

Continuing Control: Strategic Reasoning for the 21st Century

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In the summer of 1950 Captain Joseph 'J.C.' Wylie returned to Newport to begin a staff tour at the Naval War College. Over the course of his three-year tour Wylie developed and oversaw the short-lived 'Advanced Course in Strategy and Sea Power.' While the course was canceled less than three years after his departure, it ultimately resulted in a unique body of scholarship on strategic theory. Along with Wylie, and his students, Rear Admiral Henry Eccles and German-American historian Dr. Herbert Rosinski would collectively develop what I refer to as the 'Control School' of strategy. The defining feature of which would be a straightforward idea: the purpose of all war, and by extension the aim of any strategy, is the assertion of some desired degree of 'control' over the adversary. Expanding outward from this basic premise, each of these three intellectuals worked toward the development of a comprehensive theory of war and strategy that, while now largely forgotten, can improve the way we conceptualize and communicate strategy today.

'Strategic Reasoning'

Herbert Rosinski began his study of strategy by exploring the canonical works of Clausewitz, Mahan, Corbett, and others; the intention of which was to reconcile the different patterns of thought that become apparent when one looks at strategy on land and strategy at sea. Through the course of his years of study Rosinski's aim evolved. He came to believe that what was needed was the development of a comprehensive theory of strategy. Thoroughly Clausewitzian in his thinking, Rosinski sought to achieve one of Clausewitz great aims: to reconcile the nature and character of past wars with those that clearly marked the turn to a new historical epoch. He believed that the end of the Second World War, the maturation of the industrial age, and the dawn of the atomic age, meant that both war and society had entered a new historical epoch. Just as the rise of Napoleon's France had inspired Clausewitz attempt to rationalise war as it was, with war as it had been throughout (pre-Napoleonic) history. As Rosinski explained:

Today, with our field of strategy so enormously enlarged and our notions of it so grievously split between three widely irreconcilable service views – not to mention others – the need for a common theory as at least the basis for a meaningful discussion of the existing divergences has become incomparably more imperative than in Clausewitz' days. I do not see how we can ever hope to arrive at any unified,

rational and economic, national strategy except upon the basis of a previously established theory of war.¹

In light of the maturity of the industrial age and the dawn of the nuclear age, Clausewitz definition of strategy as the “use of an engagement for the purpose of the war” was no longer fit for purpose.² To Rosinski, a comprehensive theory had to unify this out-dated definition with what Rosinski viewed as the other conception of strategy hinted at, but not fully developed in *On War*: “strategy as the overall direction of war”.³ This idea of two realms of strategy had already been explored by Julian Corbett. The British navalist referred to them as ‘Minor Strategy’ and ‘Major Strategy’, what many today would term ‘strategy’ and ‘grand strategy’.⁴

The great value of a comprehensive theory, one inclusive enough to cover the comprehensive direction of a nations power (both military and non-military), is in its ability to provide the foundation for what Rosinski called ‘strategic reasoning’. Strategic reasoning, he suggested, was an analytical methodology that needed to be taught. It was analogous to the ways in which law schools do more than teach legal cases, they teach law students to think like lawyers, legal reasoning; likewise, medical schools teach more than specific medical cases they teach a broader conception of medical reasoning. The means to approach, analyse, and most importantly, communicate about strategy with others across the various services and organizations, through an explicit theory, was “imperative in order to provide common ground for a discussion and to avoid semantic misunderstandings.”⁵

‘Strategy as Control’

This idea of a comprehensive theory of strategy as a form of strategic reasoning is the framework through which the work of Wylie, Rosinski, and Henry Eccles should be viewed. It was Wylie who first presented the idea that “the aim of any war is to establish some measure of control over the enemy. The pattern of action by which this control is sought is the strategy of the war.”⁶ Rosinski, while defining strategy as the “comprehensive direction of power”, shared Wylie’s emphasis on control, declaring it “the essence of strategy; control being the element which differentiates true strategic action from a haphazard series of improvisations.”⁷

While Rosinski, the consummate scholar, defined the practice of strategy as the “coordination of all forces and resources of a community in such a clear and purposeful manner as to: make effective action possible, and to maximize the effectiveness of this action.”⁸ Wylie, ever the

¹ Herbert Rosinski, ‘Comments on the Theory of War’ (October 1957), p. 3

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book II, Chapter I; Book III, Chapter I

³ Rosinski, ‘The Structure of Military Strategy’, p. 18-22; Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 178

⁴ J. S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, 1988), p. 308

⁵ Rosinski, ‘Comments on the Theory of War’, p. 3

⁶ J. C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis, 1989), p. 124

⁷ Herbert Rosinski, ‘New Thoughts on Strategy’ (September, 1955), p. 1

⁸ Rosinski, ‘The Structure of Military Strategy’, p. 21

operator, directed his writings quite pointedly towards the thinking and practice of the operator.

The primary aim of the strategist in the conduct of war is some selected degree of control of the enemy for the strategist's own purpose; this is achieved by control of the pattern of war; and this control of the pattern of war is had by manipulation of the center of gravity of war to the advantage of the strategist and the disadvantage of the opponent.⁹

It is the specific focus on control, and its explicit distinction from – and relationship to – destruction, which most distinguishes it from Clausewitz, and the majority of land-centric strategic theory. Though this is not to say that their work stands opposed to that of Clausewitz, or even the central role of the soldier to strategy, Wylie was quite specific in insisting that the soldier on land was the ultimate manifestation of the concept.

The ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with the gun. This man is the final power in war. He is control. He determines who wins. There are those who would dispute this as an absolute, but it is my belief that while other means may critically influence war today, after whatever devastation and destruction may be inflicted on an enemy, if the strategist is forced to strive for final and ultimate control, he must establish, or must present as an inevitable prospect, a man on the scene with a gun. This is the soldier. [...] I do not claim that the soldier actually on the scene is a requisite in every case; but I do believe he must be potentially available, and clearly seen as potentially available, for use as the ultimate arbiter.¹⁰

This statement, in essence reflects Clausewitz own assertion that the aim of war is the destruction of the enemy forces, so as to impose one's will upon them.¹¹ Yet it also builds on that assertion by hinting at the fact that goals can be achieved without complete destruction, and without this "ultimate arbiter." The critical distinction that Wylie makes is the one between destruction as the end unto itself, and as a means to serve the desired ends: the establishment of control. Clausewitz discusses this, at the very opening of *On War*, in the sense of "imposing our will upon the enemy" (which, in essence, is how he views control). However, he follows that with the assertion that to "render the enemy powerless", to *destroy* his means of resistance, is the "true aim of war."¹² This distinction as expressed by Clausewitz, has, according to Wylie, Rosinski, and Eccles, all too often led strategists to assume the destruction of the enemy army is the ultimate objective of the war, without appreciating what precisely the strategist wishes to impose upon his enemy.¹³ A focus on control, they argue, provides the ability to properly calibrate the type and degree of destruction required. Absent this calibration, unchecked

⁹ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, p. 77.

¹⁰ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, p. 72

¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book VIII, Chapter IV

¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, Chapter I

¹³ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, p. 47

destruction becomes counter-productive. In discussing the contribution of both the sailor, and the soldier, Wylie argues:

Destruction in each of these two cases is only one component of control, and not the whole of it. The soldier exercises ultimate control by his unchallenged presence on the scene. The sailor contributes to control in part by destruction, but as much by other components. Like the soldier, in some cases, by his presence. Or, as often as not, by making possible various political or economic pressures toward control.¹⁴

The explicit argument, expressed most cogently by Wylie but echoed in the writing of both Rosinski and Eccles, is that while the ultimate form of control is the unchallenged presence of “the man on the scene with the gun”, it should not be assumed that this is required in all, or perhaps even most, instances.¹⁵ This is, instead, a zero-point baseline and it is equally if not more likely that the degree required (or the degree that is realistically achievable) will be a deviation from this baseline.

The central requirement of the strategist then, is to discern what specifically is the degree of control required. Rosinski draws this issue back to the foundational principal of *On War*: the relationship of war to policy.¹⁶ In essence he upholds the authority of policy over military leadership, with two critical caveats. The first being that political leadership must understand the nature and effect of the “tools” it is employing, its pre-conditions and possible consequences. The second, stemming from the first, is that policy must not ask of military leadership efforts which they are patently incapable of achieving.¹⁷

‘Continuing Control’

In developing what Rosinski had referred to as ‘comprehensive control’, which is to say control as the focusing concept that governs, and gives purpose to, the overall direction of war and the coordination of all forces and resources of the community, Eccles provided what may be a more useful conception in ‘continuing control’. Like Wylie, Eccles was concerned with the tendency of strategists, both in abstract theorizing and war planning, to focus overwhelmingly on destruction as an end unto itself. This manifested in what he referred to as ‘weapons strategies’, those that reflexively tend to hone in on a specific weapon or system of weapons (belonging either to the strategist or the adversary).¹⁸ The result of this, Eccles argued, is that the strategist tends to pattern his thinking to the capability of the weapon, rather than maintaining an agnostic appreciation of the dictates of policy. For Eccles, the benefit of phrasing this concept was ‘continuing control’ was that it, “naturally leads to a re-examination

¹⁴ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, p. 88

¹⁵ Wylie, *Military Strategy*, p. 72

¹⁶ Herbert Rosinski, ‘The Structure of Military Strategy’ (November, 1956), pp. 7-9

¹⁷ Rosinski, ‘The Structure of Military Strategy’ (November, 1956), pp. 8-9

¹⁸ See Henry Eccles comments on: Herbert Rosinski, ‘New Thoughts on Strategy’ (September 1955)

and better understanding of the objectives whose attainment is the purpose of the attempt to exercise control.” Eccles went on to suggest that:

The concept of continuing control prepares the mind for shifting its emphasis from weapon to weapon or from tool to tool in accordance with a changing situation or with the changing capabilities and use or application of the weapons or weapon systems involved. Thus, [Rosinski’s concept of strategy as “comprehensive control”] naturally leads to the intellectual concept of flexibility.¹⁹

Eccles conception here is, by his own admission, deliberately simplified and capable of considerable expansion. Given his emphasis on flexibility as this central principal, a sort of governing virtue of strategic thinking, both the concept and wording should be viewed in a broad light.²⁰ Like Rosinski, Eccles intended to develop a comprehensive theory that applied up and down the various levels of war and across the various domains of war. To that end, his call for flexibility in the use or application of weapons and weapons systems, I would argue, should be viewed not just within the case of a specific service. It should be viewed instead, as speaking to the flexible way in which the services themselves are brought to bear in the execution of a given strategy.

Keeping in mind Rosinski’s argument that the theory of control functions both as a field strategy, and in the sense of strategy as the overall direction of war, this idea should be applied at both levels. The idea of employing weapons and weapons systems towards continuing control at the level of a field strategy should, at the level of overall direction, be viewed as the flexible application of the service’s roles, missions, and specific weapons systems. Therefore this should be read in the sense of what we today call “joint warfighting”.

The theory of control, I believe, is both sufficiently broad and coherent to serve as a means of strategic reasoning in an era where the conduct of war is highly complex. Complex not only in terms of its organisational challenges from inter-service, to inter-agency, and multi-national; but also the challenges of its conduct from insurgency, to operational-access, to conventional, and even so called ‘Phase 0’ or ‘Gray Wars’. All of which can be understood and discussed in terms of their central essence: the assertion or denial of some degree of control. It is because of this that the theory of control provides a sound basis for strategic reasoning, one capable of improving the way we approach, analyse and communicate strategic understanding across a range of domains, services, and organizational structures.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid