

6

The Rise of the Armchair Strategists

Professional civilian strategists began to influence the debate on intervention at the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century. Originally these were solitary individuals, economists, lawyers, journalists or historians who became specialists on military affairs. Nowadays armchair strategists are very often supported by universities and research institutes, and their numbers have dramatically increased. The debates to which they contributed have been international with many of the most distinguished contributors coming from Central and Eastern Europe where the impact of conflict and totalitarianism was peculiarly devastating in the 20th century. Nevertheless, British writers from Norman Angell and Julian Corbett before 1914, through Hector Bywater and J. M. Spaight in the Inter-War period to P. M. S. Blackett and Robert Thompson after 1945, have played a major part in the debate, even if the largest concentration of armchair strategists has been located in Washington since the Second World War.

The impact of the armchair strategists has, nevertheless, been limited by the haphazard fashion in which the media pick up some of their ideas and ignore others, and by the way in which politicians misinterpret their ideas. Some, such as Ivan Bloch, died before the outbreak of the major conflict which they feared, others including Norman Angell experienced two great wars and were able to assess the extent that the conflicts vindicated their previous arguments. Their role is to puzzle out from the ever more voluminous data available to the public what technical, economic and political developments may lead to violence and what shape a new war might take. Looking back, we can see that naval warfare was transformed by the development of the submarine which threatened the survival of industrialised island states, such as Britain and Japan, and warfare as a whole was revolutionised by the invention and

rapid evolution of aircraft which menaced all densely packed industrial cities. In recent years an equally important revolution has been brought about by precision-guided munitions and by the multiplication of television cameras on the battlefield. However obvious it seems in retrospect, it was by no means evident at earlier periods which of these particular technical innovations and economic changes would be the decisive ones rather than the others which were competing for attention at the time.

While, as we have seen, many of the most famous war correspondents before 1914 were Social Darwinists, armchair strategists, who studied the prospect of another great war in the late 19th and early 20th century, often became increasingly anxious about the impact of such a conflict on the world economy. It had been so long since a war convulsed the European continent, and industrialisation had proceeded so quickly in the intervening period, that it was difficult to imagine how financial institutions would adapt. The Polish railway magnate and banker Ivan Bloch was undoubtedly the most original of those who wrote on the issue. He has been described recently, and with some justice, as the 'father of civilian war studies'.¹ His analysis of the *War of the Future*, published in the 1890s, remains the outstanding example of what a civilian analyst can achieve by mastering the military literature and integrating it with expertise from another sphere. Unfortunately, it remains an equally outstanding example of the inability of politicians to respond appropriately to strategic warnings when war threatens and of military leaders to take civilian predictions about their profession seriously.

Bloch's contention was that wars between the Great Powers would no longer produce the results for which statesmen hoped. Because of the developments in weaponry, military operations would lead to a prolonged stalemate and the deadlock would only be broken by the economic collapse and ensuing revolution in the belligerent states.² The First World War justified many of Bloch's tactical predictions, producing a deadlock lasting for four years, despite all that military leaders and technologists could do to break their enemies through the introduction of tanks, poison gases, submarines, airships, bombers and a host of other technical and tactical innovations. But Bloch's economic predictions were, ironically, much less accurate than his military forecasts. The belligerents were able to pay for four years of war through taxes, by inflation and, above all, through mortgaging their future revenues. Moreover, Bloch expected Russia and Austria-Hungary to survive the war economically better than Britain and Germany with their more developed and, therefore, more fragile economies. In fact, it was Russia

which collapsed first in 1917 and Austria-Hungary which followed a year later.³

Paradoxically, Bloch could envisage the field of battle, the trenches, barbed wire and the machine guns, what he could not imagine was that the financiers, amongst whom he had worked, would respond effectively in the short run to the challenge of war – experts are usually most pessimistic about their own area of expertise where they know just what can go wrong. Bloch ignored the work of the British economists from Adam Smith in the 18th century to Richard Cobden in the 19th. Smith had argued that the Great Powers' ability to borrow benefited the moneylenders in London and enabled people to 'enjoy, at their ease, the amusement of reading in the newspapers the exploits of their own fleets and armies'. Without the power to borrow, taxes would immediately have fallen more heavily on the population and intervention would have been avoided or brought to a speedy conclusion.⁴ Similarly, in the mid-19th century, Richard Cobden attacked the City of London for lending to foreign combatants and thus, he thought, encouraging and prolonging their wars. He compared it to funding brothels.⁵ Thus, the free traders pointed out that government borrowing made wars possible, while Ivan Bloch feared that the inability to borrow sufficiently would lead to national collapse. In the event, Britain borrowed \$4600 million from the United States and loaned even more to Russia, France and Italy. It agreed to go on repaying the US debt, as well as the interest of \$6500 million, until 1984; if war debts had not lapsed during the Great Depression, 17 years of peace would have been needed to pay for each year of war. Russia and Austria-Hungary liquidated their debts when they collapsed, and Germany achieved the same effect by massive inflation, which ruined the middle classes. While this experience may have discouraged the cost-conscious democracies from defending their interests in the 1930s, it did nothing to deter the Germans, Italians and Japanese who planned to pay for their future conquests through looting conquered states.

By no means all armchair strategists were as pessimistic as Bloch before the First World War. Indeed, some insisted that, despite the integration of the global economy and Britain's central place in it, technical innovations would actually strengthen the country's economic position in the event of war. Julian Corbett was making his name at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich before 1914 as Britain's leading naval strategist, lecturer and historian. Corbett's ambition and expertise were narrower than Bloch's. His objective was to show how naval strategy differed from military operations on land, what advantages Britain

gained from being the greatest naval power, and what it lost by its total dependence on maritime trade. Like all naval analysts he was only too well aware how great this reliance had become for an industrial nation unable to feed its people. However, unlike the most famous naval historian of the day, Alfred Mahan who was a US naval officer, Corbett was by training a lawyer and he believed that British commerce was safer than it had been for centuries because of the legal prohibition on privateering which had previously been the main threat to merchant ships.

Britain was also favoured by the reduction in the range of enemy commerce raiders because they now depended on steam rather than sail. Warships could still threaten merchant ships but for much shorter periods because of their need for coal. Moreover, merchant ships also used steam and could, therefore, sometimes avoid the routes where commerce raiders might lie in wait and their radio could give warning that they had been attacked.⁶ All this was perfectly correct but took no account of what the world was later to learn was the most important development, the evolution of submarines. In the First World War these would sink merchant ships without warning and thus almost bring Britain to its knees in 1917. Like many British strategists, Corbett's methods were essentially historical; he tried to deduce the future from past experience but, in this case, his imagination, legal training and intuition failed him. When Britain imposed a tight maritime blockade on the Central Powers, the Germans could only retaliate by submarine warfare. The legal and moral restraints, which Corbett and others assumed would prevent such attacks on trade, gradually fell away in the heat of battle. By 1917 submarines had created what the First Sea Lord Admiral Jellicoe called 'the greatest crisis which ever threatened the population of this country'. Britain was on the brink of starvation.⁷

Corbett accepted Bloch's argument that maritime trade had knit the world together, while rejecting his conclusions. Another part of the argument was taken up by Norman Angell, a journalist with *The Daily Mail* whose pamphlet *The Great Illusion*, published in 1909, caught the imagination of the media in a way which Bloch and Corbett were unable to do.⁸ Angell's writings were read by Edward V11, by the US industrialist and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, by politicians like Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Party leader and George Lansbury, a later one, by Arthur Balfour, the former Conservative prime minister, by strategic analysts like Lord Esher and economists like Maynard Keynes. It was Esher who helped Angell set up a foundation, sponsored by Richard Garton, a wealthy industrialist, to spread his ideas and both Balfour and Esher became directors.⁹ In some ways all this interest is surprising

because Angell was much less original and well read than Bloch or Corbett. British Liberals had always emphasised the economic destructiveness of warfare.¹⁰ Angell expanded their arguments by claiming that one developed state could not capture the trade and wealth of another. Ironically, the habit of making defeated nations pay for their own humiliation had been taken up by other states following Napoleon's example at the start of the 19th century. Bismarck had forced France to pay the full costs of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the Japanese did the same thing in 1895 when they defeated China and compelled the Chinese to pay for their own defeat and for a major increase in the size of the Japanese armed forces.¹¹ Thus Tokyo showed that war could, in some circumstances, be made to pay handsomely, though its experience a decade later when the Russians determined to go on fighting, despite all their defeats at Japanese hands, rather than pay reparations, gave warning that the fear of paying such an indemnity might prolong and exacerbate conflicts.¹² When the nations ignored Angell's warnings and went to war in 1914, it seems likely that Germany, at least, hoped to pay for the conflict by imposing reparations on its enemies, just as it had forced the French to pay in 1871. War should always be seen as an expensive option, otherwise treasuries will fail to act as a necessary brake on intervention.

In the months leading up to the First World War, Angell was fully occupied attending student conferences and lecturing at universities and at other institutions to spread his views on international relations. He felt that the crisis immediately before the war was 'the result of an irrationalism which threatened somehow to engulf the world'. Consciously or unconsciously, Angell must have believed that economic arguments were unlikely to be convincing at such a moment; he seems from his own account to have spent less time warning of the financial costs and more arguing that Britain should remain neutral so that it could mediate between the belligerents to bring an end to the conflict. He also stressed the danger arising from a war, which would leave Russia the dominant force on the continent, since St Petersburg had long been the *bête noire* of Liberal commentators for its despotism.

Angell may have been wrong to play down the fears of economic chaos; at one stage Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, informed his cabinet colleagues:

That he had been consulting the Governor and Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, other men of light and leading in the city, also cotton men, and steel and coal men, etc., in the North of England,

in Glasgow etc., and they were all aghast at the bare idea of plunging into a European conflict; how it would break down the whole system of credit with London at its centre, how it would cut up commerce and manufacture – they told him – how it would hit labour and wages and prices, and, when winter came, would inevitably produce violence and tumult.¹³

Economic experts were, thus, extremely anxious about the threat of war, but their fears had less impact on the government than political considerations. Moreover, economic collapse elsewhere could actually make the threat less horrific, if it brought war rapidly to an end. Sir Edward Grey wrote later:

Some of us thought that economic disaster would make itself felt more quickly after the outbreak of war; that it would rapidly become so acute as to bring the war to an end. In that we were wrong, but we were wrong only in our estimate of the time and manner in which the economic disaster would make itself felt. It might have been more merciful to Europe as a whole, if this disaster had made itself felt more quickly and imperatively and so had shortened the war Those who had the worst forebodings of what war would mean, did not over-estimate the human suffering or the economic distress that it has actually caused.¹⁴

In this passage, Grey showed himself familiar with the Bloch–Angell view of the likely economic impact of war and identified himself with it. Perhaps more than any other statesman he was torn then and later between fear of German domination of European politics and of the terrible suffering and social chaos which war would cause. But the effect of the Bloch–Angell view may have been the reverse of what they intended, for, from his account, Grey would seem to have comforted himself in August 1914 with the hope that war could not last long and thus that the deaths in combat would be restricted!

While Grey and his cabinet colleagues struggled with their consciences, Angell and his helpers sent hundreds of telegrams to influential people pointing out the dangers of Russian domination, if Germany were defeated, and the importance of British mediation. As we shall see in Chapter 8, the speeches by Liberal and Labour MPs in the crucial debates on the declaration of war suggest that Angell was not without influence.¹⁵ However, it should be noticed that it was his colleague from the Garton Foundation, Arthur Balfour, who ended the debate in the

House of Commons by dismissing these speeches with contempt. Balfour and many others believed that the threat to the balance of power, Britain's commitments to France and the German invasion of Belgium overrode in importance the arguments which Angell and the Liberals were advancing. Late in life Angell admitted, 'where my work failed mainly was in giving a plain and simple answer to the question: "how shall a political truth once established, be translated into a workable policy?"'¹⁶ Nowhere was this clearer than in Balfour's behaviour in August 1914.

Bloch and Angell were often misinterpreted then and later as suggesting that war had become impossible; what they actually argued, like Cobden and Bright before them, was that a great war would be economically devastating. Both Bloch and Angell believed that it might destroy the foundations of the Western economy and bring revolution in its wake. It is the fate of armchair strategists to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. After the First World War, strategists also had to try to influence debate when the elite consensus was profoundly anti-military and unsympathetic even to addressing strategic issues. However, in other ways, the general study of international affairs made rapid progress. Professorships were founded at Aberystwyth and the London School of Economics to turn the subject into an academic pursuit. The Royal Institute of International Affairs was also established to give more rigour to the debate and its annual *Survey of International Affairs*, edited for the most part by the polymath Arnold Toynbee, is still worth reading today for its insights into the politics of the inter-war years.¹⁷ Foreign correspondents filled the newspapers with accounts of the troubles in South America, China or Europe, and frequently added to these brief stories by publishing books on their experiences.¹⁸ Most newspapers had several correspondents in all the major capitals of the world and the large number of weekly and monthly periodicals gave extensive space to international topics. The Left Book Club claimed 60,000 members and the corresponding Right Book Club a further 25,000, each publishing informative accounts of foreign events and analyses of the international scene.¹⁹

The defect, as the British writer E. H. Carr pointed out, though with some exaggeration, in 1945, 'of nearly all [this] thinking, both academic and popular, about international politics in the English-speaking countries from 1919 to 1939 [was] the almost total neglect of the factor of power'.²⁰ Certainly, the well-known American and British journalists who published their accounts of European and Asian politics, Robert Bruce Lockhart, F. Yeats-Brown, Philip Gibbs, Douglas Reed, John

Gunther and Edgar Mowrer, tended to skirt round military issues.²¹ Of course, they occasionally ventured judgements; the American journalist Edgar Mowrer unwisely concluded from the Spanish Civil War that tanks and aircraft were overrated, infantry were still dominant on the battlefield; similarly, in *Japan over Asia*, W. H. Chamberlain added to the widespread underestimation of Japanese warships and aircraft.²² Generally, however, journalists left strategic judgements to specialised periodicals, such as the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, and to the retired officers who acted as military and naval correspondents for the serious newspapers. The League of Nations itself published the *Armaments Year-Book* which collated reports from governments on their military organisation and the numbers in their armed forces.²³ For the tiny handful who took an interest, it provided at least the rudiments of knowledge about the numerical balance between military forces, even if the more unscrupulous governments bent the information they supplied to suit their interests.

The First World War had certainly accentuated the elite's general reluctance to face military issues squarely. In Britain the war had come increasingly to be represented as a fight against militarism, just as the Second World War was seen 20 years later as a struggle against Fascism.²⁴ The treaties imposed in 1919 on the defeated powers reduced the size of their armies and navies, and prohibited conscription, because Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson considered this the best way of lessening the ability of their armed forces to spread their militaristic values across society. The war had been fought 'to end wars' and, exhausted by the costs of the war, the democracies were tempted to act as if the armed forces existed only because of the temporary imperfections of the League of Nations and the slow progress of its discussions on disarmament. As the writer and Cambridge lecturer Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson put it in 1923, 'war and civilisation are henceforth incompatible... the very existence of mankind is incompatible with the further development of methods of destruction on which science is actually engaged'.²⁵ Of course, many Europeans took a more pessimistic view of the prospects for violence if Germany rearmed, but anti-militarism was pervasive amongst the elite in Britain and the United States. After Hitler had taken control of Germany, the children's writer A. A. Milne could still claim, 'it is unthinkable that one nation should break faith, and attack another nation. Even if that were not so, nations should take the risk [of espousing disarmament and pacifism] for a cause higher than any national cause, the cause of humanity.'²⁶ After the casualties in the First World War, it was hardly surprising that Milne should find such

perfidy unimaginable, but, unfortunately, Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo were determined to prove him wrong.

There were, nevertheless, a number of original contributions to ideas on security during these years even if, as with Bloch and Angell in the pre-1914 period, their impact was sometimes not what the authors had hoped for. One of the leading British naval analysts of the inter-war period, Hector Bywater has been described by a recent biographer as 'the man who "invented" the Pacific war'.²⁷ Yet the books Bywater wrote in the 1920s were devoted to alerting Japan and the United States to the destructiveness of such a war. Moreover, the warning to Japan was the more strident because Bywater believed that the Japanese would be defeated if war came. Bywater may have invented the strategy which Japan pursued in 1941, he deplored the politics which led to the conflict. Like Angell, Bywater was a journalist and, therefore, adept at spreading his ideas and he engaged in an extended debate with Franklin Roosevelt in the 1920s, a debate from which, we can now see, he emerged as much the more prescient;²⁸ like Bloch, he had the sort of imagination which could, to some extent, envision how a great war would develop and tried to integrate military and economic developments.

In the 1920s, when many people in the West had forgotten Japan's devastating victories over Russia in 1904–1905, and were underestimating the Japanese armed forces' professionalism, Bywater pointed out that their warships sacrificed comfort to efficiency and so their submarines cruised for longer than those of other navies because of the toughness and endurance of the crews.²⁹ Bywater noted that Japan was totally dependent for its trade on the seas between its coasts, Korea and China. These were 'the vital arteries through which her life-blood flows. If they were severed she would perish.'³⁰ He foresaw that Japan would begin another war, as it had begun the war against Russia in February 1904, by a pre-emptive strike. This time it would attack the US navy and it would then go on to occupy an outer perimeter of islands to protect its empire. The ensuing war would be a 'terrible and protracted struggle' during which the US army would fight its way towards Japan by 'hopping' from island to island, as indeed it did between 1943 and 1945.

By the 1930s Bywater had seen that Britain would be unable to protect its base at Singapore from a Japanese attack, something which so many British politicians and senior officers failed to understand until the disaster occurred, despite their access to classified information. As late as 18 December 1941, L. S. Amery, the secretary of state for India, was still confiding in his diary that he did not expect Singapore to fall.³¹

Equally accurately, Bywater had warned the Japanese against 'provoking the lion' because Britain and the United States would eventually be victorious.³² Not only was Bywater peculiarly prescient about the shape of a future war, but he had a better idea of the resentment felt in Japan against the West and thus of the threat it presented than some of the British writers who had lived there and of most politicians including Winston Churchill himself.³³

If British armchair strategists often focused on maritime and financial affairs, Central Europeans, like Bloch, had good reason to meditate on the future of land warfare. British liberals continued to oppose rearmament into the second half of the 1930s, while continental realists understood that the dictatorships were arming for war. The argument was typified by the opposing views of the ageing British Liberal and former editor of *The Economist* Francis Hirst and the continental armchair strategist Max Werner. Hirst's analysis of the arms race appeared in 1937, when the armies raised by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were presenting a serious and growing threat to their British and French equivalents. Hirst's objective was to disparage warnings by Winston Churchill and others about the Nazi threat and to demonstrate that the dictatorships were undermining their economies by their military policy. Despite his economic expertise, Hirst proved much more mistaken about the relationship between armaments and war than Bloch had been three decades before.³⁴ Werner, the student of both armaments and economics, proved far more prophetic.

Born in Kharkov in 1901, Werner became an economist before emigrating to the West and making his living in Weimar Germany as a financial journalist. In 1933 he fled to France where he changed the focus of his interests to military affairs and spent his days in the Vincennes Library of Modern War.³⁵ He published *Towards the Second World War* in France the year after Hirst's book appeared and it was translated into English and published as the *Military Strength of the Powers* for the Left Book Club in March 1939. Werner not only saw that armoured warfare would dominate the next war but his assessment of the balance of power was also largely accurate. Germany and the Soviet Union now dominated Europe, Italy was a non-entity because of its industrial weakness and Mussolini's exaggerated idea of the importance of numbers of soldiers as opposed to equipment. Britain and France had failed to rearm quickly enough, while the United States was slowly but inexorably building up immense forces to challenge Japan.³⁶ Much of this now seems commonplace, but it was certainly not so at the start of the war when General Ismay, who was later to be Churchill's chief of staff,

believed that, if Britain fell, the United States would follow suit.³⁷ It showed that an armchair strategist, working in his library and studying the mass of data published by the various armies, could produce estimates at least as accurate as many of those made within governments by those with access to secret intelligence.³⁸ Like Bywater, Werner foresaw the ultimate defeat of Japan, he also predicted the humiliation of Italian forces in the Mediterranean and the titanic struggle on the Eastern Front. It was that struggle which dominated Werner's next books, *Battle for the World*, published in 1941 and *The Great Offensive* which came out a year later.³⁹ In these he rightly pointed out that the Eastern Front was playing the pivotal role which the Western Front had taken in the First World War.

Werner agreed with the most famous British strategic writer during the inter-war years, Basil Liddell Hart, that the democracies' security policy had failed during the 1930s. Liddell Hart had served in the army during the First World War and became, along with J. F. C. Fuller, the foremost advocate of armoured warfare. In the 1920s he also developed a series of original ideas on grand strategy and wrote a number of major works on military history.⁴⁰ In the mid-1930s Liddell Hart believed Britain too weak to send an army to help France against a German attack and, though he moved somewhat from this position after the Munich agreement, his position was always ambiguous.⁴¹ He knew many of the British political leaders and was for a time an adviser to Hore Belisha, the war minister. But he despaired of ever persuading politicians to take sufficient account of strategic factors, rather than public opinion or political advantage. In his memoirs he dwells on two of their decisions as evidence of strategic ignorance. In March 1939, when Hitler seized Czechoslovakia, the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain suddenly reversed his policy of appeasement and guaranteed Polish territorial integrity. Liddell Hart believed that Chamberlain made these changes either because of 'the pressure of public indignation over "Prague", or his own indignation, or his humiliation at having been made to look a fool in the eyes of the British public'. Confidential diaries suggest that it was, in fact, a final attempt to deter the Nazis and a consequence of the feeling that at last 'something must be done' about Nazi aggression.⁴² In any case, like many serving officers, Liddell Hart felt that it was absurd to give a guarantee that could not be fulfilled; more unusually, and probably rightly, he argued that it provoked Hitler to attack and thus to begin the war in September 1939.⁴³

The second decision, which Liddell Hart deplored, was the sudden introduction of conscription on 28 March 1939. Again this was

prompted by public anger with the government for its policies. But Liddell Hart believed it would cause confusion and slow the pace of mechanising the armed forces.⁴⁴ He also argued that it would increase Hitler's determination to attack before British preparations had reached their zenith. All this, together with what Liddell Hart saw as the vacuous boastfulness of Britain's political leaders, increased his alarm. He had already noted in his diary on 19 March:

More vehement, and boastful talk, of our offensive strength, it is only too probable that the incompetence of the policy which has brought us towards a war will be exceeded by the incompetence of our policy in war – that we shall pay the maximum price for the minimum of effort. And we shall be lucky if we do not damage our strength irreparably before we learn by hard experience to fight in a way that conserves it.⁴⁵

Given such mistakes, he seems to have become convinced that Britain would be defeated, cut off most of his military and journalistic contacts, and retired to Devon to recover from a heart attack he had had in June 1939.

Liddell Hart's worst fears were not to be realised thanks to the Channel separating Britain from the continent and the entry first of the Soviet Union and then the United States into the war. In the meantime, as pointed out earlier, once Britain had been expelled from Europe in June 1940, the only way it could attack Nazi Germany was by blockade or from the air. The leading British civilian expert on airpower in these years was J. M. Spaight, a lawyer who joined the civil service in 1901, and he made his reputation with the publication of his assessment of the legal position of *Aircraft in Peace and War* in 1919 and with the first of three editions of *Air Power and War Rights* in 1924. His 1919 book was one of the earliest to examine the legal problems posed by peacetime air travel, showing how rules about the sovereignty of airspace, the registration of aircraft, the certification of aircraft and pilots and responsibility for collisions were gradually being worked out.⁴⁶ Spaight rose to become Principal Assistant Secretary in the Air Ministry by 1934 and held that post until he retired three years later, collecting the conventional accolades of a CB and a CBE along the way.

Histories of airpower in the period tend to focus on the writings of the Italian commentator Giulio Douhet, who was regarded as the foremost exponent of the view that bombing attacks on civilians would decide

future wars. Douhet published the first part of his major work, *The Command of the Air* in 1921, supplementing it in 1926, 1928, 1929 and 1930. The nub of his argument was that aircraft had great offensive power, but had very limited defensive capability. Anti-aircraft guns were useless and many fighters were needed to shoot down just one bomber. Auxiliary aircraft, that is planes employed by armies or navies, were also a diversion of effort from the real business of airpower which was to attack enemy airfields, factories and cities.⁴⁷ The terrible threat from the air would be beneficial because it would deter people from resorting to war since, wherever they lived, they would be as much at risk as the armed forces. The problem with this prognostication was that the Italian people might be deterred but Mussolini might ignore their feelings.

The contrast with Spaight's analysis of airpower is instructive. In 1938 Spaight published what was arguably his best book, *Air Power in the Next War*, in a series edited by Liddell Hart. Spaight wisely stressed the uncertainties about what would happen in a future great war, but he meticulously compared the total destruction which Douhet argued would overcome the civilian population with the actual destruction wrought by bombers in the Spanish Civil War and in the Japanese attacks on China. This had been bad enough, but it had not encompassed whole cities and it had not brought victory to the aggressors.⁴⁸ Spaight contended that air power theorists grossly magnified the number and effectiveness of the bombers under construction; 'the programmes are not colossal, and they will not give the number of machines required if the forecasts of universal destruction are to be realised'. The published estimates of the numbers of German aircraft varied widely but all the figures were an order of magnitude less than the 27,000 planes Britain had produced in 1918 and which alone could not have defeated Germany.⁴⁹ He went on to argue, again correcting Douhet, that so many were needed for training and maintenance that far more modest numbers could be kept on the front line and that large numbers would be employed in conjunction with the army and navy since 'a war without surface encounter is improbable in the extreme'.

Spaight did not deny that air raid precautions were necessary or that war would bring civilian casualties. He accepted the erroneous notion that totalitarian states were preparing to defeat their enemies through strategic bombing alone; 'we have the evidence of statements by Field-Marshal Göring and others...and also the record of what German airmen serving with General Franco have actually done. The signs and tokens of the wrath to come are clear.'⁵⁰ But Spaight was right to say that the threat was exaggerated; we can now see that the German air

force was designed, in direct contrast to Douhet's proposals, to support its army and navy. The Luftwaffe's strategic attacks on cities during the battle of Britain in 1940 were not the outcome of long-term plans. Moreover, it was not until three years later that Bomber Command and the US Army Air Force were powerful enough to begin to devastate German cities in the way that Douhet had believed was already within the capacity of air forces in the 1920s.

Finally, and most importantly, as Spaight presciently noted, bombers had proved extremely vulnerable to enemy fighters in the First World War and they had to be escorted by fighters during the Spanish Civil War.⁵¹ We now know that bombers unescorted by fighters could not then operate in daylight against a well-defended country. Had the British elite accepted Spaight's conclusion, their policy might have been less fearful in 1938 and 1939. His inability to convince national leaders to take a cool rational look at the 'bomber threat' shows that judicious assessments by armchair strategists are only too likely to be obscured by simplistic and alarmist phrases which make newspaper headlines, particularly if these phrases come from well-known politicians or commentators.⁵² Armchair critics may have some influence in the long run, but in the 1930s the democracies were not to be given time before they were swept along by the tide of war.

Analyses by armchair strategists in the inter-war years thus appear to have had a limited impact on policy or opinion, and on the decision to declare war in 1939. If Bywater influenced policy at all, it was, allegedly, Japanese policy, and in the opposite direction to the one he intended. Liddell Hart's failure to persuade Hore Belisha and his colleagues to develop armoured forces as fast as he hoped led to his increasing disillusionment and to his exile in Devon. He was wholly opposed to the declaration of war in September 1939. Despite the prescience of his strategic views, Werner never achieved a wide readership in Britain until the war years when he became a journalist with *Reynolds News*. Finally, it might be supposed that, as a civil servant, Spaight was closer to the centre of power but he was unable to prevent the excessive fear of attacks from the air which helped to paralyse British policy up to 1939.

Once Europe had been overrun and as the United States gradually mobilised its industrial strength for war, it became the centre of the debate on war and peace. It was no accident that Werner made his home in New York and that Norman Angell came to spend much of his time in the United States. US armchair strategists sometimes appeared to have a considerable influence on administrations or at least foresaw what their strategy would be. It was in Washington in 1943 and 1944

that the distinguished US columnist Walter Lippmann sketched the outlines of the alliance systems which were to deter each other and help to prevent the outbreak of conflict after 1945. Lippmann led the move by his fellow countrymen away from the idealism of the Wilson years and the isolationism of the 1930s, to the interventionism of US policy after 1945.⁵³ He argued that all their previous policies had failed because they had relied on moralistic declarations rather than on realistic appraisals of international affairs. Such an appreciation should lead the United States to maintain forces within Britain and France after the fighting ended because it now recognised that their security was vital to its own. It would also be necessary 'to maintain combined staffs, intelligence services and military planning boards' – in other words much what NATO was to do.⁵⁴ Just as it is difficult to show how revolutionary the insights of Bloch, Werner and Bywater had been, so it is difficult to grasp the full extent of the revolution in security policy which Lippmann was proposing. No European country had *ever* previously based its armed forces in the territory of a group of sovereign states in peacetime.⁵⁵ There were no French forces in Russia or Russian forces in France in 1914 although their alliance had existed for two decades; the British government did not send forces to Poland in 1939, despite the guarantee London offered against attack. Not only were bases in foreign territory a major innovation after 1945 but so was the maintenance in peacetime of the sort of joint command and intelligence structure which had grown up in wartime.

In 1944 Lippmann predicted that three 'strategic systems' would emerge; the Atlantic Community, the Russian and the Chinese – a prediction which paralleled Orwell's but preceded it by half a decade. Contacts between them could be harmonious if they did not interfere in each other's sphere and if 'the foreign relations of every state [were] definitely fixed and not suddenly alterable... The evil... is a fluctuating, erratic foreign policy which causes uncertainty, tension, intrigue, insecurity.'⁵⁶ This was what NATO and the Warsaw Pact were to provide for four decades after the Second World War. Unaware of the development of nuclear weapons, Lippmann argued that the Soviet Union and the West had nothing to fear from each other. The elephant and the whale were each impervious to the other's strength. However, he forecast that US opinion could turn against the Soviet Union, particularly if Moscow repressed the Eastern European states. It needed to respect their independence while relying on them to provide a bulwark for its territory from outside attack. In the event, this proved impossible and the natural Western urge to 'play the Good Samaritan' would undermine

Lippmann's favoured policy of non-interference in the Soviet sphere of influence, just as Soviet ideology prevented it from abstaining from interference in the Western sphere.

Here, some years before the outbreak of the Cold War and long before NATO was a speck in the eye of Western policy makers, Lippmann had foreseen much of the future. The US analyst Robert Kagan argued in 2002 that 'no one would have spoken of a common grand strategy for the West before the Cold War'.⁵⁷ In fact Lippmann had produced just such an imaginative tour de force which did precisely that and achieved in grand strategy what Bloch had attained with his tactical vision at the end of the 19th century and Wells had achieved with his prophecies of tanks and nuclear weapons in the next decade. Moreover, Lippmann's proposed strategy helped to avoid war, while Bloch's gloomy vision was, as we have seen, either ignored or had the reverse effect in August 1914 to the one intended. Of course, Lippmann did not grasp the complete picture; the Western countries did sometimes use their forces unilaterally in ways which Lippmann hoped would disappear. On the other hand, Lippmann's predictions about the Third World were more prescient than Orwell's gloomy forecasts. Lippmann foresaw both the imminence of decolonisation and that it would unfortunately lead to 'prolonged and complicated civil and international strife' but 'eventually one or more constellations will probably form in the Hindu and in the Moslem Worlds'.⁵⁸ It has taken half a century for the Moslem states to create such a religious grouping and for India to emerge as a great power.

The US columnist's books can be compared with the writings of one of the leading British commentators in the period, E. H. Carr, a diplomat, assistant editor on *The Times*, professor at Aberystwyth and lecturer in Oxford and Cambridge. In *Conditions of Peace*, published in 1942, Carr reflected the demoralisation of the European elite. He argued that all the objectives which democracies had claimed to be fighting for had been discredited. Liberal democracy was outdated because it had failed to solve the problem of unemployment; capitalism would have to be replaced by state direction and small states were obsolete because they could not defend themselves and stood in the way of the need to develop ever larger economic units. Admittedly, Carr saw that the European countries would collaborate together far more than they had ever done in the past and was, to that extent, a prophet of the European Union but his world vision was driven by feelings of pessimism and decline.⁵⁹ Fifty years later one can see that Carr's American colleague was a much better prophet; city states, such as Singapore, have flourished in

a largely free-trading world, nationalisation and state direction of industry are discredited even in Russia and China, and democracy has been hailed by one US analyst as the only living political ideology.⁶⁰

Lippmann's close contacts with the political establishment in Washington helped him foresee and influence US policy in the post-war years. And that establishment was entering into its own as the government of the world's strongest power. The problem for British and other commentators was that they were now so far removed from this centre that their ideas often seemed irrelevant or unrealistic. It was only in areas which did not interest US administrations and, in particular, guerrilla warfare that British commentators continued to exercise real influence. In the crucial area of nuclear strategy, on which the survival of the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries depended during the Cold War, US thinkers predominated.

The air of irrelevance pervading European contributions is illustrated by one of the most original and provocative works in the nuclear field, which was written by P. M. S. Blackett, a former naval officer and a distinguished scientist who had made a significant contribution to the British campaign against the U boats during the Battle of the Atlantic.⁶¹ Blackett published *The Military and Political Implications of Atomic Energy* in 1948. It was a sustained polemic against Western policy in general and particularly against its reliance on nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet attack. Blackett argued that deterrence would not work because allied bombers could not penetrate Soviet defences and, therefore, they would be unable to restrain the Kremlin. Blackett drew his conclusions from what he saw as the failure of strategic bombing during the Second World War. Moreover, it was Blackett who popularised the idea that Washington had ruthlessly used nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not to defeat the Japanese, who were already beaten, but to flaunt its nuclear power before the Kremlin.⁶²

Blackett said nothing about the nature of the Soviet state. His criticisms were directed against the Western powers. Yet this was the height of the Cold War, when information about Stalin's mass murders in the Gulag Archipelago was trickling out into the West and when the Soviets were crushing the independence of the East European states. Blackett dismissed Lippmann's idea of a US commitment to defend Western Europe as unrealistic and undesirable, and argued in favour of British isolation. In other words his policy was the polar opposite of Lippmann's. It was at this time that Moscow was most vociferous both against Western nuclear policy and against its military coordination. This identity between Blackett's views and Moscow's, and Blackett's

disparagement of Western policy in general, encouraged George Orwell, the Central European physicist Edward Teller and the US Intelligence services to consider him a Soviet agent. In his memoirs Teller recalled having a furious argument with Blackett, who maintained that the West should abandon Berlin to Soviet control, presumably to avoid provoking the Kremlin.⁶³

Blackett knew that his views were unlikely to influence his countrymen. As he wrote in 1948: 'When the book was finished I found I had signally failed to write a recipe for action which would be likely at the present time to commend itself to the political taste of a majority of my fellow countrymen. But for this the state of the world, not I, must take the blame.'⁶⁴ This was typical of both his self-confidence and his feeling of alienation from the Anglo-American mainstream in 1948. The reviewer for the *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* referred to the author's 'odd tendency to view in a rosy light any Soviet attitudes and to be critical of the natural degree of caution showed by the United States in handling a situation for which that State feels so deep a responsibility'.⁶⁵ Similarly, the reviewer in the *Royal Engineers Journal* accused Blackett of justifying Soviet attitudes and increasing international suspicions.⁶⁶ Blackett's opposition to a coordinated Western policy and to reliance on nuclear deterrence put him so far outside mainstream thinking as to be irrelevant to the central debates.

Similarly, a decade later, Sir Stephen King-Hall, another former British naval officer, suggested an original but fundamentally unrealistic Western policy as a substitute for NATO and its nuclear weapons. King-Hall argued that 'defence had been revolutionized materially but remained mentally stagnant.... We must break through the thought-barrier in defence thinking and see what we find on the other side, a thought-barrier represented by the centuries old idea of most people that violence is the only practical means of defence against violence.'⁶⁷ Instead of relying on nuclear weapons or even on conventional forces, which he believed could not defeat a Soviet attack, King-Hall argued that Britain should prepare for mass non-violent resistance to a Warsaw Pact invasion. Such a policy would have to be agreed between the political parties, then taught in schools and in new colleges which would replace the conventional military establishments. King-Hall's strategy would have taken years to prepare but it would have avoided the risks of annihilation implicit in current policies. The trouble was that it lacked credibility; even India, where Gandhi's tactics of passive resistance weakened British colonialism in the 1930s, had maintained conventional armed forces when it became independent in 1947. Fear of nuclear weapons

was widespread in 1958 but it did not inspire confidence in King-Hall's alternative.

Nuclear weapons and the two alliances froze the status quo in the Northern hemisphere during the Cold War. At the same time, the nationalist movements, which Lippmann had foreseen, were undermining the European colonies in the Third World. When the Europeans tried to resist, they found themselves confronting guerrilla armies which sapped their will in bloody, prolonged and debilitating conflicts. It was here that British writers made their greatest contribution to post-war thinking about war and overseas intervention. Where the British simply abandoned their colonies to competing groups of insurgents, as in Palestine, or where they rushed the final move to independence, as in South Asia, they left behind quarrels which continue to embitter international relations half a century later. As they sometimes offered a way in which Britain could hand power gradually to nationalists who were sympathetic to democracy and the rule of law, experts on counter-insurgency could play a major role in stabilising the post-colonial world.

Guerrilla warfare had always troubled the imperial powers and British military theory, whatever happened in practice, had stressed the importance of understanding why people supported the guerrillas and what could be done to persuade them that violent change was not in their interests; in other words, the theory saw the struggle against guerrillas as essentially a political battle for people's minds, with the military playing an ancillary role. In a classic study of *Imperial Policing*, published in 1934, Major General Charles Gwynn had argued that it was crucial for governments not to treat the mass of people as hostile:

The admixture of rebels with a neutral or loyal element of the population adds to the difficulty of the task. Excessive severity may antagonize this element, add to the number of rebels, and leave a lasting feeling of bitterness.

Similarly, if the government and armed forces were faced with riots:

Responsibility is often thrown on quite junior officers. Mistakes of judgement may have fear-reaching results. Military failure can be retrieved, but where a population is antagonized or the authority of government seriously upset, a long period may elapse before confidence is restored and normal stable conditions are reestablished.⁶⁸

No doubt he was thinking of the massacre in Amritsar in northern India in April 1919, when General Dyer had ordered his troops to fire on Indian demonstrators killing several hundred and inadvertently giving a massive fillip to the Indian independence movement.⁶⁹ Gwynn argued that the civil government, not the military, should always control policy and that minimum force should invariably be applied to avoid antagonising the population.

Robert Thompson's writings on insurgency in the 1960s and 1970s fell into the same tradition. After a distinguished military record in Burma in the Second World War, Thompson spent 12 years in the Malayan civil service during the communist insurgency there and four years advising the South Vietnamese government on the same subject. He distilled his experience into a number of principles, which he believed governments should apply when dealing with guerrillas; first, that the government 'must have a clear political aim: to establish and maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable'. Secondly, the authorities would always have to function within the law and resist the temptation to go beyond it, which has so often overcome democracies leading them to torture and even murder those suspected of involvement in guerrilla operations.⁷⁰ Thirdly, they must have an overall plan of the way the guerrillas are to be defeated and government departments coordinated. Finally, the government should give priority to defeating political subversion, rather than to killing the insurgents.⁷¹

All this might seem either feeble or banal, but it is not the normal response to guerrilla warfare by politicians and armed forces who often lash out against those they think responsible and focus their attention on killing insurgents rather than winning the support of the mass of people. Although Thompson tried to advise the United States and its South Vietnamese allies in the 1960s, he was unable to convince them to reduce their reliance on conventional warfare and the expensive military equipment which accompanied it. To cope with US firepower the insurgents disappeared underground, digging out extensive subterranean villages and re-emerging, when least expected, to harry US forces. By 1973 the US public had had enough and the Nixon administration signed a humiliating peace treaty promising to withdraw.

Each generation apparently has to relearn these lessons. Very soon after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 the invading forces appeared to have lost Iraqi support and to be fighting a defensive war against ubiquitous guerrillas whose suicide bombers made them even more formidable in urban areas than previous generations of insurgents.

Much the same was true in Afghanistan where NATO forces found it very difficult to distinguish between innocent civilians and guerrillas, and where, because of their shortage of numbers, they needed air cover to protect them, although its use threatened the lives of the civilians and further alienated them from the foreign troops. Unless such troops can mingle amongst the people, help them and gather intelligence willingly offered to them, they simply become targets for guerrilla attack.

Politicians, led by Denis Healey, have accused some armchair strategists of being too belligerent, of enjoying the prerogative of the harlot, power without responsibility and of encouraging irresponsible interventionism. Yet, none of the armchair strategists discussed above could be described in this way. Bloch, Angell and Bywater intended their books as warnings of the destructive wars they believed were impending. Werner wanted to alert the democracies to the peril that faced them because of their tardy rearmament, and Spaight rightly feared that they were cowed by exaggerated fears of air attack into waiting until it was almost too late to resist Axis expansion. Blackett and King-Hall were searching for ways of avoiding reliance on nuclear weapons and the threats of mutual destruction they implied, while Robert Thompson was attempting to find a way the Western countries could both defeat guerrillas and help the Third World advance towards democracy.

Strategists recall that the outcome of military intervention is always uncertain. As the most famous Western strategist put it:

From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry. In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards.⁷²

The illusion harboured by statesmen that war may be short is one of the primary reasons for unwise interventions.⁷³ Many of the leading British armchair strategists today grew up during the Vietnam War. They know that elite public opinion and some elements in the media may encourage the government to undertake a war and then turn against the struggle if it is prolonged. They have generally been cautious about encouraging involvement in warfare and argued in favour of finding alternatives. While they have rarely been as imaginative and prescient as Tennyson, Wells or Orwell, they have destroyed the mythology that only professional military officers can comment knowledgeably and sensitively about strategic affairs. Thus they have helped the process of widening the debate to take in the whole community. Bloch earned the

sneers of many soldiers and journalists when he correctly predicted how warfare was developing. The atmosphere is very different today when academics and researchers from the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute crowd into the television studios to comment on war and the threat of warfare, and the shelves of the bookshops creak under the weight of their publications. But that places more responsibility on their shoulders to weigh their comments carefully, not to pretend that they have expertise beyond their chosen field and to avoid encouraging politicians to take hasty decisions.⁷⁴