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

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Abstract
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 vivdness 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 Aragorn 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 men of the south used 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 (bows drawn to the chest or chin and used by horsemen). For defense of cities there are 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 bands (III, 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 (III, 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 that 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 (Bk.3, Ch.3)]. The cavalry of Gondor 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 (Bk.5, 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 palantiri, 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 geological 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 arms.

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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 orcs serving 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 (II, p.315) of which the one seen by Frodo and Sam "was but one and not the greatest of the hosts".
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. 11). 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. There are both advantages and 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 move Sauron stands a chance of cutting off the base of his soldiers and having 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.

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 last great 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. Second, Sauron has also attempted to overawe his opponents by offering friendship to some and threatening those who refuse to accept it, as in the case of the embassy to the Dwarves (I, p. 254), or by convincing them of the hopelessness of any opposition. Denethor, for example, has become a defeatist after having seen Sauron's power in the pyre in his possession (III, p. 129). Saruman's spy, Wormtongue, has also successfully kept the King of Rohan from becoming aware of his peril until he is exposed by Gandalf (Bk. 3, Ch. 6). Lastly Sauron has won some allies by promises of loot. At least we may presume that such promises were the allegiance of the men of the south.

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 strengthened his preparations for war. Sauron has also attempted to overawe his opponents by offering friendship to some and threatening those who refuse to accept it, as in the case of the embassy to the Dwarves (I, p. 254), or by convincing them of the hopelessness of any opposition. Denethor, for example, has become a defeatist after having seen Sauron through the pyre in his possession (III, p. 129). Saruman's spy, Wormtongue, has also successfully kept the King of Rohan from becoming aware of his peril until he is exposed by Gandalf (Bk. 3, Ch. 6). Lastly Sauron has won some allies by promises of loot. At least we may presume that such promises were the allegiance of the men of the south.

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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 disunited 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 Edoras (II, 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

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12 Elves and men have been estranged for a long time (I, p. 61), and the elves and the dwarves are enemies as we see when the Fellowship of the Ring goes to Lórien (I, p. 358).

13 Gandalf speaks of himself as dangerous: "And so am I, very dangerous; more dangerous than anything you will ever meet, unless you are brought alive before the seat of the Dark Lord" (II, p. 103).


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 over-
come 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 Umbaran 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 down-
fall 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.17
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 Osogiliath
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.18

Minas Tirith, however, having been thoroughly prepared
for a siege, holds out longer than Sauron expected. The

16 Sun Tzu, the great Chinese strategist, spoke in similar
terms around 500 B.C. "Hence to fight and conquer in all your
battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists
in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting. Thus the
highest form of generalship is to baulk the enemy's plans; the
next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces; the
next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field, and
the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities" (On the Art
of War, in Phillips, The Roots of Strategy, p.26). Liddell Hart,
elsewhere, says "...nothing can be more hazardous for an army
than to concentrate its effort at the point where the enemy can
calculate on its coming, and can thus concentrate his forces to
meet it" (Strategy, p.304).

17 Auden (p.7) points out that Sauron is deceived by his
own lust for power when he fails to question Pippin. He is so
eager to torment him that he does not ask him how he happened to
be in view of the palantirs.

18 Liddell Hart remarks how an abundance of manpower may
have a disastrous effect on generalship: "It is curious how the
possession of a blank cheque on the bank of man-power had so
analagous an effect in 1807-14 and in 1914-18. ...The explanation
may be that lavish expenditure breeds extravagence, the mental
antithesis of economy of force—to which surprise and mobility
are the means" (Strategy, p.127).
cavalry of Rohan, no longer held in check by Saruman, and
aided by the Wild Men of the woods, arrives unexpectedly out of
the forest and Sauron's army is flanked and its commander
killed (III, p. 117). Quickly following upon this action, the
army is again flanked from the south by Aragorn, who has
deadset the southern allied forces that had been counted
to cover that region and to aid in the siege. The battle is
lost and most of Sauron's forces are destroyed (BK.5, Ch.6).
The arrival of the Riders and Aragorn illustrates another
vital principle of strategy: the essential nature of the timing of
an attack. Sauron's attack on Minas Tirith had been
expected and the defenders were ready for it, so there was no
surprise involved. The attack of the Rohirrim and then of
Aragorn, however, is a complete surprise and helps to dis-
lodge and disorganize the besiegers. Sauron arrived later, after the fall of Minas Tirith, they could have
done little against the victorious army of Sauron, but would
probably have been annihilated.

Sauron's being caught off balance is a result of another of
this failures 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 alterna-
tive is contrary to the very nature of war. It sins against
the light of strategy to exclude the possibility of a second
attack as well. The essential characteristic of this most
penetrating dictum that 'every plan of campaign ought to
be articulated by Liddell Hart: "...the true aim in war is
the mind of the hostile rulers, not the bodies of their troops..."
(Strategy, p.219). He counsels an immediate attack—not in order
of his own making. Gandalf says of him, "Wise fool. For if he
were to imagine what others might be like. His "bad luck" is most-
ly to things he has not noticed. Sauron's being caught off
balance is a result of another of
his mistakes which
depri evs us of the story of the
world and the secondary world of the story. Cf. J. R. R. Tolkien,
maker of Heaven and Earth with an increased
understanding of the role of war in
The Lord of the Rings with an increased
respect for the achievement of the author. The outcome of the
book is produced not by magic or simply by the author's fiat but
through the natural development of the strengths and weaknesses
of the opposing forces. This realism enables us to deal with
the work as with a work of "true" history. In fact, with an
artist like Tolkien, perhaps there is no distinction between
"true" and "feigned" history.

addendum

[Several of the members of the audience thought I had
exaggerated in remarking on Sauron's "stupidity" and that
actually he phlegmatically suffered from a run of "bad luck." After
thinking it over, I am convinced that although Sauron is intel-
ligent, his intelligence is severely limited by his inability to
perceive what others may be like. His "bad luck" is mostly of his own making. Gandalf says of him, "Wise fool. For if he
had had a better grasp of his power and the cause of his own downfall,
and all his guile to the hunting of the Ring, then indeed hope would have faded: neither Ring nor bearer could long have eluded him" (II, p.100). Perhaps a definition of "stupidity" given by a former teacher of mine fits Sauron best: "Stupidity is aggressive ignorance." I am certain that Sauron's
failure to question Pippin through the palantir must be classi-
cified as stupidity by anyone's definition. I agree with Auden:
"One of Tolkien's most impressive achievements is that he
succeeds in making the reader the mistakes which
Sauron makes to his own undoing are the kinds of mistake
which Evil, however powerful, cannot help making, just because it
is evil." (p.7)]

Footnotes from
The Character of Tolkien's Invented World
by Willis D. Glover

(We apologize for having left these footnotes out of Mythlore 10, where the body of the article appeared on pages 3-8. —GG)

1 Tolkien on Tolkien," Diplomat Magazine, XVIII (October, 1966).


4 The possibilities of parable are always present in a fairy

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5 Historians of science since Pierre Duhem have made us aware

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7 Edmund Fuller, "The Lord of the Hobbits," Tolkien and the

7 Edmund Fuller, "The Lord of the Hobbits," Tolkien and the

8 Voegelin, op. cit., 126-33 and passim.

8 Voegelin, op. cit., 126-33 and passim.

9 Tolkien on Tolkien," loc. cit., 39.