

Strategic Thinking: The French Case in 1914 (& 1940)

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A common military history examination question at West Point is “Discuss the proposition that good strategy always beats good tactics.” I tell my cadets that if they cannot answer an examination question, they should modify it they can. Behind our eight stimulating “Workshop Questions” lies a world view which I would summarize as follows. Strategy is literally crucial—the crux of war. Military failures, failures of what my friend Wick Murray calls “military effectiveness,” usually being at the strategic level—or stem from a failure to integrate strategy with sound policy. Strategic effectiveness requires not only clear and achievable goals but good policy, sound institutions, and political will.

This is the way that I have been taught to think about strategy since my first military history course, taught by Wick Murray, at Yale University in the spring of 1975. With regularly references to Clausewitz, he taught his students to admire historical cases of good strategy and, more frequently, to disparage strategic errors. Indeed, we paid so much attention to strategic failure — “incompetent” was one of Wick’s favorite adjectives — that his courses constituted a crusade to identify strategic mistakes.

Ten years later, Wick’s ideas influenced my dissertation research on French national defence in the interwar period. Beginning with the knowledge that there were massive inconsistencies between French foreign policy and military planning, I set out to answer the kind of questions set by this workshop. Assuming that bad strategy stemmed from bad institutions or incompetence, I sought to find the locus of the French

pathology why, faced with the obvious threat from Germany, France did not sort herself out.

More than a decade spent studying French strategy and policy made me realize that incompetence is not usually the reason for poor strategy. Good countries may make bad choices because they are the only options open. I began to wonder about the utility of preaching the gospel of good strategy, especially when the preachers often come bearing a particular strategic formula.

Strategy as panacea often involves initiation into one or another fraternity devoted to Clausewitz, the RMA, airpower, net-centric warfare, or, most recently, counterinsurgency. The key to sound strategy is buried somewhere in the text of *On War* and someday someone is going to find it. America's collective sigh of relief when President Obama appointed General David Petraeus to command our forces in Afghanistan was reminiscent of the French conviction that General Maximé Weygand, replacing Maurice Gamelin, in May 1940, brought with him the secret of the late Marshal Ferdinand Foch. Petraeus brings with him the secret of the "Surge."

Our eight workshop questions have stimulated a set of excellent papers, but they exemplify what I will call today for purposes of discussion the "strategy paradigm." Victory comes from developing and executing the right strategy; poor strategy comes from not thinking hard enough.

All of this is a long-winded introduction to my intent to follow my own advice and change the question. Instead of offering a case study in what I am calling the "strategic paradigm," I want to use the French experience in 1914 (and some references to 1940) to illustrate why "strategic thinking" so often fails to produce good outcomes.

Much of this argument comes from a paper I delivered at the Royal Military College, Kingston, in March 2007, which will be published in the conference proceedings, but I think of this not as a self-indulgent repetition but an opportunity to test some of my arguments in front of what I expect will be a most demanding audience.

The RMC paper was on French military strategy in 1914. Instead of investigating how the French Army found itself so thoroughly wrong-footed in 1914, I wanted to

understand the cognitive processes that made French leaders comfortable with their strategy.

I began with an idea borrowed from U. S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who, on 8 December 2004, notoriously responded to a soldier's complaint about the equipment available to United States troops in Iraq with the observation: "As you know, you have to go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you want."¹ Mr. Rumsfeld had started me thinking about the disparity between peacetime preparations and wartime requirements. That wars not do always develop as one expects them ought to be one of the defining challenges of peacetime military organizations.

On the "strategy paradigm," French soldiers ought to have been thinking clearly and carefully about the possible nature of future war, and the huge disparity between the short, victorious war generals claimed to expect before August 1914 and the drawn-out agonies of the following four years, the magnitude of what I now dub the "Rumsfeld Gap," calls for explanation. In examining what the French Army was thinking, I call upon two ideas from the final chapter of my book, *Arming against Hitler*, cognitive dissonance and the 'tyranny of the mundane.'² Cognitive dissonance is a familiar concept, but the "tyranny of the mundane" is my own invention, the notion that soldiers necessarily put so much energy into everyday activities that they have little left for distant concerns, a category into which falls, for most soldiers most of the time, the fighting of wars. The most useful answer to the question "what were they thinking?" can often be found not by reading the military theory of the day but by reflecting on what activity promised the greatest chance of positive recognition – and the least risk of reprimand – from each officer's immediate superior. Using the language of the Rumsfeld Gap, it is unlikely that soldiers will spend much time assessing the army they will want in the future when the army of the present provides so many immediate challenges.

Cognitive dissonance, the ability to accept two contrary ideas simultaneously, supports the tyranny of the mundane. An officer can know that training for war is the highest priority while at the same time knowing that it is essential that kit be clean for

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/12/08/rumsfeld.troops/>.

² Eugenia C. Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, KS, 1996).

inspection rather than be dilapidated by use. Cognitive dissonance is very useful for shrugging off tough questions like “is our artillery’s higher rate of fire really an adequate answer to their artillery’s larger calibre and its superior range?” Not that cognitive dissonance is necessarily a bad thing. Without the ability to believe that bullets kill – “but not for me” – and that defense is the stronger form of war – unless my forces are attacking – armies would be immobilized.

[“Cognitive dissonance” is a useful tool for understanding German as well as French actions in 1914. Holger Herwig’s *The Journal of Military History* essay, “Germany and the Short-War Illusion” leads to a useful illustration of the concept. Before taking the actions that precipitated the Great War, German leaders were committed to a “forty-day ‘first strike’” plan against France while knowing full well that a general European war could not be short. Herwig squares that circle by arguing that Helmut von Moltke and his team expected the Schlieffen Plan to win the opening battle, thereby improving Germany’s posture for either fighting or negotiation in the ensuing protracted conflict. Herwig calls his interpretation is less “dark” than that of Stig Förster, who charged the German high command with disingenuously launching what they knew would be a lengthy and destructive war. Herwig distances himself from Förster by arguing that Germany’s leader had completely committed themselves to a long war, but introducing the idea of cognitive dissonance allows for the more radical interpretation that Helmut von Moltke and his team had not abjured the hope, however improbable, of achieving Graf von Schlieffen’s dream. Men who were certainly not stupid could simultaneously expect to fight a short war and a long one.]

Acknowledging the value of cognitive dissonance in military culture raises questions about the nature of knowledge, and, no matter how one defines it, strategy implies knowing things.³ I would argue that belief in the importance of knowledge unpins the “strategy paradigm” in two senses. Knowledgeable people, like those who participate in workshops on strategy, understand how important strategy is. Good strategies rest on good information. At the very least, one must know one’s own goals and resources, and it is not too far fetched to think that one ought to try know at least that much about one’s potential adversaries.

³ [DOD “A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.”]

But, as the discussion of cognitive dissonance illustrates, knowledge is a slippery idea. To get to my case study, French strategic planning before World War I, historians have spent considerable energy debating what the French Army knew about German intentions to invade Belgium. Jan Karl Tannenbaum's useful essay on French intelligence puts the conventional wisdom well. As early as 1905, key elements of the German plan "were known, or at least knowable, by the French high command."⁴ Given the evidence pointing towards German action in Belgium – and the explicit warnings of Generals Charles Lanrezac, Fifth Army, Pierre Ruffey, Third Army, and Joseph Galliéni – "knowable" is a safe assessment. But it is a useful one? From "knowable" to "known" is a huge leap. Even though General Joseph Joffre was convinced enough of the likelihood of a German move through Belgium as to propose preemptive entry into that country, even though French intelligence acquired in April 1914 German documents describing the use of reserve troops alongside active ones,⁵ Joffre's Plan XVII left most of the Belgian frontier open to invasion. Tannenbaum describes this decision as "irrational," but unreason seems as inadequate an answer here as it is in explaining Gamelin's decision to shift his reserve forces to the far left flank in the spring of 1940.

Nineteen forty reminds one of an even more striking example, the war game conducted by General Prételat, commander of the French 2nd Army, holding the Sedan sector, in May-June 1938. Prételat's map exercise hypothesized a German armored attack through the Ardennes forest. Luftwaffe planes cut French railroads, delaying French reserve units and supplies. No French aircraft were to be seen. Prételat's front rapidly collapsed, and the notional German advance crossed the Meuse River at H + 60 hours, only three hours behind Guderian's achievement two years later. Prételat's report to Paris concludes with a request for reinforcement to the tune of one infantry division, artillery ammunition, medical units, and a gas decontamination company. Bigger questions about French strategy are not explicitly asked, but there are unobvious hints. For exactly, in the observation "given the capabilities of German fights on the one hand and the power of their bombers on the other, we conclude that, given the current

⁴Jan Karl Tannenbaum, "French Estimates of Germany's Operational War Plans," in Ernest R. May, ed. *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), p. 150.

⁵Tannenbaum, "French Estimates," p. 171.

state of our aviation, it will not be in condition to have any serious impact on German transport columns.”⁶ Red underlining also draws tacit attention to the speed of German movement and the likely fate of undefended railroads. From Prételat’s report one could conclude that French commanders knew a great deal about German capabilities and their own weaknesses. Arguably, they knew that, whatever French doctrine said, offensively organized armoured forces could operate with relative independence on the operational level. They knew that the *Luftwaffe* could obstruct based the movement of reserves by railroad. Obviously, the Ardennes had not been rendered, as Pétain had put it in 1934, “impenetrable.” But did they really know these things on which the German high command was not yet ready to act as early as the spring of 1938?

The notion of cognitive dissonance gives us a new way of addressing the question of French intelligence failure in 1940. Written in the aftermath of their army’s subjection of the history’s most stunning operational surprises, French intelligence memoirs insist that they had known what the Germans were doing. *We—the deuxième bureau--* knew what the Germans were up to. If that knowledge did not lead to action, then it was not our fault.⁷

Incidentally, I was struck yesterday by several of John Ferris’s observations about British understanding of the Germany. The Cabinet had read *Mein Kampf*. “They,” John said, “have good intelligence but are not good at predicting how other peoples will behave.” Is that because they do not what other people are like or because, subconsciously, they think that they do?

Claims about the “known” and the “knowable” – like Donald Rumsfeld’s remarkable soliloquy on things known and unknown and known and not known to be known or not⁸ – assumes that armies “know” in a way that demands appropriate response. Knowledge comes from processing information or, in the military context, intelligence. If one has good intelligence and acts upon it, then one knows something. If one fails to act upon good intelligence, then the fact at issue was “knowable” but one

⁶ André-Gaston Prételat, Report to Paris, p. 2

⁷ Peter Jackson offers a useful survey of the historiography.

⁸ “There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” Donald Rumsfeld, 12 February 2002, Department of Defense news briefing: <http://www.slate.com/id/2081042>. Accessed 9 March 2007.

erred. Given conflicting information, the correct solution is to collect more information and then to act upon it, thus pushing the matter into the known or knowable category. This analysis assumes that armies seek accurate information and that ignorance is the consequence of structural failures in the gathering and processing of information or of the tendency of military organizations to interpret intelligence so as to fit their preconceptions about events. Thus, in explaining French intelligence failures in 1914, Christopher Andrew stresses such structural problems as ministerial instability and feuds between rival intelligence agencies as well as the perennial culprit “preconceived ideas.”⁹ Peter Jackson offers similar criticisms of French intelligence collection before the Second World War. Individual ministries had their own sources of intelligence, which they shared with others only as they saw fit and after “sterilizing” it to suit their requirements.¹⁰ Like Andrews, Jackson identifies preconceptions as the problem, for “preconceptions limited the scope and objectivity of the Deuxième Bureau and were the crucial failure of French intelligence before the Second World War.

This line of argument seems indisputable and yet its logical conclusion, that better intelligence collection and analysis would have altered events, is not. The argument assumes that what the French Army – or any army – wants is the most accurate information about enemy rather than information it can live with on a daily basis. Back to the tyranny of the mundane. Armies tend to focus on daily life while insisting that quotidian activities are useful preparation for the next war. Some incongruence between the predicted nature of the war and the requirements of daily life can be mitigated by cognitive dissonance, but that trick only goes so far. As the Rumsfeld Gap increases, that is as one’s intelligence reveals too great a disparity between the army one has and the army one is going to want, then there exists a problem that can be “solved” – that is lived with – most easily by rethinking, rejecting, or ignoring intelligence.

What is suggested here is that “preconceived ideas” is too weak a description of the forces preventing the French Army from predicting German intentions in 1914. The problem was not merely that Joffre believed that the Germans would not integrate reserve troops into their main offensive or that they would not move west of the Meuse

⁹Christopher Andrew, “France and the German Menace,” in May, *Knowing One’s Enemies*, pp. 141, 145.

¹⁰ Peter Jackson, p. 38.

River; nor is it that strong inhibitions – “preconceived ideas” – prevented him from assessing intelligence objectively. Preconceptions were not a problem to be swept away by new intelligence but strongly held defenses against threatening information. Joffre and (and later Gamelin) could only ask the question “what are the Germans going to do?” within parameters established by the range of French responses available to him. Because they could not solve problems posed by the Schlieffen Plan or General Prételat’s *jeux d’esprit* in 1938, they could not make himself think about them.

Reinforcing the proposition that the French Army sought congenial rather than accurate information about German plans is the fate of Vice-President of the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre’s [CSG], General Victor Michel’s, proposed revisions to Plan XVI in 1911.¹¹ Michel had inherited a plan that assumed a shallow German penetration into eastern Belgium designed to envelop the French left flank in Lorraine, a move to be met by a strong Sixth Army stationed in reserve at Châlons. Believing that the Germans actually intended to drive deep into Belgium from starting points north of French and Belgian defenses, Michel proposed to spread his forces to cover the Franco-Belgian front and to counter-attack with his own left wing. Since defending the entire frontier required more troops than the active army could provide, Michel proposed combining active and reserve regiments into double-sized “demi-brigades,” a plan unanimously rejected by the CSG. The minutes of this confidential meeting, in which one general called his commanding officer presumptive a “looney,” were leaked to the press, presumably by Minister of War Messimy, who then relieved Michel of his position of commander in chief designate and, thereby, forced his resignation.¹²

Joffre’s memoirs enumerate several serious technical problems with Michel’s plan to brigade reservists with active troops, but members of the CSG offered objections rather than reasoned argument. The author of the epithet “looney” also remarked,

¹¹ Michel’s brief tenure and appearance of owing his exalted rank to republican politics rather than to “any discernable military ability” (David Ralston, *The Army of the Republic* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1967), p. 326) may have discouraged historians from giving his plan the attention it deserves.

¹² While not defending Michel, Ralston emphasizes Messimy’s machinations; Ralston, *Army of the Republic*, pp. 330-31, for which Joffre provides support, pp. 10-11. Doughty does not denigrate Michel’s ability, but his unqualified reference to his “resignation” omits an important part of the story. Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 13-14. The most complete account is Ronald H. Cole, “Victor Michel: The Unwanted Clairvoyant of the French High Command, *Military Affairs*, 43(1979), pp. 199-201.

revealingly that “there is nothing to consider.”¹³ Even though Michel’s proposal addressed a real gap in existing French plans, the CSG saw no reason to think about it. This was not a case of allowing preconceptions about Germans capabilities and intentions to dictate French actions but fearful refusal to contemplate possible flaws in existing military plans.

One way to avoid having to look too closely at the enemy’s inconvenient intentions was to design a “one-size fits all” war plan, the approach eventually taken by Michel’s successor, Joffre. Although Joffre had the same information as Michel about German capabilities, his version of Plan XVI defended only the eastern end of the Franco-German border, leaving a gap to the west should the Germans cross the Meuse.¹⁴ Further analysis so convinced Joffre of the advantage of a German entry in Belgium that on 21 February 1912, he asked the government for permission a preemptive advance across the frontier. President Raymond Poincaré demurred for fear of driving Belgium into the German camp and Britain into neutrality.¹⁵ Joffre then produced his own Plan XVII, whose guiding principle was “to go into the battle with all of his forces.”¹⁶

Historians tend to explain the transition from Michel’s policy of defense and counter-attack to Joffre’s offensive strategy in psychological and ideological terms – as if Plan XVII simply elevated the manifold attractions of the “cult of the bayonet” from the tactical level to the operational.¹⁷ But bayonet charges and operational-level offensives are different things and ought to require different justifications. Joffre had two reasons, neither suitable for public discussion, to replace Michel’s defensive plan with his own offensive one. The first unspoken reason for preferring an offensive posture was to avoid having to think about the German plan. The principles of war treat the offensive

¹³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁴ Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 18. Joffre’s title was Chief of the General Staff, Michel’s position, Vice-President of the CSG, having been temporarily abolished by Messimy in the process of removing Michel. See Ralston, *Army*, pp. 330-31.

¹⁵ Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 21.

¹⁶ **Error! Main Document Only.** Joseph Joffre, *Mémoires du maréchal Joffre (1910-1917)* (Paris, 1932), p. 143.

¹⁷ For two versions of his argument, see Michal Howard, “Men against Fire. The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914”, in P. Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), pp. 510-26.

as securing the initiative – although Clausewitz would disagree – forcing the enemy to respond to one’s attack rather than carrying out one of his own. Indeed, offensive plans are a mental economy of force operation; they allow one to focus on one’s own operational plans and to minimize the attention devoted to the enemy’s intentions. A German attack into Belgium was something France could best avoid thinking about by concentrating very hard about her own offensively-oriented Plan XVII. Such reasoning does not surface in the historical record because it is not the sort of thing admitted by commanders nor taught at staff colleges.

The second reason for an offensive war plan was even less suitable for public discussion. While Michel’s defensive orientation reflected a world in which France might have to fight Germany without the help of a major continental ally, Joffre counted on Russian support in the form of an immediate westward offensive. Russia could hardly be expected to attack single-handed and Joffre’s memoirs warn that a French defensive posture might lead the Germans to attack Russia first, leaving France isolated after the German victory.¹⁸

As future insurance against the obligation to grapple in peacetime with the more alarming contingencies, Joffre designed Plan XVII not as a battle plan, a blind offensive into Lorraine, but as a deployment plan to deal with a variety of contingencies, the most likely being a German movement through Belgium. Exactly what the French Army was to do would not be clear until Joffre had discerned the nature of German plans, that is ten or eleven days after mobilization.¹⁹ Depending on German actions, Joffre’s plan offered three possible axes of advance: one each in northern and southern Lorraine and a third towards Neufchateau in Belgium. Since Joffre thought the Germans most likely to move into Belgium, he expected to feint with the First and Second Armies in Alsace and Lorraine while Third and Fourth Armies made the main effort against the flank of the German forces to the northeast.

Robert Doughty describes this plan positively in *Pyrrhic Victory*, noting that the deeper the Germans moved in Belgium, the more vulnerable their “center” in Luxemburg and Belgium;²⁰ but B. H. Liddell Hart is more critical – “the Germans were

¹⁸Joffre, *Mémoires*, p. 23.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 144.

²⁰Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 65.

expected complaisantly to take the difficult route through the Ardennes in order that the French might conveniently smite their communications.”²¹ Liddell Hart saw the problem, the possibility that the German Army might operate west of the Meuse rather than in the more difficult eastern terrain. Fifth Army commander General Lanrezac saw the problem too, and thought Joffre’s plan so inept as to be literally incredible. Receiving no reply to an anxious letter of 31 July warning of his army’s vulnerability in the event that the Germans crossed the Meuse, Lanrezac concluded that, “Directive no. 1 must have undergone significant modifications, completely prepared in advance, but secret. I was mistaken.”²²

Lanrezac’s theory that Joffre had a new and better plan too secret to be communicated to his army commanders would seem improbable to anyone unaware that this was, in fact, how Joffre operated. Not only did he take full responsibility for French war planning, but he kept the results to himself. As late as 3 August, when Joffre gathered his army commanders for their last plenary meeting at the War Ministry before they dispersed to command their armies, the generals still hoped to receive the current appreciation of German intentions and some clarification about their individual missions. They were disappointed. Lanrezac reports that when General Dubail, commander of First Army, requested reinforcements for his attack into Alsace, Joffre refused with the words “that’s your plan, not mine.”²³ Joffre’s actual plan, feint right and punch left, was revealed on 8 August.²⁴

Why was Joffre, as Doughty puts it, so “coy” about his plans? Joffre explained that a written campaign plan might reveal to Britain his intention to enter into neutral Belgium.²⁵ Had he intended to violate both the instructions of his government and Belgian territory, Joffre would have had good reason to keep his plans secret, but Joffre had abandoned his plan for preemptive entry in Belgium. Joffre’s secrecy may reflect a personality defect, but insecurity about the operational situation was probably the key factor. The Belgian problem was not one he wanted to talk about, especially to critics

²¹B.H.Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914-1918* (Boston, 1930), p. 50.

²²<http://batmarn1.club.fr/lanrezac.htm>.

²³Lanrezac, *Le plan de campagne français*, quoted in Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 43, and at <http://batmarn1.club.fr/lanrezac.htm>.

²⁴Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 57.

²⁵Joffre, *Mémoires*, p. 145.

like Lanrezac, whose bitterness about the lack of open doctrinal debate can be guessed from the opening line of one of his lectures at the *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre*: “If the doors are firmly shut, I shall discuss the defensive.”²⁶ It is impossible to tell from his memoirs whether Joffre believed that German force structure precluded an advance into central Belgium or whether he thought the move possible only at the expense of creating a fatal weakness in their center. He certainly did not lay out these alternatives clearly, and by failing to do so, he prevented public consideration of his arguments. To discourage critical thinking was probably his purpose, and it seemed to have worked. Lanrezac, for example, contented himself with criticizing Joffre’s plan while assuming that Joffre had quietly taken care of everything. The political leaders, even less informed, undoubtedly comforted themselves with the belief that Joffre would do what was necessary. To reassure himself, Joffre leaned on his offensive doctrine, which provided him with reasons for confidence and, as it turns out, exculpation for failure. He would defend himself afterwards by arguing that he had chosen the right place to strike the enemy and marshaled superior numbers of troops there. If the tactical outcome on the battlefield had not vindicated his strategy, the fault lay with the soldiers.²⁷ Thus he blamed French defeats on imperfect understanding of new offensive doctrines and commanders “too often paralyzed by habits of routine.”²⁸

“Habits of routine” strikes a chord. Even if the “tyranny of the mundane” does not absolve Joffre of responsibility, it may play some role in events. One thinks of Plan XVII as simple. Unlike the Schlieffen Plan, no one has ever written a book about it. If Plan XVII had said merely “concentrate the troops and wait until General Joffre selects a direction of march,” it would not have taken fourteen months to produce and French commanders and planners would have had plenty of time for second thoughts. But Plan XII apparently involved a comprehensive restructuring of French military organization, including fundamental changes requiring parliamentary approval.²⁹ The tyranny of the mundane postulates that difficult but solvable practical issues get more attention than intractable strategic problems, and Plan XVII offered ample opportunity

²⁶Quoted in Raoul Castex [translated and edited by Eugenia C. Kiesling], *Strategic Theories* (Annapolis, MD, 1994), p. 336.

²⁷Quoted in Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 75.

²⁸Joffre, *Mémoires*, p. 40.

²⁹In October 1914, Joffre predicted that Plan XVII would require fourteen months to complete. His modifications to Plan XVI had taken 5 months, Joffre, *Mémoires*, pp. 164, 167, 170.

for planners to avoid the latter while immersing themselves in the details of the former. If Joffre did not encourage his subordinates to tackle tough questions, they had plenty of work to distract them.

Plan XVII can be seen as Joffre's approach to the "Rumsfeld Gap." If France could not have the larger army it would want in time of war, then he would develop a plan to win with the army it had – or at least to distract himself and his subordinates from thinking about the dismaying difference between the actual and desired armies.

Cognitive tools for wishing away the Rumsfeld Gap operated at the tactical level as well as the strategic, most notably in the area of French artillery development. The well-known part of the story is that French Army entered the Great War with almost no artillery other than its admirable 75 mm field gun, whose mobility, low trajectory, high rate of rate of fire, and bullet shield made it the artillery's reification of the "Cult of the Bayonet" and provides a striking contrast with Germany's mixture of 77 mm light field pieces and a variety of excellent medium howitzers. It did not escape Joffre that the German howitzers, with their superior range, greater weight of explosive and indirect fire capability, would have distinct advantages in a counter-battery duel. From the moment of his appointment to the CSG in 1910, he urged the development of both a light howitzer and a heavier field gun. The following year, as commander-in-chief designate, he tried again but found himself stymied by the artillery branch, which reported directly to the Minister of War. Frustrated, he invited civilian arms manufactures to submit prototypes and arranged for his own tests, but the resulting contracts were blocked by the artillery branch. When the parliament finally voted funds to purchase 220 105 mm howitzers from the Creusots works, the artillery branch reduced the order to thirty-six.³⁰

Joffre's account provides plenty of evidence of his deep concern about France's manifest inferiority in artillery, a position he supports by quoting 13th Corps Commander Ruffy's 1913 description of the German advantage "écrasante."³¹ Nonetheless, his report on the artillery balance to the CSG in January 1914 was positive, a position he later defended as necessary for morale. "Our inferiority could not escape

³⁰Joffre, *Mémoires*, pp. 67-8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

anyone. Since for a long time only some of our units will be supported by heavy artillery, it seemed right to describe such artillery as sometimes necessary rather than always indispensable."³² Even "sometimes necessary" sounds like a good argument for buying the medium howitzers, but cognitive dissonance allows Joffre to treat "sometimes" as if it meant "not at any crucial time." In order to maintain the morale of his organization, he repudiated his own sound thoughts about armaments and endorsed those against which he had been arguing for the past four years.

That French soldiers could not voice their concerns about the pernicious artillery balance has misled some historians into believing that their faith in the 75 mm was absolute in itself rather compelled by necessity, that what they were not talking about they were also not thinking about. But sometimes silence is itself a strategy, as it was in the case of French silence about expectations about Russia. Germany's nightmare, the two-front war, would be the salvation of France as long as the Russians acted energetically. French policy therefore supported Russia's military build up, including the well-known subsidy of Russian railroad expansion, and sought Russian commitment to a coordinated offensive against Germany at the outset of war. Joffre thought that the threat of Russian operations in the East might lead the Germans to abandon the westward attack, which he rightly believed to be the basis of their military strategy. At the very least, however, the new correlation of forces would free France to act with less, as he put it, "circumspection."³³ Joffre's insistence on the earliest possible French offensive met coalition requirements by demonstrating French loyalty to her agreements with Russia and keeping much of the German army engaged in the west.³⁴ Even had a defensive posture suited Joffre's temperament, French passivity would have engendered the same in Russia, allowing Germany greater operational freedom. In the worst case, moreover, the Russians might have attacked alone to be defeated by consolidated German forces.

Joffre's professions of confidence in Russian support probably fall somewhere between wishful thinking and disingenuousness. Russia's August 1911 promise of a full-scale attack on M+15 regardless of the state of Russian mobilization, while

³² Ibid., p. 73.

³³ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

encouraging, cannot be taken too seriously so soon after Russian caution during the Moroccan crisis and in view of Ambassador Alexander Izvolsky's warning to France that Russia was not ready for war.³⁵ French leaders knew that a rapid Russian deployment to the frontier would require extensive railroad construction, a project they had urged on their Russian counterparts from 1909. Franco-Russian cooperation achieved a firmer footing with the naval agreement of 16 July 1912 and the promulgation in May 1912 of Mobilization Schedule No. 19, which established a forward deployment compatible with promises to France of a rapid offensive into East Prussia. French hopes grew after staff talks in 1912 and 1913 reaffirmed Russian commitments and with the approval in July 1913 of a five-year "Great Program" of military modernization. Moreover, in 1914, France agreed to provide the loans necessary to finance a major Russian railroad expansion project. Still, as of July 1914, the "Great Program" had only been funded, and the new tracks remained unbuilt. The Russian government had no illusions as to their nation's military inferiority vis-a-vis Germany,³⁶ and Russia would ultimately go to war against Austria in 1914 not because of misplaced confidence in her military forces but because backing down would have been an intolerable humiliation.³⁷

His exaggerations about the extent of Russian promises in August 1911 combined with his reiterated insistence to Grand Duke Nicholas of the importance of an early Russian offensive suggest that the imperturbable Joffre was slightly uneasy. He must surely have been thinking about the literally unspeakable consequences of Russian defection from the proposed joint attack on Germany. In fact, not much about Franco-Russia military relationships could be discussed openly. One did not want Lanrezac voicing his opinion that France should avoid all "decisive action" until Russia and Britain were in action lest these nations get the wrong impression about the degree of French commitment to their interests.³⁸

³⁵ David Stevenson, **Error! Main Document Only.** *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904-1914* (Oxford, 1996), p. 190.

³⁶David Alan Rich, "Russia," in Richard F. Hamilton and H.H. Herwig, *Origins of World War I* (New York, 2003), 207. For the railroads, see Stevenson, *Armaments*, p. 318 and idem., "War by Timetable? The Railway Race before 1914," *Past and Present*, 162(1999), p. 186.

³⁷Holger H. Herwig, "Why Did it Happen?," in Hamilton and Herwig, *Origins*, p. 455.

³⁸ <http://batmarn1.club.fr/lanrezac.htm>.

As in the previous examples of Plan XVII and artillery development, alliance policy was a matter on which the French army could not afford to rethink its options. Public criticism of the Russian alliance would have served neither to keep the peace nor to improve France's ability to fight the ensuing war. But perhaps the least thinkable thing of all in 1914 was the actual nature of the coming war, something one might have expected French soldiers to have been thinking intently about. How long would France's next conflict last? Would victory require one battle or many? To what extent would it be fought with the resources on hand or require support from the civilian economy? How would the answers to these questions affect French war aims? Indeed, what would those war aims be? What is extraordinary about pre-war military writings is not the wrong answers but the unasked questions.

In my RMC paper I talked about how three leading French military writers: Victor-Bernard Derrécagaix, Jean Colin, and Ferdinand Foch, described the next war. I will not reiterate the argument here except to say that tactical minutiae and exaltation of Napoleonic élan in all three writers demonstrate the twin efficacy "the tyranny of the mundane" and cognitive dissonance in preventing the French Army from reflecting as to whether there might be a difference between its peacetime condition and its wartime requirements.

Clearly French soldiers – those of all the other belligerent powers– did not go to war in 1914 without having thought about the nature of contemporary conflict. soldiers are not stupid and they think very hard about their profession, but their cognitive processes often lead to the kind of results my friend Wick might confuse with the products of sheer incompetence.