallways, up and down staircases, and throughout the building's numerous chambers. Before the Swedish defenders yielded an inch, their Turkish attackers paid dearly. Overwhelmed in the end, our hero and his few surviving loyalists were born off to captivity. By his own hand several Turks lay dead.¹

Not less remarkable was the second protagonist. During dire circumstances of another sort, he found himself at the height of exasperation. Transiting stormy waters in the Gulf of Finland, the other hero witnessed a skiff struggling to right itself after having capsized in shoal waters. A rescue attempt degenerated into an exercise in futility and the bungling efforts of others to save the increasingly threatened crew only heightened his impatience. Unable to contain himself he personally intervened, throwing himself into the surf and with wanton abandon, directed the rescue. For several hours he labored with others in the cold autumn waters, hauling lines, manipulating tackle and finally righting the stricken skiff.²

The above anecdotes hardly pass muster in the annals of the extraordinary except that in these instances both protagonists were none other than absolute monarchs, each presiding over a powerful empire during an age when regal privilege extended human divinity to the sovereign personage. Royal conduct stood above reproach, royal judgment was unassailable and physical danger

anathema. Implicit in the duties of an absolute monarch was the imperative to perpetuate one's own royal "glory."³ Out of character were sovereigns comporting themselves otherwise.

As the supreme authority for the territorial entity that embodied his very self, only a most extraordinary sovereign would jeopardize his physical well-being. More remarkable was a sovereign subordinating himself for a greater goal, a vision of grand empire, albeit ruthlessly gained at the expense of himself and his subjects. Such remarkable men were the protagonists: King Charles the XII of Sweden (1682-1718) and Tzar Peter I of Muscovy, Emperor of all Russia (1672-1725).

Hardly paragons of the USAWC's image of the strategic leader, both men deserve scrutiny in accordance with strategic leader criteria. Absolute autocrats in the truest sense, they were giants of their age, remarkable men to the degree they unquestionably inspired awe and fear among their contemporaries. Their history is instructive and reveals these great rivals as men who shaped destiny, visionaries *extraordinaire*.

Strictly applying contemporary leadership models allows the student of the strategic art to reasonably conclude that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century institution of the absolute monarch represents an anachronism, that today's strategic realm bears little relevance to the Age of Absolutism. The following analysis argues to the contrary: both Charles and Peter reinforce the efficacy of such models, in particular, those espoused by the U.S. Army's FM 22-103, Strategic Leadership.

BALANCE OF POWER, THE MEN, THE GREAT NORTHERN WAR

Background

Charles XII and Peter I left legacies of supreme achievement, the former owing to battlefield exploits, the latter to cultural and institutional reform. One lapsed into obscurity, the other bequeathed an empire and earned the sobriquet "The Great." Both rulers committed egregious errors, unquestionably to the detriment of their grander designs, but one, drawing upon the limitless depth and reserves of his domain, recovered time and again; one not so well endowed left his realm drained and destitute. Such lapses, in retrospect, might have been forestalled or at least mitigated had either man embraced methodology approximating current thought as it pertains to the strategic art. In the final analysis, however, the experience of two of history's greatest antagonists suggests that theoretical models fall short in conveying strategic vision to a leadership process. True strategic vision represents the aggregate of a visionary's ambition, imagination, zeal, determination and perhaps, genius. Witness Charles XII and Peter I.

European Balance-of-Power Conflicts

The turn of the eighteenth century witnessed a Europe embroiled in ceaseless power struggles. In full stride were the balance-of-power alliances institutionalized by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years' War. This watershed accord served to solidify the supremacy of the territorial sovereign as absolute ruler and established the framework for securing among

the collective body of European powers the mutual support that presaged today's security regimes.⁴ The monarch's persona was synonymous with the political-geographic entity known one hundred years later as the nation state.⁵ Both the King of Sweden and the Tzar of Muscovy were such absolute sovereigns, each wielding within their respective domain absolute authority.⁶

The War of the Spanish Succession, 1701-1714--the quintessential balance-of-power struggle--raged concurrently with the great protracted conflict that placed the subjects at bitter opposition. The Great Northern War, 1700-1721, would decisively shape the destiny of Europe and determine both Sweden and Muscovy's status as world powers, but this struggle represented a mere backdrop for the perceived greater conflict involving the Continent's other major actors. With the Spanish Succession tenuously acknowledged at the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht and confirmed a year later at the Treaties of Rastatt and Baden--the belligerents partially agreeing to the Bourbon contender, Philip V--one could conclude that the continental European balance of power at the war's end differed little from that existing at the conflict's onset.⁷ Not so with the struggle pitting Charles XII against Peter I; one kingdom would irrevocably supplant the other as the dominant regional empire with ramifications extending to the present day.

Sweden versus Muscovy

When the two antagonists ascended their respective thrones, the relative strengths of Sweden and Muscovy differed

significantly. The former boasted an army of great repute in addition to a Baltic navy reigning supreme; the latter was landlocked, its army poorly trained, equipped and disciplined. The former represented a major European power, the latter a contemptible and backward land. This state of affairs shifted radically as a consequence of the Great Northern War.

Both Charles XII and Peter I inherited formidable legacies from their regal predecessors, famous rulers such as Gustavus II Adolphus and Ivan the Great. Sweden's armies additionally enjoyed a reputation for martial prowess, earned on the battlefields of a strife-torn Europe. Here Swedish arms pitted themselves against the Continent's best armies.⁸ Peter's immediate progenitors, however, represented a succession of dubious "Great Tsars." These Muscovite rulers projected inaction, excessive piety, and weakness. Collectively they succeeded in conferring upon Muscovy the well-deserved reputation for backwardness and decadence.⁹

Subsidized by Catholic France, Protestant Swedish armies fought decisively against the Catholic Hapsburgs during the Thirty Years' War.¹⁰ Campaigning on the Continent in both Poland and Germany, a Swedish army led by Gustavus II Adolphus, significantly influenced the war's course while securing Sweden's status as a major power.¹¹ Charles XI, Charles XII's father, bequeathed an empire--although famine plagued and financially destitute--embracing the entire Scandinavian Peninsula. Sweden enjoyed eminence as a Baltic naval power and her possessions

included several Baltic islands and territories extending as far west as Bremen and as far east as Karelia (vicinity modern day St. Petersburg). Along the southern Baltic littoral, Sweden controlled the mouths of the Neva, Dvina, Oder, Elbe and Weser rivers.¹²

Commensurate with Sweden's conquests were a host of real and potential enemies. Norway to the west remained unconquered and continental powers such as Denmark, Prussia and Poland viewed Sweden with suspicion.¹³ To an aspiring Muscovy seeking unhindered intercourse with the West, Sweden stood as a natural obstacle and enemy.¹⁴

Peter I's Muscovy was an enigma, a vast landlocked entity centered on the capital of Moscow, a city projecting a character neither European nor Asian; at the turn of the eighteenth century, Muscovy existed at the periphery of Western Civilization.¹⁵ Russia, a term not synonymous with Muscovy, did not at the time of Peter's birth impart the geopolitical meaning accepted today. Greater Russia, the territorial expanse extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea and from the Polish frontier to Siberia, represents Peter's greatest legacy, a Tsardom at the time of his death equal as a land and sea power to any mustered by Europe or Asia. "Russia" supplanting "Muscovy" as an appellation connoting the empire of the Tsar is a singular manifestation of Peter's grand vision and reforms.

Muscovy's fortunes ebbed and flowed with the march of history. Muscovite culture, measured in trade, education, war,

and industry, approximated that of western Europe from the tenth through the twelfth century but for the next several hundred years Muscovy found itself ravaged by Mongol-Tartar incursions. The resulting subjugation to the Mongol-Tatar khans stifled cultural advancement; the Tsars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries discerned their realms decidedly inferior to the West. Under the stagnating yoke of the khans, Muscovy was oblivious to the intellectual achievements of western Europe's Renaissance and Reformation.¹⁶

Most debilitating to Muscovy was a petrifying culture of conservatism, xenophobia and lethargy, intensely encouraged by the arch conservative Muscovite church that viewed the demise of the Byzantines at the hands of the Turks as fitting retribution for Greek heresy.¹⁷ Conventional wisdom held that the salvation of Muscovy relied upon the Tsar's success in protecting his subjects from Western decadence.¹⁸

Ivan the Great, 1462-1505, was the first Tsar to engage foreigners for technical assistance. His successors followed his example and continued to invite Western influence, but on an inconsequential scale. It would remain for the seventeenth-century Tsars to openly court the West. For Peter I, Russian reform following the western European model was his life's ambition.¹⁹ To this end he applied himself with a vengeance.

The eighteenth century ushered in with Sweden and Russia converging on a collision course. As a major power, Sweden offered to factor prominently in the myriad variations of

Europe's balance-of-power alignments. The King of Sweden was both courted and feared. Swedish-Polish antagonism encouraged the Poles to cast a reluctant eye toward the East, inviting Muscovite intervention as a counterweight to Swedish threats. As a landlocked domain, Muscovy cast a covetous eye toward the Baltic, a virtual Swedish lake. Only militating against an inevitable clash between the two rivals were Sweden's prostrated treasury and Muscovy's ever-present fear of conflict with the Ottoman-Porte.²⁰

Charles XII

Charles XII's youthful character and upbringing portended nothing out of the ordinary for the man earning the sobriquet "Lion of the North."²¹ A rigorous physical regimen compensated for poor childhood health. Physical stamina notwithstanding, young Charles evidenced no proclivities toward martial endeavors. Upon his accession to the throne at the age of fifteen years, Charles not unlike others of his age or maturity--or lack thereof--shocked his countrymen with abject displays of irresponsibility. Ministers from the pulpit bewailed: "Woe to thee, O Land, when thy King is a child."²²

A singularly disgraceful bout of drunken debauchery suddenly sobered the young king and thereafter Charles embraced the austere--if not severe--habits of comfort, dress, drink, and diet for which he was famous.²³ As a young man Charles was keenly self-conscious of what he feared was his own lack of masculinity. To compensate for his self-perceived boyish physique, he adopted

rough dress and deliberately exposed himself to the elements. A wind-burned face in his mind served to detract from his lacking a manly beard.²⁴ In an age when fashionable effeminate dress for men included high-heeled boots, powdered and curled shoulder-length wigs, ostentatious attire adorned with lace and frills, the King of Sweden eschewed all of these. His coat was that of a mere private of infantry, his soldier boots low-heeled.²⁵ No efforts did the King of Sweden make to conceal his balding head.²⁶ Significantly, perhaps because it was an affectation, his one distinctive trademark was a sword of extraordinary length.²⁷

Charles never married and his single affair with a married woman predated his profound change in temperament and lifestyle. Marriage would only follow completion of his more pressing matters of state.²⁸ An example of the extraordinary behavior of an extraordinary monarch is the King of Sweden exiting out of a rear window to escape the relentless overbearing overtures of a particular aspiring damsel.²⁹ Only Charles' mother and sister asserted a feminine influence on his life.³⁰

Charles' single obsession in life was eliminating the threat to Europe posed by the emerging Russian menace. His means of achieving that rested with his beloved army.³¹ It is highly probable that in this Swedish king's mind, his kingdom was, indeed, of secondary importance. His true love was the campaign, the vehicle allowing him to eat, sleep, and breathe his army. Led by its warrior king, the Swedish army campaigned overseas

continuously from the Danish War in 1700 until its destruction at Poltava (Ukraine) in 1709.

Evidence of Charles' life suggests he disdained his own court; after departing Stockholm at the age of eighteen to embark upon the Danish War, he never returned.³² His preferred realm was that of army command and it was the military art to which he relentlessly applied himself. A monarch personally commanding an army in combat is not an unheard of phenomenon--King George II of England would personally lead his troops at Dettingen as late as 1743--but few sovereigns come close to matching the indomitable Charles, a sovereign ranking among the most combative of soldier-kings.³³

Charles spared himself and his army no suffering or peril. He prided himself to the extent his very name struck terror into his opponents. His self-confidence knew no bounds. Countless actions justified this unmitigated arrogance for Charles' presence on the field typically determined the outcome of a particular combat.³⁴ In the military profession, few officers do not secretly delude themselves with the grand notion that they project this aura, that only their own genius coupled with their own inspiring physical presence extends the decisive element of success to a tactical or operational endeavor. Among history's famous captains, Charles XII, perhaps as no other, can justifiably lay claim to this assertion.

Charles assumed command at eighteen years of age at Narva, Ingria (Estonia), and until his death eighteen years later in a

forward trench before the Norwegian fortress of Fredrikshald, committed himself to war with unrivaled physical courage and energy. His decisive defeat at Poltava stands as testimony to the degree his physical presence proved indispensable to Swedish success. During this action, a Pyrrhic Muscovite victory witnessing the destruction of the Swedish army, Charles was a litter-borne invalid and not in possession of his physical and mental faculties.³⁵ This battle, among countless, represents his only absolute defeat.

Certainly not a paragon of virtue--the extent to which Charles foibles contributed to his misfortunes receives further analysis below, suffice it here to say that as a man of his time, Charles, the autocrat, conducted his affairs in a manner befitting his station in life. He brooked no dissent, sought no counsel, and was intractable to the extreme. In the end he was his own greatest enemy. The irrational path he relentlessly pursued found inspiration by some intangible or ethereal force, not the vision envisaged by FM 22-103, but one nurtured only by a man, similar to his principal antagonist, capable of altering the currents of history.

Peter I

Whereas Charles XII ranks as a great man of his age, Peter I, Emperor of all Russia, stands as one of history's giants, a man of irrefutable vision and genius. Charles' relative obscurity contrasts with Peter's renown, the latter having carved out his legacy not only in the art of war, but in science,

commerce, industry, exploration and letters. Peter I, through his great reforms, launched his countrymen in the direction of attaining great power status. This he accomplished in the face of constant adversity and obstinate resistance and solely by virtue of his own energy and untiring resolve.³⁶

Peter's accession as the Tsar of Muscovy occurred during a period when the introspective and conservative boyars, Russian aristocrats, enjoyed unrivaled influence and autonomy.³⁷ During a succession of weak personalities, the institution of the Great Tsar of Muscovy steadily deteriorated to the extent where the Tsar, although still revered, represented a mere protector of the status quo, indeed, encouraged by the Orthodox Church of Muscovy, the prevailing Muscovite view of their realm with respect to the outside world was one of suspicion and hostility. Intense xenophobia reigned rampant. The institutions of the Church and Tsar shared the high duty of preserving the "pristine quality of Muscovite life."³⁸ Peter the Great was to rip that mindset asunder.

Peter's birth ushered him into a world of intrigue. His father's death resulted in Peter's older sickly brother, Feodor, gaining the throne, a tenuous reign ending with his death six years later. Following the procedures of the day, the Muscovite boyars meeting with the Patriarch of the Muscovite Church and the Church Council convened the Assembly of the Land to decide the succession. The assembly declared for Peter to share the throne with his older and frail brother, Ivan. This declaration implied

a regency favoring their mother, the Tsaritsa Natalya Naryshkina.³⁹

Several years passed before Peter firmly secured his succession, and only after a spate of palace revolts imbued the young impressionable Peter with a lifelong neurosis. These bloody uprisings, ramrodded by the Muscovite praetorian guard, the Streltsi, and prosecuted with typical Muscovite depravity, in all probability laid the seeds for the cruelty later visited upon others by Peter's own hands.⁴⁰

Throughout the course of his life, Peter, a physical giant towering six feet and eight inches, remained vulnerable to mood extremes. These ran the gamut from displays of absolute composure and compassion to spontaneous bouts of unbridled rage and vindictive cruelty. Unquestionable courage in the face of danger gave way at other times to abject cowardice. The same man throwing himself without equivocation into icy waters to save a lowly boat crew cowered like a craven recreant on the River Pruth.⁴¹ In a fit of retribution directed against his own son and heir, Peter sanctioned the brutal whipping that killed the Tsarevich Alexi.⁴² The fate suffered by the Streltsi shortly after his accession as Tsar owed certainly to their unabashed treachery and arrogance, but most likely also to the terror they evoked in Peter as a young boy of ten years.

The Moscow Revolt of 1682 presented the young Peter with multiple traumas: the terrifying prospect of imminent death, the murder of his uncle, Ivan Naryshkina, and the humiliation of his

mother, Natalya. These experiences left Peter with a hatred for Moscow that most likely fired his penchant for rejecting things Muscovite and relishing things foreign. Ascribed also to the trauma of the Moscow Revolt were the uncontrollable face twitches and violent rages that were to plague Peter and those around him for the remainder of his days. The Muscovite establishment represented fear and danger; he would forever spiritually distance himself from its capital.⁴³

During his childhood, Peter glorified things military and as a prospective heir to the throne, his pampered existence allowed him the luxury of "play" regiments, units that later rendered him great service as his own elite guards.⁴⁴ He grew up pious, thoroughly Orthodox Christian, but Peter never embraced the church or his faith with the same degree of strength and conviction as did his progenitors.⁴⁵ A singular passion revolved around ships and the nautical art; from this sprouted an insatiable interest in science and the products of scientific advancement.⁴⁶

These interests grew into obsessions that fueled a quest for foreign travel and domestic reform. The sum of these spawned a passion for innovation and the exotic. Peter's ultimate goal was for Russia to gain equal stature with the great powers of the West. Following this path required Russia to expand territorially, fully embrace the concept of empire and unequivocally accept his cultural and institutional reforms. Such radical notions placed this Tsar at odds with his own realm

for such thinking was antithetical to Russian conventional wisdom.⁴⁷

Peter's ambition to build a navy aggravated relations with Russia's neighbors, particularly those rivals to the north and south, Sweden and the Ottoman-Porte. Access to the open water that would expand Russian intercourse with Europe and other reaches demanded military conquest. Marching in step with Russian history, Peter's fortunes in this regard ebbed and flowed. He courted disaster on numerous occasions, each time fortuitously extricating himself. It was during Peter's reign that Russia was to first rigorously exercise its inherent strengths, those that further evolved to represent the hallmark traits of Russian salvation: resiliency, endless space, depth, fatalistic courage, perseverance and survival.

Peter's supreme task embodied his country's present-day challenge: how does one awaken and align the geopolitical expanse today referred to as Russia with the political-economic realities of the contemporary world; how does one extend to all Russians the advantages accruing from undisputed membership in the community of developed nations; and how does a leader promote progress commensurate with that of the world's advanced nations? Given the daunting challenge of wresting his reluctant countrymen away from their lethargic conservatism, evasive as that goal appears today, Peter's objective was most likely far more difficult.⁴⁸

The jury remains out with regard to the inclinations of

Peter's present-day successors to effect radical but necessary change. Forged by his unrelenting resolve and energy, it was Peter's singular success in overcoming the natural Russian proclivity toward "disinclination" that cements substance to his claim for greatness.

The Great Northern War, 1700-1721

The Great Northern War was the second significant conflict involving the peripheral Baltic powers. During the first of these, The Northern War, 1655-1660, Charles' grandfather, Charles X, attempting to expand Swedish influence southward, found himself thwarted by a coalition comprising Poles, Danes and Norwegians.⁴⁹ At the time of Charles' accession, a similar coalition, seeking to take advantage of a young Swedish king and now significantly bolstered by Muscovy, threatened Sweden's possessions along the Baltic littoral.⁵⁰

Against all counsel proffered by his advisors, young Charles, demonstrating for the first time his formidable military skill, turned against and defeated in succession each of his antagonists. The Swedish route of the Muscovites before Narva in November 1700 culminated the first of many spectacular campaigns. Having dispensed with Denmark and having firmly established himself on the Continent, Charles now turned to press his advantage toward Poland.⁵¹

Charles sought to dethrone the Polish king, Augustus II, and after four years of vigorous campaigning, succeeded in installing upon the Polish throne his ally, Stanislas. Peter, taking

advantage of Charles' preoccupation with Augustus, reasserted himself against the Baltic states. In 1704, the same year Charles deposed Augustus, Peter ravaged the region and recaptured Narva.⁵²

After consolidating Swedish success in Poland, Charles again attacked the Muscovite threat to his north and in 1706, drove Peter from Lithuania. Augustus, exploiting Charles' absence from Poland, unsuccessfully reasserted his claim to the Polish throne. Rebounding south into Saxony, Charles seized Leipzig while extracting from Augustus both a recognition of Stanislas and a repudiation of the Polish-Muscovite Alliance. Peter sued for peace; Charles, incensed over the excesses perpetrated during Peter's Baltic campaign, declined.⁵³ This rejection proved auspicious for Peter.

At the zenith of his success and having secured the Polish throne, Charles vented his anger against the Austrian-Hapsburg Empire, seeking restitution for the Empire's persecution of Silesian Protestants.⁵⁴ Acknowledging Charles' military prowess, and fearing a French-Swedish alliance, the Empire readily acceded, freeing Charles at last to devote his full attentions to the arch rival of the East. Similar to Peter's spurned peace offering, this represented a moment of great decision for Europe. Charles, having declined the overtures of the Western powers to entwine Sweden in the intrigues of the Spanish Succession, fatefully turned to the East. Instead he would prosecute his obsession, eliminating the Muscovite threat.⁵⁵

On the first day of January 1708, Charles led a Swedish invasion army east across the frozen Vistula River. This signified the first of the great invasions of Russia by the West. Advancing as far as the Dnieper River by the following autumn, the Swedes began to suffer the effects produced by Russian scorched earth tactics. Cognizant of his precarious logistics, Charles summoned reinforcement from his rear while shifting south into the Ukraine to revitalize his suffering army and effect a linkup with the Cossack, Ivan Mazepa, then contemplating revolt against Peter. The Russian Tsar, anticipating treachery, drove the Cossack force from the Ukraine, shattering Mazepa's remnants against Charles' equally bedraggled army. Concurrent with these Swedish misfortunes, the Russians successfully interdicted Charles' relief column.⁵⁶

Vastly reduced in strength and suffering from possibly the coldest winter in European history,⁵⁷ Charles--as would the mighty Grande Armée and the Wehrmacht in later days--relentlessly continued his advance against Peter. Despite considerably outnumbering his Swedish adversary, Peter steadily withdrew toward the east as the Swedes, pausing to reduce the Russian fortifications at Poltava, granted him a respite.⁵⁸

While personally reconnoitering the Poltava fortifications, the impetuous Swedish king sustained a gunshot wound.⁵⁹ Rendered a weakened and litter-borne invalid, Charles was thus incapable of leading his army.⁶⁰ On 28 June 1709, disaster fell upon the Swedes. Uncharacteristic Swedish confusion presented Peter with

a fortuitous and decisive victory, the Swedish army meeting destruction and the invalid Charles fleeing to Turkish Moldavia.⁶¹ Unrestrained by his arch nemesis, Peter now applied himself vigorously to secure his grand strategic designs. While the King of Sweden festered in Turkish semi-captivity, the Tsar of Muscovy, proudly projecting his newly-found sea power, encroached upon the Swedish navy in the Baltic.⁶² Concurrently, his battle-hardened and victorious army reinstated Augustus as Peter's puppet Polish ruler.⁶³

For the next five years Charles remained a virtual Turkish captive. Never relinquishing hopes for destroying Peter, he nearly enticed the Turks to administer the *coup de grace* when the Tsar and his army found themselves hopelessly surrounded at the Pruth River.⁶⁴ Fortuitously again for Peter--and no doubt for his grand visions for reform and empire--Turkish vacillation spared the Muscovites from certain annihilation. Peter extricated himself with generous terms.⁶⁵

Acknowledging failure in late 1714, Charles, accompanied by a single servant, covertly traversed a hostile Europe to return to Sweden.⁶⁶ Seeking to revitalize a moribund Sweden--very much a result of his endless and futile campaigning, he succeeded in a series of primarily defensive actions to ameliorate his country's strategic decline. Charles' death in a forward trench during the Swedish siege of Fredrikshald, December 1718, created the conditions facilitating an end to the Great Northern War. Shot in the head at close range, Charles' demise allowed his less

intractable successors to reach the accords--the treaties of Stockholm (1719-1721) and Nystad (1721)--finally terminating the protracted conflict.⁶⁷

Peter's full-fledged navy, his crowning product of reform, ushered in Muscovy as the dominant Baltic power supplanting Sweden.⁶⁸ Muscovite Baltic possessions were now secure as was Peter's precious St. Petersburg. The war forever removed Sweden as a great power and firmly established the Tsar of Muscovy as a force to be reckoned with. Once scorned by the West, the Tsar now commanded respect, if not fear. Conditions were ripe for the Great Tsar to consolidate his vision for greater Russian Empire. Charles' memory lapsed into obscurity.

STRATEGIC LEADERS?

The conceptual framework for strategic leadership--that espoused by the U.S. Army's Draft Field Manual 22-103--ventures within the sphere of the abstruse. Its essence is difficult to articulate; the topic is entirely subjective given the difficulty in assessing a strategic leader's success or failure. As Charles XII and Peter I illustrate, history is replete with examples of great men unable to withstand strict scrutiny in accordance with FM 22-103 criteria. As outlined by current doctrinal discourse, the dimensions of the strategic art--environment, vision, culture, etc.--represent either mere tautologies or profound insights. Neither of the monarchs faced the imperative to follow a precise model of leadership; both rulers, however, would have found the U.S. Army's model extremely useful, perhaps to a

decisive degree. An assessment of select pertinent components follows.

Environment

Charles and Peter each understood, appreciated and manipulated their environments to strategic advantage. They fixated upon what they perceived as mortal threats, contrived and secured alliances and exploited technologies. Peter especially exploited the latter, his single-minded program for naval construction and training testifies to his success in bestowing upon his landlocked realm the means to achieve its long-sought strategic goals. Charles, confronted by the challenges of campaigning in the hostile wilderness of Central Europe, sustained his operations through skillful and innovative applications of siegecraft and engineering.

Culture

In FM 22-103 context, culture in the strategic sense derives from an amalgamation of individual, leader, organization and societal values.⁶⁹ Had the King of Sweden and the Tsar of Muscovy stayed within the bounds of the cultural norms prevalent during their day, both would have found themselves consigned to the dustheap of mediocrity. Yet the extent to which both men departed from those norms illustrates how strategic culture conspires to constrain or facilitate the strategic dynamic.

For both Charles and Peter, the execution of the royal charter--the predominating force influencing prevailing institutional culture--required preserving the status quo. This

entailed Peter remaining hidebound to Muscovite conservatism while Charles dabbled in the petty maneuverings endemic to the balance-of-power regime. Both rulers would have likely preserved themselves and their dominions, but one can only speculate as to the effect upon the European polity. Muscovy would most likely remain mired in its lethargy while Sweden would have preserved its major power status. It was a zero-sum undertaking with Peter emerging victorious at Charles' expense, but had our subjects not flouted the warnings of their closest advisors and not pursued their grand objectives that clearly marched out of step with conventional wisdom, then neither of their reigns would have been of consequence.

Competencies

Throughout the Great Northern War, the fortunes of the two rulers ebbed and flowed in reciprocal motion. The error of one often magnified the success of the other. In conceptual terms, both took reckless gambles that ignored second and third order effects; Charles irresponsibly overextended his army before Poltava, Peter during the Pruth River campaign.

In developing frames of reference, Charles remained rigid and intractable. His strategic reference point revolved around his own supreme self-confidence from which nothing could shake him, certainly not the logic of logistics, adverse weather, or a superior enemy. Here Peter was the superior; his tactical, operational and strategic assessments changed with the dynamics of his environment. Peter never deluded himself with visions of

grandeur. He clearly understood his weaknesses and then vigorously asserted himself to compensate for them. Peter cultivated strength from resiliency; a battlefield defeat represented a hard lesson learned in the school of war.

From their privileged perch as absolute monarchs, Charles and Peter paid little heed to cultivating the technical competencies deemed essential today. Both would have been well advised to do so. As was the regal practice of their time, neither man devoted much thought to the impact their relentless warmaking had on the political-social fabric of their respective domains. Charles' obsession to vanquish Peter bled his countrymen white; Peter, the great reformer, exacted progress at the cost of appalling suffering and loss of life.⁷⁰ It was the tyranny of the age that kept the welfare of the citizenry hostage to the whims of the absolute ruler.

The royal subjects are found most wanting when assessed on the strengths of their interpersonal competencies. To their great loss, their disdain for consensus consistently undermined their best efforts. Admittedly, the greater error falls upon the King of Sweden. Had he heeded those surrounding him, he might not have: squandered years in Poland at the expense of his Baltic territories; failed to first concentrate his army before plunging into the depths of Russia; and finally, relied upon Mazepa the Cossack before securing an alliance in tangible form. Peter, owing his legacy of greatness to his penchant for spurning advice, nevertheless nearly squandered his grand scheme for

empire on the banks of the Pruth, against all good counsel.

Vision

U.S. Army doctrine defines strategic vision as a creative and collaborative process. Having postulated a vision, it remains for a strategic leader to skillfully meld the objectives of his vision with the operational concepts and material resources necessary to attain it. These three variables collectively represent the capacity of a vision to achieve fruition. A vision exceeding its capacity or extending beyond its "cone of plausibility" is no vision.⁷¹

The visions of Charles XII of Sweden and Czar Peter I of Muscovy transcended this constrained view. Both rulers, drawing upon the inherent and absolute strengths of their privileged positions, marshaled all available resources to pursue their personal obsessions. Both found themselves confronted by circumstances offering rational arguments for retrenchment. Both ignored their counsel and followed their overarching intuition.

Charles' critics challenge his claim as a great captain, emphasizing that his reign coincided with the fall of Sweden as a great power.⁷² Although a valid observation, this falls short in recognizing that Charles' relentless campaigning against Peter suggests a profound prescience, an anticipation that the emerging force in the East represented a threat above and beyond that of a regional power struggle.

The Duke of Marlborough, wooing Charles shortly after the Treaty of Altranstadt on behalf of the English-Dutch-Austrian

Alliance, observed that Charles' "eyes always flashed" at the evoking of the Tsar's name.⁷³ So driven, Charles spurned the western allies and relentlessly pursued Peter. Defeated at Poltava, Charles sought refuge with the Turks and then spent five years inciting them to attack his arch enemy. Was this an irrational sovereign turning his back on Sweden in pursuit of a frivolous cause; or was this a man driven by a greater calling and fearful lest a precious opportunity forever pass? It is relevant here not to forget the swordsman, under assault after having spurned numerous Turkish entreaties to peacefully return to Sweden. Constant pleas to give up his crusade against Peter I fell upon his deaf sovereign ears.⁷⁴ It appears entirely congruent to this writer that Charles, an extraordinary man, would harbor an extraordinary vision.

In contrast, history confers Peter with unquestioned acclaim.⁷⁵ The unparalleled reforms enacted during the Great Tsar's lifetime stand as testimony to his perseverance, stamina and genius. The impetus for reform derived from his own ambition and initiative--his vision! When personally involved in a particular reform initiative, progress inevitably ensued; without his personal involvement, stagnation remained the order of the day. It was the extent to which Russian reform owed solely to Peter's own designs that secured his place in history, unequalled by any Tsar before or after his reign, unequalled by few other of history's great men. Like Charles XII, Peter's vision defies definition; it too projects an ethereal quality, one that extends

beyond the bounds of any theoretical construct. Unlike Charles, Peter's sobriquet as "The Great" testifies to his success.

SUMMARY

Hollywood melodrama flies in the face of the USAWC's image of a strategic leader; it is clearly "outside of the box." Similarly, both protagonists, King Charles XII of Sweden and Peter the Great, were absolute monarchs flouting orthodoxy. Both men evoke images of Hollywood actors: Charles' famous sword fight conjures up visions of Errol Flynn; Peter's rescue of the floundering boat suggests a theme appropriate to a John Wayne movie. In each instance, their aberrant royal behavior serves admirably to illustrate the unique qualities making them extraordinary men, men perhaps not worthy of emulation, but certainly men of unusual vision and most worthy of study. In hindsight, FM 22-103 offers to benefit both.

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3. Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 67.
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6. Ibid., 143; Robert Nisbet, Charles XII and the Collapse of the Swedish Empire (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), 8, 12.
7. Lt. Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, Marlborough and the War of the Spanish Succession (Ottawa: Directorate of Military Training, Army Headquarters, Queen's Printer, 1955), 155.
8. Nisbet, Charles XII, 10.
9. Grey, Peter the Great, 24-31.
10. Geoffrey Parker, The Thirty Years' War (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 124; John L. Stevens, History of Gustavus Adolphus (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1884), 178.
11. Nisbet, Charles XII, 5.
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13. Grey, Peter the Great, 156.
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- 21.Hatton, Charles XII, 47-51.
- 22.Grey, Peter the Great, 173.
- 23.Frans Gunnar Bengtsson, Charles XII, King of Sweden, 1682-1718 (London: Macmillan, 1960), 45.
- 24.Ibid., 65.
- 25.Ibid.; Hatton, Charles XII, 171.
- 26.Hatten, Charles XII, 204, 205, 461, illustrations, facing pages.
- 27.Bengtsson, Charles XII, 65.
- 28.Hatton, Charles XII, 90, 92.
- 29.Bengtsson, Charles XII, 170.
- 30.Nisbet, Charles XII, 49.
- 31.Hatton, Charles XII, 209.
- 32.Carl Gustafson Klingspor, Charles XII, King of Sweden, trans. John A Gade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 74.
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- 34.Nisbet, Charles XII, 105.
- 35.Klingspor, Charles XII, 252; Massey, Peter the Great, 491.
- 36.Grey, Peter the Great, 382-418.
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- 40.Massie, Peter the Great, 45-6; Alex DeJonge, Fire & Water, A Life of Peter the Great (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), 213.

41. Voltaire, Lion of the North, 164.
42. DeJonge, Fire & Water, 213.
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45. Grey, Peter the Great, 72-3.
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48. DeJonge, Fire & Water, 14.
49. Nisbet, Charles XII, 7-8.
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51. Nisbet, Charles XII, 98.
52. Voltaire, Lion of the North, 91.
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57. Hatton, Charles XII, 279; Klingspor, Charles XII, 246.
58. Voltaire, Lion of the North, 124-5.
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