

## Strategy and Semiosis: Insights from Operation Fortitude

Paul Ryder

University of New South Wales

### Abstract

The European summer of 1944 saw what is arguably the greatest deception wrought through deliberate miscommunication. Operation Fortitude focussed on convincing the Nazis that the invasion of Europe would come not at Normandy but further north at the Pas-de-Calais. Seeing the enemy almost completely wrong-footed, Fortitude remains the most devastating deception in the history of warfare. It is also a campaign that teaches us a great deal about the internal dynamics and semiotics of strategy more generally. Accordingly, I propose that Operation Fortitude speaks profoundly to the principle of polysemy and to the related idea that, in competitive fields, strategic design may see to it that we are deceived into misreading tactics in relation to their informing concepts. Directly related to the above, the paper proposes that, since it is always founded upon a more or less difficult-to-fathom conceptual core, all strategy *inevitably* deceives—and that the question of deception is merely a matter of degree. Further to the above, I also argue that Operation Fortitude teaches us that, at its heart, good strategy seldom depends upon a singular concept but upon several cooperating abstractions. The paper's final substantive point is that Operation Fortitude reminds us that in order to think productively about strategy, it pays to bear in mind the following military principle: at its most effective, strategy is a unique and exquisitely synergistic coupling of objectives, concepts, and (dehabitualised) tactics.

*In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.*

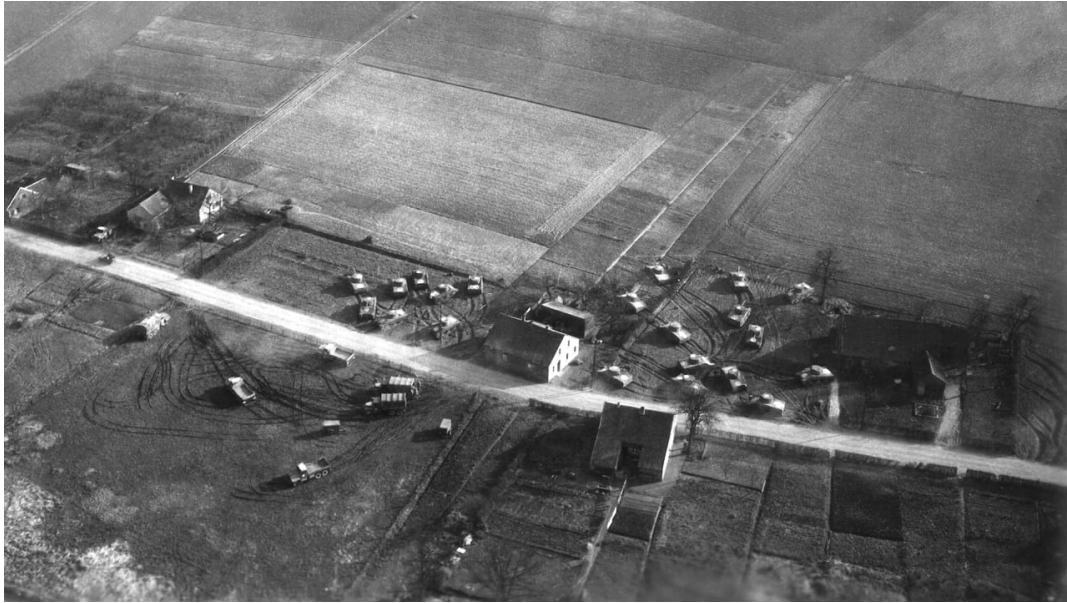
Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister

The European summer of 1944 saw what is arguably the greatest deception ever wrought through deliberate miscommunication. Everybody, including the Germans, knew that the Allies would soon cross the English Channel—but the enemy had to be kept from learning just where (Beevor, 2009, p.3). Subordinate to Operation Bodyguard—the codename for the broader strategy of deception vis-à-vis the invasion of Europe—Operation Fortitude focussed on convincing the Germans that the main attack would come not at Normandy but further north at the Pas-de-Calais. Operation Fortitude—‘the most ambitious deception in the history of warfare (*op. cit.*)’—saw to it that the Nazis were almost completely wrongfooted. Rather than positioning lethal panzer tank divisions close to the Normandy coastline where they would almost certainly have repelled the invaders, the Germans were instead deceived into holding these too far back while distributing other resources along the entire length of the French coastline opposite England’s southern shores. So it was that on 06 June 1944, those defending the Normandy coastline found themselves hopelessly overstretched. Fortitude, then, was a magnificent deception on a grand scale. It dwarfed Operation Uranus—Georgy Zhukov’s, Aleksandr Vasilevsky’s, and Nikolai N. Veronov’s breathtaking *maskirovka* (or strategy of deception) of late 1942—that would result in the encirclement, smashing, and surrender of Friedrich Paulus’ Sixth Army at Stalingrad, an extraordinary turning of the tide achieved when Paulus was within mere metres of taking the city in its entirety.

Having been surprised and humiliated by the Russians at Stalingrad and elsewhere, the Germans could not have imagined that they would, once again, be so comprehensively and consequentially taken in. An enemy they had once driven to the beaches of Dunkirk engineered a strategy founded less on secrecy *per se* and more on a tripartite conceptual schema supported by false tactical signifiers. As to the question of secrecy, it is true that the British regime of censorship was extraordinarily tight and that this did play a significant role in the success of the Normandy landings (Beevor, 2009, p.13). Far more importantly, however, the British security services had captured all German agents operating in Britain and had ‘turned’ most into double agents who, via their handlers, sent documents bearing fake news back to Berlin. Known as the ‘double cross system’, this textual deception was a key element of the Allies’ strategy (Masterman, 1972/2007, *passim*). In addition to the double cross system, and under the guidance of Hollywood’s special effects people, Operation Fortitude depended on an elaborate visual deception opposite the Pas-de-Calais where the Germans expected to see a concentration of Allied manpower and equipment. After all, this was the point of shortest crossing and so logic would dictate that the springboard for the invasion would most likely be Kent.

Here, disgraced American General George S. Patton—who had been temporarily stood down by General Eisenhower for slapping shell-shocked soldiers—‘commanded’ a make-believe 1<sup>st</sup> US Army Group: FUSAG. The Germans could not accept that Eisenhower would squander on a mere feint his most ruthless and, arguably, most effective general—and so they never questioned the veracity of the army that he led. Clearly, then, Patton was himself a key signifier. And as for the lightly-staffed FUSAG, it was a full ruse—‘designed primarily with enemy airborne photoreconnaissance in mind (Holt, 2008, Vol. 1, p.69)’. FUSAG’s equipment was almost entirely fake: dummy landing craft, wooden airplanes, inflatable rubber tanks, trucks, jeeps, and the like. These counterfeits—convincing enough on the ground and utterly convincing from eight-thousand feet—were photographed by the handful of German reconnaissance aircraft that made it across the channel.





The Germans, then, saw what they expected to see—and this contributed to a growing conviction that the main thrust of the invasion would indeed be towards the Pas-de-Calais. Confirming this, World War Two’s most famous double agent—aptly code-named Garbo—fed the Germans a feast of misinformation suggesting that while Normandy was likely to see some action, any activity opposite was a pageant meant to keep them in false gaze.

Operation Fortitude’s final, and arguably most important, conceptual component was an elaborate aural deception that took the name ‘Quicksilver II’. Quicksilver II found tactical expression in the form of fake radio traffic that imitated the manoeuvrings and communications of Patton’s ‘Ghost Army’. Together with the British 3118th Signal Service group, the U.S. 3103<sup>rd</sup> Signal Battalion went to great lengths to not only mimic the sound of troops and equipment moving *en masse* into Kent but to craft scripts ostensibly emanating from the three services that would inevitably be involved in the assault: the army, the navy, and the air force. While the Germans thought they were in receipt of impeccable intelligence from Garbo and others, and while they were able to secure some images from the reconnaissance aircraft that managed to get past the Allies’ now far superior fighter defences, so as to fill in the gaps they were forced to rely on intercepted radio traffic. As Ernest Tavares (2001, p.18) notes, the execution of the wireless deception program was exceptional. Since the Germans’ wireless intelligence was also exceptional, it had to be. For instance, Anthony Brown (1975, p.464) notes that German operators could have British units’ headquarters identified to within five miles in just a few hours. While a moot point that this expert

capacity still existed in 1944 (see Holt, 2008, Vol. 1, pp.51-52), this nonetheless necessitated tight security and the pitch-perfect communication of credible falsehoods.

What does this extraordinary case study of deliberate miscommunication in the most combative of contexts tell us? What lessons might those researching or working in the fields of strategic communication and semiotics learn from this remarkable strategy of deception? First of all, while bearing in mind Peirce's dictum that 'nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as sign (1931-58, 2.172)', we might reflect on the fact that literal or reductive readings often lead to error; that the myopic coupling of a signifier to a singular signified (dangerously) denies the Derridean principle of polysemous 'play' (1978, p.25). Beginning with visual perception, and as Shakespeare assures us, the desire for 'ocular proof' is deeply embedded in the human psyche: if we can only *see*, then, against all reason, we may be 'satisfied (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3. iii. 395).' This is a theme picked up by Martin Jay whose *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993) traces the development of 'modern ocularcentrism (p.29).' Suggesting that the eye intoxicates, deceives, and finally blinds—and echoing Foucault's argument that the modern era privileges observation as 'perceptible knowledge (1970, p.132)'—Jay notes that, in the modern world, an 'oscillation among models of speculation, observation, and revelation' guarantees 'a visually privileged order of knowledge (p.236).' On the other hand, while acknowledging the critical importance of visual perception, in their 2019 *Foreign Affairs* article "Deepfakes and the New Disinformation War" Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron propose that 'while a picture may be worth a thousand words...there is nothing that persuades quite like an audio or video recording... (p.147).' Of course, and as the Operation Fortitude case study strongly suggests, when one is subject to *both* visual and aural deception, impacts are commonly profound.

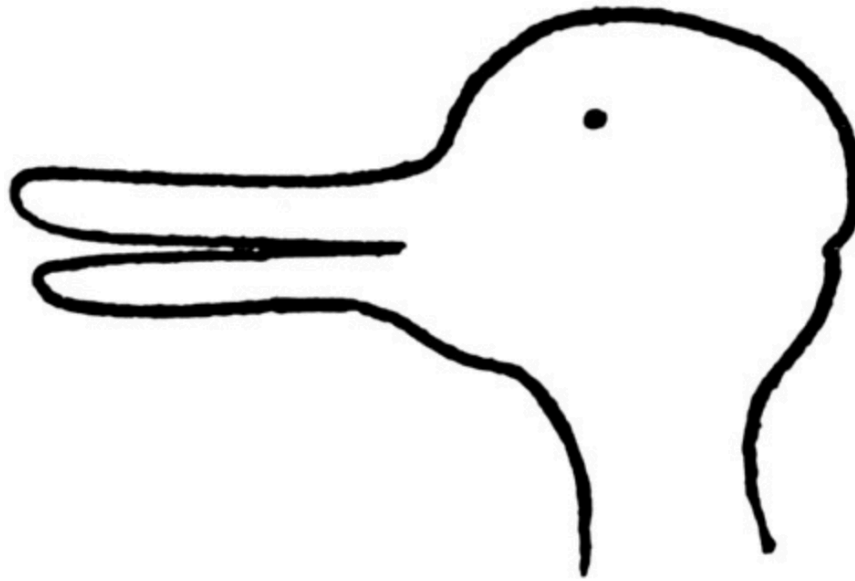
A recent article by Cristian Vaccari and Andrew Chadwick considers just this point, arguing that 'domestic and international policy actors will employ deepfakes'—videos in which a facsimile of a subject is rendered indistinguishable from the original—'in different ways, from the relatively innocuous, such as public service chatbots, to the pernicious, such as creating and spreading false videos of opponents (2020, p.10).' Contrary to the view of Chesney and Citron, above, the authors argue that while visual images are generally privileged over and above aural stimuli, where images and audio content are brought together a special 'metacognitive experience' manifests in which the 'familiar'—say, the perfect image of a political figure— combines with other forms of technical acuity to form a truth (*op. cit.* p. 2). By way of example, Vaccari and Chadwick consider the well-

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known 2018 deepfake in which former US President Barack Obama crassly excoriates Donald Trump. In fact, Obama's image had been digitised while his voice had been mimicked by actor and comedian Jordan Peele. While the 'real' Obama goes on (in the video) to expose the underlying truth, the fact that the deepfake achieved five million views and 83,000 shares bears thoughtful consideration. Also worthy of consideration is that while the deepfake is a product of contemporary machine learning, Operation Fortitude suggests that the device has significant in principle antecedents. Through the estrangement of traditional tactics including the mobilisation and concentration of men and materiel, the engagement of spies, and the use of radio, the architects of Operation Fortitude duped the Germans into thinking that the Pas de Calais had to be the focus of the Allied strategy. To channel Michael Riffaterre (1978), in a sense, the Allies rendered the ungrammatical grammatical forcing the Nazis into a space of egregious error wherein they interpreted a range of signs as being profoundly motivated or predicated on a singular referent. As Roland Barthes (1964/1977) might have put it, the Germans failed to appreciate 'the co-existence of the analogical and the non-analogical (p.53).'

Secondly, and I can only hope to touch on the point here, the Fortitude case reminds us that the heart of strategy is abstract and, therefore, *inherently* indirect. As such, Fortitude reminds us that *all* strategy deceives. Of course, I am by no means first to treat strategy as an oblique, and therefore hard-to-fathom, phenomenon. In briefly reviewing the background, I start with war-related texts—which deal with calculated indirection in the context of the battlefield—and conclude with philosophic and semiotic-centred reflections that clearly speak to deeper notions of indirection. As Freedman (2013) observes, the progenitor of the indirect approach *per se* appears to have been Sun Tzu, whose *Art of War* proposes that the purpose of engagement is dislocation and that strategic endeavour therefore needs to centre on indirect methods (Freedman, 2013, pp.136-137). *The Art of War*, then, argues that 'without deception you cannot carry out strategy': that 'when [one is] strong, appear weak. Brave, appear fearful. Orderly, appear chaotic. ...In one place, appear...in another (pp.49-50).' In the leadup to WWII these principles of strategic deception were tremendously popular and, while claiming not to have encountered Sun Tzu's work prior to producing his own, Sir Basil Liddell-Hart became the twentieth century's greatest exponent of the theory of oblique engagement. See, for example, his 1929 opus *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*. More recently, in his *Theory of Strategy* (2018) Colin S. Gray notes that surprise is a persisting feature in strategic matters (p.67) while in his *On Grand Strategy* (2018) John Gaddis writes on the question of genius and genius' capacity to conjure debilitating surprise (p.201).

I now turn to this notion of indirect strategy apropos philosophy and semiosis. I begin by mobilising metaphor as a device through which the internal dynamics of strategy might be approached. Characterised by the oblique, as is metaphor, and underpinned, as is metaphor, by the notional, it is apparent that strategy *inherently* conceals itself. Fundamental to the ‘reading’ of both metaphor and strategy is the principle of movement ‘from’ and ‘to’ (Ricœur, p. 17): that is, in metaphor we must reconcile tenor with vehicle (or image with abstraction), while in strategy we must reconcile tactic with concept (or the concrete with the ideational). To elaborate, the problem is, of course, one of determining the referent; the reality; the truth (*op. cit.* p.249). Broader questions of ‘truth’ notwithstanding, this is easier said than done: that is, in the case of both metaphor and strategy the interpretive pathway is seldom plain. With metaphor, in order to prolong textual engagement and pleasure, a more enigmatic vehicle will be selected, while with strategy, the more estranged the tactic the more difficult it will be to decipher in terms of the informing concept. As Ricœur argues, where we meet the ultra-estranged—he offers, by way of example, Shakespeare’s likening of time to a beggar—the ‘imaginative side...opens...towards a dimension of reality that does not coincide [with the ‘ordinary’ or ‘natural’] (*op. cit.*). Because this involves the concept of ‘seeing as’—as opposed to the idea of ‘seeing that’—the point is a critical one. Apropos, in *Philosophical Investigations II* Wittgenstein argues that it is one thing to say, ‘I see this...’ and another to say, ‘I see this as’—the latter of which ‘demands imagination’ (1949/1991, p.427). By way of example, Wittgenstein’s famous reflections on the duck-rabbit figure merit attention.



The above figure is ambiguous, but not clearly so. It depends on one's perception. When looked at casually, one might see a singular referent—a duck and only a duck, or a rabbit and only a rabbit—but if one looks more determinedly, one may experience what Wittgenstein terms the 'dawning' of the other, or opposite, aspect (*op. cit.*). So, while a richer (bifurcated) reading of the image presents a duality, a delimited perspective may see us deceived into receiving it as one thing or the other thing. Similarly, when considering the ultra-estranged tactic, one must be alert to the polysemous. In war, with its characteristic feints, its unusual tactical ensembles and sequences, and its various other deliberate deceptions, this is especially so. In war, an immediately recognised (or expected) tactic or tactical disposition may conceal—and often does conceal—precisely its *opposite*: the gift of the wooden horse represented an existential threat; Alexander the Great's march through Mesopotamia via the north confounded an enemy who expected him to take the shortest route to the south; in 1940, reports of a concentration of armoured divisions opposite the Ardennes were ignored on the basis that the forest was thought to be impassable. As Wittgenstein suggests, then, a dehabituised phenomenon might not be *intrinsically* different but might be rendered so via 'an unusual position... (*op. cit.*, p. 421).' Accordingly, and as is the case with metaphor, if the conceptual heart of strategy is to be decoded then a practiced mode of perception is required: a special kind of thinking through which we might sense the similarity of the dissimilar (Ricœur, p.4; Shklovsky, 1917/2012, p.6; 1970/2011, p.57). So, while strategy by virtue of its abstract nature inherently withholds itself, in the context of strategic design—especially in competitive fields—a more calculated, and implicitly deeper, concealment further complicates the evaluation of (often polysemous) tactics in relation to informing concepts. In other words, as with any other text, tactical



signs may be read—yet not necessarily read well. In this light, Nietzsche’s argument that ‘every concept originates by the equation of the dissimilar’ seems particularly pertinent and suggests that, despite the difficulties involved, strategy might somehow yield to the reading process (1873/1989, p.249). With the above in mind, I now approach Michel Foucault and others on the topic of strategy’s hidden essence.

Via personification—a special category of metaphor—Foucault proposes that, in any domain, strategy’s success lies in its invisibility. Strategy, he observes, is a silent synchronising force: ‘unspoken strategies...coordinate...loquacious tactics... (1990, p.95).’ Engaging a martial arts metaphor to interrogate this paradox, Jean Baudrillard defines strategy as an ‘evasion’; an oblique means of concentrating one’s power in order to hit at a ‘strategic heart (2012, pp.58-59).’ By way of further example, Roumen Dimitrov (2018) is one of the very few academics from the public relations discipline to acknowledge that strategy is crafted, oblique, and ‘asymmetric (p.76)’. Indeed, in the main, it is left to non-discipline-aligned authors to square up to the deeply calculating character of strategy. Examples include: Baudrillard (1983, 1983/1990, 1987/1988, 2012); Bourdieu (1979a/1996, 1979b, 1988, 1990, 2005); Foucault (1972/1980, 1975/1977; 1976/1990, 1980, 1997, 2003); Habermas (1970, 1974, 2009); and Virilio (1999/2007). Of real moment, here, is Baudrillard’s observation that ‘every form of power...speaks of itself by denial (1983, p. 37)’.

Thirdly, and clearly related to the foregoing, Operation Fortitude reminds us that while strategies may be broadly expressed through an encompassing, but always abstract, descriptor (strategy of denial, strategy of inclusion, strategy of deception, and so forth) the finest strategies usually depend upon the dynamic interplay of *several* consonant concepts, seldom upon a singular abstraction, and never upon anything purely tactical. To put it another way, I argue that what Richard Rumelt (2011) calls ‘good strategy’ is contingent upon a multidimensional and dynamic conceptual core that facilitates a focussed response to a complex challenge. While I model this in a paper in preparation, for now I note that breakthrough strategy—my term for that which achieves its objectives in the context of particularly complex and contested fields—repeatedly demonstrates this principle. From the Nazi Blitzkrieg, which, from a traditional perspective, gave tactical expression to the concepts of superiority, speed, and surprise, through the Kennedy brothers’ response to the 1962 steel crisis in which the coercive exercise of administrative power, the covert leveraging of private networks, and the weight of withering rhetoric saw the resolve of hardened steel bosses melt away, to the First Gulf War in which victory was achieved through technical supremacy, the notion

of Open Sky, and speed (Virilio, 1999/2007 p.3), concepts in concert may be seen to underpin coordinated tactics that are consonant with these—even if not obviously so. Of these examples, Operation Fortitude is the grandest and perhaps the most exquisite.

Fourthly, and finally, while Jacques Derrida (1972/1984, p.7) and Richard Rumelt (2011, p.11) argue that strategy should be thought of as a totality of objectives, concepts, and tactics, Harry Yarger (2006/2012, p.15) goes further to suggest that strategy seeks a ‘synergy and symmetry’ of these three things (Yarger, pp. 1, 56, 66). Bearing in mind the example of Operation Fortitude and given that strategy is variously considered a concentrated, coherent response to well-diagnosed challenges and/or opportunities presenting in a friction-filled environment (Ansoff, 1969; Clausewitz, 1832/1908; Drucker, 2017; Freedman, 2013; Harrison, 2013; Lawrence, 1935; Meier, 1998; Thucydides, 2007), I argue that this is true of *any* field in which strategy and strategic dynamics emerge as loci of interest.

I conclude by observing that a study of the twentieth century’s greatest strategy of deception both teaches and provokes. As observed above, Operation Fortitude teaches us that the fields of semiotics and strategy are profoundly imbricated; warns us of the limitations of the senses; cautions us against the sometimes-grave dangers of literal assessment; and confirms that, inherently—and often by design—all strategy is deception. In the words of Antulio Echevarria, I have tried to demonstrate that good strategy is, a powerful ‘intellectual architecture (p.2)’ contingent upon cooperating concepts that discipline and give focus to a consonant array of sometime profoundly defamilisarisied tactical signifiers. I have also tried to show that while the conceptual heart of strategy inevitably complicates strategic assessment (that is, the business of ‘reading’ strategy), where one’s central *objective* is to deceive (as is often the case in contested fields) then one is well advised to offer more or less estranged tactical signifiers that will wrongfoot—or perhaps even totally discombobulate—an opponent less alert to notions of polysemy and play.

—ends—

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