



*Military Strategy: A Global History* by Jeremy Black.

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In *Military Strategy*, the ever-prolific military historian Jeremy Black has produced a tight, nuanced, well crafted study of strategy around the world in the past six hundred years. He begins helpfully with a definition:

Strategy, an overarching vision of what an organisation or individual wants to achieve, coupled with a set of objectives designed to make that possible, is not the details of plans by which goals are implemented by military means. Instead, strategy is the ways by which nations, states, rulers, élites and others seek to shape their situation, producing international and domestic systems and pursuing outcomes that provide security, and safeguard and advance interests. (ix)

Black stresses that the West neither “invented” nor monopolized strategy. It existed long before eighteenth/nineteenth-century theorists began to articulate and debate the concept. This dovetails with his distinction between strategy as both an *activity* and a *concept*. That said, as the book progresses, strategic theorists have prominent places in the narrative. The author traces their slow incorporation into formal military education. The German victory in the Franco-Prussian War did not prompt an immediate run on Clausewitz’s *Vom Kriege* in Europe’s, let alone the United States’, war colleges. That process took several decades.

By the twentieth century, theory analysis, military education, and the creation of formal decision-making bodies turned strategy into “a self-conscious intellectual sphere, vocabulary and process” (258). These changes did not necessarily yield brilliant strategy. Black’s chapters on events of the twentieth century are a stern reminder of that fact. A myriad of factors influenced the creation and use of strategy, transcending formal ideas, education, and institutions.

While the author does not enter academic debates over or assessments of the merits of individual strategic theories, he does tacitly engage them indirectly. For instance, he presumes his readers will be familiar with the literature on strategy and so will recognize Basil Liddell Hart’s “indirect method” and realize when Black’s appraisals jibe with it (or not). They agree that early strategic theorists’ preoccupation with the campaigns of Napoleon and the Prussians, especially Frederick II, colored much of western strategy. Historically, British, Russian, and American strategists have been the better practitioners. Black maintains that the British espoused a sounder, more sophisticated view of strategy than did their continental contemporaries; indeed they provide the clearest case study of applying strategy in a range of contexts. He does, however, note that Chinese strategists sometimes achieved better results than many European masters of the craft.

With regard to the US Civil War, Black agrees with Liddell Hart that Sherman’s March to the Sea did more than any other campaign to destroy the South’s ability continue the conflict. But he disagrees with Liddell Hart’s assessment of U.S. Grant’s campaigns in claiming that his relentless pressure on Lee’s forces was decisive not in and of itself, but because it amplified the strategic effects of Sherman’s operations. All this as part of the larger Northern strategy directed by Lincoln to win the war.

The American Civil War demonstrates that economic and logistical superiority alone does not constitute a winning strategy—one must execute. Black contends that the South actually had a good chance of winning the war. He considers the notion of the “Lost Cause”—the idea that the South could not overcome the North’s vast superiority in resources—to be a historiographical by-product of one of the North’s diplomatic strategies to preclude Anglo-French intervention. The author’s analysis here includes two of the book’s special strengths. First, it protects the agency of historical actors and criticizes deterministic views of history. The historical study of strategy reveals the choices involved in deciding among various options. Secondly, alliances and foreign interventions are key features of sound strategies and have the effect of extending their purview to include the political realm. The ideology and worldview of political leaders play an essential role in the making of strategy. Black points to the decision of Napoleon to go to war with Russia and of Adolf Hitler to go to war with the USSR and the United States. While the choice to avoid war existed, it “would not have been in accordance with their ideologies, natures, or regimes” (216).

The author asserts that strategy cannot be considered in a vacuum; it must be set firmly within its historical and political contexts. He pays special attention to the strategic cultures of the United States and China because they are at the forefront of current thinking about future wars. That said, he reminds us that large interstate wars have, since the Second World War, given way to insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. Consequently, the book does not put forward a teleology for total war. Hence Black’s concentration on the American Civil War; not only does it speak to modern US strategic thinking, it also provides a case study of the suppression of internal rebellion.

Black could have strengthened his conclusions by examining the case of the Taiping Rebellion in detail. But compressing five centuries of a global history into a mere three hundred pages undoubtedly involved hard choices about breadth and depth of analysis. In that regard, Black has adroitly selected episodes that well represent the strategic lessons of their time. While most of his case studies come from the Western world, others, mostly from East Asia, convey a sense of global context and forestall any sort of Western triumphalism.

Specialists and interested lay readers alike will find Jeremy Black’s *Military Strategy* to be both enjoyable and deserving of their careful meditation. I recommend it highly.