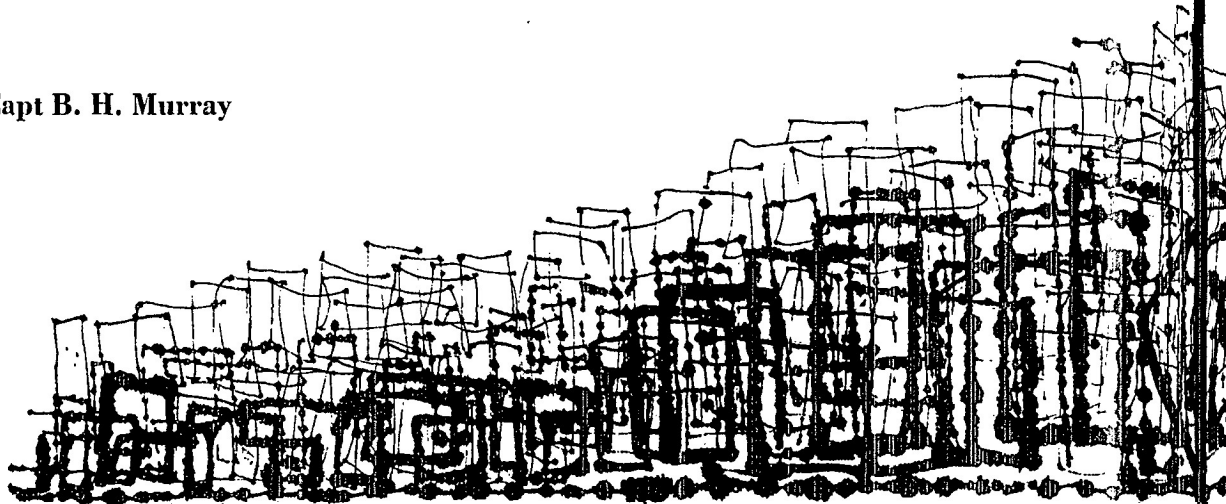


# TIME FOR A

By Capt B. H. Murray



☛ IT IS TIME FOR A CHANGE. A doctrinal concept, basic to the outlook of the US armed services, is no longer consistent with realities of the modern world. This concept is expressed in the first sentence of Field Service Regulation 97, FM100-5, page 21: "The ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight." The Germans have a word for it—*Vernichtungsstrategie*, the all-out strategy of complete destruction which by its very terms excludes all other theories of the use of force. They have also named the alternative—*Ermattungsstrategie*, the limited war.

*Vernichtungsstrategie* has dominated the American approach to armed conflict. It represents the basic jumping-off point of the professional officer, just as the germ theory of disease is fundamental to medicine, or field theory underlies the approach of the nuclear physicist, and as the presumption of innocence dominates the thinking of the criminal lawyer. This is lamentable; for as a historical truth *Vernichtungsstrategie* as the exclusive definition of war is simply incorrect, as an abstract philosophical proposition it is misstated, and as a guide to preparation and operation in the here and now it is open to very serious questioning.

The theory of *Vernichtungsstrategie* is usually attributed to Karl von Clausewitz, though in doing so, it seems that his successors in the military world have done him a disservice. Apparently Clausewitz never meant to say that *Vernichtungsstrategie* excluded all alternatives. It is true that his book *On War* concerns itself entirely with the all-out strategy, but he was aware of another form. His death cut off his further investigations in the area. A German military analyst of a later age, Hans Delbruck, however, did develop and expound the alternative form that had been suggested by Clausewitz. Delbruck gave it the name used here—*Ermattungsstrategie*.

It is not surprising that limited war was not, when propounded in the early 1900s, a popular concept. Delbruck was a man of enormous learning in the field of military history, and he was a keen analyst as well. He had the misfortune, however, to expound his ideas in a Germany dominated by the thinking of Erich Ludendorff and others of like viewpoint. In that climate of opinion Delbruck's theories were not destined to gain wide acceptance either at home or, after the German defeat of 1918, abroad.

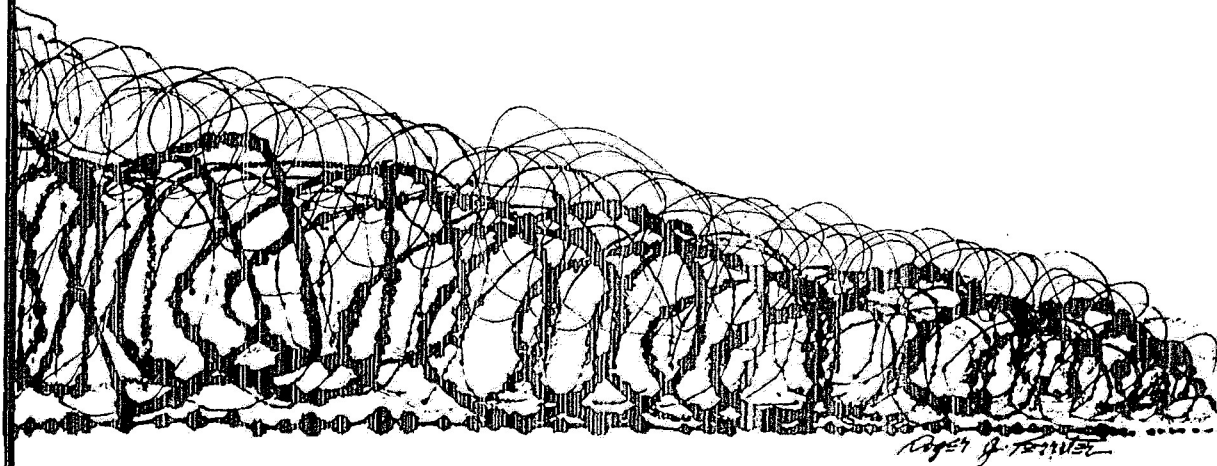
It must be admitted that *Vernichtungsstrategie* has been the orthodox

view for at least the last 100 years. It was an article of faith for the General Staff Corps of the German Army. It has had the support of such prestigious European soldiers as Helmuth von Moltke and Ferdinand Foch. Both Lee and Grant fought with faithful consistency to its basic precepts. World War I was certainly an all-out affair, and *Vernichtungsstrategie* probably found its ultimate expression—at least to date—in the *Gottterdammerung* strategy of Adolph Hitler and the unconditional surrender slogan of Britain and the United States in WW II.

With such a background of modern conflict and thinking it is not in the least unusual that the all-out strategy should be accepted as an article of faith by the practitioner of the military art. He sees war as the "continuation of political action by means of force," but in his view once the state of belligerency has occurred other means of political action must necessarily have failed, and unrestricted force is then the deciding factor. Politics must retire from the arena, while the soldier pushes the issue to its ultimate conclusion uninhibited by the limiting influence of the diplomat or the statesman. War, in this view, is by definition a resort to the ultimate arbiter of force, and it cannot be stopped short of the complete de-

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in our national strategy to meet today's needs



feat of one of the belligerents. There is no substitute for victory—and victory is used in its final meaning where the winner occupies the loser's country, and all the armed forces and the capacity and will to resist of the loser are completely destroyed.

As has been pointed out, this theory has had eminently respectable adherents in the past. It also seems to accord with a certain absolutistic stubbornness in the American national outlook towards problems of foreign policy and potential aggressors. This may be expressed in the idea that if an enemy nation is so nasty that it requires a sacrifice of American life to fight it, it is unquestionably so entirely evil that complete subjugation by American arms is necessary to prevent its ever being an aggressor again. It is certainly not the purpose of this article to propose that *Vernichtungsstrategie* be abandoned entirely. Rather its purpose is to point out the flaws in the exclusiveness of the orthodox view and to propose *Ermattungsstrategie* as an alternative method of using force—an alternative, however, which does not exclude the all-out view, but exists co-equally with it. Our strategic Air Force is a weapon of *Vernichtungsstrategie* and *Vernichtungsstrategie* only, but no one would for a minute propose that it be consigned to the junk

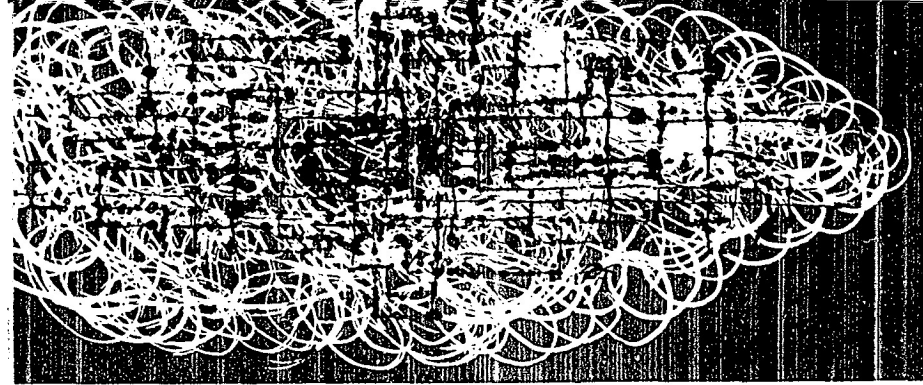
heap. In fact, it is probably the very existence of our strategic Air Force that makes *Ermattungsstrategie* an important concept for the immediate future.

"The ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight." If this is a statement taken from historical examples, it is simply untrue. Delbruck maintained that Pericles, Belisarius, Wallenstein, Gustavus Adolphus and Frederick the Great were all believers in *Ermattungsstrategie*. For two centuries—the 17th and 18th—the great states of Europe quarreled incessantly without ever pushing their wars to the ultimate decision of destroying one of the belligerents. In retrospect, the warfare of that era seems very artificial with its fancy uniforms, carefully drawn tactical formations and amazing protocol of the battlefield. But it was, nevertheless, warfare in a very real sense. There were definitely winners and losers in each war. The result turned upon victory in battle, but the use of force was very well regulated, and ultimate objectives were more often than not deliberately avoided.

*Vernichtungsstrategie* flourished in the Napoleonic era, but in mid-19th Century history there is an instructive episode which represents a re-

turn to limited war. The Minister President of the Prussian State, Otto von Bismarck, wanted to unify the various German speaking principalities of central Europe into a strong centralized German nation. To do so, however, would arouse the jealous opposition of his neighbors, Denmark, Austria and France. Supported as he was by the superb Prussian armies, he had nothing to fear from either of those states so long as they acted singly. With consummate diplomatic skill Bismarck manufactured 3 wars at 3 different times. In each case, shortly after the beginning of hostilities a pitched battle was fought somewhere near the mutual borders of the belligerents and won by the Germans. In each case the Prussian army represented by Moltke wanted to follow up the initial victory by marching on the enemy capital and destroying completely the remaining enemy forces. Though it was necessary in the third of these wars to take Paris in order to bring the French to Bismarck's terms, Moltke, to his magnificent irritation, did not get his way. The limiting influence of the Iron Chancellor prevailed, and in each case Bismarck negotiated a peace which left the defeated nation's armed forces, national pride and territory more or less intact.

It is certain that Bismarck's policy



in these situations was not actuated by any undue sympathy for the Danes or the Austrians or the French. Probably his actions were grounded in his unquestionably correct view of the power ratio prevailing in Europe at the time. His magnificent armies could easily beat one or perhaps any two of the great powers of Europe, but as he well knew, the fleets of the English Queen represented a decisive counter force which could make it possible for a sufficiently aroused England to finance and sustain a coalition that could quickly defeat Germany. Such in fact happened some years later when the limiting influence of Bismarck was abandoned for a more adventurous policy.

It must be concluded, therefore, that all wars have not been all-out wars. The exponent of *Vernichtungsstrategie* cannot find in history proof for his proposition that war is by definition an ultimate trial of strength. A short look at the comparatively narrow field of post-renaissance European history will prove him wrong. By far the larger number of wars during this era were restricted to limited trials of strength either by the design of statesmen and generals or by the equality of the war potential of the belligerents.

As an abstract proposition the absolute definition of war is misstated. It is illogical to assert that

war is an all out affair, for in fact, war has not always been so. The assertion that warfare is all-out can mean only that the writer making such a statement thinks that war *should* be an ultimate trial of strength. The military analysts who have propounded this assertion have not been blind to history. They have simply imposed a definition upon warfare from their own abstract point of view. If left in the realm of philosophy, it might do no harm to allow the statement that war is absolute. However, as the original reason for defining war is to provide a basis for considering various causes of action in the practical sphere, the statement to be true must be couched in the imperative form—war should be an ultimate trial of strength.

So stated, the proposition still has eminent adherents (though it is emphasized that Clausewitz is not among them). Such men as Alexander, Napoleon, Caesar and Lee proved by their actions that they would agree. The authority of their point of view, however, is challenged by the fact that equally great military names, such as Frederick the Great, have not agreed. A contemporary student and practitioner of military affairs, Sir Winston Churchill, seems able to maintain the ambidextrous approach advocated by this article. When he was opposed

"I have a mortal fear that someday the Corps will suffer a defeat just because everybody was thinking the same way and all were equally convinced they were right," says **Capt B. H. Murray** in explaining his reasons for writing this article. Capt Murray was graduated from Princeton in 1951 and is presently doing graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Commissioned in 1952, he went to Korea with the 26th draft Nov 52, serving first as a mortar section leader and later as platoon leader, (1/3/1). After being wounded in March 1953, he was evacuated to CONUS. Upon recovery he was assigned as an instructor in individual weapons at Basic School where he remained until released from active duty in March 1954. He is an active member of the Marine Corps Reserve in Philadelphia.

by the fanatical strategy of Hitler, Churchill talked and later enforced unconditional surrender, yet during the Korean incident his efforts at restraint showed that he was not unaware of the virtues of limitation when, in his opinion, the situation called for it.

*Vernichtungsstrategie* does not, therefore, have the absolute authority indicated by the axiomatic statement that the object of all war is complete destruction of the enemy's means and will to resist. Upon analysis it appears only that certain leading soldiers and thinkers thought that this should be so. Their view, however, is challenged by other and equally great military minds. The conclusion is inescapable that *Vernichtungsstrategie* is a mere abstract point of view. Its value is to be determined in terms of its utility when applied to the military realities of today.

In the present state of world affairs any American who truly wishes to follow out the theory of *Vernichtungsstrategie* may face some very cruel choices. If, for instance, the Red Chinese assault one of the Nationalist held off-shore islands, the all out strategist must either retreat and thus avoid the state of belligerency altogether, or if he fights, to be consistent, he must unleash the full power of the US against Red China and, no doubt, the Soviet Union too. Assuming something like a nuclear parity between the Communist and Western Worlds, this second alternative promises to be a veritable orgy of destruction. By its nature, nuclear war between strategic air forces seems to preclude exactly that definitive victory which is the aim of *Vernichtungsstrategie*. The atomic holocaust will simply be too costly for both sides.

As *Ermattungsstrategie*—local involvement of conventional forces with limited objectives—avoids the dilemma of retreat or mutual atomic destruction, it may easily become a part of American policy. It seems to be the best available alternative. It can provide a way of checking Communist expansion at the present limits, and yet avoid a major conflict.

It is time, therefore, to dust off *Ermattungsstrategie* and restore it to a place of honor alongside the orthodox *Vernichtungsstrategie*. It is time to change the fundamental

dogma that war is by definition all-out, and to realize that the Marine Corps may be facing a long period in which limited warfare best serves our national interest. In doing so, however, it would be well to consider the costs, the risks, and the implications of this new view of warfare.

In the first place, the strategy of limited war is expensive. It presupposes that the US must maintain a fully effective weapon of all-out war in order to stalemate Russian nuclear capabilities and, thus, deter Russia from large scale aggression. This weapon is, of course, the strategic air force. In addition, the US would be required to have large conventional armed forces at instant readiness. The infantryman is going to be the crucial factor in any limited war, and as initial advantages are very important, the US must have the capacity to deploy effective forces instantaneously. This sort of preparedness costs a great deal of money. If used often, *Ermattungsstrategie* will be tragically costly in human life. It requires that the US be prepared to fight the ample manpower reserves of the Communist world in situations where more often than not the enemy will have the initiative. Perhaps this is not the happiest prospect, but it is better, surely, than an all-out nuclear war or slow strangulation by retreat.

Secondly, limited warfare is risky. How can the US be sure that the other side will play the game according to the rules? Is not war so inherently dynamic that, even with quite other intentions, both sides in their attempts to best each other will broaden the scope of the conflict until it becomes total? Will not the tactical use of atomic weapons stimulate this broadening of the war process, and thus make total war unavoidable? These questions illustrate the risks and the unusual problems involved in *Ermattungsstrategie*. The power ratio between the belligerents must be so balanced that neither side dares to enlarge the scope of the conflict. Local defeat must be made preferable to the risks of an enlarged war. It may mean that the belligerents must abstain from the use of tactical atomic weapons. Diplomatic channels must be kept open. Negotiation must be flexible. The enemy must quickly be convinced by the

strength of the American reaction that his venture was ill conceived and will quickly prove very costly in light of the sudden appearance of a decisively superior American force, yet the peace terms must not be too harsh and degrading lest in his extremity the enemy be driven to a more desperate gamble which would enlarge the war.

Lastly, there are certain implications for the Marine Corps in this theory of warfare. The new rules must permeate the thinking of the officer corps and liberate creative ideas now beclouded by the dogma of orthodoxy. *Ermattungsstrategie* will require an ultimate standard of professional excellence. The war will be only a small part of the general national effort. In order to conserve lives and money it must be fought with the barest minimum of forces, yet these forces cannot afford to lose. In WW II the final surrender of the enemy atoned for the initial set backs, but in a limited war the bad performance of one regiment may mean the loss of a province in the concurrent diplomatic bargaining. US forces must be available instantly and at the very highest level of effectiveness, lest as in Korea, we find the disputed area already in enemy hands and face the costly job of recapturing it and the consequent loss of bargaining position until it is recaptured. To perform well in this type of warfare troops must be very well disciplined, but beyond that we must be prepared to introduce an element of political sophistication into the thinking of the average Marine. Trained Americans fight very well under the stimulus of a national crusade such as WW II. In a limited war, however, the individual's morale would be better sustained if he understood something of the complexity of the issues of his little war and why he is being asked to fight an enemy when final victory must be denied.

In order to reduce the number of forces actually needed in the war zone, the effectiveness of each man in the conventional weapons team must be increased. The absolute maximum military performance must be squeezed out of the individual. Constant experimentation and innovation must strive to bring this about. It is typical of the *Ver-*

*nichtungsstrategie* thinking of the American services that, though millions have been spent developing more and better bombers, the infantryman—the weapon of *Ermattungsstrategie*—is still armed with the rifle of WW II. Nobody seems to recognize any compelling pressure to increase the infantryman's fire power, yet it looks as though the chance of using infantry in the near future is a lot better than the chance of using the B-52.

The times call for a change—a change in the view of the nature of war. Old dogmas must face the test of their efficiency in terms of new realities and, insofar as they fail, they must be discarded to liberate the creative energy of the professional officer. He must be prepared to do something quite different in the future. An outmoded view of war will be of no service to him. His leadership must now meet challenges of a different kind. One thing, however, seems fairly certain—his leadership had better be good, for where *Ver-nichtungsstrategie* was a test of a nation's total war potential in which leadership was but one of many factors, *Ermattungsstrategie* promises to be a pure test of military leadership. The rules of the game impose a rough equality on the strength in terms of numbers and weapons which the two sides will bring to the battlefield. From that point on, victory belongs to the side that is best led. US & MC

