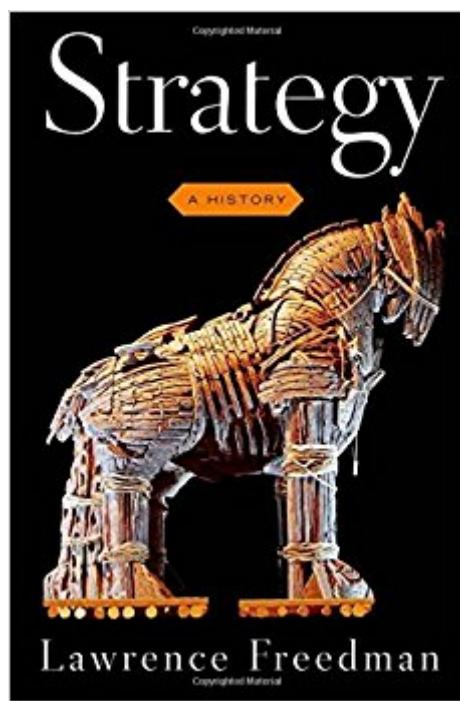


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Strategy: A History



Synopsis

Selected as a Financial Times Best Book of 2013In Strategy: A History, Sir Lawrence Freedman, one of the world's leading authorities on war and international politics, captures the vast history of strategic thinking, in a consistently engaging and insightful account of how strategy came to pervade every aspect of our lives. The range of Freedman's narrative is extraordinary, moving from the surprisingly advanced strategy practiced in primate groups, to the opposing strategies of Achilles and Odysseus in The Iliad, the strategic advice of Sun Tzu and Machiavelli, the great military innovations of Baron Henri de Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz, the grounding of revolutionary strategy in class struggles by Marx, the insights into corporate strategy found in Peter Drucker and Alfred Sloan, and the contributions of the leading social scientists working on strategy today. The core issue at the heart of strategy, the author notes, is whether it is possible to manipulate and shape our environment rather than simply become the victim of forces beyond one's control. Time and again, Freedman demonstrates that the inherent unpredictability of this environment-subject to chance events, the efforts of opponents, the missteps of friends-provides strategy with its challenge and its drama. Armies or corporations or nations rarely move from one predictable state of affairs to another, but instead feel their way through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated, requiring a reappraisal of the original strategy, including its ultimate objective. Thus the picture of strategy that emerges in this book is one that is fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point, not the end point. A brilliant overview of the most prominent strategic theories in history, from David's use of deception against Goliath, to the modern use of game theory in economics, this masterful volume sums up a lifetime of reflection on strategy.

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Customer Reviews

This book presents a sweeping historical narrative in a way that is intellectually challenging and stimulating. Even "experts" (those heavily engaged in military, business or other strategic studies or research) will enjoy a nicely-written (and flawlessly edited) overview that starts with chimps (as a proxy for prehistoric man) and ends with contemporary theories of rational decision-making based on the latest brain science (Kahneman, et al). The book is long (650 pages) and has an additional 100 pages of annotated footnotes. Freedman is careful to credit the many other writers and specialists upon whom he relies both in the text and notes. However, there is no bibliography. Nevertheless this book is an ideal starting point for the serious student or researcher who is in the early stages of delving into the history and challenges of strategic thinking. Freedman may be a specialist in war studies but I found his chapters on business and other non-military topics more interesting and insightful. He does an especially good job of weaving game theory into the narrative (without the math that so often gets in the way). The book is not without biases (he tears Tom Peters and his ilk to shreds). There are also a few imbalances and peculiarities. The sections on biblical analysis (David and Goliath, etc.) bring nothing new to the discussion. And, like many authors and historians before him, he occasionally gets lost in the endless cast of revolutionaries and the equally endless permutations in bottom-up strategic thinking in the decades after the French Revolution. For example he devotes several pages to Gramsci (a minor player who was irrelevant in his own lifetime and only marginally relevant thereafter) but only 1– pages to the whole of women's and gay rights movements in the 20th century, which actually broke some new ground in social organization. Also, the last several pages of the book are devoted to a discussion of the plot of the Capra movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" as an illustration of scripts and plots as a format for comparing dramatic fiction with real-life strategic thinking. I got more out of the last chapter when I reread it minus the movie plots. I don't think we learn much of value about strategic thinking from what comes out of Hollywood. In the end this book offers little in the way of profound breakthroughs in how to develop and implement successful strategies. If anything, it lowers our expectations about the results that can be achieved from even the most carefully-crafted strategies. This is good, however. The conventional wisdom that strategy is for amateurs while capacity is for professionals may be true. But after reading Freedman one can better understand that as a starting point for cooperation and/or conflict resolution any strategy despite whatever inherent limitations it may have

is better than no strategy at all. Overall, an excellent book, one that I really enjoyed reading.

The reviewer who said that this is not one history but several histories was spot on. The first third of the book, dealing with military strategy, was very good, although the first couple of chapters dealing with chimpanzees and Biblical history did not add much. The second third of the book, dealing with "bottom-up" strategy and including revolutionaries and Marxism, was terrible. Pointless, rambling and disorganized, it had really very little to do with the rest of the book, or strategy in general. I didn't go back and check but I would guess that there the book would go 20, 30 pages at a time without addressing anything related to strategy. It became really a history of political change and revolutionaries at that point, but tough to tell as it jumped around quite a bit. I was thankful that I did not stop reading during the middle third (I was tempted many times) because the final third, dealing with business and economic strategy, was much better. The conclusion, talking about strategy as a script or story, was a decent attempt at bringing the subject together and moving it forward, probably the best that could be done with such a broad subject. I think the author could have done a better job with half the pages. I recommend reading the first section, skimming the second and then reading the third section and conclusion.

This book arrives at an important time for "strategy," which in the early 21st century is a term that is applied everywhere, from public and private organizations to every aspect of personal life. As a result, strategy - once associated most closely with military or geopolitical endeavors, but gradually appropriated by institutions or individuals who wished to convey a sense of purpose, importance, and long range thinking to their corporate plans or personal goals - has become a buzzword essentially devoid of meaning. On one level, Freedman's book is a history of strategy, with the first section tracing military strategy from ancient to modern times, before moving on to in depth discussions of strategy in other fields, such as business. The book nimbly moves between eras and strategic thinkers, offering rich insights into strategy as it was developed (and practiced) by individual philosophers and field marshals and then bringing these key strategic thinkers into dialogue with one another. In doing so, it stands on its own as a compelling work of history both in terms of strategists and strategizing. But the book goes beyond historical narrative in offering a compelling commentary on how strategy as a distinct concept is defined and used, while also serving up a pointed critique of the idea that no challenge, in whatever field, is beyond the reach of near-omniscient "strategists." History, commentary, and critique are brought together seamlessly by Freedman's writing, which simultaneously educates and charms the reader with crisp prose and

wry anecdotes. In addition to representing an important work of scholarship, it serves to raise important questions for the consideration of strategies (and strategists) from across a range of fields. If you have ever had to read a "strategy" document - and particularly if you have ever been assigned the responsibility to write one - you should read this book.

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