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"STONEWALL" JACKSON: A MILITARY GENIUS?
AN ANALYSIS USING THE CLAUSEWITZIAN FRAMEWORK

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INTRODUCTION

"Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees."¹ With these words on May 10, 1862, General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson passed from this world into the pages of history. Lord Frederick Roberts, commander in chief of the British armies in the early twentieth century remarked: "In my opinion Stonewall Jackson was one of the greatest natural military geniuses the world has ever saw. I will go further than that—as a campaigner in the field he never had a superior. In some respects I doubt whether he ever had an equal."² Jackson's near-mythical standing accentuated by his tragic death by fratricide is continually contrasted with his myriad eccentricities. On one hand he is called a military genius, on the other, a crazy fool and an idiot. General Douglas MacArthur characterized Jackson as "one of the most remarkable soldiers we have ever seen."³ Do we take the words of Roberts and MacArthur at face value and agree Jackson was a military genius? What tools do we have at our disposal to determine if indeed Jackson was a military genius? We can find the answer in Carl Von Clausewitz's On War.

This paper proposes Clausewitz has given us a framework for analysis of what constitutes a military genius. First, I will set the foundation for thinking through the necessary elements that make up the framework as outlined by

¹ James I. Robertson, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson: the Man, The Soldier, The Legend* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1997) 753

² *Ibid*, ix

³ *Ibid*, ix

Clausewitz. I will then use this framework to evaluate the life of Stonewall Jackson and determine if we can indeed call him a genius.

CLAUSEWITIZIAN FRAMEWORK FOR MILITARY GENIUS

Clausewitz theorizes that war is a phenomenon of three tendencies, forming a paradoxical trinity affecting military operations. The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. Clausewitz says "the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army."⁴ It is within the discussion of chance and the military commander we find his definition of military genius.

"The essence of military genius," according to Clausewitz, is the harmonious combination of "mind and temperament." His framework seems simple and straightforward: What we must do is to survey all those gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military genius.⁵ He also contends we must consider these elements within the climate of war: danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance. If we consider them together, it becomes evident how much fortitude of mind and character are needed to make progress in these impeding elements with safety and success.⁶ But where do we start? Do we

⁴ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1976), 89

⁵ Ibid , 100

⁶ Ibid , 104

have any entry-level qualifiers to help us in determining whom we can call a military genius?

The first qualifier we can use to determine if further analysis is warranted is the level of command. Clausewitz states “but history and posterity reserve the name of genius for those who have excelled in the highest positions—as commanders-in-chief—since here the demands for intellectual and moral powers are vastly greater.”⁷ But our list of military geniuses would be small indeed if one had to be the CINC. Clausewitz helps us out in this area by defining the CINC as someone who leads the army as a whole or commands in a theater of operations. Those who command at lower levels, although having their own intellectual standards and prerequisites for fame and honor, do not qualify for the title of military genius. The measure of success for the genius candidate can be summed up as “managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources.” In other words, the military genius understands the linkage between the ends and the means.

The next qualifying concept involves gifts of the mind and the idea of a rapid and accurate decision making process described by the French term, *coup d’oeil*. Distilled, this concept merely refers to the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection.⁸ Since war is the realm of danger, courage is called for. In

⁷ Ibid , 111

⁸ Ibid , 102

Clausewitzian terms, physical courage leaves the mind calmer while moral courage stimulates the mind. Since war is also the realm of uncertainty, a sensitive and discriminating judgement is required to combat fog and friction.

The “gifts of temperament” is the next area for consideration in our framework for military genius. Here, Clausewitz clearly defines determination: “which spells doubt, is a quality that can be aroused only by the intellect, and by a special cast of mind at that.”⁹ The term *courage d’esprit* is used, not as an act of the intellect, but as an act of temperament. Additionally, Clausewitz agrees the term determination also includes the propensity for “daring, pugnacity, boldness, or temerity.”

The final area of consideration is the related subject of presence of mind. Clausewitz delves into a close study of the interplay of psychological forces at work, using historical terms associated with war such as energy, firmness, staunchness, emotional balance, and strength of character. In contemporary terms we might list these as leadership principles or even characteristic traits of those who we might qualify as a military genius. The sum then of his qualifiers can be put into a framework for analyzing military genius. This is not a checklist—Clausewitz would cringe if we tried to associate him with any simple, easy to follow formula for determining military genius. He would rather we use his thoughts as a critical guide, as well as a tool in analyzing military genius.

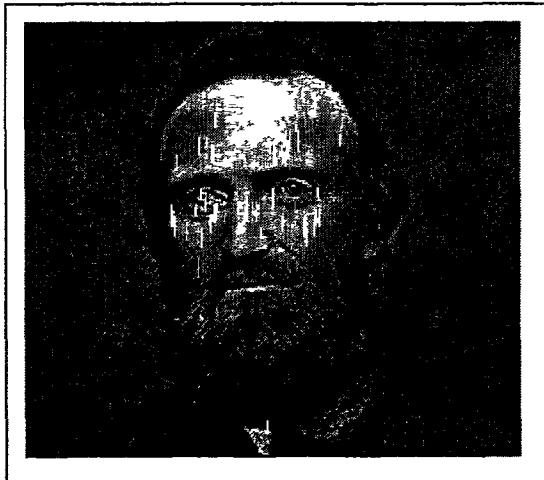
⁹ Ibid , 103

Figure 1 contains the framework we will use to determine if Stonewall Jackson can be classified as a military genius.

Framework for Military Genius (Basic Version)	
Level of Command	Is this individual a commander-in-chief? What level of success has been achieved? Are the ends, ways, and means balanced?
Gifts of the Mind	Does the individual possess <i>coup d'oeil</i> ? Do we see an inquiring mind? Does the individual have a comprehensive approach?
Gifts of Temperament	Do we find examples of "determination" in this individual? Does the individual possess <i>courage d'esprit</i> ?
Presence of Mind	In the face of danger (war) can we find continuing examples of energy, firmness, endurance, courage, emotional balance, and strength of character?

Figure 1. Clausewitzian Framework for Military Genius¹⁰

STONEWALL JACKSON: A MILITARY GENIUS?



Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born in Clarksburg, Virginia (now West Virginia) on January 21, 1824. He was left an orphan at an early age but later attended and graduated from West Point in 1846. On his own, Jackson

developed unwavering honesty, a powerful sense of integrity, and deep feelings

¹⁰ Synthesized from Clausewitz's discussion on military genius, *On War*, pages 100-112

of responsibility. He struggled initially at West Point, but his steadfast determination allowed him to succeed. While in the Mexican War, he fought with distinction and earned three brevet promotions. Jackson left the army in 1851 and for the next ten years was a professor of optics and artillery tactics at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI).

In 1861, Jackson returned to the Confederate Army, and by early 1862 had achieved the rank of Lieutenant General commanding almost half of Lee's army. He commanded a force of almost 32,000 troops in ninety-two regiments, along with twenty-three batteries of just under 100 cannon. The uniqueness of Jackson's command is that it was the more independent segment of Lee's army. It was the portion that Lee dispatched on wide-ranging activities with the full trust Jackson could get the job done.¹¹ His command then of a Confederate Army is his entry ticket to further analysis, and his measures of success secure him a place at the table.

History remembers him as "Stonewall," a name acquired in July 1861 at the battle of First Bull Run. Although only a brigade commander at the time, Jackson displayed a winning combination of leadership and character traits that would propel him to legendary status. "He took a ragtag band of Virginia farmers, some of his former students at VMI, a preacher or two, and some neighbors from Lexington and fought off a superiorly numbered Northern army

¹¹ Robertson, 631-633

that intended to invade his home state."¹² Thereafter, Stonewall went on to command his troops into such battles as the Valley Campaign (spring of 1862), Seven Days battle (June 1862, although slow and ineffective), Second Bull Run (August 1862), Antietam (September 1862), Fredericksburg (December 1862), and his last and greatest battle, Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863. General George Pickett said of Jackson, "If General Lee had Grant's resources he would soon end the war; but Old Jack (referring to Jackson) can do it without resources."¹³ Stonewall Jackson had the ability to keep his men alive, and the ability to balance the ends with his means.

Jackson did possess *coup d'oeil*. One of Jackson's classmates at West Point wrote in the 1880s:

His chief characteristics as a military leader were quick perceptions of the weak points of the enemy, his ever readiness, the astounding rapidity of his movements, his sudden and unexplained onslaughts, and the persistency with which he followed them up. His ruling maxim was that war meant fighting, and fighting meant killing, and right loyally did he live up to it.¹⁴

Throughout Jackson's campaigns, his ability to comprehend what needed to be done was uncanny, with some comparing his abilities to that of Napoleon. His inquiring mind can easily be seen by a review of his book of maxims. While at West Point, he kept a personal diary of ways to improve himself socially, intellectually, and spiritually. He maintained running lists of sayings and

¹² John Bowers, "The Stonewall Enigma," Experience at War, Robert Cowley ed (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992), 188

¹³ Robertson, 633

¹⁴ Robertson, xii

proverbs dealing with such topics as choice of friends, rules of conversation, and general principles or maxims. One of his most famous maxims dealing with personal resolve was: "You may be whatever you resolve to be."¹⁵

From the time Jackson was labeled as a member of the "Immortals", the weakest section of the West Point class, he was determined to succeed. He finished his courses of study ranked seventeenth out of fifty-nine graduates, and amassed only seven demerits during his final year at West Point. His steadfast determination was noted by General Twiggs during the Mexican War where he cited Jackson for "coolness and determination. whilst under fire."¹⁶ Jackson's determination on the battlefield is also legendary.

The Valley Campaign he orchestrated is still studied in military schools as an example of how speed and use of terrain can compensate for inferior numbers. Jackson's army of 17,000 men had outmaneuvered three separate enemy forces with a combined strength of 33,000 and had won five battles. Liddell Hart would compliment Jackson on his tactical successes by the use of the indirect approach, while Clausewitz would commend him on the psychological aspects of war he brought to the battlefield. Likewise, Sun Tzu would approve of Jackson's own formula for success: "Always mystify, mislead, and surprise your enemy." Viscount Wolseley, later to become commander in chief of the British

¹⁵ Robertson, 153-157

¹⁶ Robertson, 64

army, commented that Jackson's determination in warfare "stamped him as a military genius of a very high order."¹⁷

The final area of analysis in our Clausewitzian framework deals with presence of mind. In the face of danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance, does Stonewall Jackson have what it takes to complete the military genius picture? In one example we find not only examples of his courage and strength of character, but *coup d'oeil* as well. During the Gaines' Mill engagement of the Seven Days Campaign .

Early in the evening, Jackson rode in front of his troops with two or three staff officers. He wished to make a personal reconnaissance of the land. Suddenly, the general found himself in the presence of fifteen or twenty Federal soldiers. Recovering before they did, Jackson demanded their immediate surrender. The men laid down their arms one of the Union prisoners in front shouted as loud as he could. "Gentlemen, we had the honor of being captured by Stonewall Jackson!"¹⁸

Although this is but one example, a study of Jackson produces many more incidents where his energy, firmness, and strength of character can be seen within the context of the climate of war. A study of this nature would also produce volumes of eccentricities such as holding one arm up to provide balance and returning blood back into his body to "lighten the load." Within this context, we may be inclined to discard Jackson as a military genius. But we need to consider and heed Clausewitz's words on the combination of the elements of

¹⁷ Robertson, 445-448

¹⁸ Robertson, 483

genius: "Genius consists in a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest."¹⁹ Did Jackson possess this harmonious combination? The answer is yes, and, after using Clausewitz's framework to analyze the life of Jackson and determine if he can be classified as a military genius, the answer again is yes. Jackson has all the gifts of mind and temperament Clausewitz says exist in a military genius and should be afforded that title.



One final thought Clausewitz concludes his chapter on military genius asking who we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country. For the Confederate States of America, Stonewall Jackson was that choice.

¹⁹ Clausewitz, 100