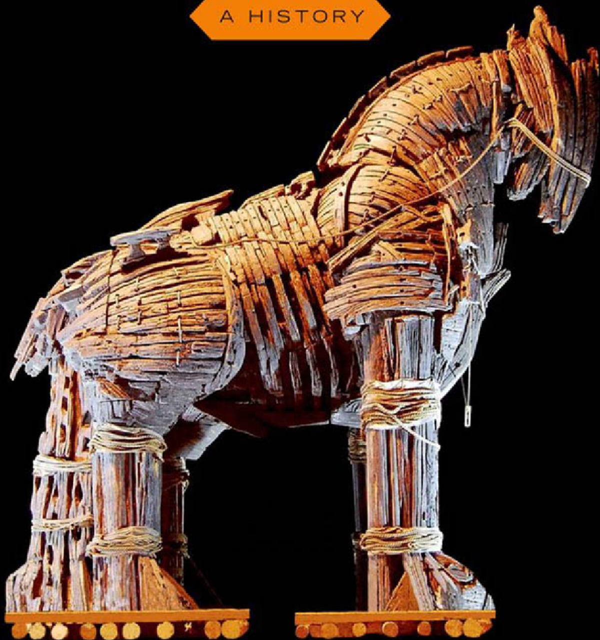
# Strategy

A HISTORY



Lawrence Freedman

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LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

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# PREFACE

*Everyone has a plan 'till they get punched in the mouth.*

—Mike Tyson

Everyone needs a strategy. Leaders of armies, major corporations, and political parties have long been expected to have strategies, but now no serious organization could imagine being without one. Despite the problems of finding ways through the uncertainty and confusion of human affairs, a strategic approach is still considered to be preferable to one that is merely tactical, let alone random. Having a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees. Without a strategy, facing up to any problem or striving for any objective would be considered negligent. Certainly no military campaign, company investment, or government initiative is likely to receiving backing unless there is a strategy to evaluate. If a decision can be described as strategically significant, then it is obviously more important than decisions of a more routine nature. By extension, people making such decisions are more important than those who only offer advice or are tasked with implementation.

Strategies are now offered not only for the life-or-death, make-or-break decisions of great states and large corporations but also for more mundane matters. There is a call for a strategy every time the path to a given destination is not straightforward or whenever judgments are required on resources

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needed, their effective application, and their appropriate sequence. In business, chief executives may take responsibility for overall strategy, but there are separate strategies for procurement, marketing, human resources, and so on. Doctors have clinical strategies, lawyers have prosecution strategies, and social workers have counseling strategies. Individuals have their own strategies—for developing a career, coping with bereavement, filling in tax returns, or even potty-training an infant or buying a car. In fact, there is now no human activity so lowly, banal, or intimate that it can reasonably be deprived of a strategy.

For those who want more effective strategies, there are plenty of books offering advice. The multiplicity of audiences shows in the variations of style. Some books rely on a jokey presentation, others on large print or inspirational stories from the successful and victorious. There are learned tomes with graphs and charts detailing many complicated factors to be taken into account. Somewhere between are checklists of activities that, if followed carefully, will at least increase the chances of achieving the right result. There are extended pep talks, encouraging bold thinking and decisive moves and a commitment to victory. These may be no more than collections of clichés, not always consistent, with hints on how to struggle with opponents and bring along prospective allies. Elsewhere there are more philosophical reflections on the paradoxes of conflict and the pitfalls of losing flexibility in the single-minded pursuit of a distant goal. There are even tips on how to be a fantasy strategist while staring at a screen, refighting ancient wars or dominating aliens in imagined universes with complicated rules and extraordinary weapons.

Can the same word apply to battle plans, political campaigning, and business deals—not to mention means of coping with the stresses of everyday life—without becoming meaningless? Columnist Matthew Parris has lamented the ubiquity of the word *strategy* and the ease with which it becomes attached to any desirable end. He commented on demands for a "growth strategy" in the face of a stagnant and indebted economy but wondered who would claim a "rain strategy" as an answer to drought. "Every sinner needs a virtue strategy. Every starveling needs a food strategy." "There exist few modern circumstances," he observed, "where the removal of the word 'strategy' from any passage containing it fails to clarify matters, usually demonstrating the argument's circularity."[1] Yet *strategy* remains the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and our capacities. It captures a process for which there are no obvious alternative words, although the meaning has become diluted through promiscuous and often inappropriate use. In this respect *strategy* is



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not much different from other related words, such as *power* and *politics*. While their exact meanings are explored, rarely to a conclusion, in scholarly texts, their adoption in everyday speech tends to be imprecise, loose, and lazy.

There is no agreed-upon definition of *strategy* that describes the field and limits its boundaries. One common contemporary definition describes it as being about maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means; about identifying objectives; and about the resources and methods available for meeting such objectives.[2] This balance requires not only finding out how to achieve desired ends but also adjusting ends so that realistic ways can be found to meet them by available means. This process can describe the simplest tasks, but when the ends are easily reached, when inanimate objects rather than other people are involved, and when very little is at stake, this barely counts as strategy. By and large, strategy comes into play where there is actual or potential conflict, when interests collide and forms of resolution are required. This is why a strategy is much more than a plan. A plan supposes a sequence of events that allows one to move with confidence from one state of affairs to another. Strategy is required when others might frustrate one's plans because they have different and possibly opposing interests and concerns. The conflicts can be quite mild, for example, between those within the same organization notionally pursuing the same goals but with distinctive responsibilities. As the quote from boxer Mike Tyson illustrates, a well-aimed blow can thwart the cleverest plan. The inherent unpredictability of human affairs, due to chance events as well as the efforts of opponents and the missteps of friends, provides strategy with its challenge and drama. Strategy is often expected to start with a description of a desired end state, but in practice there is rarely an orderly movement to goals set in advance. Instead, the process evolves through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated or hoped for, requiring a reappraisal and modification of the original strategy, including ultimate objectives. The picture of strategy that should emerge from this book is one that is fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point.

Strategy is also frequently presented as a duel, a clash of two opposing wills. This reflects the term's military origins and regular comparisons to a wrestling match. It can also be the result of the simple modeling of conflicts encouraged by game theory with the standard two-by-two matrix. Few situations involving strategy are so simple. A boxer in a ring with Mike Tyson might have few options, but his prospects would improve greatly if it was possible to break the rules and bring in a fellow fighter from outside the ring. As we shall see, combining with others often constitutes the most astute strategic move; for the same reason, preventing opponents from doing the same



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can be as valuable. A duel is also a bad metaphor because it suggests a fight to the finish with only one winner. Yet conflicts can be resolved through building on shared interests or forging a winning coalition with the next available partner. As both types of moves can require complex negotiations, it may be a challenge to convince natural supporters that the necessary concessions have been worthwhile or prudent. So the realm of strategy is one of bargaining and persuasion as well as threats and pressure, psychological as well as physical effects, and words as well as deeds. This is why strategy is the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.

For those who start as powerful, strategy should not be too difficult. The sensible application of superior resources tends to be successful. A famous biblical passage observes "that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong."[3] The American writer Damon Runyon added, "But that's the way to bet." Fighting against superior force may score high on nobility and heroism but normally low on discretion and effectiveness. This is why underdog strategies, in situations where the starting balance of power would predict defeat, provide the real tests of creativity. Such strategies often look to the possibility of success through the application of a superior intelligence, which takes advantage of the boring, ponderous, muscle-bound approach adopted by those who take their superior resources for granted. The exemplars of such an approach are Odysseus but not Achilles, Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart but not Clausewitz and Jomini. They would seek victory at a reasonable cost by means of deceits, ruses, feints, maneuvers, speed, and a quicker wit. There is an undoubted satisfaction by winning through wit rather than brute force. The problems come when opponents turn out to be not only better resourced but also as alert, brave, and clever.

*Strategy*'s etymology goes back to classical Greek. Through the Middle Ages and into the modern era, however, the relevant reference tended to be to the "art of war." The sort of issues that later came firmly under the heading of strategy—the value of alliances, the role of battle, the respective merits of force and guile—were firmly in view. The word *strategy* only began to be used in Britain, France, and Germany in the late eighteenth century, reflecting an Enlightenment optimism that war—like all other spheres of human affairs—could benefit from the application of reason. It also reflected the demands of contemporary warfare, with mass armies and long logistics chains. The employment of force now required careful preparation and theoretical guidance. Before, ends and means might be combined in the mind of the warrior leader, who would be responsible for both the formulation and execution of a strategy. Increasingly, these functions were separated. Governments



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set objectives they expected the generals to achieve. The generals acquired specialist staffs to devise campaign plans that others would implement.

Given the ease with which military metaphors are taken up in other spheres of activity, including the language of command, it is not surprising that political and business leaders adopted the idea of strategy. References to business strategy were rare before 1960. They started to take off during the 1970s and by 2000 became more frequent than references to military strategy.[4] It is through the literature on management and business that the use of the word has spread. As organizations' plans and policies, at least their most important and far-reaching ones, came to be described as "strategic," it was not too large a jump for individuals to use the term when considering how best to make professional choices. The social and philosophical movements of the 1960s encouraged the "personal" to become more "political," potentially introducing strategy into more basic relationships.

Corporations acquired planning staffs which set targets for others to follow. Politicians hired consultants who advised on how to win elections. And then those with experience in these tasks wrote and lectured on the principles of strategy, offering prescriptions that might bring success in potentially diverse settings. The rise of strategy has therefore gone hand in hand with bureaucratization of organizations, professionalization of functions, and growth of the social sciences. It reflected the hope that the specialist study of economics, sociology, politics, and psychology would make possible a more comprehensible and therefore more predictable world, so that all moves could be better informed and judged, tailored more effectively to the circumstances of the moment.

One response to the advance of the strategists was to challenge their presumptions of control and the centralized power structures they encouraged. Strategy has been presented as a conceit and an illusion, a pretense that the affairs of the multitudes can be manipulated from above by an elite. Instead of the deliberate decisions of a few, critics pointed to the countless moves of innumerable individuals, unable to see the big picture yet coping as well as they can in the circumstances, leading to outcomes that nobody had intended or even desired. This critique has encouraged demands for decentralized decision-making and empowered individuals. In turn, this encouraged strategy as a more personal response to the vicissitudes of everyday life.

This book describes the development of these different approaches, from rigorous centralized planning processes at one extreme to the sum of numerous individual decisions at the other. It shows how in these distinct military, political, and business spheres, there has been a degree of convergence around the idea that the best strategic practice may now consist in forming



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compelling accounts of how to turn a developing situation into a desirable outcome. The practice of thinking of strategy as a special sort of narrative came into vogue as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, and disillusion set in with the idea that large enterprises and even wars could be controlled by means of a central plan. Developments in cognitive psychology and contemporary philosophy came together to stress the importance of the constructs through which events are interpreted.

As a history, this book aims to provide an account of the development of the most prominent themes in strategic theory—as they affect war, politics, and business—without losing sight of the critics and dissidents. Readers might be surprised by some of the characters that appear, and by chapters that barely seem to mention strategy at all. This is because of the importance of the theories that set the terms for strategy. These establish the problems the strategists must address and the circumstances in which they operate, as well as their forms of political and social action. The result is that this book is not so much about planning for conflict or the application of practical intelligence to forms of uncertainty but rather about relationships between theory and practice, and indeed theories as a form of practice. Strategy provides a way into a whole range of discourses: abstract formulations of what it means to act rationally and postmodern musings on domination and resistance; propositions on causation and insights into the working of the human brain; and practical advice on how best to catch enemies in battle, undermine rivals in elections, and launch a new product into the market. Strategists have addressed the efficiency of various forms of coercion as well as inducements, human nature under stress, the organization of large groups of people on the move, negotiating techniques, visions of a good society, and standards of ethical conduct.

The approach I have adopted here does not follow any particular school of social science. In fact, I have sought to show how the ascent of certain schools can be explained by academic strategies. Toward the end I develop the idea of strategic scripts as a way of thinking about strategy as a story told in the future tense. I believe this follows from the lines of analysis developed during the course of the book, but I hope readers enjoy the history even if they do not accept the analysis. What fascinates me about strategy is that it is about choice and because these choices can be important the reasoning behind them is worthy of careful examination. It is about decisions that matter to those making them, dealing with personal advancement and group survival, but also views and values that are deeply held, businesses that affect the livelihoods of many, the opportunity to shape a nation's future course. To study strategy in this way is potentially subversive of those forms of social



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science which must control for the random and the disorderly, the anomalous and paradoxical, the exceptional and eccentric as awkward outliers. With strategy, these cases must be given special attention precisely because the actors have challenged expectations by either falling short or beating the odds. This might not make for great deductive theory, but it can allow the student to appreciate the thrill and drama of some of the most challenging forms of decision-making without worrying about mathematical proofs.

To keep the topic manageable I have focused largely on Western thinking about strategy, and for recent times, I have particularly examined American approaches. Because I wanted to link the main themes in the book with developments in broader political and social theory, greater geographical comprehensiveness would have been impossible. I fully understand that different cultures would yield different insights, but the United States has been not only the most powerful but also the most intellectually innovative country in recent times. In classical times Athens set the pace; in the late nineteenth century it was Germany. The advantage of staying within the bounds of Western culture is that it is possible to draw out the influences and the shared themes over time and across apparently different areas of activity. Selectivity has also been essential. I touch on the classic texts—the writers to whom regular reference is made—and those now forgotten (often deservedly so) who made an impact in their time. I have also sought to put trends and tendencies in strategic thinking in context. To keep the discussion grounded I have kept in mind Raymond Aron's observation about how strategic thought "draws its inspiration from each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose."[5] To make sense of the key theorists, and to provide a critical edge, it is important to consider the events to which these thinkers were responding. One does not, however, need to go as far as George Orwell who, reviewing a book on strategy, observed that "there is something unsatisfactory in tracing an historical change to an individual theorist, because a theory does not gain ground unless material conditions favor it."[6] The history of ideas is fascinating in part because ideas developed in one context live on and take on new meanings in another.

As a theme of this book is the growing importance of stories as a means of thinking about and communicating strategies, I have tried to show where the most important strategic stories came from, the intent behind their construction, and how their meanings were changed over time. In keeping with this narrative theme I have also used a number of examples from literature—including the Bible, Homer, Milton, and Tolstoy—to illuminate core issues and the treatment of strategic behavior.



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The book begins by treating the "prehistory" of strategy, addressing the two major sources of the Western cultural tradition—the Hebrew Bible and the great texts of the classical Greeks—and authors who have been most enduring in their influence—Thucydides, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli. The first main section of the book looks at military strategy. The second section is concerned with political strategy, particularly efforts on behalf of underdogs. The third section considers the development of strategies for managers of large organizations, especially businesses. This section is the shortest, but only because it covers half a century of literature rather than two centuries. The last section considers the contemporary contribution of the social sciences and seeks to draw the main themes together.

Research for this book has taken me into unfamiliar territory. It has proved to be an opportunity to explore issues dimly remembered from undergraduate days and many that had previously passed me by. I was taught in political theory to read the original texts and not just the commentaries, and I have tried to do so, but it would be misleading to suggest that I have not relied extensively on the interpretations of others. I have drawn—I hope with full attribution—from the insights and ideas of a wide range of specialists. Part of the enjoyment of writing this book has come from my exposure to some wonderful scholarship, in social science and fields supposedly distant from my own. Despite the best efforts of colleagues I have undoubtedly overreached in a number of areas. Nonetheless, the exercise has reinforced my conviction that academics worry too much about making a good impression within their own disciplinary boundaries while not paying enough attention to what is going on beyond them. While the stance is often critical, I hope it is not disrespectful. These are issues worth arguing about and I look forward to those who feel that I have missed significant points arguing back.

My own expertise and the origins of the subject mean that much of the book is concerned with war, but I have also sought to do justice to revolutionary, electoral, and business strategies and explore how they have influenced each other. I have no practical experience of war, although I have met many warriors. I was very politically active as a student and engaged in many energetic debates about reform, revolution, and violence. In later years, while at King's College London, I have had a variety of managerial roles for some three decades (even ending up with "strategy" in my title). In this respect, I have in my time tried to think strategically as well as think about strategy.



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# PART I | Origins

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# CHAPTER 1 | Origins 1: Evolution

*Man is descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits.*

—Charles Darwin

IN THIS CHAPTER I argue that there are elemental features of human strategy that are common across time and space. These include deception and coalition formation, and the instrumental use of violence. These features are so elemental that traces of them can be found among chimpanzees. Chimps are self-aware, understand others well enough to deceive them, and show gratitude or retribution according to whether they have been given or denied support. They have forms of communication, think through difficult problems, and plan ahead.

Years of careful observation of chimpanzees, first in the wild and then in special colonies at zoos, challenged the previous view that their social bonds were limited. It became apparent that individual chimps in the same area came together regularly and developed complex relations. They not only worked together but also had fights. Of particular interest for students of strategy, chimpanzees were political in their behavior. They built up coalitions, offering grooming, sex, and food to potential supporters—all in order to prevail in conflicts. But they also appreciated the importance of limiting their conflicts so that they could live cooperatively thereafter. They kissed

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and made up after a violent quarrel. By showing their vulnerability they invited trust.[1]

During the 1970s, Frans de Waal observed the chimpanzee colony at Arnhem Zoo, making copious notes as a remarkable series of dramas began to unfold. In his 1982 book, *Chimpanzee Politics*, he drew some startling conclusions about the complexity of chimpanzee society. In his view, the evidence of coalition formation and power struggles among the chimps deserved the label "political."[2]

Raw strength could only take chimps so far. When dominant males asserted power, their hair stood on end to make them appear larger and more ferocious than they actually were. They charged at groups of subordinate apes—who immediately scattered—and then received due respect through some submissive greeting or by being groomed in an elaborate fashion. De Waal realized, however, that as the hierarchy changed, those gaining power were not necessarily the strongest. Social maneuvers were of even greater importance as other chimpanzees joined in on one side or the other and shifted their allegiances. Changes in the hierarchy were not abrupt, but orderly.

The first change charted by de Waal began with the established dominant male, Yeroen, initially enjoying the support of most of the females but appearing unsure of how to respond to a conspicuous challenge to his authority by another male, Luit. In a definite affront, Luit mated with a female right in front of Yeroen. Then Luit got another male, Nikkie, to join him to tilt the balance of power in his favor. During the course of the power struggles, the tactics deployed involved not only displays of strength and determination but also measures designed to encourage females to defect, such as grooming them and playing with their children. Yeroen's angry tantrums, which might once have made subordinates wary of defecting, gradually lost their impact as they became more frequent. He eventually gave up. This struggle led to another. With Luit now dominant, Yeroen was prepared to work with Nikkie to regain some of his past prestige, even though he would not become dominant again.

Actual fighting played only a small part in this process. Biting, the most dangerous act of aggression, was rarely used. De Waal concluded that rather than changing the social relationships, the fights tended to reflect the changes that had already taken place. The apes appeared to know that they should limit violence among themselves, for they might have to unite against external rivals. They also seemed to understand the need for mediation and reconciliation. Once a goal had been achieved, the patterns of behavior changed—for example, both the winners and losers became less aggressive.



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According to de Waal, the core elements of this strategic activity were the ability to recognize each other individually and to perceive social relationships, including how others might combine to form coalitions and how these coalitions might then be broken up. To make choices, the chimpanzees needed to grasp the potential consequences of their actions and be able, to some extent, to plan a route to their goal. As chimpanzees exhibited all these attributes, de Waal concluded that "the roots of politics are older than humanity." His later work built upon these original insights, pointing to evidence that primates can show tolerance, altruism, and restraint, meaning they have a capacity for empathy. Empathy involves at least emotional sensitivity to others and at most an ability to understand another's point of view. This, de Waal argued, is "essential for the regulation of social interactions, coordinated activity, and cooperation toward shared goals."[3]

Deception also turned out to be a vital strategic quality. It involved deliberately sending untrue signals with a view to changing another's behavior. Apes tricked other members of their group out of food or sneaked off for some furtive courtship when alpha males were not paying attention. Again, this required a degree of empathy with other apes. It was necessary to understand the normal behavior of others if only to appreciate how they might be misled.

What we might call "strategic intelligence," for both chimps and humans, evolved through interactions in a complex social environment as much as from the demands of survival in a harsh physical environment. Consider the human brain. The brain consumes 20 percent of the body's energy, far more than any other organ, while making up only 2 percent of an adult's body weight. Something so costly to maintain must have developed to meet a vital need. Richard Byrne and Nadia Corp studied eighteen species from all the major branches of primates and correlated the size of the neocortex to the amount of deception the species practiced. They established a link between the size of the brains and general social intelligence, including the ability to work together and manage conflict, as well as trickery.[4] In evolutionary terms, the value of these skills was not hard to imagine in the face of challenges from other species that might be stronger but also more stupid. If neocortex size set the limits on the mental world of a particular animal, then it would also set limits on those with whom relationships could be formed, and therefore the number of allies available at times of conflict. So, the larger the brain the greater the ability to maintain substantial social networks. The concept of "Machiavellian intelligence," as promoted by Byrne, established a link between strategy and evolution. The sort of basic survival techniques identified by Niccolo Machiavelli for sixteenth-century Italy turned out to be similar to those necessary for survival in the most primitive of social groups.[5]



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The concept developed as part of a conjunction of research on the physical development of the brain, close observations of both primates and humans, and considerations of the influence of ecological and social factors. The early intellectual challenges facing our ancestors would have involved thinking through how to get up high trees without falling down and constructing safe places to sleep once there, or the sequence of manual actions necessary to acquire and eat particularly nutritious but hard-to-get-at foods with spines or thick skins. Physical tasks required a sequence of activities, and so it became necessary to plan ahead. Whatever the ecological imperatives and physical demands that increased brain size, at some point the key driver became the need to maintain sizable and coherent social groups. Working effectively in groups required understanding the particular characters of other members of the groups, how they were ranked in the hierarchy and with whom they had attachments, and what all this might mean in specific situations.

## *Strategies of Violence*

One important complexity was the need to take on other groups with whom there were no social bonds, what Charles Darwin called "the struggle for existence." A sense of the potential for cooperation and the limits to conflict might shape social relations within the "in" group, but different imperatives come into play once there is a confrontation with an "out" group. Individual aggression is common in animals, but warfare—groups fighting each other—is less so. Ants are among the most warlike of creatures. Their foreign policy has been described as "restless aggression, territorial conquest, and genocidal annihilation of neighboring colonies whenever possible. If ants had nuclear weapons, they would probably end the world in a week."[6] As ant warfare is conducted by specialized warriors with no capacity for reproduction, the population of the colony is not threatened by their loss in battle. Warfare among ants has a clear purpose: a struggle for food and territory. When one colony defeats another, stored grain is taken to the victors' nests and the other colony is killed off or driven away. Ant warfare is in no sense strategic. It relies on relentless and ruthless attrition through brute force. The ants stick together; build up a superior mass; and wear down the enemy defenses by constant, vicious, and no-holds-barred attacks. There is no scope for bargaining and negotiation.

By contrast, studies of chimpanzees demonstrated a strategic intelligence at work. Males of other species might fight each other one-on-one for the opportunity to mate with females. What was noteworthy about the chimps



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was that on occasion one group would take on a neighboring group, and some chimps would die in the conflict. This was not a routine feature of chimpanzee life. It became more likely under certain conditions, again suggesting strategic behavior rather than mere aggressive instinct.

Some of the most notable observations of chimpanzees at war come from Jane Goodall, the pioneering student of the social lives of chimpanzees. She began watching them in 1960 in Tanzania's Gombe Stream National Park, and found a number of occasions when individual apes had been murdered by males from neighboring colonies. A particularly dramatic conflict occurred at Gombe after a community split as the result of a falling out between two alpha males. Hostility continued between the two communities, known as the Kasekala and the Kahama. It led to a protracted conflict between 1973 and 1974 which concluded with the extinction of the Kahama. The males of the Kasekala took over both the Kahama's territory and their females.[7] Goodall observed that, when acting defensively, the chimpanzees would call each other to a fight and move rapidly toward where they were needed. Border patrols would also be mounted to explore potentially contentious territory. Because of the risk of being caught by a superior group, these patrols were conducted with great caution, avoiding unnecessary noise and checking regularly for signs of the other, hostile community. Normal boisterous behavior was saved for when they returned to familiar territory. What was most striking about these patrols was that on occasion they turned into something more predatory as the chimps moved away from the borders and quite far into neighboring territory. There would be long and silent waits until there was an opportunity to attack a vulnerable victim. After catching their victims by surprise, the attacking chimps would leave their enemies dead or dying.

It has been argued that it would be unwise to generalize from this study because of the artificial conditions created by the reduced habitat and Goodall's influence over the food supply. She used feeding stations to draw the apes out of the forest, which encouraged competition among concentrated groups. By contrast, de Waal was able to observe chimpanzees by manipulating the distribution of food to reduce conflict levels. Goodall acknowledged—and regretted—that her intervention prompted more aggressive behavior but pointed out that it did not invalidate the finding that in certain conditions chimpanzees acted in particular ways. Moreover, her findings are not unique. Close observation of communities elsewhere also showed a capacity for warfare, albeit occasional.

Why did they fight? Richard Wrangham identified the sources of conflict as "improved access to resources such as food, females, or safety." Power relationships between neighboring communities mattered because of the



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chimps' need for ripe fruit, which was in turn a consequence of their digestive systems. When fruit was scarce, individual chimpanzees traveled alone or in small groups to find more; because of the uneven distribution of fruit supplies, the territory of one community could be well endowed while another was bereft. This was a recipe for conflict, and an explanation for why a stronger community would seek to take advantage of a weaker one. Wrangham argued that adult male chimpanzees "assess the costs and benefits of violence" and attack when the "probable net benefit is sufficiently high." A consequence of a kill was that the relative position of one community was significantly enhanced (as these communities were often not large, the loss of one member made a real difference.). He called this the "imbalance-of-power hypothesis, which stated that coalitionary kills occurred because of two factors: inter-group hostility, and large power asymmetries between rival parties."[8] This explained why killing took place but not the origins of the underlying conflict—the struggle for a scarce and vital resource.

More striking than the incidence of extreme violence was the calculating attitude to conflict. Goodall observed that "a small patrol will turn and flee if it meets a larger party, or one with more males, even *within* its own range; whereas if a large party, travelling out of its range, meets a smaller party of neighbors, it is likely to chase or attack." When there was greater symmetry among the numbers of adult males, the typical result was "visual and auditory display exchanges without conflict."[9] The important point, therefore, was that the apes were astute when it came to working out power balances. They tried to avoid a fight if they were weaker, readily retreating in the face of superior force, but moved in when they were stronger. Thus it is no surprise that no instances of one of the attacking pack getting killed were recorded. What made the difference was not strength in battle but "the relative size and composition of parties when they encounter each other."[10] This pragmatic attitude to violence underlined its instrumentality.

The evolutionist, therefore, saw strategy as a natural consequence of scarce vital resources and the struggle for survival. But it was not just a question of the survival of the fittest, in terms of raw strength and instinctive aggression. The survivors would also need to have outthought their opponents, to have shown a better grasp of social relationships and how to manipulate them. From the start of time, success could come as much from being smart as being strong, and it was especially smart to get others to help overpower opponents.

Similar patterns have been discerned in so-called primitive warfare among humans, although what passed for strategy appears to have been "customary and unspoken" and can now be inferred only "from the conduct and



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effects of warfare."[11] The strategies appear to have been largely attritional, with the enemy being worn down by regular battles and raids, normally with low casualties but also surprise massacres on occasion. Victory would be total: wealth and food plundered, houses and fields destroyed, women and children killed or captured. As logistic support was minimal, it was not possible to engage in prolonged combat or extended maneuvers because either food or ammunition would soon be exhausted. Raids had a number of advantages. They were hard to guard against, as security was normally poor and small groups moving at night were hard to detect, and it was possible to withdraw if the odds looked unfavorable. There was, according to Azar Gat, every incentive to avoid open warfare. Before attempting a killing it was best if the victims were "caught helpless, relatively defenseless, and, above all, little capable of effectively harming the attackers." These factors led to a "remarkably uniform" pattern of warfare, manifested within "any society of hunter-gatherers and primitive agriculturalists studied."[12]

From the study of these societies and those of chimps we can identify some of the elemental features of strategic behavior.[13] These features emerge out of social structures that invite conflict. They require some recognition of the distinctive attributes of individuals who are potential opponents or allies, and sufficient empathy with these individuals' situations to make it possible to influence their behavior, including by impressing or misleading them. The most effective strategies do not depend solely on violence—though this can play an instrumental role, by demonstrating superiority as much as expressing aggression—but benefit instead from the ability to forge coalitions. Little in the rest of this book will suggest that this list should be expanded. The elements of strategic behavior have not changed, only the complexity of the situations in which they must be applied.



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# CHAPTER 2 | Origins 2: The Bible

*For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.*

—Exodus 9:14–16

An alternative account of the origins of strategy—indeed, of the origins of everything—comes from the Hebrew Bible. There is no suggestion in the Bible that strategy is in any sense unnatural. Many of the stories revolve around conflicts (sometimes internecine and often with the enemies of Israel) in which trickery and deception are regularly employed. Some stories (David and Goliath being the most obvious example) still influence the way we think and talk about strategy. The best strategic advice in the Bible, however, is to always trust God and obey his laws. God might allow others to shape the game, but he was always the biggest player. When he withheld support the result was often disaster. When he came in on the side of his people the result was never in doubt.

The questions of the literalness of the Bible and the issues it raises about free will and causation have long been at the heart of theological debate. If everything can be put down to God's intent, what role is there for distinctive human desires? Is human intent a product of God's intent, or can it develop

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independently? For the student of strategy, the Bible makes for frustrating reading. Its stories display evident human frailties, with a pronounced tendency for deception as a vital strategic practice. When an individual was in a tough spot and there was a crafty way out, it tended to be taken. For example, Jacob, with his mother's connivance, tricked his blind father into giving him the blessing intended for his elder brother, Esau. Jacob was tricked in turn by his prospective father-in-law, so he ended up with two wives rather than one. And finally, Jacob was deceived by his sons into believing that his favorite son, Joseph, had been killed rather than sold into slavery. The Bible acknowledges the moral ambiguity involved in trickery, and the outrage of the deceived, yet also accepts its value in the face of superior but unworthy power. In a world of flawed human beings, deception comes naturally and often.

There are two possible explanations for the latitude allowed by God in human behavior. The first is that there is nothing in the end to be learned from all of this because all actions are subject to a higher manipulation. The second is that humans are able to make their own calculations, but in the end only one strategic judgment matters: whether or not to obey God. After recasting biblical stories using game theory, Steven Brams concluded that God was a "superlative strategist."[1] Given his starting advantages, anything less than superlative would appear something of a disappointment. But Brams noted that God enjoyed omniscience but not omnipotence. He was not a mere puppetmaster but rather was affected by the choices of the other players. To help explain God's purpose and his later strategy, Brams drew on the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. God created the world for "His own glory," but this would be pointless unless it could be appreciated. "He needed a setting in which to be great." This was only possible after the creation of the world, "for now He had someone who could admire Him and to whom to compare Himself—and how favorably."[2] On this reading, God created strategy by allowing choice, because he wanted people to choose obedience through an act of will rather than because they were programed to do so. Even if individuals were part of a divine plan that had been set out at the moment of creation, they were allowed the sensation of choice and the ability to calculate and plan. The Bible tells of human choices regularly being manipulated by God to create the situations in which his greatness would become apparent.

The issue came up as soon as man and woman were formed to take control of the new world that God had created. After placing Adam and Eve in Eden, God immediately set a test. In his first words he explained that they could "eat from any fruit in the garden." One critical exception was fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. "If you eat its fruit," God warned



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Adam, "you will be doomed to die." We must assume that Eden was created with these tests in mind. If God really did not want Adam and Eve to lapse, it would have been simple not to put the fruit there in the first place. The test was soon failed. Eve tasted the forbidden fruit and then persuaded Adam to do the same. In the face of God's anger, Adam blamed his own ignorance but also Eve—the "woman whom you gave me"—and so pushed the blame back to God.

The source of the Fall was the serpent who persuaded Eve to disobey. The translations of the serpent's strategy vary from "subtle" to "crafty" and "cunning." He convinced Eve that there was no risk and much to gain. The reason the fruit was forbidden was not because of death but because of power. "God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods." The serpent was accusing God of deception. Perhaps he had a point. Once the fruit was eaten, God did consider Adam and Eve to have become "like one of us" because they could now differentiate good from evil. If they had also taken from the Tree of Life, they would have avoided death. It was precisely for this reason that God expelled them from Eden; had they managed to eat of this tree, God's threat would have been neutralized and they could have anticipated everlasting life.[3] Instead, Adam and Eve became mortal and were now doomed to die (though Adam managed to struggle on until he was 930 years old). Banishment from Eden consigned man to extracting a living from the soil and woman to suffering in childbirth. The serpent was condemned to slither around on his belly and eat dust.[4]

## *The Ten Plagues as Strategic Coercion*

The point at which God asserted his greatness to his chosen people was when he arranged the escape of the Jews from Egypt, where they were kept as slaves. One reading of the story of Exodus is that it was not so much about freeing the Israelites from slavery as about asserting God's greatness by establishing a people beholden to him and ensuring that they—and others—were in awe of his power. Under this interpretation, the Exodus story becomes a gigantic manipulation. The Israelites were encouraged to leave a country they were in no hurry to leave. Not surprisingly, they moaned thereafter when they were stuck in the desert, while God used the plagues to drive home the message of his power and superiority over Egyptian gods.

Diana Lipton has suggested that the Exodus reflected less a concern that the Israelites were being oppressed and more one that they were being seduced by Egyptian life and were in the process of being assimilated.[5] The



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Israelites had entered Egypt because of Jacob's son Joseph, who had risen to high rank in Egyptian society. They were led out by Moses, an Israelite who had grown up among the Egyptians but was persuaded by God to assert the distinctive identity of the Israelites. Moses acted largely as God's agent in all his dealings with Pharaoh.

The favored strategy was coercive, using threats to persuade the target—in this case Pharaoh—to yield. The challenge was to influence the target's calculations, so that the potential cost of not complying exceeded the potential cost of losing what was currently held. The Israelite slaves were valuable to Egypt, so the threat had to be substantial. Coercive threats must be credible to be effective, yet those issued by Moses depended on a god not worshiped by Egyptians. There was no immediate reason to take him seriously. The first challenge was therefore how to change this perception. That was not difficult. The greater challenge was to get Pharaoh to respond. The strategy, a standard form of coercion involving a progressive "turning of the screw" in an attempt to find the target's threshold of pain, led to regular promises of compliance upon which Pharaoh equally regularly reneged.

Moses initially demanded that Pharaoh "let my people go" in relatively modest terms. He asked that the Hebrew slaves be allowed to go into the wilderness for a three days' journey to pray and sacrifice. If not, Pharaoh was told, then "the Lord our God [might] fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword." The first people to be coerced in this story, therefore, were the Jews themselves. Moses presented them as caught between the power of Pharaoh and an even more powerful God. Pharaoh's response was to deny any knowledge or respect for this god and to make the Hebrews' lives even more miserable by telling them to find their own straw for their bricks. This extra suffering immediately undermined Moses's confidence and credibility.

Pharaoh was not punished at first. Instead, to persuade him to take God more seriously, he was treated to a demonstration of God's power. Moses's brother Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and it became a serpent. Surprisingly, Pharaoh's magicians performed the same trick, but then Aaron's rod swallowed up all the other rods. This had no impact on Pharaoh. Tricks involving rigidified snakes were quite common in Egypt. So Moses tried but failed to make his point in a non-punitive manner. Pharaoh remained unconvinced of God's power.

There then followed the ten plagues. First the river turned to blood. This made little impression either. Pharaoh's magicians claimed they could also transform water into blood. Then out of the river came an abundance of frogs. Pharaoh hesitated and said that the Hebrews could go, but changed his mind when the frogs were removed. After a plague of gnats, the court magicians



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were stumped. At last a trick that they could not reproduce. They acknowledged the "finger of God," but Pharaoh was still unmoved. With swarms of flies Pharaoh weakened but again reneged when the plague was lifted. Next was the killing of Egypt's cattle, followed by everyone being covered in boils. Moses was told by God to go to Pharaoh and say on his behalf:

> Let my people go that they may serve me. For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people; that thou may knowest that there is none like me in all the earth. For now I will stretch out my hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence; and thou shalt be cut off from the earth. And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth. As yet thou exaltest thou myself against my people, that thou wilt not let them go?[6]

Then came a threat of hail and advice that Pharaoh tell everyone to get themselves and their beasts home before the hail lest they die. This started to make the Egyptians uneasy. Some took the advice and sought shelter; others did not. Only the former survived the subsequent hailstorm.

Pharaoh, now anxious, agreed he was wicked and that the Hebrews could go, once the thunder and lightning stopped. Again he reneged, raising the stakes: by breaking a promise, Pharaoh had become a sinner on his own terms. After a plague of locusts, with the deadline for compliance the next day, Pharaoh's servants had a go at him: "How long shall this man be a snare unto us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God: knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?" Pharaoh relented and called in Moses and Aaron. He started to bargain. Who would go? Moses said everyone, with their flocks and herds. Pharaoh was only prepared to let the men and children go. He knew the women were irrelevant to acts of worship, and the only reason to take flocks and herds was if there was no intention to return. Moses's demands were now getting complex. The modest initial demand, an opportunity for the Hebrew men to leave for a while to pray, was being transformed into something much more complete.

After the eighth plague, locusts devouring all the fruits and herbs that had survived the hail, negotiations soon resumed. Pharaoh was contrite, but only until the locusts were blown away. The ninth plague, three days of complete darkness, was most alarming for a kingdom that worshiped the sun and dreaded a persistent eclipse. Like the third and the sixth, this plague was quite unannounced. It was a warning that the time for negotiation was over. Once the darkness lifted, Pharaoh agreed that everyone could go—other



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than the flocks and herds. Moses said it had to be everyone and everything. It was now evident that this would be no excursion for prayer and sacrifice but a permanent departure from Egypt. Furious, Pharaoh broke off negotiations: "Take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die." Moses agreed he would not return.

God said there would be one more plague and this would be successful. The Hebrews, spared all the previous plagues, were told to prepare. By daubing their houses with blood from sheep or goats God would know to pass over them when he smote the firstborn of the Egyptians. At midnight on the fourteenth day of the month there was not a house in Egypt "where there was not one dead." This caused great misery and consternation. Moses and Aaron were summoned and told to leave. So eager were the Eyptians to be rid of them that all the Israelites and their livestock were allowed to depart, with jewelry and raiments and what else they required.

The loss of the slaves was a serious blow to Pharaoh. He changed his mind one last time and decided to chase after them with chariots, horsemen, and his army. Once again, his memory was remarkably short. A regular victim of God's power, he only seemed to believe in it while the pressure was actually upon him and his people. Initially it appeared that the Hebrews had been caught. They cowered on the edge of the Red Sea, fearing that they were to die in the wilderness, with the Egyptians about to come upon them. There was no time for threats to coerce Pharaoh. This time God's intervention was more direct. The Red Sea divided and the Hebrews escaped as the waves were held back in suspended animation. The Egyptians followed the same route but the "host of Pharaoh" was drowned as the walls of water engulfed them.

The actual methods employed in this case were quite unique, but the strategic logic reflected a turning of the screw. Commentators have even noticed the pattern of graduated escalation—the first four plagues were mere nuisances, the second four caused real pain, and the last two took the Egyptians into the realm of absolute dread. Others have noted that the escalation progressed in pairs—the first pair connected with the Nile, the second involving insects, the third attacking life, the fourth destroying crops in a two-stage assault, and the last two conveying the full extent of God's power. Still others have stressed the significance of every third plague arriving without warning. We may note the importance of subtle variations in the way the pressure was applied, playing on the psychology of Pharaoh and his court.

The most striking feature of this story, however, lies in the difficulty of persuading Pharaoh to respond positively to threats of such palpable credibility and potency. Why did he take so long to let the Israelites go? Threats might fail because they are not believed or are suspected to be bluff. Initially



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Pharaoh may have assumed he was witnessing just an unusually accomplished version of the sort of magic produced in his own court. A critical turning point came when his magicians realized this magic was beyond theirs. But this point was reached quite early on in the escalatory process. Moses could always demonstrate that he was not bluffing.

Another problem might have been that Moses increased his demands with the pressure. At the start, he asked only for a chance to pray, but this turned into a chance to escape. Once the Egyptians were desperate to see the backs of the Israelites, the demand was for sufficient animals and other goods to ease the privations of the coming journey. A threat that might have been sufficient to obtain compliance with modest demands became inadequate as the stakes were raised.

A superficial reading—and certainly the telling of the Passover tale—suggests that Pharaoh's obstinacy had a simpler explanation: he was a most unpleasant man, whose continuing deceit and double-dealing contrasted with the courtesy and dignity exhibited by Moses at all times. He was so sure of his own power that he was prepared to engage in this disastrous trial of strength. There is, however, a more intriguing explanation: Pharaoh was set up. Before the plagues started, God told Moses:

> I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.[7]

Sure enough, every time Pharaoh hesitated in the face of the onslaught of plagues, the Bible reports that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. God explained this to Moses, after the hail, when Pharaoh acknowledged God's power for the first time but still reneged on a promise.

> I have hardened his heart, and the hearts of his servants, that I might shew these my signs before him: and that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son, what things I have wrought in Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them; that ye may know how that I am the Lord.[8]

God needed an obstinate Pharaoh because the only way he could demonstrate the full range of his power, and its superiority over all other powers on earth, was to put on the most awesome display. If Pharaoh had crumbled at the first plague there would have been no wondrous reports to pass down to future generations. Others would not appreciate the extent of his formidable power.



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This was problematic for Talmudic scholars and later for Christian theologians, for it raises fundamental questions of free will. If punishment comes because we have made the wrong moral choices, then what are we to do about an agent who continues to be immoral despite recognizing the folly of his ways? It was not that God wanted an excuse to destroy the Egyptians—witness his rebuke to the Jews when they rejoiced at the destruction of the Egyptian army. As noted, relations between ordinary Egyptians and the Hebrews do not appear to have been bad, yet the loss of innocent life in the final plague—even the sons of maidservants were struck down—only seems to make moral sense if the stubbornness of Pharaoh could be blamed for the suffering of his people. Strategy as well as morality depended on choice, and if the players in this drama were merely acting out a preordained script from which no deviation was permitted, then the only strategist at work here was God.

## *A Coercive Reputation*

One act of successful coercion facilitates future acts. God's threats now had credibility. The reputation of his extraordinary power made it far easier to coerce the inhabitants of the land of Israel, which had been promised to the Jews. Just before entering this land, Moses died and Joshua became the leader of the Israelites. The first obstacle to occupying the new land was the old walled city of Jericho, at the center of fertile land and in control of the water source.[9] Joshua sent two spies to discover the lay of the land. They lodged with Rahab, who is normally described as a prostitute but who may have been more of an innkeeper (an inn was always a good place to pick up gossip). When the king of Jericho demanded that the spies be handed over, Rahab hid them instead. Having heard what had happened to the Egyptians, she explained, "All the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you." They had all lost heart, and "no man had any spirit left because of you." She made a deal. In return for her family being spared whatever was going to befall the rest of the city, she agreed not to disclose the spies' mission. This deal was not based on the moral worthiness of the Hebrew God—just his superior power. When it came to actually taking Jericho, there was no need for a prolonged siege. Around the walls the Israelites marched for six days, until it became such a routine that the guardians of the city took little notice, and then they struck as God brought the walls (weakened through a recent earthquake) tumbling down.

As the invasion progressed, those on its line of advance had every reason to be afraid. There was no mercy shown to those occupying the land God



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had promised to the Israelites, although mercy could be shown to people who lived far away. Aware of this, the Gibeonites pretended to Joshua that they were not from the next city but rather a distant people. They engaged in a careful deception, appearing disheveled and claiming to have traveled from a faraway place, drawn by the fame of God. When Joshua doubted this claim, they drew attention to their "dry and crumbly" bread, their cracked wineskins, and their worn-out clothes and sandals. Joshua was sufficiently taken in that he promised not to harm the Gibeonites in return for their servitude. Soon the Israelites realized they had been duped. Joshua was furious. He could not break an oath made in God's name even if obtained by deceit. Instead he cursed the Gibeonites, telling them that they would be slaves forever. "Why did you deceive me?" he asked. The answer was honest. Once they knew of God's promise "to give you the whole land and to wipe out all the inhabitants of the country on your account," they were in great fear. Joshua had only himself to blame if he had been deceived. Convinced by the Gibeonites' appearance, he "did not inquire of the Lord." What is the point of having access to omniscience if it is not used to check out a potentially dubious story?[10]

The book of Judges relates a regular pattern of Israelites turning away from God, who then used a hostile tribe, the Midianites, to punish them. The liberating figure of Gideon appeared after the Midianites had been allowed to enter the country and impoverish the people. The Israelites were suffering for their idolatry and begged for deliverance. God chose Gideon for the mission. When he gathered a large army of some thirty thousand men, God deemed this too many. If they thought victory came by superior numbers, God judged, they might "vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'Mine own hand hath saved me.' " The numbers had to be reduced. First, those who were "fearful and afraid" were asked to depart. This cut the numbers by about two-thirds. Then a curious test was set, involving seeing how the men drank at a lake. Those who went on their knees were sent home; those who put their hands to their mouths were kept, perhaps because this showed that they were staying alert. The numbers were now only 1 percent of the original army—just three hundred men. Against them were ranged their enemies, lying "along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude." Gideon divided his three hundred men into three companies and put a trumpet in every man's hand. They were then told to watch him and do as he did when they got to the outside of the enemy camp. "When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, 'The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.' " This they did.



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And the enemy "ran, and cried, and fled."[11] This reinforced the basic lesson in all these stories. The best—indeed the only—strategy was to obey God and then do as he told you.

## *David and Goliath*

One of the most iconic of all the Bible's stories is that of David and Goliath. It is invariably invoked by an underdog, yet the underdog status was illusory because David had God on his side. The basics of the story are well known. On opposite sides of a valley were the armies of the Philistines and the Israelites. Out of the Philistine camp emerged a giant of a man, Goliath of Gath, dressed in heavy brass armor, protected by a shield, and wielding a large spear with a large iron head. He dared the Israelites to send out a champion to fight him. If he was killed in the fight then the Philistines would serve the Israelites. If he prevailed it would be the Israelites who served. The challenge, repeated daily for forty days without a response, appeared to paralyze the Israelites, including their king, Saul. They "were dismayed and greatly afraid." The only one not afraid was a young shepherd, David, who had been sent to the camp by his father with some bread and cheese for the army. He heard Goliath's challenge, saw the fear around him, and noted a promise of great riches should anyone actually manage to kill Goliath. David presented himself to the dubious king. David was still young, yet Goliath had been "a man of war from his youth." David offered as his credentials a tale of how he had killed both a lion and a bear who were after his lambs.

Saul relented and gave David his armor and sword, dressing him for a gladiatorial fight with Goliath. But David discarded these accoutrements, saying he could not take them as he had not "tested them." Instead he took his staff, five smooth stones from the brook, and his sling. Not surprisingly, Goliath found the challenger that the Israelites had eventually produced unimpressive, even insulting. "Am I a dog that thou comest to me with staves?" Their encounter was brief. Goliath promised to feed David's "flesh unto the fowls of the air and to the beasts of the field." The young man replied that he came in God's name and then ran toward the Philistine. As soon as he was in position, he took a stone out of his bag "and slung it and smote the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sunk into his forehead. And he fell upon his face to the earth." David then took the giant's sword to kill him and cut off his head. When the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled.[12]

David's success depended on surprise and accuracy. He knew he could not defeat Goliath on the giant's terms, which is why he rejected Saul's armor



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and with it the conventions of this form of combat. Unencumbered, he had speed and so could unleash his secret weapon before Goliath had a chance to respond. He had one chance with his sling. If he had missed, or if the stone had pinged off Goliath's armor or not stunned him so effectively, there would have been no second shot. As vital as the first shot was quick action to prevent any recovery. Not only did David bring Goliath down but by killing him he prevented him getting up again. He also depended on the Philistines accepting the result, and not trying to recover honor in the face of such a sneaky attack by turning the individual contest into a full battle. If they had done so, David's prowess with the sling would have been of no value. Indeed, this was a trick he could never use again. David had no plan B. If his plan A had failed, he would have been left defenseless.

The story is rarely given any context. This was one of a complex set of encounters between the Israelites and the Philistines. The Philistines controlled the territory west of the Jordan River. In earlier clashes, the Israelites fared very badly and lost four thousand men. Having apparently learned their lesson and returned to the laws of God, they regained God's protection, so that at one point a loud noise was sufficient to send the Philistines running away in panic. They were chased and subdued. The Israelites recaptured lost land. All this took place while the prophet Samuel was still leading the country as a Judge.

Saul was the first king of the Israelites, anointed by Samuel. This constitutional innovation was intended to meet the Israelites' desire to be led in the same way as other nations. Their king was chosen on the grounds that he looked the part—handsome and tall—was humble, and had shown military prowess. He was not, however, always obedient to God. Hostilities resumed with the Philistines after a provocative raid by Saul's son Jonathan in which a Philistine officer was killed. The Philistines mobilized and the Israelites were once again overwhelmed. Saul turned out to be a poor general (for example, forbidding his men food on the eve of a major battle) and cautious (reluctant to go out and face Goliath himself). Given that God was supposed to be the best defense, this lack of confidence—and therefore faith—was itself an act of disobedience. Though David's sling gained the headlines, Goliath's fate was sealed by David's faith.

Through the Bible we are allowed to see the factors at work that determined the history of the Israelites, but to the subjects of these stories it would have been challenging to work out what was going on. God's objectives were clear enough, but his methods were invariably deceptive, leading his victims into traps under the erroneous impression that they were masters of their destinies. As a result, deception became a strong biblical theme. Cunning



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was accepted as a natural method for an underdog who must use wits to succeed. The trickster appeared defiant, employing "wit, wile, and deception and assum[ing] that no victories are final and neat." Yet to the extent that they did this without God's help, the tricks often rebounded and any success was "unstable."[13] David's success resulted from combining an unreliable trick with a much more reliable faith.

The stories of the Exodus and David have both been used to give hope to underdogs. Indeed, reference to David is almost de rigueur whenever an underdog strategy is discussed. Seldom noted, however, is that success did not solely depend on the initial blow but also on the second blow, by which David ensured that Goliath had no chance to recover, as well as the Philistines' readiness to accept the result. In both stories, the key to success lay in the opponent's response. Both the Pharaoh and Goliath failed to appreciate the traps they were entering. Only Pharaoh had the opportunity to consider what he was up against and adjust his strategy accordingly. But as God was hardening his heart, any momentary understanding that he was leading his country into further hardship soon disappeared. Moses was following God's orders and so was Pharaoh. In the end, the drama—and therefore the evidence of true strategy—was artificial.

The core message of the Bible was evident to those who read it for guidance and inspiration over the centuries. God's subjects asserted their faith and their obedience as part of their standard preparations for war, even when they were fighting each other. They might have been sure that this was a necessary condition for victory. Few found it sufficient.



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# CHAPTER 3 | Origins 3: The Greeks

*Do not trust the Horse, Trojans/ Whatever it is, I fear the Greeks even bearing gifts.*

—Laocoön in Virgil's *Aeneid*

OUR THIRD SOURCE for the origins of strategy is ancient Greece. In terms of its subsequent influence, this was the most important. At first the stories told about power and war shared with the Bible the complication of divine intervention, which implied that the best strategic advice was to stay on the right side of the gods, but by the fifth century BCE a Greek enlightenment, a combination of intellectual open-mindedness and rigorous political debate, had taken place. This resulted in an extraordinarily rich philosophical and historical literature that has had an enduring influence. Homer's heroes were masters of both words and actions, although the differences between Achilles and Odysseus showed the potential tension between the two. The man of action could either be admired for his courage or dismissed as a fool for his sole reliance on strength, while the man of words could be celebrated for his intelligence or treated warily because words could deceive.

One of the curiosities of this literature is that some of its most interesting reflections on what it might mean to think as well as act strategically—not only in a military sense—were later played down and lost their impact. We can attribute this to the intervention of Plato. He was determined that

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philosophy should break decisively with the tendencies he lumped together as sophistry, which he saw as a diversion from a disinterested search for truth into a mercenary means of persuasion. There is some irony in that Plato's method for disposing of sophistry, using exaggeration and caricature, was intensely strategic. Given the care with which he was studied by later generations, the importance of Plato's success in this enterprise should not be underestimated.

From Homer came the contrasting qualities, represented respectively by Achilles and Odysseus, of biē and mētis (strength and cunning), which over time—for example, in Machiavelli—came to be represented as force and guile. This polarity continued to find expression in strategic literature. Outsmarting the opponent risked less pain than open conflict, although winning by cunning and subterfuge was often deplored for a lack of honor and nobility. There was also the more practical problem that reliance on deception was apt to suffer diminishing returns as opponents came to appreciate what they were facing. As the previous two chapters demonstrate, there was nothing unnatural or surprising in efforts to get the better of stronger opponents by catching them by surprise or tricking them in some way. Other ways of coping with superior strength, however, were combining with others or disrupting an opponent's coalition.

A preference for force or guile might reflect a temperamental disposition, but it could not be a strategy in itself. That must depend on how best to turn a complex and developing set of affairs to advantage, which in turn must depend on an ability to persuade those who must implement the strategy that it is wise. The master of casting a strategy in its most compelling form, at least according to Thucydides, was the Athenian statesman Pericles. The ability to persuade not only one's people but also allies and enemies was a vital attribute of the successful strategist. In this way, strategy required a combination of words and deeds, and the ability to manipulate them both.

## *Odysseus*

Mētis described a particular notion of a strategic intelligence for which there is no obvious English equivalent. In Greek it was related to *mētiaō*: "to consider, meditate, plan," together with *metióomai*, "to contrive," conveyed a sense of a capacity to think ahead, attend to detail, grasp how others think and behave, and possess a general resourcefulness. But it could also convey deception and trickery, capturing the moral ambivalence around a quality so essential to the strategist's art. According to the mythology,



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the goddess Mētis was chosen by Zeus as his first wife. Fearful that a son combining his strength with his mother's intelligence would become too powerful, Zeus employed her own methods of deceit and surprise to avoid that risk and so ate her. He intended to control the source of all mētis forever when he swallowed Mētis. What he did not know was that Mētis was already pregnant, with a daughter Athena, who was born—fully formed—through Zeus's head. Athena, the goddess of both wisdom and war, came to be associated with mētis more than the other divinities. She developed a close association with the mortal who most embodied mētis, Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. Athena described him as "far the best of all mortals in thought and word, and I'm renowned among all the gods for my wisdom and my cunning ways."[1]

Odysseus exhibited an agile and expedient intelligence. He could evaluate situations quickly, think ahead, and stay sharply focused on the ultimate goal even when caught in ambiguous and uncertain situations. More concerned with success than glory, he was indirect and psychological in his methods, seeking to confuse, disorient, and outwit opponents. But Odysseus also suffered from the challenge of the known deceiver. After a time, he became a victim of the liar's paradox: it became hard to get anyone to believe him, even when he was telling the truth. His greatest triumph was the wooden horse left outside the gates of Troy, which ended a decade of siege and opened up the city for utter destruction and mass slaughter. Virgil, the Roman who took a less generous view of Odysseus than did Homer, described how the Greeks made a show of giving up on their struggle to seize Troy. A large horselike construction, filled with up to fifty soldiers, was hauled to a position just outside the city walls. It carried the inscription: "For their return home, the Achaeans dedicate this thank-offering to Athena."[2]

The Trojans, hoping that the decade-long siege had been lifted, came out to inspect this strange horse. King Priam and the elders debated what to do. The choice was simple. They could treat it as a threat and either burn it or break it up to see what was inside, or haul it inside and use it as an opportunity to honor Athena. But Athena was known to have favored the Greeks and be prone to trickery. After all that had happened, was it really wise to trust either her or the Greeks? Odysseus always knew that the Trojans would need some persuasion. This was accomplished by Sinon, an expert liar. He claimed to the Trojans that he was a defector. His story was that he had escaped the Greeks after falling out with Odysseus. He was about to be offered up as a sacrifice to persuade the gods to provide favorable winds for the Greek ships to get home. The Trojans were half persuaded. Priam asked whether the "huge monster of a horse" was for religious purposes or "some engine of



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war." Sinon explained that it was indeed designed to placate Athena, whom the Greeks had offended. It was not meant for the Trojans, he added. In fact it had been built so large because the Greeks were worried that if the Trojans got the horse into the city they would never again be vulnerable to invasion.

Sinon had arrived on the scene as the priest Laocoön was warning that this apparent offering was a fraud, a "trick of war." When Laocoön threw a spear at the horse, the frightened soldiers inside had moaned. This might have been something of a giveaway, were it not for the intervention of Athena, who sent sea serpents to strangle Laocoön and his two sons. This suggested he was being punished for sacrilege—a good reason not to follow his advice. The other warning came from Cassandra, Priam's daughter, who told the people they were fools and faced an "evil fate." Alas, Cassandra had been granted the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo but was then cursed for not returning his love. Unlike Sinon, who could lie and be believed, Cassandra would make accurate predictions and never be believed. And so the decision was made. The Trojans decided to take the horse through the gate. During the night, the hidden Greek soldiers got out. On a signal from Sinon, the Greek army advanced and the gates of Troy were opened for them. The city was sacked and the people massacred.

Homer mentioned the wooden horse only in passing in *The Odyssey*, as a special example of the sort of craftiness that distinguished Odysseus from his more pedestrian peers. He had a talent for getting out of predicaments that might have led others to succumb to fatalism or lash out with hopeless bravado. Homer's indulgent view of Odysseus's escapades was not shared by Virgil. He thought such behavior deplorable and unfortunately typical of untrustworthy Greeks. In later centuries, Sinon was placed with Odysseus in Dante's Eighth Circle of Hell, a place for those guilty of fraudulent rhetoric and falsification. Proper heroes would be guided by virtue and truth rather than opportunism and trickery.

In his epics, Homer contrasted mētis with biē, or brute force. Biē was personified by Achilles, famed for his exceptional physical strength, bravery, agility, and mastery of the spear, but also his great rages. While *The Odyssey* was about mētis, *The Iliad* was largely an exploration of biē. Achilles demonstrated not only the limits to what force could achieve but also how it could become associated with a certain wildness, a bloodlust that led to terrible deaths and slaughter. Yet it was hard to do without force. When Achilles gave up on the war against the Trojans after being slighted by King Agamemnon, it was Odysseus who led the delegation sent to plead with him. Achilles's response was to denounce Odysseus and his methods: "I hate like the gates of Hades, the man who says one thing and hides another inside



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him." Just as pointedly, Achilles drew attention to the failure of mētis to stop the Greeks being pushed back to the sea by the rampaging "man-killing" Hector, the equivalent Trojan superhero.

Hector was also described as a man of mētis, the only Trojan with Zeus-like qualities and therefore the man in whom the Trojans invested their greatest hopes. On crucial occasions, the strategic good sense associated with mētis deserted him. This was attributed to the malign influence of Athena, who the poor Trojans believed was still protecting the city at a time she was doing anything but. At the council of the Trojans, an opportunity for a negotiated peace was missed when Hector was guided more by hatred for the Greeks and enthusiasm for battle than a shrewd understanding of what the future might hold. He advocated an offensive course. When the offensive began, he went on the rampage, driving the Greeks back. One casualty was Patroclus, a close friend of Achilles. His death led Achilles to turn his considerable rage away from Agamemnon and against Hector. Having reentered the fight, Achilles cut down many Trojans, while all the time searching for Hector. Eventually, tricked again by Athena, Hector found himself facing Achilles, something he had understandably hoped to avoid.[3] He was soon killed with a single blow to the neck. Achilles then tied Hector's body to his chariot and dragged it round the battlefield.

As this is close to the end of *The Iliad*, we are led to think that Achilles's victory sealed the fate of Troy. Yet the Greeks could not press home their advantage. Achilles was soon killed by Paris, the man who had caused the war in the first place by taking Helen from King Menelaus of Sparta. Paris struck Achilles with an arrow from a distance. According to one account—though not Homer's—the arrow had to hit him in his heel. In this legend, his mother had dipped the newly born Achilles in the river Styx. He gained invulnerability where the waters touched him but not on his heel, where his mother's hand had gripped him. Achilles's heel served as a reminder that even the strongest have their points of weakness which, if found, can be used to bring them down. Hector killing Patroclus and Achilles killing Hector could also be taken as salutary warnings of the dangers of overreaching, of using force without intelligent restraint. Brute force is not enough. "In the final analysis," notes Jenny Strauss Clay, "the humane heroism of Odysseus, based as it is on intelligence and endurance, is set above the quicksilver glory of Achilles."[4]

After the war had been decided by the ruse of the wooden horse, the Greeks began their journey home. It was as challenging as the original siege. Terrible storms caused their ships to sink or crash against rocks. Odysseus was blown off course and took another ten years to get home.



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His adventures along the way provided ample opportunity to apply mētis. A striking test came when Polyphemus, a giant one-eyed Cyclops, devoured a number of his men. Odysseus and his surviving men were trapped by a boulder that only Polyphemus could move. The first stage of Odysseus's plan was to get Polyphemus to drink more than was good for him. Then Odysseus told the drunk Cyclops that his name in Greek was Outis, made up of *ou tis*, meaning "not anyone."[5] This allowed Odysseus to conceal his identity and set up Polyphemus for a later piece of deception. Next, Odysseus blinded the giant by drilling a stake into his eye. As Polyphemus cried out in agony, his fellow Cyclopei asked, "Is any man stealing your flocks and driving them off? Is any man trying to kill you through cunning or superior strength?" When he replied, "Noman (*Outis*) is trying to kill me through his cunning," they took this literally and so thought no more about it.[6] Polyphemus removed the boulder to let out his sheep. He tried to feel to see if Odysseus and his men were escaping on top of the animals, but they had tied themselves underneath the animals. Unwisely, Odysseus then decided to boast. No longer Outis, he identified himself as one "known for his cunning." Polyphemus's father, the sea god Poseidon, then determined to make Odysseus's life miserable on his long journey home.

## *The Method in Mētis*

For Odysseus, the ends justified the means. The trickster was always prepared to be judged by results. The moral unease that this approach generated was evident in Sophocles's play, *Philoctetes*. This was the name of a Greek warrior en route to the Trojan War. His advantage was a bow given to him by the god Heracles; his disadvantage, a painful and smelly wound resulting from a snake bite. Odysseus found the smell and Philoctetes's cries of pain intolerable and left the poor man angry and in agony—but with his bow—on an island. A decade later, Odysseus realized that the bow was essential in the fight against Troy and set off with Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, to acquire it. Given his past treatment of Philoctetes, Odysseus knew neither brute force nor persuasion would get the bow, so Odysseus encouraged Neoptolemus to trick Philoctetes. The young man, however, had his father's "natural antipathy/ to get [his] ends by tricks and stratagems." He would prefer to "fail with honor" than to win by cheating. Did not Odysseus find the lying "vile"? No, came the reply, putting scruples above the common good placed the whole war effort at risk.



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In the play, the matter was resolved by the favored device of the deus ex machina. The god Heracles told Philoctetes to join the battle. The response was immediate: "Voice for which I have long yearned, Form, long visioned, now discerned! Thee I cannot disobey."[7] So craven obedience to a god quickly solved the dispute in a way that cunning could not. All ended happily. Odysseus succeeded in his mission, Neoptolemus maintained his honor, and Philoctetes gained glory and healing of his wound. The play underlined the difficulty of relying on deception and then expecting to be trusted. Those who knew Odysseus's reputation rarely trusted him even when he was being straight.[8] The impact of the best story was diminished when the teller lacked credibility.

Odysseus has been described as exemplifying "a particular idea of practical intelligence." According to Barnouw, he was able to consider "intended actions in the light of anticipated consequences." He kept his main purpose in mind and thought "back from that final goal through a complex network of means (and obstacles) to achieve it." The contrast therefore was not just with brute force but the recklessness of those who were not so well tuned to the signs of danger and who failed to think through the potential consequences of their actions. When Odysseus decided not to succumb to some short-term impulse for revenge, it was because he remembered how much more he wanted to achieve his long-term goals of returning safely to his wife Penelope and his kingdom in Ithaca. Rather than seeing reason and passion in opposition to one another, practical intelligence was about finding the appropriate relations between competing ends, each with an associated bundle of passions and reasons. Odysseus's understanding of how others viewed the world allowed him to manipulate their thought processes by giving out signs that he knew they would read in a particular way. He was not playing pranks on others just because he enjoyed their discomfort. Rather, his craftiness and capacity for deception were geared to his ultimate objectives. Mētis was therefore forward-looking, with elements of anticipation and planning, as well as guile and trickery. Barnouw described this intelligence as being as much "visceral as intellectual," less an "impassive weighing of alternatives," and more a prioritizing of aims or impulses that are most desired. It reflected more "the strength and depth of passion as the work of reason."[9]

Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant similarly argued that mētis as exemplified by Odysseus was a distinctive form of practical intelligence. More than being shrewd and crafty, it was also forward-looking, locating current actions as part of a longer-term plan, grasping the potential of situations so as to be able to manipulate others into error. This suggested a cast of mind


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as much as a plan of action, a way by which the underdog could triumph over the notionally stronger. Despite the association between mētis and the "disloyal trick, the perfidious lie, treachery," it could also be "the absolute weapon, the only one that has the power to ensure victory and domination over others, whatever the circumstances, whatever the conditions of the conflict." Whereas strength could be defeated by superior strength, mētis could defeat all strength.

Mētis was of most value when matters were fluid, fast moving, unfamiliar, and uncertain, combining "contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other." It was suited to situations when there could be no formulaic or predictable behavior, benefiting from a "greater grip" of the present, "more awareness" of the future, "richer experience accumulated from the past," an ability to adapt constantly to changing events, and sufficient pliability to accommodate the unexpected. This practical intelligence operated in circumstances of conflict and was reflected in such qualities as forethought, perspicacity, quickness and acuteness of understanding, as well as a capacity for trickery and deceit. Such a person was elusive, slipping through an "adversary's fingers like running water," relying on ambiguity, inversion, and reversal.[10] All this described a strategic intelligence, able to discern a way through complicated and ambiguous situations and then come out on top. But it was also largely intuitive, or at least implicit, and at moments of sudden danger and crisis, this might be all that could be relied upon. There was no reason, however, why the same qualities could not come into play when there was time to be more deliberative and calculating.

## *Thucydides*

Atē, the daughter of Eris, the goddess of strife, spent her time encouraging stupidity in both mortals and immortals. She was banished from Mount Olympus to earth. Barbara Tuchman described her as the goddess of infatuation, mischief, delusion, and folly. Atē was said to blind her victims to considerations of morality or expedience and render them "incapable of rational choice." Such gods, lamented Tuchman, provided humans with an excuse for their folly. Homer has Zeus, the king of the gods, insisting that if mortals had suffered "beyond that which is ordained" it was not because of the gods but because of the "blindness of their own hearts." It was not fate that led to disaster, but bad strategy.[11] Yet appeals to the gods continued to be made regularly in Athenian affairs. Omens were sought and oracles consulted.



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Then, during the Athenian enlightenment of the fifth century BCE, an alternative approach developed that rejected explanations for events based on the immortals and instead looked to human behavior and decisions. In addition, warfare became too complicated to be left to the heroic deeds of individual warriors; more coordination and planning was needed. The Athenian War Council consisted of ten *strategoi* who were expected to be able to lead from the front, fight with the best, and show total commitment. In this respect the origins of strategy lie with generalship, that is, the qualities that made for effective leadership.[12] Thucydides, who lived from around 460 to 395 BCE, was a *strategos*. After he failed to prevent a Spartan occupation of Amphipolis, he was exiled for twenty years, which provided opportunities to get to know Spartans as well as Athenians. "I had leisure," he recalled, "to observe affairs somewhat particularly."[13] This leisure was used to write what he considered to be the definitive history of the war between Athens and Sparta, known as the Peloponnesian War. This was fought from 431 to 404 BCE between the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta, and the Athenian empire, known as the Delian League. Sparta was the clear victor. Before the war Athens had been the strongest of the Greek city states. By the war's conclusion, Athens was much diminished.

As a historian, Thucydides exemplified the enlightenment spirit, describing conflict in unsentimental and calculating terms, posing hard questions of power and purpose, and observing how choices had consequences. He dismissed explanations for human affairs that depended on capricious fate and mischievous gods and concentrated instead on political leaders and their strategies. He insisted on a dogged empiricism, seeking an accurate account of events backed up where necessary and possible by diligent research. His narrative illuminated some of the central themes of all strategy: the limits imposed by the circumstances of the time, the importance of coalitions as a source of strength but also instability, the challenge of coping with internal opponents and external pressures simultaneously, the difficulties of strategies that are defensive and patient in the face of demands for quick and decisive offensives, the impact of the unexpected, and—perhaps most importantly—the role of language as a strategic instrument. The headlines from Thucydides were often taken to be the descriptions of the irresistibility of power and the imperviousness of the strong to the complaints of the weak or considerations of morality. On this basis he has been cast as one of the founders of realism, a temperament to which strategic theorists have been presumed to be susceptible because of their relentless focus on power and their presumption that self-interest best explains behavior. According to the more doctrinaire realism, the lack of a supreme authority governing all international affairs has always rendered states inherently insecure. If they dared not trust in the



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good intentions of others, they must make provisions for their own defense—though these provisions in turn made others insecure.[14] The significance of Thucydides from this perspective was that he demonstrated its timelessness.

In a non-doctrinaire sense, Thucydides was indeed a realist, describing human affairs as he found them rather than how he might wish them to be. But he did not suggest that men were bound to act on the basis of a narrow self-interest or that they actually served their broader interests if they did. The picture he presented was much more complex and fluid, one in which momentary strength could hide an underlying weakness, and political leaders were addressing a range of actors—some internal and others external—realizing that new combinations could create new forms of advantage and disadvantage.

He put into the mouths of key actors, however, statements which suggested that they were following the unavoidable imperatives of power, from which there could be no reprieve. The Athenians, for example, explained at one point that they were not holding on to their empire "contrary to the common practice of mankind" but "under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest." They did not set the example: "It has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger."[15] The same point was put most memorably in the Melian dialogue when the Athenians point out that "the strong do what they can while the weak must suffer what they must."[16] They had no choice but to suppress the Melians, not only to extend their rule but because not doing so when they had the chance would show them to be feeble and damage their reputation. Law and morality were fragile restraints, as the powerful could make laws and define morality to suit their purposes. Yet because Thucydides quoted arguments in favor of crude exercises of power did not mean that he endorsed them. He also reported alternative, even idealistic, views as well as the unfortunate consequences of always worrying about appearing weak, for this led later to disastrous gambles when caution would have been prudent.

The most important direct assertion of a realist philosophy comes in his most famous observation, considering the origins of the Peloponnesian War: "What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." He acknowledged other explanations, based on the "causes of complaint," but seemed to be displacing them by a more systemic analysis.[17] One challenge to this interpretation of Thucydides's views lies in questions of translation. A more subtle translation suggests that while Thucydides undoubtedly saw the shifting power balance between the two powers as being of great—and previously understated—importance, the origins of the war lie in its combination with the disputes



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of the moment.[18] That still leaves a question of whether the systemic factor deserved the prominence given it. Thucydides may have stressed it for the sake of the reputation of his hero Pericles, the ruler of Athens for some thirty years from 460 BCE.

The power and prestige of Athens had grown as a result of its leadership of the successful Greek resistance to Persia, although it was not particularly growing prior to the war. It had turned the loose collection of mutually supportive city states that worked with Athens into a more controlled alliance. This, however, created its own vulnerability as Athenian hegemony became increasingly unpopular. Pericles, who consolidated his authority as Athens's statesmen in 461 BCE, had concluded that it was a sufficient challenge to manage the existing empire without seeking to expand the League further. Sparta had acknowledged this restraint. After a war that lasted from 460 to 445 BCE, the two had agreed to the Thirty Years' Peace. Since that treaty, Pericles had avoided provoking Sparta, a fact noted and accepted by Sparta. It had neither taken an aggressive stance nor made exceptional preparations for war.

The reason why the question of the relationship between the two had come back into play was because of the complications of alliance. A coalition was an obvious benefit for a weaker power wishing to get stronger, but an alliance for a power that was already strong could be a mixed blessing because it could raise expectations and generate obligations while adding little in return. The members of the coalition might agree on a common enemy but little else. Furthermore, the measures taken by Athens to make sure that it did benefit from the Delian League, including contributions to the Athenian treasury and navy, generated resentment. As the Persian threat declined, the resentment increased and Athens became tougher, demanding that their allies become more Athenian, including more democratic. The Spartans, by contrast, showed little interest in the internal affairs of their allies. The position Pericles was trying to sustain was therefore precarious. The empire was of great value to Athens, but the city states were restless.

For different reasons, the Peloponnesian League was also restless. Sparta was being pressed by one of its most substantial allies, Corinth, to take a harder line with Athens. Corinth had its supporters, including Megara, which had its own grievance as a result of the "Megarian Decree" that denied its produce access to Athenian markets. The reason Megara was demanding a push against Athens was because it was in dispute with Corcyra, which had become an obstacle to its own expansion. Corcyra had sought to protect its position by seeking naval support through alliance with Athens. If Athens had resisted, war might have been avoided, but instead an awkward compromise emerged. An alliance would be formed but it would only be



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defensive. Donald Kagan notes the curiosity in Thucydides's presentation of the issue to his fellow Athenians. He was probably present at these debates, yet he abandoned his normal practice of providing full reports of speeches presenting alternative points of view.[19] Kagan concludes that he did so because further elaboration would have made it clear that the decisions on war were not so much inevitable but the result of Pericles's persuasive powers.[20] Those who took controversial decisions on war tended to portray their decisions as acts of necessity and play down the exercise of discretion.

It was decided to send emissaries to Sparta to explain Athenian policy, although Thucydides suggested that the presence of authoritative Athenians in Sparta at the time of the key deliberations was almost accidental. He therefore did not explain who was sent or the nature of their instructions. In a fuller account of the Spartan debate, Thucydides had Corinth, thwarted by Athens, demanding Spartan support. The demand carried a threat. If Sparta exhibited supine passivity, their allies would be put at risk and would then be driven "in despair to some other alliance."[21] This raised the stakes. Sparta would not want to acquire a reputation for weakness or be weakened in practice by the loss of substantial allies. This was what created the crisis for Sparta. To be sure, Corinth portrayed Athens as grasping with limitless hegemonic ambitions. But to the extent Sparta took note of Corinth, it was not because such fears were shared but because of concern about the defection of a key ally. Indeed the "war party" in Sparta was somewhat dismissive of Athenian power. King Archidamus was much warier, and more anxious to keep the peace, but his advice was ignored and in August 432 BCE, the Spartan assembly voted for war.

Yet even after voting for war, Sparta still sent diplomatic missions to Athens, and these almost resulted in a compromise. In the end it came down to the Megarian Decree. Notably, the emissaries did not push the cause of Corinth but identified the Decree as an unambiguous violation of the Thirty Years' Peace. Thucydides records that many speakers came forward with different views, some favoring war and others revoking the Decree for the sake of peace.[22] This time he reported Pericles's decisive intervention in detail, which focused on Sparta's rejection of arbitration. He accused it of relying on coercion rather than discussion. Such demands demonstrated a refusal to treat Athens as equal. He used an argument still often heard when warning of a larger ambition behind an opponent's apparently modest and reasonable demand. This was not a "trifle," Pericles insisted: "If you yield to them you will immediately be required to make another concession which will be greater, since you will have made the first concession out of fear."[23] Even then, there was restraint in his strategy. It put the onus on Sparta to strike the first blow and refuse arbitration.



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In the most extreme version, Thucydides's proposition about the inevitability of war does not stand up. There were a number of points where alternative views might have prevailed and made possible an alternative history. As Richard Ned Lebow has argued, far from being inevitable, war was "the result of an improbable series of remarkably bad judgments made by the leaders of the several powers involved."[24] These started with the lesser powers whose rivalries and entanglements drew in Sparta and Athens. The Athenians might have rejected Corcyra's bid for alliance; Sparta might have rejected Corinth's urgings to take a strong stand; Athens might have abandoned the Megarian Decree; Sparta might have agreed to arbitration.

Yet there were structural factors at play here. The relationship between the two alliances was unstable. There was sufficient residual distrust to create space for those lesser powers who wanted to pursue their own interests. Athens and Sparta had managed to make the Thirty Years' Peace work because there were leaders on both sides who were prepared to moderate any urges to action and aggrandizement in order to keep the peace, but each side also had hawkish factions that disliked moderation and made the case for war. Just as the Corinthians told the Spartans that Athens was inherently aggressive, so the Corcyreans told Athens that they should be welcomed as allies because of the strength of their combined navies. This would be needed when war came, for Sparta and its allies were "eager for war out of fear of you, and . . . the Corinthians have great influence with them and are your enemies."[25] Thus decision-making was unsettled by the developing fluidity in allegiances. Athens saw a choice between alliance with Corcyra or seeing its navy being taken by the Peloponnesians; Sparta saw a choice between backing Corinth's ambitions or risking its defection.

The leadership in both camps, however, was the same that had preserved the peace in the past. Now their ability to follow conciliatory, restrained strategies was circumscribed. Instead they tried to mitigate the effects of the harder line by presenting it in its most restrained version. Thus Pericles accepted an alliance with Corcyra but insisted it should be defensive, which was a novel concept intended to find the least provocative way forward short of rebuttal. When ships were dispatched to affirm this new alliance, it was only a small squadron, insufficient to embolden Corcyra to go on the offensive but also unfortunately insufficient to deter Corinth, so in the end Athens ended up with a more forward commitment than intended. When Sparta wanted to find a diplomatic alternative to the war it had already decided upon in principle, it did not push hard on behalf of Corinth but concentrated



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on what might have seemed to be a minor issue, the Megarian Decree. By then the room for maneuver on both sides was narrowing. Pericles saw danger in backing down in the face of any direct Spartan demand, but he promised to accept the verdict of arbitration.

The strategy Pericles then followed for the war also contained elements of restraint. It made sense if it was supposed that there was still a peace party in Sparta whose hand would be strengthened once it could be shown that the war party had embarked on a futile course. It also reflected another asymmetry between the two leagues. The Peloponnesian League was largely continental, while Athens—although itself on the mainland—presided over a largely maritime empire. Aware of the strength of the Spartan army, Pericles sought to avoid a land battle and rely instead on Athens's superior naval strength. Pericles did not see the possibility of inflicting a decisive blow against Sparta, so instead he sought a stalemate. His calculation was that Athens had the reserves to outlast Sparta even if the war dragged on for a number of years. In the language of later centuries, he sought victory through enemy exhaustion rather than annihilation.

Politically this strategy was brave in its restraint, but it represented an enormous gamble, and probably only someone with the prestige of Pericles could have carried the day with this proposition. The gamble did not come off. There were annual Spartan attacks on Attica—a source of produce near Athens—to which no response was made other than to send raiding parties around the Peloponnesus. The regular loss of crops from Attica drained the treasury's ability to import essential produce from elsewhere. It also left Athens looking helpless in the face of Spartan aggression. Then came a calamity. A plague in 430 BCE, aggravated by the overcrowding in Athens caused by displaced Atticans, resulted in immense distress. For once Pericles lacked good arguments. Eventually he was removed from office and peace was offered to Sparta. Sparta insisted on draconian terms, effectively asking Athens to abandon its empire, which completely undermined the peace party. Pericles returned as leader, but in 429 BCE he was struck by the plague (which almost killed Thucydides) and died. His efforts to find a course between excessive aggression and appeasement had led him to seek a combination of firmness and restraint. In the end, this increased rather than eased the risks to Athens. The strategy had a limited coercive effect on Sparta, was excessively costly to Athens, and encouraged the colonies to become rebellious. After Pericles died, Athens adopted a more aggressive strategy. This reaped some rewards, and even peace terms from Sparta, but it was then the Athenians' turn to overextend themselves.



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## *Language and Trickery*

Thucydides admired Pericles because of his ability to manage the Athenian political system by using his authority and eloquence to appeal to reason and persuade the crowd to adopt sensible policies rather than pandering to the demagoguery and mass irrationality that was an ever-present possibility in a democracy—and to which Athens succumbed after he died.[26]

Athenian democracy required that all the city's key decisions follow intense public deliberations. Strategy could not stay implicit but had to be articulated. It was essential not only to have the foresight to see how events might unfold if the right action was taken but also the ability to convince others that this was so. Assembly and courtroom debates involved opposing speeches—antilogies—that put a premium on the ability to develop strong arguments. There was an interest in the development and application of the persuasive arts.[27] Gorgias, who arrived in Athens during the early stages of the Peloponnesian War (427 BCE) and lived to a great age, offered displays of rhetorical virtuosity. He showed how it was possible to make a weak argument stronger through careful construction, and taught his art to willing pupils. He saw words as equivalent to physical force. They could cause pain and joy: "Some strike fear, some stir the audience to boldness, some benumb and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion." One of his surviving discourses demonstrated why Helen could be excused for triggering the Trojan War by running off with Paris. Protagoras, another influential figure, was notable for his explorations into the proper use of language. He somewhat uniquely described himself as a sophist (from *sophistes*, meaning "wise man"), a term that became significant retrospectively when Plato used it to define a whole group of thinkers. There was a market for a specialist education in public discourse. Litigants could learn how to plead effectively; candidates for office could broaden their appeal; active politicians could be more persuasive.[28]

Pericles enjoyed the company of the intellectuals, including Protagoras. He dismissed the idea that there was distinction to be made between men of action and those of words: "We are lovers of wisdom without sacrificing manly courage." Persuasion required compelling words: those with knowledge but not the "power clearly to express it" might as well have had no ideas at all. He presented himself to the people of Athens as "one who has at least as much ability as anyone else to see what ought to be done and explain what he sees." The importance of the persuasive arts explains why speeches and dialogues were so important in Thucydides's account. This is how Pericles presented strategic arguments, probably described by Thucydides with more coherence than they had in reality.



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Pericles's success lay in his authority and ability to convince the people to follow strategies developed with care and foresight. He sought to control events through the application and expression of intellect. As Parry put it, the creativity of his speeches lay in his ability to describe a future that could be achieved if his advice was followed. This concept of the future was drawn from existing reality but moved beyond it. Its plausibility derived from its practicability but also its "discernment of the strongest and most lasting forces in the outside world." Pericles then needed to ensure that events conformed to this vision. He therefore had to be much more than a persuasive orator. His speeches were strategic scripts, offering a satisfactory way forward that reflected his grasp of what might be possible in the light of the forces at work in the world. More than most, he could make reality correspond with his vision by setting out ways of acting that the Athenians could follow successfully. But it always also depended on how foes acted as well as factors of chance. In the end, the integrity of the script could be undermined by events. The deeper meaning of Thucydides's account was tragic, because it revealed the limits of strategic reasoning in the face of a contrary world:

> But actuality in the end proves unmanageable. It breaks in upon men's conceptions, changes them, and finally destroys them. Even where men's conceptions are sound and reasonable, where by their own creative power and their discernment of actuality they *correspond* to things, actuality in its capacity as Luck, will behave in an *unreasonable* way, as Pericles says, and overturn conceptions of the greatest nobility and intelligence.

For Pericles it was the plague in its terrible suddenness, symbolizing "the destructive and incalculable power of actuality," that undermined his vision and denied the control he sought over the historical process. Once he could not convince the Athenian people, he was undone. The tragedy for Thucydides, in offering Pericles as his hero, was that he could not accept an alternative approach. Words as action, analyzing reality and showing how it could be reshaped, were the only hope of controlling actuality. When conceptions and language struggled to keep up with reality, they became almost meaningless and turned into slogans, devoid of true meaning.[29]

Another character, Diodotus, provided a critique. When the oligarchs of Mytilene revolted unsuccessfully against Athens, Diodotus persuaded his fellow citizens not to impose a harsh punishment as demanded by the demagogue Cleon. In doing so, Diodotus reflected on the role of speech-making in a democracy. It was essential, he argued, that decent citizens should make



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cases based on rational arguments honestly expressed, but the hostile environment of the assembly was putting a premium on deception.

> It has become the rule also to treat good advice honestly given as being no less under suspicion than the bad, so that a person who has something good to say must tell lies in order to be believed, just as someone who gives terrible advice must win over the people by deception.[30]

He then illustrated his point by making his case for leniency on the basis of Athenian interests rather than justice and by drawing attention to the limited deterrent effect of harsh punishments.[31]

An even more striking example of Thucydides's concern with the corruption of language was found in his description of the uprising in Corcyra, which resulted in a bloody civil war between the democrats and the oligarchs. As he described the breakdown of social order, he also described the corruption of language. Recklessness became courage, prudence became cowardice, moderation became unmanly, an ability to see all sides of a question became an incapacity to act, while violence became manly and plotting self-defense. The advocate of extreme measures was to be trusted and those who opposed them suspect.[32] The language followed the action. As restraint collapsed so did the possibity of sensible discourse.

## *Plato's Strategic Coup*

By the end of the century, Athens was diminished and entering a period of political turbulence, during which it was brutally run for a while by Spartan sympathizers. Intellectuals—once such an active, positive force—became objects of suspicion, and they withdrew from political affairs. One figure became cast in the role of a martyr for philosophy. Socrates had said positive things about Sparta and negative things about democracy, took a constantly critical attitude, and was considered to look and act strangely. He was sentenced to death in 399 BCE for corrupting the young. Although Socrates left no writings, he did have devoted students, including Plato, who was about twenty-five when Socrates died. Plato created an idealized version of his teacher, developing his own philosophy by recording many of Socrates's supposed conversations. Plato left a rich series of dialogues on an extraordinary range of issues, but no definitive and systematic account of his views. Nonetheless, certain themes emerged strongly. The most relevant for our purposes concerned the political role of philosophy, including damning those that had gone before for the very qualities that had made their intellects



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strategic. It was Plato who labeled this prior philosophy as sophism, for which he developed a formidable charge sheet.

According to Plato, the sophists were not serious in their philosophical endeavors. They had given up on the search for truth in order to play rhetorical games, using their persuasive powers on behalf of any case—however unworthy the cause or perverse the logic—in return for payment. Based largely on his own testimony, Plato bequeathed an enduring and demeaning image of the sophists as the "spin-doctors" of their day, rhetorical strategists, relativist in their morality, disinterested in truth, suggesting that all that really mattered was power. They were hired hands, traveling wordsmiths who sold their skills to the highest bidder without any view of right and wrong. They displayed an appalling capacity to defeat a just argument by an unjust one and so use their cleverness to confuse ordinary people. An art put up for sale lost its worth. By serving a variety of masters, the sophists lacked a moral core and encouraged forms of competitive demagogy. The demands of conscience and sense of collective responsibility, shared values and respect for tradition, were all put at risk by their relentless skepticism, disdain for the gods, and promotion of self-interest. Tricks with language allowed the foolish and ignorant to appear wise and knowledgeable. For Plato, virtues were universal and timeless, and it was only through philosophy that they could be described and defined.

This charge sheet has now been discredited: the sophists were not a coherent group, and their views were complex and varied. It was not a collective name they chose for themselves, and it only acquired a pejorative connotation because of Plato. A number may not even have been that interested in persuasion but were instead experimenting in discourse and also providing a form of intellectually mischievous entertainment.[33] The artificiality of Plato's exercise is attested to by his deliberate attempt to rescue his teacher Socrates from this despised group of imposters, despite the fact that Socrates shared many of their characteristics, not least his skeptical, questioning approach to all forms of inquiry. In contemporary terms that Chapter 26 further explores, we might say that Plato engineered a "paradigm shift," and he did this by lumping together those with whom he disagreed into an old paradigm that failed to meet the tests of truth-seeking, to be compared to the new paradigm, developed around a distinct, specialized discipline and profession of philosophy. To use another contemporary term, he "framed" the issue as being a choice between the ethical search for the truth on the one hand and the expedient construction of persuasive arguments as a form of trade on the other. Pericles saw intellectual cultivation as something to which all Athenians aspired; Plato saw philosophy as an exclusive vocation with pure objectives.[34]



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Plato believed that true philosophers would be so special that they should be rulers. This would not be because they were skilled in argument and could get people to support their preferred course of action, for Plato did not believe in democracy. It was because they could acquire the highest form of knowledge, grasping with clarity and certainty the essential quality of goodness, which they could then employ to watch over and care for the citizenry. Plato was no enthusiast for intellectual pluralism or the complex interaction of ideas and action that characterized a vibrant political system. The rulers must have supreme power to decide what was wise and just. This vision has had an occasional appeal to would-be philosopher-kings and has been identified as a source of totalitarianism.[35]

Apparently contradicting his insistence on truth as the highest goal was his advocacy of a foundational myth, a "noble lie" that would keep the people "content in their roles." The advocate was Socrates: "We want one single, grand lie which will be believed by everybody—including the rulers ideally, but failing that the rest of the city."[36] No issue demonstrated more the tension inherent in combining the role of philosopher and ruler, with their respective commitments to the truth and civic order. Plato seems to have reconciled the two by a notion of truth that was not merely empirical but also moral, an insight into the higher virtues. Not everyone could have this sort of insight and this created responsibilities when dealing with lesser minds, the lower classes whose grasp of the world was always bound to be limited and illusory. The noble lie was therefore one for good purpose, introduced by Socrates as charter myths for his ideal city. These must be lies that produce harmony and well-being, compared to those of Homer, for example, whose fictions were all about killing and disputes. The noble lie was a white lie on a grand scale. Just as children might be tricked into taking medicines or soldiers encouraged into battle, so communities had to be educated into a belief in social harmony and a conviction that the existing order was natural. The class structure was therefore the result of the different metals the gods had put into individual souls—gold for rulers, silver for auxiliaries, and iron and bronze for farmers and artisans.

Plato's main legacy was not in the character of rulers but in the establishment of philosophy as a specialist profession. Later we will see how something similar happened with the post-enlightenment social sciences in modern times. What started as a set of puzzles about knowledge and its practical application, engaging directly with large and contentious social and political questions, became an assertion of a specialist expertise and claims to a higher "scientific" truth. Strategy, which had to be about conflict—not just between and within the city states but also between the claims of words



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and the reality of deeds, between the virtue of honesty and the expedience of deception—was always far from a Platonic ideal. Part of Plato's legacy was the sharp distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, in place of a tradition which appreciated the constant interaction between views of the world and the experience of coping with its complexities.



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# CHAPTER 4 | Sun Tzu and Machiavelli

*All warfare is based on deception.*

—Sun Tzu

The most powerful dichotomy in all strategic thought was the one first introduced by Homer as the distinction between biē and mētis, one seeking victory in the physical domain and the other in the mental, one relying on being strong and the other on being smart, one depending on courage and the other imagination, one facing the enemy directly and the other approaching indirectly, one prepared to fall with honor and the other seeking to survive with deception. Under the Romans the pendulum swung away from mētis and toward biē. Homer's Odysseus morphed into Virgil's Ulysses and became part of a story of deceitful and treacherous Greeks. Even the Athenians, as they found themselves on the losing side in their war with Sparta, began to have some sympathy for the Trojans and saw Odysseus's cruel trick in a new light. Heroes were sought who were more plain-speaking, honorable as well as brave in battle, less reliant on cunning and cleverness.

Thus the Roman historian Livy wrote of the more traditionally minded Senators' distaste for a tendency toward "an excessively cunning wisdom." This was akin to "Punic tricks and Greek craftiness, among whom it was more glorious to deceive an enemy than to conquer by force." Romans would not wage war "through ambushes and nocturnal battles, nor through feigned flight and unforeseen returns upon a careless enemy." On occasion there

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might be "more profit in trick than courage." The spirit of an enemy, however, could only be truly suppressed by "open hand-to-hand combat in a just and righteous war," rather than by "craft or accident."[1]

Despite this stance, the attraction of trickery remained strong. Valerius Maximus, writing not long after at the time of Tiberius, described stratagems positively and offered the first formal definition. "Truly that aspect of cunning is illustrious and far removed from all reproach, whose deeds are called by the Greek expression *strategemata*, because they can scarcely be suitably expressed by a (single Latin) term." The examples he gave were a *salubre mendacium* ("a healthy mentality") to lift morale (effectively persuading one part of your force to attack on the grounds—not necessarily true—that another part was advancing effectively); a false refugee (such as Sinon) who corrupts the enemy from within; a psychological ploy of the besieged to demoralize their besiegers; deceiving one enemy army of your presence, while striking another of their armies with double strength; maneuvers to confuse the enemy, followed by a surprise attack; and besieging the foe's city when he makes an attempt against yours. All this captured the basic psychological aspect of deception: unsettling the enemy or at least reassuring your own side. A stratagem would permit more to be accomplished than by arms alone.[2]

In *Strategemata*, composed by the Roman Senator Frontinus between 84 and 88, the traditions of Roman warfare were passed on. The book was widely disseminated and retained a long influence, including Machiavelli for example. Frontinus made a distinction, possibly of his own invention, in the introduction. "If there prove to be any persons who take an interest in these books," he asked, "let them remember to discriminate between 'strategy' and 'stratagems,' which are by nature extremely similar." Strategy or strategika referred to "everything achieved by a commander, be it characterized by foresight, advantage, enterprise, or resolution." Stratagems, or strategemata, the subject of the book, rested "on skill and cleverness." They were "effective quite as much when the enemy is to be evaded as when he is to be crushed."[3] Frontinus's stratagems certainly included elements of trickery and deception, but they also included more practical matters and efforts to sustain the morale of troops. So stratagems were a subset of strategy. Frontinus did write a general treatise on military matters, but this unfortunately was lost.

In other cultures, stratagems and cunning were considered much more appealing—especially to get out of a tight spot—and commended as essential features of an effective strategy. Lisa Raphals, picking up on Detienne and Vernant's discussion of mētis, made the comparison with the Chinese term *zhi*. This had a wide variety of meanings from wisdom, knowledge, and



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intelligence to skill, craft, cleverness, or cunning. The individual who demonstrated *zhi* appeared as a sage general, whose mastery of the art of deception allowed him to prevail over an opponent of stronger physical force, just like those with mētis.[4] Winning against a weak opponent required nothing special. Real skill was shown by getting into positions that did not allow for defeat and would ensure victory over enemies. Deception was crucial: conveying confusion when there was order, cowardice instead of courage, weakness instead of strength. It also required the ability to determine when the enemy was attempting to deceive. Spies, for example, could help understand enemy dispositions and then judge when to be crafty or straightforward, when to maneuver and when to attack directly, when to commit and when to stay flexible.

## *Sun Tzu*

The enduring model of the sage warrior was Sun Tzu, as represented by the short book on strategy known as *The Art of War*. Little is known about the author, or even if there was a single author. According to tradition, he was a general who served the king of Wu in Eastern China around 500 BCE, toward the end of China's Spring and Autumn period, although no contemporary references to him have been found. *The Art of War* seems to have been written or at least compiled over the subsequent century during the Warring States period. The context was a competition for influence among a set of individually weak kingdoms at a time when central authority in China had collapsed. Over time the text acquired important commentaries which added to its significance. There are other Chinese military classics from this period, but Sun Tzu remains the best known.

Sun Tzu's influence lies in the underlying approach to strategy. Influenced by Taoist philosophy, *The Art of War* covers statecraft as well as war. As with any ancient text, the language could seem quaint and the references obscure but the underlying theme was clear enough. Supreme excellence in war was not found in winning "one hundred victories in one hundred battles." Rather, it was better "to subdue the enemy without fighting." The great strategist had to be a master of deception, using force where it was most effective: "Avoid what is strong to strike what is weak."[5] Defeating the enemy's strategy (or "balk the enemy's plans") was the "highest form of generalship." Next came preventing "the junction of the enemy's forces," followed by attacking "the enemy's army in the field," and—worst of all—besieging walled cities.


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In Sun Tzu's formulaic aphorisms, the key to deception was simply a matter of doing the opposite of what was expected—look incapacitated when capable, passive when active, near when far, far when near. This required good order and discipline. Simulating cowardice, for example, required courage. It also required an understanding of the opponent. If the enemy general was "choleric," then he could be easily upset; if "obstinate and prone to anger," insults could enrage him and cause him to be impetuous; if arrogant, he could be lulled into a false sense of superiority and a lowered guard. A dangerous commander, according to Sun Tzu, would be reckless, cowardly, quick-tempered, too concerned with reputation, and too compassionate.

What really made the difference was "foreknowledge." This could not be "elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from calculations. It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation" and could acquire information about dispositions, the character of the troops, and the identity of the generals. The enemy's political relationships could also be a target. "Sometimes drive a wedge between a sovereign and his ministers; on other occasions separate his allies from him. Make them mutually suspicious so that they drift apart. Then you can plot against them."

For East Asian generals, Sun Tzu became a standard text. He was an evident influence in the writings of the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong. Napoleon was said to have studied a French Jesuit's translation of *The Art of War*. Though not available in English until the early twentieth century, it came to be taken increasingly seriously as a source of military and—during the 1980s—even business wisdom. The book's approach was most relevant for those facing complex struggles, in which encounters were expected to be indecisive and alliances and enmities were shifting.

*The Art of War* did not provide a single route to victory and recognized that while battles were best avoided they sometimes had to be fought. Sun Tzu described relatively simple conflicts, in which bold moves left an enemy helpless or dissolving into disorder. A possible weakness, in a "strong tendency to point out what one should strive for, rather than explain how one should achieve one's aim," was also a source of strength. Any such explanations would now seem arcane and overtaken by massive changes in military methodology; if Sun Tzu had offered detailed advice on tactics, the book would now tend to be passed over. Instead, students of Sun Tzu are "merely given specific pointers as to what to ponder, but the solution, or the way one chooses to tread, must be one's own."[6]

His approach worked best when followed by only one side: if both commanders were reading Sun Tzu, the maneuvers and deceptions could lead



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to no decision at all or else an unexpected collision that caught them both unaware. A reputation for deception would lead to a lot of double-guessing, just as one for avoiding battle could turn into a presumption of weakness. In the face of a strong and coherent adversary, clever mind games could take you only so far. If both sides were doing everything possible to avoid a frontal confrontation, then the victor would be the one who could avoid commitment the longest, eventually reaching a point where the enemy had nowhere else to go and so had to fight at a disadvantage or surrender. There was, at any rate, only a limited amount of mystery and subtlety that a leader could cultivate without confusing those being led as much as the opponent. In the end, the point about Sun Tzu was not that he offered a winning formula for all situations but that he offered an ideal type of a particular sort of strategy, based on outsmarting the opponent rather than overwhelming him with brute force.

François Jullien developed an intriguing line of thought by demonstrating the similarities between the Chinese approach to war, as exemplified by Sun Tzu, and the Chinese use of language. He argued that the disinclination to engage in high-risk, potentially destructive direct confrontations in war was also followed in rhetorical conflicts, which were similarly indirect and implicit. Circuitous, subtle forms of expression, both allusive and elusive, could be the equivalents of armies dodging and harrying. By refusing to be pinned down or make an argument with sufficient clarity to be refuted, the initiative could be kept—although this could make for potentially infinite "games of manipulation."[7] Following an indirect approach to discourse would raise the same problems as with battle: when both sides were using identical ploys the contest could be indefinite and it would be hard to reach any sort of closure.

Jullien offered a contrast with the Athenians. They saw the advantages in decisive action that brought both war and argument to a quick close, thereby avoiding the expense and frustrations of prolonged confrontation. Warfare was direct and battle based, with troops organized into phalanxes to ensure maximum impact against the enemy, and victory coming to those with the requisite strength and courage. The generals were capable of deception and understood the advantages of surprise, but they did not want to waste time in games of dodging and harassment. In the same way, the Athenians were straightforward in argument. Whether in the theater, the tribunal, or the assembly, orators would make their cases directly and transparently, with points open to refutation, within a limited time period. There could therefore be decisive arguments as there were decisive battles. In these battles of persuasion in which—as Thucydides put it—arguments were "hurled



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forcefully against each other," the decision would come from a third party such as a jury or the electorate.

This was an appealing contrast, and it may be that the approach to battles of persuasion reflected broad and enduring cultural preferences that affected attitudes to any confrontation. The suggestion, however, of a strong Greek preference for "decisive" battle came from Victor David Hanson's controversial argument that the terms for a continuing Western way of war were set in classical times.[8] Critics have challenged this theory on the basis of the analysis of Greek warfare and the subsequent history.[9] Beatrice Heuser has demonstrated emphatically that at least one strong strand in Western military thought up to the Napoleonic wars was to avoid pitched battles: "Few believed either in the inevitability or the unconditional desirability of battle."[10] Quintus Fabius Maximus, who gave his name to the "Fabian strategy," was initially derided as the "delayer" because of what seemed to be a cowardly strategy in the face of the pillaging advance of Hannibal's Carthaginian army. But after the Roman defeat at Cannae in 17 BCE, the wisdom of the approach was acknowledged. For some thirteen years thereafter, the Romans avoided pitched battles, while harassing Hannibal's supply lines, until he finally gave up and left Italy.

The Roman treatise on warfare best known through the Middle Ages, when the vital lessons were all still believed to be contained in classical texts, was the *De Re Militari* of Vegetus. Because similar constraints of resources, transport, and geography were faced during the Middle Ages, the key issues were logistical and an offensive army unable to forage and pillage would get into trouble. The relevant line from the *De Re Militari* stated that battle was the "last extremity" and should only be followed when all other plans had been considered and expedients tried. Where the odds were too great, battle should be declined. Better to employ "stratagem and finesse" to destroy the enemy as much as possible in detail and then intimidate them. Vegetus expressed, in terms similar to Sun Tzu, a preference for starving enemies into submission rather than fighting them ("famine is more terrible than the sword"), and spoke of how it "is better to beat the enemy through want, surprises, and care for difficult places (i.e., through maneuver) than by a battle in the open field."[11] There has been a debate on whether medieval warfare was really so battle averse. Clifford Rogers argued that commanders were more prepared to seek battle—at least when on the offensive—but he was far from insisting that the decisive battle was the dominant mode of warfare.[12]

The Byzantine emperor Maurice's *Strategikon* had a similar take at the start of the seventh century: "[I]t is well to hurt the enemy by deceit, by raids or by hunger, and never be enticed to a pitched battle, which is a demonstration



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more of luck than of bravery." To indicate that there was another view, Heuser quoted Henri, duke of Rohan, writing during the Thirty Years' War that "of all actions of war the most glorious and the most important is to give battle," and regretting that wars were then "made more in the fashion of the fox than of the lion, and . . . based more on sieges than on combat." But Heuser then noted that he saw no combat and that those who had experience of war were much more cautious. Maurice de Saxe, who led the French forces in the early eighteenth century, saw pitched battles as best avoided:

> Nothing so reduces the enemy to absurdity as this method: nothing advances affairs better. Frequent small engagements will dissipate the enemy until he is forced to hide from you.[13]

Using armies for occasional raiding, assaulting the economic life of the enemy, and threatening and demoralizing the enemy's population provided an alternative form of coercion to battle. Most importantly, when accounting for success—for example, with regard to the Hundred Years' War—"political elements were always more significant than military ones," even with talented strategists in command and after victory in pitched battle.[14] The English made the most of their local allies in France just as the French sought to encourage the Scots to distract the English at home.

As the retrospective label "Hundred Years' War" indicates, conflicts might move through distinctive stages but lack decisiveness because the underlying disputes were never fully resolved. In this respect, the role of battle was quite different at this time from how it later became understood. Commenting on the strategic considerations behind one of the most famous battles of this war, when the English under Henry V beat the French at Agincourt in 1415, Jan Willem Honig urged that battle be viewed in terms of the complex conventions of the time, in which sieges, hostages, political demands, and even massacres all had their allotted place. Both sides moved warily toward battle, appearing to both seek and fear it at the same time, and worked their way through an elaborate script, before the two armies confronted each other for the vital encounter. Behind all of this, argued Honig, was the "metaphysical mystique" surrounding battle, for it reflected a view of war as litigation with God as the judge and battle as decisive as a divine judgment. It came when all other forms of dispute settlement had been exhausted.

> The result was a competition in risk which was tempered by the mutually shared fear of appealing to God, the ultimate judge. This fear, and the doubt that any good medieval Christian had regarding the justice of his cause and the strength of his faith, produced an incentive to



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> develop and adhere to a set of conventions which kept the armed interaction between opponents within certain bounds.

This meant that warfare could follow relatively predictable paths, and face-saving ways of avoiding battle were available. There was still uncertainty over whether the opponent would follow the rules or offer a self-serving interpretation, but shared norms nonetheless influenced conflict and strategy.[15] Despite its dangers, battle had a special role as an occasional means of resolving disputes by reference to chance. It was a form of contract, a way of agreeing on who had won and what victory meant. It required accepting that since a peaceful settlement was unavailable, this was how a dispute was best resolved. Battle was a "chance of arms," a form of consensual violence out of which would emerge a victor. The battles were limited in time and space, fought on a defined field within a single day (tension at dawn, exhaustion by dusk). Within those confines they would be bloody and vicious, but at least they might produce a conclusion without spilling over into the rest of the country. The minimum required to declare victory was to hold the field of battle at the end of the day, as the enemy fled. A battle could only be decisive if both sides agreed who had won and the practical value of victory. This was not the self-restraint derived from either aristocratic codes of chivalry or a concept of limited strategy but a function of law. Battle was considered an enforceable wager. It was precisely because so much could be at stake and fortune could play such a large part that it was approached with such caution.[16]

## *Machiavelli*

> I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;
> I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
> I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
> Deceive more slily than Ulysses could,
> And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
> I can add colors to the chameleon,
> Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
> And set the murderous Machiavel to school.[17]

Whether rules for acceptable behavior were always followed strictly, they certainly shaped the discourse of the time. This helps explain the dramatic impact of Niccolo Machiavelli's sharp explanations for political behavior based



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on the self-interest of rulers. He went beyond tolerance for ruses and subterfuge in war to the heart of the conduct of all the affairs of state. He came to be placed on the line of cunning and thus untrustworthy operators that began with Odysseus. It was not long before "Machiavellian" came to describe anyone with a talent for manipulation and an inclination to deceit in the pursuit of personal gain, fascinated with power for its own sake rather than with the virtuous and noble things power allows one to do. Machiavelli's amorality was denounced by the Church, so that the "Machiavel," the embodiment of this theory, could be presented as almost an instrument of the devil (Niccolo fitting neatly the pre-existing Satanic moniker of "old Nick"). In the Duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), whose words are quoted above, Shakespeare identified a man who epitomized the worst defects of such a character.

Niccolo Machiavelli himself was a Florentine bureaucrat, diplomat, political adviser, and practical philosopher. His most famous book, *The Prince*, was written as a handbook for rulers and asserted Machiavelli's own qualifications to serve as an adviser at a time of great turbulence and danger in Italian affairs. There was urgency in his prose that reflected the desperation of his times and a fear of the political consequences of weakness for Florence in particular and Italy in general in the face of French and Spanish strength. For the same reason, Machiavelli also wrote intelligently and persuasively on military affairs. He sought a more enduring form of military capability, based on conscription, that could provide a more reliable base from which to defend the state and extend its power. Unfortunately, the Florentine militia he helped establish was defeated in battle with the Spanish at Prato in 1512. As with Thucydides, Machiavelli's exclusion from actual power gave him the time to write about how power might be exercised by others.

It also gave him a detached perspective, adding to his sense of the difference between the ideal world, in which the truly noble would always be rewarded for their virtue, and the less uplifting reality. Machiavelli's method was empirical, which is why he is considered the father of political science. He did not consider himself to be offering a new morality but rather a reflection on contemporary practical morality. Political survival depended on an unsentimental realism rather than the pursuit of an illusory ideal. This meant paying attention to conflicts of interests and their potential resolution by either force or trickery. But guile and cunning could not create their own political legacy: the foundation of states still lay in good laws and good armies.

Machiavelli's interest in political methodology reflected the same challenge that stimulated most strategists, including Sun Tzu: how to cope with the potentially greater strength of others. Machiavelli did not exaggerate the



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scope of strategy. There would always be risks. It was therefore not always possible to identify a safe course. Anticipating the "minimax" outcome in twentieth-century game theory, he observed that: "In the nature of things you can never try to escape one danger without encountering another; but prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the nature of the different dangers and in accepting the least bad as good."[18] What could be done depended on circumstances. "[F]ortune governs one half of our actions, but even so she leaves the half more or less in our power to control." Even in this area of apparent control, it would be necessary to adapt to circumstances. Free will suggested the possibility of fitting events to an established character; Machiavelli suggested that the character would be shaped by events.

Machiavelli's *Art of War* was the only book published during his lifetime. This might have been the inspiration for the title given to Sun Tzu's work. Indeed, almost all disquisition on the subject—from that of Raimondo Montecuccoli in the seventeenth century to Maurice de Saxe in the eighteenth to Baron de Jomini in the nineteenth—was called *The Art of War*. This was a generic title, often covering largely technical matters. Machiavelli's contribution to the genre was extremely successful and was translated into many languages. He addressed the potential value of a standing army and how one could be properly formed to serve the true interests of the state. He struggled with the practical issues of the day, from fortresses to the advent of gunpowder. Because the book took the form of a conversation between individuals debating the key issues, and it cannot be assumed that one always represented Machiavelli's thoughts, exactly where he stood on some issues remained ambiguous. But the broad thrust of his concerns was evident, particularly the importance of a competent and loyal army in providing for security and creating diplomatic freedom to maneuver. He understood the relationship of war to politics and the importance of making sure an enemy was clearly defeated even after it left the field of battle, so there was no chance to regroup. He understood that battle might be a place where Fortuna had a large hand and for that reason was wary of leaving her too much of a role. Hence the need to engage all forces in battle rather than make a limited commitment. Not surprisingly, he also showed regard for deception, trickery, and espionage, the advantages that could come through being better informed than the enemy, and an occasionally stated preference for winning without battle if possible.

The most interesting aspects of his work, however, were less about dealing with an external enemy and more about sustaining loyalty and commitment internally. This concern was reflected in his preference for a local militia rather than professional soldiers motivated only by money. He was



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unsure about appeals to patriotism and more confident in tough discipline, including practical measures to make sure that deserters could not take their possessions with them. "To persuade or dissuade a few of a thing is very easy. For if words are not enough, you can use authority or force." Convincing the multitude was more difficult: they had to be persuaded en masse. Because of this, "excellent captains need to be orators." Speaking to the army "takes away fear, inflames spirits, increases obstinacy, uncovers deceptions, promises rewards, shows dangers and the way to flee them, fills with hope, praises, vituperates, and does all those things by which the human passion are extinguished or inflamed."[19] The sort of orations that might make men want to fight would encourage indignation and contempt toward enemies and make the soldiers ashamed of their sloth and cowardice.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli offered notoriously cynical advice on how to gain and hold on to power, by being ready to indulge in all manner of private dealings while appearing publicly beyond reproach. The underlying message was that if you sought to be virtuous in both word and deed you would suffer badly. Survival must be the highest objective; otherwise nothing could be achieved. This required the prince to vary his conduct according to changing circumstance, including a readiness to act immorally whenever necessary. In one of his most famous passages, Machiavelli posed the question

> whether it be better to be loved than feared, or the reverse? The answer is that one would like to be both the one and the other: but because it is difficult to combine, it is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both. One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well, they are yours. They would shed their blood for you, risk their property, their lives, their children, so long, as I said above, as danger is remote; but when you are in danger they turn against you.[20]

This negative view of human nature was central to Machiavelli's approach. At one point he contrasted the lessons to be learned from the lion and the fox, the first representing strength and the second cunning. One needed to be a fox "in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves." As "men are wretched creatures who could not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them." It was, however, no good to be caught in displays of bad faith. That was why it was useful to be a fox: "One must know how to color one's actions and to be a great liar and deceiver. Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find somebody ready to be deceived." As much as possible it was best for the prince to



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appear to be "compassionate, faithful to his word, guileless, and devout," and even to act that way so long as it was prudent to do so. It could be helpful to be seen to be harsh, for that helped maintain order, but not to be considered entirely without virtue. "Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are . . . The common people are always impressed by appearances and results."[21] A capacity to mislead—and on a large scale—was an essential attribute. At some point the appearance of virtue could not be wholly detached from practice. Machiavelli understood that to hold on to power it was necessary to reduce the reliance on harsh, cruel methods and to behave in more moderate, graceful ways.

Princes, he warned, should avoid being hated and despised. He was not against the use of cruelty but thought it should only be employed when essential and then "once and for all" so that it was possible to turn to "the good of one's subjects." He advised strongly against the sort of cruelty "which, although infrequent to start with, as time goes on, rather than disappearing, becomes more evident." This was based on his assessment of human psychology. If the prince got his harsh behavior over right at the start, and then refrained from repetition, "he will be able to set men's minds at rest and win them over to him when he confers benefits." Otherwise, the prince "is always forced to have the knife ready in his hand and he can never depend on his subjects because they, suffering fresh and continuous violence, can never feel secure with regard to him." Though violence should be inflicted once and for all, for "people will then forget what it tastes like and so be less resentful," benefits by contrast should be conferred gradually because "they will taste better."[22] Machiavelli understood that even if power was obtained by force and guile and consolidated with cruelty, it required consent to be secured. The best power was that which had to be exercised least.

Although *Machiavellian* has become synonymous with strategies based on deceit and manipulation, Machiavelli's approach was actually far more balanced. He understood that the more the prince was perceived to rely on devious methods, the less likely it would be that they succeeded. The wise strategist would seek to develop a foundation for the exercise of power that went beyond false impressions and harsh punishments, but on real accomplishments and general respect.



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# CHAPTER 5 | Satan's Strategy

*The will is a beast of burden. If God mounts it, it wishes and goes as God wills; if Satan mounts it, it wishes and goes as Satan wills. Nor can it choose its rider . . . the riders contend for its possession.*

—Martin Luther

Machiavelli's influence on subsequent political thought was profound. His candid appreciation of the realities of power provided new ways to talk about politics, whether offered as guidance to those prepared to be flexible and adaptable—as he advocated—or taken to the extremes personified in the sinister and amoral stage villain Machiavel. One striking illustration of his influence on discussions of political conduct is found in the writings of John Milton. In his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, Milton's Satan is the embodiment of Machiavellianism. Evaluating Satan's strategy allows us to consider the limits and possibilities of the attributes associated with Machiavelli, as well as the continuing constraints imposed on strategic freedom by the presence of God.

Milton's core project was to address the most perplexing of theological issues about free will as first introduced by the story of Adam and Eve. If everything was preordained, Adam and Eve had no choice in the matter. Their original sin was not their fault. If it was their fault, God still needed to have some reason to allow it to happen. If the choice was between good

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and evil, then God must have created evil. If human beings could be tempted in this way, then they must have been created imperfect. Yet if this was a consequence of the original design, did they deserve to be punished? If there was no flaw, then how were they able to sin, and from where did they find a concept of sin? How could there be two falls, as Eve was the only one actually tempted by the serpent before she went on to persuade Adam. What was the serpent's motive?

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton tried to make sense of all of this. At one level, his story was about a rebellion within a kingdom, the defeat of the rebels, and the consequences of the rebels' attempts to reverse their defeat. At another level, it was—as Milton put it in his introduction—about how to "justify the ways of God to man," particularly how to reconcile God's omnipotence with man's free will. And at yet another level, it was about earthly relationships between kings and men. Milton wrote during the restoration of the monarchy following a civil war in which he had been a devoted republican. It was a time of suppression of dissenters; at one point, Milton himself was close to being executed for treason.

The concept of free will raises questions about God's role in human affairs. If God does not intervene, then what is the purpose of prayer and repentance? If he does intervene, then why do bad things happen to good people? Contemporary theologians may have come up with formulations to answer these questions, but in seventeenth-century Europe when Milton was writing, they were hot topics—politically as well as religiously.

The century began under the influence of a rigorous Calvinism preaching a God of such power that little could be done to thwart his will. Divine grace had been allocated in advance. Everything was set in motion by the original grand design. "God orders and ordains all things," observed Augustine of Hippo. He worked in the "hearts of men to incline their wills withersoever He wills." He "freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass," echoed the Calvinists. Nothing could happen that reflected any will other than his. Humankind was just playing out a drama according to a script set down by God at the moment of creation, with no later need for improvisation. It was beyond the comprehension of mere men. This view went even beyond omnipotence, which merely presumed that God could intervene in human society if and when he wished to do so, and assumed that history was set on an unalterable course. If all events were predetermined, and choice was merely an illusion, then the only response was fatalism. Any attempt to change the course of history was pointless.

Against the Calvinists, the followers of Jacobus Arminius argued that humans are able to make their own histories through the exercise of free will



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and that God's strength was manifest in acts of love in response to humans' obedience and repentance for their sins. The God of the Calvinists was arbitrary and beyond explanation. The God of the Arminians would allow no arbitrary exclusion from his grace and insisted on the human ability to distinguish good from evil, in order to demonstrate their obedience to God.

By the time of *Paradise Lost*, and after an early Calvinism, Milton was with the Arminians. His view was that "God made no absolute decrees about anything which he left in the power of men, for men have freedom of action." To hold the opposite position would be absurd and unfair. If God turned "man to moral good or evil just as he likes, and then rewards the good and punishes the wicked, it will cause an outcry against divine justice from all sides."[1] The best answer to the conundrum posed by Genesis was that without evil there would be no way to test the faith of humans and allow them to realize their potential for goodness. Milton has God explain that he made man, "just and right/ Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."[2]

One way to think about evil was as a function of human weakness, a constant readiness to be tempted and knowingly disobey God's word. Another way, common by Milton's time, was to consider evil as a living, active force, deliberately trying to subvert God and tempt man. Evil acquired the personality of Satan, and the serpent in Genesis was therefore really Satan in disguise, although there was no basis in Genesis for this notion. In a number of ancient civilizations, serpents have signified evil, but also fertility. Satan did not appear until late in the Bible and then not in opposition to God but as a loyal angel. Satan had an adversarial role and took a harsh line in disputations before God in heaven, but he was always loyal in the end. The best-known example of this is in the book of Job, when he is introduced as returning "from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it."[3] His role was one of challenging men in their sinfulness. It was Satan who urged God to test Job, and when God agreed, Satan was sent to make Job's life miserable. Nonetheless, Satan did this not as a rebel but as a member of the heavenly court.

Eventually Satan, acting not merely as a harsh angel but also as one who had fallen, came to be blamed for all forms of division and misery. The early Church had attempted to challenge the influence of Manichaeism (another eastern religion which explained matters in terms of the contrast between the forces of good and evil), but its insistence that evil was not constituted as a live being failed to convince. The idea of a demonic force constantly seeking to lure humankind away from obeying God took hold. The main difference for Manicheans was that in the end this had to be an unequal struggle. Hell could be no sanctuary where Satan reigned supreme. God was always superior.



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Evil could therefore imperil the world but also be sufficiently containable and vulnerable to defeat.[4] The Bible closes with the book of Revelation, in which Satan represents the forces of evil. An extraordinary scene is described, a war in heaven between Michael and "the dragon," each with their own cohort of angels. "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."[5] Biblical scholars consider this to refer to a vision of a tremendous upheaval at the end of time. Milton was not alone, however, in taking this to refer to the start of time. It was Satan's rebellion against God that led to his exile to earth where he became a troublemaker, gaining his first victory as the serpent persuading Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.

## *Heavenly Battles*

Milton's narrative gained force not only because of his mastery of language and sense of drama but also because of his intense commitment to the notion of free will. To square the circle of faith, he sought to demonstrate that the true exercise of free will leads to a decision to obey God completely and without reservation. So while God allows free will, he knows how individuals will decide. Milton also distinguished between a challenge to the authority of a secular king—a good thing—and a challenge to the heavenly king—a bad thing. Indeed, the secular king's authority needed to be challenged because it was tantamount to a challenge to God's authority. The arguments that might be used to justify disobedience in one context should not work at all in another. Yet rhetorically this did not quite work, as the arguments against both types of kings sounded very similar. As many commentators have observed, when Satan makes the case against blind obedience to God, Milton gives him the best lines. William Blake observed that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it."[6] Milton's portrayal of Satan as a leader matched a Machiavellian prince. Satan had the appropriate character—a blend of the courageous and cunning—was able to adapt to changing circumstances, had the confidence to take risks, and was aware of the respective merits of force and guile ("Our better part remains/ To work in close design, by fraud or guile/ What force effected not").[7]

The narrative structure humanizes the main characters, with the effect of diminishing God and elevating Satan. Milton undermined God's aura and left him appearing defensive and pedantic. As we have seen in Exodus, God could be deceptive and manipulative as part of his mysterious ways, but



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his approach in *Paradise Lost* was less subtle. Satan comes across as a much more rounded character, altogether more interesting.[8] Though at times he appeared regretful of his fallen status, he still followed his chosen path. His ambivalent character and claims meant that he was not always so easy to resist. For Milton, Satan was Machiavel, using fraudulent rhetoric and force to manipulate the fallen angels while also attempting to attribute exactly these corrosive tendencies to God.[9] Satan adopted the republican claims of free choice, merit, and consent in describing his rule, while asserting that God depends on coercion and fraud.

There are many themes and ideas developed in *Paradise Lost*, of which the most important is the link between the events at the start of time and the eventual crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. My focus is solely on the conflict between God and Satan and what this might tell us about their respective strategic calculations. There are two key episodes in this story. In *Paradise Lost*, they do not appear in chronological order, but here they do. The first is the story of the great battle in heaven, which is told by Rafael, one of God's loyal angels, to Adam to warn him about the nature of Satan and his potential for evil. Unfortunately, by the time this story has been told, Eve has already been tempted. The second episode, the opening scene of the book, depicts the deliberations among Satan's followers as they work out how to respond to their defeat in the first battle.

In the beginning, according to Milton, Satan—then known as Lucifer—was one of the great angels among the heavenly host. The crisis came when God proclaimed his Son to be his equal. Satan was greatly affronted. He had been given no warning of this development and now felt that his position in the hierarchy was undermined. Satan urged the other angels to join him in rebellion: "Will ye submit your necks and choose to bend/ The supple knee?" He then provided a powerful case for political rights:

> Who can in reason then or right assume/ Monarchie over such as live by right/ His equals, if in power and splendor less/ In freedome equal? or can introduce/ Law and Edict on us, who without law/ Erre not, much less for this to be our Lord,/And look for adoration to th' abuse/ Of those Imperial Titles which assert/ Our being ordain'd to govern, not to serve?[10]

A third of the angels rallied to Satan's side, and heaven was attacked. But heaven was ready. Curiously, rather than a place dedicated to peace, beauty, and tranquility, heaven was already geared up for battle and organized on martial lines. Milton had been an admirer of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army, with its organization and discipline. This seems to have given him the



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idea for a New Model Heaven.[11] This struggle was more than hand-to-hand combat. The rebels were pushed back on the first day, but they countered on the second day with cannon, only to be countered in turn by having hills and mountains hurled at them. The rebels' resort to gunpowder, a material linked to treason in the Catholic plot of 1605, is not without significance. At the time, it was often described as the devil's invention, calculated to remove honor and glory from war.

God watched this chaos and at last intervened on the third day. Why did he let it continue? The reasoning was consistent with that used to interpret the basic message of the Hebrew Bible. He was creating the conditions in which his glory and wonder would be appreciated. In this case, it was the Son whose decisive role had to be noticed. He explained to the Son that this was in order "that the Glory may be thine/ Of ending this great war, since none but Thou/ Can end it." He commanded him to lead out all the heavenly forces and drive the rebel angels down to hell. The Son accepted the command willingly, again demonstrating a clear contrast between his obedience and Satan's rebellion. For the Son, "to obey is happiness entire." Satan's forces also regrouped, "hope conceiving from despair." They made themselves ready for a battle they knew must be final. The Son told his forces to stand aside for this was his battle: "Against me is all their rage."[12]

Leaving aside the odd ideas of a civil war in heaven, the use of artillery (somehow mountains as projectiles are more fitting), or even the earthly tendency to stop fighting for the night, there was an added twist that resulted from the immortality of the angels on both sides. No wound was ever fatal, although they did cause pain. Despite his admiration for martial virtues, Milton was also demonstrating that some matters could never be truly solved by battle. Perhaps he was also reflecting on his experience of victory for the parliamentary side in the civil war followed by the return of the monarchy. Even in this particular contest, it was the special strength of the Son rather than weight of numbers that made all the difference.

## *Pandemonium*

When the enemy is able to recover from initial blows, it is difficult to inflict a decisive defeat. Immortal combatants gave an added twist to this classic dilemma. As *Paradise Lost* opened, the fallen angels were meeting to regroup and consider their next steps in their new home. Despite being expelled from heaven, Satan was undaunted. He remained a dedicated opponent of "the



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tyranny of Heav'n." "Here at last," he proclaimed from hell, "We shall be free. [ . . . ] Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!"

A strategic debate then took place in hell among the leaders of the fallen angels—Moloch, Belial, Mammon, Beelzebub, and Satan himself. The setting was a special place called Pandemonium (literally a house of devils), where the rebels gather to consider their next steps. God presumably had the option of preventing them ever causing trouble again, but he still allowed them to decide their own course of action. Satan was determined to raise his comrades out of their miserable sense of weakness and work to oppose everything that God was trying to do. "To do aught good never will be our task, But ever to do ill our sole delight." He used a parade, with accompanying brass band, to raise the spirits of his followers and demonstrate that they were still a force of great strength, greater "than the forces on both sides in the Trojan War, greater than any forces King Arthur or Charlemagne could command." While this may have raised the morale of his followers against God, it could not serve as the basis of a credible strategy.[13]

A set of options was described that might have been put to any group trying to respond to a major setback. Anthony Jay noted that "in every important respect the situation is that of a corporation trying to formulate a new policy after taking a terrific beating from its chief competitor and being driven out of the market it had previously depended on."[14] Satan, who knew what he wanted, nonetheless followed good practice and opened proceedings by asking for proposals.

Moloch was the first to step forward, recommending "open war." His appeal was based on emotion and drive, aggression and fatalism, while contemptuous of attempts to use wiles: "Let us rather choose/ arm'd with hell flames and fury, all at once/ O'er Heaven's high towers to force resistless way." He could not, he admitted, promise victory, but at least a form of revenge.

Compared with Moloch's unsubtle aggression, Belial offered more realism, but the effect was defeatist: "ignoble ease and peaceful sloth." He doubted they could achieve even revenge. "The tow'rs of heaven are filled/ With armed watch, that renders all access/ Impregnable." He made a fundamental point about the impossibility of both "force and guile" that his fellow devils seemed ready to ignore. God saw "all things at one view" and so saw and derided the devil's council even while it was in progress. Belial's alternative was therefore to wait until God relented. "This is now/ Our doom, which if we can sustain and bear,/ Our supreme foe in time may much remit/ His anger."

Mammon ridiculed both of the previous options. He had little taste for war or expectations of God's forgiveness: "With what eyes could we/ Stand



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in his presence humble, and receive/ Strict laws imposed, to celebrate his throne/ With warbled hymns, and to his Godhead sing/ Force hallelujahs, while he lordly sits/ Our envied Sov'reign." His idea was to develop the possibilities of hell: "This desert soil/ Wants not her hidden lustre, gems and gold: Nor want we skill or art, from whence to raise/ Magnificence: and what can heav'n show more?" So he urged the fallen angels "to found this nether empire, which might rise/ By policy and long process of time/ In emulation opposite to heav'n." As he had helped construct Pandemonium, Mammon's ideas had some credibility. For the first time the audience saw something they liked. Mammon "scarce had finished when such murmur filled/ The assembly, as when hollow rocks retain/ The sound of blustering winds."

But like any clever chairman, Satan had worked out his preferred outcome before the debate had begun. Everything had been structured to produce the desired conclusion. His second-in-command, Beelzebub, "Pleaded his devilish counsel, first devised/ By Satan and in part prospered." First, he undermined Mammon by warning that God would not allow hell to become equivalent to heaven. Beelzebub proposed taking an initiative but not the direct strategy of Moloch. Satan spoke of a "place/ (If ancient and prophetic fame in heaven/ err not) another world, the happy seat/ Of some new race called Man." This new race was supposedly equal to angels, perhaps created to fill the gap left by the exiled rebels. This was a way of getting at God without the futility of a direct assault. Perhaps men might be tricked into joining the rebellion. As a strategist Satan had identified one possible explanation for the defeat in heaven. It was simply a lack of numbers. There were twice as many loyal angels as rebels. Instead of trying to reverse the outcome of battle through a direct assault, which would be futile, why not trick men into joining the rebellion? After Satan praised Beelzebub's plan, it was adopted. Having come up with the strategy, Satan set off to implement it. First he needed good intelligence. "Thither let us bend all our thoughts, to learn/ What creatures there inhabit. Of what mould/ Or substance, how endued, and what their power,/ And where their weakness, how attempted best,/ By force or subtlety."[15]

He journeyed seven times around the earth to avoid the vigilance of the angels guarding Paradise. He tricked his way into Eden, appearing to the guard as a cherub. His aim was to conquer Eden and then colonize it with his fallen angels. But, coming upon Eve in Eden, he was enraptured by her beauty and for a while was "stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,/ Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge," until he pulled himself together and reminded himself that he was about "hate, not love." He considered Adam and Eve now more cynically as he recalls his aim of malign coalition: "League with you



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I seek,/ and mutual amitie so streight, so close,/ That I with you must dwell, or you with me,/ Henceforth."

In the form of a serpent, which Milton compared to the Trojan Horse, Satan tempted Eve to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Satan argued that he, a beast, received the gift of speech after eating it and God had not killed him. Eve later explains to Adam that she doubted he would have "discern'd/ Fraud in the Serpent, speaking as he spake." Even if she had been aware of the possible deceptiveness of appearances, why should she have been suspicious? "No grounds of enmity between us known,/ Why he should mean me ill or seek to harm."[16]

After eating the fruit, Eve persuaded Adam to eat some as well. This set up a potential contest for the allegiance of men. Should they give themselves over to Satan, the balance of power might tilt in his direction. For Adam and Eve, this was the moment of decision. No longer innocent, they must choose. Satan's cause was defeated when Adam and Eve made their choice; they repented and aligned themselves with God. Michael's prophecy was "so shall the World goe on,/ To good malignant, to bad men benigne,/ Under her own waight groaning" until Christ's second coming. The lesson, as Adam came to understand, was that even the few must oppose the unjust and the wicked, for "suffering for truth's sake/ Is fortitude to highest victorie." God's accomplishments would not always be the obvious route. They came "by things deem'd weak/ Subverting wordly strong."[17]

By that time, a less-confident Satan, away from his home ground and supporters, had his own "troubl'd thoughts," acknowledging the omnipotence of God and the error of his revolt, as well as the evil within him. His pride would not allow him to contemplate submission. The problem was not with the strategy Milton attributed to Satan. With all involved enjoying immortality, brute force was never going to be decisive. Satan's best hope was to turn humans so that they joined the ranks of the fallen. In this effort deception was essential, and initially Satan was successful in removing Adam and Eve as allies of the angels. What he failed to do was win them over to his cause, for here God had the ultimate weapon in his Son.

Although Milton put sentiments about freedom—in words he might have used against his own king—into the Satanic speeches, he was not necessarily of the devil's party. Milton's heaven, while odd in its apparent militarism, was never described in tyrannical terms. The angels obeyed God as a result of his inherent authority rather than fear of punishment, and individual angels were given latitude when acting on God's behalf. They came together naturally and joyously to defend heaven against the rebels. Moreover, there was every difference between using such republican rhetoric to denounce an earthly



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king, who had usurped the power of God and claimed to be his agent, and the denunciation of God himself. In 1609, James I spoke to Parliament about how "kings are justly called Gods, for they exercise in a manner or resemblance of Divine power upon earth . . . Kings are not only God's Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods." Milton's political project from the start was to challenge this presumption and the associated claim that disobedience to a king was tantamount to disobedience to God. Such a presumption was idolatrous. Milton's hell was a developing monarchy "with royalist politics, perverted language, perverse rhetoric, political manipulation, and demagoguery."[18] Despite the language Satan employed as a rebel leader, he acted as a supreme king once he got to hell. He appeared as a great sultan and addressed Pandemonium "high on a throne of Royal State." He took his command for granted. He did not offer the rebels republican self-government but rather servitude to himself, a usurping king. His feigned commitment to political rights was no more to be believed than the vivid description of a serpent's life he gave Eve while tempting her—or his other imaginative deceptions, for that matter.

The real puzzle is why Satan ever believed he could succeed. The problem was not predestination but God's omnipotence and omniscience. Not only did God have superior power, but he could not be tricked either. Whatever was being planned, God saw it coming. As a former archangel, Satan should also have seen it coming. This is why, despite appearing to be modeled on Machiavelli's ideal prince, Milton's Satan fell short in key respects. In confrontation with God he made elementary mistakes and lacked the prudence Machiavelli advised when dealing with a stronger power. Machiavelli's prince was "above all a pragmatist." Machiavelli did not admire "those who oppose insurmountable odds or persist in lost causes." In *Paradise Lost*, Satan acknowledged that while in heaven he underestimated God's strength, and once in hell he made no effort to reconsider the logic of his initial rebellion. He stuck with a strategy that had already brought him failure, in part by claiming that it was almost successful. He learned nothing that could truly make God vulnerable. His boasting that he could do so was, to quote Riebling, "a mockery of strategic wisdom." He was ready to use force or guile, but not to gain true advantage—only to wage "eternal Warr." Against an omnipotent foe, this hardly betrayed pragmatism. "Satan may seem to be a free agent, boldly innovating his future," but "he is instead a slave to his own nature."[19]

In Milton's fiction, Satan's task was to allow God to make a point. Satan was "cast in a poem with an axiomatically omniscient and omnipotent God." This meant, according to John Carey, "that every hostile move he makes must be self-defeating. Yet his fictional function is precisely to



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make hostile moves: he is the fiend, the enemy."[20] If, having seen the possibility of redemption, Satan had taken it, then the plot would no longer work. But that still left the flaw. Milton provided God with a truly evil opponent who was sufficiently clever to develop a challenge substantial enough to demonstrate God's glory but not so clever that he could conclude that he should surrender to God's mercy. By exploring the relative merits of force, guile, conciliation, and fatalism, *Paradise Lost* illuminated strategic debates, but as with all debates in which God was involved, in the end the deliberations were all futile. The players in these dramas could act to serve their own purposes only to the extent that these conformed to God's overarching plan.

## The Limits Of Guile

Although the regular references to deception in the Bible are by no means always disapproving, the serpent's cunning, which gets humankind off to such a poor start, did not set an encouraging precedent. Milton further confirmed the link between cunning and wickedness by identifying the serpent as Satan in disguise. When Milton referred to "guile," he connoted fraud, cunning, and trickery. From a strategic perspective, these still could seem preferable to violence—and certainly to defeat—but such methods were underhanded, certainly lacking in nobility and bravery. Those who won by such guile would forever have a stain on their character. Even now, it is complimentary to describe a person as being "without guile." What such a person says can be taken at face value; there is no need to search for hidden meanings. Or else we speak of a victim "beguiled" by a seductive personality or idea as one detached from normal composure and rationality. A comparable word is *wiles*, which the philosopher Hobbes employed as an alternative "to master the persons of all men he can."[21] The Oxford Dictionary definition conveys the distasteful flavor of wiles: "a crafty, cunning, or deceitful trick; a sly, insidious, or underhand artifice; a stratagem, ruse. Formerly sometimes in somewhat wider sense: A piece of deception, a deceit, a delusion."

Stratagems, as described by Frontinus, involved deceit, surprise, contrivance, obfuscation, and general trickery. A stratagem is still defined as an "artifice or trick designed to outwit or surprise the enemy." There were examples in Shakespeare in which resorting to stratagem appeared as less than wholesome, a way of gaining an unfair advantage by surprising the enemy. The mad Lear's suggestion of a "delicate stratagem" to "shoe a troop of horse with felt" was not to be taken seriously. The preference for acting without trickery was made most clear in *Henry V*, in which the king boasted



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of a victory achieved "without stratagem" but rather "in plain shock and even play of battle."[22]

The word *plot* also acquired negative connotations during the seventeenth century. Its association with dangerous mischief or malevolent scheming was sealed once the failed attempt by Catholic conspirators (including Guy Fawkes) to blow up the House of Commons while King James visited on November 5, 1605, became known as the Gunpowder Plot. *Plot* has thereafter implied treachery and conspiracy—a perverted plan, hatched by a few, dependent on secrecy, geared to overthrowing the established order. Yet, the etymology of *plot* resembles that of *plan*. Both originally referred to a flat area of ground, then to a drawing of an area of land or a building, then to a drawing to guide the construction of a building, and eventually to a set of measures adopted to accomplish something. A plan became a detailed proposal setting out how a goal would be attained. The military had their "plan of attack" or "plan of campaign," and these moved from their literal meanings to become metaphors for going on the offensive or embarking on a challenging mission in any context. When matters progress smoothly, they were going "according to plan." Eventually, a plan implied much more than a sensible way of thinking through how to complete some difficult or complicated task. *Plot* morphed into something similar but less wholesome. The fine distinction between the two was found in Dr. Johnson's 1755 dictionary. A plan was a "scheme," while a plot was also a "scheme" but a "conspiracy, stratagem, contrivance" as well.[23]

There was always a double standard when it came to cunning, trickery, deception, and stratagem. Against your own people—with whom deception should be much easier because you understood them and they were more likely to trust you—it was generally reprehensible, but against enemies, it could be acceptable and even admirable if the trick was a good one. The closer the social bond, the more distasteful were attempts to exploit the bond through deception; the weaker the bond, the more difficult it was to deceive successfully. Either way, reliance on cunning was subject to a law of diminishing returns. Once the reputation was acquired, then others would be watching out for tricks. Such tricks were therefore vulnerable to problems in execution or exposure when an opponent had good intelligence. For all these reasons, the influence of cunning and trickery tended to be most evident when small scale and personal. It was possible to trick governments and armies, but this was always a gamble and might not gain more than a temporary and limited advantage. Once warfare moved to mass armies with complex organizations, there would be limits to what could be achieved by means of guile. The emphasis would be on force.



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# PART II | Strategies of Force

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