

"Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called "The Pledge". The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course...it probably isn't. The second act is called "The Turn". The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call "The Prestige"."

Opening Monologue - The Prestige

Breaking an enemies 'will and cohesion' is what we tell good manoeuvrists to do, but we spend remarkably little time discussing with them how to do it. Study days and courses throughout the Armed Forces are filled with the various rather vague sentiments such as 'influence is everything and everything is influence', 'create and utilise dynamic narratives', or 'all ops are psyops'. But as soon as this sentiment is expressed quickly the subject returns to thinking about a problem from the perspective of this unit or formation's perspective. This is not that surprising, we control what we do and we don't control what an enemy does.

For the 'decision' we are talking about at when we talk about Shaping-Deciding-Sustaining actions, is not our decision, but our opponents. It is after all after the line has broken that most of the casualties in a battle occur. Breaking and running, to lose your will and cohesion, is not just a failure of nerve, but a failure to recognise your own best interest. To understand better why people act in an illogical way we should spend far less time attempting to learn the lessons of history from the perspective of understanding the victors, but much more trying to understand losers.

What I would like to suggest is that all successful tactics, or for that matter strategies, are at their heart a magic trick. The belief in the omnipotence and magical nature of the conjuror in the audience is the same psychological effect as a winning commander creates in his opponent. And, as in the Michael Caine quote from the 2006 film "the Prestige" (based on the book of the same name) above, those magic tricks consist of three acts, the Pledge, the Turn, and the Prestige.

Like the three act structure of stories we teach every child this structure plays into our expectations of how a narrative is constructed, the difference between a magic trick and a normal story is that it subverts what we expect. Deception is too often an afterthought in planning, tagged on at the end, under resourced, and executed half-heartedly. I want to suggest all successful tactics and strategies are at their heart deceptive.

To illustrate my point let us look at the simplest action, the platoon advance to contact. Let us imagine we are an enemy position. The first thing you see is something which is ordinary (the Pledge) a number of enemy soldiers who appear in your arcs, you shoot at them, they shoot back. Then something extraordinary happens (the Turn) another load of soldiers appear from an unexpected direction to a flank forcing them to undertake some sort of remedial action as they seek to come to terms with the unexpected, where upon, as they conduct it, development from another direction comes the Reserve (the Prestige).

What we can see is there is a double subversion of expectation. "I'm attacking from here. No actually from here. No really, from here." It is this double subversion that makes the tactic successful as it creates an idea in the mind of the enemy position that they cannot trust their instinct. As the saying goes 'fool me one, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me'.

Where a given tactic or strategy lacks a double subversion it fails. When someone instigates a tactic that doesn't have a double subversion of expectation then there is a likelihood it will fail to force a decision. This is why attacks utilising brute force seldom work, no matter how large the offense, no matter how much ordinance is dropped on an objective, as enemies expect violence from the enemy.

To pick some historical actions can see this narrative structure at work on a much larger scale in operations:

AAA

Pledge

Turn

Prestige

Gaugamela

Darius observes Alexander's Army overlapped on both sides by his own.

The Macedonian Army splits in two, fixing Darius's left and drawing his right.

The companion cavalry strike the centre of Darius's lines.

Kuwait (1991)

An army orientated for a direct overland attack to Kuwait City.

Sea born USMC operation on a separate line of advance re orientating the Iraqis south.

Large left flank off into the desert and into the Iraqi rear.

We can also see this is true in the development of strategy.

AAA

Pledge

Turn

Prestige

Mao – Revolutionary War

A population with disparate security threat leading to the commitment of security forces.

Attacks become more co-ordinated and only increase with increased security forces leading to counter measures.

The emergence of regular units out of the population.

Rome- Second Punic War

The Romans acting reactively to Hannibal's attempts to turn Italian allies and avoid decisive engagement.

Scipio's offensive action to capture New Carthage in Spain.

A direct assault on Carthage itself rather than Hannibal's army in Italy.

Or we can use this idea to see why strategies didn't work, for instance isolated terrorist attacks, or some of NATO's strategic bombing operations. That terrorists want to kill civilians, or that NATO can drop bombs anywhere in the world with impunity are the 'pledges' as no-one is surprised by them; where and when terrorists attack, or the mere fact that NATO musters the political will to use its power can achieve a 'turn'; but neither strategy has at its heart a Prestige. Neither strategy creates the moment of bewilderment, thus can never succeed.

I should stress that this just another way of looking at how we formulate plans, whether tactical, operational or strategic, and does not for mean other conceptual models are somehow wrong. For I agree with Robert Polk, in his critique of Boyd Theory, when he says that Gödel's Completeness Theorem is as applicable to doctrine as it is to mathematics. Here I am suggesting that by thinking in terms of the double subversion of expectation we can build in a litmus test of a given strategy, operational construct, or tactic – to plot where we force the enemy into a Decision Point, rather than when we are subject to them.

I suggest the reason commanders fall for tricks and deception is the same reason we enjoy subversion and misdirection in fiction. Stories such as the Song of Ice and Fire (Game of Thrones on TV) lull the brain into thinking causally, that X has happened so Y will follow, and when it doesn't it brings about a form of physiological discombobulation which gains our respect.

However, when we reread these texts, the hints of the impending twists are everywhere. Knowing more and seeing more are not the same thing. As Agatha Christie said of murder mysteries, the purest surprises are the ones where the clues have been hidden in plain sight.

When we look at histories losers, whether Darius or Paulus, we should refrain from the easy idea that they were in some sense 'incompetent', for this leads to the fallacy that 'well I'm competent, so I couldn't fall for it'. However, I want to suggest that the core skill is understanding the subversion of expectation, and so the more conventional the mind the easier it is to fool. Just like hypnosis, or the Asch experiment, certain minds are more susceptible to suggestion and conformism than others.

What can we learn from this? Well Schopenhauer said of religion "to the lover of truth, a fraud, no matter how pious, is still a fraud", and what we need are commanders are sceptics who can see past misdirection and lies, who don't take what they are being told on trust and look to see how they are being fooled. What we need are Penn and Teller, the ability to trick, but not be tricked. What we need are true believers in the ranks and atheists in command.

So perhaps we should add a serial to our higher command selection interviews – show candidates a magic show and then ask them to figure out how it was done, or see whether or not they can be hypnotised – because those who don't want to be fooled are precisely those who we want in charge.

"Every magic trick consists of three parts, or acts. The first part is called the pledge, the magician shows you something ordinary. The second act is called the turn, the magician takes the ordinary something and makes it into something extraordinary. But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it BACK. Now you're looking for the secret. But you won't find it because of course, you're not really looking. You don't really want to work it out. You want to be fooled."

Closing Monologue – The Prestige

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