

Keynote Address

Military Strategies and the Unexpected Expansion of Conflicts

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This paper provides a brief overview of military strategies employed in the past, each as a consequence of the unexpected expansion of wars. Examples have been taken from the last hundred years, the era of wars waged by developed industrialised states and organised armed forces, including air forces the introduction of which marked a significant change in warfare. Some cases have been taken from grand strategy and the unexpected expansion of wars once they had started. Others have been taken from military campaigns and the operational level of war, in particular the impact of an unexpected expansion of a campaign as a consequence of operational successes and failures. Each of these many examples is offered in the belief that it will repay more detailed study.

While nothing in war is entirely predictable, very few events have ever been completely unexpected, and there are many gradations in what constitutes military surprise. Indeed, a considerable theoretical literature exists on military surprise and how it might be achieved.¹ One important measure by which the quality of armed forces may be judged is how prepared they have been to be surprised, in the sense of caught at a disadvantage by a sudden change in circumstances. A widely quoted observation by the doyen of British military historians Sir Michael Howard is that, 'No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed'.² At the operational and tactical levels, some armed forces, notably the *Zahal* or Israeli Defence Force (IDF), have prided themselves on their ability to recover quickly from surprise, as they did in the Yom Kippur or Ramadan War of October 1973.

Almost certainly, no war in history has ever begun with the widespread belief on both sides that the war would be long, destructive and expensive, and quite possibly lost. At least one side, in starting a war, has believed that it will win, and often that it will win quickly and cheaply. For considerably over a hundred years, the classic military strategy in response to such aggressors has been to trade space for time, and to use that time to create new forces and weapons, to seek support from potential allies, and to draw the enemy into a protracted war. There are many examples of this. Saddam Hussein of Iraq's attempt at a short aggressive war with Iran in 1980, to secure complete control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, grew rapidly into the protracted and stalemated Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. Saddam's second attempt at a short aggressive war, in seizing Kuwait in August 1990, which was the first case of a member of the United Nations attempting to annex another by military conquest, grew into the Gulf War

¹ For recent US examples e.g.: Meir Finkel, *On Flexibility: Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield* (New York NY: Stanford University Press, 2011); Erik J. Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

² Quoted in e.g. *Future Character of Conflict* (London: Ministry of Defence, 2015), p. 2.

of 1990-91 through the international political response to Saddam's action. When the United States in 2003, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, led a coalition to depose Saddam, it proclaimed the end of major combat operations after six weeks, only to find itself drawn into a complex civil war in Iraq, with other regional powers intervening; only in 2011 did the United States declare its military mission in Iraq officially over. There are many variants on these defensive strategies, but most of them have had a strong irregular or guerrilla element. Also, in the nuclear age in particular, the object has been less often to defeat the enemy in battle, and more often to erode enemy domestic political and popular support for the war, by making it too expensive in political and financial terms, and in casualties suffered. A jibe repeatedly attributed to the Taliban, made against the United States and NATO in their involvement in the Afghan War 2001-13, was that 'You may have the wristwatches, but we have the time'.

The case that comes closest to meeting the criteria of a war that both sides believed would be long and potentially disastrous is actually the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in September 1939. After the experience of the First World War just over twenty years earlier, no-one in Europe wanted to fight a second long and destructive war, and the prospect was greeted with dismay by all sides, except for a small number of ideologically brainwashed young Germans in uniform. The British and French declaration of war against Germany was entirely predictable, but it was unexpected in the sense that Adolf Hitler and his government had intended a short, aggressive war against Poland alone, and were horrified to find themselves also at war with Britain and France, with their Empires and vastly superior resources. Something similar had already happened in the European crisis of June-August 1914, when Imperial Germany had sought to create the diplomatic conditions for a war in which Germany itself would not be involved: a short and limited war in which Austria-Hungary would destroy Serbia before other European powers, including Serbia's protector the Russian Empire, could intervene. Instead, the European crisis expanded to become the First World War, bringing in all the major European powers by early August, including the British Empire, again to the horror and disbelief of the German government, and also Japan, and in 1917 the United States and China.

There have been rare cases of short, aggressive or pre-emptive wars in which everything has gone right for one side, for example the overwhelming Israeli success in the 'Six Day War' of June 1967, in which the Israelis believed themselves compelled to attack first, as they were about to be attacked by greatly superior numbers, and that their only chance of survival was through pre-emption. Comparatively neglected, but equally important, are the rare cases of short and successful defensive wars fought in response to aggression, such as the British victory in the Falklands War of 1982. It is the cases of aggressive wars planned as being both short and successful, but in which the initial strategy has failed leading to unexpected expansion, that have been most commonly studied in modern military history. They provide the evidence for many common themes of military theory: such as surprise, the inherent unpredictability or 'friction' of war, and the critical relationship between governments, the leaders of their military forces, and their wider populations. This includes in recent times matters of escalation, mission creep, and predicted end-states, and the fallacious belief among political leaders that it is possible to limit or 'fine tune' a war in a predictable fashion in advance. The vocabulary in which these

ideas are expressed is self-evidently neo-Clausewitzian, but it is not inherently Eurocentric. Each generation, and each military staff college, has interpreted neo-Clausewitzian thought for its own purposes. Its most important influence has not been on the 19th Century Prussian Army of which Clausewitz himself was a member, but on global military thought since the Second World War, and particularly since about 1975 on the United States and its associated powers.

In recent times, concerns about escalation have led to a global strategic culture of deterrence, and an aversion to confrontation. There have been two significant cases of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) intervening to expand a large war that has already involved the United States, but only in a particular political context shaped by this culture of deterrence and avoiding direct confrontation. The better-known case is the surprise intervention of Chinese troops, officially designated the Chinese People's Volunteers rather than the PLA, in the Korean War in November 1950. The other is that the PLA supplied thousands of troops for rear area and logistics duties in North Vietnam at the height of the Second Indochina War, freeing North Vietnamese troops for combat in South Vietnam. In both cases, the Chinese intervention and the United States' response were governed by self-imposed limitations, notably in the United States' choice of bombing targets over North Vietnam.

In 'great wars,' otherwise known as wide or even world wars, and at the level of grand strategy, the most commonly feared cause of an unexpected change in the balance of forces has been the addition to the war or withdrawal of one of the belligerents. All such large and long wars are in reality interlocking single-state wars which begin and end at different times, and for different reasons. So, a war begun in Europe between Germany and Poland in 1939 expanded to combine in 1941 with a war in Asia begun in 1937 to become the Second World War, the world's only true global war, which for some of its participants did not end until 1949. Sometimes there has been simply no adequate response available to a country at war in response to facing yet another enemy. One of the clearest cases of this is the Soviet Union's declaration of war against Japan and simultaneous attack into Manchuria in August 1945, which, accompanied by the two atomic bombs, led directly to the Japanese decision to surrender. As the opposite case, one member of an alliance can be defeated or make a separate peace, with a resulting redeployment of enemy forces creating a crisis for that country's allies. The Russian Revolution in 1917, and subsequent Russian withdrawal from the First World War by the Peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, allowed the Imperial German Army to launch a major offensive against the Allied forces on the Western Front from March to July, with a brief but considerable numerical superiority. Threatened with outright defeat, the defending Allies found an effective military response in new defensive tactics, and in agreeing to unity of command for their armies, under the French General Ferdinand Foch. This, together with the integration of arriving American forces, enabled the Allies to pass onto the counter-offensive in July and August 1918, and to win the war unexpectedly early, in November.

There have also been cases, although they have been less common in recent times, in which an external power has intervened in an existing war entirely for its own purposes, rather than in support of either side. Rather charmingly, these have been described as 'Waterbird Wars,' from an observation attributed to the Japanese statesman Toshimichi Okubo, who in 1873 advised against a war with Korea which would only tempt Russia to intervene, like a fisherman who

steals the fish from waterbirds while they fight. At the start of the First World War, Aritomo Yamagata cited this advice, arguing that, being neutral in 1914, 'America enjoys, because of the war, the full advantage of the proverbial fisherman'.³ One well known case of a waterbird war is the intervention of Imperial Japan into the complex civil war in China, starting with the Mukden Incident in 1931, with its consequences for all the warring factions. The response adopted by the Chinese Communists was to husband their strength and as far as possible let others fight their enemies for them, a strategy they took further after the next expansion of the war in 1937, and even further again after its second expansion with the addition of the United States to Japan's enemies in December 1941, a strategy which contributed ultimately to the Chinese Communist victory in 1949. This experience was the origin and a major continuing influence upon the Maoist three-phase strategy of 'protracted war' or 'people's war'. A smaller but comparable case is the limited invasion of Cambodia in April-July 1970 by forces of the United States and South Vietnam during the Second Indochina War, with the object of disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply route running through eastern Laos and Cambodia. The destabilising effect of this intentionally brief intervention contributed to the expansion and escalation of the existing civil wars in Cambodia and Laos, and eventually to the victories of the Kymer Rouge and the Pathet Lao in 1975.

Reference to the Second Indochina War of 1961-75 and the United States' main force involvement of 1964-73 helps introduce the idea that not all expansions of campaigns have been caused by human decision-making. Some have arisen through the unexpected scale of problems created by terrain, or weather, or disease, or other natural factors, which have placed unusual demands on military staff planning for logistics and transport. Cases include the logistical crisis faced by the German Army as it was forced to halt just short of Moscow in Winter 1941-42; and the extreme difficulties faced by all sides during the Second World War, in the Pacific and the jungles of South East Asia, in conducting industrialised and mechanised warfare in a part of the world which was virtually without an industrial base or infrastructure.

An unusual case of expansion, in which an unexpected operational victory produced major problems for both sides, was the fall and surrender of France in May-June 1940. Before the Second World War broke out in Europe in 1939, the main naval theatre of war was expected by both sides the same as it had been in the First World War: the North Sea which separates Germany from Britain, with the Atlantic Ocean as the secondary theatre; and both Britain and Germany had planned and structured their navies accordingly. After the Fall of France, Germany's possession of naval bases from northern Norway to western France meant that instead the principal naval campaign would be the protracted Battle of the Atlantic, for which neither side's navy was structured or prepared. Between 1940 and 1941 Germany had to almost triple its amount spent on shipbuilding, mainly on submarines, in a hurried but ultimately inadequate response to its own victory on land.

The Fall of France also transformed and expanded what up to that point had been a European war, almost as much as the declaration of war against the United States by Germany

³ Quotations from both Okubo and Yamagata in Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1973), pp. 59-60.

would do in December 1941. In addition to the immediate German threat by sea and air to the British home islands, Italy also declared war on Britain in June, putting another hostile power with its fleet and aircraft across the British communications through the Mediterranean Sea to the Suez Canal and the British Empire in the Far East, where they faced a potentially hostile Japan. For the British, these multiple threats constituted one of the greatest strategic dilemmas ever faced in modern warfare. From early 1941 onwards, Italian and German motorised and mechanised forces, advancing eastward from Italian Libya to Egypt, threatened to reach to the Suez Canal and beyond, adding even more threats to the entire British position in Asia. The British response to what was a potentially hopeless position was to develop strategic bombing as their only way of attacking Germany, to rely on the Royal Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic and to contest passage through the Mediterranean, and to use both sea and air transport to send troops, stores and equipment across Africa, round the Cape of Good Hope, and also across the Indian Ocean. To defend the Suez Canal, the British stripped their home islands of combat troops, drew on more combat troops from around their Empire at the cost of any immediate defence against Japan, and used airpower and seapower to interdict their enemies' much shorter supply lines across the Mediterranean. The forces under British command that defeated and finally drove back the Italian-German advance into Egypt in July-October 1942 included combat divisions from South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the most modern aircraft and tanks supplied by the United States.⁴

In large and long wars, the most important factor in recovering from unexpected expansion of the war has been 'force generation,' the ability to recruit, train and equip new combat units. While armed forces can recover from tactical or operational surprise very quickly, problems of force generation and logistics, by their very nature, almost always take longer to solve than is initially predicted. Historically, the time taken to solve these problems has only been shortened as a result of extensive contingency planning before the war. This need for force generation and trained combat-ready forces ranks as being of the greatest importance at the strategic level. At the operational level rapid changes in equipment or in combat doctrine can be equally important; but in most cases at the operational level also, the critical factor has usually been the time needed to train troops and formations, rather than to produce equipment. Even in the Battle of Britain, the unsuccessful attempt by the *Luftwaffe* (German air force) in June-September 1940 to gain air superiority over the English Channel after the fall of France prior to a planned invasion, the largest problem for both sides was lack of trained pilots, rather than lack of aircraft.

The value of pre-war preparation in force generation has often proved decisive in wars, except for those which have been very short. By far the most impressive example of force generation by a country whose entry decisively altered the balance of forces in a war is the United States in both World Wars, with all the strategic advantages and operational problems that this massive expansion involved. In both wars, the United States while at peace responded to the outbreak of war in Europe with the assumption that it might have to fight. At the start of

⁴ See in particular the analysis of this strategy as a critique of Liddell Hart's 'Indirect Approach' concept in Shelford Bidwell, *Modern Warfare* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 205-6.

the First World War in 1914, the US Navy, like any large ocean-going navy, was at a perpetual high state of readiness, but the US Army consisted of barely three poorly-organised and under-equipped divisions. This was addressed by the June 1916 National Defense Act, which created a peacetime Regular Army of 175,000 men with an 'organised reserves' component, increased the strength of the volunteer National Guard, and established the basis for what became the conscript National Army on the United States' entry into the war in April 1917. American industry was already geared to large-scale production of weapons and military equipment through its contracts with the British and French. It was this combination that enabled the United States to field a substantial army on the Western Front by mid-1918.

The United States' entry into the First World War was provoked by the re-introduction by Germany of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, sinking American merchant ships on the high seas. The Germans had expected the United States to enter the war as a result of unrestricted submarine warfare, but they had underestimated the consequences for themselves. From mid-1916, direction of the German war effort had been dominated by the German Army's Great General Staff, which exercised what has been called a 'silent dictatorship' over the civilian government. In January 1917, the Chief of the Great General Staff, Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, argued that 'We expect war with America and have made all preparations. Things cannot get worse'.⁵ This land-based military thinking was almost entirely concerned with whether the United States could create and equip an effective army and transport it across the Atlantic Ocean to the Western Front before Germany could win the war. Catastrophically for Germany, Hindenburg and his planners failed to take full account of the immediate impact of the United States' financial and global political power, and of the US Navy, which within a few weeks had both joined in the Allied blockade of Germany, and in securing the transport routes across the Atlantic Ocean, both of which played important part in the Allied victory in November 1918.

A comparable situation arose for the United States at the start of the Second World War. On the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 the US Army (which included the US Army Air Force) had been run down to the point that it could not have deployed a single combat-ready division. After the Fall of France, in June 1940 Congress authorised \$5 billion for armed forces expenditure, and the increase of the Army to 1.2 million men through the reintroduction of conscription. 'America as usual,' commented one jaundiced colonel, 'was going to shoot the enemy with dollar bills – *but time!*'⁶ An even more extensive plan followed in July 1941, known as the 'Victory Program' although the United States was still not at war. The first challenge was to build a global transport system based on sea power, starting by tripling the number of American shipyards. The 'two ocean navy' was planned in 1940, and by 1945 over a thousand new warships and submarines had been built, plus a commercial and transport fleet of almost 7,000 new ships, and an expanded US Marine Corps of six combat divisions. Essentially the same business methods were used to expand the US Army, starting by

⁵ Quoted in Stephen Badsey, *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda* (Warwick: Helion, 2019), p. 169.

⁶ William A. Ganoë, *The History of the United States Army* (New York: Appleton Century, 1943), p. 517.

building the factories and training camps first, followed by the creation of 89 combat divisions, 16 of which were armoured and five airborne, and a US Army Air Force of 80,000 aircraft.

The United States achieved this rate and level of expansion by planning and standardising from the top downwards, using production-line methods. It is remarkable that this was achieved with no massive bottlenecks in this production-line, that could easily have lengthened the war by more than a year. This reflected not only business and technological skills, but also the successful mobilisation of the United States' civilian workforce in the widest sense, and the creation of a strong wartime work ethic. But with this came the problems associated with rapid expansion and standardisation. From the start of the US Army's expansion, of the three large Forces into which the Army was divided, priority in recruits was given to the Army Air Forces, then to the Army Service Forces (which ran the Army's administration), and then finally to the Army Ground Forces, which also received the lowest quality recruits, a decision not reversed until early 1944. Superior technology and training were expected to compensate for this, and on the whole they did so. But the implication for combat was that the US Army had to make almost all its critical decisions regarding weapons and fighting doctrines before the end of 1942, and mostly before its newly trained and equipped troops had any battle experience. Under these circumstances, it is also remarkable that the US Army did so well, but there were inevitable errors and many criticisms of its battlefield performance. The decision that drew most criticism, taken in March 1941, was to standardise on the M4 Sherman as the main battle tank for both the US Army and US Marines, followed later in the war by delays in replacing the Sherman with a more suitable and heavier tank. This was the battlefield trade-off for a United States' approach which outproduced its enemies in tanks and other key weapons systems by approximately three or four to one. An aphorism often attributed to Joseph Stalin during the Second World War is that, 'quantity has a quality all of its own'.

One further, and controversial, method of expanding wars, often in the face of probable defeat, is the motivation and mobilisation by governments of entire populations. This is almost the definition of any long and large war, and is commonly known as 'Total War,' a term that became common following the First World War. Although this motivation and mobilisation includes what is often disparagingly known as 'propaganda,' that is only one aspect of a relationship between the leaders of a country at war and its people, which involves much wider concepts of identity, and of social and cultural cohesion. One of the tragedies of wars is that they are much easier to escalate and expand in this way than to de-escalate, and to mobilise domestic support on a large scale is a particularly unpredictable and uncontrollable strategy. One famous and successful case is the Soviet Union's conscious shift in propaganda, in the crisis of December 1941 as the German Army neared Moscow, away from the propaganda of defending the Revolution, towards a nationalistic call to defend 'Holy Mother Russia'. But the belief that superior motivation and willpower, whether from fighting troops or the domestic population or both, can by itself overcome a massive enemy superiority has seldom proved true. Among the saddest and most studied cases are that, facing almost certain defeat, both the leaders of Japan in the Second World War, and of Germany in both World Wars, tried to convince their people that their inherent superiority as a race and nation would allow them to prevail against inferior races, regardless of their advantages in numbers and equipment. There

is a military aphorism warning against this belief also, used by officers of the United States during their involvement in Iraq 2003-2011: 'Hope is not a strategy'.

After its remarkable successes in both World Wars, the United States' belief that it would be able to limit its commitment to future wars has provided the most influential explanation for its defeat in the Second Indochina War: that the United States lost the war from the start through its failure to provide adequate force generation, as successive political and military leaders failed to provide for a military commitment that might well expand, and to employ the organised reserves.⁷ After 1975, the United States' armed forces consciously restructured themselves to make it impossible for this situation to re-occur in the future, by allocating key positions within combat formations to reservists and National Guard units, so that the country could not send forces overseas to fight a major war without these being mobilised. The wider intention behind this reorganisation was to prevent the United States going to war without its government first winning sufficient popular support. This in turn led directly to a United States government and military domestic propaganda campaign to generate support for the Gulf War of 1990-91, with accompanying immense controversies, both over the implications for democracy, and the very wide gap between public expectations and the limited military victory actually delivered. By the Iraq War of 2003-11 this practice had expanded to include the operational level: US Army battle planning in Iraq routinely included integrated plans for influencing domestic opinion at home through propaganda.⁸ Even so, when the Iraq War expanded after the initial invasion in 2003, the United States again suffered institutional problems in force generation, that were not corrected until 2006.

Even more than its predecessor, the Second World War has been characterised as a 'war of the technologists,' in which a conflict between mass armies, navies and air forces on all sides was fought in parallel with a technological arms race between small groups of scientists.⁹ Breakthroughs in reliable battlefield radio communications, in radar and sonar, and in electronic cryptography, were all critical to winning battles in both wars. Even so, as was first argued by Soviet theorists in the 1920s, by the early 20th Century fully developed industrialised states had simply become too strong to be defeated outright by technological superiority or surprise attacks, however initially successful these might be. In fact, attack by surprise and new weapons have usually been the choice of a weaker power seeking to compensate for its inherent weakness. The German surprise invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 failed to produce a decisive victory, and so did the Japanese surprise attack on the United States and British Empire in December 1941. Also, while there have been many technological innovations and responses in war to expansion and unexpected enemy superiority, it is hard to point to any case in recent military history in which an attempt to overcome superior forces

⁷ This is the thesis of the influential book H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁸ See e.g. Stephen Badsey, 'Bridging the Firewall? Information Operations and US Military Doctrine in the Battles of Fallujah,' in David Welch (ed.), *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), pp. 188-207.

⁹ A characterisation made by Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 116-135.

and win victory through a new 'super weapon' have proved successful. A critical exception to this general rule was first advanced by Soviet military thinkers in the 1950s, who argued that thermonuclear weapons with intercontinental delivery systems were so powerful that a surprise attack could indeed defeat and even obliterate a major industrial power, an idea which helped lead to nuclear deterrence theory as an entire new area of military thought.

In the last decade, claims have been made for a possible overwhelming surprise attack through cyber warfare, including what has become known as a 'cyber-Dresden,' after the devastating Allied bombing raid on the German city in February 1945. It is true that since the Second World War, advances in technology have become more important in overcoming enemy numerical advantages, and in achieving and recovering from surprise, but counter-strategies have also been developed very quickly. In the 1960s the emergence of the electronic battlefield, and of aerospace and computerised systems for observation and detection of enemy forces, produced the concept of the 'Transparency Revolution,' the belief that operational level surprise had become impossible, since the forces massing and preparing could always be detected in advance. As demonstrated by the Egyptian Army at the start of the October 1973 War, one successful counter to this has been to create the political and strategic circumstances in which, although the forces of a potential enemy can be detected, their intentions remain obscure and ambiguous. Over the decades these methods have been greatly refined, the most recent example being the Russian seizure of the Crimea from Ukraine in February 2014, in which an important part of the successful strategy was deliberately created conditions of political ambiguity and a fear of escalation, such that no effective response could be mounted.

As a final point, with hindsight the most widely criticised cause of an unexpected expansion of a war has been that of underestimating the enemy, either in terms of the quality of troops and equipment, or in a wider sense in terms of the enemy's willingness to fight, and their popular support. Conventionally, in modern military thought the combat effectiveness of armed forces is expressed as numerical strength in combination with fighting power, made up of training, equipment, and morale. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the earliest and briefest descriptions of this appeared in 1869 in a chapter of Count Leo Tolstoy's epic novel *War and Peace* as, 'In warfare the force of armies is the product of the mass multiplied by something else, an unknown x .'¹⁰ But even beyond the practical problems of intelligence gathering and estimating numbers, in almost all cases recorded in military history the calculation has involved an honest attempt to assess the unquantifiable. There have even been cases in which military planners have deliberately assumed that the enemy was significantly inferior and would behave accordingly. In both the short successful wars mentioned, the Israelis in 1967 and the British in 1982 were compelled to assume that their enemy was inferior in fighting power, because if this were not true then they stood no chance of winning the war; and in both cases this was a bold risk that succeeded. But cases in which assumptions of this kind have proved false are almost too numerous to need mention, including the British underestimation of the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy in 1941-42. While peacetime military doctrine and training provide a framework for decision-making, addressing this problem is one of the main justifications for

¹⁰ The English language version quoted here is from Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Part 14, Chapter 2.

military education (as opposed to just training), and above all for the study of military history: in order to understand where the ideas underpinning doctrine come from, and why they may suddenly not be applicable.