

## British Way in Warfare: The Debate with the Many Issues

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During the Elizabethan era a literary debate of existential proportion between Sir Walter Raleigh versus Sir Francis Knollys commenced, unleashing upon history a Leviathan yet to be tamed.<sup>1</sup> A question of grand strategy centred on English foreign policy (later British defence policy),<sup>2</sup> the debate was an attempt to determine the extent and form of English material and political investment on the Continent.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of several centuries, as with all great sea monsters, the debate began to morph into something larger than its former self. After several notable additions a 'doyen' by the name of Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart gave the dialectical debate its enduring title – the 'British Way in Warfare' (B-WIW).<sup>4</sup> Accelerated by the advent of the Cold War the debate began to take shape in a way its (ig)noble progenitors would have found quite familiar -- 'forward defence continentalists' versus 'blue-water defence [maritimalists]'.<sup>5</sup> In contemporary times the potential arrival of a 'no-deal Brexit' and the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) attempt to put 'contingency plans' in place puts the *esprit* of B-WIW back onto the menu as a policy option.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From The Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 207, and Michael Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare: A Reappraisal,' in Michael Howard (ed.) *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 170-173.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Freedman, 'Alliance and the British Way in Warfare,' *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1995), pp. 145-158.

<sup>3</sup> David French, *The British Way in Warfare, 1688-2000* (Unwin Hyman Inc., 1990), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The British Way of Warfare* (Faber and Faber, 1932).

<sup>5</sup> Hew Strachan, 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited,' *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1983), p. 450.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Elgot, Heather Stewart & Peter Walker, 'No-deal Brexit Plans put 3,500 Troops on Standby,' in *The Guardian*, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/18/brexit-cabinet-meets-to-discuss-ramping-up-plans-for-no-deal>. (Here and subsequently, all internet links were last accessed on 12 May 2019.)

With such a vast lineage the literature in this debate must be approached deliberately and carefully. This in mind, the essay is broken into three parts. As a foundation for the latter two parts, the first will discuss two issues, historiographical and terminological, that have arisen as a result of the cumulative additions to the debate. The second part will analyse Liddell Hart's perspective on B-WIW in the face of Michael Howard's critiques. The third part seeks to go beyond the bifurcated construction of the debate through the inclusion of often overlooked voices on the matter – Orwell and the 'Alternative' school.

### *Historiographical Issues*

Any relatively brief literature review of this debate would demonstrate three fundamental issues in the historiography. First, the debate is laced whether directly or indirectly with the influence of the various time periods in which the works were written. The oscillation between the maritime school and continentalist school mirrors distinct realities and issues in the contemporary environment. As Michael Howard warns, 'history does not teach lessons, historians do, and that the agenda of historians is set by current controversies...'<sup>7</sup> In the prominent military historian's famed argumentative piece, *The Continental Commitments* falls short as it cannot be separated from British defence policy during the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> Alan Macmillan says as much when he transcribes that Howard reflects the experience of the Second World War and Cold War, 'leading him to view a continental commitment as a necessity for winning the first and keeping the second cold'.<sup>9</sup> Other writers have gone beyond a mere discussion of policies and politics by layering a hint of *au courant* nationalistic pride in their works. Brian Holden Reid declares that the pursuit of B-WIW was 'sustained by a sentimental glimmer from Britain's and especially England's, distant past'.<sup>10</sup> In some ways perhaps this sophisticated alter-worshipping

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 2, and Ian Speller, 'Corbett, Liddell Hart and the "British Way in Warfare" in the 1960's,' *Defense Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2008), p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Howard, *Continental Commitments: Dilemma of British Defense Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (Prometheus Books, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Macmillan, 'Strategic Culture and National Ways in Warfare: The British Case,' *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 140, No. 5 (1995), pp. 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Holden Reid, 'The British Way in Warfare,' *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 156, No.

might be explained by a lack of commentators outside of the Anglo-Saxon sphere. If not a process of 'political pamphleteering' it may reflect 'support of a particular national strategy and, by extension, in favour of devoting greater or lesser resources to different military capabilities'.<sup>11</sup>

Second, if historians are indeed capable of discussing the past absent of the present they may invoke the reverse by applying the past as a prescription for the present.<sup>12</sup> As Andrew Lambert frequently suggests, history is about advocacy. Any brief overview of the works from the founders of the 'blue-water school' at the turn of the twentieth century would show that the writing of naval history was the selected platform to instruct a precise audience (government, politicians, military staff, or citizenry) on the proper course of action in the present.

Third, since the United Kingdom (UK) is only a 'recent convert to the idea of publishing a former national security/strategy document',<sup>13</sup> thanks in part to the British army's lack of formalised doctrinal use until the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> the B-WIW remains arguably a placeholder until the British government implements a culture of formalised doctrines.<sup>15</sup> The publication of three editions within four years (2009-2013) without first the development of a culture of doctrinal writing indicates that the new British National Security Council (B-NSC) may be putting the 'cart before the horse'.<sup>16</sup> Until such time B-WIW will retain great 'seductive appeal'.<sup>17</sup>

### *Terminological Issues*

Alongside the issues of historiography, the terminology employed poses a problem. In the early literature the authors generally utilised the same terminology – the 'British Way in Warfare'. As the Cold

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6 (2011), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 172; Speller, 'Liddell Hart,' p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> Strachan, 'The British Way,' p. 447.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Cornish, 'United Kingdom', in Heiko Biehl, Bastian Giegerich & Alexandra Jonas (eds.), *Strategic Cultures in Europe Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent* (Springer VS, 2013), p. 362.

<sup>14</sup> McInnes, 'The British Army,' p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Cornish, 'United Kingdom', p. 362.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Holden Reid, 'Introduction: Is There a British Military 'Philosophy'?,' in J.J.G. Mackenzie & Brian Holden Reid (eds.), *Central Region Versus Out of Area: Future Commitments* (Tri-Service, 1990), p. 1.

War ensued a literature developed around the concept of 'strategic culture'. Beginning in late 1970s, Jack Snyder advances that the primary competitor of the United States possessed a 'nuclear weapon strategic culture'.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the coinage of an original term and development of a novel school of thought, other scholars expanded the model – notably, Alastair Iain Johnston with 'cultural realism' and its portrayal of 'Chinese strategic culture'.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the school of strategic culture would come to analyse Britain.

On account of this literature, one must wonder what the inherent differences between 'strategic culture' and 'way in warfare' are. Colin McInnes explains that while the former is a theory, the latter is a descriptive tool that exists within a theoretical framework. To grasp the manner in which 'way in warfare' sits within strategic culture, McInnes outlines the two parts of Alastair Iain Johnston 'strategic culture:' (1) basic assumptions held about strategic environment (role of war, identification of threats, and efficacy of use of force) and (2) strategic options pursued in dealing with threats. Put simply, 'way in warfare' is the second of these two parts, 'dealing with the more operational issues of strategic choice... [and] more directly concerned with behavior...'<sup>20</sup> This might explain why Paul Cornish concludes that the 'UK culture *shapes* but does not *direct* strategy'.<sup>21</sup>

However, accepting this logic wholesale is problematic. If B-WIW is located at an operational level, then the innate variant applications of force (dictated by time and space) assure the near impossibility for a single form of B-WIW to persist. In time, one would be required to supplant '*the British way in warfare*' with '*a British way in warfare*'. Moreover, if 'way in warfare' is indeed relegated to an operational level, then it may overlap with other terminology like '*British army's way in warfare*'<sup>22</sup> and '*way of*

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<sup>18</sup> Jack L. Snyder, *Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (RAND Corporation, 1977); Gregory Vincent Raymond, *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (NiAS Press, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Reid, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 70; Alastair Iain Johnston, *A Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> McInnes, 'The British Army,' p. 128; Johnston, *Strategic Culture*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Cornish, 'Strategic Culture,' p. 361 (original italics); K. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Longman, 1968), pp. 7-8; also, Macmillan, 'Strategic culture,' pp. 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> Colin McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War: The British Army's Way in Warfare 1945-1990*

warfare'.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, overlooking potential designation issues of 'way in warfare' there is also the concern of the word 'British'. Every so often the usage of British is intended to denote solely an English past. In opposition to this interpretation, Reid argues that this false application may in fact 'distort, even though it might not contradict, the importance of the naval dimension in Britain's martial history,' for, as Nicholas Rodger reminds, 'it was Scotland as much as England whose national identity was shaped by war at sea'.<sup>24</sup> Beyond the 'Scotland question,' there is the additional headache of discerning who actually constituted the fighting force during peace and war time. In 1979, Christopher Layne puts forth that the armies of both Marlborough and Wellington were 'primarily composed of European rather than British troops'.<sup>25</sup> Along the same lines, Daniel A. Baugh pens that the increases of Royal Navy seamen were due to the allowance of 'foreign seamen to sign on to British merchant ships in times of war'.<sup>26</sup> Once the *lettres de marque* were granted, (at the very least) a minority of the privateering force must have constituted foreigners.<sup>27</sup> For these reasons, the usage of 'British' is an inappropriate moniker as it is the adjointment of unlike identities with imperfect delineations into a unitary parent-term.<sup>28</sup> In utilizing

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(Brassey's, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Reid, 'British Way in Warfare,' p. 70; Jay Luvaas, 'Review of the American Way of Warfare: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy by R. F. Weigley,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 5 (1974), pp. 1641-1642; Brian M. Limm, 'The American Way of Warfare Revisited,' *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2002), pp. 502-503; and Victor D. Hanson, *The Western Way of Warfare: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (University of California Press, 2009). Reid argues that "way of warfare" might be a commentary on "technique of war," as there is typically a discussion in the mechanics of fighting wars. Differently, Luvaas suggests that the importance of "national ways of warfare" tend to overstate uniqueness.

<sup>24</sup> Reid, 'British Way in Warfare,' p. 70, and Nicholas Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 660-1649* (W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 310.

<sup>25</sup> French, *The British Way in Warfare*, p. xv, and Christopher Layne, 'British Grand Strategy, 1900-1939: Theory and Practice in International Politics,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1979), p. 310.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel A. Baugh, 'Naval Power: What Gave the British Navy Superiority?,' in Leandro Prados De La Escosura, *Exceptionalism and Industrialization: Britain and its European Rivals, 1688-1815* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 245.

<sup>27</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *lettres de marque* as a 'licence to fit out an armed vessel and use it in the capture of enemy merchant shipping and to commit acts which would otherwise have constituted piracy'.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *God and Gold: Britain, America and the Making of the Modern*

such a term, professional historians therefore engage their field with intrinsically flawed terminology.

Although this is beyond the scope of this essay, owing to the misnomer and overlapping terminology, it may be appropriate to consign B-WIW as an 'essentially contested concept' (ECC).<sup>29</sup> This recommendation is grounded on the premise that B-WIW might be 'internally contested in that it lacks a clear and intersubjective definition'.<sup>30</sup>

### *Liddell Hart's 'British Way in Warfare'*

The First World War marked Basil Liddell Hart for the rest of his career as Azar Gat observed while sorting through the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College, London. During the interwar period, Liddell Hart became disillusioned with hero-worshipping of generals through interactions with 'the *best of them*' (italics in the original).<sup>31</sup> Beyond the influence of the First World War, Gat argues there presided four main influences on the development of Liddell Hart's outlook all of which remain unacknowledged.<sup>32</sup> It may even be said that Liddell Hart is the synthesis of Fuller, Colin, T.E. Lawrence, and Corbett, with the most important influence on his intellectual development being that of Fuller's work, *The Reformation*

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*World* (Atlantic Books, 2007). Mead argues that there exists an "Anglo-Saxon way of warfare". If correct, this may challenge the concept of a stand-alone B-WIW with its own unique properties.

<sup>29</sup> W.B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 56, (1955/56), pp. 62-87, William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 20, and French, *The British Way in Warfare*, p. xii-xviii. A discussion around the Aristotelian principle of essentialism, Gallie indicates there are 'concepts which are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their user'. As has been argued with other terms, Connolly's three 'dimensions of conceptual contention' – connotative, denotative, and appraisive – could test whether B-WIW satisfies the ECC standard. A good place to start might be with French's three paradigm models -- 'peacetime paradigm,' 'wartime paradigm,' and 'mixed paradigm' -- that encapsulate British behavior during twelve wars in between 1688 and 1945.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan R. Strand, Tina F. Mueller & Jessica A. McArthur, 'The Essentially Contested Concept of Globalization,' *Politics and Ethics Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2005), p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 666.

of War.<sup>33</sup> On the basis of this synthesis, Liddell Hart's core ideas of the 'indirect approach' (general principle of strategy), 'limited liability' (Britain's particular policy), and B-WIW (Britain's long-standing national approach) begin to take shape.<sup>34</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, owing to the limitation of space, Liddell Hart's B-WIW will be analysed without profound reference to his influences. But, it must not go unduly noticed that Liddell Hart's conceptualization of B-WIW is rooted in other literatures and within a larger principle of strategy. To understand Liddell Hart's concept of B-WIW a good starting point is a lecture delivered at the Royal United Service Institution (RUSI) entitled 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories' and the subsequent book, *The British Way in Warfare*.<sup>35</sup>

By way of Sir John Seeley's account of history, Liddell Hart posits that Britain's 'awakening' in the Elizabethan era was 'economic in origin'.<sup>36</sup> From the sixteenth century onwards and with the advent of mercantilism, the City of London began to shape British foreign policy, whereas 'economic motives led [Britain] to exchange [its] old habit of military aggression for a new one of naval aggression'.<sup>37</sup> David French, on the other hand, suggests that the 'Hundred Years' War had cured the British of any desire to acquire continental territory'.<sup>38</sup> Irregardless to the real catalyst, in tracing the historical descent of naval aggression into the modern era Liddell Hart pays attention to the 'businesslike tradition' in B-WIW. Notably, he highlights Drake and Hawkins advocacy of a 'sea-mobility'

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 680; Reid, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 71; and Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 137. Reid argues that Sir John Seeley's book, *The Expansion of England* (1883), made a significant impact on Liddell Hart's core argument while Freedman warns that 'although Fuller and Liddell Hart are often seen as intellectual twins... [they do hold important differences.] Liddell Hart was dogmatic, Fuller was pragmatic... Liddell Hart wanted to avoid battle... for Fuller, it was the likely source of victory'.

<sup>34</sup> Freedman, 'Alliance,' pp. 145-158.

<sup>35</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories,' *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 76, No. 503 (1931), pp. 486-510 and Hart, *The British Way in Warfare*, chp. 1.

<sup>36</sup> John Seeley, *The Growth of British Policy: An Historical Essay* (Cambridge University Press, 1895).

<sup>37</sup> Liddell Hart, 'Economic Pressure,' p. 493 and, Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (Yale University Press, 2018), p. 273. Lambert argues that 'the navy served the city, and the city provided the necessary funds'.

<sup>38</sup> French, *The British Way in Warfare*, p. xii.

strategy, Cromwell and Blake's use of expeditionary forces, King William III's use of indirect economic pressure, Marlborough's use of the sea to avoid French coastal forts, and Wellington's presence as an extension of 'sea-power'.<sup>39</sup> From this reading of history, Liddell Hart concludes:

'The British 'historical practice' was based on economic pressure exercised through sea-power. This naval body had two arms: one financial, which embraced the subsidizing and military provisioning of allies; the other military, which embraced sea-borne expeditions against the enemy's vulnerable extremities'.<sup>40</sup>

In lieu of recreating what has already been well-achieved, it is worth revisiting in full Gat's concise summary of Liddell Hart's analysis of the B-WIW, described in the following way:

[Britain] had subsidized and supplied the armies of Continental allies to keep her great adversaries busy on land. While she had sent only relatively small armies to the main theaters of operations to support these allies and sustain them in the war, her amphibious expeditions and seaborne raids had distracted and tied down a great number of enemy troops. Most importantly, while Britain's naval blockade had destroyed her enemy's commerce, her overseas forces had captured his colonies, thus making Britain ever richer and all the more able to wage successfully her maritime and economic style of warfare. Finally, Britain had always known how to limit her wars to what had been politically feasible and economically profitable, and never engaged in a futile and costly effort to completely crush her enemies.<sup>41</sup>

Even simpler, the key principle was the 'economy of effort'. With this understanding, Liddell Hart is keen to criticise contemporary British policies especially those adopted by British General Staff during the First World War. As Reid addresses, Liddell Hart maintains that 'Britain should have stood on the defence on land [(in support of diversionary raids)], taken the offensive at sea by seizing the enemy's possessions [(like German colonies)], weakened the enemy's power to sustain the war on land [(through a blockade of Germany,)] and emerged from the war as much enriched as her enemy was impoverished [(by the sale of weaponry, ammunitions and goods to

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<sup>39</sup> Liddell Hart, 'Economic Pressure,' pp. 494-500.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 500.

<sup>41</sup> Gat, *A History of Military Thought*, p. 696.

allies)]'.<sup>42</sup> Dubbed the 'Liddell Hart/Lloyd George case' it bears a twofold summation. Foremost, the fervent and ardent military commitment to the continent was not necessarily the best response to Germany's invasion of Belgium.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, over-exaggerated attention had been given to the western front, and accordingly a lack of 'strategic alternatives' followed. Taken as a whole, Liddell Hart concludes that during the war Britain had failed the near-term strategic aims.

Along with correcting the near-term aims Liddell Hart argues that this strategy would have forced the British government to look beyond war and into the realm of peace. As a positive incentive, this had historically guaranteed an 'unbroken prosperity during three centuries'.<sup>44</sup> In part, the argument for looking in the long-term – especially during the late Interwar period – was an effort to avoid the trappings of 'total war'. This belief claims that for as long as a policy of limited, maritime strategy is adopted the effects of total war could not possibly befall Britain. As John Stone remarks of Liddell Hart's pressing for a strategy of limited war, it was a means by which a 'democratic state might maintain its own interests and those of its friends in the face of aggression by revisionist powers'.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Howard's Critique*

Early in his criticism, Michael Howard states that Liddell Hart's views reflect the wider suffering of a generation distraught by the First World War.<sup>46</sup> Prior to the proactive undermining of Liddell Hart's thinking, he lays out a serious criticism of Julian Corbett, the latter generally regarded as one of the founding blocks. Howard reveals that Corbett's application of his theory of naval war at the turn of the century was an attempt to resolve twentieth-century problems through the application of eighteenth century 'recipes'.<sup>47</sup>

Extending the following points to Liddell Hart, one of the major distinctions between the two centuries was the loss in

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<sup>42</sup> Reid, 'British Way in Warfare,' p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> Strachan, 'The British Way,' p. 453.

<sup>44</sup> Liddell Hart, 'Economic Pressure,' p. 503.

<sup>45</sup> John Stone, *Military Strategy: The Politics and Technique of War* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177 and Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (Longmans, 1911).

'leverage'. While in the era of colonisation leverage was easily attained, in the modern era the development of railways had given land powers a degree of flexibility yet unseen on land. A second distinction was the changeling of 'limited interventions'. Although the capacity remained in the twentieth century, the adoption of this course of action rejected the securing of an 'early and decisive victory in favour of one which might at best mitigate a defeat'.<sup>48</sup> Besides, the turn to a 'strategy of raids and diversions' with the use of 'second fronts' had been by virtue of necessity over preference. The cause was often the death of continental support in an ally, leading to the establishment of an environment of survival rather than victory. In the end, the 'surprise and mobility' seen as the essence of British maritime strategy articulated by Liddell Hart only 'had resulted over the centuries in an almost unbroken record of expensive and humiliating failures...'<sup>49</sup>

Much of the aforesaid criticisms were grounded in a set of thinking outlined in a revised edition mentioned earlier. There, Howard posits that a British continental commitment was required for the protection of the home island. The conclusion adhered to the judgement that 'no continental adversary could be defeated without a military decision on the mainland of Europe and Britain could wield no influence either in war or in peace unless she was prepared to make a major contribution to that decision'.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Howard believes that (1) both maritime and land forces ought to work together and (2) 'Britain's traditional maritime strategy was not an alternative to, but rather an extension of, continental strategies'.<sup>51</sup> For the future, he predicted that Britain was unlikely ever again to maintain security of the United Kingdom in isolation from that of Continental neighbours.<sup>52</sup>

It is important to note as Lambert does, that 'strategic text should only be studied in context, [as] such works are unique to their time, and their audience'.<sup>53</sup> It may therefore be unfair to criticise

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>49</sup> Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 186.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Howard, *Continental Commitments: Dilemma of British Defense Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (Ashfield, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Speller, 'Liddell Hart,' p. 228.

<sup>52</sup> Howard, 'Continental Commitments,' p. 149.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Lambert, 'The Naval War Course, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and the Origins of "The British Way in Warfare," in Keith Neilson & Greg Kennedy (eds.), *The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856-1956: Essays in honour of David French* (Ashgate, 2010), p. 251.

Corbett on points provided outside the context they were originally construed for. It was only after the Great War that 'Corbett's pioneering work was transformed by Sir Herbert Richmond and Basil Liddell-Hart from a pragmatic, flexible response into the dogmatic prescription that is the 'British Way in Warfare'.<sup>54</sup> In an important counter-critique, Gat indicates that Howard may have misconstrued Corbett, as he implies that 'Corbett argued that a maritime power was able to apply limited power even to the attainment of the unlimited objective of total victory, whereas Corbett, in fact held that this could be done only 'in concert with continental allies'.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as a prolific and meticulous writer, had his death not prevented it, there is a high likelihood Corbett would have revisited his theory of naval war *en masse* during the late Interwar period. The counter-critique may be swept away with the simple explanation that Howard directs the point towards the wrong individual. Notwithstanding these retorts, other commentators also criticise Liddell Hart's central thesis.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Orwell and 'Alternative' School Critiques*

After meeting with Liddell Hart in 1942, George Orwell viewed him as an individual with a 'lukewarm commitment to winning the war,' describing him as 'very defeatist, and even... somewhat inclined to be pro-German'.<sup>57</sup> As much as this closing personal attack is proven to be largely fallacious, two of Orwell's criticisms continue to ring true. First, there is the general scepticism of the 'effectiveness of a naval blockade under contemporary technical conditions'.<sup>58</sup> As it were, Orwell believes that the arrival of maritime mines and development of a reliable industrial base for raw materials grossly undermined the ability to fully carry-out a successful blockade. Second, the 'limited aims' strategy implied that the enemy analysed, thought, and behaved along the same lines.<sup>59</sup> Strikingly, Orwell, in contrast to many liberal thinkers of the time, understood that the opponents in the twentieth century did not operate similarly as those

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>55</sup> Gat, *A History of Military Thought*, p. 699; Corbett, *Some Principles*, p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> Strachan, 'The British Way,' p. 455; Reid, 'The British Way in Warfare,' p. 73.

<sup>57</sup> John Stone, "George Orwell on Politics and War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2016), p. 234.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

in the 'limited aims' strategies during the era of the *cabinet wars*. The totalitarian leaders of the twentieth century could not be coerced 'into passivity by a British strategy predicated merely on generating heavy military costs for [their] intransigence'.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond Howard and Orwell's critiques of Liddell Hart's thinking on B-WIW there is also the 'New' or 'Alternative' School. Their arguments range from Howard's moderate form of 'complementary nature' or 'interdependent' view between maritime and continental roles to Barnett's extreme version of an implicit rejection of a maritime view of British strategy. The high-profile members that traditionally constitute the former are Paul Kennedy, Brian Bond, and John Mearsheimer, while the latter are Correlli Barnett, Shelford Bidwell, and John Terraine. In its extremity, the individuals are often characterised as those that swung 'the pendulum to extreme continentalism' with the hostility towards Liddell Hart grounded on the premises of concentration, scale, firepower, and attrition.<sup>61</sup> The position of the 'extreme continentalists' follows three points: (1) complete rejection of supporting structures in Liddell Hart's thinking on B-WIW, with its emphasis on mobility and dispersal as a means of 'attaining complete psychological paralysis of the enemy;' (2) decisiveness of British military interventions *only* occurred after the expeditionary forces became a field army, capable to endure extended fighting; and (3) modern wars expose society to 'total war,' requiring peacetime society to direct efforts towards a 'total strategy'.<sup>62</sup>

### Conclusion

In the first part of the essay the literary debate on the concept of the British Way in warfare (B-WIW) was scrutinised, showing that there exists serious historiographical and terminological issues. While it was not the aim of this paper to present the accurate usage of historiography, it was nevertheless crucial to recognise from the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>61</sup> Strachan, 'The British Way,' p. 455

<sup>62</sup> Reid, 'British Way in Warfare,' p. 73; Correlli Barnett, *Strategy and Society* (Manchester University Press, 1975); Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army: A Military, Political and Social Survey, 1509-1970* (Allen Lane, 1970), pp. xix, 419; Shelford Bidwell, *Gunners at War* (Arms and Armour Press, 1970) and *Modern Warfare: A Study of Men, Ideas, and Weapons*, (Allen Lane, 1973).

onset that this debate remains context-driven, utilised towards satisfying certain political ends, and perhaps even a product of shortcomings in the bureaucratisation process of the British government. Additionally, the distinction between 'strategic culture' and 'way in warfare' is not particularly clear. Those that relegated it to the operational level have only confounded the issue further by putting it within reach of other terms like 'British Army's way in warfare' and 'way of warfare'. By leaving the term unclassified as an ECC it undoubtedly leads to the problem that those who employ B-WIW talk past one another. Even without this classification the term could only ever represent as Reid writes, a loose 'idea' that says more about how the British picture themselves than a term denoting a specific framework.<sup>63</sup> As put simply by McInnes, B-WIW is a 'community of knowledge rather than abstract theorizing'.<sup>64</sup>

Within the debate, Liddell Hart's B-WIW can be imagined as a finite-spectrum, where on one end is located a financial dimension (funding of allies on the continent in the hopes of shackling the enemy onto land) whereas on the other a sea-power dimension (amphibious operations and seaborne raids in vulnerable spots). In the *milieu*, a mixed application (e.g. use of naval blockade to enrich the government) of the two aforementioned dimensions occupies the space. Through Michael Howard's critique, however, the validity of Liddell Hart's claim becomes less obvious. Beginning with Liddell Hart's sea-power dimension Howard argues that the 'limited interventions' had been used due to necessity and resulted in frequent failures. This reality in turn influenced the financial dimension by culminating in tremendous costs and the death of continental support. George Orwell's criticisms follow a similar course finding that Liddell Hart's thinking was better suited for a previous age as naval blockades were limited by maritime mines supported by heavy industrialisation and 'limited aims' strategies assumed the enemy analysed, thought, and behaved similarly. Beyond the more moderate criticisms are the 'extreme continentalists' within the 'new' or 'alternative' school. In short, they fundamentally reject the adopted premises of mobility and dispersal as means towards complete psychological paralysis of the enemy. Furthermore, they identify a need for the use of 'total strategy' in the pursuit of a decisive victory as a result of the arrival of 'total war'.

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<sup>63</sup> Reid, 'British Way in Warfare,' p. 70.

<sup>64</sup> McInnes, 'The British Army,' p. 127

In terms of the future of the debate on B-WIW much of it is dependent on event trends. Though, by describing the B-WIW as a constructed label invested with meaning and designed to shape other people's behaviours in order to arrive at the 'perfect' society imagined by British liberal values,<sup>65</sup> the ultimate hope is future strategists will see for themselves that it is truly the literary debate with the many issues and, as a result, careful not to retain a deterministic or zealous adherence to the concept of the British way in warfare.

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<sup>65</sup> Strachan, 'The British Way,' p. 457.