Footnotes from "The Christian Character of Tolkien's Invented World"

Willis D. Glover

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Sauron's being caught off balance is a result of another of his 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 alternative is contrary to the very nature of war. It sins against the light which with the unaided eye is visible everywhere, being the most persistent characteristic of 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. If with all his power he could only launch oneMd. To launch. (Strategy, pp. 345-44.) Sauron, however, had staked everything on the fall of Minas Tirth, 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 those of 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 his request. Nevertheless, Sauron is still far from finished. He has a chance 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 a new 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 lost sight of his goal which is 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 to make a serious attempt to break into Mordor, which would in any case be impossible, but rather for the sake of a change of front, in order to keep Sauron disorganized so that he will not notice the true threat to his power offered by Frodo and Sam. As he says, "We must push Sauron to his last throw. We must call out his hidden strength, so that he shall empty his land. We must march out to meet him at once. We must make ourselves that threat, not to be lost on him. We will take that bait, in hope and dread, for he will think that in such rashness he sees the pride of the new Ringlord." (III, p. 156).

...This move is a distraction, always an essential element in grand strategy. Liddell Hart defines distraction in the following terms: "Because of the risk that the enemy may achieve such a change of front, it is usually necessary for the dislocating move to be preceded by a move, or moves, which can best be defined by the term 'dislodge.' The object of these moves is to dislodge 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 'dislocation,' while surprise is the essential cause of 'dislocation.' 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, p. 345).

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"The Lord of the Rings" shows again that the art of war is truly an art, rather than a science. Strategy and military doctrine are not fixed elements that can be applied mechanically to produce a desired result. It might even be said that it was Sauron's belief that might alone be able to accomplish his objective that led to his downfall. Force is important and military power cannot be disregarded, but alone they are not always enough. It is in war, perhaps to a greater extent than in any other human activity, that the crucial element of success is a humane imagination. Sauron was the master of this element in his conception 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. His realism enables him 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 it seemed to them to have been a run of "bad luck." After thinking it over, I am convinced that although Sauron is intelligent, his intelligence is severely limited by his inability to understand what might be other than his own making. Gandalf says of him, "Wise fool. For if he had remembered Legolas' words, he would not have let Gondor into his hands."

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