

Liddell Hart and the Mearsheimer Critique: A “Pupil’s” Retrospective

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A Review Essay on *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*. By John J. Mearsheimer. 234 pages. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988.

The thesis of this book is that Sir Basil Liddell Hart, the well-known military historian, critic, and theorist, manipulated both the record of his own errant views on the basic military questions of the 1930s and the testimonials of noted German generals of World War II. He did this, according to Mearsheimer, in order to resurrect a reputation lost when the defensive strategy he had advocated failed, and blitzkrieg—the quintessential embodiment of the offense—overwhelmed “the strength of the defensive in modern war.”

In some 200 provocative pages, Professor Mearsheimer argues that Liddell Hart failed to appreciate “the importance of deep strategic penetration” and in fact developed his “strategy of indirect approach” to provide “an alternative to blitzkrieg.” Only after World War II did he “resurrect” the indirect approach by identifying it with blitzkrieg.

Mearsheimer contends that in the years before World War II, Liddell Hart shrank from supporting a foreign policy “that relied on military force to confront the Third Reich,” and that later he distorted the historical record to make it appear he opposed, rather than supported, the political decisions “not to prepare” for the coming war. Mearsheimer portrays how Liddell Hart resurrected his “lost reputation” by maneuvering publishers and German generals Rommel and Guderian in order to claim them as successful students of his prewar theories.

The first issue—the origin of blitzkrieg—is easily dismissed. While Liddell Hart did not produce a distinct treatise on the subject, there is no doubt that even in the 1920s he and Major General J. F. C. Fuller both anticipated the basic role of armored forces in blitzkrieg (although Liddell Hart never developed his ideas as systematically as did Fuller in his *Lectures on F.S.R. III*¹). He did,

however, anticipate as early as 1925 that the tank could be “concentrated and used in . . . large masses . . . for a decisive blow against the Achilles’ heel of the enemy army, the communications and command centres.” As he developed his “strategy of indirect approach,” the role of armored forces became clear:

The land “punch” of the future will be delivered by fleets of tanks, their communications maintained by cross-country and air vehicles. . . . These . . . quick-hitting forces will advance by rapid bounds into the enemy country to strike at its vitals. . . . Speed, on land as in the air, will dominate the next war. . . . Surprise and manoeuvre will reign again.²

If in later years Liddell Hart inserted the word “deep” before early references to movements behind an opponent’s flanks or penetration of his lines by independent armored columns, this does not necessarily mean—as Mearsheimer asserts—that Liddell Hart failed at the time to understand the importance of deep strategic penetration. In 1932 he wrote of mobile fighting units that “would manoeuvre widely to turn the enemy’s flanks and attack his lines of supply . . . [and] carry out a decisive manoeuvre against his rear.” Three years later he analyzed Civil War cavalry operations, concluding that in mobile raids “the nearer to the force that the cut is made, the more immediate the effect; the nearer to the base, the greater the effect.”³ His “strategy of indirect approach”—first articulated in 1927 and later expanded in his analysis of Sherman’s 1864-65 campaigns—was adaptable to armored warfare, and many of his ideas were successfully employed in the blitzkrieg of a later day.

In the judgment of Colonel Richard Swain, a trained historian, experienced soldier, and currently head of the Combat Studies Institute at the US Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth,

Liddell Hart drew his tactical and operational ideas together under the umbrella concept of the “indirect approach,” the unifying proposition that disruption must precede destruction . . . [and] continued to develop his perspective of mechanized warfare throughout the thirties. While . . . criticized for his arguments in favor of the policy of “Limited Liability” (minimal military support for France in case of a continental war) . . . his depiction of the then future war was surprisingly accurate at the tactical and operational level, and most consistent with what he had written prior to 1933 Liddell Hart’s tactical and operational views were generally congruent with the experience of the Second World War insofar as the conduct of operations was concerned.⁴

Many of Liddell Hart’s ideas are alive and well today. According to current US doctrine,

Offensive operations are characterized by aggressive initiative on the part of subordinate commanders, by rapid shifts in the main effort to take advantage of

opportunities, by momentum, and by the deepest, most rapid destruction of enemy defenses possible. The ideal attack should resemble what Liddell Hart called the "expanding torrent." It should move fast, follow reconnaissance units or successful probes through gaps in enemy defenses, and shift its strength quickly to widen penetrations and to reinforce its successes, thereby carrying the battle deep into the enemy rear.⁵

Virtually every book written by Liddell Hart after his *Sherman* (1929) promotes the indirect approach. It is true, as Professor Mearsheimer observes, that "there is hardly any discussion of tank warfare" in the *Sherman* book, but this begs the question: the book was a military biography, written at the request of an American publisher, based largely on primary sources, and in this volume—which is not true of some of his later writings—Liddell Hart blended history and theory so well that the latter does not dominate the former. Years ago, curious on this point, I reread *Sherman's Memoirs* and official correspondence to see if he had understood as clearly as Liddell Hart the use of the indirect approach, the "baited gambit," "alternative objectives," and "organized dispersion" in his later campaigns, for by that time I had learned that history and theory were easily confused. Too often history is made to support and illustrate preconceived theory, while preconceived theory in turn can provide the basis for imposing particular historical judgments and interpretations.

These tendencies are indeed true of many of Liddell Hart's later books, but not in this case—*Sherman's* own words made that clear. Liddell Hart himself later recalled that working on the *Sherman* book

not only helped to stimulate and enlarge my ideas . . . but was a most valuable part of my education in historical research. . . . The *Official Records* . . . provide . . . an unrestricted foundation for the study of a war, presenting the day-to-day and even hour-by-hour impressions and decisions of both sides. . . . It is possible to see what commanders were thinking and doing at the moment.⁶

Professor Mearsheimer claims that Liddell Hart's published views in the late 1930s "make him look like the proverbial general caught preparing for the last war." Wishing above all else to avoid a military commitment on the continent, he says, Liddell Hart was determined that Britain not repeat its World War I experience on the Western Front. But Liddell Hart offered no solution for

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the Czech problem or the Spanish Civil War, Mearsheimer continues, and increasingly he viewed the indirect approach as a way "to defeat a Continental foe without having to engage his armies." Liddell Hart, he concludes, "was quite wrong on the basic military questions of the 1930s," for he "simply could not bring himself to support the use of military force against Hitler."

There is no question that Liddell Hart's books and articles in the last years before the outbreak of war in 1939 are among his least convincing and most controversial. But if he stressed the "great and growing superiority" of the defense, he also insisted that the offense could still succeed "where the defender has no effective counter-weapons to nullify offensive instruments such as aircraft and tanks."⁷ The discriminating reader should have highlighted both points and then directed his thoughts to whichever seemed to apply to the situation at the time. Liddell Hart was wrong, of course, in a number of particulars, but this is true of many who make a living—as he did in the prewar years—analyzing current policies. We will probably not know for another generation which of the current commentators may be correct in the assessment of events now occurring on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Rereading Liddell Hart's *Europe in Arms* (1937) and *The Defense of Britain* (1939), and bearing in mind his subsequent reactions to many crises during the Cold War, "the Captain who teaches generals" emerges, it must be admitted, almost as a pacifist, intrigued with the intellectual problems of the strategist but shrinking from that fatal step that could lead to war and a possible return to the conditions of 1914-18. The Berlin Wall was built the second summer I lived at Liddell Hart's residence in Medmenham, Buckinghamshire (known as States House), while engaged in research on a book of my own, and for several weeks it almost appeared—at least in Liddell Hart's "command post"—that this momentous event in 1961 might trigger World War III! Friends back home could not understand the tone of my letters, which reflected what Liddell Hart was saying and writing to numerous friends. "However desirable it may seem politically that the West should make a stand on their rights in Berlin," he reasoned,

strategically it is the worst possible case for a stand—even more fatuous than the British Guarantee to Poland in 1939. Would any sane man stake his life on a game of cards where the opponent held all the trumps, and the only possible alternative to losing every trick in turn would be to commit suicide? Yet the policy and contingency planning of the Western powers amount to nothing better than that! Khrushchev "holds the trumps."⁸

In his chapter titled "The Resurrection of a Lost Reputation," Professor Mearsheimer correctly takes the Captain to task for putting words in the mouths of German Generals and manipulating history to demonstrate that "the roots of the great German victory [in 1940] could be traced back to him." This he

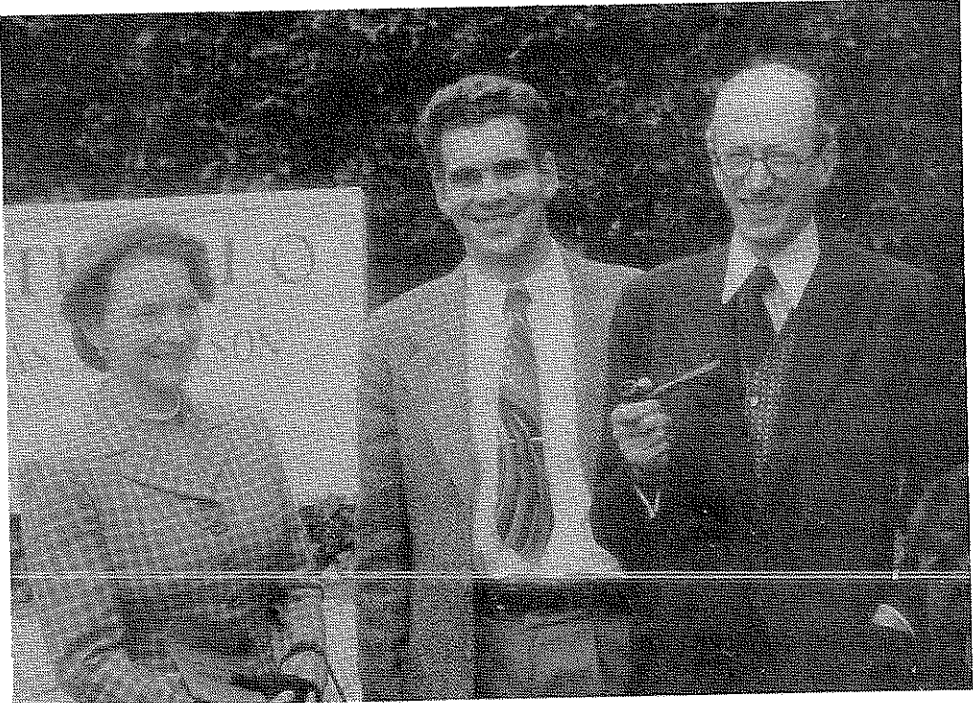
accomplished by asking leading questions in his talks with German generals during their captivity after the war, and by coaxing General Heinz Guderian and the Rommel family into admitting that both of these successful practitioners of blitzkrieg had been familiar with his theories and could therefore be described as his “pupils.” A similar quid pro quo “called for the Israelis to shower lavish praise on Liddell Hart and go out of their way to lend credence to the claim they were his disciples.” Mearsheimer even attributes Liddell Hart’s characteristic and generous efforts to befriend young scholars to a desire to “partially disarm” them. By thus rewriting history, tampering with German records, courting Israeli generals, and coopting young historians, Mearsheimer sums up, Liddell Hart did “very well for himself” and his tarnished reputation.

Professor Mearsheimer has raised some important issues and has demonstrated some neat detective work, but he makes no effort to understand the human dimension of his subject. The resulting portrait is a coarse chiaroscuro in black and white. Those familiar with the writings of Liddell Hart may have difficulty reconciling their impressions with some of the author’s assertions. To pose as problematic, for example, the possibility that “widespread exposure” of Liddell Hart’s theories could facilitate an opponent’s adopting his tactics and using them “against the British army” is naive; to assign motives without evidence can be unfair and misleading; and grudgingly to concede only that Liddell Hart “basically understood the blitzkrieg” is silly. Professor Mearsheimer reminds us that the Liddell Hart case “points up the fragility of history and the importance of being alert.” In some respects this is also true of his book.

As a historian who had the rare opportunity to spend considerable time at States House with Liddell Hart, my concern here is not to retouch Mearsheimer’s stark portrait so much as to present it in more natural colors. I was working on a book about a group of English military writers (including Liddell Hart) who flourished during the period between Waterloo and the fall of France in 1940. Liddell Hart insisted that I stay at his house, where I enjoyed unlimited access to his vast personal files. He included me in conversation whenever distinguished guests visited—which was nearly every weekend—and he opened the door to many contacts in London. If I was being “used” I was not aware of it, although when he read proofs to a book I was about to publish he did insist that I insert the word “deep” before “strategic penetration” in a part characterizing some past writings of his own. I could not understand why the point seemed so important, and when I retorted that this was not the way it was worded in his analysis of the Mongol campaigns, he replied that it should have been obvious from the context that it was what he had meant. I conceded the point, but wondered at the time why he was being such a stickler about it.⁹ It makes some sense to me now, but I do not accept the notion that he was mounting a deliberate campaign. It was evident from his manner that he honestly believed it.

I recall, too, being initially disappointed when he offered to come along the first time that I went to London to meet Major General J. F. C. Fuller, his partner in the quest for mechanization. It did occur to me at the time that he might have an inhibiting effect on my questions to Fuller, especially as regards Liddell Hart's own theories and influence, but if this was his motive it was worth it to see the two interact. Liddell Hart seemed deferential to the general in a way I never saw again.

Two years later I did spend a day alone with Fuller and asked him many questions about Liddell Hart. He declared that he would never cross swords over issues where Liddell Hart had studied the material and had thought it out. He expressed high regard for him as a historian, and basically he agreed with his theories except for the emphasis upon the defensive *as such*. (Fuller preferred to think of the offensive and defensive as sword and shield—they complemented each other and should not be separated.) Liddell Hart was a good journalist, in Fuller's view, but he always wrote in the same style and would not tailor his manner of presentation to the audience, "especially low-brow audiences." Fuller also observed that the Captain was too much a captive of his own catch-phrases—which he contended had often contributed to a misunderstanding of what he meant—and that he was disliked by many senior officers because he could be overbearing, "bumptious," and



Jay Luvaas (center), then a graduate student at Duke University, is shown with Sir Basil and Lady Liddell Hart at Monticello, Virginia, in 1952.

critical of individual performance on maneuvers. When I asked which of the two—Fuller or Liddell Hart—had wielded the most influence, he responded that Liddell Hart had probably enjoyed wider influence on a greater range of subjects while his own influence “may perhaps have been stronger on some of the generals.” He said that while Liddell Hart’s views over the years had been “very sound,” at times he had overreacted to situations “because of poor health at the moment.” This might help to explain some of Liddell Hart’s views in the years immediately preceding World War II, when he apparently suffered from a heart attack, followed by a collapse from exhaustion.

Normally I spent two days each week in London, and at States House I rarely saw Liddell Hart long enough during the day to engage in conversation except for meals, afternoon tea, and occasionally when he wanted to read something to me or needed me to type after his secretary had gone back to her brood, worn out and sometimes out of sorts. He could be very demanding, and he had a systematic routine that no one could interrupt. Evenings we generally talked until his wife—a saint if ever there was one—appeared about midnight to plead, “Basil, you *really* must come to bed.”

There were many on his “distribution list,” so copies of a letter to one friend might be sent to a dozen others, each with a covering note. He would also float drafts of articles to friends, hoping to get their reaction. Living in the country, this was about the only way he could engage with other minds except on weekends, when he entertained a wide assortment of guests: Israeli generals, French military theorists, American scholars, Commonwealth soldiers, English intellectuals—the range of his interests and the variety of his friends were remarkable. One week it would be Rebecca West; another might bring Alec Guinness, interested in the mannerisms of T. E. Lawrence, whom he was playing on stage. Often it was the widow of a British armored general, the teenaged son of his wife’s friend or of some deceased German general, an American graduate student, and once even one of my undergraduates. To all he devoted the same courtly attention.

One visitor was Major General F. W. von Mellenthin, a former General Staff officer on Rommel’s staff in North Africa. Since Liddell Hart rarely if ever deviated from his established schedule, it was my responsibility to entertain the general for several hours, which provided the opportunity to inquire whether Rommel had in fact ever mentioned Liddell Hart in his presence. “Oh yes,” he assured me, “many times. He had a good opinion of his writings. That is why I have come from South Africa to meet him.” This of course does not make Rommel a *pupil*, except perhaps in the eyes—and books—of Liddell Hart. But Rommel was familiar with his theories, and there is no doubt that other serious military readers found many of his ideas worth thinking about. My conversations with other guests, especially the Israeli Brigadier General Yigal Allon and the French General André Beaufre, made this clear.

Liddell Hart had a simplistic notion of what constitutes “influence.” Most of his books published in the last 40 years of his life carried a list of “Appreciations” by prominent statesmen and generals on the dust jacket attesting to his influence. When Liddell Hart met George S. Patton in 1944, shortly before the Third Army became operational, Patton related how he had once spent a leave studying the Atlanta campaign on the ground with Liddell Hart’s *Sherman* “in hand.” To the Captain this meant that Patton had been attracted to the Captain’s own strategy of indirect approach, and we find on the dust jacket of *Defence of the West* (1950) Patton testifying in 1944 that he had been “nourished on your books for twenty years, and gained much from your ideas.” But Patton may well have focused on Sherman’s thoughts and reactions rather than his application of a strategy of indirect approach, for he subsequently wrote that the paramount value of studying military history was “to learn how human beings react when exposed to the danger of wounds or death, and how high-ranking individuals react when submitted to the onerous responsibility of conducting war or the preparation of war.” He probably carried Liddell Hart’s *Sherman* on this occasion because it was the best operational history of the campaign available. Liddell Hart impressed Patton as being “very well read but badly balanced.”¹⁰

One day I found in his files a copy of one of General Douglas MacArthur’s reports to the Secretary of War when he was Chief of Staff in the early 1930s. Liddell Hart had underlined numerous passages and marked in the margins which of his own works a specific idea or phrase had come from. It was an old file, so this had nothing to do with rebuilding a “badly stained reputation.” To Liddell Hart these passages signified that MacArthur, who later demonstrated brilliant applications of the indirect approach in New Guinea and the Philippines, was familiar with his books. Certainly it suggests that the two were thinking along similar lines, with Liddell Hart—like many intelligent readers—underlining portions in the text that he happened to agree with. The passages could even have been the work of a staff officer desperate to find words to express his chief’s thoughts, although it is difficult to think of MacArthur ever being at a loss for words.

Years ago I attended a banquet honoring the retirement of one of my graduate teachers, Duke University history professor William T. Laprade. A parade of former students testified to something memorable the professor had said or done in class, and finally “Lap” himself marched to the podium. In his experience, he reflected, there were two kinds of students—those who remembered him for some trick he had employed to keep them awake in class, and the occasional individual who seized some point or idea, tucked it away in the recesses of his mind, and let it grow and mature until it emerged as his own concept. He might never know or acknowledge the source of this idea, but the teacher understands and can take satisfaction in the pupil’s growth.

Liddell Hart could never have settled for this second form of influence, the anonymous kind: he needed public recognition and acceptance. He was also temperamentally incapable of letting ideas make their own way in the marketplace. He refought World War I every time a new book on the subject appeared, and on occasion he even tried to discourage publication of some offending book. He opposed Richard Aldington's biography of T. E. Lawrence, for example, because he considered it unfair to Lawrence, a cherished friend and the subject of one of his most successful books. I do not recall why he urged Faber and Faber to reject Wintringham's *Story of Weapons and Tactics* in 1942, but it was probably because he did not want his publisher to promote a book in which Fuller was mentioned in the chapter on blitzkrieg and he was not. For Liddell Hart, who wrote for a living, was keenly aware not only of his place in history but of the need to market himself and his books, a point that we sometimes overlook.

Unlike Fuller, who professed not to worry about readers too dense to understand or appreciate what he had written, Liddell Hart insisted upon wholesale acceptance of his theories. He was almost incapable of admitting error. One night, when enjoying a brandy and some casual conversation before retiring, he inquired what I had found of interest in his files that day. I replied that there was one thing that I sought and had not yet found.

"And what's that?"

"The phrase 'I was wrong.'"

His rejoinder was predictable.

"You're quite wrong!"

Nor would he admit that some of his prewar ideas had gone astray in the operations in France and the Low Countries in 1940. When he wrote *The Defence of Britain* on the eve of the war he explained that "the situation was so delicate and the danger so imminent that it was vital to avoid saying anything which might have encouraged the Germans—who followed my writings closely—to attempt a stroke through the Ardennes!"¹¹

In conversation he might change his tone or his opinions, but once in print—never! My mentor at Duke University, Professor Theodore Ropp, spent several days at States House during the first summer I was there. The Captain had just completed a chapter for *The New Cambridge Modern History* titled "Armed Forces and the Art of War: 1830-70," and he asked Ropp to read the draft copy. Ropp questioned his treatment of the Prussian General Staff, which was outdated—a problem that may have reflected dependence upon his personal library. There followed a lively discussion, but the next morning the Captain fired off a revised version. Had Ropp made similar comments once the book was published, there would have been a protracted exchange of letters, for while the Captain grew increasingly critical of the generalship in World War I, when it came to defending a position once taken he displayed as much staying power as Sir Douglas Haig.

The Captain never liked to lose at *anything*—he was a fierce competitor. I once detected him surreptitiously keeping a ball in bounds with his foot while playing croquet—an “indirect approach” of sorts in a game that he used to play against tank generals with considerable skill. Every time he left States House for more than a day, he took with him all contracts with his publishers so that if any dispute should arise he would be prepared. His feelings about the First World War were so intense that he often became involved in protracted struggles with publishers, reviewers, and revisionists on problematic points. This tendency reflected not only his personal experiences but the obvious linkage between his historical writings and the strategy of indirect approach, for if his historical judgments came into question it might also imply that his theories were suspect as well. Throughout his life, Liddell Hart lived in the shadow of the Somme.

In seeking why armies since 1861 have often failed to heed the genuine lessons of history, I have come to believe that doctrine often inhibits the learning process. It can easily guide the search, provide assumptions, and shape the answers. A personal doctrine like the strategy of indirect approach can also act as blinders, and once Liddell Hart had worked out his theory he used it—like the Swiss military theorist Jomini a century before—as the basis for making judgments on past and present. War College graduates will understand Liddell Hart better if I label him a strong ESTJ on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator—governed by logic, living according to a definite formula, analytical, often critical, given to compiling lists (including one of friends in public life whose wives were liabilities, assets, or neither), and convinced that one can apply and adapt past experience to current problems.¹² Each of the twelve pockets in the suit he wore every day had an assigned mission.

He had also an unusual capacity for friendship, and his many friends doubtless bristle at the claim that Liddell Hart used generous hospitality to “partially disarm young scholars.” He never refused a request for assistance; he placed his library—and so far as I know, his papers—at the disposal of anyone interested in history. He liked young people and, what’s more, he even took us seriously! I recall one occasion when he received, unsolicited, an undergraduate honors thesis on World War I from a senior at Princeton. He devoted the next three or four days to reading it, consulting his files and books, and then composing a critique of about a dozen single-spaced foolscap pages—which is more than the young man’s professor may have provided. Asked why he devoted so much time to this matter when he was desperately behind schedule on *The Tanks*, he rejoined: “My dear boy! I did it for you, didn’t I?” He was referring, of course, to the pains he had taken to critique my master’s thesis, which he had asked me to send him. I, too, had received a dozen foolscap pages of comments and corrections. Come to think of it, everybody got about a dozen foolscap pages of detailed corrections and

suggestions (all duly reflecting his theories, of course). I doubt, however, if many of us made uncomfortable changes.

The Captain felt an obligation to help scholars and he enjoyed his role as “the Sage of Medmenham.” He also appreciated young people and the chance to help cultivate a budding intellect. Who else would write a ten-page letter to a stepdaughter explaining why her coming Confirmation would be one of the most significant events in her life—and this from the equivalent of an 18th-century rationalist! He may well have had it in the back of his mind that some of his young protégés would one day rush to his defense, but this is assuming a great deal. It assumes, for one thing, that he believed that he needed it!

I suspect that he was motivated largely by the same impulse that caused him, during World War II, to spend countless hours trying to help the army resolve cases where individuals had not found the right niche for their skills and personalities. He enjoyed helping others. The only occasion when he really lost patience with me was when I first visited Oxford in August 1961. It was toward the end of my stay, and I was practically out of funds. When I returned to States House, there was the usual accounting—my impressions (which, as a Cambridge man, he took pleasure in correcting), the bookstores I had visited, what busses I had taken, etc. When I confessed that I had been forced to hitchhike he became genuinely upset. “My dear boy,” he protested, “how could you be so stupid? Why didn’t you ask for money?” I gave him the only answer he could comprehend.

“To do that,” I explained, “would have required a direct approach.” He leaned back in his chair, took several puffs on his pipe, smiled triumphantly, and sputtered, “Quite! Quite. Yes quite.”

That evening, at least, I thought of myself as his pupil.

NOTES

1. F.S.R. stands for Field Service Regulations.
2. Liddell Hart, *Paris or the Future of War* (London: Kegan Paul, Trubner and Co., 1925), p. 88.
3. Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 132; “Analysis of Cavalry Operations in the American Civil War, with Special Reference to Raids on Communications,” in Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 244.
4. Richard M. Swain, “B. H. Liddell Hart: Theorist for the 21st Century,” *Advanced Operational Studies, School for Advanced Military Studies, US Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kans.*, 1986, pp. 124-25.
5. US Department of the Army, *Operations, Field Manual 100-5* (Washington: GPO, 1986), p. 109.
6. *The Liddell Hart Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1965-66), II, 168-69.
7. Liddell Hart, *The Defence of Britain* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 105.
8. Memorandum, July 1961. Liddell Hart Archives.
9. The offending passage still stands in Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War*, p. 223.
10. William T. Sherman, *From Atlanta to the Sea*, edited and introduced by B. H. Liddell Hart (London: Folio Society, 1961), pp. 15-16; Martin Blumenson, ed., *The Patton Papers, Vol. 2: 1940-45* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 463, 751.
11. Liddell Hart, “Comments on E. M. Earle, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy*, Chapter 15, ‘Meginot and Liddell Hart,’” p. 6. Liddell Hart Archives.
12. Isabel Briggs Myers, *Introduction to Type* (3d ed.; Palo Alto, Calif.: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1985), p. 9.