



NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

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Strategy and War

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First World War

Question #9: Clausewitz argued that when the cost of fighting exceeds the value of the object, strategic leaders should seek a way to end the war. Why did the leaders of the great powers during the First World War find this guidance so difficult to follow?

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Introduction

Since it was assumed the decision to begin a war, it is presumed that the leaders of the parties evaluate the situation, according its political objectives, and establish the military goals to achieve in order to finish the struggle. It was not different in the First World War. However, the complexity of the decision-making process was increased due to the worldwide range of the conflict and its variety of interests and leaderships. This paper will examine and answer the question: Understanding the statement from Clausewitz, when argued that when the cost of fighting exceeds the value of the object, strategic leaders should seek a way to end the war, so Why did the leaders of the great powers during the First World War find this guidance so difficult to follow?

The answer to this question is that these leaders were subject to human weaknesses. Such weaknesses, when overlapped, create a behavior that reflects the State as a person, seeking honor, but also with its feelings and interests that drive it. But, as in the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenians diplomats sent to Sparta ostensibly recognized the reasons to the war (Strassler, 43), we can create some parallel to understand why making war and why do not haul it, explaining the reasons for the human weaknesses that made the Clausewitz statement so difficult to follow. So, firstly, the honor will influence decisions as in the quoted ancient conflict. Second, the feelings involved, like in the Peloponnesian War was represented by the fear. And finally, the individual interests, specially the US interests in the continuity of the conflict, that we can compare with the reigning interests from that ancient time. These interests will be contrasted by noble ideals, but these ideals only fit like a mask to the really profitable continuity of the war. And it will not be easy to call for some negotiation, because both parties need to be satisfied with an agreement, even with so different political aims. And that realistic period only reinforces these weaknesses.

The Honor can cloud the lens

The honor, for a State, involves the credibility portrayed in its alliances and support, the pride of its representatives and the influence of its rules around others. It will be translated by the govern and its proxies, in the political and military levels.

The credibility was very important for the States in that time. It was a matter of existence or surveillance. A good example is when it is discussed the existence of the Austria-Hungary in itself. It was said that if its vitality was jeopardized or even if it did not exist, replaced by just small republics, maybe it was kind of an invitation to some Russian universal monarchy (Kagan, 98;99). No matter what happened, its security depended somehow in this credibility, like an instrument of deterrence. That's the importance. Beyond the singularity of a State, its survival depended on alliances. But those alliances were interesting thinking in mutual goals, aiming to make a strong partnership. And when a belligerent country was favouring a compromise peace, it was marginalized (Stevenson, 110). Thus, it would have a lot of problems to call for the interest of others in joint to a marginalized State. Maybe its own existence was under threat, because this state could be seen as a coward state, that gives up under pressure. It was the sheer realism. It was how the world worked. And if the credibility would be doubtful, the pride could be seriously damaged.

The pride that exuded by its representatives also created some way to make the peace harder. Pride worked as a self-confidence, demonstrating a self-knowledge of its credibility. In that time, some representatives of some governs did not think in their people, but in their own wishes and ambitious goals, no matter how huge they were. The example of the Russian Tsar, when talked to a German envoy, in 1908, shows how it puts the role of the people representative aside. The Tsar explained that the popularly elected national legislature was merely a discussion forum, without power. He said: "I am the master here. I, myself, decide" (Kagan, 94). Some

politicians crossed the line to prevent getting your pride scratched. As Moltke predicted, the next war would utterly exhaust all, from the victorious or the defeated, and only could come to an end if the whole national force could be considered broken (Strachan, 42). Such a thing evidences the excess of pride from the decision makers, aiming in ambitious goals and do not considering peoples' costs and deprivation. Then, the arrangements for ending the war become less interesting, with the proud leaders focusing only in control and power.

All of this seek for credibility and pride makes a deal harder, because each side wants to prevail in its claims, without to give in at all, imposing their demands, based on own wills and rules. Buffer states, worldwide naval bases, change of regime, colonies, navies extinctions, return of sovereignties, territorial and resources disputes: all these issues were so divergent in war aims that the diplomatic negotiation could not have a different end but fail (Stevenson, 110;111). It was clear that while there was any chance of victory, no matter the costs, the war would go on, until their rule could be imposed.

Although the seek for honor, some feelings are always part of the rationality, with the necessity to be controlled or explored. The cognitive process is always included in the understanding of the decision making.

Feelings can distract the reader

As human beings even the best souls are subject to failure, committing mistakes. Leaders' minds are under pressure all the time. Some alternatives to avoid the individual tendencies are based on sharing the decision, dividing the power of decision-makers. The lack of democracy, the

exposition to bias and heuristics and the lack of leadership made things even more difficult to avoid more bloodshed.

We can observe some democratic tendencies that time. But it was only the embryo of democracy we have today. The foreign policy and war decisions were matters under almost absolutists decisions. Germany (Kagan, 86), Great Britain (89;90), Russia (94) and Austria-Hungary (97) had Foreigner Ministers that could hide from others (except the King) decisions about war. And even the Head of the State, claiming divine right, could decide directly. In Britain, the Army never achieved that degree of autonomy, with the executive arrogating to itself powers totally contrary to that democratic parliamentary organization. Such changes were affecting even the division of powers, mainly judiciary issues (Strachan, 236;237). In Germany, there were too much power and influence in the hands of the military, some of them volatile leaders, like Wilhelm and Ludendorff (Stevenson, 130). Sometimes they overstepped its professional responsibility (Stevenson, 111). So, the political aims could be let aside to the military ones, and sometimes were charged of fear. Discussions and considerations about more classes and the real interest of the people become far from this method of rule and the few people involved in the decisions increases the possibilities of personal trends.

The aforementioned lack of democracy emphasized the personal trends, like bias and heuristics, normal characteristics of a human being, but sometimes dangerous. The confirmation bias was presented when, Germany chose for a gamble instead of a good opportunity for a deal. After Ludendorff's initial offensives in the second half of 1917, the Germany could get some advantageous agreement, if they tried, considering that US was not engaged in the war, once no unrestricted submarine warfare would have happened (Stevenson,130). But considering that they were close to the victory, Germany carried on the campaign, believing that its expansions of

munitions and the Russia's collapse would lead to the final victory (Stevenson, 119). Such agreement would be so better than that they achieved in the end of the war. But even if it was a wish to finish the war, the lack of representativeness for negotiation as a united bloc could complicate this solution for both parties.

In this kind of worldwide war, the leadership and representativeness of the interests of each bloc must be well defined. If the Soldiers and Generals were well-organized in the battlefield, the authority and priorities were barely defined. The United States (US) was not contractually bound to the Entente, and between them, none was pre-eminent in such a point to represent the aspirations of all group; Although Germany was dominant among the Central Powers (CP), there was a lack of coordination from that govern with the others (Stevenson, 109). Thus, there was no coordination to stablish limits and combined war objectives, stablishing those acceptable and those that, if were not disposable, would at least be postponed. Negotiation was not aimed to the bloc objectives.

Considering the honor and feelings, these are shortcomings of the human being, but usually considered as cognitive failures that happens subconsciously. But when the mind acts with intention to get rewards with the suffering of others, the dark side of the war achieve the peak of the realism.

US Interests made the letters smaller... harder to read

When the war occurs, the belligerents try to impose their will, using military means, in a competition for power. But it does not mean that others interested countries cannot have gains in this tragical dispute. There were a lot of interests among the belligerents, but no other was more important to the tide of this war and its continuation. The opportunity for increasing profits,

avoiding risks of losing money and getting influence explain the role of the US and how the costs of the war were exceeding the value of the object, but still carrying on.

In a nutshell, those things that were being lost in Europe, with its costs, were being transferred to US and its capacity to absorb the costs and provide an answer to keep the effort in the Entente side. The biggest increase in the industrial production in the world was performed in the US (Kagan,92). This increase could take some ride in the demands of countries that needed to focus in war. The exports of the war were reckoned in millions of dollars: 204, in January, and 245, in December 1914. In December 1915, 359; and a year later, 523. The Dow Jones index showed an 80 percent in gain between December 1914 and 1915 (Strachan, 216). The war showed itself a profitable business and a good opportunity for the US.

There was an important concern about the spending of the Allies, and it was about the risk of losing money and influence. The dependence on American industry and stock market was so high and important that Germany paid heed, considering it so serious that it risked an unrestricted submarine warfare and considered US as a non-neutral. The Entente Countries were borrowing so much money, like a loan of 1,500 million in six months between the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917. The market was excited till be remembered that the return to the investment would depend on a Entente victory (Strachan, 228). Likewise, the President Woodrow Wilson, the same that was talking about peace without victory, once in the war, was encouraging to reject peace feelers. With the fight, the dependence of the Allies would be increased and could wield more leverage over the peace (Stevenson,112). So, peace was not the goal in itself, but the return of the investment and the influence among the belligerents, what made the war continuation a better deal for the Americans. Beyond this, the aftermath of the war should be favorable to the US, due to its several

investments in the Allies' countries, being the only thing capable to convince the isolationism police to intervene.

All these considerations must be taken in the light that the US was the key factor to finish the war. But its presence was more relevant because their soldiers were in European soil when the troops were so worn out that the simple presence of their huge numbers and brand new corps could have a psychological effect that brought the war to an end, by negotiation (Strachan, 310;311). So, it was clear that the Germany forces understood the power of the North American Country and would consider the possibility of finish the war in limited terms and acceptable war aims.

Beyond this, with this power and aforementioned influence for the CP and being its industry and economy the core of the Allied struggle, obviously they could have the initiative to finish the conflict, proposing mediation. The success was not guaranteed, but of course the US could call both parties to the reflection and, with its military strength and economic power, it could have the suitable features for a good mediator, due to its distance of the conflict as well as its respect. The other way was by waging war, but earlier from all this bloodshed. Like Great Britain, that did not wait the war reach its territory, but engaged when saw the continental threat. But, naturally, the US interests were carefully calculated and prevailed in the evaluation.

Counterargument: bolding the letters

Some others may argue that the US interest was not explainable as a reason to protract the war, even because the isolationism was the US policy and the only reason to engage in the war was the threat to the territory and the threat to the trade.

The US was not interested in the war. The lack of Russian interest, in the final year of the war, damaging the strategy of the simultaneous attacks on all fronts, was a blow to the Entente (Strachan, 242). Russia was trying to solve your own problems. There was no reason to create more. It would be some waste of time and resources that would delay the country development. It can be compared to the lack of US interest in the war. Developing the country and keeping out of the war was primordial because avoid expenses in external affairs and keep the course of the nation to the progress. It does not mean nothing more than this: No interest in war neither in its final.

Otherwise, even when the decision came to engage in the conflict was because there was a seducing telegram from Germany to Mexico, in order to incentive this neighbor country to cooperate in attacking US, using the resentment of some US acts (Strachan, 227). So, the profits could not have any role in the decision to finish that war, it was about home security. Other reason was the German's unrestricted submarine warfare, that created the desire to defend the right of free trade above the peace ideal (Strachan, 227). These cases convey the idea that noble ideals were the forerunners of the US ideal when entering the war, once again evidencing no pursuit of less noble interests.

However, the isolationism was not only a policy in order to bring the internal development of the Country, avoiding war expenses. But actually, it was clearly aligned to exploit the opportunities that the war created, fostering the US economy. As soon as the Britain blockade begun in Europe, some in US, Irish and German people were criticizing those procedures (Strachan, 215). But it but it only lasted until they presented the profits made (Strachan, 216). The US interests really proved to be the reason to each US decision in the war. The Zimmerman telegram was clearly a threat to the US, and it showed that Germany understood that US were not willing to give up of this profitable trade (Strachan, 227). But that doesn't contradict the claim that

US interests have moved their policy, because home security is critical to business. Instead of this, they were acting as a supporter for the Allied, of course, because it was profitable. Finally, about the unrestricted submarine warfare, it would be overcome for the sake of the US interests. And it was before, when the British vessel Lusitania, a passenger ship, was sunk with 128 Americans on board. The security for its citizens and the ideal of free navigation and trade could not have changed since then. However, the fear of a Allied defeat (Strachan, 228) and the advices of the treasure Secretary that financing the conflict would soon become difficult, diminishing Washington's economic leverage (Stevenson, 122) were enough to come to conclude that despite its benefits, the war must be finished. Even in this situation, the American people would like more savings. Once there was no other way but defend the country, it would have to be done till latter consequences, stretching this profitable war as much as they could. The President used the term "mad" to explain the American behavior regarding the war (Stevenson, 121). The human nature usually rationalizes in a so high level that can really create such an impression of madness.

Rebuttal: the blindness to Clausewitz readings

As if that were not enough, those chances to avoid the conflict were diminished. Different from conflicts between individuals, when worth the popular saying "it takes two to tango", for foreign relations it is different. It was not necessary that the aforementioned conditions, that reflect the human weaknesses, happens to more than one side. And to stop the fight, both sides simultaneously must be willing for it to do so (Stevenson,108). It demands a rare coincidence of interests. In the Brest-Litovsk conference, when the Russian government abandoned the conference with the CP, declaring the war ended, its opponents immediately renewed their advance (Stevenson,108). There was no agreement and, even both sides having some affinities, until both

considerations was satisfied, no agreement was possible. For France and Britain, making peace was not an option while France was occupied by German troops (Stevenson, 110). This thought reflects how difficult is negotiate under disadvantageous position. Only one disagreement could rule out a whole compromise of peace, and it happened, as in the case of Germany's intentions in controlling Belgium as a buffer state (Stevenson,118). Deadlock becomes the natural tendency, in the face of so much distrust, and human weaknesses become crutches to support decisions.

Conclusion

Sometimes it seems that the Clausewitz's readings were neglected. However when zooming the facts, we can understand that the human weaknesses could distort the understanding of the leaders of the First World War, causing a lot of difficult to follow Clausewitz's guidance that when the cost of fighting exceeds the value of the object, strategic leaders should seek a way to end the war. Honor, feelings, and US interests explain how these weaknesses could domain the mind of those men. The noble ideals widely publicized from the US in that time was nothing but a mask to its own interests. And the interests were the compass of that era of exacerbated realism. The difficult for an agreement, between so different sides, could only let it clear that such kind of global war would cause so much costs for each small object. And even in the clarity of this current promising times, such human weaknesses often overshadow the visions of our decision makers, even today.