

Mahan, A. T.

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Strategy

Abstract of Capt Mahan's  
lectures, 1896  
1.

Captain Mahan delivered a course of lectures upon Strategy, clearly and forcibly setting forth the great truths of the Art of War. The course this year comprised those <sup>lectures</sup> of the year before, though rewritten and with many changes and additions. The whole course was divided into two series; the subject of the first of these ~~series~~ being "The Strategic Features of the Caribbean".

In this the lecturer pointed out that the whole theater of interest in the Caribbean may be ~~included~~ in a symmetrical figure, an ~~isocles~~ triangle with the corners lopped off. The base of this triangle is a line joining Pensacola and St. Thomas, 1600 miles long. Lines join Pensacola with the Passes of the Mississippi and St. Thomas and St. Lucia; these lines form the lopped off corners.

These corners are then joined to the apex at Panama forming there an angle a little larger than a right angle.

The line from the Passes to Panama is 1300 <sup>miles</sup>, and the line from St. Lucia to Panama is a little less ~~than~~, or 1200 miles long

This triangle includes, or very nearly includes all the chief points of interest in this locality; ~~that is~~, the Mississippi, Key West, Havana, Cienfuegos, Santiago de Cuba, Samana Bay, St. Thomas Kingston, Chiriqui Lagoon, Colon, Gaudaloupe and St. Lucia; and it will be noticed, <sup>in passing</sup> that the first class powers, as the United States and Great Britain, are ~~separated~~ by a chain of points belonging to the inferior or third class powers.

Some of these may be taken as representing groups of efficiency, and are the centers of groups; thus, St. Lucia is the center of St. Vincent, Granada, the Grenadines, Barbadoes and Trinidad; Havana that of Matanzas, Port Mariel Cabanas and Bahia Honda; Pensacola of Pensacola and New Orleans, and Key West the center of <sup>the Florida</sup> Keys and the Dry Tortugas.

The lecturer called attention to the fact that the strong centers of influence were at the extremities of the triangle, and that Jamaica and Key West were advanced points from these strong centers; to the resemblance, in effect, between the Florida Peninsula and the Island of Cuba, and that all trade may be said to pass close to them, either through the Florida Channel, the Yucatan Channel or ~~the~~ through one of the passes in the chain of islands, <sup>which Eastward</sup> extending from the west end of Cuba ~~eastward~~ for 1000 miles.

*He said:* "Cuba blocks the entrance to the Gulf, leaving only two small entrances to our southern coast from the sea; the Florida Strait and the Yucatan Channel. The Florida Strait is a strait lined on one side by the territory of a hostile country, while on the shore side there are absolutely no ports; in fact none for less than 170 miles after rounding the extremity of the Peninsula of Florida, as far as Tampa or possibly Charlotte Harbor. So, in time of war the Florida Strait would swarm with commerce destroyers right near their base—the best possible position."

How important then is it, ~~the lecturer said~~, to strengthen Key West with artificial strength in time of peace. Key West, while first in position, its *needs* can not be supplied with certainty during war. "

It will be noticed that the tracks of all trade and shipping are through the passages in the chain of islands running nearly east and west from Cuba, and that these straits and passes in the Caribbean correspond to mountain passes or defiles in land warfare and which may be watched and controlled by forces in their rear.

Thus Mona Passage is at the apex of an isosoles triangle St. Lucia-Jamaica-Mona. In the same way Cienfuegos is a first class military port, and the natural base for commerce destroying on the line of trade passing through the Yucatan Channel.

The lecturer proposed the question "Is Cuba the most important position from a military point of view-is it the key to the theater of maritime interest in the Caribbean, as it certainly is to the Gulf"? For a proper consideration of this subject ~~the lecturer~~ *he* divided it into three heads; (1) the entrance to the sea, (2) transit across, and (3) objectives within it.. Then assuming equal forces which he stated was necessary for clearness, he discussed exhaustively the entire subject under the separate subdivision above stated: The following is an inadequate summary of this discussion.

Cuba commands the Windward Passage and extends her influence as far as the Mona Passage; and it should be noted that all the

islands in the Caribbean, with the exception of Jamaica, are on the line forming the rim to this sea.

Jamaica is so near this line that that it may sometimes be spoken of as on the rim, and sometimes on the inside; it is equally distant from the Isthmus, the Yucatan Channel and the Mona Passage; it is 150 miles nearer the Isthmus than Santiago de Cuba, and still nearer than Cienfuegos; and lastly it guards the Winward Passage though in the latter case, Santiago could do this equally as well with fewer ships, the base being so much nearer the Passage.

The lecturer concludes that Jamaica as a base commanding the entrances is in the best position in this sea; in rear of the pass

Regarding transit across, or lines of communications, the lecturer said that <sup>from bases outside the sea to objections within</sup> in any expedition an enemy should sit down before the port where it is preparing, if possible; but if it <sup>be</sup> gone and its destination is known, the enemy should await its arrival at the point of arrival. Many examples of this are furnished by the French and English wars; <sup>and so</sup> in operations against the Isthmus, Jamaica is on the flank of the communications of the enemy, besides being nearer to all the approaches to the Isthmus than Cuba.

If the enemy leave a force to hold Jamaica, he divides his force; if he goes on and leaves it in his rear he cuts loose from his communications.

Jamaica, Chiriqui Lagoon and the Isthmus are the chief points

of military interest in this sea; the only other <sup>such</sup> ~~two~~ points in the south are Cartagena and Curacao; while in the west Belize might prove of <sup>value</sup> ~~interest~~ as a coaling depot for ships from Jamaica watching the Yucatan Channel

Jamaica and the Isthmus are the main objective points; yet while Jamaica is central in a military and geometrical sense, Cuba holds an interior position with reference to Jamaica, for her lines of communications are behind her, and being large she can be supplied at many points. When the Windward Passage is held by Cuba, Jamaica's line of communications is via St. Lucia. If the fleet of Cuba were driven into port it could be supplied by land; an advantage over the Lesser Antilles, for if their fleet were driven into port it would be sealed up there.

In case of scarcity of coal at Jamaica, followed by a coal famine, and an enemy holding the northern rim of the Caribbean, Jamaica would disappear from consideration as a strategic feature, as all communication with Europe, Bermuda, Halifax and even the United States must be via St. Lucia

The lecturer added " of one thing we may be sure - in the Caribbean sea is the strategic key to the two great oceans - the Atlantic and the Pacific, of our own maritime frontiers.

The second series of the course was devoted to "some considerations on the art of war, naval and land, with illustrations from Bonapartes Italian campaign of 1796-1797.

The lecturer opened this series with a discussion of war as an art and not a science; making clear ~~to all~~ the difference between the two. He said, "War is an art and not a science. There is a great difference between the two. Science is the formulation of laws bearing on a given subject, as the natural laws or laws of nature. These laws are the tabulated results of experiment, they remain unalterable and incontrovertible. They must be observed and followed, if neglected or ignored they will crush us.

Any mind in discussing or weighing scientifically can follow only the straight and well marked way; it cannot deviate, it cannot choose. Science is facts or ultimate principles, as explained by principles or laws thus arranged in natural order, It is applied or pure. Applied science is a knowledge of facts or phenomena as explained or accounted for by powers, causes or laws. Pure science is the knowledge of these powers causes or laws considered apart, or as pure from all applications.

Art on the other hand depends on skill and practice in the performance. Art and science both enquire; the latter for the sake of truth, the former for the sake of production.. Art is the application of things in the natural world to the uses of life. Science is systematised knowlegde; art is knowlâge

made efficient by skill. The great captain is the great artist

Each campaign is an artistic study in itself; each is different from its generic prototype; each a creation; and these creators like great artists, are born not made; though attentive study has made up much of what nature has not supplied

In the course of this discussion the lecturer pointed out ~~that~~ one thing to be mentioned as a strong factor in all operations is doubt. A perfect brood of ills is the progeny of this. It is seen in the offensive and the defensive. It operates more strongly with the ~~defensive~~ than with the offensive. The offensive usually has a marked out plan, and by skill and energy can correct for necessary changes or weak points, as it works itself out. But the defensive is in doubt from the very start; he does not know the plan of his enemy, where or when he may strike, and each new rumor or report only makes things worse by increasing the doubt and uncertainty.

Doubt gives rise to visions, hallucinations; dangers are magnified and pictures made. Napoleon said 'do not make pictures for yourselves'. Examples of doubt ~~were~~ <sup>are</sup> Napoleon at Marengo, and Grant on his first march to meet Harris. In the first case, Napoleon being in doubt, and unable to find <sup>out</sup> which direction the Austrians would take in their retreat, he was compelled to maintain a long line, which at the point of attack was weaker than the enemy, and only the opportune arrival of Desaix finally secured the day for the French.



In the second case <sup>when</sup> Grant approached ~~ed~~ the reported location of the enemy's camp his imagination pictured <sup>to</sup> Harris drawn up beyond the brow of the hill to receive him and ~~his~~ heart rose till it seemed in his throat, but he just kept on <sup>Not having the moral courage to call a halt.</sup> until finally he reached the top of the hill and Harris camp lay before him; <sup>then</sup> ~~and~~ his heart resumed its natural place. The camp site was still there but the troops were gone. It then occurred to him that Harris was as much afraid of him as he of Harris. The moral of which is that one should not permit oneself to look only at one side magnifying the dangers and multiplying in imagination its difficulties, dangers and weaknesses.

The lecturer dwelt upon the theme that "war cannot be made without risks" "Napoleon said 'My Admirals seem to think that war can be made without risks, but where they learned it or from whom I do not know' Sherman in his march through Georgia; Farragut in cutting loose from his connections at sea when he passed the forts below New Orleans are examples of risks taken to effect an end. Risks, both of them, and the passage of Fort Morgan as well, but they were all proportioned to the advantage to be gained. They both saw the risks and were willing to take it; particularly at Mobile where Farragut was called upon <sup>to decide</sup> on the spur of the moment, which he was quite able to do, not rashly, but by reason of having prepared his mind for just such contingencies.

"To be able to see things as they are is most important in war"/ An example of failure to do this is Villeneuve, Marmont is known as a wise and skilfull war maker on paper, but History knows how well he was able to carry out his theory. Risks must be taken, things must be looked at as they are, and we must not make pictures

If this faculty is not born, reason and will can do much to instill it.

The lecturer pointed out that the foregoing principles were illustrated in Bonaparte's Italian campaign in 1796 and 1797.

*phases of the*  
The campaigns of these years were three in number; in the first and third he acted on the offensive; but in the second, which was much longer than the other two, occupying fully four fifths of the whole time, he acted purely on the defensive.

The 1st phase from April 1st, 1796 to the 1st June 1796 comprises six weeks fighting around and near Benoa. It exhibits the complete annihilation, or rather obliteration of the Sardinians, who composed the right wing of the allied line; the driving back of the Austrians as far as Mantua; the establishment of the French Headquarters at Verona, and the seige of Mantua. This phase is marked by the battles of Montenotte, Millesimo, Dego, Mondovi, and the famous battle of Lodi and the entry into Milan, May 10th.

The second phase is from June 1st 1796 to the 2nd of February 1797. It comprises the seige of Mantua, and its final capitulation from starvation, and furnished an example of the purely defensive with an inferior force, in which activity and skill prevailed at last; for nothing can make up for inferiority of force but superior skill. It is marked by the defeat of Quasdonovich at Lonato ~~on~~ August 3rd; of Wurmser at Castiglione ~~on~~ August 5th; at <sup>Roveto</sup> " September 3rd; and again at Bassano on September 8th, with his final retreat into Mantua.

The third phase includes the period from the resumption of hostilities in November 1797 <sup>and</sup> the famous battle of Arcola; the campaign ending with the battle of Rivoli, the capitulation of Wurmser and the fall of Mantua with the advance of the French towards Leoben and the signing of the preliminaries of peace at that place, which was finally concluded with the Treaty of Campo Formio.

The lecturer examined critically the various phases of the campaign successively; describing clearly ~~ixxxixxx~~ their history ~~of each~~ and describing and discussing the lessons to be learned from each.

Of the first phase he said " we find exemplified here one of the hardest lessons to learn in the art of war, that is, to mass and not to scatter-mass and do not scatter. Dissemination is necessary for rapid preparation and concentration for rapid execution.

Napoleons maxim was 'desseminate to subsist, concentrate to fight'.

In these operations ~~so far~~ at no time did Bonaparte ~~scatter~~

his forces. He massed them, striking out here and there when circumstances required it, very much like a strong man hitting out with his fists to make his blow, and drawing them back again to his body. The lecturer called attention to the fact that battles are fought for an end, and the one who can accomplish that end with the least fighting is the best fighter. Naval battles he said, cost much in blood, oak and hemp, but the <sup>less</sup> least they cost in ~~is~~ blood in the accomplishment of the end, the more glorious are they. Troudeville said 'beware of the sterile glory of <sup>fighting battles</sup> simply for winning them.'

In considering the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Italian campaign which closed with the battle of Rivoli, <sup>the lecturer</sup> ~~it was~~ pointed out that this phase exemplified the advantage of central position, and of concentrating the central mass against a divided offensive. When an enemy has two lines of attack, the best way to do <sup>he said,</sup> is to amuse him on one of these, while you deliver the main attack at the other; as Wellington did at Ciudad Rodrigo. <sup>the</sup> great error of trying to do two things at the same time is to be carefully avoided.

This was the mistake of Wurmser as he advanced in two lines from the Tyrol upon Mantua. The conduct of Napoleon <sup>o</sup> is an example of a mind prepared by study and reflection seizing upon the right thing to be done at once, and without hesitation, and carrying it through without hesitation. Although Napoleon had said that war is a business of positions' yet he did not hesitate to give up

the very best when the necessity required it; and moreover was quick to judge of the necessity. The lecturer said; Indeed any one who thinks the rules of war are fixed mathematical formulae had better disabuse his mind of the idea at once. The proper objective of any force is the enemy's organized force, and concentration is much better than dispersion for fighting; yet as rules are made to guide not to fetter the judgment, nothing but the immediate circumstances of the case can be the guide.

In discussing the third phase of the Italian campaign the lecturer <sup>emphasized the fact</sup> ~~pointed out~~ that <sup>in</sup> this campaign, short as it was, Bonaparte had wrung victory from despair. ~~He~~ was trying to do one thing at a time and did it against great odds while the home government was trying to do many at the same time, and, as a natural consequence, succeeded in none of them, except where Bonaparte had won by virtue of his own personal skill, courage and activity.

~~This~~ phase closed with the battle of Arcole, where a small obstacle in itself held Bonaparte in check for ~~three~~ days, and prevented the entire success of the immediate movement.

The lecturer called attention to the counterpart of this situation in ~~XXXXXX~~ Acre, which obstacle holding out prevented the conquest of the whole of Syria

This short phase of the campaign, <sup>he said</sup> illustrates the disasters attendant upon delay; and it may be said in passing that delay is usually advantageous to the defense.

It shows, too, the danger of concentrating from exterior lines when the point of concentration is in the hands of the enemy, or can be seized by him. At Arcola great risks were taken, but the desperate situation required it; advantage was taken of the blunders of the enemy, and though Bonaparte was not wholly successful, Verona was saved.

The lecturer concluded the series with a *detailed and* critical description ~~and discussion~~ of the battle of Rivoli on the 13th and 14th of January, 1797; which practically annihilated the last of the Austrian armies then in the field, and virtually closed the campaign in northern Italy.

In this battle Napoleon opposed 22000 to 28000; the small force ordered up from the position south of Lake Garda not coming up in time. The mistake seems to have been the attempted concentration of the Austrians in the face of the enemy, a mistake which might well have been avoided, and which there was no excuse for committing. This cardinal error, as well as other minor ones of the enemy, were diligently watched, recognised, and ably put to profit by the never flagging zeal of Napoleon.

Concentration in strategy and tactics differ this far; that in the former it should be effected before meeting the enemy, and is best and properly made then; provided that the place is well chosen; but in tactics the strategic combinations being effected, they rely solely on the active watchful commander for their success

and are made upon meeting the enemy.

Throughout the ~~course~~ <sup>lectures</sup> the lecturer <sup>frequently</sup> accentuated the advantage of interior lines and positions, <sup>and</sup> ~~giving~~ a special illustration in the campaign of the French in the north, <sup>in Germany, which</sup> occurred simultaneously with the Italian campaign. This ~~same~~ <sup>has said</sup> campaign illustrates how important it is for each commander in chief to keep in mind the effect of <sup>pointed out how</sup> his part of the field upon the rest; <sup>and</sup> after the first successes of Bonaparte in Italy, Austrian detachments were drawn away from the army opposing the French on the Rhine, ~~commanded~~ by the Arch-Duke Charles, thus leaving the latter without the superiority which accorded to him the initiative.

The lecturer <sup>showed</sup> ~~pointed out~~ with what clear perception the Arch Duke conducted the operations of his armies by, <sup>swiftly and secretly</sup> reinforcing the northernmost ~~secretly and swiftly~~ <sup>and</sup> falling upon and beating Jourdan, <sup>thus compelling Morran in the South to withdraw to the Rhine</sup> and stated the similitude in this case to be the battle <sup>his motion</sup> of Metaurus.

Throughout the lecture dwelt upon the application of the rules of land warfare to sea warfare, <sup>this</sup> and illustrated by many similar situations from history.