

Rumsfeld's Military Thinking and the Nazis'

by Steve Douglas

The criticisms of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his chicken-hawk cohorts, by members of the “traditionalist” U.S. military leadership, are not unlike those lodged against Hitler by various German Army leaders steeped in the traditions of the Prussian/German Staff. Hitler's perverse fascination with *Wunderwaffen* (“Shock and Awe” high-tech weapons of his day, was duly noted by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, the most able of the German Army's group commanders: Hitler “was amazingly familiar with the effect of the very latest enemy weapons and could reel off whole columns of figures on both our own and the enemy's war production. Indeed, this was his favorite way of side-tracking any topic that was not to his liking,” Manstein wrote *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General*.

“Moreover, Hitler's interest in everything technical led him to overestimate the importance of his technical resources. As a result, he would count on a mere handful of assault-gun detachments, or the new Tiger tanks, to restore situations where only large bodies of troops could have any prospect for success. “What he lacked, broadly speaking, was simply military ability, based on experience—something for which his ‘intuition’ was no substitute. While Hitler may have had an eye for tactical opportunity and could quickly seize a chance when it was offered to him, he still lacked the ability to assess the prerequisites and practicability of a plan of operations. He failed to understand that the objectives and ultimate scope of an operation must be in direct proportion to the time and forces needed to carry it out—to say nothing of the possibilities of supply. He did not—or would not—realize that any long-range offensive operation calls for a steady build-up of troops over and above those committed in the original assault. All this was brought out with striking clarity in the planning and execution of the 1942 Summer offensive. Another example was the fantastic idea he disclosed to me in the Autumn 1942, of driving through the Caucasus to the Near East and India with a motorized army group.”

Field Marshal von Manstein's observations about Hitler's belief in the power of the will are equally applicable to the chicken-hawks' mentality today: “This brings me to the factor which probably did more than anything else to determine the character of Hitler's leadership—his overestimation of the power of the will. This will, as he saw it, had only to be translated into faith down to the youngest private soldier, for the correctness of his decisions to be confirmed and the success of his orders ensured. . . . The will for victory which

gives a commander the strength to see a grave crisis through, is something very different from Hitler's will. Such a belief inevitably makes a man impervious to reason and leads him to think that his own will can operate even beyond the limits of hard reality—whether that reality involves the presence of far superior enemy forces, problematic conditions with respect to space and time, or merely in the fact that the enemy also happens to have a will of his own.

“In the face of his will, the essential elements of the ‘appreciation’ of a situation on which every military commander's decision must be based were virtually eliminated. And with that, Hitler turned his back on reality.”

Manstein's counterposition of Hitler's obsession with the micro-management of small army formations, from a distance of hundreds or even thousands of miles, against the battle-proven Prussian military tradition of *Auftragstaktik*, could well have been made with reference to Rumsfeld's conduct today. “It has always been the special *forte* of German military leadership, that it relies on commanders at all levels to show initiative and willingness to accept responsibility, and does everything in its powers to promote such qualities,” Manstein said. “That is why, as a matter of principle, the ‘directives’ of higher commands and the orders of medium and lower commands always contained so-called ‘assignments’ or ‘missions’ (*Aufträge*) for subordinate formations. The detailed execution of these ‘assignments’ was the business of the subordinate commanders concerned. This system of handling orders was largely the reason for the successes scored by the German Army over its opponents, whose own orders generally governed the actions of subordinate commanders down to the very last detail. . . .

“Hitler, on the other hand, thought he could see things much better from behind his desk than the commanders at the front. He ignored the fact that much of what was marked on his far-too-detailed situation maps was obviously out of date. From that distance, moreover, he could not possibly judge what was the proper and necessary action to take on the spot.

“He had grown increasingly accustomed to interfering in the running of the army groups, armies, and lower formations by issuing orders which were not his concern at all. . . . There were to be quite enough clashes with the Supreme Command as a result of Hitler's meddling.”

Hitler's purge of the Army leadership in 1938—coupled with his creation of the OKW (Armed Forces High Command) assembly of yes-men and sycophantic mediocrities who translated his utopian ravings into military orders—bears remarkable similarity to Rumsfeld's purge of the joint planning staff, as reported by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*. Manstein wrote, “Hitler had so organized the Supreme Command that no one was vested with the authority to advise him on grand strategy or to draft a war plan. The Operations Staff of OKW, which was theoretically qualified to discharge such a task, in practice merely played the role of a military secretariat. Its only *raison d'être*, was to translate Hitler's ideas and instructions into the terminology of military orders.”