

BUSINESS
IS THE
CONTINUATION
OF WAR
BY OTHER MEANS

JEAN VAN MARCKE

**Lannoo
Campus**

Contents

Provocative Statements: The Axioms of Conflict 10

Preface 14

Introduction 18

CHAPTER ONE

On War, the Military: The Great Principles 22

War Is Back 22

The Context: From Manager to Strategist 28

The Eternal Principles of War 43

The Engine Room: Theory 51

Case Study in Failure: The War in Ukraine 62

CHAPTER TWO

How to Transfer from Military to Business 68

The Academic Awakening: What Is Strategy? 79

The Failed Mathematical Solution 88

The Great Schism: Conflict versus Rationalization 95

The Centrality of Conflict 97

The Mark of the Master Strategist 106

CHAPTER THREE

On Strategy 110

The Paradox of Victory: Winning Battles, Losing Wars 113

Defining the Indefinable: What Is Strategy? 119

The Hierarchy: Grand Strategy, Functional Strategy,
and Tactics 124

The Philosophy of Power 128

The Strategy Toolkit: Types and Principles 144

Types of Military Strategy 146

The Strategist: Mind, Decision, Structure 157

When Strategy Fails 168

The Soul of Strategy 178

CHAPTER FOUR

The Three Grand Masters 198

Sun Tzu: Grand Strategy and the Art of Avoidance 204

Clausewitz: From Strategic Theory to
Decisive Engagement 214

Michael Porter: Competitive Advantage and
Strategic Positioning 224

The Analyst and the Philosophers: Where Porter Meets the Masters	235
The Smartphone Wars: Apple Through the Eyes of the Grand Masters	240
Strategy Is a Moral Act	243

CHAPTER FIVE

The Future of War and Strategy, Toward a Conclusion 248

The Strategic Vacuum	260
Conclusion: The Human Purpose, Beyond War	266
A Final Confession	273

Appendix: The Eastern Way of War 276

Acknowledgments 298

Endnotes 302

About the Author 324

On War, the Military: The Great Principles

“The fortunes of war have determined the growth of empires, the spread of ideologies and religious beliefs, and the building of nations.”

—John Keegan

War Is Back

After seventy-five years of relative peace, we must admit that the sweet illusion is over. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama famously predicted *The End of History*—the idea that liberal democracy and peace had permanently triumphed.² He was wrong. Since February 24, 2022, when Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, and October 7, 2023, when the horrors of the Hamas attack on Israel shattered any remaining complacency, war is back.

*La guerre est naturelle à l'homme.
C'est la paix qui est l'exception.*

—Jean Van Marcke

As this book goes to press, the escalation continues. On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a joint air campaign against Iran—targeting its nuclear program, its missile sites, and its supreme leader. Within hours, Ayatollah Khamenei was dead, and Iran responded with waves of ballistic missile and drone strikes against Israel, US bases across the Gulf, and civilian targets in Bahrain, Kuwait, and beyond. What began as a strike has turned into a war of aerial attrition with no clear strategic end state, no defined political objective, and no exit in sight. Clausewitz would recognize the pattern instantly: force without political direction, escalation without restraint, and the dangerous illusion that military supremacy alone can produce a durable outcome. Here, in real time, is the civilizational fault line that defines our age—the collision between the secular liberal order and the forces of jihadist resistance that refuse to accept its permanence. It is not a war between nations. It is a war between paradigms. And it is precisely the kind of conflict for which the frameworks in this book—friction, fog, the primacy of politics—were designed.

The illusions that lulled us into a sense of “post-history” security have collapsed. We thought the only conflicts left were about social security or digital “disruption.” We were wrong.

I say this not as an alarmist, but as a witness. I was born in 1937. To me, the dates 1940, 1941, and 1945 are not chapters in a history book; they are the soundtrack of my childhood. We lived next to a major railway station connecting France and Belgium—a prime strategic

target. I vividly remember the sound of the bombs striking behind our house. I remember rushing down to the cellar door with my family, the air thick with dust and terror. One day, the blast pressure was so immense that it blew the front door open while we were still descending the stairs. I remember looking out and seeing planes shooting at cars on the road, seemingly for the sport of it. And I saw the blood.

When I write that war is back, I am not speaking of a theoretical shift in international relations. I am speaking of a return to a reality where stability is the exception, and violence—kinetic or economic—is the rule.

Even during the so-called “Happy Globalization,” the shadow of conflict never truly disappeared. My father, a man I would describe as a “Poet” in his leadership style—quiet, deep, and wise—possessed a profound instinct for geopolitical risk. At the height of the Cold War, during the era of Stalin and Khrushchev, he shared a concern with me.

“I am worried,” he said. “The Russians are too powerful. I do not trust the situation.”

His solution was not to build a physical fortress, but a strategic one. “Go to the United States,” he told me. “Take a tour. Get to know the competition. *We must hedge some of our interests in America.*”

We did. I went to America, my youngest brother Bruno followed, and we acquired companies there. That foothold in the United States was not just a business expansion; it was a geopolitical hedge against a European war that thankfully never came. It was a lesson in preparing for war in order to preserve the peace—and it proves that business strategy can never be truly separated from the grand strategy of nations.

For nearly seventy-eight years after World War II, the West lived in a bubble of relative peace and continuous growth. The dividends of this peace were redistributed in welfare and social well-being, but we ignored the necessity of preparing for conflict. Now, the illusion is shattered. War—whether literal or metaphorical—is back at the

center of everything: social media, supply chains, manufacturing, and investment. Thus it is back at the center of business.

What does the return of war mean for business leaders?

It means, first, that the illusion of the integrated, borderless supply chain is over. Geopolitical risk is no longer something that happens to other people; disruption now causes immediate harm. It means, second, that competition is no longer a genteel game played within agreed-upon rules. Strategy must now address the threat of force, sanctions, and limited war—the rough edges of a world that has shed its post-Cold War optimism. And it means, third, that technology is not a cure-all. Technology does not solve conflict; it can dampen it or escalate it, but it cannot make it disappear.

In short, we return to the fundamental truth. War is back. And if war is back, then strategy—the art of survival during conflict—must be back at the center of the boardroom.

Before we proceed, a note on the scope of this chapter. We have opted not to interfere with the disciplines of pure management or leadership models. We concentrate on a single, simple question: *In a conflictual situation, what can business learn from three thousand years of military experience?*

War and business share more than vocabulary. They share structural elements—power, conflict, position, decision, advantage, and the pursuit of peace—that transcend their different domains. Military tradition has studied these elements for over three and a half thousand years with systematic rigor and life-or-death stakes; the business tradition, though developing rapidly, has barely sixty years of formal strategic thought behind it. What we propose in this book is a *knowledge transfer*: moving proven concepts from the mature domain of military strategy to the developing domain of business strategy, using the eternal principles—concentration of force, economy of effort, maneuver over mass, surprise and deception, unity of command, simplicity of execution—as the bridge between the two worlds.

A Study of History and the Transfer of Strategic Knowledge

WAR	SHARED STRATEGIC ELEMENTS
DOMAIN Physical violence, coercion, destruction of enemy forces	POWER
	CONFLICT
STUDY HISTORY 4,000+ years (<i>Sun Tzu to present day</i>)	POSITION
	DECISION
CANONICAL THINKERS ▪ Sun Tzu ▪ Clausewitz ▪ Liddell Hart ▪ John Boyd ▪ And others	ADVANTAGE
	PURSUIT OF PEACE
CONCEPTUAL MATURITY -HIGH-	KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER VIA ETERNAL PRINCIPLES
CHARACTERISTICS ▪ Tested doctrine ▪ Proven frameworks ▪ Accumulated wisdom ▪ Life-and-death stakes ▪ Systematic study	Concentration of force Economy of effort Maneuver over mass Surprise and deception Unity of command Simplicity of execution

Figure 1 The transfer of strategic knowledge from mature to developing domains.

BUSINESS

DOMAIN

Economic competition, market share,
profit capture

STUDY HISTORY

~60 years as formal discipline
(*Chandler, Ansoff era to present*)

CANONICAL THINKERS

- Alfred Chandler
 - Michael Porter
 - C.K. Prahalad
 - Henry Mintzberg
 - And many others
-

CONCEPTUAL MATURITY

–DEVELOPING–

CHARACTERISTICS

- Emerging doctrine
 - Competing frameworks
 - Limited historical depth
 - Lower stakes (not existential)
 - Fragmented study
-

The Context: From Manager to Strategist

The journey of strategy, as we understand it today, has its roots in a profound historical transformation: the evolution of the medieval knight into the “Captain of Industry”—the autocratic figures who wielded power with distinct flair in the early days of industrialization.

Initially, business did not have “strategy”; it had “policy.” Policy is a broad set of guiding principles, a static framework for decision-making. However, the mid-twentieth century marked a pivotal shift. As markets crowded and competition intensified, policy was no longer sufficient. It evolved into strategy. This shift reflected the emergence of the “manager”—a key player in shaping organizational direction to secure market share and outmaneuver rivals.

This section explores the concept and context of strategy formulation, tracing its evolution from the factory floor to the boardroom and its enduring significance in the landscape of competition. But we must begin by addressing a common confusion: *A plan is not strategy but the method for its implementation.* A plan is a document. Strategy is a way of thinking.

The Rise of the Management Class

The evolution toward (strategic) management was paved by the first great names who exalted the virtues of this new approach to running enterprises. First among them was Frederick Winslow **Taylor**.

Taylor was an engineer skeptical of university education—he famously declined a position at Harvard, yet his philosophy permeated the early curriculum of every business school that followed. The starting point for Taylor’s method was the belief that for every elemental task, there was “one best way.” Through seminars and best-selling books, he became the first management “Guru,” preaching a philosophy of total control: premeditated schedules, clear instructions, and constant supervision. In Taylor’s world, errors were

prevented instead of corrected, and the terrible waste of delays and accidents was avoided through relentless standardization.³

It is worth noting that Vladimir Lenin studied Taylor with great interest, claiming that “for now, the workers’ commissars could watch management’s every move.” Taylorism helped set the frame for the Soviet system of industrial organization—rigid, efficient, and centrally controlled. The irony that the founding text of capitalist management found its most devoted disciple in the architect of communism will not be lost on the reader.

But if it was easier to push Taylorism in the Soviet Union, where resistance was crushed, it was far more difficult in the West. In the United States, a search began for a business strategy that went beyond extracting efficiency from the workforce and addressed the broader “labor problem.” This search produced the Human Relations School—a reaction to the coldness of scientific management.

Mary Parker **Follett** was its most original voice. Follett objected to the idea of power as “power over”—the ability to simply make things happen through dominance. She advocated instead for “power with.” She believed that if power were shared, all energies, not just those of the elite, would be mobilized toward shared goals. In her view, there should be neither isolated individuals nor an abstract “society,” only the group-unit—what she called the “social individual.”⁴

However, we must look at this critically. Follett’s thinking brings us uncomfortably close to what we now call “Groupthink”—the phenomenon where individuals reinforce each other’s wrong assumptions until the group is collectively blind. In fact, the “bottom-up mantra” that flows from this tradition can be fundamentally anti-strategic. It creates situations where it is difficult for leadership to intervene, where it is nearly impossible to shape the direction of the board, and where control is effectively handed to people who may have no real understanding of the hard business issues at play.

Though these steps illustrated the organizational benefits of enlightened self-interest, they provided no answer to the problems of conflict—the very point at which strategy is most needed.

The Origins of the “Manager”

To understand the limitations of the manager as a figure, it helps to look at the word itself.

Manager derives from the thirteenth-century Italian word *maneggiare*, which referred to the ability to handle a horse—*manus* meaning hand.⁵ From the stable, the term migrated over time to the conduct of affairs more broadly, but its equestrian origins are revealing. *Managing* meant something more than administration but less than total control. Anyone who has handled a horse knows that it requires persuasive—or manipulative—skills as well as coercive ones. It requires a flair for extracting performance from a living being, organization, or situation that might otherwise resist. “Handling” implies coping and dealing with a state of affairs that can never be fully controlled.

Considered as a profession, *management* referred to people employed for their skills in handling complex affairs—an estate, a portfolio, a business—on behalf of an owner. For this reason, the role of the manager was expected to stop short of true strategy. The ultimate control, and therefore the strategy, would stay in the hands of the owner or a board appointed by the shareholders.

However, as organizations grew more complex, the dependence on managers increased. Effective power began to shift to those who actually understood the real issues of the business—the handlers of the horse. This was, in a sense, inevitable. You cannot ride a horse by committee.

The Professionalization of Management and the Fall of the Planner

Despite their rising influence, early managers were still employees, liable to be fired if affairs were badly handled. The strict military chain of command was initially deemed inappropriate for business;

there was a greater range of functions to be coordinated and less reliance on unquestioning obedience. However, management steadily evolved into a distinct profession, recognized by the establishment of the great business schools—starting with the Wharton School in 1881.

For a long time, this professional class relied on models of centralization, rational analysis, and long-range planning. Alfred Chandler famously coined the principle “Structure follows Strategy,” implying a logical, linear progression from strategic intent to organizational form.⁶ But by the late twentieth century, both the military and the business world suffered a loss of confidence in these rigid models.

The “End” of the strategic planner was not a failure of theory but of practice. As the business environment became less manageable and more volatile, the cumbersome planning models—originally designed for large, stable bureaucracies like Ford’s—became dysfunctional. They were too slow. More importantly, there was a growing demand for an approach that could cope with conflict—the *rapport de force* within and between businesses.

New knowledge from peripheral disciplines began to infiltrate strategy. From the pure economic sciences, where Michael Porter originated, to sociology and information technology, new dimensions arose. Later came non-linear dynamic systems, chaos theory, and game theory. We began to ask: What can we learn from the Chinese masters and the game of Go?

And the old model of rational choice—the faith that rigorous analysis would always yield the right answer—was exposed for what it was. As Einstein is said to have remarked: “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.”⁷ Rational choice delivered far less than it promised. It was challenged by cognitive psychology and political science, where scholars like William Riker sought to move beyond a Machiavellian focus on power toward testable, scientific models. Yet the rational choice paradigm often amounted to little more than speculative hypotheses deduced from suspect models. The fact that these theories could be discussed mathematically did not elevate them to the level of

the natural sciences. Social sciences, the basis of rational choice, are inherently messy. The real world refused to behave as the equations predicted.

The Captains of Industry: Poets and Knights

To understand strategy in practice—not in the classroom but in the smoke and dust of actual competition—we must look at the “Captains of Industry,” the figures who dominated the American economy at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: those autocratic men who wielded power with the distinct flair of medieval knights transplanted into the age of steel and oil.

The philosopher Kierkegaard offered a useful framework for understanding these *leaders*. He said there are *two types*: the “Poet” and the “Chevalier.”⁸ The Poet is quiet, deep, interested in people, and modest. The Chevalier is the knight—prepared to fight, to advance, to impose his will on the world.

My father was the Poet. He was a thinker, an organizer, much like Alfred Sloan—who built the systems of the modern corporation. He was not a man for the front lines; he was a man for the map room.

When I entered the business, I was the Chevalier. I was closer to Henry Ford—impatient, action-oriented, eager to be “on the battlefield.” I had to learn to balance my own aggressive instincts with the existing team my father had built. My challenge was first to make myself acceptable, and then to prove that I had the leadership to manage them. Over time, through study and practice, the Chevalier learned the wisdom of the Poet. But the instinct to fight never fully disappeared. I suspect it never does in anyone worth following.

This era confronts us with the raw issue of power. The great industrialists operated under a provocative worldview that would horrify a modern HR department: “Labor is a supply of manpower as any other supply, no less, no more.” During this period—described by Alvin Toffler as the “Second Wave” of industrialization—strategy was

expressed through the colossal growth of industrial corporations.⁹ Tensions between capital and labor were subdued, if not eliminated, often by force.

Capitalism found a blunt means of coping with the volatility of economic cycles—growth followed by recession: *scale*. The best coping mechanism was mass. Sudden changes in economic conditions were easier to withstand if supported by deep layers of management and capital. The “Robber Barons”—Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, J.P. Morgan, and the oil barons—shared a common strategic approach. They pursued forward integration, controlling the entire chain from supply and pipelines to distribution. They maintained enormous cash reserves, ensuring they were never caught short by market fluctuations. They sought not to work with market forces but to control them entirely. They pursued the submission of competition: contrary to the ideology of “free markets,” cooperation was merely a tool to disrupt and defeat rivals. And through sheer growth, they achieved a kind of sovereignty, treating the Federal Government as a meddlesome, inferior power.

John D. Rockefeller: The Master Strategist

Among these titans, John D. Rockefeller stands as the archetype. He grew Standard Oil from a twenty percent market share in 1870 to ninety percent in 1880—a feat of strategic concentration that has few parallels in business history.¹⁰

To circumvent legal restrictions, Rockefeller utilized a legal device of remarkable cunning: the “Trust,” allowing him to consolidate control over a vast network of oil companies without directly owning them. Stockholders conveyed their shares “in trust” to a board of trustees. Standard Oil did not technically own the other companies; the Trust did. This allowed for centralized control without direct ownership—a masterstroke of corporate maneuvering that anticipated the holding company structures of the twentieth century.

The reaction to his quasi-monopoly was fierce. When the Antitrust Act arrived in 1890, Rockefeller did not retreat. He used dramatization to buy political support and planted friendly stories in the press. He was, undoubtedly, a supreme commander. He viewed the system as a whole, assessing the position of individual parts with a cold, detached eye. He directed his lieutenants with stealth, speed, and expert execution.

Rockefeller was not averse to military metaphors himself. When justifying his secretive methods, he posed a question that every modern CEO should pin to their wall:

“What general of the Allies ever sends a brass band in advance with orders to notify the enemy that on a certain day he will begin to attack?”

This question should echo through this entire book. What do you tell others about your strategy? Is it wise to signal your intentions to your competition? The answer, more often than not, is no. Silence is a weapon; transparency is a luxury you earn only after victory.

Beyond the Robber Barons

We must ask: What can we learn—or better, what should we forget—from these great Captains of Industry? They were not all predators in the Rockefeller mold. There were remarkable industrialists who built value rather than merely capturing it. Chief among them was Henry Ford.

Henry Ford: The Paternalistic Visionary

Ford was an exemplary, forward-looking captain of industry. In an era when cars were luxury toys made for racing—where speed was more important than reliability—Ford’s genius was *strategic*

anticipation. He foresaw a demand that did not yet exist and a means of production that had never been attempted.

He received no support from investors or bankers. He endured the disdain of the elite who put money ahead of work. Yet he understood something that most of his contemporaries missed: strategy is not just about controlling the market; it is about *creating* it.

In 1913, the “universal car” was born. The Model T was an automobile designed for everyday wear and tear, offered at an exceedingly reasonable price made possible by a revolutionary form of production: the assembly line. Ford’s strategy was brutally simple: one model in large numbers. When customers appealed for distinction or variety, his answer became legendary: “Any customer can have a car painted in any color that he wants so long as it is black.”¹¹

Ford played a central role in the breakthrough of industrial society, offering an alternative course between socialism and crude capitalism. By paying high wages, he fed the desire for mass consumption of his own products—a stroke of strategic circularity that created both the supply and the demand. However, managing the opposing demands of capital and labor proved complex. His approach remained essentially paternalistic: he knew what was best for the worker and the customer, and he brooked no dissent. The Poet he was not; the Chevalier he was, but one who believed his knights should be grateful for their armor.

Alfred Sloan: The Architect of the Modern Corporation

Contrasting sharply with Ford was Alfred Sloan, President and Chairman of General Motors for thirty-three years, from 1923 to 1956.¹² While Ford was a charismatic leader with a single-product vision, Sloan was an MIT engineer who thought in systems. While Ford aimed for a universal car for the country, General Motors

had grown through the acquisition of small car companies until it became so indebted that it was effectively taken over by bankers.

Sloan faced an entirely different reality. He had to account for a major stakeholder—the Du Pont family—and a chaotic collection of brands. Unlike Ford, Sloan required an *internal* strategy to manage the organization as well as an *external* one to deal with the competition. This duality—the war within and the war without—is a challenge that every modern CEO will recognize.

In 1920, Sloan set out his “Organization Study,” a document that became the touchstone for modern management. He solved the paradox of scale by establishing two seemingly contradictory principles. The first was *decentralization*: the company was split into divisions—later known as Strategic Business Units—each with its own chief executive responsible for operations. The second was *centralized control*: a central organization retained authority over financial and policy guidelines, essential for the company’s cohesion. This tension between *Command and Control* on the one hand and *Maneuver Warfare* on the other remains the fundamental choice in organizational design—as true in the boardroom as it was on the battlefield.

The key strategic question Sloan faced was this: Ford held sixty percent of the market. How do you compete against a colossus? His answer was not to copy Ford but to *segment* the market. He formulated a strategy to produce “a car for every purse and purpose.”

The genius of this formulation was that it did not reflect the market reality of the time; it *created* a new reality. It introduced the concept of upward mobility in consumption—Chevrolets for the entry-level buyer, Buicks and Oldsmobiles for the rising middle class, and Cadillacs for the wealthy. Within six years, General Motors led the market with 1.8 million cars sold. Ford, locked into his single-model philosophy, had no answer. The Chevalier with one sword had been outflanked by the strategist with five.