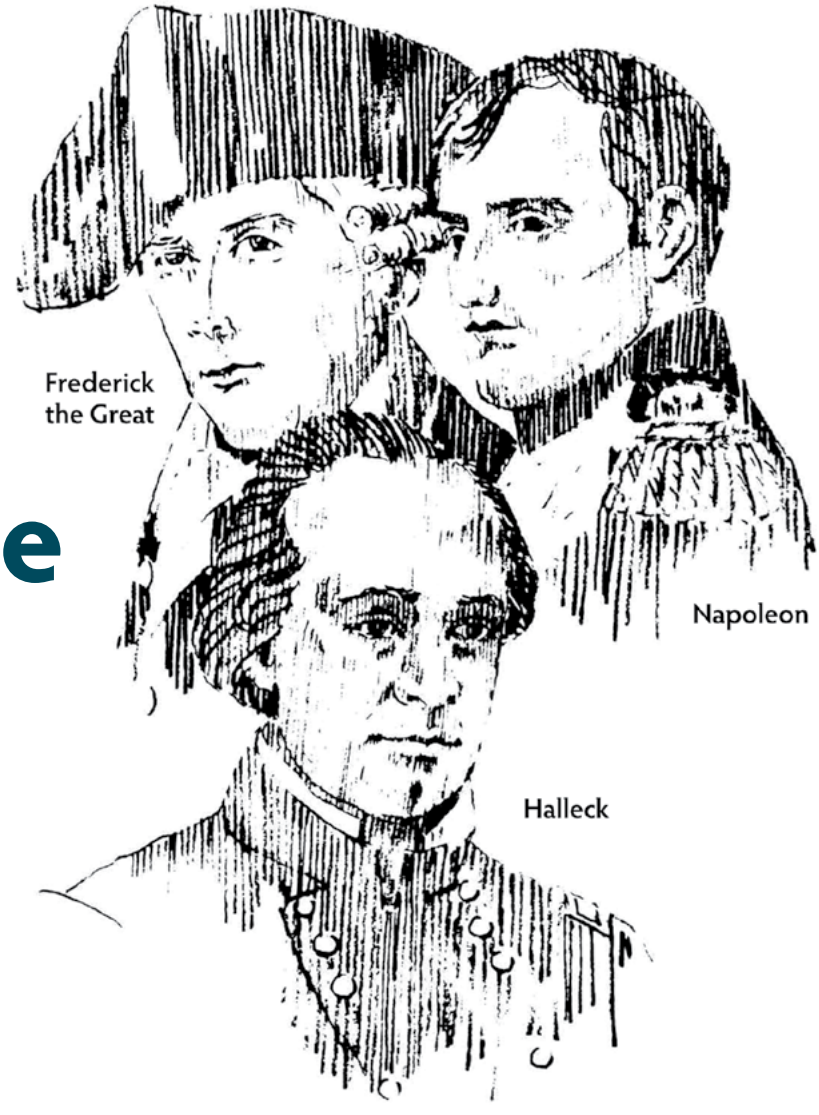
Some Vagrant Thoughts on Doctrine

Jay Luvaas



Doctrine, in the military sense of the term, is of comparatively recent origin. The word has been around since the 14th century. It originally meant "the action of teaching" or "that which is taught or laid down as true concerning a particular subject or department of knowledge," usually in the realm of religion or politics.[1]

"Doctrine" did not enter the military lexicon until a generation ago. It appears in none of the principal English or American military dictionaries of the 19th century. American doughboys trying to converse with their French Allies in World War I could not have found the word in the *French-English Military Technical Dictionary* issued by the War Department. And somehow G.I. Joe managed to fight and win in World War II without an official definition of doctrine in the 1944 *Dictionary of United States Army Terms*.

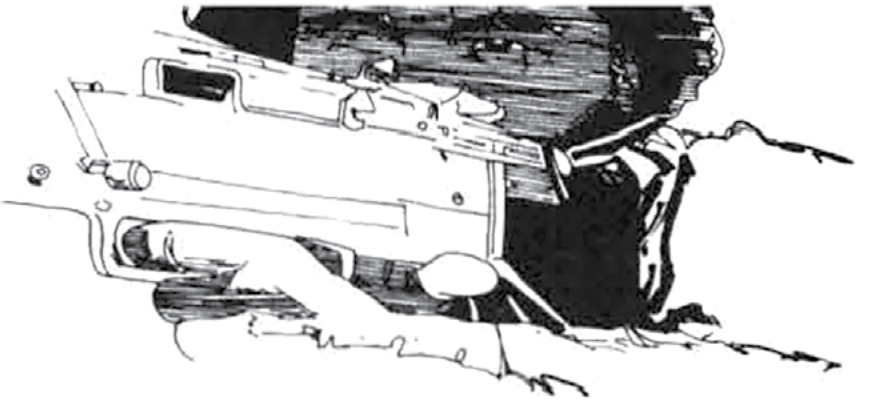
Not until the 1950 edition of the dictionary was there any specific mention of the word. It was defined as the:

... compilation of principles and policies, applicable to a subject, which have been developed through experience or by theory, that represent the best available thought, and indicate and guide but do not bind in practice. Essentially doctrine is that which is taught. ... a truth, a fact, or a theory that can be defined by reason ... which should be taught or accepted as basic truths.[2]

Although armies used to win victories without suspecting that military doctrine existed, the *concept* was clearly there. Certainly, the Romans had prescribed training techniques and organization as well as a tactical recipe that succeeded for several centuries. Their doctrine in battle, camp and on the march was understood by every officer and legionnaire and eventually was written down in idealized form by Vegetius in the fourth century.

The introduction of the standing army in the late 17th century brought the possibility of standardization. The main instruments were drill manuals and published regulations which instructed the officer in what he needed to know to train, drill, discipline, maneuver and maintain his troops. As long as armies remained small, there was little need for doctrine.

Frederick the Great was probably the first to conceive of doctrine as such. After the Silesian wars, he



reissued the regulations for the Prussian infantry and cavalry, adding his own thoughts, and wrote secret instructions for his infantry and cavalry commanders in an attempt to indoctrinate them. He preferred the case method to communicate his doctrine, creating a number of hypothetical situations to show how tested rules or maxims might best be applied. During the Seven Years' War, he wrote on the changes in Austrian tactics and the means by which these might be countered. A decade before his death, he prepared treatises to instruct his independent commanders on the principles of strategy and new ways of employing artillery.[3]

In the 19th century, doctrine came to be linked with professional military schools and the rise of the general staff. Here, the Prussians led the way, for the Prussian (later the German) General Staff was actively involved in the production of theoretical works and historical studies.

The "order of teaching" at the *Kriegsakademie* specified that, before there could be good "practice" (that is, doctrine), "there must be a true theory" which could only be acquired from sound historical analysis. Theory, therefore, did not have an independent existence; "it must always derive its sustenance from fresh contact with the historical reality of which it is the abstract." Conversely, it was assumed that "historical study that did not yield a theory would be barren and useless."[4]

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Other armies before 1870 had, at best, an informal doctrine, gleaned most often from the *Maxims* of Napoleon Bonaparte and the works of men of established reputations such as Marshal Auguste Marmont and Baron Henri Jomini. Although such books were never officially adopted in England or the United States, they were widely read. Together with popular treatises by disciples in both countries, this literature created a set of assumptions about the nature of future combat. Most Union and Confederate officers probably marched off to war in 1861 fully convinced that Lieutenant H. Wager Halleck's description of the tactics of combined arms—derived from Jomini and portraying the idealized Napoleonic battle—represented the ultimate.

They quickly discovered, however, that the increased range and accuracy of firearms had rendered such tactics obsolete and, by about 1863, a new and informal doctrine was emerging. A new role was embraced for cavalry, field fortifications, more flexible infantry formations and a different relationship in the relative importance of the combat arms. This improved doctrine was not reflected in the official regulations and drill manuals issued on either side during the war. It was developed through experience and provided a constant theme in professional military literature after the war.

The decade of the 1860s marks a turning point in doctrinal matters. If the American Civil War experience did not make an impact upon European armies, the Prussian victories over Austria and France did. For the first time, the general adoption of the rifled musket and the rifled cannon changed the tactical literature of most European armies. As a German writer observed:

Our present peaceful leisure ... must be taken advantage of to provide our ... tactics with a firm foundation based

upon the experience gained in war; to establish a system more adapted to our present requirements. ... so as to be able without prejudice to act on the field of battle as we have been accustomed to do on the drill-ground, and to be less dependent ... upon the personal inspiration of subordinate officers. ... [thus providing] an army with the cement necessary for enabling it to withstand the enormous friction of the battlefield.[5]

By 1913, the doctrine of *offensive a outrance* had permeated not only the tactical manuals but also the new regulations entitled *The Conduct of Large Formations*. By this time, French doctrine was so drenched with the offensive spirit that it was observed that "even the customs officials attack."[6] The doctrines of the Russian and Austria-Hungarian armies were likewise offensive in nature, while German doctrine stressed hunting the hostile flank to win the decision by envelopment.[7]

The British and American armies both borrowed heavily from German tactical doctrine and instruction techniques. The first Field Service Regulations, which appeared in both countries in 1905, represent an effort to develop a genuine doctrine. In both armies, the German influence was unmistakable. As one US officer commented in a lecture at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, two years after the first Field Service Regulations were issued:

Our Field Service Regulations unmistakably show the impress of German thought. [Helmuth] Von Moltke teaches us our strategy, [Robert] Griepenkerl writes our orders, while [Kalmar] Von der Goltz tells us how they should be executed.

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Another, who had helped to write the *Infantry Drill Regulations, 1911*, asserted that German offensive doctrine was probably best suited to our national character.[8]

After 1918, military doctrine everywhere became increasingly nationalized. Reflecting perhaps their experiences on the Eastern Front and limited to a small army by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, German military leaders sought to compensate by stressing quality and the offensive spirit. German doctrine in the 1920s emphasized mobility, maneuver and surprise. The French, obsessed with heavy losses and the conditions that prevailed on the Western Front, turned increasingly to the preponderance of firepower. In both armies, tactical tendencies were strengthened by the requirements of national security:

German military doctrine in the late 1930s was offensive, innovative, and integrated with the political aspects of German grand strategy [whereas, in France,] the doctrinal parameters set by civilians, largely for balance of power reasons, reduced to zero the probability of independent military advocacy of any kind of offensive doctrine.[9]

It is, therefore, misleading to depict what happened in 1940 simply in terms of conflicting military doctrines. When civilian leaders had asserted during the course of World War I that war had become too serious a matter to be left in the hands of the generals, it followed that in peace the sources of military doctrine would reflect broader concerns.

Since 1945, armies have had to respond to the nuclear battlefield, the polarization of international politics, the accelerated pace of technology, an obvious and perpetual threat, and the rediscovered "spectrum of conflict."[10] What is needed for war in Europe may not suffice elsewhere—in one place we have allies to consider; in another, local conditions to overcome. No longer may one doctrine be sufficient. Doctrine seems destined to periodic changes in emphasis, if not in direction, as we search for solutions to achieve the right balance between the offensive, defensive and deterrence.

I Corps training at Gondrecourt, France, 15 August 1918.

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Doctrine can be a servant or a master. It can provide a useful context for studying past or present military operations, or it can narrow our vision by dictating the questions and forming the basis for judgment as we view military developments elsewhere. It can be used as a guide, or it can be prescriptive. We should not forget that the original meaning of the word was "teaching" and, as I look at teachers I have known, they seem to fall into one or another category. Some stress the importance of information per se; others use the tools of the discipline to guide the student in evaluating and using the information.

Doctrine has been variously described as a common way of objectively approaching and handling a subject; the "logic" of professional behavior; a common philosophy, language or purpose; as "codified common sense"; and, on occasion, even as the opinion of the senior officer present. It is not an end in itself, nor does it seek to establish rules that must always be obeyed. It is essentially a teaching tool, and the reader of the new Field Manual

82d Airborne office discusses operations with Caribbean peace force soldiers, Grenada, October 1983.

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100-5, *Operations,* would do well to recall the observation of a literary figure of the 18th century: "A book is a mirror: when a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out." The late Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall put it another way: reiterations of doctrine cannot transform human nature or "change cockroaches into butterflies."[11] MR

Notes

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary Being a Corrected Re-issue With an Introduction, Supplement, and Bibliography of a New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, Eng., 1933, Volume 111, pp 572-73.

2. Special Regulation 320-5-1, *Dictionary of United States Army Terms*, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., August 1950, p 78.

3. *Essai sur la Grande Guerre, de Main de Maître, ou Instruction militaire du Roi de Prusse Pour ses génèraux* . . ., London, Eng., 1761; and *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, edited and translated by Jay Luvaas, Free Press, N.Y., 1966, pp 149-66 and 305-37 *passim*.

4. Spenser Wilkinson, *The Brain of an Army: A Popular Account of the German General Staff*, Macmillan & Co., London. Eng., 1890, p 99.

5. Major W. von Scherff, *The New Tactics of Infantry*, translated by Colonel Lumley Graham, Henry S. King & Co., London, Eng., 1873, p 3.

6. Ronald Harvey Cole, *"Forward With the Bayonet!": The French Army Prepares for Offensive Warfare, 1911-1914*, Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1976, p 224.

7. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain and Germany Between the World Wars*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1984, pp 14 and 22.

8. Timothy K. Nenninger, *The Leavenworth Schools & the Old Army: Education, Professionalism, and the Officer Corps of the United States Army, 1881-1918*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1978, p 87; and Captain John H. Parker, "The Military Education of the Youth of the Country for a Period of at Least One Year as

a Means of Developing the Military Spirit of the Country for the National Defense," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, March-April 1912, Volume 50, p 224.

9. Posen, *op. cit.*, pp 138 and 179; and Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Remaking of Modern Armies*, John Murray, London, Eng., 1927, pp 211-34.

10. Training Regulations (TR) 10-5, *Doctrines, Principles, and Methods: Basic*, War Department, Washington, D.C., 23 December 1921, pp 1 and 3; and TR 10-5, *Military Training: Basic*, War Department, Washington, D.C., 15 August 1928, pp 3-5.

11. S. L. A. Marshall as quoted in Major Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76, Leavenworth Papers*, Number 1, Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kan., August 1979, p 50.

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