



By ML Cavanaugh

***Quote to Consider:** From *Game of Thrones*, Season 2, Episode 7 (“[A Man Without Honor](#)”).

TYWIN LANNISTER: The tallest towers, the strongest walls. The Great Hall had thirty-five hearths. Thirty-five. Can you imagine? Look at it now. A blasted ruin. Do you know what happened?

ARYA STARK: Dragons?

TYWIN: Yes. Dragons happened. [Pours some wine.] Harrenhal was built to withstand an attack from the land. A million men could have marched on these walls, and a million men would have been repelled. But an attack from the air with dragon fire, mmm-mmm. Harren and all his sons roasted alive within these walls. Aegon Targaryen changed the rules. That’s why every child alive still knows his name.

Just how many strategies are there?

One guy says we should always, always, go for the “[indirect](#)” approach. Another, a military historian, [says](#) there are “three (and only three) types of military strategy.” A venture capital guy lands on [three](#) too. Not to be outdone on volume, author Robert Greene’s book insists there are [33 strategies](#) of war, all of which can be applied to the “subtle social game of everyday life.”

If strategy’s an [orientation toward success](#) in a competitive environment—if we can come to some definitional common ground—then why can’t we figure out precisely how many there are out there?

Maybe it’s because we like to classify. We like to name things. We like to be the one that “discovers” something and then we love to patent it to claim insight among peers.

So we go around labeling and binning different strategies for different scenarios. For example, a “[Fabian](#)” strategy refuses to fight a superior force, so it’s often and “best used by the weaker force,” according to Robert Bateman. Or there’s the well-known nuclear strategies like Mutually Assured Destruction and “massive retaliation.” Or the non-violent approaches waged by Gandhi, King, and Lewis, to longer-term success.

But these front-end adjectives often merely describe the tactics employed in carrying them out. Typically, these were the physical, tactical implements, almost like a chef describing her meal by the tool used to produce it, or, say, a person defining their diet by the spoon or fork. It’s incomplete, at best. And besides, it seems a little off to describe your approach to eating as a “spoon strategy” or “fork strategy.”

So what’s really the common denominator in strategy?

I spent the better part of a decade trying to get under Napoleon’s hat. I wanted to know what made him—and others in his position—so successful as military supreme commanders. What separated the successful from the unsuccessful?

That led me to write a (PhD) dissertation on supreme military command. I studied the interactions between three sets of commanders in crucial campaigns during high-stakes wars: Washington and Howe in the American Revolution, Grant and Lee in the Civil War, and Eisenhower and Hitler in the Second World War. (Hitler, of course, wasn’t a general but since he called all the strategic shots he was the most appropriate opposite for Eisenhower.)

During research, I came across William Ury’s *Getting Past No*, the classic [book](#) on negotiating. Early on, Ury points out that “your single greatest opportunity as a negotiator is to *change the game*.”

That’s when it clicked. This is what these successful supreme commanders were after, and achieved. For Washington, changing the game meant fighting on during the winter of 1776-1777, even after Howe garrisoned his troops. Washington surprised his adversary by unexpectedly counterattacking in the cold. For Grant, changing the game meant embracing pain, knowing it would hurt Lee more in the brutal, long campaign slog of 1864. In contrast to his predecessors, Grant pushed his adversary into a continuous fight that ground the opposition down to nearly nothing. For Eisenhower, changing the game meant focusing all allied energies on the single most important objective in 1944. And while Eisenhower’s multiple landings and broad front may not have been entirely surprising, these decisions pushed Hitler’s Nazis back to their own home soil and changed the war’s endgame.

The second hint came from the screen instead of another book. There’s a scene in the

second season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* (the dialogue's been rewritten above in the "Quote to Consider") where a main character named Tywin Lannister sits in the charred ruins of a castle. He explains the castle was built to be impervious to invasion, that, once, it seemed the perfect defensible position.

Then something changed. Dragons. (In our world: airpower.) And when those dragons came along, they burned the supposedly impenetrable castle to a crisp. To cinders. To nothing. As an afterthought, Tywin remarks that—for the dragon-flyers—their victory was about how they "changed the rules."

This is what strategy should be, what it must be. It's not seeking to win tomorrow, or avoiding a loss today. Strategy's not about wins and losses in the near-term, but how you change the game in the long-run. Successful strategy is an earthquake that alters the earth in your favor. It's how you create a durable competitive edge that literally upends your opponent's ability or willingness to fight.

This is the only successful strategy. The one common feature. An asymmetric advantage for our side, a durable disadvantage to their side. Of course this has infinite applications and approaches, but the common approach to sustained victory is to change the game.

Why not just reach to the shelf and dust off a previously branded approach? Why not just grab for one of Greene's magical 33—like the "blitzkrieg strategy" or the "center-of-gravity strategy"—or, while we're at it, maybe let's "contain" China's rise just as containment once worked against the Soviets?

Labels become limits. They straitjacket your strategy in shackles made decades before for a different adversary.

Of course it's safe to use shorthand to separate one approach from another. The problem is that far too often, we let the labels have far too much power.

Because, simple as it sounds, every competition's different. It's unhelpful—or even dangerous—to walk into the next challenge with a previous problem's solution (as when the US marched a World War II-mindset off to war in Vietnam, to disaster).

The successful wartime strategies of supreme commanders in close contests are bespoke, tailored, made to fit a certain war. Successful strategies aren't stratagems to be dusted off decades or centuries after previous use.

The adversaries, methods, environments, objectives change, and so must the next strategy. A 21st century supreme commander blindly applying the approach of a Washington, a Grant, or an Eisenhower would look as foolish as if they put on a tricorn, slouch, or service cap worn in the 1770s, 1860s, or 1940s. It just wouldn't fit, physically or stylistically.

Same goes with other competitions. Strategy, like suits, should never be 'one-size-fits-all.'

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Game-changers succeed. Look around our world, as it is, right now. Start with politics. The outgoing US president has changed the political game in the country, and by some accounts, the world.

In business, think about Tesla, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Netflix—they've all upended markets and competitors by changing the game. They've provided unique, unanswerable value propositions to which competitors cannot respond (yet).

They are *being* what their competitors cannot. They're the "[purple cows](#)" in an age of black-and-white Holsteins. Barnes & Noble's new CEO gets it, which is why the *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) he's "abandoning the strategy that made it a bookselling behemoth two decades ago—uniformity designed to create economies of scale and simplify the shopping experience. Instead, the company is empowering store managers to curate their shelves

based on local tastes.” He’s fighting back against Amazon by being what Amazon cannot...and, maybe, changing the game in B&N’s favor again.

In sport, think the “[Fosbury Flop](#).” I once heard Dick Fosbury say, about his innovative gold-medal-winning technique, “I knew I had to do something different.” Or the Oakland Athletics of *Moneyball* fame, [exploiting](#) the “difference between how the A’s perceive a player and how they think the industry perceives that player.” Or even, in another bounded, finite competition like cycling, how “[marginal gains](#)” can lead to breakthroughs and podiums.

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What does this mean? What’s the takeaway here?

It’s that our obsession as practicing strategists (and Homo Sapiens are all practicing strategists, to be sure) should always be to look to change the game in which we want to succeed.

Depending on the arena, that might look radically different. If at sport, you’ll be bounded by a literal field of play, then maybe something akin to “marginal gains” might be a great approach, when every centimeter and fast-twitch fiber counts.

But in most other unbounded, open fields of competition, that’s just not gonna cut it. Let’s say you figure out a way to pack ten percent more bullets into every magazine of every gun you have on a battlefield. Great. But that doesn’t matter much if the adversary hits you with the steel rain of indirect fire artillery, or a well-hidden explosive that takes out tank tracks, or if they raid the supply depot holding all your food and water.

Or maybe say you build the world’s best castle, with the highest, strongest walls and deepest, broadest moat.

It doesn't work because there's always another dragon out there.

The only question is whether that dragon is you.

***Question to Reflect:** What's the single most impactful thing you can do right now with what's on hand to change the game you're in?

This post originally appeared at StrategyNotes.co. Lt. Col. ML Cavanaugh, PhD, (@MLCavanaugh) is a US Army officer, senior fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point, and writes a newsletter at StrategyNotes.co.

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