

Of Landpowers and Seapowers

by Martin Blumenson

If the United States and the Soviet Union engage in conventional warfare, who might win? Let's turn back the clock and let history give us some insight into the answer.



Many years ago when I was a youngster, there appeared in the newspapers one summer a series of articles that speculated on who would win a contest between a boxer and a wrestler. With strengths and techniques so dissimilar, how would they make contact? Who would gain victory? So far as I recall, despite a great deal of entertaining writing, no one solved the problem in a convincing manner.

The same questions arise in the case of a war between a landpower and a seapower. Who would win? And how?

If the United States is an established seapower and the Soviet Union an established landpower, the problem has a certain relevance. Suppose the two countries engaged in warfare. How would they meet? What would the outcome be?

No doubt many experts have considered and examined this potential situation. Looking ahead, they have, very likely, conjured up theoretical confrontations, assessed the balance of opposing factors, and weighed all sorts of probabilities. In the end, even the most careful calculations provide little guarantee of reality. Although research into the future is now more scientific than ever before, informed guesswork and trend projection may produce a wide margin of error.

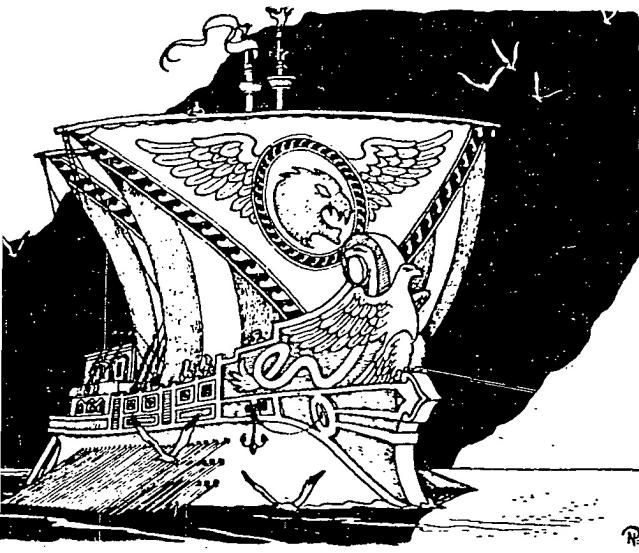
In contrast, the past offers a more depend-

able record, although dangers lurk there, too. The identifiable sequence of events is always subject to different interpretations. Distortions of one sort or another are always possible; for example, one tends to see what one is predisposed to observe. But at least we are dealing with what has already actually happened.

Throughout the course of history, by virtue of geography, resources, and tradition, some states have had a facility for making war on land, others have been proficient at sea. On occasion they have been in conflict. How did they grapple with each other? Who triumphed? What determined the result?

A brief historical journey through the ages may reveal a pattern, perhaps demonstrate a lesson, maybe even illuminate a principle. With R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy's magnificent *Encyclopedia of Military History* to help us ascertain the facts, let us take a rapid tour and survey some of the clashes between an established landpower and an established seapower.

In the 5th century B.C., Athens, a seapower, and Sparta, a landpower, fought the Peloponnesian War. Sparta invaded, marched on Athens overland, ravaged the Athenian countryside, tried to crush the forces defending the city, but was unable to seize the capital. Athens defended on land, held off the Spartan Army, took the offensive at sea, consistently defeated the small and inexperienced Spartan Navy, and devastated the Peloponnesian coast.



After several years of stalemate, the tide turned. Athenian forces landed on the Peloponnesian shore and established a fortified base at Pylos, now Navarino. The Spartans reacted violently, but the Athenians flung back the Spartan land attacks. They also captured a Spartan fleet, which left a contingent of soldiers on the island of Sphacteria, not far from the mainland. Reinforcements from Athens arrived at Pylos, overwhelmed the isolated Spartans on Sphacteria, and took 292 surviving Spartan warriors prisoner. Sparta sued for peace.

Why? The loss of a relatively small unit of soldiers was no threat to the power of Sparta. Yet the minor Athenian tactical victory on land psychologically disabled the Spartans, for it broke their supremacy in ground warfare. The short and temporary Peace of Nicias ensued.

War having broken out again, the Athenians sailed to Sicily to capture Syracuse, the richest city on the island. The Sicilians were unable to resist the Athenian entry into the harbor of Syracuse, but they fought the Athenians to a standstill on land.

Two years later, a combined fleet of Corinthians and Syracusans, allies of Sparta, annihilated the Athenian ships in the harbor, then killed or took prisoner the soldiers who sought to escape. The power of Athens seemed close to dissolution, but the city recovered.

The Spartans rebuilt their navy and became

allied with Persia. Their combined naval forces attacked 200 Athenian vessels moored for the night, destroyed the ships, slaughtered or captured the crews, and blockaded Athens. Its naval supremacy broken, Athens capitulated.

Very simply, it appears that when the Athenians defeated the Spartans on land, they won; when the Spartans beat the Athenians at sea, they triumphed.

Was this a solitary experience unique to the age of antiquity? Or was the pattern repeated? Were there similar recurrences?

The rivalry of Rome, a landpower, and Carthage, a seapower, may be instructive. During the First Punic War, in a shocking reversal of roles, 330 Roman vessels defeated 350 Carthaginian warships. Having swept the sea clear of the Carthaginian naval shield, the Romans landed an army and crushed the Carthaginian ground forces in the battle of Adys. The Carthaginians requested an end to the hostilities.

Several years later, about 200 Roman ships were blockading Carthage when a Carthaginian fleet of about the same size approached. In the subsequent battle of Drepanum, the Carthaginians manifested their traditional strength. The Romans lost.

Having rebuilt its navy, Rome dispatched about 200 ships to Sicily. In the following year, the Romans battled the Carthaginians at sea, captured 70 ships, sank about 50 more, and gained supremacy. Carthage asked for peace.

During the Second Punic War, Carthage threatened Rome on land. Circumventing Roman control of the sea, Hannibal marched an army overland from Spain through southern Gaul and across the Alps to the Po Valley. He had great success in a series of engagements, notably at Cannae, and came close to winning the war. But he was unable to impose a decisive or psychologically killing defeat on the Romans, and the conflict ended inconclusively.

In the Third Punic War, the Romans maintained their command of the sea, blockaded, besieged, captured, and destroyed Carthage, which had traditionally been a seapower.

Rome had become dominant in both areas of war-making enterprise. Yet what eventually menaced and ultimately destroyed the power of Rome were not the conquests of a maritime adversary but rather the land incursions of the European barbarians. Despite proficiency in both military spheres, the Romans were fundamentally vulnerable on land; when that mastery in ground warfare was gone, Rome collapsed.

During the decentralized and chaotic post-

Roman period and medieval age in Europe, despite almost continuous warfare, there were few recognizable powers, few identifiable masters of war on land or sea that struggled with others of opposite strengths. So, too, during the consolidation and emergence of the European states, which gradually attained organization, coherence, and tradition.

England, after destroying the Armada in 1588, replaced Spain as a dominant seapower, then competed with and eliminated Holland as a seapower. France evolved essentially into a landpower but continued to have maritime aspirations and, over the course of several centuries, contested with England for supremacy at sea.

During the Seven Years War or, as the Americans call it, the French and Indian War, the English and French fought in part for control of the New World. Wolfe's dramatic and decisive victory over Montcalm in 1759 on the Plains of Abraham at Quebec is remembered for many reasons—both commanders were gallant, both died in the battle. But the significance of the victory and the defeat, at least in our context, is that Wolfe, representing a seapower, defeated Montcalm, representing a landpower, on land. England won the war.

By the time of the American War for Independence little more than a decade later, England was unquestionably the mistress of the sea. The Americans could fight only on land. To win, the English had to beat the Americans decisively on the ground. If, for example, Burgoyne had succeeded at the battle of Saratoga, the Americans might well have given up. In-

stead, the American victory brought France into the struggle, and the French Navy challenged the English in a vital and potentially painful area to the English.

If the pattern here observed thus far continues to have relevance, England lost the war not because Cornwallis surrendered his ground forces at Yorktown, but rather because the French, allies of the Americans, gained at least temporary supremacy at sea.

Let us, very quickly, review the facts. After Cornwallis moved to Yorktown with 7,000 troops in August 1781, Washington and Rochambeau decided that combined Franco-American and joint land and sea operations would be possible if de Grasse could cut the sea communications between the Chesapeake and New York, where the English were firmly established. De Grasse sailed from the West Indies, arrived off Yorktown on 30 August, and disembarked 3,000 French soldiers while Washington and Rochambeau marched their armies from Rhode Island and New Jersey to Virginia.

Rushing from New York, a fleet under Graves appeared off the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. Early in September, de Grasse and his 24 ships closed with the English in the Battle of the Virginia Capes. After five days of fruitless maneuvering, Graves disengaged and returned to New York, leaving command of the sea to the French.

Washington and Rochambeau reached the scene, invested Yorktown, and in mid-October, with the French still in temporary and local control of the sea, obtained Cornwallis' sur-

American and French officers confer at Yorktown following Cornwallis' surrender.





Nelson's victory at Trafalgar re-asserted England's supremacy on the sea.

render. Shocked by the loss of sea mastery—there were, of course, additional reasons—the English made peace.

During the Napoleonic Wars, England the seapower waged war against France the land-power. Off Cape Trafalgar in October 1805, Nelson, with 29 ships, attacked a Franco-Spanish force of 33 vessels and captured 18 of them in what Ernest and Trevor Dupuy call the most decisive major naval victory of history. For, they say, the English destroyed French naval power—by capturing 18 ships?—and re-asserted the supremacy of England on the sea.

What was important about the victory, it seems to me, what made Nelson, who was mortally wounded in the battle, a great national hero was not the decisive tactical action but rather the immense strategic issue at stake. Had Nelson lost at Trafalgar, had the French and Spanish won a great naval triumph, the result might well have knocked England out of the war.

It took the land battle of Waterloo in 1815 to bring Napoleon to defeat. Wellington and a coalition of landpowers beat France, which had been the acknowledged master of land warfare for more than 15 years.

Three examples in the 20th century offer additional evidence.

First, the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05, Russia the landpower, Japan the seapower. Without a declaration of war, the Japanese attacked and largely destroyed the Russian ships at anchor in the harbor of Port Arthur. Army troops then landed at Inchon, Korea, moved north to the Yalu River, and defeated Russian ground forces. Fighting their way down the

Liaotung peninsula toward the naval base of Port Arthur at the tip, Japanese soldiers invested Port Arthur, which surrendered in February 1905. Having won the war on land, the Japanese now faced a challenge at sea.

The Russians in October 1904 had sent their Baltic Fleet on a long and wearying voyage to the Pacific. The ships arrived in May 1905, entered the strait of Tsushima, gave battle, and by nightfall of the first day of the engagement, were fleeing in disorder. Had the Russians won the sea battle, the war would have probably ended in a draw. At Tsushima, the Japanese confirmed their victory, which they had already attained over the landpower on the ground.

The second example, World War I, involved three major participants, seapower Britain allied with landpower France against landpower Germany. The British immediately sent an expeditionary force of 150,000 men across the Channel to fight alongside the French. The act conformed to the thought that Germany could be defeated only on land.

The terrible land battles on the Western Front affected Britain less than France. The slaughter on the British battlefields of Passchendaele, Ypres, and elsewhere produced insufficient motivation for the British to consider seriously withdrawing from the war. But the bloodshed at Verdun and other French battlefields, prompted serious discouragement and defeatism among the French and a mutiny in the army.

While the Germans invaded France to overcome the French on land, they also made war at sea to defeat the British. At first they had little success. Their ships were swept from the

seas, and Allied maritime traffic continued virtually without interruption. Turning to under-sea warfare, the Germans expended their submarine fleet and initiated an unrestricted underwater campaign in February 1915. They called off this offensive in September, but they had by then sunk about a million tons of Allied shipping and brought Britain close to defeat. From February to May 1916, the Germans resumed their submarine attacks and almost forced Britain to its knees. Had the Germans continued their attacks at sea, they might well have gained victory over Britain and triumph in the war.

The great naval battle of Jutland in mid-1916 resulted in a tactical victory for the Germans, but the outcome had no effect on the strategic balance. What Jellicoe and Beatty accomplished was what Nelson had achieved a hundred years earlier. They prevented a defeat that might well have lost Britain the war.

In the end, after receiving an infusion of American manpower, the Allies won World War I against Germany the landpower on the ground of the Western Front.

The third illustration is World War II. At the outbreak of hostilities, a British expeditionary force of nearly 400,000 men moved at once across the Channel to join the French ground forces. When the German armies in the spring of 1940 invaded western Europe, they achieved quick success in their lightning campaign and beat the British and French land forces in six weeks. For France, a landpower, the defeat was fatal, and the French capitulated. For Britain, a seapower, the setback was catastrophic, but the British remained a belligerent.

Possessing almost a hundred submarines and a powerful surface fleet at the outset of hostilities, Germany launched a naval offensive. By August 1940, the Germans had destroyed 2.5-million tons of British shipping. The German underwater campaign gained momentum and force and in 1942, after the United States had entered the conflict, came close to defeating both Britain and America. Not until the spring of 1943 did the battle of the Atlantic begin to swing in favor of the Allies. By mid-year the number of new Allied ships constructed was not merely replacing but exceeding the total number of vessels destroyed. That was the real turning point in the war. Britain and the United States, both seapowers, could no longer be defeated. Together, with the Soviet Union, they gained eventual victory over Germany on land.

In the Pacific war, Japan bombed Pearl Har-

bor to destroy American naval power. Had the attack disabled the U.S. aircraft carriers, if the formula here is still pertinent, the blow might have been mortal. Surely the loss of the Philippines after ground combat, although constituting a disaster and a profound shock, posed no such threat. Nor did the loss of Singapore and other British territories provide sufficient incentive for Britain to quit.

As it turned out, the United States recovered, rebuilt and expanded its navy, and, in a war between seapowers, inflicted defeat on Japan by destroying the Japanese at sea.

Twenty-five years later in the Gulf of Tonkin, the real or imagined attacks on two U.S. destroyers by North Vietnamese patrol boats touched a sensitive American nerve. The confrontation at sea created consternation and near panic and produced a nervous overreaction on the part of the government. Perhaps Americans perceived the event as a challenge to the supremacy of the United States as a seapower.

Baldly expressed, the thesis here presented is that landpowers and seapowers must be strong in both categories. Each must be capable of delivering the decisive blow in the other's specialty. Yet at the same time, each must be able to protect its own particular vulnerability. Mastery in one military realm may prove to be the supreme weakness.

Whether this still has significance today is somewhat debatable, for at least two relatively recent developments have fundamentally altered the practice of war. The advent of air-power has complicated the landpower-sea-power equation and perhaps upset the almost too neat equilibrium. And the existence of nuclear weapons has given quite a different nuance to the formerly stark concepts of victory and defeat.

In any event, historical situations, circumstances, and conditions are never, of course, as simple as my portrayal here. Whether there is a pattern, lesson, or principle is perhaps beside the point. The purpose of this brief and, no doubt, overstated survey is to suggest the continuing relevance of history to our thought and discussion of contemporary concerns.

If our short historical voyage has produced a particle of meaning or illumination, let us apply it to our original figures. The boxer must pin the wrestler to the mat in order to win, the wrestler must knock out the boxer to win. And each must be strong enough to avoid defeat in his special ability.

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