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IMPERIAL STRATEGY AND A COMBINED STAFF.

By LIEUT.-COLONEL J. C. DUNDAS, D.S.O., R.A., *General Staff.*

"A State without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."—*Edmund Burke.*

THE debate initiated by Lord Haldane in the House of Lords on May 5th, following on the publication of various letters and articles in the Press, shows that public opinion is becoming interested in a subject which is of vital importance to the future of the Empire and one which has been exercising the minds of officers of all three services during the past two years, namely, the control of Imperial Strategy.¹

2. At the same time, after reading recent expressions of opinion, both service and civilian, it is impossible to avoid feeling that the wide diversity of view evidenced is to some extent due to the various writers and speakers having in mind organizations and functions which are by no means identical. This view is strengthened when one observes that the organization under discussion is indifferently referred to as an Imperial General Staff, a Ministry of Defence, or a combined Staff, and its functions outlined by different speakers on the same occasion in the following terms:— (a) distinguished general officers who direct and influence the activities of the special staffs of the forces; (b) in place of the Committee of Imperial Defence presided over by the Prime Minister, a Minister of Defence, supreme over all the services, directing military policy in regard to the future with the aid of the new Imperial General Staff; (c) an Imperial War Cabinet; (d) a staff to control naval, military or air operations.

3. It seems possible, therefore, that a short discussion of the various principles underlying the conduct of Imperial Strategy and the organizations now in existence for carrying them into effect may lead to a clearer understanding of the changes which a large body of military opinion to-day considers necessary.

4. First of all; what in general terms are the functions required of those organizations charged with the control of Imperial Strategy?

¹ The term "Imperial Strategy" (Imperial Defence is a misnomer) is used in this article in the widest sense, covering the examination in peace time of all problems which may affect the future safety of the Empire, diplomatic or other peaceful action necessary to secure that safety, and, in war, the control of operations undertaken with the same end in view.

These are as follows :—

A.—IN PEACE.

(i.) To consider all world situations which may necessitate the employment of armed force, to work out the strategic measures by which such situations can best be met and the forces required for the successful conduct of operations should peace strategy¹ fail to procure a favourable settlement.

(ii.) To collect, sift, and assimilate all forms of intelligence which may be of value in determining the direction which should be given to imperial policy in peace and the strategy which should be adopted in war.

(iii.) To consider and work out the organization and system of training of the forces of the Crown which will best meet the requirements of campaigns under the varying strategic, tactical, and climatic conditions which are foreseen as probable.

(iv.) To ensure that the orders of the chief, under whom the particular staff functions, are duly executed.

B.—IN WAR.

(i.) To consider the strategy which should be adopted.

(ii.) To collect, apply, and disseminate intelligence.

(iii.) To advise the commander under whom the staff acts.

(iv.) To ensure that the orders of that commander are duly executed.

5. We thus arrive at two distinct conclusions :—

(a) That both in peace and war the work of a staff is in the main contemplative and advisory, and only in one respect executive.

(b) That the problems which staffs are called upon to study vary in scale from those involving a review of the whole world to those concerned with one particular area only ; that the forces with which they are called upon to deal vary from those of the Empire to those engaged in one particular theatre of war ; that the intelligence which they have to assimilate varies from that of world-wide scope, and often only indirectly affecting naval or military strategy (*e.g.*, information as to foodstuffs, raw materials, merchant shipping), to the local information required by a commander in a particular campaign. Speaking generally, however, the above duties fall into four categories :—

(i.) Those concerned with the security of the Empire and with the forces of the Crown as a whole.

(ii.) Those dealing with the combined action of the Navy, Army and Air Force of the United Kingdom.

(iii.) Those concerned with the organization, training, etc., of one service alone.

¹ Peace strategy includes diplomacy, economic pressure, formation of alliances, etc.

(iv.) Those concerned with the conduct of operations at sea, on land, or in the air, where the action of one service alone is involved.

Although these four categories will often overlap, none the less it seems clear that their characteristics are sufficiently distinct to necessitate the existence of separate bodies, each suitably organized to carry out its particular task.

6. Having now ascertained the principles in relation to Imperial Strategy to which effect has to be given, let us next consider the bodies which exist to-day for that purpose and the extent to which they fulfil their rôle.

There are to-day :—

(i.) The Committee of Imperial Defence.

(ii.) The departmental staffs of the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry.

(iii.) In war, the staffs of Commanders-in-Chief at sea, in the field, and perhaps in the air.¹

7. The Committee of Imperial Defence is presided over by the Prime Minister, and consists of such statesmen as he may call in to discuss any subject under consideration. Members of Dominion Governments when in England may also attend its meetings. It possesses a small secretariat charged with the duty of collecting information and securing continuity of policy. The Committee meets at varying intervals, but works mainly through sub-committees. To its meetings, or those of its sub-committees, are summoned the heads of the fighting forces in the Admiralty, War Office or Air Ministry, when matters affecting their departments are under consideration.

The Committee is thus essentially political, altering its composition with each change of Government, hearing expert witnesses, but allowing them no opportunity of influencing decisions by the recording of their vote. Valuable as has been the work done by the Committee it suffers from certain inherent defects.

(i.) Its president and members are men already overburdened with duties of state.

(ii.) Its meetings are only held at comparatively rare intervals,² and then for the discussion of a particular question only. In the intervals between its meetings, continuity of policy is only secured by the secretariat, which has neither authority to act on its own initiative, nor would be a suitable body to which to entrust any power of decision. Consequently, there is a lack of continuous effort, an absence of long thought out and well matured policy, and questions often reach an acute stage before they are dealt with; with the result that hasty

¹ The question of the staffs of subordinate commanders does not arise in this connection.

² From the Armistice up till May, 1920, neither the Committee nor, so far as is known, any of its sub-committees had met—a lapse of eighteen months at a time when problems of vital importance awaited consideration.

decisions, not always perhaps those which would have been arrived at after fuller consideration, are taken, or a decision is delayed in a matter in which early action is of importance until the question at issue shall have been threshed out.

(iii.) Expert opinions laid before the Committee—which, again, be it noted, is composed of politicians—are generally based on a purely departmental view of the situation; that is to say, the soldier expresses the military view, the sailor the naval one, and so on. It is then left to a purely civilian body to decide what weight should be attached to the technical objections raised by naval experts to the proposals put forward by the military authorities and *vice versa*, to consider the merits and demerits of alternative schemes in the face of these objections, and, finally, to take decisions of the greatest moment and often involving the overruling of the views held by one or other of the service experts. How grave may be the results which will follow on such a decision the Report of the Dardanelles Commission illustrates.

The responsibility of deciding between the views of service experts is one which should never be thrown on any body of statesmen if it can possibly be avoided, and with a sound staff organization the occasions when it cannot be avoided should be extremely rare.

(iv.) Proposals laid before the Cabinet are rarely, if ever, thoroughly threshed out in detail jointly by Navy, Army, Air Force and other departments involved (*e.g.*, Ministries of Shipping, Transport) before they are brought forward for decision, or if so considered, then only by committees or conferences summoned *ad hoc*, composed of men who perhaps meet for the first time, or who at best do not know each other intimately, and who consequently are inclined in practice, perhaps insensibly, to take up a defensive attitude in favour of the proposals put forward by their own departments, and to underrate the objections raised on the part of the other services.

(v.) The Committee of Imperial Defence is not truly Imperial, since members of Dominion Governments are rarely available to take their places at its meetings, and there are no Dominion officers of sufficient standing permanently located in this country to represent the views of their Government.

8. Departmental staffs of the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry deal with plans, intelligence, organization and training almost entirely from the point of view of their own service. As a result, insufficient regard is paid, in considering these problems, to the capabilities and limitations of other services, and insufficient weight is given to such factors as transportation and the like which have a very real bearing on these matters; there is much overlapping in the matter of intelligence, for each department is served by its own intelligence service, although the bulk of the information collected is of common use and only a small portion of value to one particular service alone; the system of organization and training of any particular service, with which are so intimately bound up its limitations and capabilities, are little understood

by the other services ; personal contact is lacking, and that co-operation which is induced only by intimate knowledge of each other's habits, methods and personality is consequently absent.

9. In war at sea, on land or in the air, we have the naval, military or air staffs of Commanders-in-Chief¹ as the case may be.

Although such staffs serve their purpose when operations are of a purely naval or military nature, it is when we come to consider operations in which two or more services are acting in combination that we find the situation unsatisfactory. Each staff works separately under its own commander. A hard and fast division of duties, rigid demarcation of spheres of action (*e.g.* high-water mark in the case of landing operations) and the like have to be enforced, not because they best suit a particular situation, but because the two staffs do not work as one staff, do not use the same terms, are not accustomed to see things with the same eye—because, in short, they can, with the best will in the world, only co-operate by rule of thumb, by the letter of the law. How real is this rigidity and how vitally it may affect the success of combined operations is well known to all who have taken part in such operations either in peace or war.

10. Reverting then to paragraph 5, we find that there are now in existence bodies which in greater or lesser degree deal with :—

- (i.) Imperial Strategy ; but only in a limited degree.
- (iii.) The organization and training of each service individually.
- (iv.) The operations of naval, military, or air forces acting alone ;

but none to meet the requirements of (ii.) combined operations.

11. What, then, are the changes in organization which are necessary to secure the successful execution of the four categories of staff duties mentioned above ?

All such changes in organization must be based on four axioms :—

(i.) That the making of war is as much an act of government as the conduct of peace strategy.

(ii.) That, having regard to the geographical conformation of the British Empire, every operation of war viewed in its broadest aspects must be a combined operation.²

(iii.) That our strategy must be imperial.

(iv.) That to ensure successful staff work, full value must be assigned to the personal equation.

12. Let us now apply these axioms.

(i.) Since the policy of peace and war is an act of government, its control must be in the hands of statesmen and not of sailors, soldiers, or airmen as such. So far a Cabinet Committee meets requirements. On

¹ Except in the case of independent air forces, air staff officers are usually attached to the staffs of naval or military Commanders-in-Chief.

² This is a point completely lost sight of by Commander, R.N., in his paper "Megalomania in Defence," in the *National Review*, of October, 1919.

the other, hand, statesmen before taking decisions must have at their disposal the best expert opinion available.¹ It is in this respect that the effect of axiom (ii.) that every operation of war in its broadest aspect is a combined one at once makes itself felt.

(ii.) Assuming for the moment Air Force co-operation with both Navy and Army to be a matter of course, it is clear that the degree of combination between these two latter services will vary in every individual situation. In one case the Army may require the Navy's co-operation only indirectly in matters of transportation, maintenance of sea communications, keeping open trade routes and the like; in another, as in the Dardanelles campaign, it may require the very closest tactical support; while at the other extreme in a campaign where the main objectives are naval it is the Navy which would require the co-operation of the Army in seizing and holding advanced bases necessary for the successful prosecution of maritime operations.

Whatever form, however, this co-operation may take under varying conditions, the main point to note is that in every case naval and military requirements must be to some extent antagonistic. It is no use a soldier selecting a theatre of war in which to operate if the Navy cannot transport the necessary forces thither in safety nor maintain sea communications open. It is equally useless for a sailor to insist on landing military forces at a spot which is ideal for the purpose if military operations cannot be developed thence. In short, the strategy of combined operations is one of the rare instances where compromise is, generally speaking, not only necessary but desirable. It therefore comes to this: in order that statesmen may be enabled to adopt the wisest imperial policy in peace and the soundest line of strategy in war, they must receive expert advice tendered, not by departmental heads of the services and based on the requirements of the service which they represent, but by a single mouthpiece and based on the mature consideration of the best brains of all three services working in conjunction. Whether this mouthpiece be a Minister of Defence, the Chief of a combined General Staff, or a written memorandum jointly drawn up by the chief representatives of each service on that combined General Staff, is a matter of secondary importance. The vital point is that the advice tendered should be the outcome of combined deliberation, that alternative proposals put forward should represent the advantages and disadvantages of each from the point of view of all three services, and not, as is apt to be the case at present, take the form of one scheme favoured by the Navy because it provides conditions ideal for naval operations, and another adopted by the Army because it best fulfils military requirements. In short, no proposal considered impracticable by one or other service should be put forward to the Government as a suggested basis for combined operations, but only those which all three are prepared to accept as feasible. It then only remains for the Cabinet to adopt that which, when regarded

¹ *Opinion*, not *opinions*. There is all the difference in the world between these two, as will be seen by reference to paragraph 12 (ii.).

from a wider viewpoint than that bounded by the horizon of naval or military advantages and disadvantages, appears most likely to ensure the successful prosecution of Imperial Strategy.

In this respect there is no room for doubt that our organization of to-day completely fails to carry out its rôle.

(iii.) Strategy must be imperial ; therefore the General Staff which is to advise in regard to it must be imperial ; it has to deal with problems affecting the Empire as a whole, therefore it must consider the forces of the Empire as a whole. Here at once arises a difficulty. The Dominions reserve, and always will reserve, to themselves the right to dispose of their forces in peace and to organize them primarily for local defence ; even in war their employment for imperial purposes can only be reckoned on subject to the consent of the Dominion Government given when the emergency arises,¹ a consent which, fortunately for the Empire, is never likely to be withheld if the cause be a just one.

Since therefore responsible Ministers of the Dominions cannot spare the necessary time regularly to attend meetings of the Cabinet or Committee of Imperial Defence, but can only be present on rare occasions to discuss matters of first importance, and usually when these have reached an acute stage, it is all the more necessary that their views should be continuously represented and problems affecting them considered by representatives on an Imperial General Staff in whom they have confidence ; for only if the Dominions are so represented, only if they feel assured that their side of the picture has been made perfectly clear by men who know the situation thoroughly, only then will they be willing to accept a policy based on the recommendations of that staff. At present Dominion problems are worked out at home by British officers, or in the Dominions by Dominion officers, without the possibility of close personal touch, and with the meagre assistance afforded by official correspondence as the sole method of securing co-operation. As a result, Dominion Governments are inclined to view any policy proposed from England with suspicion and to prefer proposals put forward locally as more likely to fulfil the requirements of their country, though perhaps far less satisfactory when regarded from the point of view of the Empire as a whole.

(iv.) Successful combination depends on due recognition of the importance of personality. It is perhaps little realized by the general public how large a factor in staff work the personal equation plays. Yet there is no more noticeable feature, both in peace and war, than the increase in efficiency attained by a staff when the individual members have worked together for some time, have learned each other's idiosyncracies and habits and have begun to work, not as individuals, but as a team. The case of the different services working in combination is exactly parallel. Each has its own habits and methods of doing things,

¹ As Mr. Watts, speaking in London on May 13th, 1920, very truly remarked : " The Dominions are jealous of their autonomy."

each has its own language, each at first looks on the other with suspicion.¹ Only, therefore, by continuous personal contact can that close co-operation between individuals and between the services be attained which is the essence of success in the consideration of problems of combined strategy or the conduct of combined operations of war. Interdepartmental committees, conferences and similar fortuitous meetings for the discussion of a particular question can never produce sufficiently close unity of thought. Members of these committees etc., meet as representatives of their departments to urge the views of those departments, and not as individuals striving towards a common goal. The Plans Department of the Admiralty and the Operations Directorate of the War Office may consult each other officially a hundred times in regard to a problem, may hold conferences and appoint committees, but the results achieved under such conditions never approach in value those which would follow in a far shorter space of time on the labours of three or four men who had worked together previously and knew each other well. In short, in combined staff work, and no less in imperial staff work, the personal equation is everything.

13. Finally; what definite conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion?

(i.) The direction of Imperial Strategy demands:—

(a) A body of statesmen with whom must rest the final decision as to the policy to be adopted. The more imperial the composition of this body, the more universally will its decisions be accepted throughout the Empire. Whether such an end be attained by the creation of an Imperial Council in England, by following Mr. Watts's suggestion "that Great Dominions would do well to keep responsible Ministers at the seat of Empire Government," or by other means which have been suggested, is beyond the scope of this article to discuss. What we must aim at is an increased measure of imperial control in matters affecting the Empire.²

(b) In place of the secretariat of the Committee of Imperial Defence an expert body, comprising the best brains to be found in the forces of the Crown; a body which has learned to work as a team; a body which will continuously and systematically contemplate the world situation as it affects the well-being of the Empire, and which by "thinking ahead"

¹ Cf., House of Lords, May 5th, Lord Haldane: "The staffs of the Navy and Army would always be brought up in a different way." Lord Curzon, quoting the First Lord: "The machinery in control of the three services was entirely different, and the work of the Navy carried out under different conditions from those affecting the Army."

² Mr. Watts's speech is one of vital importance as regards the future of Imperial Strategy, if, as is probable, it foreshadows suggestions likely to be made by the Commonwealth of Australia in regard to this question. He went on to say: "The greatest care must be taken, whether by the establishment of a clearing house or not, to see that the Empire's voice in the international affairs of the world comes from one set of lips"—a statement which, *mutatis mutandis*, is exactly the view which the writer has tried to express in regard to combined strategy and combined operations of the three services.

will be prepared at any time to tender the combined opinion of the three services as to the best method of dealing with situations which arise or are foreseen as likely to arise; a body which in war shall supply the Cabinet with the best advice obtainable as to the strategy of combined operations, taking into account the requirements and limitations of all three services; a body which shall secure co-ordination in the conduct of all such operations; a body which shall speak "with one set of lips."

(ii.) Combined operations of the three services require a combined staff to secure their successful development. This does not mean that the naval Commander-in-Chief should serve under the military or air force Commander-in-Chief, or *vice versa*. Each has his own sphere of command, each has his own rôle to carry out. What it does mean is that the staff duties of the three services, which in such operations are interwoven to an extent perhaps little realized, must be carried out by men who know each other personally, who understand the habits, ideas and language of the sister services intimately, and who consequently work towards a common goal as a team, but each keeping his own place in the field, without friction or misunderstanding. Only if such a system be introduced can that "rigidity" which has so much hampered combined operations in the past be obviated.¹

(iii.) The organization, training and equipping of the three services in such a way as will best fit them to carry out the policy of the Government are the functions of the staffs of those services. No comment on this conclusion would appear to be necessary other than to say that in such matters an imperial organization, system of training and method of equipping should be aimed at, were it not for the fear expressed by naval writers that the existence of an Imperial General Staff would interfere with the control of the Admiralty over naval forces in these matters. Such a fear is groundless. The function of the Imperial General Staff is to advise the Government as to the policy which will best meet the requirements of the Empire. The function of departmental staffs is to train, organize and equip their respective services to fulfil these requirements. The division of duties is clear cut and well defined, and there should be no cause for overlapping or mutual interference.

(iv.) We have to consider the executive functions of the staff in war. It is this aspect of the Imperial General Staff which the Navy views with the greatest suspicion. This suspicion appears to be based on the fact that the Admiralty, unlike the War Office or Air Ministry, actually controls operations of war. The centralization of command in the Navy, made possible by the advent of wireless telegraphy, allows the Admiralty to act the part of "Supreme Command" in regard to naval forces. The

¹ Let Commander, R.N., ask any of the naval or military staff present at Gallipoli, or even those students at the two Staff Colleges who have carried out combined naval and military exercises, what their opinion is. I think he will find that it agrees with the views expressed here.

War Office, on the other hand, owing to the different conditions which prevail in land warfare, can never interfere with the discretion of a Commander-in-Chief in a theatre of war beyond laying down the general policy to be adopted. In short, the difference is this: the Admiralty in certain cases exercises executive command, War Office and Air Ministry do not. None the less the dread of interference by the Imperial General Staff with the executive control of the Admiralty over fleets at sea is baseless. The functions of the Imperial General Staff would in no case extend to the issue of executive orders to the fleet or, for the matter of that, to land forces. Does any advocate of the Imperial General Staff contemplate the issue by that staff of orders to the Commander-in-Chief of the fleets in home waters to move out to attack the enemy fleet at a certain hour, or to a Commander-in-Chief in a theatre of war to attack the enemy on a certain day on such and such a front? I trust not. No, its executive functions would be limited to the issue of "directives générales" (to use a French expression which is exactly apposite but has no parallel in our vocabulary) laying down the general objective of the combined operation and the measures necessary to secure co-operation between the three services. It would then rest with the departments concerned to decide upon the actual forces to be employed, and finally with the combined staff of the naval, military and air force commanders to carry out the detailed arrangements for the operation.

Under such conditions there would be no risk of interference by the Imperial General Staff with the executive control of the Admiralty in combined operations, and still less in operations in which the Navy was alone concerned.

14. Such, then, in outline are the principles underlying the direction of Imperial Strategy, the organizations existing at the present time to carry them into effect, and the main alterations which appear necessary to provide for the security of our Empire in the days which lie ahead.

To-day we stand on the threshold of a new world wherein the old order changeth, giving place to new; the well-known landmarks of the past have disappeared and new and as yet unrecognized ones are looming through the mist ahead. To-day, therefore, it behoves us to break down all vested interests, to cast aside all shibboleths and look reality in the face. What is our common aim? There can be but one answer—security of Empire. What matter then if Admiralty be degraded¹ or other departments shorn of some of their present power? Surely no matter at all if thereby we save the State. What, after all, are Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry but a name, a sentiment? Transfer the best of the brain power which these departments now absorb to an Imperial General Staff where each service is still master in its own house, but all three work together in unison for the common cause, and what does any one of the three lose? Nothing. The prestige of Admiralty, War Office or Air Ministry is unimpaired; it is merely transferred to another sphere.

¹ The term used by Naval Commander, *op. cit.*

Henceforward, therefore, let us cease to think and speak of England and her Colonies, let us learn to think imperially, to speak of our free Commonwealth of Nations. Henceforward let us cease to think in terms of three separate services and look for salvation to one force united in a common aim. Only thus can we hope to retain the position which the Empire won and which it holds to-day ; only thus can we hope to establish the Pax Britannica amongst the restless nations of the world ; and, above all, only thus can we fulfil our duty to the gallant dead, who to-day from many an ocean grave and many a stricken field bid us keep flaming the torch they handed on, call us to complete as they would wish the task which they began.

" We are the dead. . . .
To you with failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to lift it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields."

Such is their call ; may no neglect of opportunity on the part of those who remain ever give them cause to feel that their sacrifice was made in vain.