

To our families, and Patricia D. Murphy

INTRODUCTION

LONG AFTER IMMANUEL KANT wrote *Concerning Eternal Peace* (1795), an essay seemingly rendered pathetic by courses of events since that time, war remains a subject of intense interest, at times bordering on morbid fascination. Even as we recognize its role as a dangerous anachronism in an age of potential universal destruction, people of all nations and political persuasions are drawn to it. Even as we, consciously or not, nourish atavisms that can border on the pathological, we find ourselves enthralled by war, its immense drawing power attested to by more pacific (and probably more rational) souls who declare that, in striving for peace, we must find its “moral equivalent.”

Probably one of the most persistently engaging aspects of that subject gilded over by the term “military science” is that of great blunders or disasters. Often, such can be explained by recourse to more or less conventional forms of explanation. A general was defeated or a campaign lost because of simple errors of judgment, enemy technological superiority, lack of numbers or resources, and the like. Sometimes, however, these explanations either are not quite enough or they simply fall down altogether. Sometimes, the story of persistent errors and/or persistently high losses or mystifying failure in the course of a generally successful career calls for a variety of explanations not found within the confines of “traditional” historiography.

In recent years, the “psychohistorical” method has been employed with varying degrees of success in dealing with historical figures or problems that, past

a certain point, seem to be opaque to more conventional forms of historical explanation. *Military failure or incompetence has turned out to be an area of considerable interest, much as it has been for historians of a more conventional turn of mind. Probably the best-known example of this is Norman Dixon's *On The Psychology of Military Incompetence*.¹ In a well-written, imaginative, and often analytically astute work, the author has applied crucial elements of psychoanalysis to the actions (or at times, lack of them) of various British military leaders from the Crimean War up to, and including, World War II. Aside from the fact that Dr. Dixon has confined himself to considering the British military (although, God knows, he has more than enough material with which to work), there are problems with utilizing one approach, however sophisticated it might be in content and application, to a panoply of military leaders and problems. First of all, there is the obvious one of "reductionism," something that can result if one attempts to bring together historically and temporally disparate figures and circumstances under such covering terms as "repressed aggression," "anality," and "authoritarian personality." There can then arise yet another, perhaps more serious problem, when one attempts to separate out "good" from "bad" generalship along the obvious lines of anality/non-anality, authoritarianism/lack of authoritarianism, and so forth. For individuals such as Bernard Montgomery, one of the "good" generals, this has raised somewhat perplexing problems.²*

In a broader sense, Dr. Dixon's often valuable work is flawed by a crucial problem: namely, he is concerned with individuals who generally can be marked down as "failures." Thus, consideration of failure on the part of a usually successful general, such as Montgomery, raises questions concerning the relationships established between certain personality "types" and the childhoods which nurtured them and respective patterns of success or failure.

In this volume we will consider eight problems in military leadership and/or planning. In so doing, we will draw upon a variety of psychological approaches in attempting to provide at least provisional explanations for situations that appear to elude more conventional forms. There will be no overarching psychological explanation, for example, psychoanalytical. Rather, we will utilize specific explanations to "cover" specific problems. In a word, to the greatest extent possible, we have allowed particular historical problems to determine the forms of psychological explanation appropriate to dealing with them, rather than attempting to adjust historical circumstances to suit a given explanatory form. There is always a danger when one attempts to apply a single hypothesis or approach to varieties of individuals or circumstances, even if these were "products" of a given society. Through seeking out psychological explanations best suited to given circumstances or conditions, we believe it possible to provide answers to problems posed not only by individual battles, but by extended campaigns as well.

Again, we will be focusing not only upon individuals usually judged to be failures, or at least mediocre, but upon apparent lapses in the careers of individuals usually viewed in a more positive light at least in military terms, or even as so-called military geniuses. In a word, while we will consider problems posed by George McClellan and Douglas Haig, we will also examine "lapsés" in the careers of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, among others. Again, varieties of psychological explanations will be used in the process.

If there is no overarching method in this work, is there at least a *theme* that holds together this panoply of individuals and problems? We believe there is, and that it can be discerned without doing violence to historical evidence. This can be described as the persistence of habit, fixed systems of belief, or given attitudes or mental predisposition, and the inability of even the most imaginative military leader, as well as established dullards, to adjust to new or changing circumstances. Differences in ability and supporting psychological makeups are extremely complex and not amenable to analysis using a single analytical theme. Applying not one but a variety of psychological approaches will allow us to deal with the problem of inflexibility as it articulated itself in different forms and in different times.

As we will see, what can be described as inflexibility can be rooted in and reinforced by success. Yet, such successes can lay the foundation for disaster. In this regard, the careers of Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Robert E. Lee, and Adolf Hitler come to mind. Inflexibility also can paralyze someone to the point that success is never obtained at all. George McClellan's peninsular campaign will illustrate this to no small degree. Inflexibility rooted in predispositions or attitudes of some sort can exist side by side with openness to new ideas, serving to hobble their application. Such seemed to occur with Winston Churchill, particularly with regard to his view of airpower. On the other hand, in considering the British approach to war in World War I, we will confront a situation in which the attritional nature of modern military campaigns, particularly those conducted on the western front, allowed that gross inflexibility, rooted in a basic acceptance of a long outdated system, was perhaps *responsible* for ultimate victory, even though at a hideous cost. Inflexible Allied bombing strategies concerning Germany, also intensely attritional, possibly were successful *because* of the protracted nature of a campaign in which what ultimately mattered was overwhelming material supremacy. John B. Hood's Franklin disaster will be considered as a rather singular example of how continued frustration could lead to exaggerated emphasis upon persistent tendencies that had rarely led to any success whatsoever.

In applying various psychological approaches to these individuals and problems attaching to their military adventures, the authors will not be attempting to draw lines between them and "just plain folks" like us. The various forms of psychological dysfunctionality that afflicted them in one circumstance or the

other afflict all people in one form or another, or on one occasion or another. Rarely, though, are *most of us in the position*—and here, we are paraphrasing Robert G. L. Waite—to transform private psychological lapses or imbalances into public disaster.⁵ How this relates to the role(s) of military decision making in an age of potential total annihilation—with or without a cold war—must, at the very least, be viewed as a vexed question.