Britannia Rules the Waves

By William Anthony Hay

Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). 544 pp., $35.00.

Strategy addresses the general question of aligning military means with political ends, but it operates in specific contexts. Institutions, culture, and geography in the fullest sense inform national approaches to war that historical experience shapes further. Prussia, for example, compensated for its lack of defensible frontiers to check hostile neighbors and natural resources with formidable institutions to sustain its large army and sophisticated doctrines of maneuver warfare to keep wars short. Austria, a multinational empire whose expansive territories presented very different operational environments, relied on a defensive strategy backed by fortresses and interior communication lines along with diplomacy. Industrial capacity later enabled the United States, another continental power, to develop a way of war that combined maneuver with concentrated firepower and mass to devastating effect. Each strategy leveraged assets to compensate for liabilities.

Britain developed its own way of war as an insular commercial state dependent on global trade. Sir Julian Corbett made explicit Karl von Clausewitz's implication that strategy works as "a unique national construct, where 'strategical' principles meet specific contexts." A lawyer who lacked military or naval experience, Corbett looked beyond the standard preoccupation with tactics and battle of his day by taking Clausewitz's theory from its Central European context and posing the question of how a liberal, mercantile state without a large army could sustain a favorable European balance of power and deter conflict. The answer from historical precedent was a limited maritime strategy using combined operations by army and navy to impose economic pressure and thereby secure political aims. Corbett's approach integrating theory with practice offered a guide for British strategy in his own day that provides valuable insight on contemporary strategic challenges.

The revival of great power rivalry and failed wars in the greater Middle East make strategy an important subject. Military historian Hew Strachan argued persuasively that elevating operational thinking to strategy's place denied even successful campaigns the focus and direction required to translate them into political outcomes. Corbett, in Strachan's words, as "the real originator of a distinctly British approach to strategy" offers a valuable way to engage the subject. Andrew Lambert's *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the*

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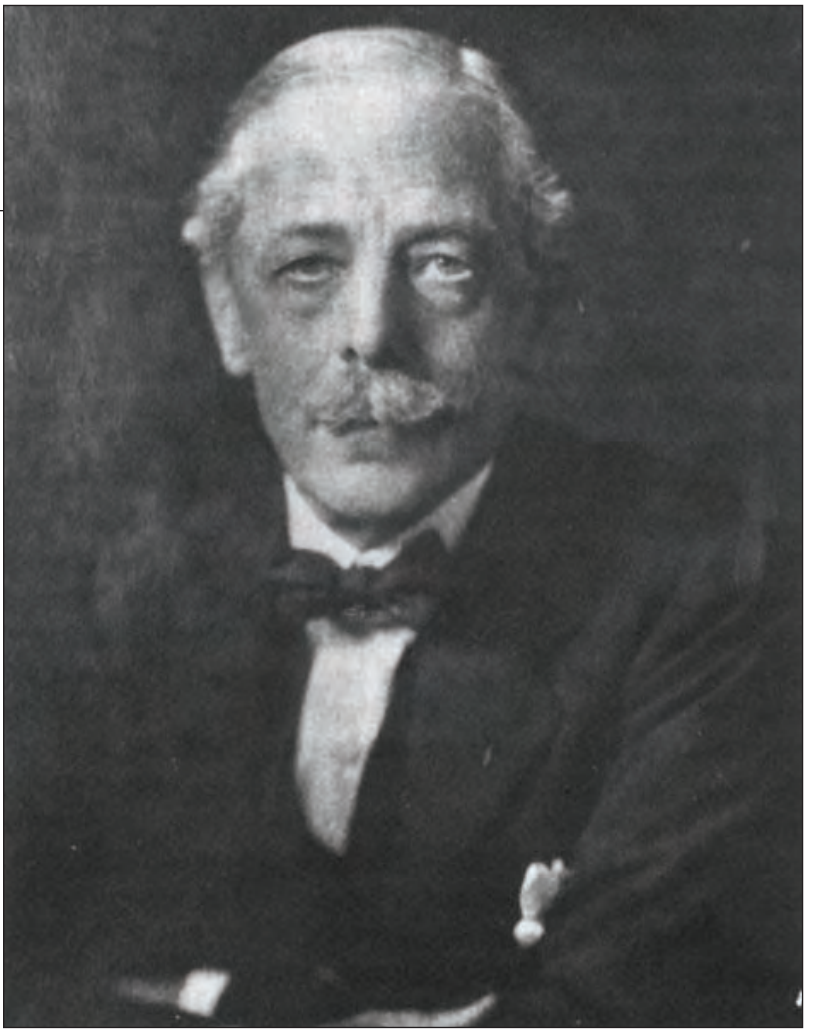

Battle for a National Strategy introduces his subject's approach by combining biography and the history of ideas with the fateful reassessment of national strategy between 1900 and 1914. Deftly sketching Corbett's formative influences before tracing the development of his work and showing how it shaped key debates before 1914, Lambert captures Corbett's importance not only for understanding British strategy, but also the Liberal Britain that World War I swept away.

Corbett epitomized a dominant liberal outlook that faced growing challenges over his life. Lord Macaulay captured its ethos in describing England's history as the inexorable story of progress, moral and material. Industrialization and laissez-faire economics brought prosperity while political reforms averted social conflicts that sparked revolutions in continental Europe. Classical antiquity set powerful examples of public virtue and free inquiry, but Victorian liberals welcomed scientific innovation and looked to the future rather than triumphs in the past. Stadial theories from the Scottish Enlightenment taught them that commercial society provided the highest level of civilization. London epitomized the result as the financial center and capital of a global maritime empire that underwrote the Pax Britannica which made it all possible. It was the best of all possible worlds.

Corbett grew up in a tight family circle where his father's new wealth as an architect-turned-developer secured financial independence and eased the transition to gentility. Lambert's term "middle class" describes England's affluent high bourgeoise with an ethos distinct from either landed gentry and nobility or the much larger working class. Education at Marlborough College, a relatively new public school, sharpened Corbett's intellect while

Image: Photo of Sir Julian Corbett. Wikimedia Commons.

fostering a vocation of national service. Purposefulness, high culture, and romanticism, with patriotism virtually a religion, defined his mature outlook as an English gentleman. Disliking Oxford's conservative politics and Tory High Churchmanship, his father sent Corbett to Cambridge where he read law, which taught reasoned argument and precise use of evidence. He also made contacts that brought him into the heart of the British establishment.

Travel furthered his education with a trip to India providing a journey through empire with the voyage there as informative as what he saw in the subcontinent. Corbett praised the magnificence of sites like the Taj Mahal while reporting British suppression of the earlier Indian Mutiny as a victory of civilization and valor over barbaric savagery. No militarist, he worried that transferring the seat of government from the port city of Calcutta would change commercial rule from the margins into "a new Mughal Empire of soldiers and emperors." Corbett also later feared a British settler society on a continental scale would turn inward from the sea and lose touch with its roots. The maritime route to India underlined the global nature of British power with distant territories linked by steamship and undersea cables. Corbett's patriotism encompassed a "Greater Britain" of empire the liberal historian J.R. Seeley likened to a "world-Venice, with the sea for streets."

Corbett gave up legal practice after 1882. Too reticent a personality to stand out in parliament despite his strong intellect, he engaged pressing current issues as a writer in efforts, including novels and plays, that developed his style and descriptive powers. Lambert calls his fiction "better suited to the elite circles in which he moved than the mass audiences that sustained the genre," while history led Corbett to the maritime subjects that became a vocation. A popular biography of George Monck, the general turned naval commander who effected Charles II's restoration in 1660, engaged sources critically and delved into its subject's own reading on military theory. Corbett turned next to Sir Francis Drake, integrating current ideas on naval strategy into a biography that recognized how trade, financial credit, and politics together shaped sea power. Critical reviews forced him to raise his game by dropping literary flourishes and deploying evidence more effectively. History's recent transformation from a literary genre to a profession based in universities had set new standards for research and critical source analysis that appealed to his legal training. Applying them turned Corbett from a popularizer into a recognized naval historian as the subject drew renewed popular attention.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American sea officer and Naval War College professor, encouraged that interest by making the case for strategic history in *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783* (1890). A later volume continued the story through the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Mahan used campaigns to draw broader conclusions about how naval victories shaped outcomes on land. Theories of land warfare,

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especially by Antoine-Henri Jomini, who had been on curriculum of the U.S. Military Academy where Mahan's father taught, provided a starting point emphasizing fleet actions and decisive battles in terms that explained naval operations to soldiers and civilians alike. He followed a deductive approach that started with a hypothesis and then tested it against relevant examples. Highlighting the intersection of maritime commerce and a strong navy, Mahan made the case for them to fellow Americans. Britain may have been his model for a sea power, but he adapted the template to the United States and by extension other continental states like Germany and Russia where his work found an eager audience. Mahan's theoretical innovations addressed pressing strategic questions by combining points made by others to greater cumulative effect. He also set an intellectual challenge for Corbett who learned from Mahan and treated the American as a foil for his own efforts.

Corbett's ties with veteran naval officers who wrote history drew him into their world as they shared practical experience. He joined the Naval Records Society, established in 1893 to publish historical documents in aid of professional development. Involved with its management, Corbett edited volumes that honed his use of sources and shaped his historical writing. Unlike serving officers preoccupied with tactics and battle, he considered the conduct of war an extension of politics rather than a separate activity. It led him to use political, diplomatic, and military history as context for analysis grounded in strategic theory that established him as a public intellectual. Lecturing to the Royal Navy War Course from 1902 and then advising the Admiralty challenged him to explain how Britain had waged war to guide future planning.

As a civilian, Corbett sought to broaden naval officers' perspectives beyond seamanship and tactics to the higher direction of war. History provided case studies explaining strategy and delivering lessons that officers could apply to current military problems. The work served the advisory functions of planning staff in developing options as well as providing advanced professional military education. Lecturing pushed Corbett to engage a cannon of strategic writing mostly by French and Germans that emphasized short, decisive land campaigns and downplayed both politics and the role both coalition diplomacy and logistics had in Britain's experience. He saw how treating strategy as the purview of commanders in chief and generals transformed it into a kind of scaled up tactics that risked conflating battlefield success with diplomatic outcomes at the expense of a wider view.

Rather than fixed maxims, which as a lawyer he disparaged, Corbett offered an analytical framework to guide thinking and placed strategy in context. Circumstances that varied for each country defined the problems to address. Colmar von der Goltz, a more recent German military theorist, noted that anyone writing on strategy "ought not in his theory to neglect the point of view of his own people." Corbett accordingly turned the British Empire's strategic experience into a usable doctrine.

His British way of war applied to continental struggles a limited maritime strategy using economic warfare and smaller military forces to support allies. He defined maritime strategy as the principles governing war when the sea is a factor. Naval strategy then determined fleet movements once maritime strategy had decided its actions in relation to land forces. Controlling sea communications protected, if not expanded, Britain's trade while denying adversaries resources and wealth. The resulting financial strength could sustain protracted conflicts that pushed rivals to their limits. Continental states with large armies and vulnerable frontiers needed quick success through decisive victories to avoid attritional war. Britain enjoyed flexibility in using combined operations by naval and military forces against vulnerable points of its own choice. Peripheral attacks diverted the enemy from other efforts or simply kept them off balance and unable to concentrate their own force. Besides compelling adversaries to seek terms, Corbett's strategy deterred rivals by raising the cost of aggression. It leveraged Britain's advantages as an insular state with a dominant navy and strong public finances to wage the kind of war that favored its strengths instead of one that pressed its vulnerabilities.

Image: Adriaen van Diest's The Battle of Lowestoft, 3 June 1665: Engagement between the English and Dutch Fleets. *Circa 1670s. Wikimedia Commons.*

The qualifier "limited" covered both ends and means. Britain had the limited aim of preserving a European balance of power and protecting specific interests such as keeping the Low Countries out of hostile control. Corbett's maritime strategy made limited demands short of mass conscript army or a costly state designed to sustain war. Enlightenment absolutism may have been an historical curiosity by the late 1800s, but Corbett saw conscription and an expanded bureaucracy as incompatible with a liberal political order. Competing with continental states on their terms would be a defeat itself given the changes it would require, but the approach Corbett prescribed sought to avoid that choice by offering a way to sustain even unlimited conflicts at manageable cost.

Lambert traces the concept's development through Corbett's writing. *England in the Mediterranean: A Study of the Rise and Influence of British Power within the Straits, 1603-1713* showed how commanding trade routes with bases like Gibraltar won control over commerce that financed the navy and constrained the options of rival land powers. Corbett linked English emergence in the Mediterranean with Russia's rise as the two great events of seventeenth-century history. He presented maritime strategy as part of a larger art of war English statesmen mastered. Revealingly subtitled *A Study in Combined Strategy*, Corbett's *England in the Seven Years War* presented a conflict mainly treated in its separate theaters as a complete whole. Early missteps gave France the initiative to seize the Mediterranean base of Minorca while campaigning successfully in Germany, but an imperial maritime strategy turned the tide. Prussia and a British financed army in Germany pinned the French down on the continent while coastal raids and a Canadian offensive pushed them to counter at the cost of losing their fleet. Sea control not only preceded battle, but provoked it by seizing France's colonies and trade. Defeats brought the French to terms that confirmed Britain's maritime ascendancy.

Historians and naval officers praised Corbett's account of the Seven Years War which still holds up as effective scholarship. He

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distilled historical lessons into principles and linked them with more recent conflicts in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and the "Green Pamphlet" defining concepts for the war course. Naval staff officers, Corbett noted, had the responsibility to carry on where diplomacy left off by giving ministers options to secure aims. They accordingly needed conceptual tools and examples to articulate maritime strategy and hold their own in disputes with soldiers and civilians. He provided them in his lectures and historical studies, including *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (1910), which applied limited maritime strategy to the decidedly unlimited struggle with Napoleon. Nelson's famous victory secured unchallenged command of sea routes even as Britain fought alone for a counter-stroke through economic blockade, a land campaign in Iberia, and eventually military intervention with a European coalition. Growing involvement with current policy debates made *Trafalgar* Corbett's last historical book and left his project tracing Britain's strategic experience incomplete.

Changes in the late-nineteenth-century strategic environment prompted military reforms and a reassessment of British foreign policy. Benjamin Disraeli called the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 "the German revolution, a greater political event than the French," as it swept away every diplomatic tradition in Europe, but the consequences only came gradually into view. France and Russia, with their interests outside Europe, remained Britain's likely adversaries even as the United States began its transition from wealth to power. The Naval Defense Act of 1889 formalized the two-power standard by requiring the Royal Naval to maintain battleship numbers to match the next two largest navies. It began a lavish rise in naval spending that prompted Gladstone to resign as prime minister in 1894 over the financial commitment at what he considered the taxpayer's detriment. The Franco-Russian alliance combined the naval force of Britain's likely foes when it lacked firm partners. Splendid isolation looked increasingly less attractive.

The Boer War highlighted Britain's gaping military shortcomings and diplomatic isolation. Striking defeats in a conflict expected to last only a few weeks revealed poor planning and even worse leadership. Britain had dispatched the largest army it had ever sent abroad to South Africa where a guerilla war persisted until May 1902. A costly and controversial victory prompted an inquiry to improve the army's effectiveness. It also renewed military interest in continental examples of force structure and strategy. Arthur James Balfour, the Conservative prime minister, introduced a Committee of Imperial Defense and reshaped military administration in other ways. Foreign policy shifted from isolation. Besides a regional alliance with Japan covering the Far East and continued rapprochement with the United States, Britain secured an entente cordiale with France in 1904.

Support for the Boers, including provocative statements by Kaiser Wilhelm, the tempestuous grandson of Queen Victoria, altered the hitherto chummy tone of

Anglo-German relations while Continental Europe became more polarized between rival alliances. Bismarck had constructed alliances to deny the French support while minimizing the risk of conflict in Central Europe. But tensions between Russia and Austria, Berlin's closest partner whose support had implications for German domestic politics, over the Balkans derailed his diplomatic efforts. When his successors foolishly allowed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia to lapse, the French seized their chance. Partnership with St. Petersburg split Europe into rival alliance blocs. Germany also increasingly antagonized Britain by its naval expansion program and overtures to Turkey that marked a forward policy in the Middle East. It became a new rival and model for military best practice among soldiers rethinking strategy.

Corbett's disdain for Imperial Germany's militaristic culture reflected a wider trend in Britain even as he learned from a range of its military thinkers. "Suspicion and readiness to take offense," he told a friend in 1901, "is the mark of every middle class German you meet travelling and envy the note of all their journalism." Militarism and tolerance of petty restraints, along with suspicion and envy, to him characterized savages. Indeed, Corbett saw "Germans as the most savage of recently civilized people" and drew an unfavorable parallel between Prussians and Zulus or Masai. The bellicosity of writers like Goltz and Heinrich von Treitschke he read as a strategic analyst sharpened concerns about Germany's threat to peace and liberal order that went beyond chauvinist prejudice or comfortable assumptions of British superiority.

Image: Anton von Werner's The proclamation of the German Empire. *1885. Wikimedia Commons.*

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Britain underwent its own polarization in the decades before 1914. Lambert highlights tensions between Corbett's progressive commitments as a proponent of liberal commercial society and the social conservatism behind support for conscription and a continental military commitment, but both positions faced challenges from working-class enfranchisement and other social changes. Walter Bagehot, a key mid-Victorian liberal figure who lauded the bourgeoise ethos of parliamentary government in *The English Constitution*, had feared the effects of enfranchising working-class men and the growing influence of mass culture. Britain seemed in decline. An "Age of Decadence," in Simon Heffer's evocative description, followed midcentury high-mindedness and the competitive spirit behind the country's eighteenth-century rise. Falling agricultural incomes during the long depression from the 1870s had weakened the aristocracy and landed gentry while fueling unrest in Ireland. Irish Home Rule threatened the United Kingdom's political integrity. Trade union militancy also grew as workers struggled with employers for a greater share of earnings. An aggressive suffragette movement forced its demands through civil disobedience and other kinds of direct action.

Conservatives accordingly sought to uphold established hierarchies under threat even when doing so involved challenging parliamentary democracy and defying lawful authority. Military conscription, in their eyes, not only provided manpower to match rival powers but also promoted social discipline. Victorian liberalism, despite an election victory in 1906, seemed besieged from left and right with the latter increasingly willing to challenge the authority of parliamentary government and back soldiers against elected politicians. Conflict over the prospect of ministers calling the army to enforce Irish Home Rule anticipated wartime problems in civil-military relations and paralleled intransigence over strategy.

Corbett worked alongside Sir John Fisher and other reformers who adapted maritime strategy to new technology and opposed army leaders anticipating a European war fighting alongside France. He helped transform Fishers' thinking into strategic doctrine and defended his program for naval modernization. With their combination of guns, armor, and speed, ships like ***HMS*** Dreadnought rendered older battleships out of date and forced rivals to catch up in a building race where Britain possessed the lead. They served a limited deterrent strategy by raising the cost of naval war and forcing the enemy to seek battle or yield sea control. Fisher's deployment of the fleet to the North Sea targeted Germany by cutting maritime communications. Blockade raised legal questions Corbett understood and he framed arguments to uphold it without alienating neutral powers including the United States. As with his historical and strategic writing, they gave serving officers intellectual tools against critics. Corbett's efforts also linked economic power and diplomacy with national strategy. He updated old practice for new circumstances.

Henry Herbert Asquith's government, however, did not impose policy at the cabinet level to bring the services together behind a coherent strategy. Doing so would have brought a clash with soldiers backed in parliament and the press while hurting efforts to limit expenditure. Naval expansion still contributed to a political clash over taxation in 1909 that brought a constitutional crisis resolved by curbing the House of Lords' veto on legislation. Britain's army and navy pursued divergent strategies which meant neither had the means to pursue its preferred approach. Nor did they coordinate planning to enable joint efforts. Lambert describes Fischer's plan to deploy the fleet in the Baltic and cut vital German access to Swedish iron ore as a more realistic option than sending a non-existent land army to aid the French in Europe. The threat had deterred Germany during the 1905 Moroccan Crisis, but it required an amphibious army supporting the fleet which was sent instead to fight alongside France in 1914.

Britain's "controlling aim," Corbett had told the Naval War Course in 1907, was to avoid "being forced to fight for our ends where our power was weakest." Decisions in 1914 took exactly the step he warned against. The result, Lambert argues, "cost a million lives, shattered the British economy, polarized British politics, wrecking a Liberal party that stumbled into a continental war." Treating the Western Front as World War I's decisive theater demoted other areas to sideshows and made a limited maritime strategy with peripheral operations irrelevant. Having anticipated the danger, Corbett worked to draw lessons as an advisor and official historian of naval operations. The volumes he wrote explained errors while making a case for maritime strategy as an alternative.

Image: Picture of the HMS Dreadnought. *1907. Wikimedia Commons.*

For example, the Dardanelles Campaign launched against Constantinople in 1915 broke with maritime strategy's principles by trying to force the Turkish Straits with naval force alone. Subsequently, landing troops at Gallipoli repeated the stalemate on the Western Front on a narrower scale. The lesson was that combined operations using the mobility sea control circumvents defenses and cuts into the enemy rear, while a static war of attrition squandered that advantage at great cost.

Ill-health and strain ended Corbett's career in 1922 with much left undone including the last volumes of the official history. He had also defended the maritime belligerent legal rights on which British strategy depended against the United States and promoted naval history as an academic field. Much of Corbett's argument for a British way of war, Lambert writes, had to be uncovered by others. His friend Herbert Richmond influenced Basil Liddell Hart, the soldier and journalist who later popularized the concept, but without the depth and literary force to make it stick. Corbett's ideas became by default the system Britain followed during World War II. Cold War imperatives revived the continental commitment and a preoccupation with total war that set different priorities, but since 1989 the world formed by globalization looks a lot more like the one in which Corbett wrote than its immediate predecessor.

Although Corbett framed a strategy for Edwardian Britain, Lambert notes the relevance of his thinking to the current Western security partnership that "favors deterrence over war, dominates the maritime domain, and shows little interest in mobilizing large conscript armies." He also stresses Corbett's insistence that strategy serves the wider national interest over service priorities and be directed by statesmen advised by experts rather than military professionals. The United States, while a continental state, has been a naval hegemon since 1945 and depends on sea control to operate globally. Frequently raised parallels between China and Wilhelmine Germany place America in Britain's position before 1914, highlighting the relevance of maritime strategy. Options for a European challenge then suggest ways of responding to its Asian counterpart today.

The key lessons from Lambert's fine study, however, lie in Corbett's approach to considering strategic problems. Emphasizing the higher levels of war prevents conflating strategy with military operations and focuses attention on political considerations. Neither the conduct of war nor its objectives can be separated from politics; avoiding the trap of trying to do so requires a wider view in matching available means to realistic aims. Processing strategic experience using historical examples prevents relying upon rote maxims that become an intellectual cage limiting thought. These points are less about a particular national strategy than how to think usefully about strategic problems. Applying them would be a good step towards the reassessment the United States needs after thrashing about during the past several decades. □