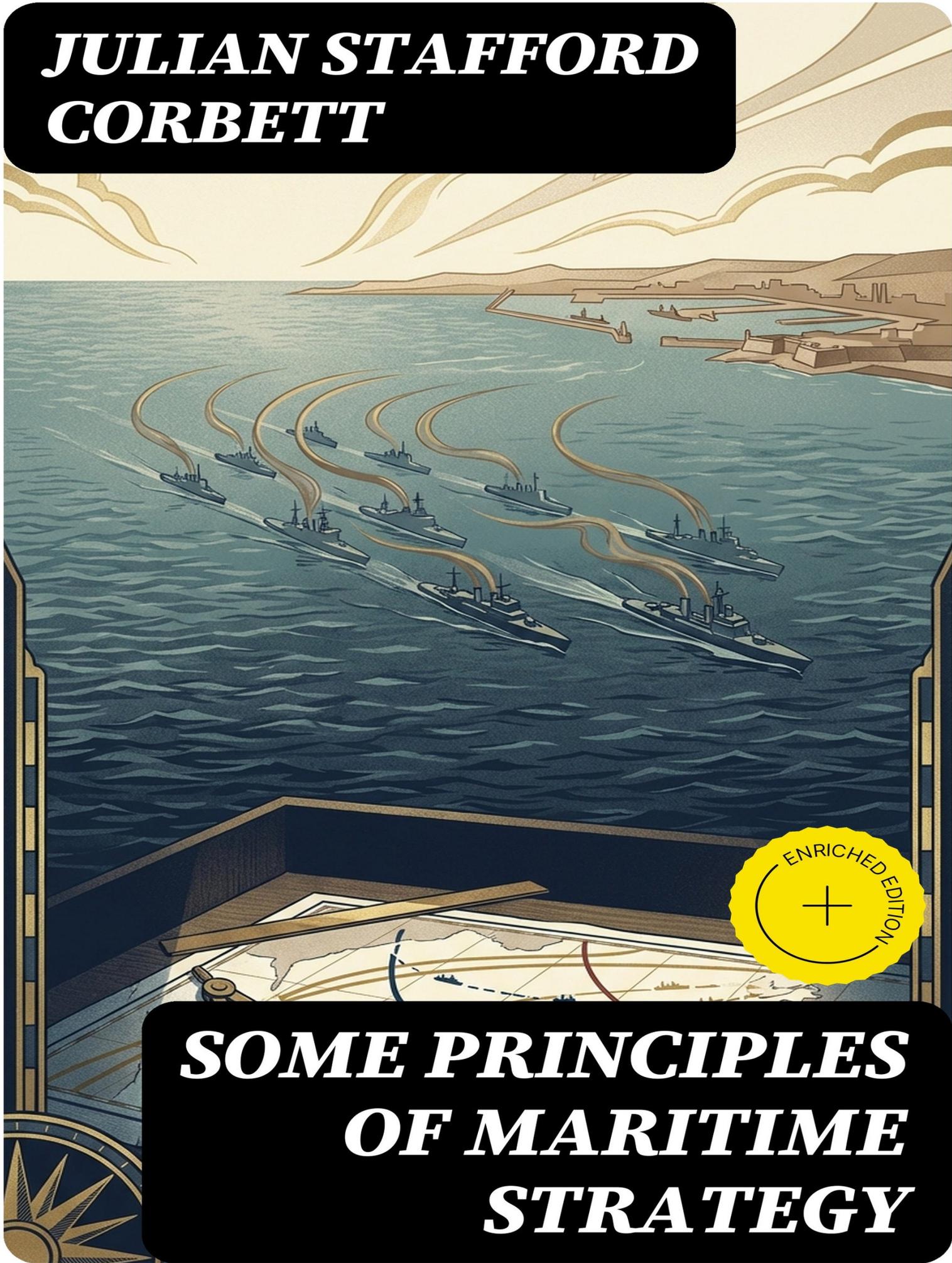
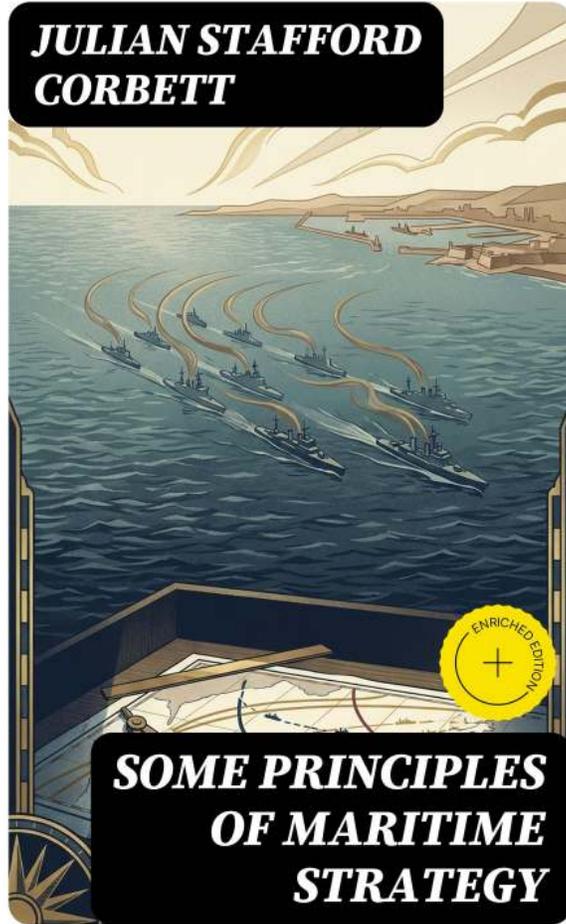


***JULIAN STAFFORD  
CORBETT***



***SOME PRINCIPLES  
OF MARITIME  
STRATEGY***

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**SOME PRINCIPLES  
OF MARITIME  
STRATEGY**

**Julian Stafford Corbett**

# **Some Principles of Maritime Strategy**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Nora Caldwell*

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# Introduction

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At its core, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* wrestles with the paradox that control at sea is seldom absolute, yet it determines everything from the movement of armies to the fate of nations, requiring commanders and statesmen to pursue influence rather than annihilation, to balance decisive encounters with patient protection of communications, to coordinate ships with soldiers, and to treat the ocean not as a battlefield to be possessed but as a medium to be used, where power is measured by freedom of action, prudent risk, and the steady pressure of strategy applied across time, distance, and political purpose, a tension that anchors Corbett's lasting lesson about means, ends, and the limits of force.

Julian Stafford Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* is a work of military theory published in 1911, emerging from the early twentieth-century British discourse on sea power. Written on the eve of the First World War, it addresses an era of great-power maritime competition and rapidly modernizing fleets. The book situates naval operations within a broader strategic and political frame, speaking to readers interested in statecraft as well as warfare. Although centered on the global maritime environment of its time, the treatise ranges across historical examples and distills general principles that avoid dependence on any single technology, service culture, or nation's particular experience.

For contemporary readers, the book offers a methodical, closely reasoned argument rather than a narrative history. Corbett builds concepts step by step, using historical cases for illumination without demanding specialized technical knowledge, and his tone is analytical, calm, and precise. The voice is that of a strategist explaining how policy, command, and operations interlock. The reading experience is rigorous yet accessible: definitions are carefully drawn, distinctions are plain, and the emphasis remains on how to think about maritime problems. It is not a manual of tactics or ship design, but a framework for understanding the strategic uses of sea power.

A central theme is command of the sea—conceived not as permanent possession but as a relative condition enabling movement, protection, and pressure. Corbett explains how control can be general or local, temporary or sustained, and why these gradations matter to both fleets and armies. He clarifies that decisive battles have their place but are not an end in themselves, and that success may come from securing communications, denying them to an adversary, or inducing a stalemate favorable to policy. The discussion shows how concentration, economy of force, and risk management shape choices about when to fight, when to avoid action, and how to compel without overreaching.

Another enduring concern is the linkage of sea and land. Corbett emphasizes that maritime strategy gains meaning through its effects ashore—by enabling expeditions, sustaining coalitions, and constraining opponents through blockade and commerce protection. He develops the

importance of lines of communication, the hazards of dispersion, and the logic of operating from bases and along littorals. Throughout, geography is treated as opportunity and constraint rather than destiny, and law and politics frame what violence can achieve. The result is a disciplined vocabulary for discussing amphibious operations, coastal campaigns, and the broader orchestration of instruments of power.

The book remains relevant because the fundamentals it describes outlast platforms and fashions. In a world dependent on seaborne trade and connected by strategic waterways, the ability to safeguard or threaten movement still shapes diplomacy, deterrence, and crisis management. Corbett's insistence on aligning military action with political purpose speaks directly to contemporary concerns about limited war, escalation control, and coalition operations. His nuanced view of sea control and denial helps readers make sense of contested zones, persistent competition, and the value of patience. The text equips students, practitioners, and citizens to assess maritime choices with realism and restraint.

Approached as a guide to disciplined thinking rather than a set of prescriptions, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* invites readers to test assumptions and weigh costs against aims. Its careful distinctions—between strategy and tactics, control and presence, victory and advantage—provide tools for analyzing today's problems without forcing them into outdated molds. Read slowly, with attention to the logic linking policy to operations, the book rewards reflection and rereading. Corbett offers not a formula but a way to ask

better questions about the sea's role in national power, and that, more than any single case, is why the work endures.

# Synopsis

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Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, published in 1911 by British naval historian Julian Stafford Corbett, sets out a systematic theory of how sea power serves national policy. Writing in a period of naval competition, Corbett aims to refine strategic thought beyond simple pursuit of fleet battles. He argues that maritime strategy must be understood in relation to political objectives and the needs of the state, not as an autonomous art. The treatise frames the sea as a medium of communication whose control enables or constrains military action ashore, establishing the book's central problem: how navies secure strategic advantage by shaping movement and access.

Corbett begins by defining command of the sea as a relative, not absolute, condition. Control may be general or local, permanent or temporary, and should be judged by the freedom it grants one side to use maritime communications while denying them to the other. From this premise he distinguishes the goal of securing communications from the means of fighting fleets. Decisive action may matter, but the essence is safeguarding one's own movements and threatening the enemy's. This approach places emphasis on economy of force, careful choice of objectives, and the temporal character of control that can shift with circumstances and policy.

He next examines offensive and defensive postures at sea, insisting that both can serve strategic purpose.

Concentration of force is desirable but never absolute; dispersion may be necessary to protect trade or threaten scattered enemy routes. Corbett analyzes the influence of a fleet-in-being, sea denial, and the risks and benefits of seeking battle. He explores commerce war and its counter, arguing that protecting maritime trade and bases is integral to strategic endurance. Throughout, he weighs how naval operations can fix, distract, or exhaust an opponent without courting unnecessary hazard, aligning operational choices with the limited aims many governments actually pursue.

A hallmark of the work is its treatment of joint operations. Corbett argues that navies chiefly enable or constrain events on land by transporting, covering, and sustaining armies. Amphibious expeditions, coastal descents, and the seizure of maritime positions are presented as means to convert sea control into political results. He considers the demands of logistics, the selection of bases, and the timing required to coordinate fleets with armies. By stressing the interdependence of services and the primacy of policy, he recasts naval power as an instrument that multiplies options ashore rather than a self-contained force judged solely by fleet encounters.

Corbett then details methods for exercising command short of annihilating an enemy fleet. He discusses blockades, distinguishing forms that aim to contain a navy from those intended to strangle communications, and assesses the legal and diplomatic constraints shaping such measures. Reconnaissance, scouting screens, and information management appear as crucial enablers of economy and surprise. He considers attrition through raids,

pressure on trade, and graduated escalation, noting how these tools can force choices upon adversaries while preserving one's strength. The thread running through these discussions is prudence: strategy should balance opportunity with risk in service of attainable, politically coherent ends.

To test his principles, Corbett surveys historical campaigns across several centuries, selecting cases that illuminate how command of communications determines wider outcomes. He highlights occasions when dispersed operations or timely concentration shifted advantage and instances where seeking battle proved secondary to securing movement. The examples underscore his preference for limited aims and for operations that exploit the sea's mobility rather than treating it as a mere battlefield. He engages prevailing doctrines of his era while maintaining a distinct emphasis on policy constraints, providing readers with a comparative lens that connects theory to practice without reducing complex histories to simple formulas.

The book concludes by reaffirming maritime strategy as a discipline anchored in national purpose and in the control of movement rather than in destruction for its own sake. Its measured analysis offers a vocabulary—command, communications, concentration, and limited war—that continues to inform professional debate. Without prescribing rigid templates, Corbett leaves readers with criteria for choosing when to fight, when to avoid action, and how to translate sea power into political effect. This enduring framework, sensitive to context and joint action, gives the

work continuing relevance for students of strategy and for practitioners confronting the persistent challenges of operating from the sea.

# Historical Context

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In 1911, amid the late Edwardian era, Julian Stafford Corbett published *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* in London, drawing on lectures given to Royal Navy officers and advisory work for government. Britain's global position rested on sea-borne commerce protected by the Royal Navy, whose headquarters institutions—the Admiralty, Naval Intelligence, and the Committee of Imperial Defence—framed debates on grand strategy. Corbett's book distilled lessons for practitioners, synthesizing historical case studies into guidance for policy and operations as Britain confronted a changing balance of power and accelerating naval innovation. It addressed officers preparing for staff duties and command.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain faced growing strategic strain. The Two-Power Standard formalized by the Naval Defence Act of 1889 was challenged by Germany's battle fleet expansion under Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's Risk Theory and Naval Laws of 1898 and 1900. Britain's alliances and understandings—the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 and the Entente Cordiale of 1904—reoriented commitments and allowed concentration of strength in home waters. Control of key maritime arteries, notably the Suez Canal and the approaches to the North Sea, was paramount. Corbett wrote against this backdrop of an Anglo-German naval arms race and imperial communications under pressure.

Technological upheaval reshaped naval thought. HMS Dreadnought (1906) rendered earlier battleships obsolescent and spurred a race in big-gun, turbine-driven capital ships, including the battlecruiser concept championed by Admiral Sir John Fisher. Submarines, torpedo craft, and mines threatened close blockade, while wireless telegraphy and centralized fire control increased battle ranges and coordination. Fisher's reforms concentrated the Home Fleet, retired older vessels, and reorganized readiness. These changes compelled reconsideration of scouting, screening, and commerce protection. Corbett addressed how sea power's purposes endured despite new means, warning that material advances did not erase the primacy of securing maritime communications over mere fleet accumulation.

In the intellectual climate shaping officers and policymakers, Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings since 1890 elevated decisive fleet action and concentration. French advocates of the *Jeune École* had earlier stressed commerce raiding and torpedo attack, challenging traditional battle doctrine. Recent conflicts furnished evidence for all sides: the Spanish-American War (1898) underscored naval reach; the South African War (1899-1902) highlighted dependence on sea-borne logistics; and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) displayed both a crushing fleet decision at Tsushima and the power of mines and coastal defenses. Corbett engaged these debates by recasting "command of the sea" as a functional, not purely annihilative, objective.

International law questions kept strategy tethered to diplomacy. The Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907

addressed conduct at sea, while the Declaration of London (1909) sought to codify contraband, blockade, and neutral rights through an international prize regime. In Britain, fierce controversy led to non-ratification in 1911, leaving naval planners uncertain about the legal contours of economic warfare. Corbett grappled with these issues, explaining how blockade, visit-and-search, and prize adjudication interacted with policy and alliance management. His discussion situated maritime coercion within lawful limits, reflecting contemporary concern that strategic effectiveness depended on measures that foreign governments and courts would accept.

Professionalization advanced through staff education and historical analysis. The Admiralty's Naval Intelligence Department, the Committee of Imperial Defence, and the Royal Navy's War Course fostered war planning, staff methods, and war games. Corbett contributed by producing studies that distilled British experience from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—amphibious operations, blockade systems, and protection of trade—to inform modern doctrine. He emphasized joint operations, arguing that decisive results often arose from coordinated sea control enabling limited, well-chosen land campaigns. This approach aligned naval history with practical planning and made the book influential in officer education, bridging academic scholarship and operational guidance.

Domestic politics sharpened the strategic conversation. The 1909 "naval scare" over German construction prompted the slogan "We want eight and we won't wait," contentious Naval Estimates, and press campaigns about battleship

numbers. A Liberal government constrained by social spending priorities faced forceful navalist lobbies. Within the service, disputes over fleet deployment and budgets paralleled arguments about doctrine. Corbett's emphasis on limited objectives, sea communications, and the primacy of combined operations offered a counterweight to single-minded counting of capital ships. He placed commerce protection and distant blockade within a coherent policy framework, integrating war aims with the resources Parliament would authorize.

Published on the eve of the First World War, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* synthesized Britain's naval tradition while critiquing overreliance on decisive battle theories. It defined command of the sea as relative control for securing communications, advocated distant blockade over hazardous close investment, and stressed joint operations designed to achieve limited political ends. The book mirrored Edwardian anxieties about German power, new technologies, and legal constraints, yet insisted that policy should direct naval method. Its clarifications influenced Royal Navy staff thinking and provided a framework later tested in war, while remaining firmly rooted in the debates and institutions of its time.

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BY

JULIAN S. CORBETT, ESQ., L.L.M.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## **The Theoretical Study of War—Its Use and Limitations**

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At first sight nothing can appear more unpractical, less promising of useful result, than to approach the study of war with a theory. There seems indeed to be something essentially antagonistic between the habit of mind that seeks theoretical guidance and that which makes for the successful conduct of war. The conduct of war is so much a question of personality, of character, of common-sense, of rapid decision upon complex and ever-shifting factors, and those factors themselves are so varied, so intangible, so dependent upon unstable moral and physical conditions, that it seems incapable of being reduced to anything like true scientific analysis. At the bare idea of a theory or "science" of war the mind recurs uneasily to well-known cases where highly "scientific" officers failed as leaders. Yet, on the other hand, no one will deny that since the great theorists of the early nineteenth century attempted to produce a reasoned theory of war, its planning and conduct have acquired a method, a precision, and a certainty of grasp which were unknown before. Still less will any one deny the value which the shrewdest and most successful

leaders in war have placed upon the work of the classical strategical writers.

The truth is that the mistrust of theory arises from a misconception of what it is that theory claims to do. It does not pretend to give the power of conduct in the field; it claims no more than to increase the effective power of conduct. Its main practical value is that it can assist a capable man to acquire a broad outlook whereby he may be the surer his plan shall cover all the ground, and whereby he may with greater rapidity and certainty seize all the factors of a sudden situation. The greatest of the theorists himself puts the matter quite frankly. Of theoretical study he says, "It should educate the mind of the man who is to lead in war, or rather guide him to self-education, but it should not accompany him on the field of battle."

Its practical utility, however, is not by any means confined to its effects upon the powers of a leader. It is not enough that a leader should have the ability to decide rightly; his subordinates must seize at once the full meaning of his decision and be able to express it with certainty in well-adjusted action. For this every man concerned must have been trained to think in the same plane; the chief's order must awake in every brain the same process of thought; his words must have the same meaning for all. If a theory of tactics had existed in 1780, and if Captain Carkett<sup>[1]</sup> had had a sound training in such a theory, he could not possibly have misunderstood Rodney's signal<sup>[2]</sup>. As it was, the real intention of the signal was obscure, and Rodney's neglect to explain the tactical device it indicated robbed his country of a victory at an hour of the direst need.

There had been no previous theoretical training to supply the omission, and Rodney's fine conception was unintelligible to anybody but himself.

Nor is it only for the sake of mental solidarity between a chief and his subordinates that theory is indispensable. It is of still higher value for producing a similar solidarity between him and his superiors at the Council table at home. How often have officers dumbly acquiesced in ill-advised operations simply for lack of the mental power and verbal apparatus to convince an impatient Minister where the errors of his plan lay? How often, moreover, have statesmen and officers, even in the most harmonious conference, been unable to decide on a coherent plan of war from inability to analyse scientifically the situation they had to face, and to recognise the general character of the struggle in which they were about to engage. That the true nature of a war should be realised by contemporaries as clearly as it comes to be seen afterwards in the fuller light of history is seldom to be expected. At close range accidental factors will force themselves into undue prominence and tend to obscure the true horizon. Such error can scarcely ever be eliminated, but by theoretical study we can reduce it, nor by any other means can we hope to approach the clearness of vision with which posterity will read our mistakes. Theory is, in fact, a question of education and deliberation, and not of execution at all[1q]. That depends on the combination of intangible human qualities which we call executive ability.

This, then, is all the great authorities ever claimed for theory, but to this claim the chief of them at least, after years of active service on the Staff, attached the highest

importance. "In actual operations," he wrote in one of his latest memoranda, "men are guided solely by their judgment, and it will hit the mark more or less accurately according as they possess more or less genius. This is the way all great generals have acted.... Thus it will always be in action, and so far judgment will suffice. But when it is a question not of taking action yourself, but of convincing others at the Council table, then everything depends on clear conceptions and the exposition of the inherent relations of things. So little progress has been made in this respect that most deliberations are merely verbal contentions which rest on no firm foundation, and end either in every one retaining his own opinion, or in a compromise from considerations of mutual respect—a middle course of no actual value."<sup>1</sup>

The writer's experience of such discussions was rich and at first hand. Clear conceptions of the ideas and factors involved in a war problem, and a definite exposition of the relations between them, were in his eyes the remedy for loose and purposeless discussion; and such conceptions and expositions are all we mean by the theory or the science of war. It is a process by which we co-ordinate our ideas, define the meaning of the words we use, grasp the difference between essential and unessential factors, and fix and expose the fundamental data on which every one is agreed. In this way we prepare the apparatus of practical discussion; we secure the means of arranging the factors in manageable shape, and of deducing from them with precision and rapidity a practical course of action. Without such an apparatus no two men can even think on the same

line; much less can they ever hope to detach the real point of difference that divides them and isolate it for quiet solution.

In our own case this view of the value of strategical theory has a special significance, and one far wider than its continental enunciators contemplated. For a world-wide maritime Empire the successful conduct of war will often turn not only on the decisions of the Council chamber at home, but on the outcome of conferences in all parts of the world between squadronal commanders and the local authorities, both civil and military, and even between commanders-in-chief of adjacent stations. In time of war or of preparation for war, in which the Empire is concerned, arrangements must always be based to an exceptional degree on the mutual relation of naval, military, and political considerations. The line of mean efficiency, though indicated from home, must be worked out locally, and worked out on factors of which no one service is master. Conference is always necessary, and for conference to succeed there must be a common vehicle of expression and a common plane of thought. It is for this essential preparation that theoretical study alone can provide; and herein lies its practical value for all who aspire to the higher responsibilities of the Imperial service.

So great indeed is the value of abstract strategical study from this point of view, that it is necessary to guard ourselves against over-valuation. So far from claiming for their so-called science more than the possibilities we have indicated, the classical strategists insist again and again on the danger of seeking from it what it cannot give. They even

repudiate the very name of "Science." They prefer the older term "Art." They will permit no laws or rules. Such laws, they say, can only mislead in practice, for the friction to which they are subject from the incalculable human factors alone is such that the friction is stronger than the law. It is an old adage of lawyers that nothing is so misleading as a legal maxim, but a strategical maxim is undoubtedly and in every way less to be trusted in action.

What then, it will be asked, are the tangible results which we can hope to attain from theory? If all on which we have to build is so indeterminate, how are any practical conclusions to be reached? That the factors are infinitely varied and difficult to determine is true, but that, it must be remembered, is just what emphasises the necessity of reaching such firm standpoints as are attainable. The vaguer the problem to be solved, the more resolute must we be in seeking points of departure from which we can begin to lay a course, keeping always an eye open for the accidents that will beset us, and being always alive to their deflecting influences. And this is just what the theoretical study of strategy can do. It can at least determine the normal. By careful collation of past events it becomes clear that certain lines of conduct tend normally to produce certain effects; that wars tend to take certain forms each with a marked idiosyncrasy; that these forms are normally related to the object of the war and to its value to one or both belligerents; that a system of operations which suits one form may not be that best suited to another. We can even go further. By pursuing an historical and comparative method we can detect that even the human factor is not

**26** A naval-strategic concept meaning an intact enemy fleet can exert influence merely by existing, deterring operations or tying down forces without fighting; the phrase became common in 19th–20th century naval thought.

**27** An 1898 conflict between the United States and Spain over issues including Cuban independence, notable for decisive naval actions such as the Battle of Santiago de Cuba.

**28** Refers to Rear-Admiral William T. Sampson, commander of the U.S. naval forces blockading Santiago de Cuba during the Spanish–American War.

**29** Alfred Thayer Mahan (often styled Admiral Mahan in discussion of naval strategy) was an influential American naval historian and strategist whose late-19th-century works analysed sea power and included commentary on the Spanish–American War.

**30** A 1904–1905 war between Imperial Russia and Imperial Japan fought mainly over rival ambitions in Manchuria and Korea, notable for major naval battles and the first modern defeat of a European great power by an Asian one.

**31** Sir Francis Drake, a late-16th-century English sea captain and privateer who played a prominent role in naval operations against Spain and who wrote influential despatches during the 1588 Armada crisis.

**32** The title used here for Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, the Spanish commander and governor in the Low Countries who was associated with plans for the 1588 invasion of England; historical references generally identify him with that role.

**33** An English naval commander of the late 17th century (often spelled Shovell in other sources) who led squadrons such as the detachment into the Irish Sea mentioned here and was active in home-waters operations of that period.

**34** Anne Hilarion de Tourville (1642–1701), a senior French admiral who commanded the French main fleet in the late 17th century and led operations off the English Channel in 1690–1691.

**35** Arthur Herbert, 1st Earl of Torrington (c.1648–1716), an English admiral who commanded the home fleet in 1690 and is associated here with the defensive ‘fleet in being’ approach at the Battle of Beachy Head period.

**36** A shallow anchorage and bank in the Thames estuary (often called Gunfleet Sands) historically used as a sheltered but hazardous point of retreat or anchorage for ships in home-waters defence.

**37** A convoy referenced here carrying trade goods from Smyrna (modern İzmir in western Turkey), which in the 17th–18th centuries was a valuable Mediterranean commerce route and a prominent target for enemy fleets.

**38** Warships loaded with combustibles and sent burning among enemy vessels to set them alight or disrupt formations; widely used in the 16th–17th centuries but largely declined in effectiveness as naval tactics and ship design evolved.

**39** Refers to Admiral Edward Hawke (1705–1781), an 18th-century Royal Navy commander who led the British blockade and won a decisive victory over the French fleet off Quiberon Bay in 1759.

**40** Refers to Admiral Edward Boscawen (1711–1761), a senior Royal Navy officer who defeated the French Mediterranean squadron at the Battle of Lagos (1759) during the Seven Years' War.

**41** This phrase denotes the Battle of Quiberon Bay (20 November 1759), when the British fleet under Hawke defeated the French fleet under Conflans, effectively ending French invasion plans that year.

**42** A Franco-Spanish plan in 1779 to unite expeditionary forces and invade southern England (targets included Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight); the scheme was ultimately aborted and no landing was effected.

**43** Admiral Sir Charles Hardy (c.1714–1780), a veteran Royal Navy officer who commanded the British main fleet during the 1779 crisis and earlier served as second in command to Admiral Norris in 1744.

**44** Large, often heavily armed merchant ships employed by the East India Companies (notably the British East India Company) for long-range trade with Asia; they carried cargoes and sometimes provided their own defence or escort.

**45** A naval formation assigned to a combined expedition whose primary function was to secure local command and prevent interference with landings and supply, distinct from the squadron that directly escorted transports (term used in the Crimean War organisation).

**46** In late 19th–early 20th century naval usage, 'torpedo' referred to explosive devices used against ships (including early self-propelled torpedoes and spar torpedoes) and

'mine' to stationary or drifting explosive charges laid in water to damage or sink vessels.

**47** Sebastopol (also spelled Sevastopol) was the principal Russian naval base on the Crimean Peninsula and the scene of a major siege by British, French and Ottoman forces during the Crimean War (1854–1855).

**48** This refers to an expedition led by Sir Francis Drake in 1585 that raided the Spanish port of Santo Domingo (San Domingo) in the Caribbean, one of England's early overseas amphibious operations during the Elizabethan period.

**49** Admiral Dundas in this passage is the British naval commander referred to as Commander-in-Chief during the Crimean operations; he was an officer of the Royal Navy active in the mid-19th century and responsible for handling covering squadrons in those campaigns.

**50** Admiral Togo refers to Tōgō Heihachirō, the commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), noted for decisive actions such as the Battle of Tsushima and operations to secure Japanese landings.

**51** The 'Lissa episode' denotes the naval Battle of Lissa (1866) between Austria and Italy during the Austro-Italian War; the engagement became famous for its tactics and for the Italian fleet's defeat despite superior numbers.

**52** Persano is Admiral Carlo di Persano, the Italian naval commander at the Battle of Lissa (1866), whose handling of the Italian fleet was widely criticized after the defeat and who faced censure for his conduct.

**53** Refers to Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō, the leading commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Russo-