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Introduction

THE INDISPENSABLE ART:
THREE GENERATIONS OF MAKERS
OF MODERN STRATEGY

Hal Brands

There's no substitute for strategy. Strategy is what allows us to act with purpose in a disordered world; it is vital to out-thinking and out-playing our foes. Without strategy, action is random and devoid of direction; power and advantage are squandered rather than deployed to good effect. The mightiest empires may survive for a while if they lack good strategy, but no one can thrive for long without it.

Strategy is very complex, and strategy is also very simple. The concept of strategy—what it is, what it encompasses, how it is best pursued—is subject to unending debate, confusion, and redefinition. Even the most talented leaders have struggled to conquer strategy's dilemmas. Yet the essence of strategy is straightforward: it is the craft of summoning and using power to achieve our central purposes, amid the friction of global affairs and the resistance of rivals and enemies. Strategy is the indispensable art of getting what we want, with what we have, in a world that seems set on denying us.

In this sense, strategy is intimately related to the use of force, because the specter of violence hangs over any contested relationship. If the world was harmonious and everyone could achieve their dreams, there would be no need for a discipline focused on mastering competitive interactions. Indeed, this book was completed as Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave Europe its largest interstate land war since World War II, thereby reminding all of us—tragically—that hard power has hardly gone out of style. Yet strategy encompasses the use of *all* forms of power to prosper in an unruly world. It is, in fact, a fundamentally optimistic endeavor, premised on the idea that coercive

means can serve constructive ends, that leaders can impose control on events rather than being dominated by them.¹

Strategy, then, is timeless, but our understanding of it is not. The basic challenges of strategy would have been familiar to Thucydides, Machiavelli, or Clausewitz, which is why their works are still required reading today. The field of strategic studies is rooted in the belief that there is a basic logic of strategy that transcends time and space. But the basic meaning of the term “strategy” has never been fixed, and we forever reinterpret even the most enduring texts through the lens of our own preoccupations. If strategy seems to be such an elusive, protean creature, it’s because every era teaches us something about the concept and the requirements of doing it well.

It is essential to renew our understanding of strategy today. Serious people can no longer believe, as was sometimes argued a generation ago, that war—and perhaps strategy itself—have become passé in an era of post-Cold War peace. Fierce competition, punctuated by the threat of catastrophic conflict, is the grim reality of our time. The democratic world faces sharper challenges to its geopolitical supremacy and basic security than at any point in decades. Strategy is most valuable when the stakes are high and the consequences of failure are severe. This means that the premium on good strategy, and on the deep understanding of the history that informs it, is becoming high indeed.

I

“When war comes, it dominates our lives,” wrote Edward Mead Earle in his introduction to the first edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy*.² That volume was conceived during some of the worst moments of history’s worst war; it was

1. There is a robust literature on the meaning and nature of strategy. As examples, see Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2018); Paul Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2. Edward Mead Earle, “Introduction,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, Earle, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943 [republished New York, NY: Atheneum, 1966]), vii.

published in 1943, as that conflict raged across oceans and continents. This setting lent the book extraordinary urgency by underscoring that the study of strategy had become, for the world's few remaining democracies, a matter of life and death.

The contributors, a collection of American and European scholars, sought to promote a better understanding of strategy by tracing the evolution of military thought through key individuals from Machiavelli to Hitler.³ Yet the volume emphasized another reality made inescapable by World War II—that a country's fate depended on far more than its excellence in combat. "In the present-day world," Earle wrote, "strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation—or a coalition of nations—including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed."⁴ It was a discipline that involved multiple dimensions of statecraft and operated in peace as well as war.

Makers of Modern Strategy drove home the point, made during the interwar period by British thinkers such as J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart, that strategy was not simply the preserve of great military commanders. It was the province, also, of economists, revolutionaries, politicians, historians, and all the concerned citizens of democracies.⁵ The book showed how an immersion in history could produce a richer, more rigorous engagement with the intricacies of strategy and the dynamics of war and peace. The first *Makers* thereby helped establish strategic studies as a modern academic field, one that used the past as a primary source of insight on present problems.

If strategic studies was a child of hot war, it matured during the Cold War. The United States became a superpower, with vast intellectual needs to match its sprawling global commitments. The nuclear revolution raised fundamental questions about the purpose of war and the relationship between force and diplomacy. A new generation of scholars studied and, in many cases, revised the body of historical knowledge upon which the discipline drew. Scholars and statesmen reinterpreted old works, such as the writings of Carl von Clausewitz, through the prism of Cold War challenges.⁶

3. Many of the Europeans were refugees from Hitler's Germany. See Anson Rabinach, "The Making of *Makers of Modern Strategy*: German Refugee Historians Go to War," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 75:1 (2013): 97–108.

4. Earle, "Introduction," viii.

5. See Lawrence Freedman's essay "Strategy: The History of an Idea," Chapter 1 in this volume; also, Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*

6. See Hew Strachan's essay "The Elusive Meaning and Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz," Chapter 5 in this volume; also, Michael Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of*

This was the context that eventually led, after more than one false start, to a second edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* in 1986.⁷ That volume, edited by Peter Paret with the assistance of Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert, dipped into issues, such as nuclear strategy and violent insurgency, that had come to the forefront of Cold War politics.⁸ It considered World War I and World War II as part of a discrete historical era rather than more-or-less current events. The second edition paid increased attention to the historical development of American strategy, while also bringing the interpretation of key issues and individuals up to date. Yet interestingly, the Paret volume took a somewhat narrower view of strategy, defining it as “the development, intellectual mastery, and utilization of all of the state’s resources for the purpose of implementing its policy *in war*.”⁹ The overall thrust of the book was that the incalculably high stakes of modern war made an understanding of military strategy essential.

Both volumes were—and remain—classics, which can still be read profitably for the insights of individual essays as well as the window they provide into the evolution of strategic analysis in the Western world. Both were models of how to employ academic knowledge for the purpose of educating democratic publics so that they could better defend their interests and values. But both volumes have aged, unavoidably, since publication, and so both remind us that the state of the art does shift over time.

II

Since 1986, the world has changed dramatically. The Cold War ended and America won a degree of primacy unrivaled in modern history, only to face problems old and new. Nuclear proliferation, terrorism and insurgency, gray-zone conflict and irregular warfare, and cybersecurity all joined—or re-joined—a growing list of strategic concerns. New technologies and modes of warfare challenged accepted patterns of strategy and conflict. For a time,

Social Science on National Security (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943); Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

7. On the evolution of the franchise, see Michael Finch, *Making Makers: The Past, The Present, and the Study of War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2023).

8. Perhaps because the Cold War still qualified as “current events” in 1986, the book contained only three substantive essays, along with a brief conclusion, that considered strategy in the post-1945 era.

9. Peter Paret, “Introduction,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Paret, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3, emphasis added.

America enjoyed a respite from great-power geopolitical competition. But that holiday is now unmistakably over, as China challenges for hegemony, Russia seeks dramatic revisions to the European balance, and an array of revisionist actors test Washington and the international order it leads.

Today, the global status quo is sharply and unceasingly contested; the prospect of war between nuclear-armed states is frighteningly real. There is no guarantee that the democracies will prevail, geopolitically or ideologically, in the twenty-first century as they eventually did in the twentieth. After a period of unprecedented dominance that cushioned the effects of strategic lassitude, America and its allies find themselves in an era that will demand strategic discipline and insight.

As the future has grown foreboding, our understanding of the past has changed. In the last forty years, scholarship on international politics, war, and peace has become increasingly internationalized, with the opening of new archives and the incorporation of new viewpoints. Scholars have brought fresh insights to the study of seemingly familiar subjects, from the meaning of classic texts to the causes and course of the world wars and the Cold War.¹⁰ It may be a challenging time to do strategy, but it is also a good time to update our understanding of it.

There is, first, the question of who and what counts as a “maker.” Theorists and practitioners of war remain fundamentally important. Many of the great men of strategy whose ideas and exploits filled earlier volumes—Machiavelli and Clausewitz, Napoleon and Jomini, Hamilton and Mahan, Hitler and Churchill—reappear in this one.¹¹ Individual makers still receive top billing, because it is people who formulate and execute strategy, and it is through their ideas and experiences that we can best comprehend the unrelenting demands of those tasks.

Yet individuals do not make strategy in a vacuum; it is molded, as well, by technological change and organizational culture, social forces and intellectual movements, ideologies and regime types, generational mindsets and professional cohorts.¹² It is debatable, for instance, whether America’s Cold War

10. See, as surveys, Thomas W. Zeiler, “The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 95:4 (2009): 1053–73; Hal Brands, “The Triumph and Tragedy of Diplomatic History,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:1 (2017); Mark Moyar, “The Current State of Military History,” *Historical Journal* 50:1 (2007): 225–40; as well as many of the contributions to this volume.

11. The essays on them, however, are entirely original to this volume.

12. A point that the second volume of *Makers* also stressed. See Paret, “Introduction,” 3–7.

nuclear strategy flowed primarily from elegant analysis by the Wizards of Armageddon or from opaque, unglamorous, and often-impersonal bureaucratic processes.¹³ Perhaps more importantly, strategic thought and actions by non-Western makers—Sun Zi and Mohammed, Tecumseh and Nehru, Kim Jong-Un and Mao Zedong, among others, individuals largely absent from earlier volumes—have powerfully shaped our world and must inform our comprehension of the art. This isn't a matter of faddishness or political correctness: looking for strategy in unfamiliar places is what prevents the intellectual stagnation that can come from merely playing the greatest hits again and again.

What counts as “modern” has also shifted. New domains of warfare have emerged; the digital age has transformed intelligence, covert action, and other long-standing tools of strategy. The list of issues that will preoccupy policymakers in the coming decades—and influence what is seen as relevant history—is not the same as it was in 1986 or 1943. Today, moreover, a bloody, tumultuous twentieth century can be studied in its entirety; both the Cold War and the post-Cold War era represent discrete historical periods that have a great deal to teach us about issues ranging from nuclear strategy to counter-terrorism and to the survival mechanisms of rogue states. Consequently, roughly half of the essays in this volume deal with events in the twentieth century and later.

Finally, what counts as “strategy?” The term originally connoted tricks or subterfuges that generals used to outwit their opponents. In the nineteenth century, it came to be associated with the art of military leadership. Later, amid the world wars and the Cold War, a larger concept of strategy became more common, even as the concept was still associated primarily with military conflict.¹⁴ Here, too, a certain revision is warranted.

Some of the greatest American strategists, such as John Quincy Adams and Franklin Roosevelt, have been diplomats and politicians rather than soldiers. Strategies of peacetime competition can be as consequential as strategies of military conflict, not least because the former often determine whether, and on what terms, the latter occurs. Geopolitical rivalry plays out in international organizations, cyberspace, and the global economy; tools as varied as finance and covert action, and as intangible as morality, can be potent weapons of statecraft. Even strategies of non-violent resistance have profoundly influenced international order.

13. See the essays by Francis Gavin (“The Elusive Nature of Nuclear Strategy,” Chapter 28) and Eric Edelman (“Nuclear Strategy in Theory and Practice,” Chapter 27) in this volume.

14. See Earle, “Introduction,” viii; Paret, “Introduction”; as well as Lawrence Freedman’s contribution (“Strategy: The History of an Idea,” Chapter 1) to this volume.

To be clear, the study of war and preparations for war remains utterly central to the study of strategy, if only because violent conflict is the final arbiter of the disputes that strategy is meant to address. When war comes, it does indeed dominate our lives; the history of military coercion and organized violence could hardly be more relevant given the many contemporary threats to international peace. But if Napoleon, who mastered the use of violence, led his country to ruin, while Gandhi, who mostly abhorred violence, helped lead his country to freedom, then surely that tells us something about what qualifies as strategy after all.

III

This book represents an effort to grasp the enduring realities of strategy, while taking new insights and perspectives into account. Its essays are essays organized into five sections.

Section I examines “Foundations and Founders.” These essays grapple anew with the classics of the genre, exploring their contested meanings and continued relevance. They examine ongoing debates in our understanding of strategy, while also discussing how foundational issues such as finance, economics, ideology, and geography shape its practice. And they show how modern strategy is still heavily influenced, for better or worse, by the thoughts and actions of individuals who have been dead for centuries or even longer.

Section II investigates “Strategy in an Age of Great-Power Rivalry,” stretching from the rise of the modern international state system in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the eve of the great tumults of the twentieth. This section explores patterns of war and competition in an earlier, multipolar world, against the backdrop of momentous developments—intellectual, ideological, technological, and geopolitical—that encouraged equally remarkable innovations in strategy. It traces the rise of concepts, such as the balance of power and the laws of war, meant to simultaneously harness and regulate the antagonisms within the international system. Finally, it examines the strategies of those who resisted the established and emerging great powers of the era—whether a confederation of Native American tribes in North America, or theorists and practitioners of anti-colonial activism in British India and beyond.

Section III covers “Strategy in an Age of Global War,” focusing on the development of the ideas, doctrines, and practices that featured in World War I and World War II. These cataclysms were unlike anything humanity had seen before. They had the potential to destroy civilization; they pitted advanced industrial societies against each other in desperate, prolonged struggles for

survival; they broke the existing world order in irreparable ways. Leaders crafted strategies to address the novel challenges and opportunities inherent in conducting modern warfare on a global scale; they advanced visions for the reconstruction of global affairs. In their achievements and their shortcomings, the strategies that emerged from these conflicts molded international politics through the end of the twentieth century and beyond.

Section IV addresses “Strategy in a Bipolar Era.” After World War II, America and the Soviet Union emerged as rival superpowers atop a divided international system. European empires dissolved, generating new states and widespread disorder. Nuclear weapons forced statesmen to reconsider the role of force in global affairs and to consider how tools of war might be used to prevail in peacetime competition. Leaders everywhere, not just in Moscow and Washington, had to devise strategies for securing their interests amid a global Cold War. This section covers the issues—nuclear strategy, alignment and non-alignment, conventional and proxy wars, the strategies of small states and revolutionary regimes, the question of how to blend rivalry and diplomacy—that marked the late twentieth century and remain salient today.

Finally, Section V considers “Strategy in the Post-Cold War World,” an era characterized mainly by America’s primacy and the reactions that primacy generated. A preponderant America sought to make the most of its advantages. Yet power provided no exit from perpetual dilemmas of strategy, such as balancing costs and risks or reconciling means and ends. Nor did it permit an escape from the actions of rivals pursuing their own strategies for undermining or overturning the US-led international order. By the early twenty-first century, the prevailing understandings of strategy were being tested by technological changes that carried competition and warfare into new arenas and accelerated the speed of global interactions. This section thus analyzes the strategic problems that marked America’s hegemonic moment and the rise of the threats that mark the contemporary landscape.

In each section, the authors consider the time-bound and the timeless—the particular historical circumstances that produced a given body of thought or action, as well as strategic insights or ideas whose purchase is not limited to any particular setting. Across the various sections, this volume offers a number of thematic and comparative essays, meant to highlight issues and debates that are larger than any single historical figure.¹⁵

15. The chronological breakdown of the sections is, necessarily, somewhat imprecise. For example, certain themes that figured in the world wars—the concept of total war, to name

Taken collectively, the essays in the book contain examples of both failed and successful strategies. There are strategies designed to win wars decisively and strategies meant to limit or even prolong them. There are strategies informed by religion and ideology, and there are examples of actors who believed that struggle itself was a strategy—that resistance, whether effective or not, could be a form of liberation. There are maritime and continental strategies, strategies of attrition and strategies of annihilation, strategies of democracies and strategies of tyrannies, strategies of transformation and strategies of equilibrium. The conclusions that emerge are rich and complex; the authors don't always agree about key issues, episodes, or individuals. Nonetheless, six key themes cut across the volume and the history it relates.

IV

First, the church of strategy must be a broad one. Even in 1943, amid a global war, it was clear to Edward Mead Earle that strategy was too important and complex to be left entirely to the generals. That insight looms even larger today. One has only to look at Vladimir Putin's violent revisionism, or at China's awesome naval buildup and threats to forcibly reorder the Western Pacific, in order to understand that war and the threat of war remain central to human affairs. Yet one has only to look at the expansiveness of Beijing's bid for global primacy—which also involves seizing the initiative in international organizations, weaving webs of economic dependence around foreign countries, striving for dominance in key technologies of the twenty-first century, using information operations to divide and demoralize democratic societies, and promoting Chinese ideological influence worldwide—to understand that strategy is something far more multifaceted than war or the threat thereof.¹⁶

The apotheosis of strategy is synergy: combining multiple tools, whether arms, money, diplomacy, or even ideas to achieve one's highest objectives. Its essence lies in fusing power with creativity to prevail in competitive situations, whatever the precise form of that power may be. This means that expanding the database of cases we consider is vital to making our knowledge of strategy as rich and varied as strategy itself.

one—had their roots in earlier eras. And some figures, such as Stalin, straddled the divide between eras.

16. The same point could be made about the strategies being pursued by other US rivals today. See Seth Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2021); Elizabeth Economy, *The World According to China* (London: Polity, 2022).

Second, grappling with strategy requires recognizing the primacy and pervasiveness of politics. This isn't simply an affirmation of Clausewitz's much-misunderstood dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means. The point, rather, is that while the challenges of strategy may be universal, the content of strategy can hardly be divorced from the political system that produces it.

The strategies of Athens and Sparta in the Great Peloponnesian War were rooted in these powers' domestic institutions, proclivities, and fissures. Napoleon's innovations in military strategy were products of the epochal political and social changes wrought by the French Revolution. The strategy that John Quincy Adams fashioned for nineteenth-century America was meant to ensure the success of the democratic experiment, in part by harnessing the ideological force it exerted abroad. And the strategies of geopolitical revolution pursued by the great tyrants of the twentieth century were intimately related to the strategies of political and social revolution that they pursued in their own countries. All strategy is suffused by politics, which is why political and social change—the rise of democracy, the rise of totalitarianism, or the onset of decolonization—so often drives the evolution of strategy.

This is also why strategic competition is as much a test of political systems as it is a test of individual leaders. The debate over whether liberal societies can outperform their illiberal enemies reaches back to Thucydides and Machiavelli. It is a fundamental question of America's ongoing rivalries with China and Russia. A prominent, though not undisputed, theme of this volume is that democracies may well do strategy better. The concentration of authority can produce dexterity and brilliance in the short term, but the diffusion of authority makes for stronger societies and wiser decisions in the end.¹⁷

Third, strategy is most valuable when it reveals power in unexpected places. Even the strongest countries need strategies; the application of overwhelming might can be a winning approach. Yet reliance on brute strength isn't the most interesting form of strategy, and the outcome of competitive interactions is not always determined by the material balance of power. The most impressive strategies are those that shift the balance of forces by creating new advantages.¹⁸

17. On this debate, see the essays in this volume by (among others) Walter Russell Mead ("Thucydides, Polybius, and the Legacies of the Ancient World," Chapter 2), Tami Biddle Davis ("Democratic Leaders and Strategies of Coalition Warfare: Churchill and Roosevelt in World War II," Chapter 23), and Matthew Kroenig ("Machiavelli and the Naissance of Modern Strategy," Chapter 4).

18. The point is also made in Richard Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security* 25:2 (2000): 5–50; Freedman, *Strategy*.

Those advantages can come from an ideological commitment that unlocks new and deadly ways of warfare, as the Prophet Mohammed demonstrated in the Arabian Peninsula. They can emerge from the superior orchestration of coalitions, as the Grand Alliance managed in World War II, or from the deft application of multiple tools of statecraft, as Tecumseh revealed in his war against westward US expansion. Advantage can come from pressing in areas where the enemy is vulnerable or sensitive, as Russian and Iranian strategies of irregular warfare have proven. Strength can even come, paradoxically, from weakness, as the Cold War's lesser powers showed by exploiting their vulnerability in order to coerce superpower concessions. Or it can come from a unique insight about the nature of a contest: Mao ultimately triumphed in the Chinese civil war because he manipulated regional and global conflicts to win a local one. Indeed, though strategy may be manifested in action, it is a deeply intellectual discipline. It involves skillfully sizing up complex situations and relationships, thereby finding within them some crucial source of leverage.

Admittedly, creativity can't always negate the cruel arithmetic of power: having big battalions and lots of money never hurts. But "be stronger" isn't useful counsel. What is useful, perhaps, is to understand just how diverse the sources of advantage can be, and how good strategy can make the ledger more favorable than it might otherwise be.

What, then, is the key to making effective strategy? Thinkers and practitioners have long sought a universal formula for success. The principles of war and strategy were "as true as the multiplication table, the law of gravitation, or of virtual velocities, or any other invariable rule of natural philosophy," claimed William Tecumseh Sherman.¹⁹ A fourth theme of this work, however, is that strategy will always remain an imprecise art, no matter how much we might like it to be a science instead.

To be sure, the essays in this volume suggest plenty of general guidelines and helpful advice. Skilled strategists find ways of applying their strengths against an adversary's weaknesses; they never lose sight of the need to keep means and ends in equilibrium. Knowing when to stop is critical, because overreach can be fatal; understanding oneself and one's enemy is a cliché, but vital nonetheless. If strategic failures are often failures of imagination, then strategists need ways of ensuring that their assumptions are probed and

19. Lawrence Freedman, "The Meaning of Strategy, Part II: The Objectives," *Texas National Security Review* 1:2 (2018): 45.

checked.²⁰ Yet the quest for fixed maxims of strategy—as opposed to insights about good process—has invariably gone wanting, because the enemy also gets a say. Strategy is an incessantly interactive endeavor, one in which a thinking adversary is poised to spoil even the most elegant design.²¹

If anything, the following essays underscore the ubiquity of surprise and the perishability of strategic advantage. Hitler’s strategies of expansion produced brilliant results, until they didn’t. In the post-Cold War era, the very fact of American dominance led adversaries to devise asymmetric responses. The emergence of new domains of warfare usually leads strategists to dream of capturing enduring advantage, only for reality to set back in as others catch up. In almost every era, eminent leaders have gone to war expecting short, victorious conflicts, only to get long, grinding ones instead.

All this ensures that strategy is a never-ending process, one in which adaptation, flexibility, and that most intangible quality—sound judgment—are as important as the brilliance of any initial scheme. This may be why democracies, on balance, fare better: not because they are immune to errors of strategic judgment, but because they demand an accountability, and provide built-in course correction opportunities, that aid in recovering from them. It also reminds us why history is so important to good strategy: not because it reveals checklists for achieving strategic excellence, but because history offers examples of leaders who managed to thrive amid all the risk, uncertainty, and failure that the world invariably threw their way.

This leads to a fifth theme—that the cost of strategic and historical illiteracy can be catastrophically high. If tactical and operational mastery mattered most, Germany might have won not one but two world wars. In reality, what twice doomed Germany—and the losers of nearly every great-power showdown in the modern era—were critical strategic miscalculations that eventually left them in hopeless straits. Good strategic choices provide an opportunity to recover from tactical shortcomings; serial strategic errors are far less forgiving.²² From ancient times to the present, the quality—or lack thereof—of strategy has determined the rise and fall of nations and the contours of international order.

20. On strategic failures as failures of imagination, see Kori Schake’s “Strategic Excellence: Tecumseh and the Shawnee Confederacy,” Chapter 15 in this volume.

21. Hal Brands, “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41:4 (2018): 31–51.

22. This point runs throughout Alan Millett and Williamson Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, Volumes 1–3 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Herein lies the value of history. There is always a need for humility in drawing on lessons from the past. It is easy to forget that the most “timeless” texts were products of particular eras, places, and agendas not exactly analogous to our own. “History,” wrote Henry Kissinger, “is not . . . a cookbook offering pretested recipes.” It cannot yield universal “maxims” or “take from our shoulders the burden of difficult choices.”²³

Yet if history is an imperfect teacher, it’s still the best we have. History is the only place we can go to study what virtues have made for good strategies and what vices have produced bad ones. The study of history lets us expand our knowledge beyond what we have personally experienced, thereby making even the most unprecedented problems feel a bit less foreign.²⁴ Indeed, the fact that strategy cannot be reduced to mathematical formulas makes such vicarious experience all the more essential. History, then, is the least costly way of sharpening the judgment and fostering the intellectual balance that successful statecraft demands. Above all, studying the past reminds us of the stakes—that the fate of the world can hinge on getting strategy right.

This is history’s greatest lesson. The first *Makers of Modern Strategy* was produced when horrible tyrannies ruled much of the earth and the survival of democracy was in doubt. The second was published near the end of a long, demanding struggle that put the free world to the test. The third comes as the shadows cast by competition and conflict are growing longer and it often seems that authoritarian darkness is drawing near. The better we understand the history of strategy, the more likely we are, in the exacting future that awaits us, to get it right.

Thus, a final theme: the contents of *Makers of Modern Strategy* may change over time, but the vital purpose never does. The study of strategy is a deeply instrumental pursuit. And because it concerns the well-being of nations in a competitive world, it can never be value-free.

The editors of the first two editions of *Makers* were unembarrassed about this fact: they explicitly aimed to help the citizens of America and other democratic societies better understand strategy so that they might be more effective in practicing it against deadly rivals. This was engaged scholarship in its most enlightened form—and it is the model this new edition of *Makers* aspires to emulate today.

23. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1959), esp. 54.

24. Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Can Teach Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

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