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**Storia Militare Moderna**

a cura di  
VIRGILIO ILARI



*Società Italiana di Storia Militare*

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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma  
Contatti: [direzione@nam-sigm.org](mailto:direzione@nam-sigm.org) ; [virgilio.ilari@gmail.com](mailto:virgilio.ilari@gmail.com)

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*In copertina:* Targa sbalzata e ageminata appartenuta a Enrico II, re di Francia, attribuita a Étienne Delaune, Jean Cousin il Vecchio e Baptiste Pellerin, Fontainebleau 1555 circa, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 34.85. Public domain.

*Recensioni*  
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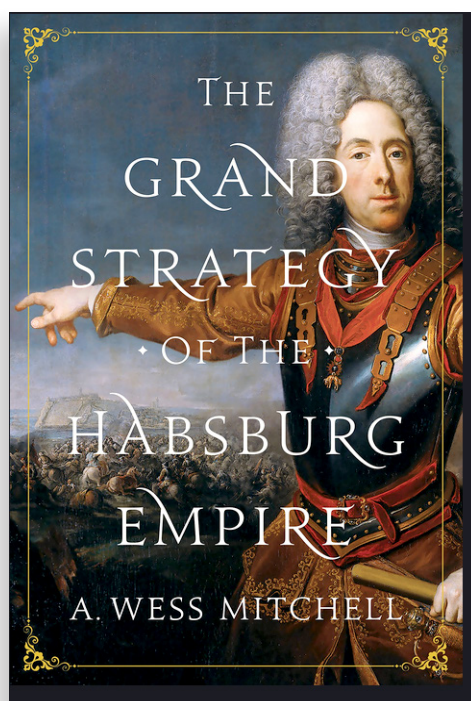


ARON WESS MITCHELL,

*The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire,  
1700–1866.*

*A Study In Interstitial Time Management.*

Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2018.



1.

**T**he analogies between the American “empire“ and empires of the past have inspired, since the seventies of the last century, a number of historical works, notably among them: “*The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*” (1976) and of the “*Byzantine Empire*” (2009) by Edward Luttwak. Looking in the mirror, Americans think of themselves as the new Romans (or even East-

ern Romans) although the Athenian paradigm of the democratic thalassocracy was quite fashionable until Graham Allison, in his *“Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?”* (2017) identified the US with the defender of the “status quo”, Sparta, confronting a rising Athens, i.e. the People’s Republic of China.

More surprising but no less interesting are the strategic lessons that Aaron Wess Mitchell draws upon the history of the Habsburg empire, between the War of the Spanish Succession (1700-1714) and the “War of the Seven Weeks” (1866) that expelled, after six centuries, the dynasty from Germany. Curiously, the author does not conclude its essay with the downfall of the Empire, in 1918, after a prolonged struggle on many fronts.

The author is a renowned US scholar, co-Founder of the Center for European Policy Analysis, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs between 2017 and 2019. The Secretary General of NATO has recently appointed Wess Mitchell as Co-Chairman of the High Level Reflection Group. Among his previous works, it is notable: *“The Unquiet Frontier, rising rivals, vulnerable allies and the crisis of American Power”*, an essay co-written with Jakub Grygiel in 2016. The essay stresses the crucial value of traditional alliances in dealing with the challenges posed by Russia, China and Iran. “Great-Power Competition” is the name of the game after 15 years of “Long War “ on terrorism and the book by Wess Mitchell and Grygiel is said to have been taken as a reference in the formulation of the 2017 National Security Strategy by General Mc Master.

## 2.

The starting point of Wess Mitchell’s book is well chosen. The extinction of the once powerful Spanish branch of the dynasty, in 1700, and the subsequent, long war between France and the anti-hegemonic “Grand Alliance” led by Britain, the Holy Roman Empire and the Dutch Republic, was the first of the many tests of survival that the Austrian Habsburgs had to go through. In a way, the War of the Spanish Succession already displayed some of the fundamental elements of the Habsburgs’ Grand Strategy: terrain, technology and treaties.

The Habsburg’s standing army, however, was born during the “Thirty Years War”. Soon afterwards, Raimondo Montecuccoli, the Italian generalissimo who



inflicted a historic defeat on the Ottoman army at Sankt Gotthard in 1664, became the founding father of the Austrian military tradition.

According to Mitchell, the main feature of the Habsburg Strategy was time-management and sequencing of the threats, relying mainly on a defensive military strategy and an active diplomacy. On one hand, being a central (“interstitial”) power exposed the Habsburg Empire to multiple threats coming from different quarters. On the other hand, the lack of centralization, the absence of a “Fiscal Military State” like the French and the Prussian ones, the multi-ethnic and multilingual composition of its population were all factors, which did not favour an offensive strategy.

In 1714, the Habsburgs did not recover their Spanish legacy, as Emperor Charles VI had wished, but retained most their European domains: the Southern Netherlands, Lombardy, Naples and Sardinia, subsequently exchanged with Sicily in 1720. The war marked the ascendancy of Prince Eugene of Savoy, the victorious Commander in Chief and President of the War Council (“Hofkriegsrat”) from 1703 to his death in 1736. Eugene was the quintessential “Grand Strategist” and laid the foundations of Habsburg strategy for the years to come.

The War Council was a kind of National Security Council that advised the Emperor, but actually decided on security policy, strategy and logistics. When the President of the Council coincided with the Commander in Chief (“the generalissimo”) as was the case with Montecuccoli, Prince Eugene and Prince Schwarzenberg, consistency between foreign policy and strategy ensued. Eugene succeeded, with his victories on the battlefield and thanks to his fine political and diplomatic skills, to restore Habsburg pre-eminence within the Holy Roman Empire and in Northern Italy. The victorious campaign of 1716-1718 secured the Ottoman frontier.

As it often happens with great leaders, Eugene left no heir but one: Frederick II of Prussia, the sworn enemy of the Danubian Monarchy for more than thirty years. Therefore, at the death of Charles VI, his daughter and heir, Maria Theresa had to face multiple threats, which put the survival of the hereditary lands at stake.

By carefully managing time and sequencing the different threats, concluding temporary peace with her bitter foe (Frederick) at the price of losing her richest province (Silesia), compromising with the Hungarian nobility, getting sup-

port from Britain against France and from Sardinia to shield Lombardy from France and Spain, Maria Theresa avoided catastrophe in the War of the Austrian Succession. Maria Theresa, after recruiting the best diplomat of her time, Wenzel von Kaunitz, secured the election for her husband as Holy Roman Emperor and recovered most of her possessions at the Peace of Aachen.

After the war, Kaunitz became the mastermind of a great coalition which put Austria, France, Russia and Sweden against “the Monster” (“*der Ungeheuer*”) i.e. Frederick II, while Prince von Liechtenstein reorganized the artillery to offset the superior firepower of Prussian line infantry.

During the Seven Years War, the defensive strategy of Field Marshal Laudon brought its fruits by repelling the Prussian pre-emptive strike against Saxony but, at the same time, the reluctance to take the offensive against the Prussian king that had to face the Russian onslaught from the East, ultimately let the attrition war end in stalemate. At the end of the war, Austria, while not recovering Silesia, succeeded in restoring Saxony - the buffer state – therefore enhancing its deterrence towards an exhausted Prussia.

The subsequent years saw a relative decline of Prussian military prowess, especially after the “War of Bavarian Succession” (“The Potato War”) that ended with a diplomatic draw. Austria blocked the Prussian advance in Bohemia thanks to its elaborate system of fortresses, the superiority of its artillery and the delaying tactics of its light troops. Joseph II, assisted by his chief strategist, Field Marshal von Lacy, realized that the Austrian Netherlands were defenceless and strategically a liability and tried, unsuccessfully - due to Prussian opposition - to exchange them with Bavaria. While his centralizing reforms sparked rebellion both in the Netherlands and in Hungary, Joseph wisely stroke an alliance with Russia that would endure for 70 years. The development of geospatial intelligence- through the drawing of highly detailed maps of the Habsburg lands and of adjoining frontier territories - and the construction of new fortresses added valuable assets to the defensive system of the Habsburg Empire.

### 3.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars put an end (1806) to the Holy Roman Empire and represented a new test of fire for the Austrian Habsburgs. Once again Old Austria survived the storm that changed the geopolitical land-

scape of Europe. After suffering four defeats from Napoleon in 12 years, (1797, 1801, 1805 and 1809) Austria re-emerged, in 1814, as the leader of the Allied Coalition that brought about his downfall. The architects of the resurrection of the Austrian Empire from the ashes of the Holy Roman Empire, under the nominal authority of Emperor Francis II, were his brother, Archduke Charles, the generalissimo who first defeated Napoleon on a battlefield and re-organized the Army, Field Marshal Prince zu Schwarzenberg and Prince von Metternich.

At the Vienna Congress, Metternich brought back Austria to centre stage making of it the pivot of the Concert of Europe. Austria relinquished the defence of the Rhine frontier to Prussia (“The Watch on Rhine”) but kept Germany under its political control through the German Confederacy. Metternich succeeded in restoring supremacy in Italy and in securing the eastern border through the renewal of the Russian Alliance. The diplomatic system created by Metternich maintained peace and stability, defusing crises with summit diplomacy, limited military interventions and close police co-operation. The new “rounded off” borders, without the western outposts (Belgium and “Vorderösterreich” – Breisgau-), allowed Vienna to plan a defensive strategy based on buffer States, fortresses and military alliances, that preserved the very existence of the Empire through the 1848 revolutionary storm.

The new military saviour, in 1848–49 was Field Marshal Josef Radetzky, who defeated the Sardinian Army at Custoza and, finally, at Novara. Decisive, however, was the Russian intervention in Hungary to suppress the revolt against the Habsburg rule. It was the last intervention in the name of solidarity among the monarchs of the Holy Alliance.

The young Emperor, Francis Joseph, saved by the warriors of the older generation, wasted the fruits of victory in the following years. Having humiliated Sardinia and Prussia, Austria should have expected, eventually, revenge from its Northern and Southern neighbours. It was, however, on the diplomatic turf that the Habsburg Empire was outmanoeuvred, first by Cavour and later by Bismarck. The “Metternich system” that survived his creator well after 1848, ended with the Crimean War. Austrian diplomacy committed the fatal mistake of not supporting its traditional Russian ally and of siding with the Western powers, Britain and France, on the Eastern question. When Cavour skilfully provoked Vienna to go to war over Lombardy, Austria found itself isolated, facing a French Army allied

with Sardinia. Still, the high casualties suffered at Solferino and the prospect of prolonged siege warfare around the fortresses of the “Quadrilatero”, compelled Napoleon III to make peace with Austria. Retaining Venetia did not preclude, however, the birth of a united Italian State in a couple of years, after the demise of Austrian satellites in Northern and Central Italy, the conquest of the Kingdom of the Two Sicily and the annexation of most of the Papal States. The establishment on its South Western border of Italy, the third “hereditary foe” after the Ottoman Empire and France, would be fatal for the Monarchy, in 1918.

The Austrian defeat in the Seven Weeks War marked the expulsion of the Habsburg from Germany and most of Northern Italy. The Monarchy, fallen into the diplomatic trap set by Bismarck after the Second Schleswig-Holstein War, was crushed by the most powerful war machine of Europe, the Prussian Army of Helmuth von Moltke. On the Italian Front, however, the traditional defensive strategy, anchored to the fortresses of the “Quadrilatero”, paid off. Archduke Albrecht, the son of Charles, “the generalissimo” of the Napoleonic Wars, once again defeated the Italian Army at Custoza, while the small Austrian Navy, under the command of Rear Admiral von Tegetthoff, scored a great naval victory over the superior Italian Navy.

The Empire restyled in 1867, after the constitutional agreement with Hungary, as Austria-Hungary, survived for another 50 years until the Apocalypse of World War One. For the author, after the Seven Weeks War the fate of Austria-Hungary was doomed, and the World War One, fought on three fronts allied with a “revisionist” power such as Imperial Germany, was the final act of a former great power that forgot the very principles of its grand strategy.

#### 4.

In his conclusion (“Interstitial Empires, Then and Now”), the author draws some lessons upon the overall successful (two centuries) survival strategy of an “interstitial” great power that are still relevant for the United States of today. According to Mitchell:

«... a Great Power which faces threats on every side is unlikely to be able to sustainably match the strength of all of its enemies on all of its frontiers at all times. Trying to do so will generate economic burdens in peacetime that are beyond the ability of the state to bear and, in wartime, stretch its military capabilities to the breaking point...»

The ability to fight and win two major conventional wars at a time, a tenet of US Grand Strategy after the Cold War, seems not be attainable any more. The US nowadays «... is an interstitial power on a global scale, flanked by rivals that vary from revisionist Great Powers to rogue regimes armed with nuclear weapons and non-state terrorist groups.» In the current context of Great Power Competition, involving more than one rival, in a threat environment à *tous azimuth*, and with a widening gap between available resources and multiple challenges, the US should take into account lessons from the Grand Strategy of the Austrian Habsburgs.

Therefore, the US should put aside the traditional annihilation strategy of decisively defeating any emerging threat and shift to a more time-sequenced strategy based on the assumption that multiple threats can materialize from different quarters. From this perspective, Wess Mitchell's essay looks like a blueprint for a new "Grand Strategy" for the US, which appears to be in tune with the strategic *Zeitgeist*. Of course, geopolitical analogies cannot go too far. For instance, how much interstitial is the US, as the established naval super-power, compared to its continental rivals, Russia and China? Are they not facing threats from different corners as well? Are Russia and China less multiethnic than the US? Nonetheless, Wess Mitchell is right in highlighting the strategic lessons of a great empire of the past for the American superpower of today.

## 5.

Aaron Wess Mitchell's essay is an excellent, well-documented and scholarly work in comparative strategy, based on thorough historical research. Looking at the Habsburg Monarchy from a strategic perspective, highlighting not only its well-known weaknesses but also its survival skills, breaks new ground in European and Austrian historiography. Until recently, the «Prussian paradigm» in military history has prevailed and Austrian strategy and military school have been, more often than not, underestimated.

The naval dimension of the Austrian Habsburg's strategy, although playing a minor role, might have been inquired by the author. Not considering the "river war" on the Danube against the Ottomans, all along the XVII and XVIII centuries, the Austrian Navy began to be a player in the Mediterranean after the annexation of Venice. Until 1848 it was called the «Venetian-Austrian Navy», based in Venice and with many Venetian officers in the leading positions. The

Navy, with its Levant Squadron, joined the Royal Navy in the naval campaign of the Orient Crisis of 1840. After the 1848 Revolution the Austrian Navy lost most of its Venetian officers and was reorganized by Admiral Dahlerup, a Danish experienced officer. The new Austrian Navy was quite effective during the War with Denmark, at the Battle of Helgoland, and triumphed over the superior Italian Navy at Lissa. By reacting to the Italian incursion in the Adriatic, von Tegetthoff staved off the Italian attempt to project power on the Coast of Dalmatia. In the timeframe between 1866 and 1918, Austria-Hungary, although not a colonial power, developed an enterprising maritime policy, relying on the port of Trieste and on the Lloyd Shipping Company, to foster its trade. The deployment of a Naval Squadron in the Far East and the participation in the multinational expedition against the Boxer revolt secured Austria-Hungary a place among the eight dominant powers in China («the first G-8») and a foothold in Shanghai as well. During World War One, the Austrian-Hungarian Navy not only played the role of a “fleet in being” covered by the natural defensive position of the Dalmatian Coast (terrain) but also resorted to submarine warfare (technology). The Allied naval blockade in the Strait of Otranto strangled Austria-Hungary as it did with Germany in the North Sea.

The history of the Habsburg Empire has often been a narrative of “decline and fall”, even in the most nostalgic works about *Felix Austria*. Wess Mitchell recognizes the “writing on the wall” soon after the War of 1866. Maybe, it would have been worthwhile to carry on his excellent analysis to its conclusion in 1918, also in light of new history works, like the remarkable *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* by Christopher Clark (2012).

EMANUELE FARRUGIA

# Storia militare moderna

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