

Michael Howard and the dimensions of military history

War in History
2020, Vol. 27(4) 536–551
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DOI: 10.1177/0968344520915028
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Abstract

In early 2002, Sir Lawrence Freedman invited me to deliver that year's Liddell Hart Lecture at King's College London. Only after I had accepted, did he reveal that the invitation came with a caveat: I had no choice as to the subject. I was to speak about Sir Michael Howard, whose 80th birthday would fall on 29 November 2002, and the dimensions of military history. Freedman thought this particularly appropriate because I had just taken up the Chichele Professorship of the History of War at Oxford, a chair which Michael himself had held between 1977 and 1980. Despite his comparatively brief tenure of a chair which dates back to 1909, I was already used to scholars, especially from overseas, telling me that I had Michael Howard's job. Belonging to a generation which had come of age when Michael Howard dominated the field, and deeply conscious of my own personal debt to him for his support and encouragement throughout my career, I was apprehensive, almost to the point of terror. Michael was an Olympian figure, and even – as Maurice Pearton once put it to me – 'vice-regal'. The lecture was delivered on 3 December 2002 in the Great Hall at King's, and Michael Howard was sitting in the front row, directly opposite the lectern. Michael died on 30 November 2019, the day after his 97th birthday. The lecture is now published in tribute to him. It is unchanged, except for minor editorial tweaks. It is important to remember that Michael revealed much more about his early life and wartime service than I was privy to in 2002 when in 2006 he published his memoir, *Captain Professor: A Life in War and Peace*. One story not included in that book was Michael's recurrent nightmare, which he told me in response to the anecdote with which the lecture begins. In his dream, he is travelling in a London taxi in the early evening. He looks out of the vehicle's window to see a poster, advertising a Mozart concert at the Albert Hall to be given that night. Below the programme of music is the line, 'conducted by Michael Howard'. Michael loved Mozart, but as a listener, not a performer. Michael too could know fear, as he acknowledged in *Captain Professor*.

Keywords

Michael Howard, military history, Second World War, Clausewitz, war studies

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In the early 1980s, perhaps it was the mid-1980s, I now forget, Michael Howard and I were both invited by Geoffrey Parker and John Lynn to the University of Illinois for a conference that was called *The Tools of War*. Michael has probably suppressed it from his memory, but it was the first time I ever had to speak in Michael's presence. Afterwards, he was kind enough to be complimentary about what I said. At that point, I confessed to him that I had had to overcome a recurrent nightmare, that I was in a large hall giving a lecture, that I had lost my notes (or at least lost the thread of what I was going to say), and that Michael was sitting in the front row and was fidgeting and looking generally disapproving. I thought I had laid that bogey to rest, but in my nightmare the subject of the lecture was not Michael Howard.

I want you, by way of preliminaries, to imagine that you are on the Appointments Committee of this Department of War Studies, at this great institution, in whose hall we are gathered. It is the present. It is the 3 December 2002, and you are to select a new lecturer for the department. You pause over the CV of one of the candidates. Educated at a famous English public school, known for its close association with the Army, he has read History at one of Oxford's more distinguished colleges. I hesitate to say the most distinguished college. But he graduated with a second. He has not got a doctorate and his principal academic enthusiasms are the Tudors and Stuarts. He seems to have spent rather too much of his time on the stage and in the Officers' Training Corps, rather more than in the library. His principal qualifications for the post are that he has had a distinguished career in the Coldstream Guards and that he is the author of that regiment's history of its recent wartime service. You linger only briefly. The candidate has fulfilled none of the basic criteria for a university post. He hasn't got a first: he hasn't got a doctorate, he hasn't got a first article in a refereed journal, and he has no academic tome in the press. He goes into the discard file. His references are probably not taken up, and he is certainly not called for interview. But of course it is not 2002; it is 1953 and Michael Howard got the job. Thank God! The criteria for appointments almost 50 years ago were not those of today.

What has happened in the interim is the professionalization of the academic world. With good reason we academics moan and groan under its worst excrescences, but, thanks above all to Michael Howard, the study of military history and its professionalization have brought immense benefits. Michael has told us that we need to study the subject 'in width, in depth and in context'.¹ He must be fed up having those lines quoted back at him, but he is going to get them one more time. That now happens. It didn't happen, or at least not very much, in 1953.

When Michael Howard took up his lectureship in Military Studies, as it was then called, the Chichele Professorship of Military History at Oxford was held by Cyril Falls. Falls was a balanced, sane commentator who wrote particularly well on the war in which he himself had served, the First World War. But the memory from my childhood

1 Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and other essays* (London, Temple Smith, 1983), p. 194. Footnotes to Michael Howard's writings have been given in their most accessible form. Therefore articles and lectures are referred to through the volumes of his collected works, and not necessarily in the place where they first appeared.

in the late 1950s was that he was more in evidence as the author of a weekly column in the *Illustrated London News*. The dominant figure of course in the field of military history in 1953 was not Falls but the man whom he had beaten in his election to the Chichele chair and the man whom of course we honour in today's lecture, that is Basil Liddell Hart.

Like Cyril Falls, Liddell Hart was in many ways more a journalist than an academic, and neither of them had much sense of putting military history in context, in setting it against the social, economic and political background of its own times. For Liddell Hart, military history was a tool, a tool to communicate ideas about war that had present application and future implication more than a help to understand the past. Liddell Hart was a great communicator. He wrote trenchant, clear prose, enlivened with telling metaphors and simple, not to say simplified, analogies. By 1953, he was also growing into the role of teacher and supervisor. He was recovering from the personal and professional crisis which he had confronted in the war years, and had found new intellectual purpose in addressing the issues of nuclear weapons and their utility. His acquaintance was, in Michel Howard's own word, 'electrifying'.²

In an essay written on Liddell Hart's death in 1970 Michael called Liddell Hart, 'a sage'. The key definition of the sage was that he was an independent scholar, somebody who has largely vanished from our intellectual landscape, leaving us in hock to funding councils and government departments. Michael has made his own debt to what he calls 'this implacable and loving master'³ clear enough. In 1965, he edited the *Festschrift* published in Liddell Hart's honour and he dedicated his collection of essays, *Studies in War and Peace*, published in the year of Liddell Hart's death in 1970, to his memory. But Michael has also become one of Liddell Hart's most forthright critics; that process took at least a decade to manifest itself and it was shaped by Michael's work on British strategy, particularly British strategy in the Second World War.

In 1959, Sir James Butler invited Michael Howard to take on the writing of volume 4 of the *Grand Strategy* series in the official history of the Second World War. If the First World War was the war that shaped Liddell Hart's thinking, the Second World War was the war that shaped Michael Howard's. Both went straight from university to the front, Liddell Hart from Cambridge to France, Michael Howard from Oxford to Italy. War was their rite of passage to adulthood. The Second World War was what persuaded Michael Howard that the whole idea of studying Military History was not – to quote him – 'archaic and repellent', a view he had espoused as a schoolboy in the 1930s.⁴

Michael's direct experience of combat is another feature that marks out his career in the passage to professionalization in academic military history. Up until Michael Howard's appointment, almost nobody who had studied the history of war had not themselves experienced war. Since Michael Howard's appointment, almost nobody who has held an academic post, at least in this country, has experienced war. When my generation began our careers, the fact that we had not served in the forces, let alone been under fire,

2 Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (London, Temple Smith, 1970), p. 12.

3 Howard, *Causes*, pp. 198-9.

4 Howard, *Studies*, p. 10.

could elicit unfavourable comments. In the eyes of some of us, the lack of direct experience disqualified us from pontificating, not that in the long run that actually stopped us from doing so. For such men, Michael is of course supremely qualified to pontificate and he has a Military Cross to prove it.

However, his reflections on his own service have been scattered and infrequent, and often his allusions to his own experience are indirect rather than direct. He has given us a marvellous pen portrait of his own commanding officer, George Burns, whom he memorably likened to ‘a mobile service station moving among his troops and filling them up with courage’.⁵ In writing on war literature he has spoken of the greatest and worst test of war, the death of comrades.⁶ In discussing medieval warfare, he has praised the qualities of the warrior, nobility, honour, loyalty and indeed chivalry,⁷ and he has testified above all to the importance of the regiment, not only because it produced officers like Burns, but also because it sustained morale and motivation in the most adverse circumstances. Consider this extract, written in 1961 in his essay on ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, where he considers the role of regimental history. Consider it, though, not for what it says about the writing of history, but in the light of autobiography:

The young soldier in action for the first time may find it impossible to bridge the gap between war as it has been painted and war as it really is—between the way in which he, his peers, his officers and his subordinates *should* behave, and the way in which they actually do. He may be dangerously unprepared for cowardice and muddle and horror when he actually encounters them, unprepared even for the cumulative attrition of diet and fatigue. But nevertheless the ‘myth’ can and often does sustain him, even when he knows, with half his mind, that it is untrue.⁸

This, the sustaining of the myth, is, he tells us, the function of regimental history, or ‘nursery history’ as he self deprecatingly calls it.

Self deprecatingly, because Michael, together with John Sparrow, a true All Souls team, wrote the history of the Coldstream Guards in the Second World War. In their preface, and I don’t know if Michael actually wrote the preface, but I rather guess he did, Michael Howard mentioned the periods of training, the waiting in reserve, the holding of the line, the intermittent patrolling, the boredom, discomfort and inactivity of soldiering.⁹ He also mentioned, what my father reflecting on his own wartime experiences in Italy used to call ‘MFUs’, major fuck ups. Remember that 57 per cent of all officers commissioned into the Coldstream Guards in the Second World War became casualties, and 32.4 per cent were killed.¹⁰ Michael himself was twice wounded.

5 Michael Howard, ‘Leadership in the British Army in the Second World War: Some Personal Observations’ in G.D. Sheffield, ed., *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Experience Since 1861* (London, Brassey’s, 1997), p. 118.

6 Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 182.

7 Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London, Profile, 2002), p. 12.

8 Howard, *Causes*, p. 189.

9 John Sparrow and Michael Howard, *The Coldstream Guards 1920-1946* (London, Oxford University Press, 1951), pp xv–xvi.

10 Sparrow and Howard, *The Coldstream Guards 1920-1946*, p. 562.

As he approached his 21st birthday, his battalion had completed 3 months' continuous action in the breakout from Salerno and the fighting at Monte Cassino. I reckon, Michael, that you must have celebrated your 21st birthday in Naples out of the line. I may of course be wrong, but at the beginning of December you were back in the line. Michael Howard spent the winter of 1943/1944 in rain and cold facing the Gustav line, in water-filled slit trenches and under shellfire.¹¹ In the summer of 1944, he took part in the advance through the mountains of central Italy following the marvellously simple order of the battalion's commanding officer, '3 Coldstream Guards will capture Florence'.¹²

Michael Howard therefore knows, to use the title of John Keegan's marvellous book, *The Face of Battle*, but although he has given us flashes and insights into the nature of front-line experience, he has not chosen to write about that experience in a sustained way. Instead his response to the war has been to contextualize it. Looking back on his own experience in 1970, he said that it prompted this conclusion:

Perhaps war and conquest had played a larger part in shaping the past than we had been prepared to concede, and . . . military skills were not yet negligible factors in social survival.¹³

Sir James Butler's invitation to Michael to contribute to the official history was the opportunity for this contextualisation. His first thoughts appeared in his Lee Knowles lectures published as *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* in 1968; the big book itself appeared in 1972. It covers the crucial year, August 1942 to September 1943, when, to use a cliché from another source, the tide turned. *The Grand Strategy* volume won the Wolfson prize, but in some respects it has never had its full measure of recognition, and that is for two reasons. First of all, when Michael Howard began the project, he could reckon on the records remaining closed to 1992, but in 1966 the Public Records Act reduced the period of closure from 50 years to 30, and, therefore, the documents which he was using, and from which he cited extensively, became available in the very same year as the book itself.

Second, he made no reference in that book to signals intelligence. Ultra was not in the public domain in 1972. This was not the only time that Michael has been wrong footed by the sensitivities of intelligence in the matter of official histories. In 1980, he completed his official history of strategic deception in the Second World War, but Mrs Thatcher then postponed its publication until 1990, by which time some of his thunder had been stolen by others.

Michael's sustained scholarly endeavour for over a decade on the workings of the official history drew him to three general conclusions about the nature of British strategy, not only in relation to the Second World War, but also more broadly.

The first was the definition of grand strategy; this of course underpinned the whole edifice. It reflected the contextualisation he had done, that which produced a concept of strategy far wider than those concepts which had shaped the thinking of military theorists

11 I have left the lecture as I delivered it, but Michael Howard tells me that I have over-egged the pudding. He fell ill in the winter of 1943-44, and had some time out of the line recuperating.

12 Sparrow and Howard, *Coldstream Guards*, p. 182.

13 Howard, *Studies*, p. 11.

up to and including Liddell Hart. Its key component was economic. 'Grand strategy', he wrote, in the first half of the twentieth century consisted basically in the mobilization and development of national resources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime'.¹⁴

The second general conclusion, and one that flowed from the first, was that Britain could not exercise choices in war that were simple alternatives. His particular targets were the heads of the Royal Air Force, the Chief of the Air Staff, Portal, and Harris of Bomber Command. In October 1942, Portal had written a paper in which he advocated the building up of 'the largest possible force of heavy bombers to shatter the industrial and the economic strength of Germany'.¹⁵ Michael's comments on this paper were those of a tutor marking the essay of an undergraduate whose flashy ideas exceed his capacity for sustained thought. Portal, he wrote, had 'stated his conclusions in his premises'. However, in condemning the bomber offensive for failing to achieve its declared objectives, Michael Howard did not deny that it had utility. In particular he argued that the bomber offensive had a prime role in drawing off the German air force from the Russian front,¹⁶ a point which Richard Overy has recently re-emphasized in his own work. His central criticism of Bomber Command reflected its reluctance to release air support and air assets for the battle of the Atlantic.¹⁷ In 1942–1943, the war at sea was the first priority, and shipping was central to Britain's conduct of the war. Strategy was now what we would call a joint business, but then no doubt would have been called a combined one. His conclusion, therefore, was that the role of the Chiefs of Staff Committee was to allocate scarce resources between competing theatres.

The third general conclusion was determined by that judgement. Michael argued that allied strategy in the Mediterranean, and its relationship to the opening of the second front in Europe, had to be reconsidered. He dismissed the argument that Churchill had gulled the naive Americans into a peripheral strategy. The shipping situation meant that the Allies were not yet ready to mount a cross-Channel attack in 1943, but that did not mean that they could simply sit on their hands and wait for 18 months until June 1944. They had to exploit the victory in North Africa, and they had to keep up the pressure on Germany. Therefore, the Mediterranean strategy reflected what Michael called 'the spirit of the chase and not any dedication to a peripheral strategy'.¹⁸

Looking at Britain's strategy as an historian, and doing so in width and in depth, had led Michael Howard on a path that diverged from that of Liddell Hart and especially from the latter's idea of the British way in warfare. This was the notion that Britain could stay clear of warfare on the continent of Europe, and instead use financial support for its allies and military expeditions against the enemy's vulnerable extremities as alternatives. In 1971, Michael took the opportunity of the Ford Lectures, published as *The Continental*

14 Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy*, vol 4 (London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972), p. 1.

15 Howard, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 198–9.

16 Howard, *Grand Strategy*, p. 321.

17 Howard, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 10, 255.

18 Howard, *Grand Strategy*, p. 49.

Commitment in 1972, to make clear that British strategy was not, as Liddell Hart had believed it was, a choice between a maritime and imperial strategy on the one hand or a European and military strategy on the other. Britain's geographical position, adjacent to Europe but athwart its main maritime communications, meant perforce that it had to get involved with both things at the same time. Since 1972, and particularly in the years following the publication of *The Continental Commitment*, much scholarly ink has been spilt on British defence policy between 1900 and 1945, but Michael Howard's book remains the most succinct, the best judged and the clearest exposition of Britain's strategic dilemma in the 20th century.

Its criticism of Liddell Hart was guarded rather than explicit, but two years later, in 1974, Michael Howard made his point clear in his Neale Lecture on 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited'. Few former pupils can have been more devastating in their judgements on their teachers. Liddell Hart's *British Way in Warfare* was

A piece of brilliant political pamphleteering, sharply argued, selectively illustrated and [more] concerned to influence British public opinion and government policy than to illuminate the complexities of the past in any serious or scholarly way.¹⁹

The idea of the British way in warfare is not even Liddell Hart's; it was Julian Corbett's—and Corbett had expressed it better because he had recognized the need to harmonize naval and military power. This is not to say that Michael accepted Corbett, because Corbett believed that it was possible for a maritime power to apply limited means for the achievement of unlimited objectives.²⁰ Michael was clear that that was not the case: 'Maritime strategy', he wrote '... was always ... a result not of free choice or of atavistic wisdom, but of *force majeure*'.²¹ His conclusion was trenchant:

A commitment of support to a Continental ally in the nearest available theatre, on the largest scale that contemporary forces could afford, so far from being alien to the traditional British strategy, was central to it.²²

This quotation is at first blush a clear rejection of Liddell's Hart's *British Way in Warfare*, but, ironically, it is in another and broader respect an acceptance of Liddell Hart's legacy. Although written in what is unequivocally a historical work, and expressed in the past tense, its thrust was also contemporary. By 1972, Britain had embraced a continental commitment, and Michael Howard wrote on the subject precisely to give present policy a historical context. Now, Michael is not so facile as to argue that there are lessons of history, but he still believes that, 'After all allowances have been made for historical differences, wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity'.²³

19 Howard, *Causes*, p. 172

20 Howard, *Causes*, p. 174

21 Howard, *Causes*, p. 180

22 Howard, *Causes*, p. 180

23 Howard, *Causes*, pp. 193-4

Some might argue that today's lecture in celebration of Michael's 80th birthday should have been entitled 'Michael Howard and the dimensions of strategic studies', but Michael has consistently described himself as an historian not a social scientist. 'I think in terms of analogies', he has written, 'of process rather than structure, of politics as the realm of the contingent rather than of necessity'.²⁴ None the less Michael Howard's apprenticeship—here at King's, at the hands of Liddell Hart, and with the foundation of the Institute of Strategic Studies and his association with Alastair Buchan—meant that in his hands military history and strategic studies have always stood in a close relationship to each other. In 1983, he brought the two threads together in what was an obviously utilitarian way in the introduction to his volume of essays on *The Causes of War*. He said, 'A study of the past can usefully supplement the more numerous and influential analyses of current world events based on disciplines which . . . suffer from a notable lack of historical data'.²⁵

The relationship which he is here describing is essentially one-way. Military history feeds our understanding of strategic studies. Indeed, history is one of the component disciplines in a subject which notoriously lacks a clear discipline and which contains many other disciplines as elements of its constitution. There is no suggestion in Michael's writings that strategic studies can necessarily illuminate history.

In seeing the historical study of war as essentially a useful tool in confronting modern predicaments, Michael has therefore followed in the tradition of Liddell Hart, and established an approach to strategic studies which is particularly British. Here in the United Kingdom, and even more here in London, as in Oxford, Michael Howard's legacy has been that military historians and students of strategic studies can actually talk to each other, rather than indulge in the sort of adversarial relationship that seems sometimes to pertain across the Atlantic.

That having been said, it would be totally wrong to place Michael Howard in a British tradition just because he is English and just because he has written so extensively on British strategy. That would suggest an insularity that is alien to Michael in an intellectual sense and even more inappropriate in strictly geographical terms. Britain may be an island, but that in itself has never much concerned Michael. He has shown little interest in naval history narrowly defined—an attribute which I shall say in passing has had unintended side effects, as others too in this country have neglected it, a neglect which King's, I am delighted to say, has now amply rectified. Michael's interest in Britain's continental strategy arises precisely because he sees war in European, if not Eurocentric, terms. As early as 1961, in his first great work, *The Franco-Prussian War*, he declared, 'For a continental nation at grips with his neighbour sea power can never be more than an auxiliary weapon'.²⁶

That book—a work which, when I was drawing my notes together for this lecture, I found myself once again reading, and, to use a cliché, turning the pages and not wanting to put it down—resulted in Michael Howard mastering four essential points, which

24 Howard, *Studies*, p. 13

25 Howard, *Causes*, p. 6; see also Howard, *Studies*, p. 9, and Howard, *Lessons*, p. 2.

26 Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p. 76.

immediately took his perspectives out of the rut of British military history. First of all, he was clear that the Franco-Prussian war marked a clean break with the past and set the stage for the twentieth century, not just because it put Germany on the map of Europe and therefore set the course to 1945, but also because it involved the introduction of mass-produced technologies to the battlefield.²⁷ Second, he was clear that Germany won the war and France lost it not simply because of what had happened on the battlefield, not simply because of what Moltke and Bismarck had done and others had not, but also because of the social backgrounds and the political structures of the states engaged, and perhaps even more because of those latter factors.²⁸ Third, he was clear that war did not exempt the non-combatant populations of the belligerents, and that by October 1870, 'the war had entered a stage in which terror and counter-terror were to play a formidable part'.²⁹ In the sieges of Strasbourg and Paris, German artillery deliberately targeted civilians. Fourth, he was clear that civil – military relations, and this of course arose from his study of the Bismarck – Moltke dispute, were vital both to the direction of war and to its control. Their resolution ensured that war would not just be a sterile and self-perpetuating act of its own but could go on to achieve a more lasting peace.

His sources and guides for all these observations were not written in English, but in French and above all in German. Howard was among the first in this country to grasp and promote in the English language the achievements of Gerhard Ritter, and in particular his four volume study of German militarism, which he was using and promoting a decade before the English translation, *The Sword and the Sceptre*.

Even more important in this process of putting war in its social and political context was of course the influence of Hans Delbrück, surely the founding father of academic military history and in many ways a much more obvious comparator with Michael than Liddell Hart. Like Michael Howard, Hans Delbrück sustained the study both of history proper and of contemporary events at the same time. Like Michael Howard, he was also aware that military history could not be treated in isolation from its broader historical context. In 1975, Michael Howard wrote a short book. He has written many short books. Many have been enormously influential. But this has probably been the most influential of all those influential short books. This was *War in European History*. Its preface contained a manifesto, which not only paid obeisance to Delbrück but also stated,

'To abstract war from the environment in which it is fought and study its technique as one would those of a game is to ignore a dimension essential to the understanding, not simply of the wars themselves but of the societies which fought them. The historian who studies war, not to develop norms for action but to enlarge his understanding of the past, cannot be simply a 'military historian', for there is literally no branch of human activity which is not to a greater or lesser extent relevant to its subject'.³⁰

27 Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 2, 456.

28 Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 1, 8, 119, 182, 243, 328.

29 Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 378-80; see also pp. 252, 250-6, 275-8, 371.

30 Michael Howard, *War in European History* (London, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. ix; see also Howard, *Studies*, pp. 184-9.

At times, Michael Howard has pursued this agenda to the point where he has seemed even Marxist. If we think about his definition of grand strategy and the importance of economic mobilization within that, we can see why, when he wrote of Hitler in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1963, he said, 'Basically modern war was a conflict of rival economic systems, which the side with access to the fullest economic resources was bound to win'.³¹ The emphasis on the social and economic dimension of military history put Michael Howard firmly at the front of what has been called the 'new military history'. Intellectually and programmatically that was undoubtedly true; but Michael has left to others, many of them his pupils, the detailed studies of the social compositions of armies, the relationships between armed forces and their parent societies, and the views of the armed forces entertained by those societies. Since the 1960s those have all become almost sub-specialisms of their own, and very often the 'new' military history has seemed to be the history of war with the fighting left out.

Michael's interest has been too firmly rooted in the phenomenon of war itself for this to have been an attractive route for him to go down. Indeed, what Michael Howard had to say in the 1960s about war was distinctly unfashionable. War, he said, had been 'throughout history a normal way of conducting disputes between political groups'.³² We have come to associate Michael Howard with Clausewitz, of which more in a minute, but the political thinkers with whom he immediately grappled were Hobbes and, above all, Rousseau.³³ Men, he said, do not fight as individuals but as members of a state, and 'at the root of all save the most celestial organizations there must lie the sanction of force'.³⁴ The monopoly of force is what characterizes the state.³⁵ War also defines the state in another sense. There would be no United States without the American War of Independence or the American Civil War. Germany came into being through war and Germany was divided again through war. Originally war was used to determine the state's territorial frontiers. But since the French Revolution it has determined also the incorporation of the population in the affairs of the state. Those who fight for the state because they are its citizens identify with the state and so legitimize it.³⁶

'The Nation State still remains the only mechanism by which the ordinary man or woman can achieve some sense, however limited, of participation in, and responsibility for, the ordering of their own societies and the conduct of the affairs of the world as a whole'.³⁷

In terms of domestic policy, this brings Michael back to Hobbes. The state creates public order, the state takes violence out of daily intercourse and restricts its use to state purposes. It does so through the mechanism of the law, but the law itself rests on power. And it is the order which power confers which we call peace.

31 Howard, *Studies*, pp. 118-9; see also Howard, *Causes*, p. 103.

32 Howard, *Causes*, p. 7.

33 Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (London, Temple Smith, 1978).

34 Michael Howard (ed.), *Soldiers and Governments* (London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957), p. 9.

35 Howard, *Causes*, p. 34.

36 Howard, *Invention*, p. 3.

37 Howard, *Causes*, p. 32.

The second set of consequences is international. Armed conflict is imminent in any international system.³⁸ War may be evil but those who renounce its use find themselves at the mercy of those who do not.³⁹ The purpose of armed conflict or of its threat has been to persuade another state to follow a course of action or, if not that, to dissuade it from following a course of action.⁴⁰ Michael has always therefore preferred definitions of strategy – as opposed to grand strategy – that are tighter than many that are current in the field of strategic studies today. Strategy is something a military commander does, and it involves the use of force.⁴¹

Peace is not, therefore, some sort of normal condition in human relations. It results from the establishment of a legitimate order, and, at least historically, that legitimate order could only proceed from war.⁴² This was a conclusion that Michael Howard had expressed as early as 1961 in *The Franco-Prussian War*.⁴³ It is a form of realism which can of course infuriate the Left, as Michael found was the case in his exchange with E P Thomson during the height of the Cold War, and it is a theme to which Michael Howard returned as recently as 2000. States, he has averred, make possible peace as well as war, and they therefore need to retain robust military capabilities in order to maintain that peace.⁴⁴

For Michael Howard, therefore, the restraints on war are rational and political. The characteristics of armies include order, discipline and hierarchy, and they use force in a purposeful and deliberate way.⁴⁵ The primary means of controlling war is strategy. When Michael Howard criticized the bomber offensive he did so not primarily because it breached the principle of non-combatant immunity, but simply because it didn't work. By contrast Sherman's campaign was effective precisely because it did work. It met the criterion of utility.

This is not to say that Michael is amoral. After all his some of his forebears were Quakers. The fact that the world is as it is does not relieve the individual of the responsibility to make it better. Michael has himself published a short book on *War and the Liberal Conscience*, and has edited volumes on *Restraints on War* and *The Laws of War*. The need, as he would see it, given the unavoidability of war or the threat of war in the international system, is to seek ways to control and manage the use of violence in interstate relations. Here, once again, Michael finds himself at one, rather than at odds, with Liddell Hart.⁴⁶ Like Liddell Hart, he has sympathized with the aspirations of those who have sought collective security or who have preached pacifism, but he has had no time at all for their intellectual lack of rigour.

The nuclear age vindicated Liddell Hart. Michael Howard's own words on that sense of vindication in Liddell Hart can help us see something of Michael's own credo: nuclear

38 Howard, *Causes*, p. 131.

39 Howard, *Studies*, p.17.

40 Howard, *Studies*, pp. 193, 196.

41 Howard, *Studies*, p. 154; Howard, *Causes*, p. 36.

42 Howard, *Invention*, p. 6.

43 Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, p. 454.

44 Howard, *Invention*, pp 103-4.

45 Howard, *Causes*, p. 10; also Michael Howard, ed., *Restraints on War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979).

46 Howard, *Causes*, pp. 200-3.

weapons have meant ‘that force, if used at all, must be used with skill, and restraint, that the object of all war is a better peace and that the nature of that peace will be determined not by only by who wins but by the way in which the war has been fought’.⁴⁷ For Michael Howard, therefore, nuclear weapons have changed the issues of strategy less than their technological impact has suggested.⁴⁸ Their aim, and perhaps now we should speak in the past tense, was still to persuade or dissuade another state, but that object could now be ‘achieved less by the manipulation of actual forces than by [the] manipulation of risks’.⁴⁹ Peace had come to rest on the balance of deterrence.⁵⁰

Michael Howard’s view of war is therefore predicated on the idea that continuity is central to its understanding, and that the state has the potential to be both an ethical and a rational actor. The interpenetration of politics at every level of war makes it more likely that the use of force will be limited than unlimited.⁵¹ Michael, and this is hardly an earth-shattering statement, is therefore a Clausewitzian.

In 1991 after the Gulf War, Michael nominated Clausewitz as the man of the year in a poll for the *New York Times*. That he was able to do so and be understood was itself largely the result of his own contribution to the study of Clausewitz. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that before the Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation, all, at least in the English-speaking world, was darkness, and that after that there came the light. Here again was another breach with Liddell Hart, who had above all been responsible for disseminating that darkness. It is worth considering, moreover, that the total sales of *On War* in the English-speaking world have now probably vastly exceeded the total sales ever achieved in Germany since its first publication in 1832. The first German edition of 1500 copies was still not sold out 20 years later. By 1989, Princeton University Press reported that they had sold 40,000 copies of the Howard and Paret translation and it had been by then adopted as a text at the principal US service academies.⁵² Somewhere in the back of my mind is the information that it has now sold over a quarter of a million copies.

It is both a tribute to Michael Howard’s influence, and also a salutary reminder, to recall that what all those budding Colin Powells at US service academies are reading is the Howard and Paret interpretation of Clausewitz. In his own essay in that translation, Michael Howard quoted Clausewitz’s warning that if he did not complete *On War*, as he did not, he would leave a ‘shapeless mass of ideas’.⁵³ Both Michael Howard and Peter Paret used their translation not least to give those ideas shape. Michael has been quoted as saying, ‘We may occasionally have overdone it, like overcleaning a picture’.⁵⁴ The result has been that modern English-language readers of *On War* have found in it a clarity

47 Howard, *Causes*, p. 207.

48 Howard, *Studies*, p. 248.

49 Howard, *Causes*, p. 97; see also p. 114.

50 Howard, *Studies*, p. 148.

51 Howard, *Studies*, pp. 206-7.

52 Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 204.

53 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 28.

54 Bassford, *Clausewitz*, p. 58.

and cogency which had eluded their predecessors. The Clausewitz that Michael Howard was first drawn to was the Clausewitz who wrote of friction and of moral forces.⁵⁵ This was the Clausewitz that spoke to the former subaltern of the Coldstream Guards who sat in a slit trench in the winter of 1944–1945. But the Clausewitz who came to dominate was of course the Clausewitz in Book 1 of *On War*, in Howard's and Paret's judgement the only fully revised part of the book. This is the Clausewitz who not only sees war as a political instrument, but also suggests that politics can be a possible restraint in war. In Clausewitz's own time, war broke its restraints precisely for political reasons. First, the French Revolution enabled the state to mobilize more fully and completely, and then Napoleon confronted Prussia, as he had done other states, with what Herfried Münkler, in a recent study of Clausewitz, called an existential crisis.⁵⁶ This is probably a more important observation for the historian than it is for the contemporary student of strategy, and it is the latter more than the former to whom Michael often directs his remarks.

In his introduction to *Clausewitz*, yet another short, magisterial book, in the Oxford University Press Past Masters series, Michael Howard ends with a key concept of Clausewitz's Book 1, the idea of 'the trinity'. He says, 'it would be a good place for any contemporary strategic thinker to begin'.⁵⁷ But there are two difficulties with this bit of advice for the contemporary strategic thinker.

First, Clausewitz's discussion of 'the trinity' is very short, about half a page, and it is never referred to again. Second, it is unclear what Clausewitz meant precisely by 'the trinity'. In a lecture that he gave in 1984, to mark the outbreak of the First World War, Michael Howard said that 'the trinity' was the government, army and the people.⁵⁸ But in an earlier piece, published in 1979, Michael said that 'the trinity' was made up of the social forces that those agents expressed, the political objectives, the operational instruments and the popular passions.⁵⁹ Both interpretations are entirely justified by the text. But so too is the view of Daniel Moran, who says that Clausewitz's trinity consists of abstractions of reason, chance and violence, and that each of these can be expressed in different ways according to whether they are associated with the government, army and the people. He goes on to say that violence in an unfettered way does not necessarily have to be associated simply with the people; it could be associated with the government and so on.⁶⁰ Michael Howard does not deny the role of emotional and moral forces in Clausewitz, Clausewitz the romantic, but his temperamental preference is for Clausewitz the rationalist, the product of the Enlightenment.

55 Bassford, *Clausewitz*, p. 207.

56 Herfried Münkler, *Über den Krieg. Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretischen Reflexion* (Weilerswist, Velbrück, 2002), pp. 91–115.

57 Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 73.

58 Howard, 'Europe on the Eve of the First World War', in R. J. W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, eds., *The Coming of the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3.

59 Howard, *Causes*, p. 103.

60 Daniel Moran, 'Strategic Theory and the History of War', in John Baylis, James Wirtz, Eliot Cohen and Colin Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 27.

Clausewitz had a rough ride in the 1990s, principally from Martin van Creveld and John Keegan.⁶¹ Mary Kaldor has told us there were old wars, by which she meant wars between states of the sort with which Clausewitz was concerned, and there were new wars.⁶² Their criticisms have found a wider audience since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Michael's response to this challenge, to the messages of continuity and rationality, has been typically robust. The attack on the Twin Towers, he declared, was not war; war is a political act engaged in by states, and terrorism is a means not an end. Established states, not failed states, can and do use terrorism.

I believe he is right but I do not intend to debate that now or to follow through the implications, partly because we are running out of time but principally because my brief is to talk about Michael Howard and the dimensions of military history. What these reflections on the attack on the Twin Towers and the way in which Clausewitz has been seen draw out is Michael Howard's central creed, that the historian can bring valuable insights in contextualizing current events. Many of the themes addressed since 9/11 were anticipated by Michael, mostly in lectures and essays which he delivered and wrote in the 1980s, when he was Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and which he published in *The Lessons of History* in 1991, but some of them go back to 1961 and *The Franco-Prussian War*.⁶³

In 1988, a year before Sam Huntington wrote on the clash of civilizations in *Foreign Affairs*, and 8 years before the publication of his book with that title, Michael stressed that liberalism could not claim universality – that international relations had to rest on the recognition of cultural diversity.⁶⁴ In 1985, he laid down the precept that 'the greater the power, the greater the nationalist reaction is likely to be'.⁶⁵ He stressed that liberal powers could not assume that they were somehow exempt from the notion that military and political dominance invites competition. Britain's presumption that Pax Britannica was benign and that therefore British naval supremacy was acceptable to the rest of the world was exactly that – presumption. Finally, as long ago as 1967, he pointed out that most wars since 1945, not since 1990 or 2001, have not been inter-state wars, but wars of liberation or insurgency, guerrilla or partisan wars.⁶⁶ He recognized full well that what for him was the key building block of the international order, the state, was under challenge. In 1991, he was predicting that this would generate the fundamental problems of the 21st century.⁶⁷

The difficulties that the state confronted were rectifiable, but were evident both internally and externally. Internally the state was failing to reflect society and so failing to create a sense of community, especially among the young. For Michael, as he wrote in 1984, conscription in the two world wars had forged 'a sense of national identity and

61 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, Free Press, 1991); John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, Hutchinson, 1993).

62 Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge, Polity, 1999).

63 Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 250-4, 371-9.

64 Howard, *Lessons*, pp. 139-51.

65 Howard, *Lessons*, p. 138.

66 Howard, *Studies*, p. 195.

67 Howard, *Lessons*, p. 4.

cohesion far greater than any political or social programmes could possibly have achieved'.⁶⁸ A problem for many new states was that they had not had to fight to assert their identity. For older states, abandoning conscription displayed a worrying myopia about the role of power in social order, as well as a readiness to neglect the forces which might create a sense of community.

Externally, Michael argued, the international community had also lost its way through its readiness to give sovereignty to supra-national organizations and to international commitments. Michael looked with particular alarm at the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention, which gave belligerent rights to freedom fighters, so undermining the principle that war was the monopoly of the state.⁶⁹

The self-evident point is that we may be all gathered here because Michael has now attained his 80th year, but that there is absolutely no sign that his powers or his output are diminishing. At breakfast this morning in All Souls, Noel Malcolm told me that in his 85th year Leopold von Ranke signed a contract to write a six-volume history of the world. I've not had time to check the veracity of that story, but if Leopold von Ranke could do it at 85, Michael, there is no excuse for slacking at 80. Michael has written outstanding long books, but, as I have also already said, he is the master of the short book. In the last couple of years, two have appeared, *The Invention of Peace* and *The First World War*. Like Liddell Hart, Michael Howard is a great communicator. He writes fluent, literate prose, which is always not only clear and succinct but also a delight to read. Unlike Liddell Hart, Michael Howard is a man of judgement and common sense. If there is one reason why his books, his essays and his reviews will last, it lies here: that he is always right. He does of course know it, and woe betide those who get things wrong, like Liddell Hart or Portal.

I presume that here, in King's College, London, I can be rude about the founder of University College London, so let me quote Michael Howard on Bentham, as an example. Bentham's *Plan for a Universal and Perpetual Peace*, published in 1789 was, according to Michael, 'smug, parochial and simplistic, making sweeping generalisations on the basis of minimal knowledge'.⁷⁰ Those of us who have waded through Bentham can only say amen to that. Or how about this on historians who try and explain the origins of the First World War in terms of the accumulation of capitalist rivalries? They

are like the drunk in the story who, when asked why he was searching for his lost watch under a street lamp rather than further up the road where he had dropped it, explained it was because there was more light there.⁷¹

Far too many of my words this evening, and now even my one joke, have been Michael's own. I have concentrated on Michael Howard's published and intellectual output, but his contribution to the establishment of academic military history is of course much more than that. It is institutional, here at King's, at Oxford, and also, I have to say,

68 Howard, *Lessons*, p. 157.

69 Howard, *Restraints*, p. 13.

70 Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, p. 33.

71 Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience*, p. 63.

in all those other universities elsewhere where they have imitated what has happened here at King's. It is also personal—in the countless research students he has supervised, many of them now producing works of great originality and achieving signal success. Above all, however, I think it is as a role model.

When I was admissions tutor at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (Liddell Hart's old college), we were proceeding on that very delicate path that many Oxbridge Colleges trod in the 1980s, that is to say towards the decision to admit women. The Master of the college invited Heather Brigstocke, the High Mistress of St. Paul's Girls School, to advise us. She arrived late for the meeting, swept in, elegant and beautiful, and, when asked what we needed to do, said simply that we needed women fellows, who would be role models for the female undergraduates. We could only nod our approbation, wondering how many Heather Brigstockes we could find. Michael Howard has been our role model. He has not only occupied the pinnacles of military history for almost half a century, he is also (and this is an extraordinary and unique achievement for a military historian) occupied the pinnacle for all historians, the Regius Professorship of Modern History at Oxford. Professor Sir Michael Howard, CH, CBE, MC, FBA, DLitt, your innumerable public accolades and distinctions have not only shed lustre on you as an individual, they have also laid the true foundations for the profession of military history in this country and elsewhere.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.