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A REVIEW OF TWO BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION TO STRATEGY

André Beaufre
Faber and Faber, 1965, 25s.

DISSUASION ET STRATÉGIE

Général Beaufre
Librairie Armand Colin, 1964

The first of these two books by General André Beaufre was published in its original French edition in 1963, but only recently in its English translation. The second, published last year, is, I am told, soon to appear in translation, but I have not yet seen the English version. General Beaufre has also edited another book, called simply Stratégie, which appeared in the summer of 1964 as the first of what is apparently to be a series put out by the organization which he heads and which was created only some two years ago -- the Institut Français d'Études Stratégiques. The latter volume was a collection of papers

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by four other members of the Institute, to which Beaufre contributed only some pages of introduction.

With the publication of these works, General Beaufre will have the wider acquaintance outside his own country that his work and his talents deserve. He is of course already well-known to those privileged to attend certain international conferences of strategic specialists, but the number of persons who have been able thus to benefit from his insight and experience as well as his wit, his charm, and incidentally his excellent English has been until now too small.

What is distinctive to General Beaufre in his writings are not so much his conclusions as his method, and here I suspect that my national origin adds to my difficulties in achieving empathy -- not because of any important political divergence but because of basically different habits of thinking. As an undergraduate many years ago I was taught that the philosophic school known as "Pragmatism," developed by William James and others, was distinctively and characteristically American. That thought could have no real meaning to an undergraduate, but later on it began to acquire meaning for me. I am most forcefully reminded of it in reading especially the first of General Beaufre's two books.

My own bias rears itself in the view that, strategy being essentially the pursuit of success in certain types of competitive endeavor, a pragmatic approach is the only appropriate one. The basic pragmatic principle is, I suppose, that "Truth is the idea that works." Thus, one weighs a strategic concept or idea by investigating as thoroughly as possible the factors necessary to its

successful operation, as well as the question whether those factors do in fact exist or are likely to exist at the appropriate time. This inevitably involves one in a good deal of detailed study, preferably over the whole range of relevant and important variables -- political, technological, geographic, etc.

General Beaufre's approach is difficult to define, but it is certainly very different. Let us look at what he rejects as well as what he accepts. He apparently rejects the kind of analysis which sets off some of the better-known American specialists because, "despite their painful accumulation of much data," they seem to lack "the guiding principle, a philosophy...." He then goes on to warn us: "Lacking a way of life, a philosophy, we have to run before the wind of change and yield in the face of attack by the more dynamic philosophies ranged against us."

I am not sure I know what the alternative is to running "before the wind of change," but I had thought there was by now a general consensus that awareness of technological and other kinds of change is a top-priority requirement among strategists.

Even more strikingly, General Beaufre rejects also the utility of military history. "My book," he says, "makes little use of history....My primary reason is that I have tried to reduce the problem to its essentials which are in fact ideas; moreover...I believe that history can be used to substantiate almost any conclusion." Indeed it can, and often has been. But surely the best antidote to the kind of history he is justly condemning is good history, not the rejection of all history. If he had on the

contrary said that most strategic analysts who have achieved international repute in recent years display a critical weakness in their ignorance of or insensitivity to historical precedent -- which is after all our only available guide to how men behave under the stress of crisis and war -- it would have been a point worth making. Anyway, if one rejects accumulation of both contemporary and historical data, what is left?

As to the value of a "philosophy" in the sense that General Beaufre seems to mean it, instructive examples from the past are not rare. The French general staff of 1914 had one all right, and a very "dynamic" one it was too. The French and British generals were, however, rather too rigid about it. Moreover, they overlooked a fatal booby trap, the machine gun. What is a philosophy worth that misses the booby traps? The plain, homely good sense of Marshal Pétain's "fire kills" was arresting only because it raised its head inside a morass of terrifying nonsense.

I have no objection to the development of "principles of strategy" if the generalizations in question are both meaningful and true -- and preferably also, in view of the accumulation of 150 years of writings in the field, somewhat novel. Our expectations in these respects are not set up by finding right at the outset of the book a statement to the effect that it was (only?) because of a "lack of philosophy" that France went down in 1940, and also: "It was the Anglo-Saxons who staged the comeback from 1942 to 1945 because they had a philosophy and a strategy."¹

¹In this instance I checked the correctness of the translation with the original French version, which reads:

I cannot be sure that what the author is saying is quite untrue because I do not really know what he means, but it is difficult for me to imagine an interpretation of the word "philosophy" that would make it even partially true. I am, however, certain that if it were true it would not be the whole truth or even a major part of it. The English Channel, British stubbornness, and vast American resources were certainly among the essential factors determining the differences between the French performance and that of the "Anglo-Saxons."

On the question whether strategy is profitably or appropriately considered a "science," with a specific body of principles and tested conclusions, it seems to me that in at least two vital respects our subject matter is recalcitrant. First, we are not dealing with units, that is, with countries A, B, C, and D, but rather with the Soviet Union, the United States, France, Britain, and China -- to mention only the current nuclear powers. The number of such powers is small, and each of them is quite different from the others in important respects. Second, it is obvious that since the beginning of the nuclear era only twenty years ago, we have passed through several distinct epochs in which political and technological circumstances differed markedly from preceding epochs. The strategic thinking of the times also changed, with obvious conditions of lag and other forms of inappropriateness.

"Le redressement de 1942 à 1945 est l'oeuvre d'Anglo-Saxons, forts d'une philosophie et d'une stratégie." Otherwise I relied upon the fact that General Beaufre knows English too well to let a bad translation get through.

We have been striving hard but with only partial success to achieve awareness of the significance of the changes going on before our eyes.

I do not deny that there are certain propositions that over-ride all these differences and changes, such as that men fear violent death, or that uncertainty may magnify dangers otherwise considered small (to mention only some of the ingredients of deterrence), but these, if they manage to be both meaningful and true, are usually not very novel. And beyond them there is much business pressing upon us that is terribly complex.

Our author's second book, on dissuasion (or deterrence) and strategy, is a much more valuable contribution because it attempts at least to connect with the important issues confronting us today. It starts out with an analysis of nuclear deterrence as the "key" to contemporary strategy. It then goes on, first, to an analysis of bilateral deterrence, and thence to one of multilateral deterrence, or what Beaufre calls "the problem of the third partner." Unlike his eminent countryman, General Pierre Gallois, General Beaufre appears to feel that the military justification for the French nuclear effort does not require insistence upon the alliance-fragmenting nature of nuclear weapons. He does insist upon the importance of the army remaining national, "which is to say sinking its roots profoundly into the country and intimately bound to it."² But his reasons are mostly cultural and psychological: the armed services have always remained the repository of the

²In this quotation and those that follow, translation is by the reviewer.

virtues of action and of sacrifice for an ideal. "Their virile education must be the natural antidote of the bourgeois softening produced by the easy life."

The second part of the book is given over to what the author calls the "consequences of deterrence," by which he means the development of specific forms of limited conflict characteristic of the nuclear era rather than of the past. He is attracted to terms like "indirect strategy" to signify a reliance upon a nuclear strategic power which is, however, kept in the background, but he is clearly not addicted to a massive retaliation concept, as some of his countrymen appear to be (though they immediately assert that one will never have to resort to it).

He concludes with a chapter on the wider "strategic" -- by which he really seems to mean "political" -- consequences of deterrence. One novel (at least outside of France) idea he produces here is that a primary reason for independent nuclear programs on the part of countries like France is to prevent "the two greats," the Soviet Union and the United States, from concluding between them an entente or condominium in order to rule over the rest of the world. Let that ruling be done by a "concert of the nuclear Powers," which would at least have the merit of including France. "This conclusion," he says, "is particularly important."

There is no doubt that we can look forward to important further contributions by General Beaufre and his associates, though I am sure the process would be hastened by their dismounting entirely from that intellectual high horse that Beaufre has thus far felt it necessary to ride. Just

as the cavalry discovered long ago that one fights more effectively dismounted, so, I believe, one thinks more clearly and effectively by grappling with a problem à pied. One can waste so much time and effort grooming those majestic concepts, which then proceed only to get in one's way.

