

Luttwak Takes a Bath

Edward N. Luttwak's *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard, 1987) xii + 283pp, hc. \$25.00.

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No matter how widely people disagree about what foreign policy is ideal, most agree that our actual foreign policy is irrational. By "irrationality" I mean several things: logical incoherence, a failure to choose means appropriate to given ends, and the choice of ends that cannot be achieved in reality. Most of us, however, believe that this irrationality is somehow accidental. Economic planners do not *intend* to be irrational, but the insuperable knowledge problems inherent in economic planning necessitate that their behavior is, in fact, irrational. Bureaucrats do not *intend* to be irrational, but the very structure of bureaucracy encourages irrational behavior. Legislators do not *intend* to be irrational, but the goals that they pursue - such as equality of condition - cannot be achieved in reality, thus necessitating irrational behavior.

What is difficult for even the most cynical person to believe is that, outside of a totalitarian state, a regime would be irrational not by accident, but as a consciously chosen goal. Nobody, it seems, could be irrational *on principle*. It simply boggles the mind.

Enter Edward N. Luttwak.

Edward N. Luttwak is one of today's most prolific and influential strategic analysts. A prominent, highly articulate neoconservative, Luttwak's books and essays in *Commentary* have earned him wide credibility and the position of Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University. Luttwak's best-known works are *The Pentagon and the Art of War*, *On the Meaning of Victory*, *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*, and *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union*. They are models of clear thinking. In them Luttwak deftly reduces masses of historical data to essentials, takes into account dozens of different factors in the strategic equation, penetratingly dissects flawed arguments, exposes false premises, and presents it all in a clear, linear fashion, sparsely embroidered with subtle, devastating polemical twists.

Luttwak has been attacked both as an anti-military muckraker and as an icy Dr. Strangelove - for the same reason: a coolly logical way of dealing with highly emotional issues. He recognizes that our security is not enhanced by writing uncritical apologies for the Pentagon. Nor is it enhanced by the glassy-eyed hysteria of the disarmament crowd. His work is animated by the conviction that the emotional inability to understand violence clearly and to use it resolutely (in self-defense) leads, in the long run, to far more violence and bloodshed than it avoids in the short run.

Luttwak's *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* promised to be the culmination of his past works, taking insights introduced in polemical and historical contexts and developing them in the context of an abstract, systematic treatise. Perhaps my expectations

for the book were unreasonably high, but I am saddened to find *Strategy* quite disappointing. Instead of being the zenith of Luttwak's work it is its nadir. Although the book is filled with fascinating anecdotes and brilliant analysis, it fails precisely in its stated goal of presenting a *logic* of war, a set of principles which can serve as tools of analysis and decision-making in the context of war. This failure is so grievous, in fact, that *Strategy*, to the extent that it contributes to strategic decision-making, may actually be dangerous, for the essence of Luttwak's message is the advocacy of *irrationality on principle*.

To be specific, the form of irrationality that Luttwak advocates is logical contradiction. He advocates logical contradiction as rational insofar as it achieves strategic ends. The central thesis of *Strategy* is that "*the entire realm of strategy is pervaded by a paradoxical logic of its own*, standing against the linear logic by which we live in other spheres of life." By "paradox" Luttwak does not mean statements that merely *seem* to be contradictory, but statements that are *actual* contradictions. He introduces the book with the Roman dictum "if you want peace, prepare for war," claiming that it is "paradoxical in presenting *blatant contradiction* as if it were a straightforwardly logical proposition." Furthermore, he contends that our contradictory *statements* of strategic principles mirror a contradictory strategic *reality*, a reality in which opposites merge into and emerge out of one another.

Luttwak acknowledges a "similarity" between his paradoxical logic and the dialectical logic of Hegel and Marx. This is true. Luttwak's logic of paradox has the same strengths - and the same fatal weaknesses - as Hegelian and Marxist dialectic. The strength of Hegel's dialectic is that it is based on the insight that we learn from our mistakes. Dialectic is a process by which we test the adequacy of our concepts by thinking them through in concrete contexts, causing them to yield up their contradictions and ambiguities and encouraging us to come up with more adequate - that is to say, more coherent - concepts. The weakness of Hegel's dialectic, especially as it has been appropriated by Marxists, is that it can be mistaken for an abstract *method* or recipe which can be detached from the concrete, historical and empirical investigations that it depends upon and turned into a perverse sort of irrational "rationalism" in which the dialectician "deduces" social phenomena and historical processes through "negating" their antecedents. As we shall see, this is precisely what happens to Luttwak.

In his concept of "ordinary linear logic" Luttwak seems to conflate Aristotelian logic, naive commonsense, and dubious applications of "systems analysis" to military problems (e.g. by Robert S. MacNamara during his tenure as Secretary of Defense).

Strategy is filled with alleged examples of the paradoxical nature of strategic reality. For example, common sense tells us the best road is the shortest, smoothest, and most direct. However, when an evading army has to march to a city, the most direct route will be the most heavily guarded. Therefore, runs the argument, in strategic situations the most indirect, inhospitable route becomes the safest. In war, *bad is good*. Or: when an invading army blitzes over the border, easily conquering miles and miles of territory, it dissipates its strength, stretches its supply lines, and opens itself to counter-attack. Therefore, *victory leads to defeat, or: good is bad*.

Now, it is easy to see the truth in these scenarios. The nature of war is such that an indirect route is often the best, and an army is more easily defeated when it is scattered over a vast territory and far from home. Sun Tzu, however, recognized this thousands of years ago and made it intelligible without resort to "paradoxical logic."

Why then does Luttwak insist on formulating perfectly *logical* principles as contradictions? By what error of Aristotelian logic does he come to take a bath in the Heraclitean stream?

Luttwak's error is the equivocation of two senses of the word "paradox". One sense of "paradox" is rooted in the Greek "*doxa*" meaning "opinion" or "common sense". The prefix "para" means "beyond." Together, they mean what is beyond common opinion, what confounds common sense. "Paradox" also, however, means *logical* contradiction. *The two senses are not interchangeable.* Common sense is not logic. And the expectations of naive common sense are not identical to reality. If events confound common sense, there is no contradiction in logic or reality. There is only the clash of naiveté and experience.

Let us put this in concrete terms. Say that we're to invade Tipperary. We ask a merchant which road is best. In the context of peace, the best road is the shortest and smoothest, and he tells us so. If we take the short road and find ambushes at every turn, then we should reflect upon our situation. If we reflect for a moment, we shall realize that it is perfectly logical in the context of war to expect such ambushes. Therefore, in the context of war, the long road is the best road, for it better achieves the strategic goal.

The failure in this example is not a failure of "linear" rationality. It is a failure to act rationally in the first place. An essential feature of rational action is that it is contextual. People do not act in vacuums. They act in specific contexts. Rational action is the pursuit of a goal by means appropriate to the context as well as appropriate to the end. Irrational action means to drop one's context and act according to inappropriate assumptions. For example, a rational chess player recognizes that he is in fact playing chess. He does not, therefore, try to win by using the rules of checkers and the strategy of bridge. Similarly, a rational strategist does not act upon assumptions drawn from common sense. Since common sense is for the most part formed during peacetime, its uncritical use in war amounts to dropping one's context.

It does not, however, amount to an invalidation of Aristotelian logic. Only by equivocation can Luttwak argue that sound strategic principles, which take into account the context of war and therefore conflict with common sense (paradoxes in the first sense), are also contradictions of logic (paradoxes in the second sense).

Indeed, all of Luttwak's examples of the failure of linear logic are actually instances of context-dropping. And all of his alleged strategic paradoxes are quite logical, if one takes the proper context into account. It is not the substance of his analysis with which I take issue. It is the abstract formulation of the results of that analysis that is dangerous. Luttwak has a peculiar talent for formulating perfectly logical principles in contradictory terms.

But this is a trivial wordgame that anyone can play, even in what Luttwak would call "linearly logical" enquiries. For instance, there is the Erwin Schroedinger and Fritjof Capra approach to describing sub-atomic physics. Businessmen have to "spend money to make money." Hedonists have to gain happiness by not aiming for it. Insomniacs trying to fall asleep have to think of something other than falling asleep. And so on.

Equally trivial is Luttwak's contention that war is a realm in which opposites merge into and emerge out of one another, war producing peace, peace giving way to war, etc. Aristotle himself, however, recognized that this is the case in all forms of generation and corruption. Chairs come into being from non-chairs (wood and metal and cloth) and trees from non-trees (seeds and soil and sun). If chairs were generated from chairs then there would be no generation in the first place. But this fact need not be phrased in logical language as "negations negating" and "opposites interpenetrating."

It would be extremely foolish for someone to look at paradoxically phrased maxims like "War leads to peace" and "You have to spend money to make money" and conclude that you can have your cake and eat it too. One should not draw the general conclusion that the best way of getting something is to pursue its opposite. But this is the precise impression one takes away from Luttwak's book. His argument is not that strategic principles can be phrased in contradictory terms just for the fun of it. His point is that such principles must be phrased in such terms if they are to describe the reality of war. Concrete events that confound common sense are identified with logical paradoxes. Logical paradoxes are then turned into an abstract method for strategic thinking. In Luttwak's words: once people understand his book

strategic practice can be freed from the systematically misleading influence of commonsense logic. For the conduct of foreign policy, this offers the prospect of an eventual liberation from the false discipline of consistency and coherence, to allow scope for concerted policies that are purposefully contradictory.

Frankly, this prospect is just plain frightening. Our foreign policy suffers from no shortage of inconsistency and incoherence. I fear that those who are incapable of discerning the contextualist substance of Luttwak's analysis of strategy will remember only the book's catchy, constantly repeated paradoxical formulas. They will treat illogical thinking as a *recipe* for strategic success. Hence the irony that what promised to be the culmination of Luttwak's past work may undo any of its positive effects by giving new license to even more irrationality in our foreign and defense policies.