

Correspondence

David Schoenbaum
John J. Mearsheimer

Clausewitz and the British Generals

To the Editors:

"Although the British case provides no solutions for the problems America faces," John Mearsheimer concludes in his cogent review of Brian Bond,¹ "much can be learned by examining the policies Britain pursued as she sought to solve her strategic dilemma."

At least in the abstract, the proposition is hard to quarrel with. It may be true, as Richard Neustadt says, that "There is little historical memory in the American government; there is no reason to expect Americans to look for it in any other government."² But there is a lot of history out there nonetheless. Willfully, arbitrarily, selectively, or manipulatively as the case may be, some of it inevitably gets recalled by somebody, including somebody in power.

Mearsheimer's argument—that Britain in the 1930s was done in by the irreparable disjunction between its policy, strategy, and economic capacity, rather than by Colonel Blimp—is credible, useful, and a salutary step beyond Bond's. But neither its premises nor its implications are exactly simple or self-evident.

The British Army was, of course, woefully unprepared for World War II, as many other armies were unprepared for the wars that confronted them, and the British Army itself had so often been unprepared in the past. Force structure, the relative weight and budget of the respective services, the constitution of the services themselves were all real problems.

Money was a problem too, though it is rather less clear why the cost of adequate defense for Britain should necessarily have exceeded the cost to Germany and France, countries of roughly comparable size, resources, and industrial capacity, similarly devastated by the war of 1914–18, and engulfed by the same worldwide depression; or to Japan, which in 1939 produced only a little more than 40 percent as much steel as the United Kingdom.

David Schoenbaum is professor of history at the University of Iowa.

-
1. "The British Generals Talk," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1981), pp. 165–184.
 2. "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1981), p. 13

Granted that Britain might theoretically have assumed sole responsibility for deterring, or containing, Germany in the years after World War I, and especially after 1933. Granted also that the economic burdens and political strains involved in this would have exceeded any imaginable British capacity.

But the real choices were of a rather different order, just as they had been in the quarter-century struggle with revolutionary France and Napoleon, and were to be again in World War I. Unlike revolutionary France or Nazi Germany, Britain had no stake or interest in asserting a European hegemony. Like America since 1945, its interest lay only in preventing one. What this involved was alliance politics, in which diplomatic commitments and force structure, like war itself, were the continuation of policy by other means. Not even in the Palmerstonian high summer of British power was there any suggestion that Britain could, or should, go it alone in continental affairs.

Where the continental commitment lapsed, as it periodically did, the explanation would seem to lie as much in political as in economic or military factors. In the post-Napoleonic period, for example, Britain backed away from the continental commitment because Castlereagh was unable to persuade parliament of Britain's stake, as we might say these days, in squashing national liberation movements.³

The debacle of the 1930s is another story. As Mearsheimer suggests, the impact of World War I on its survivors is a vast cautionary tale, but almost incidentally for what it might have taught Blimp or Liddell Hart, or De Gaulle, Guderian, Patton, or Tukhachevsky, about the possibilities of armored warfare.

Everybody learned from World War I, but within very large and different categories of national experience. The French, in their way, learned to be defensive. The Germans learned to forsake the intolerable stresses and hazards of two and more front wars for the calculated risks of continental *blitzkrieg* commensurate—but only just—with their own precarious economic circumstances. Britain learned to avoid continental commitments. America learned to avoid any commitments at all.

In a kind of unconscious parody of Clausewitz, whom only a few contemporaries seem actually to have read and virtually no one understood, force

3. Cf. Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Kissinger's first book is still fascinating, and not only for what it reveals about the author. The conventional wisdom that Metternich is the hero is interesting too, but rather for what it says about the book's readers—and non-readers—than what it says about Kissinger.

structure reflected political purpose. But this varied too. Germany, resolved in its way to avoid a repetition of 1914–18, invested in cheap aggression. France and Britain, resolved in their way to avoid a repetition of 1914–18, invested in limited liability and their respective *status quo*. If deterrence failed and worse in 1939–40, the failure was rather of policy than of Blimpishness. As Mearsheimer acknowledges, Britain had prepared quite literally for the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Liddell Hart would seem at least as reflective of the British problem as any conceivable budgetary dilemma. A “progressive thinker” in “the realm of pure strategy,” as Mearsheimer writes, Liddell Hart seems also to have been a major obstacle to the continental commitment on which his strategy actually depended. The argument is richly suggestive. But what it seems to suggest is that in the real world, where even global powers like Britain in the 1930s have to choose among limited resources, “pure strategy,” like Clausewitz’s “absolute war,” is a seductive and dangerous abstraction.

Like any other lessons of history, those cosmic guideposts so often invoked in “Pogo”-style steamboat gothic, the implications of this for contemporary American policymakers are inevitably speculative. There may, in fact, be less to the argument than meets the eye. Whatever else it may be, the Soviet Union is not Nazi Germany. Unlike the Britain of the 1930s, America is not a colonial power, nor, we hope, in irreversible economic decline. Despite increased dependence on imported oil and strategic minerals, America can manage without imported food and resources as Britain could not. Perhaps ironically, it is the dependence of major allies that constitutes a large part of today’s strategic challenge. But it hardly follows that the solution lies only in some latter-day equivalent of Gunga Din and the Thin Red Line. If America now, like Britain then, has a stake in Middle Eastern stability, it also enjoys some non-military options unknown to British governments in the 1930s—a political solution of the Palestinian problem, for instance, or a genuinely conservative national energy policy. As Mearsheimer rightly implies, the differences between the strategic environment of the 1930s and 1980s might be so great that the lessons of history are only a distraction.

If the historical game is nonetheless to be played, there are two areas where it might be useful. The first, as applicable to the American situation as it was to the British, has to do with allies. Anybody who meets the military and the wider defense establishment with any regularity can confirm a tendency to misunderstand and underestimate the interests and contributions of America’s allies, as well as a corresponding tendency to overestimate the

capacity and solidarity of Soviet clients and satellites. But even at the very peak of its post-war power, America acknowledged the role of its European allies in creating and maintaining NATO. As with Britain before it, there was never any suggestion or likelihood that America could, or should, go it alone. Weapons systems, force structure, and whatever else may currently divide Blimps from “progressive thinkers” are unquestionably important. But if historical experience is any guide, the integrity of the alliance is likely to remain at least as important to American security.

The second area is the connection between force structure and political purpose. Without quite acknowledging it, Mearsheimer confirms not only what the British got wrong but, ironically, what they also got right. The problem of the British Army in the 1930s was not so much that British governments failed to build forces appropriate to their view of the world, than that their view was wildly askew.

Like the “pure” strategists of the interwar period, relentlessly debating the relative merits of tanks vs. horses, carriers vs. battleships or bombers vs. air defense, today’s strategic debaters tend to a rather different error. Attrition vs. maneuver, the draft vs. the volunteer force or tanks vs. precision-guided missiles can also be debated on their abstract merits. In fact, they generally are. But these are not really abstract issues. On the contrary, they presuppose and only make sense with respect to real adversaries in real places and circumstances. What is regrettably missing in far too much of the current debate is the fundamental question of force, and forces, as means, rather than as ends in themselves. A little more historical education might or might not improve the precision of current debate. But the question of what things are for, and whether they serve their purpose, could at least be asked a little more often in military, let alone civilian, quarters, and a bit more attention to Books I and VIII of Clausewitz would not hurt either.⁴

—David Schoenbaum
Iowa City, Iowa

4. A personal experience, representative of many others: in late summer of 1976, the intelligence officers at the Naval War College in Newport arranged an *ad hoc* briefing for the faculty concerning the new Soviet carrier *Kiev* whose debut appearance in the Mediterranean had just created a mild sensation. Dozens of color slides, including a few of the *Kiev*’s heroic fantail, presumably revealed the ship’s awesome capabilities. “But what is it good for?” an attending officer asked his colleagues innocently. The briefing ended with an awkward silence.

To the Editors:

The main point of contention between me and Professor Schoenbaum concerns our respective views as to the relevance of history for contemporary problems. He is not convinced that today's decision-makers can benefit from studying the British experience in the 1930s. I think that he greatly underestimates the value of history.

Certainly, there are limits to history's usefulness. Anyone looking for specific solutions to difficult problems is likely to be disappointed. History, however, can provide policymakers with a needed frame of reference which will enable them to understand better the dimensions of the problem facing them. Moreover, history can provide important clues as to what is the best solution to a given problem. The value of history is best demonstrated by briefly examining two of the principal lessons of the British case.

The first lesson is that an insular power with worldwide defense commitments must involve itself in European politics to insure that no state becomes master of that continent. In the mid-1930s, when Hitler's Germany was threatening to upset the European balance, Britain adopted a policy of "limited liability" toward Europe, and concentrated instead on building forces to defend her homeland and empire. It soon became clear, however, that defense of the homeland as well as of the empire was directly affected by events on the continent. More specifically, Britain could not tolerate German control of Europe. Thus, the British did an about-face and began preparing forces to fight on the continent.

In the United States in recent months, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the American commitment to NATO. There have been calls for a radical reduction in the size of American land forces in Europe. As the British case clearly demonstrates, American national interest is inextricably linked with an independent Western Europe. Aside from the disastrous economic losses that would result from Soviet hegemony on the continent, such an eventuality would present significant geopolitical problems. As Halford Mackinder noted, Europe occupies a pivotal position in the international system. For example, it would be nearly impossible for the United States to fight a war in the Middle East if the Soviets were the dominant force on the continent.

Given the balance of forces between the West Europeans and the Warsaw Pact, it is obvious that there is a need for a large American presence in Europe. Those who think that the West Europeans by themselves can deploy

armies that will deter the Soviets in a future crisis are falling into the same trap that ensnared those British policymakers in the inter-war years who thought that outnumbered France alone could deal with powerful Germany. The United States has no choice but to commit itself to the defense of Western Europe. In this regard, Schoenbaum's point that the United States should work more closely with her allies is well taken.

Having accepted a continental commitment, Britain's major problem was that she simply did not have the resources necessary to meet all of her commitments, a point that Schoenbaum does not fully appreciate. This leads to the second lesson from the British case, which is that military strength is largely dependent on economic strength. As argued in my original article, Britain's position as a world power was eroding quickly by the 1930s, mainly because of her rapidly declining industrial base. At the time, many critics argued that Britain simply did not have the "political will" necessary to operate in a Hobbesian world. Moreover, this explanation of British behavior predominated in the years after the war ended. Now that the British archives for that period have been opened, a clear-cut consensus is emerging that the ultimate failure of British policy in the 1930s had much less to do with political will and much more to do with the large gap between her resources and her commitments. What does this mean for the United States?

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the assertion that the United States has lost its political will is often heard. The implication is that the solution to America's problems is largely of a political nature. In other words, there is a desperate need for vigorous and forceful leaders who will not be afraid to deal with threats to U.S. interests. Although it is hard to disagree with the need for determined leadership, this line of argument misses the more important point, which is that America's future as a great power will be determined largely by economic and not political factors. The ability of the United States to meet its worldwide commitments in the 1980s will be more a function of the economy's capability to generate the necessary military power than of any infusion of political will at the upper levels of government.

Invariably, there are limits to how much can be spent on defense; therefore, difficult decisions will have to be made on how to allocate available defense monies. In this regard, there is a definite need for political leaders who are capable of making wise decisions. As Schoenbaum notes, it is imperative to match force structure with political purpose.

The argument that the health of the American economy should be the principal concern of defense specialists and strategists leads to my final point.

Despite this military rationale for a powerful economy, large-scale increases in military spending are often detrimental to a healthy economy. Consider Britain in the 1930s. She was deeply concerned about her balance of payments problem, which stemmed in large part from the fact that British exports were not very competitive. Thus, there was tremendous pressure to use scarce capital to refurbish the industrial plant so that British exports could compete in the world market. At the same time, there was the demand, which was certainly a legitimate one, to invest these resources in a military build-up. Most policymakers felt that investing too heavily in rearmament would undermine the British economy, which was wisely considered "the fourth arm of defense." It seems clear that the Reagan Administration is running up against the same dilemma. Recently, Wassily Leontief, the Nobel laureate in economics, warned that using scarce capital to support massive increases in defense spending "will starve the rest of the economy of the investment it desperately requires to remain competitive in the tightening worldwide market." Although there are important differences between the British economy of the 1930s and the U.S. economy of the 1980s, a close examination of the British case will help American policymakers better understand the problems they face.

—John Mearsheimer
Cambridge, Massachusetts