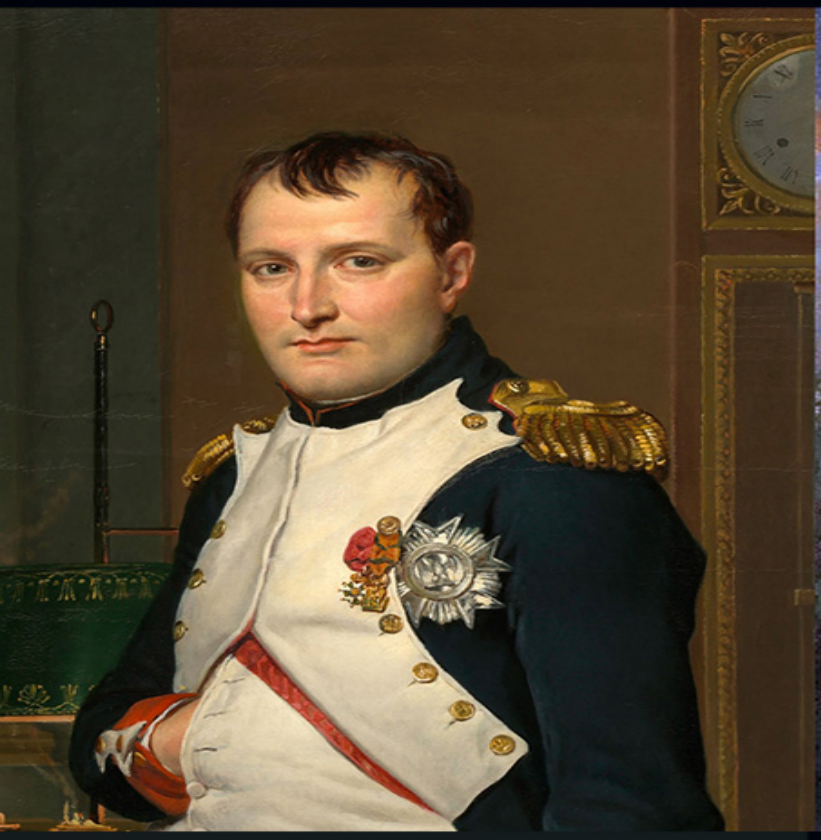
Napoleon Bonaparte
Carl von Clausewitz



The Art of Strategy

Napoleon's Maxims of War
Clausewitz's On War

Napoleon Bonaparte, Carl von Clausewitz

The Art of Strategy: Napoleon's Maxims of War + Clausewitz's On War

The Art of War in 19th Century Europe

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Napoleon's Maxims of War

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PREFACE.

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The publisher has reissued this little volume as a publication timely for the occasion. A collection of maxims which directed the military operations of the greatest captain of modern times, cannot fail to prove of great use to such young officers as really desire a knowledge of the art of war. The maxims are illustrated by instances drawn from the campaigns of Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Frederick, and Napoleon. These great men were all governed by the same principles, and it is by applying these principles to the perusal of their respective campaigns, that every military man will recognize their wisdom, and make such use of them hereafter as his own particular genius shall point out.

“And here, perhaps,” says the translator, Col. D’Aguilar, “my task might have been considered finished; but perceiving how incomplete the collection was alone, I have endeavored to supply the deficiency by having recourse for further illustration to the memoirs of Montécuculli, and the instructions of Frederick to his generals. The analogy of their principles with those of Napoleon, has convinced me that the art of war is susceptible of two points of view: one, which relates entirely to the acquirements and genius of the general; the other, which refers to matters of detail.

“The first is the same in all ages, and with all nations, whatever be the arms with which they fight. Hence it follows that, in every age, great commanders have been governed by the same principles.

“The business of detail, on the contrary, is controlled by existing circumstances. It varies with the character of a people, and the quality of their arms.

“It is with a view to impress the justice of this remark, that I have sought for facts in different periods of history, to illustrate these maxims, and to prove that nothing is *problematical* in war; but that failure and success in military operations depend almost always on the natural genius and science of the chief.”

MAXIM I.

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The frontiers of states are either large rivers, or chains of mountains, or deserts. Of all these obstacles to the march of an army, the most difficult to overcome is the desert; mountains come next, and broad rivers occupy the third place.

NOTE.

Napoleon, in his military career, appears to have been called upon to surmount every difficulty which can occur in wars of invasion.

In Egypt he traversed deserts, and vanquished and destroyed the Mamelukes, so celebrated for their address and courage. His genius knew how to accommodate itself to all the dangers of this distant enterprise, in a country ill adapted to supply the wants of his troops.

In the conquest of Italy, he twice crossed the Alps by the most difficult passes, and at a season, too, which rendered this undertaking still more formidable. In three months he passed the Pyrenees, defeated and dispersed four Spanish armies. In short, from the Rhine to the Borysthenes, no natural obstacle could be found to arrest the rapid march of his victorious army.

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In forming the plan of a campaign, it is requisite to foresee everything the enemy may do, and to be prepared with the necessary means to counteract it.

Plans of campaign may be modified *ad infinitum* according to circumstances—the genius of the general, the character of the troops, and the topography of the theatre of action.

NOTE.

Sometimes we see a hazardous campaign succeed, the plan of which is directly at variance with the principles of the art of war. But this success depends generally on the caprice of fortune, or upon faults committed by the enemy—two things upon which a general must never count. Sometimes the plan of a campaign, although based on sound principles of war, runs the risk of failing at the outset if opposed by an adversary who acts at first on the defensive, and then, suddenly seizing the initiative, surprises by the skilfulness of his manœuvres. Such was the fate of the plan laid down by the Aulic council for the campaign of 1796, under the command of Marshal Wurmser. From his great numerical superiority, the marshal had calculated on the entire destruction of the French army, by cutting off its retreat. He founded his operations on the defensive attitude of his adversary, who was posted on the line of the Adige, and had

to cover the siege of Mantua, as well as central and lower Italy.

Wurmser, supposing the French army fixed in the neighborhood of Mantua, divided his forces into three corps, which marched separately, intending to unite at that place. Napoleon, having penetrated the design of the Austrian general, perceived the advantage to be derived from striking the first blow against an army divided into three corps, with no communication between them. He hastened, therefore, to raise the siege of Mantua, assembled the whole of his forces, and by this means became superior to the imperialists, whose divisions he attacked and beat in detail. Thus Wurmser, who fancied he had only to march to certain victory, saw himself compelled, after ten days campaign, to retire with the remains of his army into the Tyrol, after a loss of twenty-five thousand men in killed and wounded, fifteen thousand prisoners, nine stand of colors, and seventy pieces of cannon.

Hence, nothing is so difficult as to prescribe beforehand to a general the line of conduct he shall pursue during the course of a campaign. Success must often depend on circumstances that cannot be foreseen; and it should be remembered, likewise, that nothing cramps so much the efforts of genius as compelling the head of an army to be governed by any will but his own.

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An army which undertakes the conquest of a country, has its two wings resting either upon neutral territories, or upon great natural obstacles, such as rivers or chains of mountains. It happens in some cases that only one wing is so supported; and in others that both are exposed.

In the first instance cited, viz., where both wings are protected, a general has only to protect his front from being penetrated. In the second, where one wing only is supported, he should rest upon the supported wing. In the third, where both wings are exposed, he should depend upon a central formation, and never allow the different corps under his command to depart from this: for if it be difficult to contend with the disadvantage of having *two* flanks exposed, the inconvenience is doubled by having *four*, trebled if there be *six*—that is to say, if the army is divided into two or three different corps. In the first instance, then, as above quoted, the line of operation may rest indifferently on the right or on the left. In the second, it should be directed toward the wing in support. In the third, it should be perpendicular to the centre of the army's line of march. But in all these cases it is necessary, at a distance of every five or six days march, to have a strong post or an entrenched position upon the line of operation, in order to collect military stores and provisions, to organize convoys, to form of it a centre of movement, and establish a point of defence to shorten the line of operation of the army.

NOTE.

These general principles in the art of war were entirely unknown, or lost sight of, in the middle ages. The crusaders in their incursions into Palestine appear to have had no object but to fight and to conquer, so little pains did they take to profit by their victories. Hence, innumerable armies perished in Syria, without any other advantage than that derived from the momentary success obtained by superior numbers.

It was by the neglect of these principles, also, that Charles XII, abandoning his line of operation and all communication with Sweden, threw himself into the Ukraine, and lost the greater part of his army by the fatigue of a winter campaign in a barren country destitute of resources.

Defeated at Pultawa, he was obliged to seek refuge in Turkey, after crossing the Nieper with the remains of his army, diminished to little more than one thousand men.

Gustavus Adolphus was the first who brought back the art of war to its true principles. His operations in Germany were bold, rapid, and well executed. He made success at all times conducive to future security, and established his line of operation so as to prevent the possibility of any interruption in his communications with Sweden. His campaigns form a new era in the art of war.

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When the conquest of a country is undertaken by two or three armies, which have each their separate line of operation, until they arrive at a point fixed upon for their concentration, it should be laid down as a principle, that the union of these different corps should never take place near the enemy; because the enemy, in uniting his forces, may not only prevent this junction, but may beat the armies in detail.

NOTE.

In the campaign of 1757, Frederick, marching to the conquest of Bohemia with two armies, which had each their separate line of operation, succeeded, notwithstanding, in uniting them in sight of the Duke of Lorraine, who covered Prague with the imperial army; but his example should not be followed. The success of this march depended entirely on the inaction of the duke, who, at the head of seventy thousand men, did nothing to prevent the junction of the two Prussian armies.

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All wars should be governed by certain principles, for every war should have a definite object, and be conducted according to the rules of art. (A war should only be undertaken with forces proportioned to the obstacles to be overcome.)

NOTE.

It was a saying of Marshal Villars, that when war is decided on, it is necessary to have exact information of the number of troops the enemy can bring into the field, since it is impossible to lay down any solid plan of offensive or defensive operation without an accurate knowledge of what you have to expect and fear. “When the first shot is fired,” observes Marshal Villars, “no one can calculate what will be the issue of the war. It is, therefore, of vast importance to reflect maturely before we begin it.” When once, however, this is decided, the marshal observes that the boldest and most extended plans are generally the wisest and the most successful. “When we are determined upon war,” he adds, “we should carry it on vigorously and without trifling.”

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At the commencement of a campaign, to *advance* or *not to advance*, is a matter for grave consideration; but when once the offensive has been assumed, it must be sustained to the last extremity. However skilful the manœuvres in a retreat, it will always weaken the *morale* of an army, because, in losing the chances of success, these last are transferred to the enemy. Besides, retreats always cost more men and *materiel* than the most bloody engagements; with this difference, that in a battle the enemy's loss is nearly equal to your own—whereas in a retreat the loss is on your side only.

NOTE.

Marshal Saxe remarks, that no retreats are so favorable as those which are made before a languid and unenterprising enemy, for when he pursues with vigor, the retreat soon degenerates into a rout. "Upon this principle it is a great error," says the marshal, "to adhere to the proverb which recommends us to build a bridge of gold for a retreating enemy. No; follow him up with spirit, and he is destroyed!"

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An army should be ready every day, every night, and at all times of the day and night, to oppose all the resistance of which it is capable. With this view, the soldier should always be furnished completely with arms and ammunition; the infantry should never be without its artillery, its cavalry, and its generals; and the different divisions of the army should be constantly in a state to support, to be supported, and to protect itself.

The troops, whether halted, or encamped, or on the march, should be always in favorable positions, possessing the essentials required for a field of battle; for example, the flanks should be well covered, and all the artillery so placed as to have free range, and to play with the greatest advantage. When an army is in column of march, it should have advanced guards and flanking parties, to examine well the country in front, to the right, and to the left, and always at such distance as to enable the main body to deploy into position.

NOTE.

The following maxims, taken from the memoirs of Montécuculli, appear to me well suited to this place, and calculated to form a useful commentary on the general principles laid down in the preceding maxim:

1. When war has been once decided on, the moment is past for doubts and scruples. On the contrary, we are bound

to hope that all the evil which may ensue, will not; that Providence, or our own wisdom, may avert it; or that the want of talent on the part of the enemy may prevent him from benefiting by it. The first security for success is to confer the command on one individual. When the authority is divided, the opinions of the commanders often vary, and the operations are deprived of that *ensemble* which is the first essential to victory. Besides, when an enterprise is common to many, and not confined to a single person, it is conducted without vigor, and less interest is attached to the result.

After having strictly conformed to all the rules of war, and satisfied ourselves that nothing has been omitted to ensure eventual success, we must then leave the issue in the hands of Providence, and repose ourselves tranquilly in the decision of a higher power.

Let what will arrive, it is the part of a general-in-chief to remain firm and constant in his purposes; he must not allow himself to be elated by prosperity, nor to be depressed by adversity: for in war good and bad and fortune succeed each other by turns, form the ebb and flow of military operations.

2. When your own army is strong and inured to service, and that of the enemy is weak and consists of new levies, or of troops enervated by long inaction, then you should exert every means to bring him to battle.

If, on the other hand, your adversary has the advantage in troops, a decisive combat is to be avoided, and you must be content to impede his progress, by encamping advantageously, and fortifying favorable passes. When

armies are nearly equal in force, it is desirable *not* to avoid a battle, but only to attempt to fight one to advantage. For this purpose, care should be taken to encamp always in front of the enemy; to move when he moves, and occupy the heights and advantageous grounds that lie upon his line of march; to seize upon all the buildings and roads adjoining to his camp, and post yourself advantageously in the places by which he must pass. It is always something gained to make *him* lose time, to thwart his designs, or to retard their progress and execution. If, however, an army is altogether inferior to that of the enemy, and there is no possibility of manœuvring against him with success, then the campaign must be abandoned, and the troops must retire into the fortresses.

3. The principal object of a general-in-chief, in the moment of battle, should be to secure the flanks of his army. It is true that natural positions may be found to effect this object, but these positions being fixed and immovable in themselves, they are only advantageous to a general who wishes to wait the shock of the enemy, and not to one who marches to the attack.

A general can, therefore, rely only on the proper arrangement of his troops, to enable him to repel any attempt the adversary may make upon the front, or flanks, or rear of his army.

If one flank of an army rests upon a river, or an impassable ravine, the whole of the cavalry may be posted with the other wing, in order to envelop the enemy more easily by its superiority in numbers.

If the enemy has his flanks supported by woods, light cavalry or infantry should be despatched to attack him in flank or in rear during the heat of the battle. If practicable, also, an attack should be made upon the baggage, to add to his confusion.

If you desire to beat the enemy's left with your right wing, or his right with your left wing, the wing with which you attack should be reinforced by the *élite* of your army. At the same moment, the other wing should avoid battle, and the attacking wing brought rapidly forward, so as to overwhelm the enemy. If the nature of the ground admits, he should be approached by stealth, and attacked before he is on his guard. If any signs of fear are discoverable in the enemy, and which are always to be detected by confusion or disorder in his movements, he should be pursued immediately, without allowing him time to recover himself. It is now the cavalry should be brought into action, and manœuvre so as to surprise and cut off his artillery and baggage.

4. The order of march should always be subservient to the order of battle, which last should be arranged beforehand. The march of an army is always well regulated when it is governed by the distance to be accomplished, and by the time required for its performance. The front of the column of march should be diminished or increased according to the nature of the country, taking care that the artillery always proceeds by the main road.

When a river is to be passed, the artillery should be placed in battery upon the bank opposite the point of crossing.

It is a great advantage, when a river forms a sweep or angle, and when a ford is to be found near the place where you wish to effect a passage. As the construction of the bridge proceeds, infantry should be advanced to cover the workmen, by keeping up a fire on the opposite bank; but the moment it is finished, a corps of infantry and cavalry, and some field-pieces, should be pushed across. The infantry should entrench itself immediately at the head of the bridge, and it is prudent, moreover, to fortify on the same side of the river, in order to protect the bridge in case the enemy should venture an offensive movement.

The advanced guard of an army should be always provided with trusty guides, and with a corps of pioneers: the first to point out the best roads, the second to render these roads more practicable.

If the army marches in detachments, the commander of each detachment should be furnished with the name of the place in writing, where the whole are to be reassembled; the place should be sufficiently removed from the enemy to prevent him from occupying it before the junction of all the detachments. To this end, it is of importance to keep the name a secret.

From the moment an army approaches the enemy, it should march in the order in which it is intended to fight. If anything is to be apprehended, precautions are necessary in proportion to the degree of the danger. When a defile is to be passed, the troops should be halted beyond the extremity, until the whole army has quitted the defile.

In order to conceal the movements of an army, it is necessary to march by night through woods and valleys, by

the most retired roads, and out of reach of all inhabited places. No fires should be allowed; and, to favor the design still more, the troops should move by verbal order. When the object of the march is to carry a post, or to relieve a place that is besieged, the advanced guard should march within musket shot of the main body, because then you are prepared for an immediate attack, and ready to overthrow all before you.

When a march is made to force a pass guarded by the enemy, it is desirable to make a feint upon one point, while, by a rapid movement, you bring your real attack to bear upon another.

Sometimes success is obtained by pretending to fall back upon the original line of march, and, by a sudden countermarch, seizing upon the pass, before the enemy is able to reoccupy it. Some generals have gained their point by manœuvring so as to deceive the enemy, while a detachment under the cover of high grounds has surprised the passage by a stolen march. The enemy being engaged in watching the movements of the main body, the detachment has an opportunity of entrenching itself in its new position.

5. An army regulates its mode of encampment according to the greater or less degree of precaution, when circumstances require. In a friendly country the troops are divided, to afford better accommodation and supplies. But with the enemy in front, an army should always encamp in order of battle. With this view, it is of the highest importance to cover one part of the camp, as far as practicable, by natural defences, such as a river, a chain of

rocks, or a ravine. Care should be taken also that the camp is not commanded, and that there is no obstacle to a free communication between the different corps, and which can prevent the troops from mutually succoring each other.

When an army occupies a fixed camp, it is necessary to be well supplied with provisions and ammunition, or at least that these should be within certain reach and easily obtained. To insure this, the line of communication must be well established, and care taken not to leave an enemy's fortress in your rear.

When an army is established in winter quarters, its safety is best secured either by fortifying a camp (for which purpose a spot should be selected near a large commercial town, or a river affording facility of transport), or by distributing it in close cantonments, so that the troops should be near together, and capable of affording each other mutual support.

The winter quarters of an army should be protected, likewise, by constructing small covered works on all the lines of approach to the cantonments, and by posting advanced guards of cavalry to observe the motions of the enemy.

6. A battle is to be sought, when there is reason to hope for victory, or when an army runs the risk of being ruined without fighting; also when a besieged place is to be relieved, or when you desire to prevent a reinforcement from reaching the enemy. Battles are useful, likewise, when we wish to profit by a favorable opportunity which offers, to secure a certain advantage, such as seizing upon an undefended point or pass, attacking the enemy when he has

committed a fault, or when some misunderstanding among his generals favors the undertaking.

If an enemy declines an engagement, he may be compelled to it, either by besieging a place of importance, or by falling upon him unawares, and when he cannot easily effect his retreat. Or (after pretending to retire), by making a rapid countermarch, attacking him vigorously and forcing him to action.

The different circumstances under which a battle should be avoided or declined, are, when there is greater danger to be apprehended from defeat than advantage to be derived from victory; when you are very inferior to your adversary in numbers, and are expecting reinforcements; above all, when the enemy is advantageously posted, or when he is contributing to his own ruin by some inherent defect in his position, or by the errors and divisions of his generals.

To gain a battle, each arm must be advantageously posted, and have the means of engaging its front and in flank. The wings must be protected by natural obstacles, where these present themselves, or by having recourse when necessary to the aid of art.

The troops must be able to assist each other without confusion, and care must be taken that the broken corps do not fall back upon, and throw the rest into disorder. Above all, the intervals between the different corps must be sufficiently small to prevent the enemy from penetrating between them, for in that case you would be obliged to employ your reserves, and run the risk of being entirely overwhelmed. Sometimes victory is obtained by creating a diversion in the middle of a battle, or even by depriving the

soldier of all hope of retreat, and placing him in a situation where he is reduced to the necessity either to conquer or die.

At the commencement of a battle, if the ground is level, you should advance to meet the enemy, in order to inspire the soldier with courage; but if you are well posted, and your artillery advantageously placed, then wait for him with determination: remembering always to fight resolutely, to succor opportunely those who require it, and never to bring your reserves into action except in the last extremity; and even then to preserve some support, behind which the broken corps may rally.

When it is necessary to attack with your whole force, the battle should commence toward evening; because then, whatever be the issue, night will arrive to separate the combatants before your troops are exhausted. By this means, an opportunity is afforded of affecting an orderly retreat if the result of the battle requires it.

During an action, the general-in-chief should occupy some spot whence he can, as far as possible, overlook his whole army. He should be informed, immediately, of everything that passes in the different divisions. He should be ready, in order to render success more complete, to operate with fresh troops upon those points where the enemy is giving way, and also to reinforce his own corps wherever they are inclined to yield. When the enemy is beaten, he must pursue him instantly, without giving him a moment to rally; on the other hand, if he is himself defeated, or despairs of victory, he must retreat in the best possible order.

7. It shows great talent in a general to bring troops, who are prepared for action, into collision with those who are not: for example, fresh troops against those which are exhausted—brave and disciplined men against recruits. He must likewise be ready always to fall with his army upon a weak or detached corps, to follow the track of the enemy, and charge him among defiles before he can face about and get into position.

8. A position is good when the different corps are so placed as to be engaged with advantage, and without any remaining unemployed. If you are superior in cavalry, positions are to be taken in plains and open ground; if in infantry, in an enclosed and covered country. If inferior in numbers, in confined and narrow places; if superior, in a spacious and extensive field. With a very inferior army, a difficult pass must be selected to occupy and fortify.

9. In order to obtain every possible advantage from a diversion, we should ascertain first, that the country in which it is to be created is easily penetrated. A diversion should be made vigorously, and on those points where it is calculated to do the greatest mischief to the enemy.

10. To make war with success, the following principles should never be departed from:

To be superior to your enemy in numbers, as well as in *morale*; to fight battles in order to spread terror in the country; to divide your army into as many corps as may be effected without risk, in order to undertake several objects at the same time; to treat WELL those who yield, to ILL treat those who resist; to secure your rear, and occupy and strengthen yourself at the outset in some post which shall

serve as a central point for the support of your future movements; to guard against desertion; to make yourself master of the great rivers and principal passes, and to establish your line of communication by getting possession of the fortresses, by laying siege to them, and of the open country, by giving battle; for it is vain to expect that conquests are to be achieved without combats; although when a victory is won, they will be best maintained by uniting mildness with valor.

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A general-in-chief should ask himself frequently in the day: “What should I do if the enemy’s army appeared now in my front, or on my right, or my left?” If he have any difficulty in answering these questions, his position is bad, and he should seek to remedy it.

NOTE.

In the campaign of 1758, the position of the Prussian army at Hohen Kirk, being commanded by the batteries of the enemy, who occupied all the heights, was eminently defective; notwithstanding, Frederick, who saw his rear menaced by the corps of Laudon, remained six days in his camp without seeking to correct his position. It would seem, indeed, that he was ignorant of his real danger: for Marshal Daun, having manœuvred during the night in order to attack by daybreak, surprised the Prussians in their lines before they were able to defend themselves, and by this means surrounded them completely.

Frederick succeeded, however, in effecting his retreat with regularity, but not without the loss of ten thousand men, many general officers, and almost all of his artillery. If Marshal Daun had followed up his victory with greater boldness, the king of Prussia would never have been able to rally his army. On this occasion, Frederick’s good fortune balanced his imprudence.

Marshal Saxe remarks, that there is more talent than is dreamt of in bad dispositions, if we possess the art of converting them into good ones when the favorable moment arrives. Nothing astonishes the enemy so much as this manœuvre; he has counted upon *something*; all his arrangements have been founded upon it accordingly—and at the moment of attack it escapes him! “I must repeat,” says the marshal, “there is nothing that so completely disconcerts an enemy as this, or leads him to commit so many errors; for it follows, that if he does *not* change his arrangements, he is beaten; and if he *does* change them, in presence of his adversary, he is equally undone.”

It seems to me, however, that a general who should rest the success of a battle upon such a principle, would be more likely to lose than to gain by it; for if he had to deal with a skilful adversary and an alert tactician, the latter would find time to take advantage of the previous bad arrangements, before he would be able to remedy them.

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The strength of an army, like the power in mechanics, is estimated by multiplying the mass by the rapidity; a rapid march augments the *morale* of an army, and increases its means of victory. Press on!

NOTE.

“Rapidity,” says Montécuculli, “is of importance in concealing the movements of an army, because it leaves no time to divulge the intention of its chief. It is, therefore, an advantage to attack the enemy unexpectedly, to take him off his guard, to surprise him, and let him feel the thunder before he sees the flash; but if too great celerity exhausts your troops, while, on the other hand, delay deprives you of the favorable moment, you must weigh the advantage against the disadvantage, and choose between.”

Marshal Villars observes, that “in war everything depends upon being able to deceive the enemy; and having once gained this point, in never allowing him time to recover himself.” Villars has united practice to precept. His bold and rapid marches were almost always crowned with success.

It was the opinion of Frederick that all wars should be short and rapid; because a long war insensibly relaxes discipline, depopulates the state, and exhausts its resources.