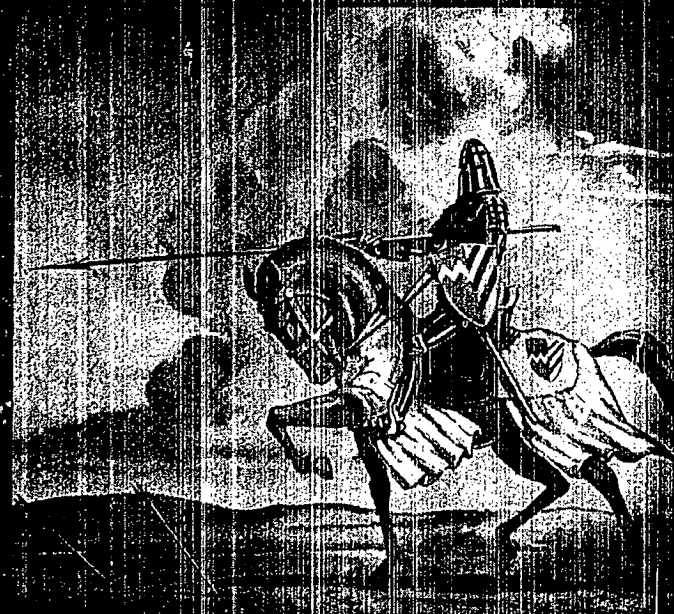


Single concept:

# Road to Disaster

By George Fielding Eliot



1346: More Knights

❧ HISTORY IS REPLETE WITH EXAMPLES OF THE DISASTROUS results which attend solidification of military thought within the mold of a single concept of war. At times this solidification has taken place in the mind of one man who has had the power to compel adherence to his concept, or the magnetism to inspire unreasoning acceptance of it. At other times, a predominant group or class of individuals has evolved such a concept and given it their allegiance. In either case, the eventual result has generally been the same: defeat at the hands of an enemy sufficiently observant and adaptable to take advantage of the fixation and confront it with the unexpected.

Fixation on a single concept of war, whether in strategy or tactics, is indeed a negation of the time-honored principles of mobility and surprise. It invites an enemy possessing an ounce of originality, or even ordinary horse sense, to employ these principles against it. We shall here present a few outstanding historical examples of this process, in the hope that they may serve as a warning against any such tendencies being allowed to develop in our own military policy—especially in this nuclear age when recovery from initial defeat may prove not to be purchasable at any price in blood and devotion.

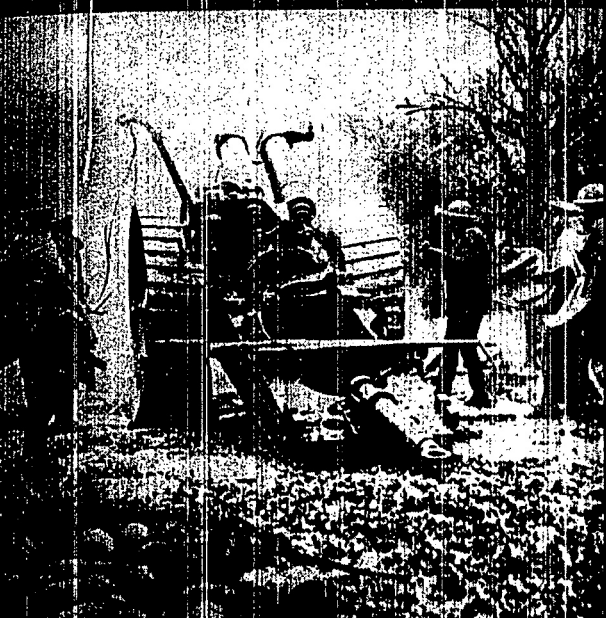
The record suggests all too clearly the possessive character of such fixations. Facts—even the facts of repeated failures—are disregarded. Again and again we find error persisted in, at frightful cost, by minds persuaded that the cherished concept itself *cannot* be wrong; that failure has been the result of not using enough force or of some tactical mistake; that next time all this will be put right and triumphant success will follow.

Let us first review three instances of this possessive

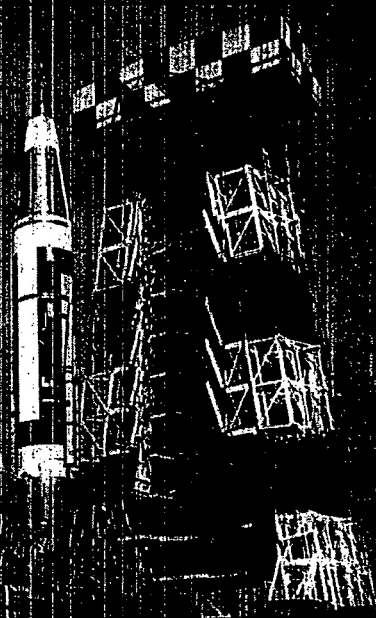
tendency—one from the almost legendary age of chivalry, one comparatively recent but prior to the appearance of nuclear weapons or modern air power, and one that is right with us today. These three examples may be entitled, respectively: Pile on More Knights—Pile on More Fire Power—Pile on More Megatons.

**Pile on More Knights**—By the middle of the 14th century AD the elaboration of plate-armor, added to the virtual monopoly by the gentry of the right to bear arms, had reduced tactical decision on the battlefields of Continental Europe to the outcome of a simple head-on collision between two masses of armored horsemen. Footmen for the most part (except in the Swiss cantons and certain “free cities”) were ill-armed feudal levies, permitted to fight only in a menial capacity. Their fate was decided by whether or not the chivalry of their side won. With victory, they mopped up the battlefield and did such plundering of the dead and wounded as opportunity permitted; with defeat they were mercilessly slaughtered by the chivalry of the other side. Indeed they were often enough ridden down by their own lords and masters for no greater offense than being in the way. In either case they had little chance of defending themselves against horsemen encased in plate armor.

That “common men” could have any real effect on the outcome of a battle was an idea utterly foreign to all continental notions of the day. Winning battles was the responsibility and the privilege of the knightly class. Their weaponry was designed chiefly for the purpose of enabling them to meet other knights in the shock of mounted combat. Maneuver was out of the question for men whose bodies were burdened with up to 100 pounds of metal, mounted on armored horses



WWI: More Firepower



Post-WWII: More Megatons

A distinguished military writer  
returns to the Gazette and pins  
down an historical truth—that  
reliance on a single concept of  
war is playing the enemy's game

bearing another 30 or 40 pounds. Thus there seemed small need for the noble knight to burden his noble mind with tactical—much less strategical—detail. Skill in horsemanship and in personal combat was prized; he who excelled in these accomplishments was accounted a great warrior. "The ultimate product of the armorer's craft," writes Lynn Montross, "was the creation of a mobile human fortress—a man defended not only from foemen but from the invasion of ideas."

In England, however, something new had been added. The English had their knights and squires in plate-armor, but their armored cavalry had a battle partner—missile-armed infantry, equipped with a long bow

and its clothyard arrows. This weapon had, in the words of Sir Winston Churchill, "developed to a point where even the finest mail was no certain protection. At 250 yards the arrow hail produced effects never reached again by infantry missiles at such a range until the American Civil War." The English archers were chiefly drawn from the sturdy yeoman class of small farmers; they were professional soldiers, regularly enlisted and paid and organized in companies. Moreover, experience with the longbow in the bitter Welsh and Scottish wars had taught the English knighthood the need for working out tactical combinations and something approaching a tactical doctrine for the combined use of armored cavalry and archers to the best effect.

"Of all this," says Churchill, "the Continent, and particularly France, our nearest neighbor, was ignorant. . . . It was with a sense of unmeasured superiority that the English looked out upon Europe towards the middle of the 14th century." The events of the Hundred Years' war, in which the English object was to enforce the claim of their Plantagenet kings to the throne of France, fully justified that sense of military superiority. The chivalry of France simply refused to understand what they were up against, refused to accept—in the face of accumulating and bloody evidence—the idea that gentlemen in coat-armor could not sweep "low-born" yeoman infantry off the battlefield. In the first serious trial-at-arms—Crécy in 1346—the English King, Edward III, a sound tactician though no great strategist, set up a defensive position with a solid armored phalanx of dismounted cavalry in the center and archers echeloned forward on both flanks. The French knights simply flung themselves, in disorderly masses as they reached

the battlefield, straight at the English center, and were slaughtered by the archers on the flanks.

Ten years later, at Poitiers, the pattern was repeated—with the variation that the French armored chivalry attacked on foot, having come to the conclusion that the sole secret of English success lay in the use of their knights as dismounted pikemen! Again the arrow-hail did its deadly work. A small English mounted reserve provided the decisive maneuver element, and a French army far superior in numbers was utterly routed. The French King was taken prisoner.

More fighting on this same pattern followed. In 1420 the French King recognized King Henry as heir to the French throne and Regent during his lifetime. The stubborn adherence of the French warrior-class to their single concept of war had brought France to the final shame of subjection to a foreign monarch. Not all Frenchmen accepted this disgrace. Fighting went on. And at last the French—their spirits revived by the inspiration of the Maid of Orleans—found in Dunois a general-in-chief who knew how to use maneuver and surprise. Further, he had the imagination to apply a new weapon—field artillery, worked by despised commoners—to his tactical need for firepower capable of dealing with the English archers. By the end of 1453, the English had been driven off the Continent except for the bridgehead of Calais. The doctrine of Pile on More Knights had cost France a bitter price indeed. It was finally abandoned by a general who saw the futility of trying to fight the small English professional armies on their own terms and had the originality to develop a tactical doctrine which enabled the French to use their superior numbers effectively.

**Pile on More Fire-Power**—After the Marne operations in 1914 had checked and rolled back the German invasion of France, the flanks of both the German and the Anglo-French armies were extended to the Channel coast in a series of operations in which neither side gained decisive advantage. Solid lines of field fortifications, gradually increasing in depth on both sides, then confronted each other all the way from the sea to neutral Switzerland. The new trench-warfare conditions were entirely outside the experience of either the British or the French senior commanders. What they wanted was a “breakthrough” into “open country”—i.e. a return to the maneuver situations with which they were familiar. Unfortunately some of the earlier attempts to do this, notably the British attack at Neuve Chapelle in March, 1915, set the wrong pattern for the future.

#### Liddell Hart's Analysis

The artillery preparation at Neuve Chapelle was short but intense. “Complete surprise was obtained,” notes B. H. Liddell Hart, “and most of the first positions captured, but control broke down, reserves were late in coming up, and the opportunity of exploiting the initial success vanished. . . . The cost of this success might have been offset by the benefits of its experience. But both (Sir Douglas) Haig and the Allied Command as a whole missed the true lesson, which was the surprise obtainable by a short bombardment that compensated for its brevity by its intensity. . . . Instead they drew the superficial deduction that volume of shell fire



To Allied GHQ of WWI it was heresy to question the “more firepower” concept. From left are Lloyd George, Sir Douglas Haig, French Field Marshal J. J. Joffre, UK Munitions Minister M. Thomas

was the key to success.” This deduction gradually hardened into a fixed concept: Pile on More Fire-Power. The defensive qualities of machine guns and barbed wire, and of field fortifications echeloned in depth; the folly of attacking on narrow fronts with insufficient reserves at hand to exploit possible success; and above all the crowning fact that prolonged artillery preparation forfeited all hope of surprise—these basic essentials were ignored. As casualties mounted, while attack after attack heralded with optimistic forecasts ended in ghastly failure, the concept of Pile on More Fire-Power became almost an article of faith with the responsible higher commands. Only by final success could the price already paid for it be justified.

There were those who, as the tragedy developed, began to question the validity of the basic concept of Pile on More Fire-Power. To the orthodoxy of the High Commands, these questioning minds were heretical, and deserved the penalties of heresy. Notable among the questioners was Gen. Allenby, who tried to apply the surprise possibilities of a short bombardment to his 3d Army's attack at Arras in the spring of 1917. “GHQ was profoundly shocked,” notes Allenby's biographer, Lord Wavell. Allenby was forced to modify his proposal, and also his subsequent interest in the concentrated use of tanks. An air of relief was evident at GHQ when Allenby was removed from the Western Front to the Middle East Command, where he made his reputation by showing what can be done with scanty resources by the application of mobility, surprise, and imagination to the tasks of war.

The means to do just this on the Western Front, too, had become available in 1916, when the first tanks began to roll off British production lines. The key to

offensive victory on that front was to be finally found in the combination of armor and infantry, with surprise maximized by launching the tank attack with no artillery preparation at all—not even for registration. But at GHQ, there was at first little confidence in tanks. They were parcelled out as infantry support in small units. Not until November 1917 was a major tank attack at last permitted (at Cambrai) and then initial success, which was stupendous, was frittered away because reserves to exploit it were wanting.

### Churchill's Indictment

Sir Winston Churchill, in *The World Crisis*, says bitterly: "Accusing as I do without exception all the great allied offensives of 1915, 1916 and 1917, as needless and wrongly conceived operations of infinite cost, I am bound to reply to the question, What else could be done? And I answer it, pointing to the Battle of Cambrai, *This could have been done. This in many variants, in larger and better forms, ought to have been done, and would have been done if only the Generals had not been content to fight machine-gun bullets with the breasts of gallant men, and think that that was waging war.*" The great British attack of August 8, 1918, where 600 tanks fully supported were launched by surprise, proved at long last the worth of the infantry-armor team. It had taken three years of bloody struggle to restore mobility to the battlefields of the Western Front; for two of those years the tactical means had been at hand, but the tactical imagination to apply the means was stifled by the reigning concept of Pile on More Fire-Power. Bitter indeed was the price paid for this concept by the British and French peoples.

**Pile on More Megatons**—We are living today with a deeply-entrenched and centralized fixation about our national strategy which stems from the original air power concepts of Giulio Douhet and William Mitchell (Pile on More Bombs) as developed to fit the conditions of the nuclear age. Today we may call this fixation Pile on More Megatons. Its devotees admit the missile to partnership with the plane, and speak no longer merely of air power but of aerospace power.

The cornerstone of this concept is the belief that victory is to be sought by launching the maximum possible volume of destructive bombardment against the hostile heartland, to wipe out the weapons systems by which the enemy can do the like to one's own country, the bases from which they operate, and his means of making more: to destroy both his ability to make war and the will of his people to do so. In this concept, air power or aerospace-power is the supreme offensive, and therefore decisive, element. Other forms of military power must be regarded as secondary and auxiliary to this shining warrior.

Hence, in the formulation of national strategic policy and its implementation through the budget process, it is contended that every other military consideration must be subordinated to the capability for massive long-range bombardment—in these days, nuclear bombardment.

This is, of course, sheer rationalization. It does not rest on any sound basis of proven fact or accepted experience. So far as experience with strategic bombing goes, the lessons of WWII are all we have to guide us. In that war strategic bombing did not prove to be the all-powerful, decisive force which had been pictured by Douhet and others. It failed to overcome Britain. It helped to weaken Germany, but the defeat of Germany followed the defeat of her armies in the field. It provided the *coup de grace* against Japan, but only after Japan—an island nation with limited domestic resources—had been defeated and isolated by sea-power. In all these cases, post-war arguments by the advocates of Pile on More Bombs (or Megatons) have contended stoutly that they were right all along, that more weight given to their concept would have won more quickly and at less cost. Much controversy has raged around these contentions.

The fundamental error of Pile of More Megatons lies, as with all single fixations of its kind, in its rigidity. It assumes that one form of power can do everything, or almost everything. It refuses to accept true partnership in a team in which various forms of power shall be harnessed for a common effort. And it distorts the record of experience in the attempt to show that, when forming part of such a team in the past, it did all the work that really counted and could have done even better if it had been allowed to.

### We Lack Nuclear Experience

When we come to consider nuclear bombardment, we are in the realm of pure rationalization unhampered by experience. This should warn us to be even more careful about accepting untested concepts at face value. Save for two bombs dropped on Japanese targets in 1945—very small and primitive affairs as today's weapons go—nuclear weapons have never been used in war. Neither have long-range ballistic missiles (unless the German V-2s can be so described), nor missile-firing submarines. What the results of an exchange of nuclear weapons between two fully-armed powers such as the U.S. and the Soviet Union would actually be, or what effect on human beings and human reactions might follow, we have only very limited and conjectural criteria to enable us to judge. What the enemy thinks on this subject we can only try to guess, though his thinking validates or invalidates all our theories on deterrence.

Yet we do have some nuclear-age experience with

"When we come to consider nuclear bombardment, we are in the realm of pure rationalization unhampered by experience. This should warn us to be even more careful about accepting untested concepts at face value."

deterrence, deriving from the cold war, and it is not without value. We have reason to believe that our monopoly of nuclear weapons and of long-range delivery systems, in the years immediately after 1945, prevented the Soviet Union from using their overwhelming ground-force superiority to support the expansion of their dominance of Europe beyond the point at which they believed atomic retaliation might follow. As their own nuclear capabilities increased, so did their industrial capabilities. The two went hand in hand, so that as nuclear striking power gave them a better counter-balance to our weaponry, they also acquired an ever-growing commitment in the shape of hostage targets. The validity of their industrial and scientific accomplishments as proof of the overall values of Communism as a way of life has been widely accepted by many minds, both in their own dominated area and among uncommitted peoples; along with this acceptance comes their own rising belief that time is on their side, and consequently a diminished tendency to risk all on a nuclear gamble.

## Caught in a Diplomatic Bind

But along with this has also come what seems to be an increased sense of security in taking lesser risks. The sputniks and the luniks have carried far and wide the conviction that the world balance of power is shifting in Soviet favor. Opportunities based on exploiting this conviction are being eagerly pursued. To the realization that the major risk must be avoided is added, with cold Communist logic, the belief that we must think so too. Moreover, we are more sensitive to charges of aggression. We are caught in a diplomatic bind on the colonial issue between the sensitivities of our European allies and the "emerging" peoples of Africa and Asia, to say nothing of the feelings of our neighbors in Latin America. On top of all this, we have a new Administration. Here, then, may be new and golden opportunities for a Red policy of limited risk, which if boldly pursued in a series of carefully gauged ventures may pay rich dividends.

In fact, we are all, the Communists no less than ourselves, groping cautiously forward into the unknown, with the horizon obscured by clouds our visions cannot penetrate. It is not a time for hard-and-fast assumptions as to the future conduct of war, much less for immobilizing our military policy by adopting any single-track concepts as to what the next war will be like. Rather it is a time for careful forethought, for exploiting to the very fullest our geographical advantage of global freedom of action, based on superior access to the sea and to over-sea air space, and our far wider experience in distant seaborne and airborne operations.

What we require is not a single form of power, a single concept of war to which all else has been subordinated, but the utmost of flexibility in order swiftly to react to unexpected moves by the other side, and to

confront our opponents, on occasion, with unexpected moves of our own.

This means, primarily, a new and active policy in which we shall not rest content to abandon all initiative to the Communists and confine ourselves to reacting to their moves. The kind of military establishment required to support such a policy must, as above noted, be based on the principle of freedom of action: to which the single concept of war is anathema. Pile on More Megatons cannot serve as the military support of global activities designed for the preservation of freedom and the defeat of hostile challenges to freedom. Indeed we shall have to modify some other well-worn shibboleths too. One that comes immediately to mind is the concept, now strongly entrenched in NATO thinking, that the ground troops with their tactical aviation form the NATO shield, while the nuclear striking force is the terrible swift sword. This may continue to have some application to NATO's special western-front situation. Elsewhere over the wide range of our global responsibilities, the exact reverse is the case. The deterrent nuclear striking-power of a relatively invulnerable nuclear force is our shield, which enables us to use the sword of amphibious or air-lifted power to deal with local threats and exploit local superiority born of our mobility. This is an interesting reflection, for the development of amphibious warfare has suffered much in the past at the hands of single-track thinking.

**Amphibious Warfare is Dead**—WWI saw only two major amphibious operations in the European theater: the Dardanelles campaign in 1915, and the German attack on the islands in the Gulf of Riga in 1917. The first was a failure; the second a success. Yet because of the tremendous controversy over the setback at the Dardanelles, highlighted as it was by personalities such as Churchill, Kitchener and Fisher and by the heated strategic debate between the "Westerners" and "Easterners," amphibious assault *as such* was given a bad name. The Royal Commission brought together in 1917 to inquire into the reasons for the Dardanelles defeat solemnly recorded its judgment that "from the outset the risks of failure attending the enterprise outweighed its chances of success," and much more which in the light of subsequent careful analysis turns out to be nonsense. Of course 1917 was not a good year for such an inquiry. One very plain reason for failure at the Dardanelles (aside from obvious shortcomings in planning and execution) was that the commander on the spot, Sir Ian Hamilton, was repeatedly denied the rather minor margin of additional resources which might, on more than one occasion, have changed defeat into victory. The cause of these denials was the growing obsession of Pile on More Fire-Power; men gripped by this fixation resented with ferocity any subtraction of troops or ammunition for other purposes. In 1917 these men were desperately concerned to prove that they were right, had always been right. Their hatred for "side-shows" was a living thing. Amphibious warfare, it was

solemnly proclaimed, was dead—doomed by the rapid fire of modern weapons, by the submarine, and by the airplane which in future would deny the amphibious operation its crowning advantage of surprise.

### de Seversky's Big Mistake

The funeral ceremonies of amphibious warfare were celebrated again and again during the period between the two world wars, not just by the die-hard "Westerners" of WWI but by the eager devotees of the new fixation, Pile on More Bombs. Whatever might have happened at the Dardanelles, these latter proclaimed, was now old hat. Modern air power had doomed amphibious attack for good and all. It wouldn't just perish on the beaches, it would never get there. Air power would sink it on the way. Even after Pearl Harbor, at a time when the patient between-war efforts of Marine Corps planners were just beginning to show a few buds of promise, Maj. Alexander P. de Seversky wrote trenchantly: "The idea that navies can carry war to hostile shores across the ocean under the protection of air power brought along on armadas of aircraft carriers is wholly unrealistic . . . There are . . . considerations which make such an undertaking utopian and doom it to failure if directed against any nation with even a minimal amount of defensive aviation." Yet WWII, from start to finish, produced amphibious operations, both in the Pacific and in Europe, on a scale never before dreamed of—and with a record of almost unbroken success. The unhappy exception was the British attempt to restore the situation in Norway, because once again they had not prepared and planned for amphibious operations and developed their Marines and naval aviation accordingly. "It seems we have to learn the old lessons over again with each new generation," wrote Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes (who had served at the Dardanelles) with understandable bitterness. However, the three major amphibious landings in which the British participated later in the war (North Africa, Sicily, Normandy) were admirably planned and conducted, and British land, sea and air forces bore their full share of the burden. Surprise was achieved in all three cases, says the British official historian, Capt. Roskill, R.N., "contrary to all expectations." Meanwhile American amphibious offensives drove across the Pacific and broke the power of Imperial Japan.

The echoes of the last shot had scarcely died away when somber voices were heard to proclaim that we would never see another amphibious assault—not in the nuclear age. Inchon followed in 1950. Today the vertical envelopment concept is being perfected to deal with conditions, nuclear or non-nuclear, which may be encountered in the future. The devotees of Pile on More Megatons are prophesying doom, but it is precisely because our military establishment is as yet so organized that competitive concepts and plans can be developed and tried out that we have come through two World Wars, plus Korea, as well as we have, and can face the

future undismayed.

Here indeed is the very pivot to which our future hopes are keyed. Here is the chief lesson to be drawn from all the historical analysis above presented. We are confronted by enemies with little or no experience in wars of global mobility, with the long-range extension of their power overseas or through the air, with oceanic warfare and major amphibious operations. As long as these concepts are major elements in our own strategic planning, our enemies are faced by strategic factors they do not understand. If, however, we channel our main effort into the single concept of Pile on More Megatons, we shall be offering our opponents free of charge a priceless advantage: the advantage of a readily calculable risk. We shall be assuring them against being suddenly confronted by the unexpected.

We shall be doing exactly what the French chivalry did 600 years ago, what the Allies did on the Western Front in 1915-1917—making everything simple for the enemy by immobilizing our planning and denying ourselves the capability of surprise. The Plantagenet kings of long ago knew their opponents, were confident that the French would conform to a well-established pattern. All they had to do was to set up their spearhead, flank it with archers and wait to cut down the full-headed frontal attack. When at last Dunois did confront them with the unexpected, the English gains of three-quarters of a century soon evaporated. The Germans in 1915-1917 expected no tactical surprises from the Allies; when at last they got one on August 8, 1918, the shocked Ludendorff called it "the black day of the German Army." Which it was—two years and a million or so casualties later than it might have been. Part of the cost was, as already observed, the failure of a highly promising amphibious operation: the price for that was still being paid in Norway a quarter-century later.

### Flexibility is the Answer

The soundest approach to a viable national strategy, geared to the service and support of national objectives, has always been to relate political decision to the full spectrum of professional military advice. The narrower the area of choice open to the political leadership, the more calculable—for the enemy—are the factors of decision. As war increases in complexity, as alternatives multiply in substance and in detail, the greater is the need for a people who seek to deter a powerful enemy from making war by fear of inevitable consequences to accentuate that fear by a strong infusion of X-factors. In the current power-balance, as between the USSR and the US, narrowing our reaction capabilities to the concept of Pile on More Megatons is playing the enemy's game. Confronting the Kremlin with all the uncertainties and risks of a global war of movement adds up to a far higher and more effective level of overall deterrence, whether the act we seek to deter is nuclear assault on North America or a brush-fire war in Africa. US & MC