

Choosing Our Battles

by Earl P. Holt III

There's a famous and oft-quoted line from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* that "***the better part of valor is discretion.***" Rarely is any cause advanced by rashly sacrificing one's resources, as epitomized in Tennyson's "***The Charge of the Light Brigade.***" It is much wiser to choose your battles carefully, particularly where you can bide your time and improve your chances of victory by gaining an advantage over an enemy.

Thermopylae: When a massive Persian army led by Xerxes attempted to invade Greece in 480 B.C., an alliance of Greek city-states led by Spartan King Leonidas ventured out to engage the Persians by heading them off at the narrow, coastal pass named *Thermopylae*. The Greeks recognized that within the narrow confines of Thermopylae, the Persians would be unable to outflank or otherwise successfully maneuver around the badly outnumbered Greek forces.

Although eventually defeated, the Greeks were able to halt the advance of the Persians for seven days until the last Spartan was finally killed. The sacrifices of the Greek warriors at Thermopylae allowed the Greek navy at Artemisium to retreat to the Island of Salamis, where it later achieved a great victory over the Persian armada at the Battle of Salamis. After that defeat, Xerxes withdrew his forces from Greece.

Agincourt: This was the final and decisive battle of the *Hundred Years War* between England and France that took place on October 25 of 1415, immortalized in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The English army under Henry engaged a vastly larger French army that outnumbered them by as much as two-to-one or even three-to-one.

Henry's generals wisely chose to fight on a dry and solid section of the battlefield near the town of Agincourt, requiring the French to cross several hundred yards of rain-soaked and muddy terrain, reportedly knee-deep in some places. This left the French soldiers and their mounts exhausted by the time they finally reached the English, and extremely vulnerable to the arrows of English longbows as they slowly advanced through the mud. The result was one of history's great massacres.

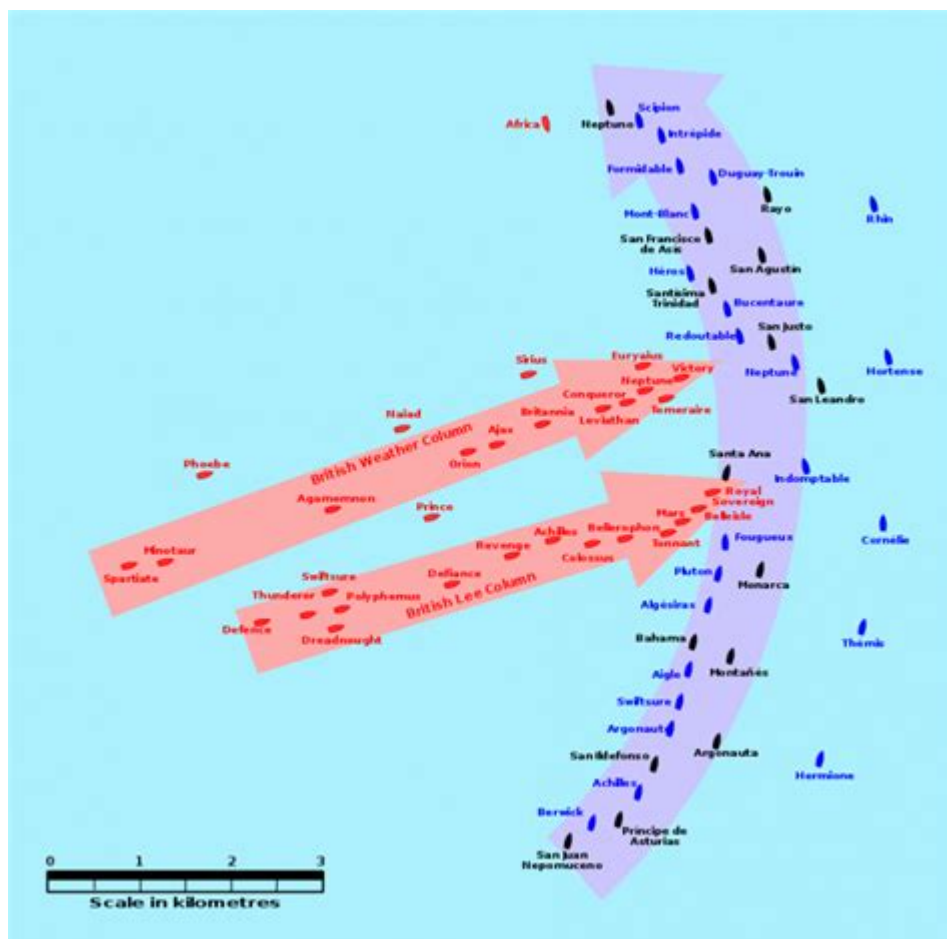
Battle of Trenton: After being driven from New York in 1776 by British forces during the American Revolutionary War, General Washington's Continental Army sought refuge in Pennsylvania to lick its wounds. Morale was low and desertions were high. Out of desperation, Washington devised a plan to cross the Delaware River into Trenton, New Jersey, in the early morning hours of December 26th, 1776 and capture its garrison of 1,500 Hessians (German mercenaries) loyal to Britain.

With the Hessians recovering from the after-effects of a Christmas Celebration, Washington crossed the Delaware in the dead of night in sleeting and hazardous conditions. Although 3,000 of the planned 5,400 man force were unable to cross due to weather conditions, Washington led the remaining 2,400 in a surprise attack that seized the garrison and captured two-thirds of the Hessians, with negligible losses on the American side. While it was only a small victory, the Battle of Trenton provided an enormous boost in morale, and generated many new recruits and reenlistments that helped to revitalize the Continental Army.

Trafalgar: During the Napoleonic Wars, a combined fleet of 33 French and Spanish ships set sail from the Spanish Port of Cadiz intending to dominate the English Channel and provide safe passage for Napoleon's army to invade England. On October 18, 1805, this *Franco-Spanish* fleet

was met off Spain's Atlantic Coast near Cape Trafalgar by Admiral Nelson's British Royal Navy consisting of a fleet of 27 ships.

Although outnumbered, Nelson abandoned orthodox naval tactics and attacked the flank of the enemy's single column of ships as it headed north, using two parallel columns of British ships that attacked east and perpendicular to the enemy's fleet. This split the combined Franco-Spanish fleet into thirds, and sowed great confusion among the enemy which was too close to the shoals of Cape Trafalgar to maneuver adequately. Nelson's tactic resulted in one of history's most celebrated naval victories, in which the combined Franco-Spanish fleet lost 22 ships, and the British Royal Navy lost not a one.



Battle of Trafalgar

Battle of San Jacinto: After Mexican General Santa Anna captured the Alamo and executed every surviving combatant, his army then pursued General Sam Houston's smaller, rag-tag army of volunteers all over what is now south-central Texas. Santa Anna's ultimate goal was to destroy Houston's army and thereby end the *Texas Revolution*.

On the afternoon of April 21, 1836, Houston's army initiated a surprise counter-attack against Santa Anna's forces from below their encampment on a plateau, in what would become the final and decisive battle of the *Texas Revolution*. With the battle cry "**Remember the Alamo**" ringing in every man's ears, Houston's army took 18 minutes to massacre the larger army of Santa Anna in one of the most lopsided victories in the history of warfare, which historians have named the *Battle of San Jacinto*.

Battle of New Orleans: This was the final battle in the *War of 1812*, fought on January 8th of 1815 between Britain and the fledgling United States. After burning the White House and occupying Washington DC, British forces planned to capture New Orleans as a prelude to control of the Mississippi River and newly-acquired territories within the *Louisiana Purchase*. Aware of an impending invasion of the Gulf Coast, Major General Andrew Jackson arrived in New Orleans on December 1st of 1814 and began the task of hastily assembling an army of volunteer militia.

On January 8th of 1815, the British landed near New Orleans and began their slog across the coastal marshland to reach New Orleans from the southeast. Jackson's impromptu militia engaged the British from behind their own cotton-bale, timber and earthen ramparts and decimated the numerically superior invading British force, first with the expert marksmanship of their cannoneers at long range and later, at close range with their muskets. In an ironic reversal of the English victory at Agincourt, British forces were *sitting ducks* at New Orleans, allowing

General Jackson's army to pick them apart as they advanced through the bog.

Battle of the Bulge: By mid-December of 1944, the *Allied Expeditionary Force* (AEF) that landed at Normandy on *D-Day* was concentrated in Eastern Belgium, across the Rhine from Nazi Germany. In response, Hitler's Generals devised a brilliant but desperate counter-offensive that punched through the AEF's thinly-defended northern forces near the *Ardennes Forest* in what historians have termed "*The Battle of the Bulge.*"

In response to this German counter-offensive of 26 *Panzer* and *Tiger* Divisions, Eisenhower hastily ordered the *101st* and *82nd Airborne Divisions* -- and fragments of other artillery units -- to be trucked to the quaint but critical Belgian town of Bastogne to defend it. Both sides recognized Bastogne was the "**KEY**" to the *Battle of the Bulge*, because it was the intersection of eight roads in a rural area where few roads existed. Eisenhower's orders were to hold Bastogne **"AT ALL COSTS."**

The ultimate goal of Hitler's Generals was the port city of Antwerp, Belgium -- a mere 100 miles west-northwest of Bastogne -- through which flowed the fuel, ammo, food and reserve forces that supplied the AEF. If the Germans could take Bastogne, they had a clear and unimpeded path to Antwerp, where they could disrupt allied supply lines and leave the AEF stranded and vulnerable in Eastern Belgium. **There was no alternative: Bastogne HAD to be defended.**

For two weeks, the *101st* and *82nd Airborne* fought heroically to hold off every German advance in what became the greatest land battle of the *European Theater*. The 82nd and 101st were two of America's most highly decorated combat units in W.W. II, and they showed why by ferociously repulsing repeated German attempts to enter and seize Bastogne. They immortalized themselves by fighting as tenaciously as the defenders of the Alamo or the Greeks at Thermopylae, and even

ridiculed a "*surrender or die*" ultimatum from the German Commander. Their courage and tenacity bought critical time that ultimately allowed three Divisions from Patton's Third Army to relieve Bastogne and its defenders, effectively ending all hopes of Germany's conquest of Europe.

The purpose of this brief survey of historic battles is to illustrate the advantages of discretely using time, terrain and tactics as "*force-multipliers*" when engaging a superior force. Rather than charge headlong into an enemy and squander resources -- as the *Light Brigade* unwisely did in Tennyson's poem -- it is far better to choose an opportune moment or method of attack, and one that improves the likelihood of victory.

Instead of foolishly attempting to occupy the Capitol Building in Washington -- or participate in a crackpot scheme to abduct a corrupt and useless Michigan Governor -- the opportunity for such an historic victory for decent Americans may very well take place on November 8th of this year. Let's not screw it up, beforehand.