The Role of Warfare and Strategy in *The Lord of the Rings*

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After a brief analysis of the medieval nature of the arms, armor, and troops in the War of the Ring, examines the strategic advantages and disadvantages of both sides. Postulates Sauron's "poverty of imagination" as a fatal flaw. The realistic depiction of military strategy gives *The Lord of the Rings* a feeling of "true" history.

**Additional Keywords**
The subtitle of *The Lord of the Rings* is "The War of the Ring." It is a little curious then that so far no one has (to my knowledge) examined the role that warfare, and especially military strategy, plays in the development of the story. The vividness and realism with which Tolkien conceived his work apply equally to these matters which are in a very real sense part of the essence of the book itself.

The weapons used and the tactics of war practiced at the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth are almost completely medieval in nature. The offensive weapon par excellence is the sword, of which there are various types, from the short dagger-like sword favored by the hobbits to the curved scimitars of the men of the south (III, p.114) and the great swords used by Aragon and other warriors, which, we may presume, were usually two-edged swords used for swinging rather than stabbing. Other offensive weapons are spears, bows and arrows, battle-axes (used mostly by dwarves and men from the east (I, p.283; III, p.121)) and maces. [Ivor Rogers pointed out that there is no evidence that the weapons are longbows; rather, they are short bows drawn to the chest or chin and used by horsemen.]

For siege operations there are catapults which hurl rocks, some of which are incendiary, although we are not told how they burn (III, p.96). The implication is that it is through black magic, although it seems that Sauron has some kind of explosive, since the Deeping Wall of Helm's Deep (II, p.142) and the walls of the Pelennor (III, p.91) are breached by blasting. There are siege towers (III, p.98) and also a great ram, one hundred feet long with a metal head, used for breaking down the gate of Minas Tirith (III, p.102).

For personal defense there are hauberks made of chain mail (I, p.290) and ring armor (I, p.293) and helmets which seem to be of leather with steel or iron rings (II, p.127). Some helmets have noseguards; at least the ones used by orcs do (III, p.189). There are also shields, probably of leather or wood, round in shape (II, p.127). For defense of cities there are walls and moats. Minas Tirith is a good example of a heavily fortified city with seven defensive walls (III, p.23).

For battle Sauron relies mainly on large numbers of heavy infantry made up mostly of orcs, and supplemented by men from the south, the Haradrim (III, p.73), and Easterlings (III, p.95). He has few horsemen (III, p.72), although he does have war elephants which have a devastating effect in the siege of Minas Tirith (III, p.101). In this respect his opponents are much better prepared than Sauron because they have a great many knights, especially the Riders of Rohan. Battlefield tactics seem to vary from primitive to rather sophisticated methods. The knights serve mainly as shock troops, and one of their tactics is, in good medieval style, a wild charge at the enemy infantry, as, for example, when the Riders of Rohan attack the besiegers of Minas Morgul (III, p.112). [Ivor Rogers remarked among the Riders there are also horse archers. The tactics used in attacking the orcs carrying the hobbits to Saruman are typically those of mounted bowmen. They surround the orcs and keep firing arrows at them until their formation is so weakened that it can be broken and the orcs are killed with swords and spears (III, Ch.1). The cavalry of Condor seem to be well trained and disciplined too, when they sally forth to attack the besiegers and form a screen to protect the troops retreating from the river defenses (II, p.94). The siege tactics of Sauron's infantry are well developed too (III, Ch.4).

As far as communications go, Sauron has definite advantages over his opponents, who are limited to messengers on foot or horseback. Once the Nazgûl take to riding on great birds, Sauron has the makings of a rudimentary air force. It is, of course, limited mainly to reconnaissance. He also has a primitive form of television available in the palantíri, although he fails to make good use of the one belonging to Saruman at a critical moment (II, p.199).

It is in matters of grand strategy that we see the closest connection between the main themes of *The Lord of the Rings* and the development of the story. The strategy adopted by Sauron is determined by his long-range goal—namely, the complete conquest and domination of Middle-earth—by the geography of the area to be conquered, and the nature of his opponents. He has a number of strategic advantages. First, he has in Mordor a practically impregnable base of operations. Regardless of the geographical improbability of such a land being formed naturally, the fact remains that the mountains surrounding Mordor provide superb protection on all sides except the east, where Sauron has taken care to protect himself by making allies of the men who live in that region. All the other entrances are few and narrow, and have been heavily fortified. Although they are guarded, their fortifications have led Sauron to believe that he need not concern himself with them further, and he therefore fails to take proper precautions against infiltration. Next, Sauron has had the advantage of long preparation for war, carried on for the most part in secret. He also has vast numbers of troops, both orcs and men. He may be presumed also to have large stocks of

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1 Page references are to the Houghton-Mifflin edition, Boston, 1954. I = *The Fellowship of the Ring*; II = *The Two Towers*; III = *The Return of the King*.
2 One in particular is mentioned: the great black mace used by the Lord of the Nazgûl (III, p.115).
5 It may be questioned whether the easterners are really allies. Boromir says that Sauron has allied himself with them (I, p.258), but Tolkien later says that the lands to the east are tributaries to Mordor providing booty and slaves (III, p.201). Some of the troops serve only under duress (p.208).
6 Sauron has had at least 49 years to plan his conquest, since we know that at the end of *The Hobbit* Bilbo was 52 years old and *The Lord of the Rings* begins on his one hundred and eleventh birthday.
7 It is hard to estimate the total number of troops, but the impression given is that Sauron has many more than his opponents. Tolkien speaks variously of "an endless steam" of orcs leaving Minas Morgul (III, p.315) of which the one seen by Frodo and Sam "was but one and not the greatest of the hosts"
of matériel stored in Mordor (III, p. 201), plus an active arms industry continually producing new war supplies.

The geography of Middle-earth imposes on Sauron certain definite possibilities of action, for in land warfare terrain is always a factor in determining a course of action.  In order to conquer Middle-earth Sauron must conquer the lands directly to the north and west of Mordor: Gondor and Rohan to the west; the lands of the elves, dwarves, and men to the north; and Eriador, where the hobbits live, in the northwest. The southern lands are allied with him (at least temporarily) and he need not take them into consideration. To the north Mirkwood has long been under his control with the exception of the places where the Wood Elves live. The elves of Lórien, southwest of Mirkwood, although

that Mordor now sent forth" (p. 316), and later of "great forces... flowing in from the East" (III, p. 94) and "battalions of Orcs of the Eye and countless companies of men..." (p. 95). In Mordor Frodo and Sam see "as far as their eyes could reach, along the skirts of the Morgai and away southward, there were camps, some of tents, some ordered like small towns" (III, p. 200). More precise figures are given for the forces opposing Sauron. Before the siege of Minas Tirith begins somewhat less than 3000 reinforcements of men allied to Gondor arrive in the city (III, p. 44). There are thousands of knights who ride from Rohan to Minas Tirith (III, p. 67), and in the last battle about 6000 infantry and 1000 knights attack Mordor, with 3000 riders of Rohan remaining in Anórien to hold off the remaining forces of Mordor that have not been destroyed (III, p.158).

The following quote illustrates this point well: "This state of mind in which the soldier derives his conception of the strategic scene is brought about primarily by the matter of geography. Prominent and direct in its effect is the fundamental fact of terrain. 'Terrain' as a word does not have deep meaning to the non-soldier, but to the soldier it is everything. It is the fixed field within which he operates. It is the limitation within which he must function. It is the opponent that he must always face no matter who may be his enemy. It is the fact of terrain that establishes the field within which the soldier's professional intellect must generate its plans" (J.C.Wylie, Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control [New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1967]), p. 49.

bitter enemies of Sauron, are strangely passive in the conflict, and limit themselves to giving aid and comfort to the Fellowship of the Ring (Bk. 2, Ch. 6-8). It is possible that their numbers are simply too limited to permit them to do more than defend their land against attack. Thus although Sauron has certain advantages in the north, there are serious limitations to his freedom of action there. It provides little opportunity for the conquest of Eriador because of the barrier imposed by the Misty Mountains; a barrier is not necessarily a barrier to military operations, as witness Napoleon's crossing of the Alps to invade Italy in the campaign of 1800, but the Misty Mountains seem to be truly formidable. There are passes, but they are extremely rugged and narrow, as is seen when Frodo and his companions try to cross but are driven back by storms (Bk. 2, Ch. 13). Against even a small force of defenders an army might find it impossible to cross. Sauron might try to do what Frodo and the Fellowship did and attempt to pass through the mines of Moria, which are already controlled by orcs. Here again, however, the narrowness of the tunnels would be likely to prevent the passage of many troops, and with a little ingenuity the tunnels could be permanently blocked by Sauron's enemies.

Another possibility would be a passage to the north of the mountains where there are no disadvantages in such a move. Sauron's forces would be stretched out on long lines of communications far from their base and could be more easily attacked. Also, they would necessarily pass through the cold and barren wasteland of the north before being able to turn south into Eriador. In such a way the weight of numbers would be thrown off in the south and have to fight on inferior ground. There are indications that Sauron did attempt to force a passage through the north but was held back by the defense presented by the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain and the men of Dale.9

Another course of action would be to cross the Anduin to the south of Minas Tirith and go around the mountains of Gondor. It might even be possible to undertake an amphibious operation with the aid of the corsairs of Umbar. But Sauron does not think in this fashion. As Napoleon once remarked, "Conditions of the ground should not alone decide the organization for combat, which should be determined from consideration of all circumstances." Sauron's chief opponents are to the west in Gondor and in Rohan, and unless their military forces are destroyed, he will never be able to become absolute master of Middle-earth. Also it is to the west that the remaining passage into Eriador is found through the Gap of Rohan, controlled by the men of Rohan. Once his armies are past the Gap, no further natural barriers exist to block him.

Therefore Sauron has three immediate goals. First, he must try to prevent his enemies from uniting so that he may conquer each one individually with his superior forces. The secrecy of his preparations has been an aid in this scheme, for few in Middle-earth knew anything about the return of Sauron to Mordor or his preparations when he cut off their base and have to fight on inferior ground. There are indications that Sauron did attempt to force a passage through the north but was held back by the defense presented by the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain and the men of Dale.9

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In this last goal, he has had a brilliant success in the person of Saruman the White to whom he has promised a share in the dominion of Middle-earth (I, p. 272). The Tower of Orthanc is the key to the Gap of Rohan, and by winning Saruman to his side Sauron has a strong hand in the important city. The Riders of Rohan. Saruman has a formidable force of orcs under his direct command, and even if he cannot conquer Rohan single-handed, at least he can prevent the cavalry of Rohan from going to fight in Gondor.10 Once Gondor has fallen, Sauron's army can

Tolkien mentions this only briefly in Appendix A, but it seems to have been a serious threat since he says, "Go it was that when the War came at last the main assault was turned southwards: yet even with his far-stretched right hand Sauron might have done great evil in the North, if King Dain and King Brand had not stood in his path" (III, p. 359). Gandalf remarked, "...and a war was fought far away. We know not what may have happened, far beyond the borders of our own land. With the thought of the great Battle of the Pelennor, do not forget the battles in the Dale and the valour of Durin's folk."11 From Napoleon's "Military Maxims" in Thomas R. Phillips, ed. The Roots of Strategy: A Collection of Military Classics (Harrington, Pa., Military Service Publishing Co., 1940), p. 437.

11 "Even reckoned as a lord and captain Saruman has grown very strong. He threatens the Men of Rohan and draws off their help from Minas Tirith, even as the main blow is approaching from the East" (III, p. 100).
march to the aid of Orthanc (or to conquer it, since Saruman has proved to be a treacherous ally). When this task has been accomplished, no further effective military forces would remain to prevent the complete conquest of Middle-earth.

Such, then, are the strategic goals and the advantages of Sauron. Against his apparent superiority, the strategic advantages of the forces of good seem to be few indeed. They are disinclined and tend to distrust each other. They have made few preparations for the coming conflict, except for Gondor which has had an opportunity to prepare the city of Minas Tirith for a siege by strengthening the wall of the Pelennor (III, p. 22) and by building defensive fortifications on the river. In spite of their apparent weakness, however, they have several powerful advantages. First and most important, they have possession of the One Ring, without which Sauron cannot be supreme. Secondly, they are fully aware of the dangers involved in using the Ring and are determined to destroy it. They also have a unique source of strength in that almost all of the free creatures of Middle-earth, including even the dead whom Aragorn brings to aid him, are natural allies against Sauron. Although not united, they are not blind to the danger he represents for all the peoples of Middle-earth; and once they see what he is doing, they do become united. Examples of the aid they give are seen in the rough Woses, the wild men of the Druadan Forest who lead the Rohirrim through the hidden valley to Gondor (II, 5, Ch. 5), and in the eagles who help Gandalf escape from Saruman and in the final battle provide last-minute help. Finally, the forces of the free peoples have in Gandalf the Grey a strategist of the highest order, a truly dangerous enemy for Sauron. For weapons and armies are only tools of war; in themselves they do not win victories. It is only in the hands of a skillful commander that military force can be decisive; and in comparison with Gandalf, Sauron is hopelessly outclassed.

From the very beginning Gandalf consistently follows the rule of strategy expressed by Liddell Hart in his classic work on strategy: "Choose the line (or course) of least expectation. Try to put yourself in the enemy's shoes, and think what course it is least probable he will foresee or forestall." This is just how Gandalf reasons. At the Council of Elrond he shows his understanding of Sauron when he remarks, "For he is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it" (I, p. 283). By understanding how Sauron will act, Gandalf is able to plan a course of action that he cannot anticipate.

W. H. Auden has shown that Sauron's greatest weakness is his lack of imagination, and in strategic matters a weak imagination can be fatal. Sauron can only think of how he would act in another's position. As Gandalf says after his return from Moria, "He supposes that we were all going to Minas Tirith; for that is what he would himself have done in our place. And according to his wisdom it would have been a heavy stroke against his power. Indeed he is in great fear, not knowing what mighty one may suddenly appear, wielding the Ring, and assailing him with war, seeking to cast him down and take his place. That we should wish to cast him down and have no one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind" (II, p. 100). Against a resourceful enemy, a ruler like Sauron will always be at a disadvantage.

Saruman is much like Sauron in this respect, and the strategic ineptitude of both is strikingly revealed in their choice of objectives in their first large-scale assault. They both choose the least imaginative, least effective, and most costly of all types of attack, one that throughout history has appealed to the mediocre commander: a direct frontal assault on the opponent's strongest position—the city of Minas Tirith in the case of Sauron, and the Hornburg in Helm's Deep in the case of Saruman, both of which are strongly fortified and prepared for war. As Liddell Hart says, "Unless there is opportunity for a quick surprise assault, a siege is the most uneconomic of all operations of war. When the enemy has still a field army capable of intervening, a siege is also the most dangerous—for until it is crowned by success the assailant is progressively weakening himself out of proportion to his..."
enemy.” Neither Sauron nor Saruman, however, gives any thought to the dangerous possibilities of his actions, but thinks that massive force alone is sufficient to attain his ends. Sauron is also misled by his conviction that the Ring must be in Minas Tirith and that to get it, he must break in. Because of this conviction also, he attacks before he is completely ready. This false belief, however, is a direct result of his basic inability to consider all possible moves by his opponents. Sauron's confidence in the sufficiency of his forces to overcome any opposition is reflected too in the overconfidence of his lieutenant, the Lord of the Nazgûl, who neglects the possibility of any aid coming to Minas Tirith and thus has no scouts out to warn of the approach of the Riders of Rohan (III, p. 111). It is true that there are forces in Andórien to guard against attacks from Rohan (III, p. 157), but the Riders arrive through the hidden valley in Umbarian Forest. Forests do not usually provide an impassable barrier to determined troops, as the French found out to their sorrow in 1940 when the German armor broke through the Ardennes Forest and caught the French high command completely unprepared in a surprise attack remarkably similar to the attack of the Riders.

Sauron's and Saruman's poverty of imagination is clearly seen too in their attitudes toward the creatures of Middle-earth whom I have referred to above as the “natural allies” of the forces of good. Sauron cannot imagine that weak and apparently insignificant creatures should pose any threat to him. He himself is great and powerful and trusts in military force. Those who are unlike him are simply beneath his notice. He makes great preparations to fight Gondor and Rohan, but completely ignores the hobbits until he discovers that one of them has the Ring (I, p. 58). Saruman imitates Sauron in this respect and indeed goes one step further. He wantonly burns some of the trees of the Forest of Fangorn. To Saruman such an act is probably not considered worthy of even passing notice. It is a simple act of thoughtless cruelty, and yet it is an essential element in bringing about the downfall of Sauron. Although the ents who guard the trees seem to be weak and unimportant (after all, they have no weapons and are peaceful and unwarlike), in reality, once aroused to anger they become terrifying warriors. It is the ents who destroy Orthanc and then wipe out the army of orcs besieging the Hornburg (Bk. 3, Ch. 7). By this battle, Sauron's strategic advantage in Rohan is lost. He becomes aware of Saruman's defeat (II, p. 201), but fearful of what may happen to the Ring, he begins his own attack on Minas Tirith still confident that his superior forces alone are sufficient to conquer the city.

And yet, there is no reason why Sauron should have been ignorant of what has happened to the Ring, since he had the opportunity to question Pippin through the captured palantir. However, his stupidity in failing to make use of the advantage of the communications at his disposal simply aggravates the results of his original choice of an objective of attack, for even the loss of Saruman's army need not have proved disastrous. Indeed, the elimination of Saruman has removed a dangerous rival for the Ring. A more profound military thinker would have avoided a direct attack on the fortress of Minas Tirith in the first place. He might have had to cross at Osgiliath because it is the only fordable place on the river, but there was no need to attempt to break into the city. A truly able commander would have placed a covering force near the city to contain any possible breakout and sent the main body of his army against Rohan. Sauron could thus have prevented his enemies from uniting and have destroyed them separately. Even if the forces in the city had wished to go to the aid of Rohan, they would have been forced to leave their fortifications and fight in the open in disadvantageous conditions. Even given Sauron's conviction that the Ring was in the city and that it was therefore essential that he enter to get it, there is no excuse for his having failed to guard his flanks adequately. But Sauron does not think as a good strategist. Having such large numbers of troops available, he presses the assault, heedless of the cost.

Minas Tirith, however, having been thoroughly prepared for a siege, holds out longer than Sauron expected. The
Sauron's being caught off balance is a result of another of his failings as a strategist: his lack of any alternative moves to be made in case one of his plans is disrupted. To quote once more from Liddell Hart: "The absence of an alternative is contrary to the very nature of war. It sins against the light of history, which holds that a commander's most essential and foremost duty is to never let the enemy completely outmaneuver him. In his most penetrating dictum that 'every plan of campaign ought to have several branches and to have been so well thought out that one or the other of the said branches cannot fail of success.' ...A plan, like a tree, must have branches--if it is to bear fruit. In a war plan, if one idea fails, the commander must have another ready to launch another attack and he has many troops that have not been used (III, p. 154). Now the decision rests with Gondor and its allies. Shall they remain on the defensive and wait for another attack, or take the offensive against Mordor?

Once again Gandalf shows his ability as a master strategist. Like Napoleon, he realizes that "defensive war does not exclude attacking, just as offensive war does not exclude defending..." (Phillips, p. 437). The move which he proposes reveals that he has never found a moment of less opportunity to exploit the enemy of his freedom of action, and it should operate in both the physical and psychological spheres. ...'Stonewall!' Jackson aptly expresses this in his strategical motto—'Mystify, mislead, and surprise'. For to mystify and mislead constitutes 'distracting', while surprise is the essential element of 'dissocation'. It is through the distraction of the commander's mind that distraction of his forces follows. The loss of his freedom of action is the sequel to the loss of his freedom of conception (Strategy, pp. 344-44.) Sauron, however, had staked everything on the fall of Minas Tirith, and when this proves impossible, he is left again where he started.

Also, after this battle the opposing military forces are more equally balanced than before the army that besieged Gondor was not the largest of the forces at Sauron's command, there can be no doubt that he has suffered a grievous loss which, coupled with the loss of his allies, has given a serious setback to his plans in the south. Nevertheless, Sauron is still far from finished. He has a weapon to launch another attack and he has many troops that have not been used (III, p. 154). Now the decision rests with Gondor and its allies. Shall they remain on the defensive and wait for another attack, or take the offensive against Mordor?

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