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# The Strategy that Gave Independence to the U.S.

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### The Strategy that Gave Independence to the U.S.

We celebrate this year our nation's "birthday," but 1976 is also the bicentennial of what General Washington, a master of understatement, as well as, as we shall see, a master of strategy, called an "unhappy predicament." The commander-in-chief's solution to the predicament was the strategy that won the war, and put the United States on the way towards being a real country. This solution was the thoroughgoing adoption of Fabian strategy. Looking into what this was, and how Washington made it work, permits a better appreciation of Washington's real stature in military history.

The pragmatic genius who gave his name to the strategy was Q. Fabius Maximus, who was also given the name Cunctator, for slander and opprobrium when the issue was in doubt, for honor afterwards. It meant Delayer. In 217 B. C. Hannibal had already made himself master of all Spain, had already crossed the Alps with his army and a cavalry that included trained war elephants, and had already

destroyed a Roman army at Lake Trasimenus. Rome's immediate reaction was to appoint Fabius Dictator. On taking the field, he laid down a simple and immutable plan of action: He avoided all direct encounter with the enemy; moved his camp from highland to highland, where Hannibal's Numidian and Spanish cavalry could not follow; and watched Hannibal's movements with unrelaxing vigilance, looking for opportunities. Most of these opportunities were simply chances to chip away at Hannibal's strength by cutting off stragglers or the details constantly being sent away from the main body to forage for supplies. His idea, in the smooth words of Plutarch, was "to let the force and vigour of Hannibal waste away and expire, like a flame, for want of the aliment." Against a superior force overseas from its home base, this made great good sense. And this constant avoidance of battle, which could more accurately be called watchful opportunism than retreat, led after a few months to the entrapment of Hannibal's main force in the valley of the Vulturinus (now the Voltorno) River. Seeing that the water and good pasturage of the upper valley had drawn Hannibal into a jar, Fabius, using his superior knowledge of the territory, quickly descended to Hannibal's rear with 4,000 men to seal the opening, leaving other forces upon the heights on both sides. This could have been decisive, but Hannibal, boxed in as much by his own blunder as by Fabius's watchfulness, was capable of making up for error with stratagem. The cattle, which ancient armies generally kept around for the sake of keeping the meat fresh, could in darkness be made to pass for an armed force. He had torches and bundles of dry twigs and branches tied to their horns. After nightfall, these were lit, and Hannibal's soldiers drove them up one of the enclosing mountain ridges. The cattle advanced calmly, the ancient historians say, until the fires burned down to quick. The cattle then stampeded, and the Romans were stampeded from enough of the ridge to pass an army through.

The thing that set Fabius apart from his fellow Romans and fellow generals was that he could learn from experience, even other people's experience, so much faster than anyone

else. Fabius knew how to win a set battle: he had already been awarded a triumph for defeating the Ligurians that way, and driving them back to the Alps. But it only took one Trasimenus to teach Fabius that this was not the way to fight Hannibal: 15,000 Roman soldiers killed, and 15,000 more taken prisoner, were to Fabius a clear lesson. Lucius Minucius was slower to see, and so was the dissatisfied Roman public: they gave Lucius, Fabius's second in command, equal authority, with the understanding that he would go out there and win the war. He went out there and fought a battle on the first opportunity, which was a trap: Hannibal, knowing Lucius' eagerness, had hidden part of his force in a plain which, though riven with gullies and ditches, seemed level from a distance. Then at dawn, in full sight of L. Minucius, he sent a detachment up to take the hill overlooking it. Minucius swallowed the bait. He attacked the detachment, first with cavalry and a few troops, then, as the engagement was constantly requiring more and more force, with his whole army. It was a complete encirclement, and would have meant the complete loss of yet another Roman army had not Fabius arrived in time to cut open an escape route. Lucius Minucius learned his lesson, and openly, abjectly, submitted himself and his army to the command of Fabius.

The dictatorship having come to its half-year term, Fabius lay down his command, and new consuls were chosen who continued his policy of wearing out the enemy while avoiding disaster. Meanwhile, there arose a politician who was becoming popular by declaiming that as long as Rome fielded generals like Fabius, the war would continue: Rome must send out a general who would march out there and win it. This second Minucius was named Varro. He won election, and what he marched out to was that eternal landmark in the history of defeat: Cannae. It is now the name of a classic in tactics, for one still speaks of a "Cannae encirclement." Just as in a duel, where the challenged party may choose the weapons, Hannibal was able, once again faced with a Roman General eager for battle, to choose the situation under which the battle would be fought. Varro, confident in his new levy of 88,000 men, twice the number of the

enemy, set up the red battle ensign the first dawn after closing, at Cannae. Hannibal marched his men around to have a position upwind of the Roman army, so all the dust in marching and later in fighting would be blown into the eyes of the Romans. Further, he weakened his center, placing his worst and weakest there, reserving his best troops for the wings. The Roman forces attacked, drove the enemy before them at the center, but made no progress at either right or left wing, so their final formation before the massacre was a perfect half moon, surrounded, compressed. It was reported that 50,000 were slain and 14,000 taken prisoner. The Roman eagerness to finish the war, gambling almost everything on the event of a single day, actually extended the war: winning it took fourteen more years.

Before Cannae, Hannibal's force led an outlaw existence with tenuous supply. This stunning victory opened to him the resources of all southern Italy; even Capua, second largest and richest city of all Italy, submitted to Hannibal's leadership. Cannae led also to an alliance with Philip V, king of Macedon, and to the election, in Syracuse, of Hannibal's agents as generals. The total cost, then, of the Roman one-day gamble near the little town of Cannae on the Adriatic, was southern Italy, Sicily, and Macedon. It should also have cost them the war.

That it did not was partly because Hannibal unaccountably did not march on Rome, and partly because Fabius calmed the Romans, averted panic, and, with what had been condemned as fear and cowardice now recognized as wisdom, again took the helm. With everyone now aware that repudiation of his policies had meant Cannae, he persevered in them. Rome never again opposed one single large army to Hannibal in Italy, but stifled his movements with two or more smaller ones. Though he came out the winner in numerous engagements, even trapping and destroying Marcellus, Fabius' usual colleague in the consulship and his fellow-commander, in 208, Hannibal gradually became more and more weakened. Fabius was always there, but yet Hannibal could never trap him. Yet he always had to be dealt with. Eventually, Hannibal's

only object became to hold his ground in the south until his brother Hasdrubal should appear in the north with fresh forces. But when Hasdrubal finally came in 207, the Roman consular army faced him and beat him.

Hannibal was so stricken with the loss of his hopes that he abandoned all thought of offensive, and merely held on for four years, contracting his forces into the wild mountains of Bruttium, the region of the "toe" of the Italian "boot." What brought him out, of course, was that Scipio, the grown son of the first Roman General Hannibal ever entrapped, circled and destroyed, had marshalled the nerve to take the war to Carthage, and now (late 203) had to be faced in North Africa.

In sum, Hannibal faced eight generals in Italy, over a space of fifteen years. A tactical, though perhaps not a strategic, genius, he entrapped and imposed disaster on all of them, but not Fabius.

Did General Washington know all this? Unless I've overlooked it, there is not one word in the twenty-eight large volumes of his collected writings to show that he did. My own conclusion is that he arrived at the Fabian position by his own independent wisdom, and good judgement of the circumstances of 1776. He was told about Fabius in '78, long after he had already determined on the Fabian principle and was holding onto it with calm, despite all complaints of dilatory cowardice, despite the attempts to have him replaced with some such hot, eager Minucius as Horatio Gates, even despite the modern historians who, not knowing about Fabius either, fail to appreciate his retreats, caution, and slow, patient ways.

The situation that had called for the original Fabian tactics, of course, was that one was faced with a superior enemy who, if you opposed him in the open in a frontal attack, could destroy your force in a day (even if he didn't know what to do after the victory), but whose weakness was the logistical fact that he was overseas from his ultimate source of supply. Quite beside the obvious parallels, the situation for the United States of America was rather

worse: Unlike the Rome of 218, the United States of 1776 could not afford to lose 64,000 fighting men in a single day. Washington certainly knew that.

The very surprising thing is that he seems for several years to be the only American who did. As one examines the years of the Revolution, this becomes very clear. But before one could hope to see the situation through Washington's eyes it is necessary to look at what the "United States of America" actually was in '76, the more so since '76 is taken as the nation's birthday.

1776 made us not a country, but a group which would, given the successful conclusion of seven more years of war, still only be thirteen separate but allied states. The alliance was defined by the Articles of Confederation, which actually were based on the military needs of 1754! In that year a gentlemen's agreement of alliance among the colonies seemed prospectively useful with a view to wars with the French and Indians. So Ben Franklin produced one. It was rejected, but later formed the basis of the Articles, which were started in 1776. These formed the basis for Congress's actions as if adopted, but were not even fully ratified until March of 1781. Though Article One said "The Style of this Confederacy shall be the United States of America," the next defined the Confederacy as a "firm league of friendship." In short, no Constitution, no country. Under the Articles, taxation there was none, but the power to make requisitions on the states; executive there was none, but the power in Congress to "appoint such committees and officers as may be necessary for managing the general affairs"; judicial branch there was none, but in the Congress was the "last resort in disputes and differences between the States." The States, in short, were countries, the United States a United Nations, each with not a governor, in the modern sense of that word, but a head of state. Ben Franklin was, for illustration, President of Philadelphia.

It was such a hopeless and non-working league that it couldn't even pay an army. Nobody appreciated this better than the Commander-in-Chief. Washington's full-time

clothed as they ought to be. In short, my situation has been such that I have been obliged to use art to conceal it from my officers." *That* was Washington's 1776. Though acutely aware that his available scope of action was limited, he was even then planning the attack on occupied Boston. The plan was ingeniously Fabian, and completely effective. Though the British had strongly fortified Boston, they had left Dorchester Heights vacant. The heights commanded the harbour as well as the city, and Washington took them and began bombardment. The Admiral of the British fleet informed General Howe that he would not keep the King's ships in the harbour while Washington held the heights. A detachment was sent to dislodge the Continental forces, but was repulsed. That Washington was on the heights to stay meant that Howe had to leave Boston or lose the support of the fleet. He abandoned Boston March 17, taking 11,000 soldiers with him back to Halifax. Washington, it is clear, had a very good talent for seeing and making use of available opportunities, and for grasping basic principles.

The private letter setting out Washington's 1776 shows it, expounding a large part of his constant and successful strategy as well as the difficulties of the situation: (1) to hide inability to act lest the exposure of it lead to attack and annihilation even if hiding weakness lead to ridicule for inaction, and (2) never permit anything to become the all-or-nothing gamble. He expounded a third basic part of his strategy two years later in a letter to a chastened Lafayette, who had already learned the wisdom of it in the field. The incident leading to the letter is demonstrative proof that Washington's Fabian tactics were (1) not recognized as such in North America, and (2) that the need for them was not recognized in North America. I suggest that the reason the need was not recognized, and thus that the strategy itself was not recognized as Fabian, and defended as such, was Washington's not speaking in his own defense.

The demonstration is that early in 1778, the United States of America in Congress assembled voted to attack Canada. This had

already been attempted in '75. Lafayette, an eager volunteer and a Marquis, but also an impetuous youth of 21, was to be in charge. On his arrival in New York to take command, he found 960 12-year-olds and 60-year-olds and in between. No army, even he realized, with which to complete the march, much less to mount an offensive. He begged off, which Washington was perfectly happy to permit him, but also asked leave for a lesser coup, "a diversion against New York." Washington's reply (10 March, '78) is the key to the strategy which won the war. "The expedition which you hint at would be inadvisable in our present circumstances. Anything in the way of formal attack, which would necessarily be announced to the enemy by preparatory measures, would not be likely to succeed. If a stroke is premeditated in that quarter, it must be effected by troops stationed at the proper distance for availing themselves of the first opportunity afforded by the enemy. This therefore must rather be the effect of time and chance, than premeditation." Washington was a constant and successful practitioner of the advice he gave eager subordinates. Two of his best-known successes stemmed from surprise turnarounds from what had been thought to be retreat. Driven out of New York by 20,000 British soldiers, and retreating in the van of the British advance through New Jersey to Philadelphia, he suddenly turned upon Lt. Cl. Rall's advanced corps of Hessians Dec. 26. This, of course, is known as the "Crossing of the Delaware." He repeated this brilliant exploit Jan. 3, blinding Cornwallis with campfires, nightmarching to his rear, and surprising three British regiments and three companies of light cavalry at Princeton, and only then encamping for the winter.

In the volumes of correspondence, one can see the Commander-in-Chief directing, in a clearly Fabian way, the 1777 campaign which led to the surrender of Burgoyne. As everyone knows, "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne spent most of that summer marching through wilderness from Ticonderoga towards Albany, only to fall short of his goal and surrender to General Gates Oct. 14. Gates, of course, received the credit, even though he had never

gone near the battle of Freeman's Farm October 7, a battle which was, in fact, won by the unauthorized leadership and unsurpassed bravery of Benedict Arnold, who had already been relieved of command by Gates! How does Washington fit in? Informed that Generals Lincoln and Schuyler had in mind to unite the militia to the continental force in frontal opposition to the advancing Burgoyne, the Commander-in-Chief advised: "If this is really the intention, I should think it a very ineligible plan. An Enemy can always act with more vigor and effort when they have nothing to apprehend for their flanks and rear, than when they have, and, it is one of the most approved and most universally practiced Manoeuvres of War, to keep their fears continually awake on these accounts, and, when circumstances permit, to be actually in condition to give them Serious Annoyance in those Parts. Independent of the Inconveniences that attend a situation, where the Rear and Flank are constantly exposed to the insults of light parties which may be at every moment harassing them; the necessity of never losing sight of the means of a secure retreat, which ought to be the first object of an Officer's care, must be exceedingly embarrassing where there is a Force in such a position as to endanger it. If a respectable body of men were to be stationed on the Grants, it would undoubtedly have the effects intimated above, would render it not a little difficult for Mr. Bourgoigne to keep the necessary communication open, and they would frequently afford opportunities of intercepting his Convoys. If there were none there, he might advance with Security, leaving Small Posts behind, and might draw his Supplies regularly and without interruption, than which nothing could tend more to facilitate his operations and give them Success." He further added that any militia beyond that needed for the harassment of rear, flank, and supply might properly be added to the front.

This letter of August 16 to the governor of New York over the use of his militia shows plainly the Commander-in-Chief's clear Fabian understanding. Much more important, though, is that it contains the instructions which

trapped Burgoyne and forced his surrender, as we will shortly see. A similar letter was sent on August 20 to General Gates, noting that Gates could expect Daniel Morgan's Riflemen on the 28th, and the regiments of Colonels Cortland and Livingston "within a few days; with these Reinforcements, besides the Militia under General Lincoln . . . I am in hopes you will find yourself equal to stop the progress of Mr. Burgoyne and by cutting of his supplies of Provision & ca. to render his Situation very Ineligible."

Burgoyne's march shows neatly what the Fabian treatment can do to an army. He left Ticonderoga with 9,500 men, July 6. After a month or so, he was forced to send his left wing off to Bennington for supplies. On August 16, the same date as Washington's letter to Governor Clinton of New York opposing a use of militia in frontal opposition, John Stark's New Hampshire militiamen set upon and destroyed this wing. The governor and the local generals thus will have received Washington's advice and this immediately illustration of the wisdom of it simultaneously. Burgoyne, now with 6,000 men, met the enlarged American force, about 6,000 strong, under the command of Gates 30 miles north of Albany September 19. Burgoyne attacked, according to British sources; Morgan's Riflemen struck first according to the American sources. All agree that the British force took heavy losses. Burgoyne fortified his positions at the site of the battle, the clearing of Freeman's Farm, and waited for reinforcements. Almost three weeks later, during which time the British force and morale were being diminished by constant American raids, he attempted a break-out. This was repulsed. Benedict Arnold then took over and led the counter-attack which captured one of Burgoyne's two fortifications, and gave the victory in this engagement, called the Battle of Saratoga, or perhaps more accurately, the second battle of Freeman's Farm, to the American side, October 7. But this was not yet the complete victory which "The Battle of Saratoga" is now thought of. It is the difference between

winning an engagement and forcing your opponent's complete surrender: Burgoyne still had a potentially effective force of 2,000 men, with which he retreated from the field, to Saratoga. But his path to retreat was not clear; there was this militia in the way, in accordance with Washington's advice on its placement. He had nowhere to go, and on October 14 asked Gates for terms of surrender. Given the Fabian background, one can see that directly behind Arnold, who deserves credit for forcing the retreat, comes Washington, who deserves credit for the strategy which made the retreat impossible. Gates, "the victor of Saratoga," was simply there as the officer-in-charge to surrender to.

This, of course, is the victory that led to the French Alliance, which would in the end mean the entrapment of Cornwallis at Yorktown as soon as the French fleet arrived. But meanwhile, an army had to be kept together, and Washington had to avoid losing it all between '77 and Yorktown ('81). This required constant and alert practice of what became conscious Fabianism. As we have noted, the reinforcements sent to Gates were intended for rendering Burgoyne's "Situation very Ineligible." In the face of a superior force overseas from its home base, this was the appropriate response. The basic principle—which Gates never grasped—is simply to survive as an armed force until opportunity permits delivery of an annoying or decisive blow. Failure to survive obviously meant you permitted something to become critical and were defeated. Period. Survival meant ultimate victory. This was, I learn from military historian Ira Gruber the heart of French strategic thinking of the day. Its nature could not go unrecognized everywhere, nor for much longer. Washington often sought written advice from the Generals in camp. Here, in the translation of Colonel John Laurens, is the response of a recent arrival which will also serve to identify for us a contemporary understanding of Roman military history: "What we ought to propose to ourselves, is to defend the country inch by inch, . . . to hinder the enemy from making himself master of it,

consequently never to receive him but when we are protected by a natural or artificial fortification, in other words, to carry on what is styled a *defensive war*. This is our true part and it is so obvious that in Europe, all Military men and even those who are not so, suppose this to be our Conduct — If the Americans could consult the modern daily publications, they should there find that the model offered to General Washington is principally Fabius, that wise Roman who ruined Hannibal by refusing to fight him in plain. Fabius however commanded Romans, but these Romans had been thrice defeated, they were disheartened, dreaded the enemy, and were nearly reduced to the condition of new and unformed troops. The Consul conducted himself accordingly, avoided general Battles, kept himself on the defensive, always occupying strong positions and where the enemy could not attack him but with considerable disadvantage — it is true that this kind of war was not approved of at Rome; Men of leisure who loved to be amused by great events, men of impetuous dispositions, men whose discernment was not sufficient to judge of what circumstances required, in a word the particular enemies of the consul, turned him into ridicule, affixed to him insulting surnames, but the sage General was unmoved by them. He knew that after all, the event would determine his reputation in the world — he therefore invariably pursued his plan, and by his firmness which was crowned with success, he merited the appellation of Savior of Rome." It was never a case, though, of advising the General to model himself after Fabius. This was simply recognition that he *was* Fabius, and a use of Livy to encourage him to remain so.

There is nothing in all the volumes of orders and correspondence to show that Washington had read Livy: This first instance of it occurs much after Washington had already by his own insight duplicated the strategy of Livy's hero. It was a lesson that LaFayette learned thoroughly: entrusted with the command of the principle force opposing Cornwallis in Virginia, the Marquis borrowed £2,000 to dress his 1,000 soldiers (April of '81) and marched them from Baltimore to Richmond.

Having 2,000 militia, his own corps of nearly a thousand light infantry, and 40 dragoons with which to defend Virginia from Cornwallis' 4,500 British regulars, he did a *volte-face* from his first impulse to "risk something," realizing his own ruin would be the ruin of the State. His May 24 '81 letter to the Commander-in-Chief is illuminating: "Were I to fight a battle I should be cut to pieces, the militia dispersed, and the arms lost. Were I to decline fighting, the country would think itself given up. I am therefore determined to skirmish, but not to engage too far, and particularly to take care against their immense and excellent body of horse, whom the militia fear as they would so many wild beasts." The Fabius-Hannibal parallel abides, even to the elephants. But that is an aside. LaFayette was now twenty-four, and Sir Henry Clinton, British Commander-in-Chief for North America, easily assumed that his man in the south, Cornwallis, would destroy the youth. Cornwallis himself thought to nail him. "The boy will not escape me," he said. But the boy would not be pinned down, even when Cornwallis took the capital, flushing Governor Jefferson. The boy on that occasion managed to outmarch Cornwallis to interpose his force between Cornwallis and the state arsenal, and then to

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dog Cornwallis about the state, changing his camp daily, sometimes even marching on Cornwallis' rear, sometime even attacking, never utterly committing himself. Finally abandoning thoughts of catching LaFayette and looking instead to the comfort and health of his men, Cornwallis settled in at Yorktown during the first week of August. And LaFayette, though he had left Virginians near panic by not "stopping" Cornwallis, had survived in force to be, upon the arrival of Admiral de Grasse and General Washington, part of the three-lever nutcracker which forced the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown.

He had remained at all times 20-30 miles distant from his intending captor, doing the same thing he ordered his subordinates: "Whatever road the enemy take, you will please to proceed in that route, and, if opportunity offers, attack them." He had become strategically, in fact, Washington's *altera persona*, and, as "A Gentleman in LaFayette's Army" wrote to the Baltimore paper of July, '81, "was Fabius to Cornwallis's Hannibal." LaFayette knew consciously what he was doing. So had his commanding officer Greene, who had earlier honored Cornwallis by naming him a Hannibal, and had done rather well as a Fabius himself. The word was out. And, with de Grasse's decision to bring the French fleet to Chesapeake Bay making it possible to pen Cornwallis in Yorktown, rather than Clinton in New York, the war was won as soon as Washington succeeded in sneaking south out of New York. He contrived to make the first ten days of the 400-mile march to Yorktown look exactly like an impending attack upon Staten Island from the New Jersey shore. Artfully and completely deceived, Clinton finally pursued too late to be of use: he was apprised of the surrender en route.

How was it that the experienced Cornwallis could sit still long enough to become encircled, and "the boy," through the entire summer, could not be trapped? Part of the answer is that Washington was the boy's Commander-in-Chief. Have a look at Washington's instructions to Lafayette on the occasion of LaFayette's first command after the non-invasion of Canada.

After putting him in charge of the territory between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, Washington advised: "You will remember that your detachment is a very valuable one, and that any accident happening to it would be a very severe blow to this army. You will therefore use every possible precaution for its security and to guard against a surprise. No attempt should be made, nor anything risked, without the greatest prospect of success, and with every reasonable advantage on your side.

"I shall not point out any precise position to you; but shall leave it to your discretion to take such posts occasionally as shall appear to you best adapted to the purpose of your detachment. *In General, I would observe, that a stationary post is unadvisable, as it gives the enemy an opportunity of knowing your position, and concerting plans successfully against you.* In case of any offensive movement against this army, you will keep yourself in such a state as to have easy communication with it, and at the same time harass the enemy's advance" (May 17, 1778).

In 1781, from September 28 to October 17, the outcome required von Steuben's experience at conducting a seige, but reaching those twenty days at Yorktown had required Washington's natural gifts at *being* a Fabius for himself, and at taking an impetuous boy and turning *him* into another, and sticking to it for six years.

Though won, the war was not over, and wouldn't be until the treaty was signed in September of 1783. During this entire interval Clinton was in command of an undefeated British army in New York. The situation required that Washington keep an inactive army under control for two more years, and finally manage to disband it without any money to send it home with. The problems were worthy of another Roman military and civil genius out of the pages of Livy, Polybius, and Plutarch. That would be Cincinnatus, but that's another story.

*T. N. Winter*

University of Nebraska