

Secrecy, Deception and Intelligence Failure:  
Explaining Operational Surprise in War

by

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Signature of Author.....



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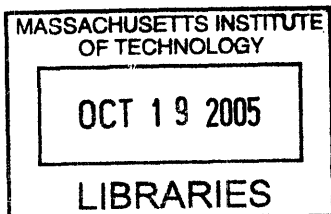
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ABSTRACT:

Operational surprise attacks are large-scale, theater-level intrawar attacks, which result from a country misestimating the capabilities and intentions of its enemies. This thesis analyzes how these massive surprise attacks occur during war when countries should be especially wary of their enemies and vigilant for any evidence of attack. Three hypotheses may explain the frequency and success of operational surprise attacks including operational secrecy, strategic deception, and intelligence failure. Using the Battle of the Bulge in World War II and the Chinese counteroffensive in the Korean War as case studies, this analysis illustrates these three elements and evaluates their relative causal weight in these attacks.

This study concludes that each hypothesis is a contributing element to the surprise attack, but that a failure of intelligence is the critical factor. Moreover, this failure stems from a “victory disease” – a belief held by military leaders and their intelligence staff when victory appears near that one’s enemy is too weak or has allowed the opportunity to mount a successful counterattack pass. Thus, precisely when one’s enemy becomes most desperate on the battlefield countries run a greater risk of surprise attack by failing to accurately estimate an enemy’s strategic intentions and military capabilities.

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# INTRODUCTION

Throughout history the issues of intelligence, deception, and surprise have been the subject of discussion and analysis by military theorists, political scientists, and policymakers.<sup>1</sup> Since the terrorist attack of 9/11 and the flawed intelligence estimates on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), there has been a renaissance in government commissions, official reports, and scholarly articles focused on the flaws in the American intelligence system which include corrective policy prescriptions.<sup>2</sup> While contemporary studies of intelligence concentrate on specific intelligence failures, much of the older literature examines the issues of strategic warning and surprise, undoubtedly motivated by the experience of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II and the fear of a Soviet surprise attack during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Largely overlooked in writings on intelligence, however, is the issue of operational surprise.<sup>4</sup> Operational surprises are large-scale intrawar attacks that occur at the theater level between two or more warring countries.

Nestled between strategic surprise and tactical surprise, operational surprises cover a less-studied, but nevertheless vital niche of cases. To understand these varied types of surprise it is important to juxtapose the nuances between the three types.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For examples, see the various works of Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, Niccolo Machiavelli, Barton Whaley, Richard Betts, Michael Handel, John Lewis Gaddis, Jack Davis, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See the 9/11 Commission Report <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/index.htm>; Iraqi WMD report <http://www.wmd.gov/report/>; and the National Counterintelligence Strategy [http://www.ncix.gov/publications/law\\_policy/policy/FinalCIStrategyforWebMarch21.pdf](http://www.ncix.gov/publications/law_policy/policy/FinalCIStrategyforWebMarch21.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, the discussion on “signal to noise ratio” in Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 1962).

<sup>4</sup> One exception is Barton Whaley’s work *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Cambridge: MA, Center for International Studies; 1969). However, this work focuses on simple statistical measures of cases.

<sup>5</sup> Soviet military science uses terms for each of the levels of operation from tactical to grand strategy, in particular note *operativnoe iskustvo* (operational art), as opposed to *strategiya* (strategic) and *taktika*

Strategic surprise is widely considered to be the surprise that occurs at the outset of hostilities between two warring countries at the national level. Typically, the surprised country experiences increased political tension with the attacker but believes that an attack, whether preventive or preemptive<sup>6</sup>, is only a distant possibility. Frequently, the leadership of the surprised country believes that it will be able to resolve the situation with diplomacy or at least delay hostilities while it reinforces its defenses. Some classic examples of strategic surprise from World War II include the German invasion of the Soviet Union, and the Japanese attack against Pearl Harbor. Of course, many other modern wars (e.g. the Korean War, the Six Day's War, the Yom Kippur War, etc.) were launched when one country attempted to attain its political objectives through a strategic surprise attack.

Tactical surprise, on the other extreme, is surprise achieved at the unit level during the outset of an attack. Most, but not all, battles begin with the units of one country attempting to achieve surprise in order to reduce the advantages accruing to their enemy from fighting from prepared defensive positions. While examples of tactical surprise abound, one good example is the German glider attack on the Belgian fort Eben Emael in 1940.<sup>7</sup> In this attack a small German force landed on the roof, used shaped charges to destroy the artillery casements, and captured the 750-man garrison. Even

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(tactical). Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Cambridge: MA, Center for International Studies; 1969), 246.

<sup>6</sup> For more discussion of the difference between preventive and preemptive see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1966), 224-230, 249-250, and 269.

<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the Dutch commander did issue an alert to his forces on the German border just before the attack of May 10, 1940, but the warning was not communicated to all units behind the line because action was not immediately expected in interior sectors. As a result, the two German airborne divisions that landed in the Fortress Holland area came up against troops that had not been alerted, in the interest of avoiding needless fatigue. No more than a company of 85 German troops in gliders captured the vital fortress of Eben Emael in Belgium, which had a garrison of at least 750. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 114.

though this mission helped clear the way for German columns to advance through Belgium into France, neither its success nor failure would have had major strategic implications for the war.

While strategic, operational and tactical surprise share the factors of location and timing, operational surprise lies between these two extremes regarding the scale of the operation.<sup>8</sup> Operational surprises occur at the theater and campaign level (versus the national or tactical levels) and between at least two countries already engaged in hostilities. It is nearly impossible to classify an attack simply by using numbers. However, to get some idea of the difference in scale, operational surprise require armies or army groups rather than companies or battalions and hundreds of square miles instead of an attack against a particular target such as a unit or village.

Oftentimes an operational surprise attack is so large it has a significant impact on the course of the war – whether it succeeds or because it fails.<sup>9</sup> For example, MacArthur's surprise attack at Inchon in the Korean War reversed the direction of the war and sent the North Korean forces reeling back north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in defeat. When this sort of attack succeeds, the winning side may destroy the enemy's force or ability to wage war or at the least achieve important strategic goals (e.g. strategic terrain, natural resources, or manufacturing facilities). On the other hand if an operational

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<sup>8</sup> Two other factors commonly analyzed in surprise attacks are mass and method. Both strategic and operational share the characteristic of mass – typically substantial amounts of men and material at the Corps or Army Group level of operations. A surprise of method, however, utilizes a novel means of executing the attack. One such example is the German use of blitzkrieg tactics during World War II. This analysis focuses on the operational aspects of timing, location, and mass.

<sup>9</sup> This paper focuses on operational surprise by an attacker, however, operational surprise may also be achieved on the defense (e.g. the Japanese method of defense on Okinawa). I am grateful to Robert Vickers for pointing out this distinction.

surprise attack should fail, the attacker may either fatally deplete its forces or allow a weakened enemy time to recover.

In some cases, a country which perceives itself to be losing the war will husband its resources and lash out in a last ditch effort to bring its adversary to the bargaining table or to increase its leverage if diplomatic talks are ongoing. For example, many military historians believe that this was Hitler's goal late in World War II, when he conceived of and initiated the attack in the Ardennes region that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. If successful, the attack might have caused a rift between the allies and allowed the Wehrmacht breathing room to focus its forces against the Soviet armies on the Eastern Front. As it happened, however, the U.S. and Britain were able to contain and eventually rollback the "Bulge." The Wehrmacht's resulting loss of 30 divisions undoubtedly weakened its ability to mount a strong defense on either front or, ultimately, prevent allied forces from capturing Berlin.

More important than factors such as the location, timing, or magnitude of the operation, however, are the estimates of an enemy's capabilities and intentions. Operational surprise attacks are egregious intelligence failures because preparations for the attack are not detected, the intentions of the attacker are not accurately assessed, or the defender discounts the enemy's capabilities to even launch such an attack. Admittedly, it is rare that countries experience an unexpected "bolt from the blue" attack. Despite this, one can understand how the trauma of such an event could drive scholars to examine the issue of strategic warning. What is less easy to understand is how so little theoretical attention has been paid to surprises that occurs at the theater level between countries already engaged in military combat.



Countries should expect their enemies to utilize whatever means at their disposal to gain an advantage – particularly surprise attacks. Since the advent of the mass army and industrialization this has frequently been accomplished by crushing one’s enemy under a superior weight of men and material. Indeed, often tallying the population of military age, the population’s growth, a country’s natural resources and production capabilities is sufficient to predict which country between two is likely to triumph. This is particularly true (but not always) when one country is at substantially better endowed than its opponent. Despite the importance of relative economic position and population dynamics, deception and surprise remain useful tools for increasing both the efficacy of an operation as well as its likelihood of success.

Since countries at war should expect surprise attacks and have focused their intelligence collection, analysis and warning resources on their enemies, how is it that countries are surprised at the operational level? Do the Clausewitzian factors of “fog of war” and battlefield “friction” simply blind a country to its foe’s actions and inhibit its ability to respond? Are deception operations so effective that countries are consistently able to obscure their actions and surprise their enemies? Instead perhaps countries blind themselves to their enemies’ true capabilities and thus fail to adequately prepare themselves for defense or react in a timely manner to surprise attacks? The answer seems to be a combination of each of these factors, but particularly the failure of intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The success of a surprise attack might be considered by some to be *de facto* evidence of an intelligence failure, regardless of an enemy’s operational security or strategic deceptions. This perspective holds intelligence to a very high standard indeed. Instead, it is rational to expect intelligence officers to make “best efforts” to collect information and provide “competent, reasonable” analysis. Eliot Cohen and John Gooch put this best on their book on military failures when they assert, “At its best, intelligence can provide the bounds for strategic calculation, but it is asking too much to expect it to look into the future.” In other words, intelligence is useful for providing estimates of an enemy’s intentions and capabilities, but cannot be expected to foretell the precise future operations of the enemy. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books; 1990), 43.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that operational surprises tend to occur when the losing side makes a major effort to reverse a deteriorating military situation. Thus, the surprised country underestimates the enemy's national will, strategic intentions, and remaining military capabilities, and is unprepared to counter or contain the threat.

This analysis has already identified the four main factors that contribute to operational surprise – location, timing, scale, and the defender's estimates of an enemy's capabilities and intentions. In order to increase the effectiveness of the attack it is important to maximize the degree of surprise in each of these variables. Obviously, it is better to attack where the enemy is least prepared, when the enemy does not expect it, and with forces the enemy has not identified in one's order of battle. To accomplish this there are many intelligence and operational tools that are frequently employed. Each of these efforts hinge, however, on counterintelligence, operational security, and deception. For example, during World War II both the Allies and the Germans employed a wide range of deceptions to achieve the elements of surprise. These efforts included maintaining high operational security, limiting enemy reconnaissance, transmitting fake wireless signal traffic, building dummy vehicles and decoy units, appointing military leaders over non-existent armies, running spies and double agents, creating false operational plans, and launching feints or demonstrations against other sectors. Since that time, both the technical and physical means of deception have evolved but the ultimate objective of blinding an enemy to one's capabilities and intentions has remained unchanged.

To better understand operational surprise, this thesis first examines the literature that discusses deception, intelligence and surprise. From Sun Tzu and Clausewitz to

Richard Betts and Barton Whaley, the importance of deception and intelligence to attaining tactical and strategic surprise has been analyzed and debated. Chapter One summarizes the evolution of these writings and infers theoretical hypotheses on the factors of operational surprise to be tested in the subsequent case studies. Chapters Two and Three comprise two case studies where significant operational surprises with important strategic implications were inflicted against superior American forces since World War II.

Chapter Two analyzes the Battle of the Bulge – an archetype of operational surprise attack that occurred in the waning months of World War II on the Western Front between the Allied Expeditionary Force and the German forces. Were allied forces blinded to German intentions and preparations by the “friction” of war or German deception operations? Or did allied commanders and intelligence officers believe that the Germans were so beaten that they could not mount an effective counterattack much less a counteroffensive?

The other case study examines the Chinese counteroffensive across the Yalu River during the Korean War. It should be noted that many political scientists and policymakers consider this a case of strategic surprise attack rather than operational surprise.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the Chinese did become a new entrant into the Korean conflict with their strike across the Yalu. However, the United States and the UN forces had been engaged in major military engagements for five months. Moreover, the Chinese had publicly warned the international community that they would not allow UN forces to

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<sup>11</sup> Whaley classifies both the Battle of the Bulge and the Chinese counteroffensive across the Yalu in the same category (strategic), but draws no distinction between surprises that occur at the beginning of a war and those that occur during a war. Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Cambridge: MA, Center for International Studies; 1969), B-10 – B-23.

approach the Yalu and critical hydroelectric plants in North Korea without response. Why then did American and United Nations (UN) forces fail to predict the Chinese intervention on behalf of the North Korean communist forces? Again, were the operations and deceptions of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) so effective that Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP) and the UN forces were hoodwinked? Or did the intelligence and military leadership fail to adequately evaluate the possibility of a Chinese attack and accurate estimates of troop strength and intentions which resulted in the operational surprise attack and the political stalemate on the peninsula that continues to this day.

Although, operational surprises occur regularly in war, these cases were selected to evaluate the relative explanatory power of operational secrecy, strategic deception and intelligence failure on operational surprise attacks against the United States. These instances of surprise attack allow a test of how a weaker opponent was able to achieve operational surprise against a superior opponent, the United States. One might assume that countries near to victory would have advantages for both detecting preparations for surprise attacks and blunting their effects. Nevertheless, weaker countries manage to inflict these surprise attacks on their enemies sporadically throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Betts notes

The importance of surprise for an attacker varies inversely with his advantage in forces or the risks he faces from the victim's retaliation. Surprise is almost superfluous if the attacker dwarfs the opponent (as when the Germans swallowed Poland in 1939), but it is vital if opposing forces are evenly matched (as in the invasion of France a year later). Shock is the only hope at all if the victim is stronger than the attacker (as the Israelis were vis-à-vis the Arabs in 1973).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 6.

Thus, when a country is losing the war, a surprise attack may seem to be the best option. Paradoxically, this occurs exactly when the country winning the war runs the greatest risks of being attacked, is most predisposed to dismiss intelligence warnings, and typically incorrectly estimates its enemies intentions and remaining capabilities.

Each of these surprise attacks were carried out against the military of the United States at times when it enjoyed comparable, if not superior, intelligence, logistics, and technology (but not necessarily troop strength) and still suffered enormous losses and setbacks. Because the United States is the sole remaining superpower, it is likely that it may find itself in similar positions in the future. If, as this study argues, operational surprise attacks are the result of intelligence failures rather than an enemy's secrecy and deception operations, then the military of the United States would do well to learn from mistakes of its past hubris. Finally, the robust historical accounts of the Battle of the Bulge and the Chinese counterattack provide ample sources for considering the factors that affect the success of the operational surprise attack.

# CHAPTER I

## DECEPTION, SURPRISE AND INTELLIGENCE

If we always knew the enemy's intentions beforehand, we should always, even with inferior forces, be superior to him.

– Frederick the Great<sup>13</sup>

### *The Advantage of Surprise*

The myriad advantages of surprise have been obvious to the practitioners of war for millennia. All things being equal, a surprise attack is simply more likely to succeed. By catching an unsuspecting enemy off guard before he can assemble his forces or prepare his defenses, one is more likely to be able to bring a superior weight of men and material to the decisive point in the battle. While often difficult to achieve, surprise is the most effective force multiplier and often critical to the success or failure of an operation.

Richard Betts notes that

Increments of forces provide an arithmetical advantage, but the effects of successful shock are geometrical. Surprise is a force multiplier. It can neutralize much of the victim's defense by enveloping or destroying forces at the outset. Surprise can also keep the victim reeling when his plans dictate that he should be reacting, and it prevents him from using his capabilities efficiently while the attacker exploits his own to the maximum.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, one military analyst, after comparing the combat effectiveness where surprise was achieved and where it was not, concluded that “the combat capability of the side

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<sup>13</sup> Frederick the Great as quoted in Colmar Von der Goltz in *The Nation in Arms* (London: Hugh Rees; 1913), 198.

<sup>14</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 5.

achieving surprise was – on the average – almost doubled.”<sup>15</sup> Another estimated that the effect of surprise changes the ratio of casualties in favor of the attacker from 1:1 to about 5:1.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of how great the accruing advantage, it is clear that achieving surprise has been a key strategy from ancient times to the present.

Surprise, however, is rarely achieved without deception and almost never without an intelligence failure.<sup>17</sup> Michael Handel asserts that “deception and surprise are closely related, as deception provides one of the most effective ways to achieve surprise. Surprise and deception in turn can presumably be avoided or prevented by timely, reliable intelligence.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, one may think of deception and intelligence as opposite sides of the same coin. While utilizing deception to achieve surprise, however, it is essential to use intelligence to prevent oneself from being deceived and surprised in turn.

This chapter focuses on the development of the surprise attack as a basic tenet of warfare during ancient, Napoleonic and modern times. By examining the writings of Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and a handful of modern theorists it is possible to trace the waxing and waning of the popularity of deception operations and efforts to achieve the effect of surprise. In particular, it is interesting that the trench warfare experience of World War I on the Western Front seems to have influenced the perception of both military theorists and commanders of the utility of surprise attack. Moreover, most modern theorists have only considered the importance of strategic surprise, while overlooking cases of

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<sup>15</sup> Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974* (Harper and Row, 1978), 5.96

<sup>16</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Cambridge: MIT, Center for International Studies; 1969), 193.

<sup>17</sup> Richard K. Betts notes that “If the victim fails to obtain warning, surprise occurs. If he obtains warning but does not respond to it, he still suffers the effects of surprise.” Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Handel. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London: Frank Cass; 1992, 2002), 215.

operational surprise and their implications for the future conduct of war. Operational surprise attacks during war may be just as important as strategic surprise attack for suddenly changing the relative balance of military, and even political power, between rival states. For example, the successful Israeli counterattack across the Suez Canal in the 1973 War was an inflection point for the course of that conflict. By examining surprise attacks in these circumstances it is possible to understand both when and why they are likely to occur and how to minimize their impact and effectiveness.

### ***Sun Tzu and Surprise***

Although achieving surprise has been critical from ancient times to the present, the way in which military theorists and analysts have considered the issue and the way in which generals have sought to exploit it has evolved substantially over that time. For example, the ancient military theorist, Sun Tzu, writes about surprise much differently than Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian theorist of the 1800's. Sun Tzu fetishizes the art of deception in achieving surprise and victory while Clausewitz largely dismisses deception and surprise as distractions from his perspective on waging war.

Sun Tzu's writings focus on an earlier time, when surprise was deemed even more critical than in modern war. Because there was relatively little difference in the weapons or tactics between warring states, deception and surprise were often crucial factors for achieving the local battlefield superiority necessary for victory when deploying forces larger than the enemy was not an option. The responsibility for devising and executing such stratagems was primarily left to the military commander.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Handel. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London: Frank Cass; 1992, 2002), 216.



Due to the relatively small size of the forces and the highly tactical nature of most premodern military engagements, it remained possible for a single individual to both contrive and render deceptions without having the support of a general staff or intelligence apparatus.

Throughout *The Art of War*, the esteem with which Sun Tzu holds deception and surprise is obvious. Sun Tzu asserts that “all warfare is based on deception”<sup>20</sup> and encourages military leaders to use surprise to “attack where [the enemy] is unprepared: [and to] sally out when he does not expect you.”<sup>21</sup> He applies these prescriptions expansively to the subject of war, addressing tactical, operational, strategic and political aspects. Similarly, Sun Tzu’s definition of deception is also quite broad, including “both active and passive measures, from elaborate deception plans, simple baits, and diversion, to secrecy and concealment.”<sup>22</sup> Each of these prescriptions was based on obtaining timely accurate intelligence, and he counsels his reader to “know the enemy, know yourself; [and] your victory will never be endangered.”<sup>23</sup> Nor was Sun Tzu the only military theoretician to value deception. In his *Discourses*, Machiavelli writes that “nor do I believe that force alone will be enough, but fraud alone will be enough.”<sup>24</sup> From these writings it is possible to see how important deception and surprise were for military engagements.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press; 1971), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press; 1971), 69.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Handel. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*. (London: Frank Cass; 1992, 2002), 217.

<sup>23</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press; 1971), 129.

<sup>24</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker (London: Penguin Books; 1970, 1983), 310.

<sup>25</sup> For examples, see also Thucydides, Frontinus, Caesar, Machiavelli, etc.

## *Clausewitz Overlooks Surprise*

Curiously, Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote *On War* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, is much less concerned with deception, surprise, or intelligence. In part, this stems from his greater focus on the strategic levels of the campaign, and his analysis rarely strays into tactical or operational aspects. This lack of attention may also be attributed to the fact that in the age of mass armies, mass mobilization, and large-scale battles, strategic surprise was quite difficult to achieve. Still, the degree to which Clausewitz discounts deception and intelligence is remarkable. His negative views contradict Sun Tzu's at least on the operational level and are worth quoting at some length; Clausewitz writes:

While the wish to achieve surprise is common and, indeed, indispensable, and while it is true that it will never be completely ineffective, it is equally true that by its very nature surprise can rarely be outstandingly successful. It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard surprise as a key element of success in war. The principle is highly attractive in theory, but in practice it is often held up by the friction of the whole machine.

Basically, surprise is a tactical device, simply because in tactics, time and space are limited in scale. Therefore in strategy surprise becomes more feasible the closer it occurs to the tactical realm, and more difficult, the more it approaches the higher levels of policy.

Preparations for war usually take months. Concentrating troops at their main assembly points generally requires the installation of supply dumps and depots, as well as considerable troop movements, whose purpose can be guessed soon enough.

It is very rare therefore that one state surprises another, either by attack or by preparations for war...Cases in which such surprises lead to major results are very rare. From this we may conclude how considerable are the inherent difficulties.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 198-199.

Underlying this perspective was his belief that achieving a local superiority of men and firepower was necessary for winning. Clausewitz believed, however, this was best accomplished through tactical maneuvers and superior generalship, rather than surprise.

Moreover, while Clausewitz felt that surprise was a positive force to be achieved if possible, he had little use for tactical deception. Again he was generally considering the strategic level of operations and felt that deception “should not be considered as a significant independent field action at the disposal of the commander.”<sup>27</sup> At the tactical and operational levels, deception is both less certain of success and less effective if successful. Clausewitz further denigrates the use of deception when he asserts

To prepare a sham action with sufficient thoroughness to impress an enemy requires a considerable expenditure of time and effort, and the costs increase with the scale of the deception. Normally they call for more than can be spared, and consequently so-called strategic feints rarely have the desired effect. It is dangerous, in fact, to use substantial forces over any length of time merely to create an illusion; there is always the risk that nothing will be gained and that the troops deployed will not be available when they are needed.<sup>28</sup>

During Clausewitz’ time, diversions were largely accomplished by moving troops around the battlefield and potentially away from the decisive point, inevitably weakening any attack. Thus, it is understandable that Clausewitz would prefer to utilize troops for fighting in battle than marching them around hoping to deceive the enemy. However, times have changed and deception operations have become more effective.

Clausewitz also does not hold intelligence in high regard. While he implicitly credits intelligence for preventing countries from being able to mobilize in secret or

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<sup>27</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 202-203.

<sup>28</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976; 1976), 203.

execute strategic surprise attacks, Clausewitz does not believe that battlefield intelligence is particularly useful for military leadership. He laments that

A general in time of war is constantly bombarded by reports both true and false; by errors arising from fear or negligence or hastiness; by disobedience born of right or wrong interpretations, of ill will, of a proper or mistaken sense of duty; of laziness; or of exhaustion; and by accident that nobody could have foreseen. In short, he is exposed to countless impressions, most of them disturbing, few of them encouraging...If a man were to yield to these pressures, he would never complete an operation.<sup>29</sup>

Clausewitz believes that since war is chaotic and ever-changing, a commander's greatest strength is his intuition and ability to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Perhaps it was the lack of real-time communication on the battlefield during the Napoleonic Era reduced the value of intelligence for Clausewitz. Clausewitz asserts that

If we consider the actual basis of this information [i.e. intelligence], how unreliable and transient it is, we soon realize that war is a flimsy structure that can easily collapse and bury us in its ruins...Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain. This is true of all intelligence but even more so in the heat of battle, where such reports tend to contradict and cancel each other out. In short, most intelligence is false, and the effect of fear is to multiply lies and inaccuracies.<sup>30</sup>

He further notes that "the only situation a commander can know fully is his own: his opponent's he can know only from unreliable intelligence."<sup>31</sup> Instead of intelligence, Clausewitz believes that a good general should intuitively understand the objectives of his enemy and from this derive his enemies' plans for achieving them. Admittedly, war is both uncertain and fluid, however, modern military commanders rely heavily upon many sources of intelligence to understand their enemy's intentions and capabilities.

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 193.

<sup>30</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 84.

## *Surprise post-World War I*

While generals throughout the last century have continued to follow Clausewitz' dictum of attempting to achieve local superiority on the battlefield, they have come to rely upon deception, surprise and intelligence to achieve superiority for themselves and deny it to their enemies. During World War I advancements in military technology such as barbed wire protected trench networks, machine guns and high explosive artillery shells as well as new strategies (e.g. defense in depth) made attempts to achieve superiority and breakthroughs nearly impossible. In fact, Whaley's study of this subject revealed that 25 out of 26 major battles that occurred during World War I possessed neither elements of surprise nor deception.<sup>32</sup> Later, in the years between the two World War, the German General Waldemar Erfurth wrote that

Absolute superiority *everywhere* is unattainable; hence it must frequently be replaced by relative superiority *somewhere*... Since relative superiority will hardly be accomplished if the enemy knows the plan of concentration before the hour of attack, the principle of surprise is of importance equal to that of the principle of concentration. To defeat the enemy, he must be attacked with superior numbers at the decisive point; but to possess superior numbers at the point of attack, the enemy must be surprised.<sup>33</sup>

From Erfurth's commentary and the revival in World War II of deception efforts and surprise attacks it is clear that the combatants on all sides were pursuing strategies to avoid another trench warfare stalemate. Moreover, the changing roles of strategic and tactical intelligence and the ability to obtain information in real time meant that operations had to be shielded in secrecy and protected by elaborate deception campaigns.

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<sup>32</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), B-38.

<sup>33</sup> General Waldemar Erfurth, *Surprise*, trans. Dr. Stefan T. Possony and Daniel Vilfroy (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company; 1943), 40. Italics are his.

## *The Theory of Surprise Today*

In more recent times, political scientists and policymakers have attempted to further advance the understanding of surprise attacks first explicated by Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and others. The vast majority, however, have written only on the subject of strategic surprise. After World War II, western theorists and were still recovering from the shock of the Japanese surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. During the Cold War, theorists were undoubtedly motivated by the fear of a Soviet surprise nuclear or conventional attack in West Germany. Additionally, the surprise attack by the Arabs against Israel in the 1973 war highlighted the continued relevance of this topic. The majority of these scholars, however, study strategic surprise and its implications for sudden changes to the strategic balance of forces and early war termination. In general, these authors argued for faster, more accurate intelligence analysis, the facilitation of communication both within and between commands and political leadership, as well as better preparation in order to respond to surprise attacks immediately. Others have written on the related issues of perception, misperception, and psychology in decision-making.

The subject of operational surprise in war, however, has received scant attention. Most authors seem to believe that only strategic surprises are likely to change the course of the conflict and are therefore more worthy of study than operational surprises. Only Michael Handel and Barton Whaley have written on the subject of operational surprise – Handel only tangentially in his work on deception operations and intelligence. Whaley's manuscript, "Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War", describes selected battles from

1914 (World War I) to 1968 (the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia) and mines them for general conclusions about deception and surprise.<sup>34</sup>

From Whaley's "Strategem" the reader can derive several noteworthy conclusions that reinforce the importance of studying the niche of cases that comprise operational surprise.<sup>35</sup> In his work, Whaley compared 68 instances of strategic surprise and/or strategic deception and 47 examples of tactical surprise or deception and no major differences were found.<sup>36</sup> In other words, surprise attacks, whether they are strategic, operational or tactical all share important characteristics. Thus, political scientists should not so readily dismiss the importance of studying operational surprise. This is particularly true since operational surprises may have a significant impact on the course of a conflict and often hasten war towards a conclusion. One example of this phenomenon, is the Israeli counterattack against the Egyptians in the 1973 war.

Whaley also argues that operational security plays little role in achieving surprise, instead attributing success largely to deception stratagems.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, he notes the high correlation between deception and surprise when he notes that 73% of the strategic surprises in his study displayed both elements, leaving the remaining 27% featuring either deception or surprise but not both.<sup>38</sup> Lastly, he analyzes five factors of surprise

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<sup>34</sup> Whaley admits that the use of "selected" examples do not meet the fundamental statistic requirement of randomness.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that Whaley makes no distinction between operational and strategic surprise or between surprise at the start of hostilities or one that occurs while it is ongoing. He defines tactical to include smaller unit operations from squads to divisions and strategic to include an entire campaign as fought on a front (by a corps, army, or army group) or in a theater up to overall war policy. Barton Whaley, "Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War" (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), 245.

<sup>36</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), v.

<sup>37</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), 163.

and concludes that in roughly 75% of the cases the enemy was surprised by time and place, 60% by the strength of the attack, 45% by the intentions of the enemy, and 16% by the method of the attack.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in cases where surprise succeeds, more often than not, one typically knows both the intentions and means of the enemy's attack but not its location or timing.

### ***The Importance of Operational Surprise***

One aspect of surprise attacks that has received scant attention from Whaley or other scholars is the issue of the operational surprise attack – the large-scale surprise attacks that occur during wars. It is curious that a country fighting a war and ostensibly focused on its enemies' intentions and capabilities could neglect their defenses, suffer from deception, and be badly surprised. It is clear that high operational security, elaborate strategic deception operations, and intelligence failures each contribute to the success of operational surprise attacks. Do these elements contribute equally to operational surprise or does one factor have more relative causal weight?

While secrecy and deception are important, the failure of intelligence to provide accurate and timely estimates of an enemy's capabilities and intentions is the vital element enabling operational surprise attacks to succeed.<sup>40</sup> Surprisingly, it is most often these self-induced intelligence failures and not enemy deception efforts that permit the execution of operational attacks. Despite high operational security and elaborate

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<sup>39</sup> Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (MIT, Center for International Studies, 1969), 215.

<sup>40</sup> The subsequent case studies support this conclusion, however, it should be noted some exceptions exist. For example, the success of Operation Overlord, the amphibious landing on the Normandy beach in World War II, can be attributed largely to the deception operation unleashed against the Germans by the Allies.



deceptions stratagems, always exists providing indication of an attack. What is more shocking is that the scant information that is collected during these situations is ignored or explained away. Little effort is made to reconcile obvious discrepancies or even to seek additional intelligence that could confirm or refute the possibility of an enemy attack. More often than not, the weaker or losing side turns to the gambit of an operational surprise attack in an attempt to reverse their declining position. Betts notes this odd paradox that “while the victim assumes that attacking would create new problems for the enemy, that enemy may gamble that an attack could solve or avert new problems.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, precisely when one country is winning the war it becomes less concerned with a surprise attack that is more likely to happen.

One may wonder how a country allows itself to grow complacent and suffer an enemy’s surprise attack? Perhaps the military intelligence simply lacks the appropriate resources (e.g. planes, satellites, skilled analysts, etc.) to estimate the intentions and capabilities and of their enemy. Do psychological factors or perhaps hubris in a country’s superior warfighting capability erode its concern for enemy operations? Admittedly, a scarcity of intelligence collection resources could limit the area of coverage and the amount of intelligence collected.

Richard Heuer provides an alternate psychological explanation when he writes that

Alertness to the possibility of deception can influence the degree of one’s openness to new information, but not necessarily in a desirable direction. The impetus for changing one’s estimate of the situation can only come from the recognition of an incompatibility between a present estimate and some new evidence. If people can explain new evidence to their own satisfaction with little change in their existing beliefs, they will rarely feel

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 132.

the need for drastic revision of these beliefs. Deception provides a readily 'available' explanation for discrepant evidence: if the evidence does not fit one's preconceptions, it may be dismissed as deception. Further, the more alert or suspicious one is of deception, the more readily available this explanation. Alertness to deception also leads the analyst to be more skeptical of all the evidence, and to the extent that evidence is deemed unreliable, the analyst's preconceptions must play a greater role in determining which evidence to believe. This leads to a paradox: The more alert we are to deception, the more likely we are to be deceived.<sup>42</sup>

While this phenomenon almost certainly can and does occur, this reasoning is insufficient to explain the frequency and success of operational surprise attacks. In some cases such as Operation Overlord, the operational secrecy or strategic deception might be so effective that the enemy will be successfully deceived. In other cases like the Battle of the Bulge, the veil of secrecy and deception may be partially pierced by the victim but yet the enemy discounts this intelligence because it overestimates its enemy's helplessness.

The primary condition that allows a military to become complacent, however, is the belief that the war is nearly won and that its enemy has lost the resources or opportunity to successfully achieve a major reversal of fortune. This reasoning makes it easy to dismiss any contrary evidence (e.g. intelligence of a buildup) and lulls commanders into a false sense of confidence and security. Unfortunately, in this situation commanders tend to run risks with the disposition of their units that often increases the effectiveness of the attack.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard J. Heuer, "Strategic Deception: A Psychological Perspective", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25 (June 1981), 294-327.

## CHAPTER II

### The Battle of the Bulge: A Failure of Allied Expectations

The weaker the forces that are at the disposal of the supreme commander, the more appealing the use of cunning becomes. In a state of weakness and insignificance, when prudence, judgment and ability no longer suffice, cunning may well appear the only hope. The bleaker the situation, with everything concentrating on a single desperate attempt, the more readily cunning is joined to daring. Released from all future considerations, and liberated from thoughts of later retribution, boldness and cunning will be free to augment each other to the point of concentrating a faint glimmer of hope onto a single beam of light which may yet kindle a flame.

– Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*<sup>43</sup>

#### ***Hitler's Last Gambit: Surprise Attack through the Ardennes***

In 1944, the Wehrmacht had been steadily pushed out of France and back into Germany following the successful Allied landing and subsequent breakout operations from the beaches of French Normandy. By the middle of August the Allied armies controlled nearly all of France, Belgium and Luxembourg and stood only 50 miles from the Ruhr, the industrial base of the Third Reich. The Allied strategic bombing campaign was strangling German petroleum production. It was apparent that the once mighty German war machine was taking a drubbing on both the Eastern and Western fronts. Despite these problems, the military of the Third Reich was still making the Allied forces pay dearly for every kilometer. A premature attempt by the Allies to capture canals and bridges in the Netherlands (Operation Market Garden) to facilitate the invasion into the German homeland failed. Afterwards, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary

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<sup>43</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 203.

Force (SHAEF) resigned itself to a slow, grinding effort against the German forces manning the Siegfried Line and defenses around the Rhine. Another critical Allied goal was to open Antwerp and other ports that the Allies could utilize instead of trucking supplies all the way from Normandy to the front.

It was in this position of weakness that Hitler decided to launch his last great gambit. After reviewing the deteriorating strategic situation in August, Hitler determined that given sufficient time the situation could be saved. Despite losses of resources and production centers, the German economy peaked in the fall of 1944 due to the implementation of strict central management. Indeed, Germany was able to produce “a record million and a quarter tons of ammunition, three-quarters of a million rifles, a hundred thousand machine guns, and nine thousand artillery pieces.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Luftwaffe was beginning to deploy jet-propelled fighter and bomber airplanes that flew three times faster than the current Allied airframes, but did not yet have sufficient numbers to be tactically significant. The only decline was in the production of tanks, but those numbers were partially offset by large numbers of self-propelled assault guns. Lastly, the Third Reich still had nearly 10 million men in uniform, including 7.5 million in its army.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Hitler believed that he still had the capacity to force a stalemate and allow the Third Reich to survive to fight another day but only if Germany continued to hold the Ruhr.

On the Eastern Front, Hitler could afford to trade space for time. The Russians had regained all the land lost during Operation Barbarossa up to the borders of East Prussia. However, apart from the psychological damage of ceding portions of the

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<sup>44</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 18.

<sup>45</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 18.

German homeland to Stalin's communist armies the area contained little vital to the German war effort. Hitler also knew that the Red Army's supply lines were stretched too long and too thin to allow another offensive in the east before the spring. Nevertheless, a German offensive in the east would surely have succumbed to the same factors that defeated the first invasion – distance, cold weather, and the preponderance of Soviet men and materiel.

On the Western Front the Allies faced the combined challenges of long supply lines, defensive fortifications such as the Westwall (the German defensive position from before the war also known as the Siegfried Line), and challenging terrain for maneuver operations. Here the Allies did not yet have an overwhelming strength in numbers. Additionally, because of Hitler's prescience in ordering diehard holdouts in both French and Belgian ports the Allies had to transport all of their supplies and replacements from the French coast. Finally, the distances to strategic targets for the Germans were not insurmountably great. It was only 100 miles from the Ardennes region, a quiet sector of the line, to Antwerp. Moreover, the Germans had successfully launched the German invasion into France in 1940 from this very spot. Nevertheless, the difficult terrain comprised of hills, valleys, rivers, and narrow roads, made large operations requiring speed and maneuver difficult. And the cold, wet weather of the winter would quickly turn roads into knee-deep mud or snow.

Despite these challenges, Hitler believed that a surprise armored thrust to recapture Antwerp would deny the Allies a vital port, destroy or capture the American 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armies around Aachen, as well as the British and Canadian armies in northern Belgium. Furthermore, he reasoned that Britain would be hard-pressed to raise and equip

another expeditionary force and Canada would be domestically unwilling to send additional forces to their destruction. Hitler doubted that the United States would continue to fight a European war single-handedly, particularly when the Third Reich represented no threat to the United States. Thus, he hoped to split the Allies and negotiate a separate peace and then throw his remaining forces against the Soviets to destroy communism. Specifically, Hitler noted that

In the whole of world history there has never been a coalition which consisted of such heterogeneous elements with such diametrically opposed objectives... Ultracapitalist states on the one hand, ultra-Marxist states on the other. On the one side a dying empire, that of Great Britain, and on the other a 'colony,' the United States, anxious to take over the inheritance... The Soviet Union is anxious to lay hands on the Balkans, the Dardanelles, Persia and the Persian Gulf. Britain is anxious to keep her ill-gotten gains and to make herself strong in the Mediterranean. These states are already at loggerheads, and their antagonisms are growing visibly from hour to hour. If Germany can deal out a few heavy blows, this artificially united front will collapse...<sup>46</sup>

While he correctly noted the differences between the Allies, Hitler underestimated their steadfast commitment to removing him from power.

Nevertheless, it was this perception that motivated Hitler to create and equip roughly 30 divisions, 12 panzer and panzergrenadier divisions and 18 infantry (parachute and volksgrenadier) divisions, for this last desperate gamble through the Ardennes.<sup>47</sup> The timing would require at least two months for the Wehrmacht to assemble these units and refit units pulled from the line. It would also permit the attack to coincide with the winter weather and fog that would keep Allied reconnaissance and tactical bombers grounded

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<sup>46</sup> Attributed to Hasso Von Manteuffel, "The Battle of the Ardennes 1944-45," in H.A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, eds., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Putnam's 1965), 401 in Richard K. Betts, "Strategic Surprise for War Termination, "Strategic Military Surprise," eds. Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan (New York: National Strategy Information Center; 1983), 166.

<sup>47</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler's Last Gamble*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 19.

and hinder the rapid deployment of reinforcements. Of course, these same challenges would face the German units. Indeed, SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Sepp Deitrich, one of the German commanders, cracked that

All Hitler wants me to do is cross a river, capture Brussels, and then go on and take Antwerp! And all this in the worst time of the year through the Ardennes where the snow is waist deep and there isn't room to deploy four tanks abreast let alone an armored division! Where it doesn't get light until eight and it's dark by four and with reformed divisions made up chiefly of kids and sick old men – and at Christmas!<sup>48</sup>

Admittedly, immense challenges lay ahead for the Germans.

Throughout the planning process, Hitler's generals attempted to limit the strategic goals to capturing the American 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> armies. General von Rundstedt, the commander of the Western Front, believed that "all, absolutely all conditions for the possible success of such an offensive [to Antwerp] were lacking."<sup>49</sup> Field Marshall Model, commander of Army Group B, and General von Manteuffel, commander of units in support of the surprise attack, both attempted to scale the operation back to a smaller double envelopment. Even General Jodl, chief of the OKW planning staff, noted that "Antwerp as the objective is 'unalterable, although from a strictly technical standpoint, it appears to be disproportionate to our available forces."<sup>50</sup> Despite the protestations from his generals Hitler forbade any reduction of the plan's objectives even when it was obvious the operation was faltering, perhaps partly because he had previously overcome the odds in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and France. Ultimately, the attitude of the German commanders towards the coming offensive can be discerned when Jodl noted that the assault through the Ardennes is

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<sup>48</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 37.

<sup>49</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 35.

<sup>50</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 36.

an operation of extreme daring, but Germany is in a desperate situation and a desperate remedy is needed. We cannot escape our fate by remaining on the defensive. Such an unexpected bold attack may turn the tables. At the worst we shall cause the enemy to postpone his assault on us. Anyway, gentlemen, there can be no arguments – it is the Fuhrer’s orders!”<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, Germany’s situation was desperate and deteriorating; “the sheer weight of numbers, a weight which would increase as more divisions crossed the Atlantic and as Frenchmen were armed, [would make] a German victory impossible.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Hitler calculated that only the loss of the British and Canadian armies, in addition to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> American armies, which comprised nearly half of the Allies forces on the Western Front, would force the Allies to the negotiating table.

To this end Hitler and the Third Reich managed the astounding feat of raising and equipping the forces necessary for the attack while facing critical manpower shortages. However, it should also be noted that in the initial assault there were only five panzer and thirteen infantry-type divisions with two more panzer divisions and a panzer grenade in immediate support – roughly 70 percent of the forces Hitler had originally slated for the offensive.<sup>53</sup> After designating the Western Front the highest priority for men and equipment, manpower climbed from 416,000 on December 1 to 1, 322,000 on December 15 to achieve localized ratios of 3 to 1 in the Ardennes and 10 to 1 in the assault areas.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, these new units were generally well-equipped with new weapons. Admittedly, the assault force was woefully short of motorized transport but since gasoline was in

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler’s Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 31.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler’s Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler’s Last Gamble* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 19.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 185.



short supply and difficult to transport this may have been a less important factor in its ultimate defeat.

The events of the battle have been well-covered in the historical literature and there is little need to recount them here. After several delays related to weather and last minute preparations, the German attack was finally launched on December 16, 1944. By dawn, the German Wehrmacht had accomplished the unimaginable, at least as far as Allied intelligence was concerned. Indeed, “the German Army had concentrated a total of twenty divisions – with nearly 410,000 men, more than 2,600 artillery pieces and multiple rocket launchers, and about 1,400 tanks and assault guns – on a 110 kilometer front facing the U.S. First Army.”<sup>55</sup> Both Allied commanders and the soldiers in this heretofore quiet sector were completely surprised by the suddenness, ferocity, and strength of the penetration from the Eifel into the Ardennes. The soldiers in the field had no warning from SHAEF indicating a potential attack. Countless small unit heroics and personal sacrifice slowed the German advance until Allied reserves could be committed to defensive positions around St. Vith, Bastogne, Malmedy, and other small towns. This last gasp for the German Wehrmacht was halted well before the Meuse River, only halfway to Sixth Panzer Army’s objective of Antwerp. Ultimately, the Allies were able to prevent the German breakthrough and slowly force the line back to its original, bulge-less position.

Although Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, recognized the German attack as a great opportunity to engage and destroy the enemy outside of their fortifications, Generals Patton and Montgomery largely failed to execute the required

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<sup>55</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler’s Last Gamble* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 35.

double envelopment, allowing much of the German force to escape. Moreover, it is clear that had the Allies had adequate warning or even strong suspicions of an attack, additional experienced forces would likely have been deployed to the Ardennes or near the region as a strong reserve. The Allied troops manning the line would likely have paid additional attention to security and been arrayed in a defense in depth, rather than in a cordon – a deployment more prone to complete collapse if pierced by the enemy. Clearly, the German attack owed the vast majority of its substantial success to the operational surprise it was able to achieve.

### ***Elements of Surprise: Terrain, Weather, Secrecy, and Deception***

Like Winston Churchill, Hitler took immense personal interest in the military operations of his country, especially those involving secrecy and surprise. Consequently, he was personally involved in many aspects of preparations for the attack through the Ardennes. From selecting the location and timing, to crafting and equipping the force, to conceiving deception operations, Hitler provided crucial impetus to see his plan executed. And the success of the surprise in the Ardennes can largely be attributed to several key factors – location, timing, tight operational security, German deception operations and the complete failure of Allied intelligence to identify the former or pierce the latter.

### ***Forbidding Terrain***

Once again, by selecting the Ardennes from which to launch his counteroffensive Hitler found a crucial weakness in the Allied line to exploit. Charles B. MacDonald,

military historian and rifle company commander during the Battle of the Bulge, noted that the Ardennes was

A westward extension of the high plateau of the Eifel, so deeply etched through the centuries by serpentine streams that it appears to be less plateau than mountains,...it presents a rugged face scarred by deep gorges and twisting stream valleys. It has the shape of a big isosceles triangle with an eighty-mile base along the frontiers, extending from an ill-defined point in the north near the Belgian town of Eupen (14 miles south of Aachen) to the vicinity of Luxembourg City, the capital of Luxembourg, in the south. Although part of the region protrudes westward beyond the Meuse River, so deep and broad is the cut of the Meuse that for military purposes the region can be said to end there, some sixty miles from the base of the triangle. As the most extensive stands of forest are close to the German frontier, so too is the most forbidding terrain. *For almost the entire length of the frontier, the terrain poses a major obstacle to military movement.*<sup>56</sup>

Because the terrain was so challenging for maneuver operations and the road network so limiting, the Allies dismissed the possibility that Hitler would attempt to force 30 divisions through the Ardennes.

Thus, for the Allied forces it was a lightly held section of the line used to rest battle weary troops and give green replacements some combat experience on the front line. Both Allied intelligence and the military leadership failed to grasp that the Schnee Eifel, the German sector directly adjacent to the Ardennes in the east, had two unique features that would aid any surprise attack. First, the region was covered with a dense forest punctuated by a few small towns. Peter Elstob, a military historian, notes that “the heavily wooded terrain east of the breakthrough sector offered ideal cover...Small villages were used to hide quite large formations and camouflage – an art of which necessity had made the Germans master – was very strictly applied.”<sup>57</sup> These features

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<sup>56</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 25-26 (emphasis added). For a more complete description of the area see also 26-27.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler's Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 47.

enabled the Germans to easily hide divisions worth of men, ammunition, supplies, and vehicles from the limited aerial reconnaissance the Allies conducted just before the attack. The Allies did not have the numbers of planes to survey the entire front and what planes they did possess were tasked with higher priority sectors near Cologne. Second, in preparation for World War I the Prussians had built out a dense network of spur lines from the marshalling yards at Cologne.<sup>58</sup> The Germans were able to utilize this rail network to the edge of the German frontier to quickly amass the 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army, which saved both time and precious gasoline during the weeks leading to the attack.

### *Paralyzing Weather*

By choosing to attack in the late fall, Hitler hoped to utilize the effect of weather to achieve a greater surprise against his opponents. Of the climate, MacDonald notes

the Ardennes has a harsh, wet climate, with rainfall averaging 35 to 40 inches a year. Some of the heaviest rains come in November and December, so saturating the soil that any movement off the roads is difficult; and with them comes the fog or mist that sometimes fails to clear before midday and reappears again in late afternoon. Snow sometimes accumulates up to a foot in depth – deeper in drifts – and cold, raw winds sweep the heights.<sup>59</sup>

Typically, bad weather favors the defender – or at least the side that does not have to maneuver much. In this case, Hitler hoped that the dense fog would keep Allied tactical bombers, resupply planes, and aerial reconnaissance planes grounded, delaying the discovery of the size and scope of the surprise attack and limiting any Allied reaction. In addition, Hitler likely hoped that the “friction” generated by difficult road conditions would be a relative advantage for the Germans. To counter the attack the Allies would

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<sup>58</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 27.

<sup>59</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 28.

have to shuttle supplies and reinforcements from distant positions, while the Germans would merely be uncoiling from their concentration in the forests of the Schnee Eifel. Unfortunately for Hitler, the combined “friction” of American small unit’s heroic defense at key junctions and the weather slowed the initial assault sufficiently to preclude any chance of the German forces recapturing Antwerp.

### ***German Operational Secrecy***

Maintaining tight operational secrecy was another crucial factor for the effectiveness of the surprise attack. First, Hitler limited access to the plans and objectives to only those with a “need to know.” He required code clerks and generals alike to sign a pledge to guard the information or forfeit their life. Since the plot on his life from earlier that summer, Hitler falsely suspected that someone in his inner circle was betraying his plans to the Allies. For years, the Allies had successfully decoded German intercepts and read the military and diplomatic traffic of messages sent by Enigma machines. Even though he considered the Enigma machines secure, Hitler forbade any details about *Wacht Am Rhein* (the operational code name for the Ardennes attack meaning Watch on the Rhine) to be sent by telephone, telegraph, or wireless. In fact, special couriers shadowed by Gestapo agents delivered all communications to ensure no hint of the plan was compromised to the Allies.<sup>60</sup> Trevor Dupuy, a noted military historian points out, however, that this action

merely confirmed as a direct order what was already an established fact. Radio had been necessary to deliver messages to the far-flung elements of the German armed forces in the heyday of the greatest expansion of the German Reich. However, as the German fighting frontier contracted in

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<sup>60</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 40.

1944 to the old prewar boundaries, there was less need for radio transmissions.<sup>61</sup>

Still, ULTRA intercepts were deemed vital by the Allies and Hitler prevented the Allies from reinforcing the Ardennes by his attention to communication security.

The attention to operational security for *Wacht Am Rhein* went well beyond communications issues. The German Army's attention to detail was incredible as Elstob notes that

only the guns that had been in the line for a long time were allowed to fire and even they on a reduced scale to lend credence to the idea that the Germans were very low on ammunition. Radio communication was kept going at exactly the same rate as last month and patrolling was kept down to a minimum. At the same time further north, where the attack was supposed to be going in, artillery fire and wireless communication was greatly stepped up, civilians were openly evacuated and a 'ghost army', the Twenty-fifth, was created with radio traffic, movements orders and all the paraphernalia of a new army.<sup>62</sup>

Naturally, soldiers in the divisions assembling for the attack were only told of their mission on the night before the attack but generals commanding corps had only two weeks notice and division commanders were informed merely 5 days before *null tag* (zero day).<sup>63</sup> Troops were marched into position at night and permitted only charcoal fires. Similarly, Germany transported heavy equipment and supplies over the rail lines during periods of darkness. If these trains were forced off schedule the engineers hid in tunnels during the day to evade detection by Allied reconnaissance.<sup>64</sup> As the tanks and self-propelled guns approached the front lines, the Wehrmacht covered the roads with straw and flew planes at low altitude over Allied positions in an attempt to mask the

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<sup>61</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler's Last Gamble* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 36-37.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler's Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 48.

<sup>63</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 47.

<sup>64</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 46.

noise.<sup>65</sup> Special security detachments prevented anyone from violating the camouflage discipline. Furthermore, during the last three days of the deployment at distances of 12, 6, and 2 miles from the line, respectively, special attention was paid to the men from Alsace to keep them from escaping and telling the enemy – only the most trusted veterans were used for patrols.<sup>66</sup> In fact, only five men deserted from the German forces on the Western Front during the first two weeks of December.<sup>67</sup> Finally, for the pre-dawn attack itself the Germans opted to use either short, but fierce artillery bombardments or the infiltration of small groups of shock troops to achieve the initial penetration of the Allied lines. Moreover, these units were aided by artificial light created by bouncing searchlights off of low clouds.<sup>68</sup>

### ***German Deceptions***

Preparations for the surprise attack also included deception operations to enhance its possibility for success. First, to belie the aggressive nature of the build-up in the Schnee Eifel, Hitler named the operation *Wacht Am Rhein* (meaning Watch on the Rhine). In the event of inadvertent discovery, the defensive connotation of the name was designed to help persuade foreign intelligence officers that the German forces were preparing for the coming Allied attack into Germany, rather than preparing for a major armored thrust to Antwerp.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, most official communications concerning the

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<sup>65</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 48.

<sup>66</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 48.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler's Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 102. Bizarrely, when Hitler asked von Manteuffel how he knew there would be low cloud cover, he responded that “You have already decided there will be bad weather.”

<sup>69</sup> Later this name was changed to *Herbstnebel* (meaning Autumn Mist). This code name is also non-threatening and perhaps an allusion to the fog cover Hitler hoped would keep Allied planes grounded.

buildup of the 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army began with the phrase “in preparation for the anticipated enemy offensive” to prey upon Allied preconceptions about German intentions.<sup>70</sup>

To further mislead Allied perceptions of German intentions, Hitler named Gerd von Rundstedt to command the Western Front. Von Rundstedt was an old, venerable Prussian soldier well-versed in the tenets of accepted military doctrine. This appointment was designed to make Germans and Allied forces alike believe that Hitler was committed to a grinding war of defensive attrition. Hitler secretly named Generals Model and von Manteuffel to command the operational forces of Wacht Am Rhein in their drive to Antwerp. This deception is similar to the one practiced by the Allies when they fabricated General Patton a fictitious army in England to deceive the Germans into thinking that Operation Overlord would come ashore at Pas de Calais.

Finally, for the last piece of the deception operation Hitler turned to SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny. Skorzeny was named to command Operation Greif and was tasked with seizing key bridges over the Meuse River, cutting lines of communication, and generally sowing confusion to increase “friction” in the rear of the Allied forces. To this end the Skorzeny requisitioned English-speaking volunteers, uniforms, equipment and vehicles to conduct operations behind enemy lines. Stephen Ambrose, a military historian, notes that

Throughout the Bulge, those 500 or so volunteers in American uniforms were having an impact beyond their numbers. They turned signposts, causing great confusion. They spread panic. Once it was known that the Skorzeny battalion was behind the lines, the word went out with amazing speed – trust no one. The GIs, especially the MPs, questioned everyone, right up to Bradley – who plays center field for the Yankees? Who is Mickey Mouse’s wife? What is the capital of Illinois? General Bradley was detained for answering Springfield to the last question; the MP

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<sup>70</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 40.



insisted it was Chicago. One general was arrested and held for a few hours because he put the Chicago Cubs in the American League.<sup>71</sup>

Although this Operation Greif (Condor) was effective at sowing confusion, it ultimately failed to secure vital bridges and Allied supply dumps needed for the Sixth Army's Panzer divisions to cross the Meuse River.

### ***German Security and Deception Failures***

Despite extraordinary operational security measures and careful attention to deception plans, there were a handful of mistakes that should have alerted SHAEF to the possibility of a German operations. First, on September 4<sup>th</sup> Hitler informed Baron Hiroshi Oshima, the Japanese ambassador, that he intended to open a large scale offensive in the West after the beginning of November. In and of itself, this is somewhat surprising given how closely he appeared to hold this information within his own military. On the other hand, Hitler was likely highly conscious of the setbacks inflicted upon the Third Reich in the Eastern and Western Fronts as well as Italy within the last year. Given his personality it is likely that he informed his allies both to reassure and impress them with his ability to mount a major operation. Oshima dutifully reported this information to the Japanese government as well as a subsequent conversation on November 15<sup>th</sup> confirming Hitler's intention to launch an assault on the Western Front to his government.<sup>72</sup> Under the classified MAGIC program, the United States had been decrypting Japanese intercepts since before the start of the war. Both messages from

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 219.

<sup>72</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 24-25, 48-49. Indeed, the only benefit of the intercepts may have been to help Eisenhower identify the counteroffensive for what it was, rather than a spoiling counterattack against Allied concentrations in Aachen.

Oshima were soon received and decoded but inexplicably neither had any appreciable effect on the SHAEF planning for the front.

The Germans also let slip another small detail concerning operation *Wacht Am Rhein*. In their zeal to recruit volunteers for Skorzeny's Operation Greif the German command staff requested English-speaking personnel, Allied uniforms and equipment for "Secret Commando Operations" from all divisions on the Western Front.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Skorzeny felt that Greif should be cancelled and after the war noted that

This order was subsequently to appear as a most wonderful example of blundering in so far as the secrecy of the operation [Wacht Am Rhein] was concerned – an example of blundering by the Supreme Authority of the German Army...I flew into a towering rage. Incontestably the Allied secret service would get wind of this affair. After the war, I learned that less than a week later the Americans were in possession of this order. I never understood why they drew no conclusions from it and why they failed to take certain precautions at the time.<sup>74</sup>

Within weeks the Allied forces had obtained a copy of this order and should have determined that this sort of commando operation must be offensive in nature. Still, no additional Allied reconnaissance or intelligence assets were devoted to probing this issue.

Nevertheless, through high operational security, Allied preconceptions, and luck, Hitler and the Germans managed to prevent the Allies from discovering both their intentions and their reconstituted force until it was too late.

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<sup>73</sup> Much has been made of Skorzeny's "150 Brigade", the special operations brigade, but he admits that he was only able to obtain 10 sailors fluent in English, and about 150 who could make themselves understood. The rest of his 3,000 odd men command would have to act as deaf mutes. Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Secret Missions*, trans. Jacques Le Clercq (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc.; 1950) 224, 228-229.

<sup>74</sup> Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Secret Missions*, trans. Jacques Le Clercq (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc.; 1950), 224-225.

## *Allied Intelligence Failures*

The German surprise attack through the Ardennes was clearly a significant Allied intelligence failure. Despite the operational secrecy and deception operations, it should never have been possible for Hitler to assemble 20 divisions in the Schnee Eifel and launch an attack of that magnitude without some kind of warning. In retrospect, the Allies had sufficient intelligence (e.g. signal intercepts, local reports, and changing order of battle information) to avoid being caught completely flat-footed. Admittedly, it is easy to sift evidence through the filter of hindsight. Yet it seems clear that with what little facts which were available that something was amiss and that more intelligence should be collected and analyzed. Tactically, the Allies lacked aerial reconnaissance, human intelligence sources in Germany, relied too heavily upon ULTRA intercepts, and generally conducted too little all-source analysis. Structurally, there was poor interfacing both up and down the chain of command from SHAEF to the platoons on the front line as well as between the various army groups in the sector. The biggest problem, however, was the perception that the Germans were beaten and that it was only a matter of time before they crumbled in defeat. Trevor Dupuy, the historian, laments that “Unfortunately, in the euphoric aftermath of the successful drive across France and the stunning Soviet victories in the east, Allied intelligence predicated all their estimates on the expected early collapse of the German war effort.”<sup>75</sup>

Poor weather during the fall limited the number of aerial reconnaissance missions to only a few hundred. What few missions that were not scrubbed because of fog focused on the sector of the Hurtgen Forest and the German positions across the Roer River

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<sup>75</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler's Last Gamble* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 40.

adjacent Aachen, in preparation for the coming Allied offensive. Even though the Eifel region was frequently requested, pilots often chose to survey higher priority areas while the weather held. Unfortunately, the Allies had been successfully deceived into believing that Hitler was creating the 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army as a mobile reserve near Cologne to counter Allied forces in the north. Indeed, during the last five days leading up to the attack only three missions were flown over the Schnee Eifel.<sup>76</sup> The pilot of one of these missions was surprised to encounter heavy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) in this supposedly quiet sector.<sup>77</sup> There is no indication that his report had any impact on warning or operations in the Ardennes.

What had heretofore been a useful source of information for intelligence officers – namely spies and informants in France and Belgium – suddenly dried up as Allied forces entered Germany proper. Major General Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower’s Chief of Intelligence noted that

It was not a simple matter to estimate German capabilities and intentions at this time. The excellent sources of Intelligence from which we had profited in France and Belgium were no longer available. There we had a generally sympathetic population and people who, often at great risk to themselves, told us much about the Germans, sometimes using messengers from the Resistance groups, sometimes using shortwave wireless sets.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was largely excluded from running agents in Germany by Army intelligence officers. Worse, most Germans were still loyal to the Fuhrer or at least to their family members fighting for the Third Reich. Initially, there was little love was lost between American soldiers and German townspeople.

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<sup>76</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 56.

<sup>77</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 181.

<sup>78</sup> Major General Sir Kenneth Strong, *Intelligence at the Top: The Recollections of an Intelligence Officer* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd; 1968), 154.

Consequently, Allied soldiers were no longer to obtain reliable intelligence on local German troop movements or intentions.

The lack of human intelligence placed even greater *de facto* reliance upon ULTRA intercepts. Unfortunately, for the Allies two factors limited the usefulness of messages decrypted at Bletchley Park during the fall of 1944. First, the Germans were now back in their own country where they could rely more or less upon secure telephone exchanges to a much greater degree than when during the occupation of France. Second, Hitler's intuition to prevent any detail of the *Wacht Am Rhein* operation from being transmitted electrically was prescient. But the problem was even more pervasive than simply losing the intelligence. Trevor Dupuy eloquently summarizes this dilemma when he writes that

The Allies' reliance on ULTRA had infected the high-command intelligence staffs (direct ULTRA information was not disseminated below the level of field army), with a pervading sense of complacency. The older means of intelligence gathering were not only less depended on but considered to be less dependable. Unfortunately, to a great extent the lack (or apparent lack) of data on German capabilities and intentions was interpreted as a loss of strength on the part of the Germans rather than a loss of information on the Allies.<sup>79</sup>

After becoming accustomed to the depth and quality of the message traffic delivered by ULTRA in the preceding years, the military leadership was blindsided by the attack in the Ardennes because no mention of it had been made in the German wireless military traffic. Despite this, it does seem that Eisenhower quickly realized that the attack was a large counteroffensive rather than the spoiling attack the General Bradley believed it to

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<sup>79</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bognard, and Richard C. Anderson, Jr. *Hitler's Last Gamble* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers; 1994), 38.

be.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps this could be attributed to Ike's knowledge of the MAGIC intercepts of the Japanese or simply a greater perception of the enemy's intentions.

Other signs of German interest in and around the Ardennes were also ignored or misunderstood. For example, intelligence officers throughout the Allied commands failed to attribute particular importance to increasing German requests for low level reconnaissance over the Ardennes or desperate pleas to maintain the rigid train schedules into the Eifel region.<sup>81</sup> While taken separately these intercepts could have been attributed to defensive preparations for the upcoming Allied attack, but taken in conjunction with the captured order seeking English-speaking volunteers for commando operations it seems that this should have raised suspicions. Greater attention to all-source analysis (e.g. signal, human intelligence, aerial reconnaissance and armed reconnaissance) could have made a substantial difference in reducing the element of surprise and minimizing losses during the Battle of the Bulge.

While a myriad of intelligence problems existed within the Allied Expeditionary Force, there was little recognition of that fact and less impetus to rectify the situation. Unfortunately, most of the ranking intelligence officers concurred with the assessment that Germany was on its last legs. In late August (nearly two and a half months before the Battle of the Bulge), Eisenhower's G-2, Major General Kenneth W. D. Strong, asserted that after "two and a half months of bitter fighting, culminating for the Germans in a blood-bath big enough even for their extravagant tastes, have brought the end of the war in Europe within sight, almost within reach."<sup>82</sup> Just days before the Germans

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<sup>80</sup> Charles MacDonal, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 185.

<sup>81</sup> Charles MacDonal, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 65-66.

<sup>82</sup> Charles MacDonal, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 51.

assaulted the Ardennes, Brigadier General Edwin L. Sibert, 12<sup>th</sup> Army's G-2, believed that "it is now certain that attrition is steadily sapping the strength of German forces on the western front and that the crust of defenses is thinner, more brittle and more vulnerable than it appears on G-2 maps or to troops in the line."<sup>83</sup> Nor was the underestimation limited to American intelligence officers. Brigadier E.T. Williams, General Montgomery's G-2, asserted around this same time that "the enemy is in a bad way...his situation is such that he cannot stage a major offensive operation."<sup>84</sup> Ironically, on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the day of the attack, General Montgomery, wrote that

The enemy is at present fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations. Furthermore, at all costs he has to prevent the war from entering a mobile phase; he has not the support or the petrol that would be necessary for mobile operations, nor could his tanks compete with ours in the mobile battle.<sup>85</sup>

In the end game, perhaps these estimates could be considered accurate since the Sixth Panzer Army was never able to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Allied intelligence and leadership vastly overestimated the weakness of the Third Reich.

There were only two senior intelligence officers who appeared to recognize the danger. The first was General Patton's G-2, Col. Koch. By December 10<sup>th</sup>, Koch believed that if von Rundstedt was pulling Panzer divisions out of the line when the German forces were so hard-pressed in both the north and south that the Germans must be planning a counter-attack to blunt the Allied blow against *Festung Deutschland* (Fortress Germany).<sup>86</sup> This briefing convinced Patton's staff to conduct contingency

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<sup>83</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 53.

<sup>84</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 53.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler's Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 207-208.

<sup>86</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 69.

planning to prepare to respond to attacks from the Ardennes, which later allowed the Third Army to turn north into the shoulder of the Bulge in just a few days. Col. “Monk” Dickson of the First Army, seemed to believe that the German threat in the Ardennes was real. In estimate No. 37, issued by Dickson in December of 1944 he warned that the enemy was husbanding resources and that morale was very high, both somewhat atypical for German forces in this area at this stage of the war – potentially indicating an attack in the Ardennes.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, Dickson did not get along personally or professionally with Sibert of the First Army and consequently there was little communication between the commands. Moreover, Dickson had such a reputation as a pessimist that whenever units disappeared from the order of battle in different sectors he would include them in his own estimates often without evidence. This threat inflation was commonly referred to as “Monk’s Shrubbery,” and certainly reduced the credibility of his hunch about the Ardennes in 1944. Even though Dickson was later proved correct about the coming Battle of the Bulge he failed as an intelligence officer to provide his command or SHAEF timely, accurate, and persuasive evidence for his beliefs.

Amongst the units facing the coming assault, it is astounding that Dickson stood virtually alone in providing warning. In an obvious case of “mirror-imaging” – having expectations about another’s actions based on what you would do in the same situation – the Allied generals and intelligence officers did not foresee the coming attack because they deemed the terrain and weather too difficult. Elstob correctly asserts that

There were many reasons why such an offensive was not considered feasible: the terrain and the weather seemed to make large-scale armoured movement impossible, such an advance between heavy Allied concentrations in the north and the south would leave a vacuum behind it which these forces could rapidly fill, and lastly all intelligence reports

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<sup>87</sup> Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets* (New York: Perennial; 1985), 70-71.



indicated that Germany did not have the tanks, guns, planes, ammunition or men for anything but limited attacks.<sup>88</sup>

Kenneth Strong, head of SHAEF intelligence, agreed when he wrote that he based his “estimate of German capabilities partly on the number of divisions we thought they had available and their lack of equipment and poor training, and partly on the general German logistical weakness, including the shortage of fuel for tanks.”<sup>89</sup> Thus, following the prevailing view, Allied intelligence officers had no clear intelligence signal that the Germans had the remaining military ability to launch a counteroffensive of 20-30 divisions. Indeed, every Allied soldier from Eisenhower to the green private from the Replacement Depot believed that “the German troops facing us were of low quality and seemed to be of the opinion that if we didn’t bother them, they would leave us alone.”<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately, this was not to be the case.

## ***Conclusion***

Ultimately, the Germans failed to achieve their triumvirate of goals – to recapture Antwerp, destroy the British, Canadian and American armies in the north, and force a separate peace upon the Allies on the Western Front. Contributing factors to its defeat include the challenging terrain, the cold, wet weather, mud, insufficient supplies of gasoline and ammunition, too few tanks, not enough experienced soldiers. These frictions became increasingly severe until the attack ground to halt before the banks of the Meuse River. Admittedly, each of these reasons were recognized and understood by

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<sup>88</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler’s Last Offensive* (New York: The MacMillan Company; 1971), 46.

<sup>89</sup> Major General Sir Kenneth Strong, *Intelligence at the Top: The Recollections of an Intelligence Officer* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd; 1968), 155.

<sup>90</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 187.

the Allies which is why they never believed the Third Reich would risk so much on such a reckless gamble.

On the other hand, it was not the weather or the terrain that destroyed the German Panzer divisions. Small American forces fought tenacious delaying battles, wrecking German timetables and buying time for some forces to escape and others to move into blocking positions. Eisenhower also recognized the attack for what it was early in the fight – a major counteroffensive. He quickly responded by ordering the 101<sup>st</sup> and units from the 10<sup>th</sup> Armor to Bastogne, the 82<sup>nd</sup> to the north as a reserve, Patton's Army to attack the southern flank, and temporarily granted the British General Montgomery control of the American First and Ninth Army. Hitler had counted upon confusion and delay as Eisenhower sought political guidance and permissions to respond. Moreover, Hitler did not understand the enormous logistics capabilities of the Allies and the Red Ball Express. Of this Allied advantage, Ambrose writes

On December 17<sup>th</sup> alone, 11,000 trucks carried 60,000 men, plus ammunition, gasoline, medical supplies, and other materiel into the Ardennes. In the first week of the battle, Eisenhower was able to move 250,000 men and 50,000 vehicles into the fray. This was mobility with a vengeance.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, the cold weather and fog which so hampered early Allied efforts at aerial reconnaissance, resupply and interdiction could not last forever. When the weather finally cleared German movements and positions were no longer screened by fog. Allied air interdiction was finally able to harass and destroy the remnants of the Hitler's last strategic reserve – wasted in a desperate gamble in the Ardennes.

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 201.

Despite these obstacles the course of the Battle of the Bulge and the war on the Western Front remains a disputed counterfactual question. Had the Germans crossed the Meuse River in the first few days and seized Antwerp in the first 2 weeks the shape of history might look quite different. Nor was this outside the realm of possibility. For the first two weeks, Allied forces suffered serious setbacks and high unit casualties. Fortunately, enough of a tactical force remained effective to blunt and slow the advancing German columns.

Let us then return to the original question concerning what allowed this near catastrophe to occur. Was Germany secrecy and deception so good that the Allies could not have discovered the activities in the Schnee Eifel? Or did Allied commanders and intelligence officers blind themselves to the remaining capabilities and will of the Third Reich's war machine? After reviewing the Battle of the Bulge the answer seems to be more the latter than the former. The Allies did not see the attack coming because they did not look for an impending attack or the signals that might threaten such an action. Nor can their inaction be attributed solely to their dependence on ULTRA intercepts. Although it is true that the Allies relied heavily on ULTRA messages to guide their strategy, they simply failed to collect sufficient intelligence or interpret the information they did have correctly. More simply put, the Allies did not anticipate the Battle of the Bulge because a German counteroffensive seemed beyond the realm of reasonable possibility.

In the fall of 1944 the Allied Expeditionary Force failed to detect the buildup of the 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army across its front and reinforce these undermanned sector. The Allies did not actively seek appropriate intelligence on their enemy's disposition and intentions

and misread the intelligence they did manage to collect. This lapse, in turn, was encouraged by the Germans who did everything in their power to leave the Allies with their misperceptions. Admittedly, better intelligence would not have prevented the attack, but the Ardennes region could have been reinforced and units along the line arrayed in a manner to create a greater defensive depth to blunt the force of the German attack. It seems clear now, that had the Allies had been examining their enemy closely and interfacing with the various commands across the front, that they would have been more guarded in their disposition.

Thus, the lesson from the Battle of the Bulge is that in moments of an adversary's weakness is when one should be most wary. Given Hitler's personality and his past actions when weak (including Austria, Czechoslovakia, and France) the Allies should have expected a last ditch gamble. Even Churchill believed that "madness...is an affliction which in war carries with it the advantage of surprise."<sup>92</sup>

The Battle of the Bulge is instructive for the bitter lessons the Allies had to learn. First, do not rely upon a single source of intelligence no matter how valuable. By using all sources a more complete and credible picture can be assembled. In this case, the Allied reliance upon ULTRA was a serious failing. Intelligence must be coordinated and communicated not just within individual collection units but across them all. In this manner everyone can see the puzzle become clearer as the pieces are assembled. Intelligence units need personnel to generate accurate, timely, and persuasive estimates so that commanders have time to react appropriately. For example, Dickson, the only

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<sup>92</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Aftermath, 1918-1928* (New York: Scribner's 1929), 603 as noted in Barton Whaley, *Strategem: Deception and Surprise in War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, Center for International Studies; 1969), 133.

officer, to guess the danger lurking in the forests of Schnee Eifel was not believed because he constantly inflated the threat in his reports. Lastly, it must be reiterated that one should never cease to be wary of an enemy even when he appears close to defeat, because recovering from a surprise attack is a costly and uncertain endeavor. Musing on the difficulties of executing a surprise attack, Clausewitz notes, “The enemy force can never assemble and advance so secretly that the defender’s first news of it would come from his outposts. If that were to happen, one could only feel very sorry for him...”<sup>93</sup> One can only wonder what he would have thought of the operational surprise attack on the Allied forces in the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge.

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<sup>93</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 454.

## CHAPTER III

### Blinded by Hubris: The Chinese Counterattack in the Korean War

The wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.<sup>94</sup>

- General Omar Bradley

This second case study examines the Chinese counterattack against the U.N. forces fighting in North Korea. Many theorists improperly consider the Chinese attack across the Yalu River to be a strategic surprise attack. Instead, 8<sup>th</sup> Army, X Corps, and Republic of Korea (ROK) units suffered from a skillfully executed operational surprise attack, albeit with significant strategic ramifications. The argument is not one of scale. Certainly, the introduction of several hundred thousand Chinese combat troops into North Korea places it squarely within the realm of operational or strategic surprise, rather than tactical surprise. Critics will argue that Communist China was not previously directly engaged in hostilities on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, the Congress of the United States had not officially declared war. Instead the Truman administration had led the U.N. to initiate a “police action” to end the aggression of North Korea and restore peace to South Korea.

The reality of the situation, however, was that U.S. and U.N. forces were fighting a limited war against North Korean communist forces. The entrance of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) did not open a new front or theater in the war; nor did the Chinese attack across an international border. Their troops hid in the mountains of North

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<sup>94</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 612.

Korea and struck and enveloped U.N. columns after they had advanced past their positions. Thus, the Chinese merely supplied additional troops and aid to a beleaguered ally and fought from within that ally's own territory. Because the U.S. was already at war in that theater, indeed the same theater of operations, the Chinese intervention must be considered an operational surprise attack.

Returning then to the focus of this analysis, the real question is not whether an operational surprise occurred in the highlands of North Korea, but how did the U.S. and U.N. forces fail to predict the intervention of hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops into Korea? Did terrain and weather play a critical role in blinding the U.N. reconnaissance? Were these veterans of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) particularly adept at maintaining operational secrecy? Did the Chinese government use feint or deceptions to lead the U.N. forces to believe they would refrain from attack or attack in a different location? Or did the U.N. and U.S. intelligence simply fail to accurately forecast the intentions and capabilities of the Chinese Communists and, if so, why?

The following sections summarize the Chinese intervention and analyze the relative importance of terrain, weather, operational secrecy, strategic deception, and intelligence failure to its success. Not surprisingly, each of these factors contributed to the success of the Chinese surprise attacks. Critical, however, was the failure of U.S. intelligence to understand Chinese motivation and intentions in the region or subsequently to detect Chinese infiltration into North Korea.

### ***“Unexpected Developments”: Chinese Counterattack in the Korean War***

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, North Korean forces under the communist leadership of Kim Il Sung launched a strategic surprise attack against South Korea. Despite months of border incursions and warnings from intelligence and diplomatic officers, both South Korea and the United States were unprepared for the onslaught of men and Soviet-supplied armor. Seoul, the South Korean capital, quickly fell and South Korean army resistance crumbled. U.S. and U.N. forces were eventually pushed into a small corner of the peninsula called the Pusan Perimeter. The situation was a stalemate; the North Koreans could not force the American forces to withdraw but for them to break out of the bridgehead would have been extremely costly.

As a result, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the U.N. force, conceived and executed a brilliant amphibious landing well behind enemy lines. The landing was so risky that MacArthur had to defend his plan by arguing that it was likely to succeed because “the enemy commander will reason that no one would be so brash as to make such an attempt... Surprise is the most vital element for success in war.”<sup>95</sup> Ironically, MacArthur understood and valued the element of surprise yet did little to protect his forces from suffering from it during their drive to the Yalu. Nevertheless, the operational surprise attack at Inchon was a staggering success. American troops cut North Korean supply lines and narrowly missed the envelopment and destruction of the entire North Korean force. Yet, even in the hour of his success, the specter of Chinese intervention caused MacArthur to inquire, “Have we seen or heard anything of the Russians or Chinese?”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 575.

<sup>96</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 115.



MacArthur was right to worry. Until Inchon, the Chinese and Soviets were content to let the North Koreans engage the South Korean and U.S. military forces while providing supplies and avoiding direct confrontation. When the North Korean army collapsed it quickly became apparent that the U.S.-led coalition might drive to the border of Manchuria and unite the Korean peninsula under a pro-U.S. government. Apart from losing a friendly communist government on its border, the Chinese also valued the hydropower generated in the reservoirs and rivers around the Yalu for industrial production.<sup>97</sup> Mao Zedong and the Chinese Politburo also believed that a confrontation with the United States was inevitable, particularly over the fate of Taiwan. Mao decided he could make a better case for intervention if China's territorial safety was directly threatened by the Americans troops.<sup>98</sup> Upon learning that the North Koreans had suffered about 40 percent losses (equivalent to 50,000 men killed) the Chinese felt that they had to intervene.<sup>99</sup> General Nie Rongzhen, the commander of the North China Field Army, perhaps most colorfully expressed the motivation for aiding Kim Il Sung's failing regime by noting that "when the lips are destroyed, the teeth feel cold."<sup>100</sup> Thus, with the North Korean army in disarray, China began to prepare for the possibility of war in North Korea while simultaneously warning the United States of the consequences of approaching Manchuria.

Even though the Chinese did make public pronouncements warning the U.S. not to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, these were dismissed by the Truman administration as "bluffs"

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<sup>97</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 40.

<sup>98</sup> Chen Jing, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press; 1993), 153-156.

<sup>99</sup> Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War 1950-53* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc.; 2000), 73.

<sup>100</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 127.

or “blackmail.” Evidence of the warnings is covered in greater detail in a subsequent section. As history has shown, the Chinese were willing to fight a war with the Americans to make the point that it was no longer the “sick man of Asia.” Indeed, the Chinese General Peng described the strategy as a “limited intervention in Korea, [to] inflict a quick defeat on the Americans, make them reconsider their policies and force their withdrawal. If this ploy [of limited intervention] should fail, then launch a full-scale offensive against the United Nations.”<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, when the Chinese did not follow up on their initial successes the U.S. commanders attributed their action to weakness and a reluctance to fight.

Given the possibility that the Chinese were willing to engage a smaller, but more modern and heavily armed force, MacArthur should have expected them to utilize tactics similar to those previously employed against the Chinese Nationalists. In fact, had anyone bothered to read Mao’s treatise *On Protracted War* published in 1938, they would have seen a blueprint for the initial counteroffensive against the U.N. forces. Mao argued that

Our strategy should be to employ our main forces in mobile warfare over an extended, shifting, and indefinite front, a strategy depending for success on a high degree of mobility in difficult terrain, and featured by the swift attack and withdrawal, swift concentration and dispersal. It will be a large-scale war of movement rather than a positional war depending exclusively on defensive works with deep trenches, high fortresses, and successive defensive positions... We must avoid great decisive battles in the early stages of the war, and must first employ mobile warfare gradually to break the morale, the fighting spirit, and the military efficiency of the living forces of the enemy.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War 1950-53* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc.; 2000), 74.

<sup>102</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 46.

Mao also acknowledged that “we have always advocated the policy of luring the enemy to penetrate deep because this is the most effective policy for a weak army in strategic defense against a strong army.”<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, by dividing his forces into two pincers and sending them into the North Korean hills MacArthur inadvertently leaned into the Chinese punch.

Even given the lack of intelligence on Chinese intervention, it is odd that MacArthur did not act with more caution. Supposedly, he was aware that when the Japanese crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel in 1904 a Russian government had made it a *casus belli*.<sup>104</sup> History should have sensitized him to the psychological importance of this latitudinal boundary. Moreover, his orders from the Joint Chiefs of Staff repeatedly stressed the need to avoid Chinese and Soviet intervention. For example, on September 11 after the landing at Inchon they wrote that “if there was no ‘indication or threat’ of intervention by Peking or Moscow, he was then “to extend his operations north of the Parallel and to make plans for the occupation of North Korea.”<sup>105</sup> And later the JCS reemphasized that MacArthur’s

military objective is the destruction of the North Korean armed forces. In attaining this objective you are authorized to conduct military operations...north of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel in Korea, ***provided that at the time of the operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.*** Under no circumstances, however, will your forces cross the Manchurian or USSR borders of Korea and, as a matter of policy, no non-Korean ground forces will be used in the northeast provinces bordering the Soviet Union or in the area along the Manchurian border.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 40.

<sup>104</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 583.

<sup>105</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 583.

<sup>106</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 12. (emphasis added).

MacArthur, however, believed that the Chinese were unwilling or incapable of effectively intervening after his landing at Inchon. Since he felt that “Korea was Mars’ last gift to an old warrior,” it seems that MacArthur felt he could silence his critics and burnish his career with one more resounding victory.<sup>107</sup> Thus, on November 24<sup>th</sup> he ordered one last “massive compression envelopment” which, if successful, “for all practical purposes end the war.”<sup>108</sup> Sadly, his attempt to get his troops home by Christmas failed.

In fact, by the third week of November the Chinese had assembled a massive force to counter MacArthur’s men. One historian summarizes the situation as follows:

In front of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in the west was the XIII Army Group of the Chinese Fourth Field Army. This comprised eighteen infantry divisions of some 180,000 men. Concentrated before X Corps in the east was IX Army Group of the Chinese Third Field Army, with twelve infantry divisions of about 120,000 men. In addition to this force of at least 300,000 Chinese, twelve divisions of the North Korean Army, numbering about 65,800 men had recovered sufficiently to be fit to reenter combat. And about 40,000 guerillas were operating behind the U.N. Command.<sup>109</sup>

Just days after the UN forces began the envelopment offensive to end the war, the Chinese Communist Forces attacked in strength, ending any hopes of reaching the Yalu by Christmas. In a single stroke, “the war was transformed from a police action against an obscure and weak government to a conflict with the most populous nation in the world and the second-ranking communist power.”<sup>110</sup> Despite being badly mauled, the UN

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<sup>107</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 15.

<sup>108</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 101.

<sup>109</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 90.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), p. 56.

forces were able to conduct a fighting retreat out of the mountains.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, after years of additional fighting the battle lines would stabilize again at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and on July 27, 1953 the armistice formalizing the Demilitarized Zone would be signed.

Now let us examine the elements of operational surprise that may have contributed to the defeat inflicted on the U.N. forces in North Korea, including terrain and weather, strategic deception, operational secrecy and tactical deception, and intelligence failure.

### ***Terrain and Weather in North Korea***

Two elements that contributed to the operational surprise in North Korea were the inhospitable terrain and bitter weather of the Korean winter. The Chinese capitalized on the advantage that the topography offered their soldiers. One MacArthur biographer notes that in North Korea:

The hills in fact seem interminable. They are also dun-colored, granitic, steep, and speckled here and there with boulders, scrub oaks, and stunted firs... The hillsides are gouged with thousands of dells and gorges, many deep enough to conceal battalions of troops. It is ideal terrain for guerilla fighting.<sup>112</sup>

Certainly, at the start of the campaign the hills and valleys kept the Chinese Communist Forces well hidden from the ROK and U.N. forces as they drove north to the Yalu River.

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<sup>111</sup> This example is noteworthy because it contradicts the widely held view that the surprised country will suffer much higher casualties than its attacker. Although it was the UN/US forces that were surprised the Chinese bore the brunt of the casualties. Records indicate that the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division had incurred 4,418 battle casualties (604 killed, 114 dead from wounds, 192 missing, and 3,508 wounded), while captured Chinese documents indicate they suffered 37,500 casualties (15,000 killed and 7,500 wounded by the Marine ground forces, plus 10,000 killed and 7,500 wounded by air operation). In this case, air superiority and better weapons allowed the surprised entity to inflict very heavy casualties on its attacker. Note these numbers are from Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books; 1982), 381.

<sup>112</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 545.

Although it is difficult to find Chinese statements commenting on their use of terrain, its importance to the Chinese can be inferred by their choice of ambush location. Fighting in the flat, coastal areas would have enabled the American and U.N. forces much greater use of their mobile supply lines, armor, and tactical room to maneuver. In the mountains the soldiers and marines were often forced to secure the ridgelines on both sides of a single, narrow road and fight through roadblocks and ambushes during their retreat to the coast. This style of fighting limited the amount of firepower the American forces could bring to bear against the Chinese and made the effective use of artillery particularly difficult. Additionally, the central spine of mountains induced MacArthur separate the X Corps and 8<sup>th</sup> Army and attempt a double envelopment of the remnants of the North Korean force. This division left the flanks of both columns exposed in the towering mountains and meant that neither force was able to reinforce the other or even communicate by radio.<sup>113</sup>

Aside from the benefits to surprise of attacking the American and U.N. forces in the Korean highlands the Chinese had three other strategic reasons for this location. First, they were protecting an important source of electricity. As James McGovern notes

Electricity generated at many dams and reservoirs on the Yalu and its tributaries provided the basic supply of power for North Korean and Manchurian mining and manufacturing. Manchuria had the richest agricultural resources in China and was that country's most highly developed industrial region, largely as the result of the Japanese occupation from 1931 to 1945. For these practical reasons, Peking might well be concerned about an advance of foreign armies toward the Yalu River.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War 1950-53* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc.; 2000), 85-86.

<sup>114</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 40.

Some of these critical power generation stations were located near the Chosin and Fujan Reservoirs in North Korea. Second, the Yalu River flows between Chinese and North Korea border for five hundred miles through a “gorgelike channel rimmed by high mountains, before emptying into the Yellow Sea.”<sup>115</sup> Had MacArthur’s forces managed to reach the Yalu River, the Chinese would have had a challenging time attacking against these well-defended heights. Lastly, the Chinese Politburo believed that since a confrontation between the U.S. and China was inevitable, Korea was a more advantageous battlefield than either Vietnam or Taiwan because of its proximity to Manchuria and its topography.<sup>116</sup>

Along with the terrain, the bitterly cold weather may have enhanced the effectiveness of the Chinese counteroffensive in North Korea. Fresh snowfall would often conceal evidence of Chinese movement from the little aerial reconnaissance the U.N. forces employed. At night temperatures could easily drop to negative tens of degrees and soldiers on both sides suffered from frostbite, exposed skin instantly freezing to metal, malfunctioning weapons, and, for the U.N., difficulty in keeping vehicles operational. In fact, neither side was properly equipped with cold weather gear for winter combat. While stories abound of U.N. soldiers struggling to deal with the incessant cold, the Chinese soldiers were no better off. In fact, Russell Spurr describes the horror that Chinese reinforcements witnessed in the North Korea hills when he writes that

Whole platoons appeared to have perished, squatting in squad order, rifles on shoulders, kitbags on backs, all snow-sheathed, terrible. Gangs of coolies had frozen to death, pressed down by their heavy A-frames, and

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<sup>115</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 40.

<sup>116</sup> Michael M. Sheng, *Korea and World Affairs*, Vol. XIX, No., 2, Summer 1995, University of Missouri, Research Center for the Peace and Unification of Korea; 5 of the internet version. As seen in Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 126.

there were smatterings of North Korean refugees, women and children mostly, heaped hopelessly together in search of warmth. A few old men in tall Korean hats had chosen to meet their end sitting bolt upright, hands folded in laps, like Buddhas frosted by the snow.<sup>117</sup>

Certainly, the horrific weather elevated both combat and non-combat related casualties for both sides. The snow and frigid temperatures hindered American reinforcement and logistics convoys as well as air support. On balance this was an advantage for the Chinese forces because they were both psychologically willing and physically capable of sustaining much higher casualty ratios than their American counterparts.

### ***Ominous Warnings or Strategic Deception?***

Unlike their use of secrecy and tactical deception, the Chinese counteroffensive in North Korea was preceded by almost no strategic deceptions. The Chinese Communist leadership repeatedly warned the United States and her U.N. allies in both public pronouncements and private conversations that they would not allow American forces to approach the Yalu River or the vital Manchurian industrial region that lies just beyond it. Unfortunately, MacArthur, President Truman, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, all believed that the Chinese communists were bluffing. As a result, they were completely surprised when the Chinese forces ambushed the U.N. forces. In fact, despite fierce attacks and plenty of evidence of Chinese involvement it took days for MacArthur to realize that American faced an “entirely new war.”<sup>118</sup> In retrospect, it is not surprising that the Chinese chose to warn the United States about the consequences of

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<sup>117</sup> Russell Spurr, *Enter the Dragon* (New York: Newmarket Press; 1988), 267.

<sup>118</sup> Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War 1950-53* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc.; 2000), 80.



approaching the Yalu, given their resolve to protect their interests.<sup>119</sup> What is remarkable is that American intelligence units failed to ascertain the truth of their intentions or detect their movement into Korea. The sheer size of Chinese forces in the theater might have given even the hubris-filled MacArthur pause in his drive to the Yalu.

While the Chinese warnings were explicit and persistent, they were not directly transmitted to the United States because the two countries did not have diplomatic relations. For example, a mere 10 days after the Inchon landing, Chinese General Nieh Jung-Chen informed the Indian diplomat Sardar K. Panikkar that China would not “sit back with folded hands and let the Americans come to the border... We know what we are in for, but at all costs American aggression has to be stopped.”<sup>120</sup> One week later, Chou En-lai the foreign minister noted in a speech that “the Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression, nor will they supinely tolerate seeing their neighbors being savagely invaded by imperialists.”<sup>121</sup> The following day, October 3, En-lai pledged that American intrusion into North Korea would encounter Chinese resistance.”<sup>122</sup> One week later, after ROK and U.S. units continued their drive north, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that “now that the American forces are attempting to cross the

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<sup>119</sup> The Chinese expected to endure an American blockade, the bombing of their coastal cities and perhaps even nuclear weapons. Indeed, the acting Chief of Staff of the Army, General Nieh is reported to have remarked to Ambassador Panikkar that “We have calculated all that [the bombing]... They may even drop atom bombs on us. What then? They may kill a few million people. Without sacrifice, a nation’s independence cannot be upheld... After all, China lives on farms. What can atom bombs do there?” James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 11.

<sup>120</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 135.

<sup>121</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 10.

<sup>122</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 10.

38<sup>th</sup> parallel on a large scale, the Chinese people cannot stand idly by with regard to such a serious situation created by the invasion of Korea.”<sup>123</sup>

Despite these repeated pronouncements, American leadership and intelligence believed that the Chinese were bluffing. Part of the disbelief stemmed from their use of Panikkar, an Indian diplomat who had been friendly with the communists in the past. Moreover it seemed to make little sense to commit forces to help a regime that seemed nearly destroyed. On September 10, Secretary of State Acheson noted that “I think it would be sheer madness on the part of the Chinese Communists to do that [intervene] and I see no advantage to them doing that.”<sup>124</sup> Even President Truman, who was worried about both Chinese and Russian intervention believed that Chou En-lai’s warnings were “a bald attempt to blackmail the United Nations.”<sup>125</sup> Sadly, the assessment of the American political and military leadership was wrong. The Chinese would intervene and force the military stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel that continues to this day.

It can be argued that the Chinese did make some small use of strategic deception before their surprise counterattack. First, on July 7<sup>th</sup> the Politburo ordered the formation of a “Northeast Defense Army,” perhaps suggesting that it would only be used in defense of Manchuria and not in operations supporting the North Koreans.<sup>126</sup> In reality, this army group was always intended to confront the American forces and was quickly renamed the Chinese Volunteer Army (CVA) to maintain the pretense that it was volunteers from the PLA rather than official Chinese military units. Another potential example of deception

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<sup>123</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 11.

<sup>125</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 11.

<sup>126</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 125.

occurred on October 12, 1950 when ROK troops captured 9 Chinese soldiers in poorly concealed hiding places. They claimed to be part of only 9000 other Chinese volunteers who were fighting with the North Koreans.<sup>127</sup> It is unclear whether these prisoners were ordered to surrender and then mislead the U.N. forces or simply uneducated peasant soldiers unaware of the hundreds of thousands of other Chinese soldiers in Korea. Indeed, the latter seems more likely. Still, evidence of 9,000 Chinese 'volunteers' would have been a significant addition (nearly 12%) to the badly mauled North Korean forces. Even more bizarre is the fact that there seems to have been no additional intelligence collection efforts to verify their claims or attempt to locate the Chinese forces.

Had the Chinese so desired they could have hinted about invading Taiwan. Better yet, the Chinese could have made a show of force north of the Yalu to dissuade MacArthur from continuing to drive north. Instead, they chose to repeatedly warn the American-led U.N. force about the potential consequences of their actions. When these warnings went unheeded, the Chinese responded in the most effective way available to them against a smaller but more modern military – they used surprise attacks to even the odds.

### ***Chinese Secrecy and Tactical Deceptions***

Chinese secrecy and tactical deceptions played important roles in helping them to achieve their operational surprise against MacArthur's forces. These painstaking efforts were substantially more effective because U.S. intelligence forces were not focused on Chinese operations and dismissed the piecemeal intelligence indicative of possible

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<sup>127</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 34.

operations south of the Yalu River. Nevertheless, due credit must be given to veterans of the PLA for the attention they paid to operational secrecy. First, the Chinese forces that crossed the Yalu in mid-October moved on foot, only during the night, unaccompanied by trucks or armored support.<sup>128</sup> Part of their astounding ability to move without detection was an incredibly small logistics supply line. Max Hastings notes that

A Chinese soldier required just eight to ten pounds of supplies a day, against sixty for his UN counterpart. Thus, to sustain fifty divisions in combat, Peking needed to move only 2,500 tons of supplies a day south across the Yalu. This compared with 600 tons for a single U.S. Army division, 700 tons for the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division.<sup>129</sup>

Once in Korea the CCF hid during the day in forests, caves, tunnels, farmhouses, or whatever other cover was available.<sup>130</sup> Even the Chinese uniforms helped to camouflage their units from overhead surveillance. One author notes that “their brown uniforms matched the prevailing colour of the Korea environment – brown hills, brown villages – and this made the troops difficult to detect. [Furthermore,] US reconnaissance aircraft rarely concentrated their cameras on the high ground.<sup>131</sup> Thus, by the skillful use of camouflage and cover, and avoiding areas of surveillance, the Chinese were able to slip several hundred thousand soldiers into North Korea without being detected.

Even after the initial shock of their first phase of attacks in October of 1950, the Chinese continued to use secrecy and tactical deception to great advantage. For example, they halted wireless communication to avoid detection by the U.S. intelligence units.<sup>132</sup> Admittedly, it is unclear whether the electronic emissions control was driven by a

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<sup>128</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 38.

<sup>129</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 138.

<sup>130</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 41.

<sup>131</sup> Brian Catchpole, *The Korean War 1950-53* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc.; 2000), 75.

<sup>132</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 160.

conscious decision by the Chinese military or the fact that they had very few radios. In fact, bugles and verbal commands coordinated tactical movements and attacks. On the other hand, the fact that the Chinese set forest fires in North Korea to serve as a smokescreen whenever they had to move by daylight indicates that they were well aware of the capabilities and limits of American intelligence.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, after the initial surprise they continued to use irregular tactics to deceive U.N. forces. For example, Bong Lee notes that sometimes “they even marched during daytime, pretending to be ROKs, knowing that the airplanes would not be able to tell the difference.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, through secrecy, camouflage and tactical deception, the Chinese were able to avoid detection until the launch of their surprise attacks in November. It certainly helped that U.N. and American forces were not actively looking for Chinese formations in the highlands of North Korea.

### ***American and U.N. Intelligence Failures***

Despite the skillful use of secrecy by the Chinese, the operational surprise inflicted on MacArthur’s command in North Korea is the result of the American intelligence failure to accurately estimate the Chinese capabilities and intentions in North Korea. Several factors, including a dearth of intelligence collection resources, specious conclusions from “mirror-imaging,” and a callous dismissal of contrary evidence, allowed the Chinese forces to remain hidden in the mountains of North Korea until their ambush of the U.N. forces.

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<sup>133</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 42.

<sup>134</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 160.

MacArthur's command faced a huge challenge in collecting intelligence about the Chinese. Partly, this stemmed from a lack of resources. For example, due to post-World War II cutbacks, the Far East Air Force (FEAF) did not have a single expert qualified in the art of photo interpretations and there were few accurate maps of North Korea with which to compare aerial photographs.<sup>135</sup> Consequently, when the Chinese set forest fires to hide daytime troop movements their significance was not recognized by MacArthur's command. Perhaps this would not have been an important indicator had they detected the crossing of the Yalu by several hundred thousand Chinese soldiers. Unfortunately, due to Chinese skill and American inattention the crossings went undetected. Restrictions on aerial reconnaissance also hindered intelligence collection near the Manchurian border. Richard Betts laments that "directives designed to reduce provocation of the Chinese also reduced the intelligence collection capacity against them; reconnaissance beyond the Yalu was prohibited and constrained even close to the border."<sup>136</sup>

Even when the Americans had good intelligence analysis it was ignored or undercut by MacArthur and his intelligence staff who suffered from a belief that U.N. victory was inevitable. For example, James M. Gavin, a famous airborne hero of World War II, investigated Kimpo Airfield in Korea after its capture. He admits that he

was amazed to find an elaborate arrangement of hard stands and revetments all around the airfield. They were as good or better than any I had seen in the airfields of Europe in World War II. Obviously, some sophisticated thinking had gone into the planning, and much labor and effort had been expended in anticipation of using the airfield by a modern air force. Either the North Koreans were wasting their time, which

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<sup>135</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 42.

<sup>136</sup> Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 58.

seemed unlikely, or a first class air power was about to intervene in the war.<sup>137</sup>

Willoughby dismissed this discovery as unimportant. Since the Chinese were not a major air power perhaps this is understandable. On the other hand, it could suggest that the North Koreans believed they might receive airplanes or other aid from the Soviets, or perhaps from the Chinese acting as their proxy.

After the North Korean invasion, the United States also had difficulty reconstituting the spy networks it had run under its occupation a few years earlier.<sup>138</sup> This too, limited the amount of useful information flowing to the military leadership. Had General MacArthur or the Joint Chiefs of Staff any inkling of Chinese involvement, it might have given them pause. Had they known that nearly half a million Chinese soldiers were pouring across the Yalu, it seems likely that they have altered their strategy, perhaps holding at the more easily defended “neck” of the Korean Peninsula.

Intelligence collection was not the only problem that plagued U.S. decision-making in the Korean War. It appears that both American civilian and military leadership fell into the trap of “mirror-imaging” – the process by which one assesses an enemy’s intentions based upon one’s own assumptions. This can be a very dangerous mistake, particularly when both sides do not share the same assumptions. For example, after the Inchon landing it did not appear logical or reasonable to General MacArthur, MacArthur’s Intelligence chief General Willoughby, Acheson or others that China would intervene on North Korea’s behalf. Most believed that if the Chinese had sent forces

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<sup>137</sup> Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Victory at High Tide* (Philadelphia: Lipincott; 1968), 267. As cited in William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 580-581.

<sup>138</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 32.

while the U.S. forces were on the ropes they might have succeeded in driving them from the peninsula. Once the North Koreans had been crushed, however, the Chinese would have to do the majority of the fighting themselves to save the North Korean communists. In retrospect, this seems an ironic position to have held because only six months earlier the U.S. had intervened on behalf of the South Koreans under very similar circumstances. Perhaps the best example of this vein of thinking is revealed in General Willoughby's Far East Command Daily Intelligence Summary of October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1950. He notes that

From a tactical viewpoint, with victorious U.S. divisions in full deployment, it would appear that the auspicious time for [Chinese] intervention has long since passed; it is difficult to believe that such a move, if planned, would have been postponed to a time when remnant North Korea forces have been reduced to a low point of effectiveness.<sup>139</sup>

MacArthur himself had personally conveyed the same assessment to President Truman during their meeting on Wake Island in September. Even then, MacArthur asserted that there was very little chance of Soviet or Chinese intervention because

Had they interfered in the first or second months it would have been decisive. We are no longer fearful of their intervention. We no longer stand hat in hand. The Chinese have 300,000 men in Manchuria. Of these not more than 100/125,000 are distributed along the Yalu River. They have no air force. Now that we have our own Air Force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter."<sup>140</sup>

Importantly, the American intelligence community did not contradict these attitudes because at the time it was believed that the Soviets controlled their "client states" and would not risk another world war by allowing the Chinese to engage American forces.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 52.

<sup>140</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 7.

<sup>141</sup> P.K.Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950", *Studies in Intelligence*, NO. 11, (2001) pp. 57-65. [http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/fall\\_winter\\_2001/article06.html#\\_ftn48](http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/fall_winter_2001/article06.html#_ftn48)



The CIA prepared nine intelligence estimates on the likelihood of Chinese intervention in October but stressed that although the Chinese could intervene it was unlikely that they would.<sup>142</sup> It should be noted that while a CIA report did state that 400,000 Chinese troops had moved to the Korean border and ordered to cross around October 18<sup>th</sup>, the same report downplayed its significance by noting that “the optimum time for such action has passed.”<sup>143</sup> The U.S. Army Chief of Staff later admitted that the consensus opinion in the intelligence community was that the Chinese were bluffing and that the threat “probably covered a less drastic plan of action.”<sup>144</sup> One notable exception to this consensus was Edmund Chubb, Director of Chinese Affairs in the State Department. Chubb was convinced that China would intervene but his “persistent pessimism on the issue undermined his credibility.”<sup>145</sup> Since MacArthur and the senior members of the Truman administration dismissed a Chinese intervention as unlikely, dissenting views were largely ignored.

This failure to accurately predict the Chinese intentions or detect their movement into North Korea was a grievous mistake. It was understandably easy to dismiss the threat of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army because it

had few tanks and no heavy artillery, air force, atom bomb, or capability, to mount operations combining land, sea, and air arms... These obvious weaknesses were not conducive to leading General MacArthur, the Pentagon, or the State Department to take seriously the danger signals of the Chinese Communist threat to intervene in Korea.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> On October 3, 6, 12, 13, 16, 20, 28, 30, and 31, 1950 in Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 145.

<sup>143</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 145.

<sup>144</sup> Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 58.

<sup>145</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 134.

<sup>146</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal*. (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 44.

What MacArthur, the JCS, and the State Department did not understand was the importance the Chinese placed upon securing their border and standing up to the United States. After the war, General Willoughby questioned whether it was reasonable to believe that

Communist China [was] prepared to take the stunning gamble of throwing its forces into war against a country possessing the atom bomb and complete air control of the campaign area? Could she afford to risk the destruction of her flimsy industrial base and the severance of her tenuous supply lines from the Soviets, which would deny her the resources to support modern war or to sustain large military forces in the field and in turn weaken the Peiping Communist government's hold in Asia as to threaten the eventuality of a Red debacle?<sup>147</sup>

Aside from underestimating the strength of Mao's regime, it is obvious that Willoughby could not imagine the advantages that could accrue to the Chinese forces by their initial use of surprise attacks in North Korea. By ambushing the U.N. forces the Chinese slowed their headlong advance towards the Yalu, forced them into fixed positions, tested their vaunted military capabilities, and assessed whether further attacks would draw retaliatory nuclear strikes on Chinese cities.<sup>148</sup>

Once MacArthur and his command had decided it was too late for effective Chinese intervention only massive, indisputable evidence of massive Chinese forces would have forced a reassessment. For example, in October General Paik Sun Yup of the ROK 1<sup>st</sup> Division examined Chinese corpses and estimated he faced a ten thousand strong Chinese division.<sup>149</sup> On October 29<sup>th</sup>, the 26<sup>th</sup> ROK Regiment identified 16 POWs of the 124<sup>th</sup> CCF Division. They concluded ominously that the

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<sup>147</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 85.

<sup>148</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 86.

<sup>149</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 52.

CCF has decided to intervene in the Korean War. [And] that this reinforcement is being effected by unit rather than piecemeal replacement from volunteer cadres. However, until more definite information is obtained it must be presumed that the CCF has not decided on full scale intervention...The advantages to be gained by all-out intervention, at a time when the NK forces are on the verge of complete collapse, is not readily apparent.<sup>150</sup>

MacArthur's intelligence chief, General Willoughby dismissed the importance of these contacts by characterizing the Chinese as "stragglers."<sup>151</sup> Then on November 1<sup>st</sup>, an American marine battalion in X Corps and a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division found themselves in fierce firefights along the Chongchon River, after which the Chinese broke contact and melted away into the hills.<sup>152</sup> MacArthur described the situation as "not alarming."<sup>153</sup> Ultimately, it would take days of relentless assaults and ambushes beginning on Thanksgiving night to convince MacArthur that the war had fundamentally changed. Still, it seems clear that the warnings from Beijing, coupled with Chinese corpses and large well-known troop concentrations in Manchuria should have persuaded MacArthur and his subordinates to act with some caution in their headlong advance towards the Yalu, instead of the second phase of Chinese attacks in late November.

## ***Conclusion***

The Chinese achieved operational surprise in the Korean War because of their zealous attention to operational secrecy, and, more importantly, the failure of American military and intelligence to accurately estimate the capabilities and intentions their

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<sup>150</sup> James McGovern, *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur's Dismissal* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.; 1972), 64.

<sup>151</sup> Bong Lee, *The Unfinished War: Korea* (New York: Algora Publishing; 2003), 154.

<sup>152</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 601.

<sup>153</sup> William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 1978), 601.

enemy. The United States lacked enough intelligence resources to perform sufficient aerial reconnaissance in the North Korean theater of operations. The inability of the U.S. to assemble a spy network in North Korea or China limited the amount of tactical information that MacArthur's command received. Finally, MacArthur and his intelligence officers discounted a series of warnings and mounting evidence of Chinese involvement because it did not seem logical to them.

Despite being seriously concerned with the possibility of Chinese intervention, the Truman administration and MacArthur failed to heed the warning messages and signals indicating preparations for an attack. Max Hastings describes this operational surprise best when he writes

It was an extraordinary achievement of modern warfare. Between October 13 and 25 the intelligence staffs of MacArthur's armies failed to discern the slightest evidence of the movement of 130,000 soldiers and porters. A combination of superb fieldcraft and camouflage by the Chinese, with their lack of use of any of the conventional means of detecting modern military movement – wireless traffic, mechanized activity, supply dumps – blinded the UN command to what was taking place on its front. Above all, the generals were not looking for anything of this sort. They had persuaded themselves that war was all but over. Their senses were deadened to any fresh perception.<sup>154</sup>

Once again, one can see the hubris of military leadership emerge when victory is near causing them to discount unfavorable information and subject their forces to the risk of an unexpected attack.

Certainly, the failure to investigate Chou En-lai's warnings or devote more resources to the Chinese forces assembling in Manchuria was inexcusable. This occurred simply because MacArthur and his command believed that they could achieve a *fait*

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<sup>154</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 137.

*accompli* and secure the Korean peninsula before China could intervene successfully.

Harvey DeWeerd laments that MacArthur's command

refused to believe our intelligence [in 1950] because it would have been very inconvenient...we would have had to do something about it. In the end...it was more convenient not to have believed...but those acquainted with statecraft and politics know how much easier it is to rectify an error of omission, even at tremendous cost, than to make an embarrassing decision in advance.<sup>155</sup>

Given MacArthur's personality, only direct and unambiguous intelligence of Chinese movements might have forced a change in his strategy.

What that change might have been no one can say with any certainty. The British had advocated stopping the advance at the narrow 'neck' of the peninsula to assuage Chinese fears and allow the UN forces to occupy an easily defended stretch of ground. Naturally, this meant ceding the northernmost part of Korea to China or as a haven to Kim Il Sung and his followers. Of this advice MacArthur had nothing but contempt as he demonstrated when he remarked that

the widely reported British desire to appease the Chinese Communists by giving them a strip of North Korea finds its historic precedent in the action taken at Munich on September 29, 1938...To give up any portion of North Korea to the aggression of the Chinese Communists would be the greatest defeat of the free world in recent times. Indeed, to yield to so immoral a proposition would bankrupt our leadership and influence in Asia, and render untenable our position both politically and morally.<sup>156</sup>

It seems unlikely that MacArthur could have been reined in without a complete victory, but perhaps his strategy might have changed. Perhaps the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the X Corps would have advanced more warily, improving roads, caching supply dumps and bringing

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<sup>155</sup> DeWeerd, "Strategic Surprise in the Korean War," 451-452. As cited in Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings; 1982), 108.

<sup>156</sup> U.S. National Archive, FR7:1108-9. As cited in Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; 1987), 126.

forward field hospitals in order to better prepare for the coming fight with the Chinese forces. Ultimately, had the Chinese surprise attack been blunted or parried, perhaps the stalemate along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel that continues to this day could have been avoided.

# CONCLUSION:

## INTELLIGENCE FAILURE AND OPERATIONAL SURPRISE ATTACKS

We are never deceived; we deceive ourselves.

- Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

The losses and setbacks sustained by American forces as a result of operational surprise attacks in the Battle of the Bulge and the Chinese counteroffensive in the Korean War highlight the importance of understanding the interplay of secrecy, deception and intelligence failure. These cases demonstrate that while operational secrecy and strategic deception are important to the successful execution of a surprise attack, poor intelligence collection, analysis and dissemination are necessary elements. In each case, the American-led forces believed their enemies to be nearly defeated and dismissed the possibility of an attack as implausible. In addition to inaccurately estimating the intentions and capabilities of their enemies, American intelligence officers made inadequate attempts to understand conflicting intelligence that did not fit with their optimistic mindset. The secrecy and deception operations practiced by the Germans and Chinese, however, did play an important role in allowing the incorrect presumptions to stand unchallenged. After reviewing these cases and the intelligence that was collected it appears that only direct and unambiguous information would have altered the Americans' assessment of their respective situations.

Some scholars argue that this failure to sufficiently challenge one's perceptions and beliefs with contrary evidence is 'essential to the logic of inquiry' and human cognitive processes. Robert Jervis and others have commented that

The evidence from both psychology and history overwhelmingly supports the view...that decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images. Indeed, their theories and images play a large part in determining what they notice. In other words, actors tend to perceive what they expect. Furthermore...a theory will have a greater impact on an actor's interpretation of data the greater the ambiguity of the data and the higher degree of confidence with which the actor holds the theory.<sup>157</sup>

Moreover, it requires "more, and more unambiguous, information for an actor to recognize the an unexpected phenomenon than an expected one."<sup>158</sup> This explains the power of secrecy and deception. Both elements reinforce the existing beliefs and wishful thinking of the intended victim.

Despite this natural fallibility of generals and their intelligence staff when prosecuting a successful military campaign, some information always exists that indicates preparations for a major operation. For example, in both cases intelligence existed about massive troop concentrations in the Schnee Eifel (Germans) and in Manchuria (Chinese). That this intelligence was ignored or explained away, without seriously challenging the existing estimates of the intentions and capabilities of the enemy, directly contributed to both cases of surprise attack. That is not to say that all battlefield intelligence is equally important or accurate. Clausewitz rightly dismisses the maxim that "we should only believe reliable intelligence and should never cease to be suspicious" because "many intelligence reports in war are contradictory, even more are false, and most are uncertain..."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Floyd Allport, *Theories of Perception and the Concept of Structure* (New York 1955), 382; Ole Holsti, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy," in David Finlay, Ole Holsti, and Richard Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago 1967), 70 as cited in Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April, 1968), 455-456.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April, 1968), 456.

<sup>159</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1976), 117.



The conclusion from this analysis of the Battle of the Bulge and the Chinese counteroffensive across the Yalu, however, is that it is critical to remain wary of an enemy whose military capacity to resist appears to be low. Evidence contrary to this perception should be carefully considered and the disposition of one's own forces must enable a commander to respond immediately to contain and rollback an attempted surprise attack. It is important to ensure that the intelligence is used to estimate an enemy's intentions and capabilities, rather than estimating an enemy's strength (or lack thereof) and explaining away or ignoring conflicting evidence. Commanders must strive to obtain sufficient all-source intelligence resources, prioritize collection targets, consult experienced analysts and share intelligence estimates between headquarters and field units. After assembling all the intelligence the military leadership must take special care to examine and review evidence that challenges their assumptions about their enemy. In this way, the deleterious effects of operational surprise attacks might be avoided or lessened.

Future studies on this topic might include additional case studies as well as a statistical study of surprise attacks. Case studies that include two or more near-peer competitors such as the Iran-Iraq War, the Arab-Israeli conflicts of the 1960's and 70's, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam may prove useful to test whether these findings hold true for other situations. Large amphibious assaults such as those carried out at Normandy and Inchon might yield important insights about surprise attacks due to their high success rate. A statistical analysis of modern wars from World War II to the present might prove useful for discovering the frequency of attempts at operational surprise attacks. There might be a correlation between percent of territorial losses or casualties and the

likelihood of a country resorting to a surprise attack. A more precise casualty exchange ratio could also be calculated to determine the advantage that accrues to the attacking country.

Leaving aside those questions for future research, this thesis has attempted to identify and define operational surprise attacks – a type of surprise attack that has hitherto been largely overlooked by military theorists. By examining the Battle of the Bulge and the Chinese counterattack in the Korean War it is possible to analyze the interplay and relative contributions of secrecy, deception, and intelligence failure in these operational surprise attacks. In these cases when victory was believed near, operational surprise attacks were successfully executed because one country severely underestimated its enemy. Furthermore, these attacks are unexpectedly effective precisely because the victim does not believe its enemy has the remaining resources to challenge it. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the flaw is internal to a country's own military is inherently optimistic, because it means that the fault can be rectified without influence or cooperation from one's enemies. By altering collection, analysis and communication of intelligence contrary to the prevailing assumption of the enemy it may be possible to reduce the possibility of future surprise attacks. Indeed, should the United States continue to conduct global military interventions, the American military and intelligence community would do well to remember this historical lesson before China or Iran has the opportunity to remind them.

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