



SMALL WARS

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Resurrection is Emancipation: Exploring ?Strategy? as a Dead Metaphor

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Brasidas...took up a defensive position on Cerdylum...on high ground across the river...with good views in all directions, so that no move made by Cleon and his army could escape notice. – Thucydides[1]

A perspective, or overall orientation, emerges from realizing the heuristic potential of a guiding metaphor; it leads to the formulation of motives or interpretations ... [and] contains a 'program of action' for responding.... We name one thing in terms of another, treat the name as a realistic perspective, and act as if it applies literally to a given situation.

– Robert L. Ivie[2]

The word strategy has been literalized to the point that it serves unquestioned as the *raison d'être* of US Defense Department war colleges. So pervasive is the term that the present author could not find a single military journal article attempting to challenge the expression as anything but quintessential to the professional of arms. This essay seeks to de-literalize the word—theorizing that its meaning has been morphologically displaced from an ancient Greek wartime phenomenon. The goal here is to emancipate thinking about strategy by surmising its multi-disciplinary conceptualizations and finding evidence that, somewhere along the line, strategy became a dormant (if not dying or dead) metaphor. Indeed, with the backdrop of Donald A. Schön's theory of displaced concepts, one can postulate about the morphology of strategy – a word that, through networks of exchanged meaning, has been recontextualized since the ancient Greek phenomenon appeared.[3]

A Theory of Concept Displacement

When faced with seemingly intractable situations, humans draw on metaphors (partial meanings) to make sense of them. Better put, metaphors help “reorganize alien realms.”[4] Schön's theory of sensemaking (i.e. *displacement of concepts*) is encapsulated in his own concise description:

Theories are selected for displacement on a number of bases: the gifts of the various overlapping cultures involved, the metaphors underlying the ready-made theories in terms of which the new situations are already partly structured, and the demands of those situations—that is, the aptness of the old theory, taken as a projective model, to provide new solutions for the problematic aspects of those situations.[5]

Hence, strategy can be investigated as an extended metaphor; and, in doing so, will spur critical and creative inquiry upon its meaning structures. The hope of this essay is to emancipate military practitioners

and war scholars to see merit in the *redesigning* of otherwise institutionalized, one-dimensional framing of problem settings.[6]

Only a handful of writers have attempted to linguistically unravel the military sensemakings we have built around the phenomenon of war.[7] Some provide morphological insight by examining how others have borrowed meaning from the context of war. For example, cognitive linguists have marveled at the daily use of terms normally associated with the logics of war.[8] The uses of war metaphors seem endless (metaphors highlighted in *italics*):

Muster support for the war on poverty

NFL team's *offensive* line

Apple *outmaneuvers* Microsoft

The leadership qualities of *General George S. Patton*

Bureaucratic *infighting*

The *tactics* of partisan politics

The *attack* on American family values

A Madison Avenue marketing *blitzkrieg*

A political *campaign*

Defense attorney

Equally intriguing is the way other knowledge disciplines have influenced the logics of war through what has become a “metaphoric network:”[9]

The *Fog* and *Friction* of war

Military professionals practice the *management* of violence

Department of Defense *business processes*

Iraq and Afghanistan *surges*

The *Cold* War

Psychological warfare

The enemy *Center of Gravity*

Irregular warfare

Military as an element of *power*

Fourth generation warfare

How does this displacement of concepts happen? Specifically, how did it happen with strategy?

Original Meaning as an Observable Phenomenon

The linguistic context of the word strategy seems to stem from an ancient Greek military officer responsible for the outcome of a battle or war -- *stratégos* (hence the Greek root prefix “*strat-*” or “*level*” and suffix “*-égos*” or “*being*”). How high ranking military officers literally directed their forces in war is

encapsulated in the original meaning of the word strategy. One can only speculate how the subjective meanings we derive today were extended and displaced from the objective reality of a senior officer of a Greek archipelagos' city-state army, standing on the high ground, able to physically see, hear, and smell the Peloponnesian battlefield. Perceiving the flow of the battle with his senses, the general was tactically able (the meaning of tactics is derived from the related the Greek word *taktikós*, which translates to “orders”) to bring some order to the battle in his favor. The army's purpose (or *telos* – Greek for goal) was set by his employer – the city state. The original meaning of strategy, then, was the general who literally sensed the events unfolding from a vantage point, created favorable conditions through tactics, and was motivated by his city-state's wartime goals (Figure 1).

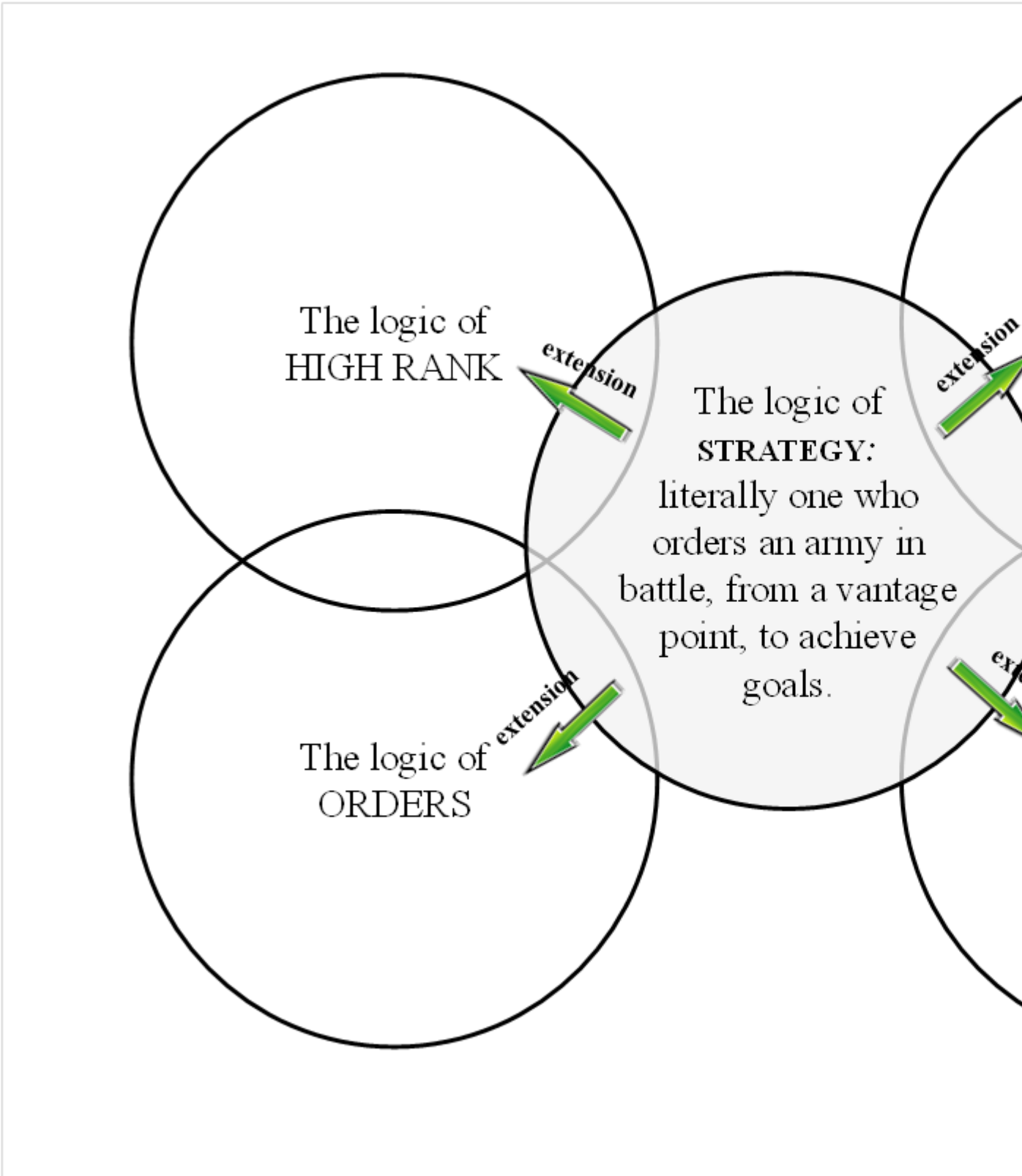


Figure 1. Over time, the meaning of strategy includes extended meanings and their associated logics, rooted in the base metaphor, *stratégos* (literally, the military ranking individual that gives orders [*taktikós*] to an army in battle, from a high ground vantage point, to achieve goals (*telos*)).

Strategy as a Metaphor (Carrier of Meaning) for Other Knowledge Disciplines

These and other associated meanings of strategy have since been projected into other knowledge disciplines such as business, international relations, public administration, and, sports, connected by the emerging transdisciplinary “strategic studies.” In time, when motivated with the demands of new, unfamiliar situations, other disciplines engaged in heuristic searches for explanations, finding logical-resemblances to the “work of the general” that include: having the hierarchical authority *level* that comes with *high rank*; developing a *vision* toward the future, as one would *sense* from a vantage position; finding ways to bring *order* their institution; and, setting *goals* that define *success*. These extended meanings continued into far ranging derivative theories for action in the particular field. The resembled “war logics” of strategy were projected into other knowledge disciplines and recontextualized (Figure 2).

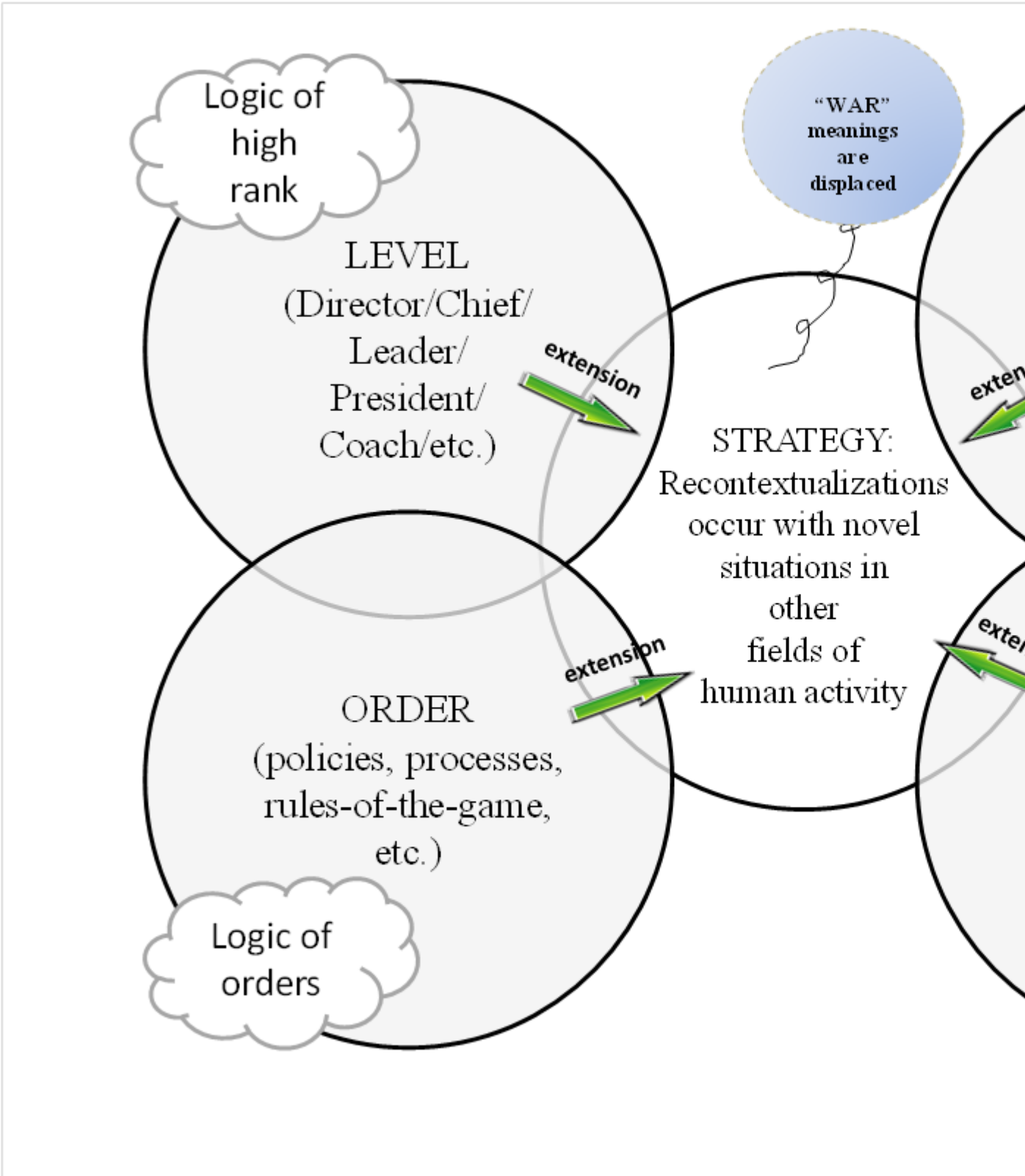


Figure 2. Examples of displaced and extended meanings that serve the interdisciplinary studies of strategy (a.k.a. “strategic studies”), re-contextualizing around other problem settings (e.g., a business activity, international diplomacy, public office, or sports situations).

From the Schönian perspective, the morphological process affecting the meaning of strategy seems to be anchored in the development of theories of action through multifaceted contextualizations and recontextualizations of how and what to do when faced with important, novel situations.^[10] In plainer English, knowledge communities adapt the meaning of strategy as they reflect in and on the new situations they face and reconstitute its meaning. The emergent contexts warrant further displacement of the meaning of strategy and dynamically shared meaning among the disciplines (various contexts) and layers of new associated metaphors are themselves extended and displaced in the emergent metaphoric network. The displaced ideas of strategy that took on elaborated meanings in other fields are projected back and forth with military studies. Extended language constructions (e.g., the noun, strategy, becomes an adjective, “strategic”) emerge in the military and other communities of practice, such as: “strategic leaders;” “strategic vision;” “strategic end state;” and, “strategic planning.” These extended and displaced meanings are today found in the highest level conceptualizations of all US Defense Department war colleges and are elaborated to the point of serving as their *raison d’être* (Figure 3).^[11]

Figure 3. Extensions and displacements make strategy a “stew” of an interactive, generative, and eventually mutually-referencing network of meaning.

The Significance of Extension and Displacement

Strategy can be framed as a morphological stew of interactive, generative metaphors that eventually becomes “mutually-referencing” in the emerging of a relatively insular interdisciplinary network of “strategic studies.”^[12] There are at least three important and overlapping implications: (1) The resulting **epistemological frustration** (lack of closure) is continuously generated through the metaphoric network of strategic studies; (2) The potential emancipation that **institutional reflexivity** could afford; and, (3) The challenge of **reframing** in problem settings.

Epistemological Frustration. The interdisciplinary exchanges of meaning that occur in the face of novel or emergent situations (in the context of business, international relations, public administration, sports, military, and so forth) represent what may be for some a disconcerting appreciation for the fluctuating and transforming view of the meaning of strategy. Evidence of epistemological frustration about “what strategy is” is widespread in various disciplines that entertain the concept.^[13] Schön’s theory of concept displacement teaches us that there can never be an answer to “what strategy is.” To the positivist (someone who believes the only legitimate knowledge is that which empirically and positively predicts causality), this conclusion seems exasperating.^[14]

Alternatively, the interdisciplinary extensions of meaning that occur in the face of novel or emergent situations (in the context of business, international relations, public administration, sports, military, and so forth) represent a fluctuating and transforming, social constructionist view of strategy. Situations that are volatile, uncertain, and complex defy a stable causal science of human intervention, so the demands of positivism and its hope for progressive knowledge can never be met. To the constructionist, the epistemology of strategy is and always will be fluid and ambiguous. This admission, that the word strategy is equivocal, becomes the constructionist’s pathway toward institutional reflexivity.

Institutional Reflexivity. To reiterate, Schön offers that theories are rooted in the logics that metaphors provide. In institutions, base metaphors have widespread “rhetorical control” over the theoretical framing of situations as problems.^[15] In institutions, “the origin of the confusion may lie in the inadequacy” of the metaphor-based theories “by which we try and order” phenomena.^[16] Hence, the reflexivity process would explore the assumptive connections between the non-literal logics imbedded in extended and displaced metaphors that drive theory-construction in the institution. Institutions (that also comprise metaphoric networks that Thomas Kuhn conceptualized as a “paradigm” of a “community of practitioners”), cannot easily “step outside” the logic of the base metaphors that drive those theories.^[17]

What Oswald Spengler calls “historical pseudomorphosis” can blind the institution to alternatives – spirally-referencing, reifications eventually create a narrow, homogeneous form of reasoning and what follows are the associated pitfalls of cognitive dissonance, groupthink, single-loop learning, unidisciplinary sensemaking, and so forth.^[18] The cure is reflexivity — “...an awareness of the situatedness of scientific knowledge and an understanding of the researcher and research community from which knowledge has appeared.”^[19] Institutional reflexivity is related to the idea of community members exercising practical skepticism about the esoteric knowledge and values that the institution would otherwise hold dear. In a reflexive institution, collective-consciousness requires not only suspending belief in what may be dogmatic assertions but also admitting (humbly) that the institution can never know how to obtain positive knowledge. Perhaps initially frustrating to institutions that have been culturally situated in a positivist epistemology, this more critical view may serve to emancipate the collective mind and stimulate searches for linguistic frames outside the otherwise assumed esoteric boundaries. In the

present case, the logic displaced from the literal work of the ancient Greek general has served as the metaphoric foundation for large-scale educational institutions of strategy, namely, US war colleges.

Without reflexivity, institutions tend to reify meanings – they create what appears to be an objective reality associated with the base metaphor.[20] In the case of US war colleges, the idea that education about war can be addressed at levels (linked back to Greek “strata”) feeds the reification of “levels of war” which are presently explained as tactical (lowest), operational (mid-range), and strategic (highest). Hence, entry-level officer education is molded around instruction in tactics, mid-range officer education is oriented on operations, and the more senior officers attend war colleges to study strategy. Logics related to levels also emerge and Piagetian[21] constructs such as “officer development” follow the logic of strata – enlisted and junior officers (babies and children), mid-grade officers (adolescents) and high-ranking officers (adults and seniors). The logic includes this sampling of taken-for-granted assumptions that a more reflexive institution may want to challenge:

- One cannot think strategically without going through the lower levels of development (tactics and operations);
- Only the senior-ranking officials are empowered as strategic leaders; and,
- The hierarchy of learning objectives that makes up military educational curricula needs to follow both the promotion system of empowerment and the levels of war.

The Art of Reframing. In that regard, Professor Ray Holland defines “transdisciplinary reflexivity” as going beyond the traditional view of “unidisciplinary” logics and into multi-level reflexive analysis.

Hence, transdisciplinary reflexivity on the idea of strategy may include the following:

- Assume the knowledge of strategy is not subject to “scientific methods” (e.g., subject to rigorous natural science methodologies, such as reductionism and levels of analysis).
- Explore the interpretations of strategy-like terms from the view of other cultures, institutions, and/or knowledge disciplines (outside “strategic studies”) and hermeneutically consider their associated interpretive and symbolic meanings.
- Observe how disagreement with one’s own institutional view of strategy (or arguing the view that “strategy does not exist” outside the institutional reification of the term) may result in social alienation of those who express those disagreements.
- Notice when and if the practice of individual or rogue-group reflexivity about strategy is oppressed/suppressed by those more powerful members of any and all institutions that study strategy. [22]

As the institution becomes receptive to reflexive activities, the critical and creative searches for alternative frames become more favorable in light of internal politics.[23] Openness to new meaning constructions across other, less familiar, knowledge disciplines may be a key to solving “the poverty of words available” when faced with unfamiliar or alien situations.[24] When members of the institution accept that “their” science of strategy involves the critical mindfulness of how the displacement of concepts works, a Kuhnian “paradigm shift” becomes not only seen as possible, but can be rigorously pursued and rewarded. [25] The meaning of strategy can be “redesigned” at will by projecting other frames of reference into it. Alternatively, the word can be subjugated to other useful partial “meaning carriers” (base metaphors) that can help frame or reframe problem settings.

In other words, a more reflexive institution may concentrate efforts at designing creative ways to construct sensemakings about messy situations at hand and critically dismiss (at least temporarily) the idea of strategy in search of other frames—even those that may be available from other cultures. For example, one promising extra-cultural view of military efficacy is provided by French sinologist François Jullien.

He carefully portrays the Greco-Western dominant contextualization of strategy as quite foreign to the logic, grammar, and rhetoric of Chinese Confucianism. In lieu of ends-based rationality, typically associated with Greco-teleology, the Chinese developed a very different way of reasoning that is opportunistic (reminiscent of a Heraclitean “in-the-flow” ontology) and reflects the dynamic “competing balance” (e.g., a *yin* and *yang*) view of time, space, and knowledge.[26] Whereas Clausewitz illustrated the metaphor of “friction” as walking in water, the Chinese school contextualizes very differently: “[Water] has no constant shape. There is nothing softer and weaker than water, yet nothing is more penetrating and capable of attacking the hard and strong.”[27]

A reflexive institution may also seek sources of reframing outside its dominant metaphoric network (e.g., outside the institutions that have otherwise “fed” on the extensions and displacements of strategy). For example, the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) is expressly founded for “multidisciplinary collaborations ... of complex adaptive systems [that are] critical to addressing key environmental, technological, biological, economic, and political challenges.”[28] Here the dominant metaphor is derived (originally) from the subatomic sciences which spawned the relatively new interdisciplinary science of complexity.[29] At SFI, strategy is hardly a mentionable idiom and instead the concepts of “perpetual novelty” and “endlessly unfolding surprise” are key extensions of the original complex subatomic phenomena that serve as base metaphors.[30] At SFI, rather than focusing on the romantic hope of the empowered “strategic leader” who, with “strategic vision and strategic planning,” achieves the nation’s “strategic end state,” attention shifts to extended metaphors of complexity -- such as those associated with “self-organizing systems.”[31]

The purpose of the more reflexive, design-of-meaning approach, involving searches multidisciplinary and multi-institutional frames is not to seek “the best answer.” The ideal is to stay open to multiple frames, “triangulating” on the novel situation at hand, and never expecting closure.[32] Some traditional military practitioners and researchers may complain that this openness to designing frames with multiple metaphoric bases is impractical and is the prerogative of college professors who observe intractable social messes from a safe distance and produce this kind of academic solipsism. After all, how can one extract a “utilitarian art” associated with institutional reflexivity and the continuous search for multiple metaphoric frames (such as from other cultural perspectives or complexity)? This is a question that could arguably lead to a renaissance in military science and explore how the institution could become more skeptical in debates over professional practice and reflect more critically on the phenomenon, war.

[1] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1954), pp. 350-351.

[2] Robert L. Ivie, “Cold War and the Rhetorical Metaphor: A Framework of Criticism,” p. 73, in Martin J. Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott, *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology* 2d ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1997), pp. 71-79.

[3] In the present study, the author takes a semasiological approach to linguistics. For an onomasiological approach to the evolution of the meaning of strategy, see Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010).

[4] Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1979), citing the works of Alfred Schutz, p. 244.

[5] Donald A. Schön, *Displacement of Concepts*. (London: Tavistock, 1963), p. xi.

[6] Max Black, "More About Metaphor," p. 25, in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (New York: Cambridge, 1993), pp. 19-41.

[7] Richard E. Neustadt, Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Making* (New York: The Free Press, 1986); Yuen F. Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992); Philip A Talbot, "Corporate Generals: The Military Metaphor of Strategy," *Irish Journal of Management* 24, 2003, pp.1-10; Douglas R. Stickle, *Malignants in the Body Politic: Redefining War Through Metaphor* (Maxwell Air Force base: Air University Press, 2004); Alistair Mutch, "Organization Theory and Military Metaphor: Time for Reappraisal?" *Organization*, vol. 13, no. 6 (2006), pp. 751-769; Frederica Ferrari, "Metaphor at Work in the Analysis of Political Discourse: Investigating a 'Preventive War' Persuasion Strategy," *Discourse & Society*, vol. 18, no. 5 (2007), pp. 603-625; and, Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University, 2009).

[8] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), pp. 4-7.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977), p. 244.

[10] John G. Mitchell, *Re-Visioning Educational Leadership: A Phenomenological Approach* (New York: Garland, 1990).

[11] In all of the US War Colleges' mission statements, the word strategy or some derivative is included.

[12] Donald A. Schön, "Generative Metaphor and Social Policy," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Ed.) (New York: Cambridge, 1993), pp. 137-163.

[13] See, for example, Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning: Reconceiving Roles for Planning, Plans, and Planners* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

[14] Harriet Martineau, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (London: John Chapman, 1853), p.5.

[15] Martin Kilduff, Ajay Mehra, and Mary Dunn, "From Blue Sky Research to Problem Solving: A Philosophy of Science Theory of New Knowledge Production," p. 308, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2011), pp. 297-317.

[16] James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 12.

[17] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3d ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

[18] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Oxford University, 1939), p. 268.

[19] Cynthia Hardy, Nelson Phillips, and Stewart Clegg, "Reflexivity in Organization and Management Theory: A Study of the Production of the Research 'Subject,'" p. 554," *Human Relations*, vol. 54, no. 5 (2001), pp. 531-560.

[20] Burrell and Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms*, p. 266.

[21] Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a developmental psychologist and a self-professed epistemologist, his research concerned how schemata are socially constructed, who was well-known for his theory of human cognitive development. See, for example, his *The Child's Construction of Reality* (Oxon: Basic Books, 1954).

[22] Ray Holland, "Reflexivity," p. 474, *Human Relations*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1999), pp. 463-484.

[23] Donald A. Schön and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection: The Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[24] Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, pp. 106-107.

[25] Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 92.

[26] François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, trans. Janet Lloyd, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004).

[27] David Lai, *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept*, SHI (Carlisle: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), p. 4.

[28] Santa Fe Institute (<http://www.santafe.edu/about/>).

[29] M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Touchstone, 1992).

[30] Waldrop, p. 147 and 165.

[31] Waldrop, p. 102.

[32] Steve Woolgar, *Knowledge and Reflexivity* (London: Sage, 1988).

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Chris Paparone is a retired US Army Colonel who served in various command and staff positions in war and peace in the continental United States, Panama, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Bosnia. He is a graduate of the US Naval War College and received his PhD in public administration from The Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg. He has published numerous articles, book chapters, and in 2013 published a Bloomsbury book titled *The Sociology of Military Science: Prospects for Postinstitutional Military Design*. He considers himself a burgeoning "critical military epistemologist" and will feature an article on CME in a forthcoming Journal of Military and Strategic Studies special issue.

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