

War on the Budget Plan: The Elizabethan War with Spain

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ABSTRACT

How can an under-developed country defeat a superpower? Elizabeth I of England did just that in a 19-year-long war with Spain following the defeat of the Armada in 1588. She did so while refusing to change an outmoded feudal political system that appeared incapable of fighting a modern war, let alone defeating a superior enemy. This paper explores some of the methods she used to achieve this remarkable feat.

Queen Elizabeth's philosophy was that "English resources were to be committed only in the most necessary and desperate conditions, and then for the shortest time possible" (MacCaffrey 217). Though the war outlasted Elizabeth, she achieved her limited war aims and Philip II of Spain failed in his. Elizabeth didn't pursue glorious victories or territorial aggrandizement but simply a return to the previous status quo. War with minimum risk may have been unusual for the times, and the lack of glory frustrating to some of her subjects (such as the Earl of Essex), but in the end she won both the war against Spain and her battle against change. Amazingly, she used an outmoded feudal infrastructure, stretched far beyond any previous use, to wage and win a modern war.

The long reign of Elizabeth I began with 30 years of relative peace. This ushered in a period of prosperity that Elizabeth's government did its best to prolong. The Queen held true to her motto, 'semper eadem', always-the-same (MacCaffrey 541), but the world changed even if England tried not to. English security depended (as it would for centuries) on maintaining a balance between her more powerful continental neighbors France and Spain. With civil war raging in France after the collapse of the French Monarchy in 1585 (Wernham 144), Philip II of Spain became unquestionably the most powerful monarch in Europe. With a mixture of religious zeal and personal ambition he seized the opportunity. This began an undeclared war between England and Spain that would last for 19 years.

With the introduction of firearms (matchlocks), a military revolution had occurred. This innovation changed the face of warfare, creating the first modern armies. The creation of a modern army, however, required an extensive bureaucratic infrastructure to support it. Elizabeth's government treated the war as a temporary phenomenon that made it unnecessary to alter the established peacetime routine of the state being simply an extension of the monarch (MacCaffrey 57). Elizabeth I tried, and almost succeeded, in financing the war out of normal revenues and Parliamentary subsidies. In this way she could hold on

to the previous control of the crown while combating an empire with far greater resources than England's.

Compared to Philip II's Spain, England was rather underdeveloped (MacCaffrey 20). During decades of almost continuous warfare between the Valois Kings of France and the Hapsburgs of Spain and Austria both monarchies developed institutions for waging large scale and long term warfare. They had professional standing armies and the fiscal and bureaucratic apparatus necessary to sustain a war machine indefinitely. In England, there was no standing army, much less bureaucracy, and England had limited taxation ability (MacCaffrey 20).

Philip's initial goal was to reestablish Spanish authority in the rebellious provinces in the Netherlands, a rich area comprising the modern day Belgium and Holland also referred to as the Low Countries. The Spanish would pursue this goal for 80 years and ultimately fail at it. Elizabeth, although willing to accept nominal Spanish sovereignty over the Low Countries, as in the time of Charles V, couldn't accept the risk of Spanish troops at nearby Dutch harbors. The coast of the Netherlands, as well as the French channel coast, was referred to by the English as the invasion coast (MacCaffrey 293). It was the best site from which to launch an invasion of England. The elimination of England would free Philip for what Wernham refers to as the "central element in the struggle," the attempt by Philip to gain control of France (555).

Neither monarch ever declared war on the other. But with their aims so diametrically opposed over the status of the Netherlands, conflict was inevitable. It began with mutual trade embargoes and Philip's involvement with the plot to replace Elizabeth with Mary, Queen of Scots. Between 1568 and 1585, Elizabeth unofficially sanctioned piracy against Spain, pocketing the proceeds (McGurk, Tudor 78-79). This even included a Spanish pay ship taken in the Channel in 1569 (Conklin 497), on its way to the Low Countries.

Elizabeth was "starkly modern in her realization that money was power" (Smith 175). This had much to do with why the English tended to overestimate

Spain. It is easy to excuse this. Spain had twice the population of England (Nolan 403). With an annual budget of less than £300,000 (McGurk, Tudor 88) the English watched as Philip's Plate fleet brought him an estimated £3,000,000 a year in silver from the New World in addition to his regular revenues (Wernham 15). Philip had his own problems, though. Expenditures in the Low Countries consumed half of the annual Royal budget (Conklin 496). An additional problem came with actually getting the money to the Low Countries to pay the large army stationed there. The shortest and fastest route was through the English Channel, but rough seas and the presence of English pirates made for an uncertain journey. To add to his woes, the plague wiped out an estimated 8% of the Iberian population between 1598-1602 (McGurk, Elizabethan 14).

Elizabeth's long term strategy was "the maximum disruption of her neighbors' dominions, with minimal cost or risk to England" (MacCaffrey 558). England's overriding fear was of Spanish invasion after the Armada. Wernham argues that England's war with Spain was primarily a land conflict, focused on the security of the Channel ports of France and the Low Countries (563).

The war with Spain was fought on a much broader geographic scale than any previously known (Nolan 408). England faced commitments in the Netherlands, in Normandy and Brittany in France, expeditions against Spain and Portugal, and expeditions against the Spanish West Indies. A prolonged series of revolts against English rule in Ireland consumed almost half of the English troops raised (MacCaffrey 10). In addition, Elizabeth maintained a large part-time militia force.

Elizabeth operated under constant financial constraints throughout the war. Her allies, the United Provinces (as the rebellious Dutch provinces were known), and Henry III and Henry IV of France, were in even worse financial straits. Henry IV at his accession controlled barely half the country and few of the large towns, which was where tax revenue came from (MacCaffrey 138). Henry IV most often paid English troops sent to France, although this often involved loans from Elizabeth to cover the costs.

After the assassination of William the Silent in 1584, the United Provinces had difficulty in establishing a government with enough control to wage war. This lack of leadership led to the provinces being known as 'the headless commonwealth.' In 1585, Elizabeth brought her support for the Dutch rebels out in the open by signing a treaty with them and dispatching 7,000 men under the Earl of Leicester. As part of the treaty the Dutch received a subsidy from England but had to pay the English troops stationed there. Generally, far more time was spent negotiating these financial concerns than was spent on strategy.

The costs of mobilizing the troops for overseas

use were paid for locally, by the county or city, so that Elizabeth avoided the rather substantial costs involved with equipping them. In the actual raising of troops, Elizabeth made full use of the Lord Lieutenants, directly appointed by the crown. They had previously been used to raise troops in emergencies, but now they became a more permanent institution, still tied directly to Elizabeth's patronage. When a levy for troops was issued, the Lord Lieutenant used local officials to pick men. Many men were simply pressed into service. MacCaffrey says that levying soldiers meant clearing the cities of the homeless and unemployed (43). McGurk argues that in practice "the rouges, vagabonds, and idlers were drafted in a policy of social cleansing, often at the expense of the army" (Elizabethan 33). This led to not only a low quality of troops, but to a high desertion rate, which peaked during the Nine Years War in Ireland. At one point in 1600, the Privy Council complained that out of 350 men, only 140 showed up for embarkation (McGurk, Elizabethan 35) even though desertion was a capital crime. The saying at the time was "better to be hanged at home than die like dogs in Ireland" (McGurk Elizabethan 35).

Sir John Falstaff, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (1598), gives us a thinly veiled contemporary perspective on the quality of soldiers in the 1590s and the corruption involved in their recruitment:

I have misused the King's press damnably. I have got, in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers, three hundred and odd pounds. I press me none but good house-soldiers, yeoman's sons. I press none but such toasts-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pin's heads, and they have bought out their services; and now my whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies, slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores; and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust serving-men, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a clam world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable ragged than an old faced ancient; and such have I, to fill up the rooms of them that have bought out their services. (14)

Prospects for survival for the Elizabethan soldier were grim. During 1588 and 1589, 24,000 men were sent on official expeditions to France and Portugal. Almost half never returned (Wernham 18). Disease was the greatest killer andcrippler. In Brittany, Norris figured a force of 2,000 men would require 500 to 600 replacements every six months whether or not they saw action (Wernham 482).

For the English expeditionary forces, the record of success was very limited. Elizabeth committed the absolute minimum of forces, seldom enough to achieve victory, but usually enough to stave off the defeat of her allies. The expeditionary forces were more like mercenaries, usually being paid by the Dutch or the French king. The expeditions to Spain and the West Indies were very much entrepreneurial enterprises. In 1589, the army that accompanied the "Counter Armada" to Portugal included 9,000 government troops and almost 10,000 "volunteers" who joined in hopes of profitable plunder (Nolan 406). The operation was organized on a joint stock basis, with financing by the United Provinces, English merchants and other adventurers, and the Queen. It was the only way that Elizabeth could afford the operation. Strategic aims and profit motives made for confused objectives. Often, as in this case, neither was achieved.

One area where this entrepreneurial spirit did function well was privateering. After the defeat of the Armada in 1588, at least 100, and in some years as many as 200, privateers were at sea (Wernham 235). On average, privateers made at least modest profits (Wernham 249). This helped to offset the loss of trade revenues due to the conflict and proved a constant annoyance to Spain.

For defense against invasion, Elizabeth relied on locally raised militia to deal with emergencies. This was the time honored feudal tradition of an army of peasants; poorly armed and untrained. Elizabeth, in 1573, turned this into a permanent part-time force, the Trained Bands. As the name implies they were trained, and much care was given to equip them with up-to-date weapons (Nolan 400). Although occasionally used to add experienced men to a levy being sent to the continent, their primary mission was to repel a Spanish invasion. Nolan argues that Elizabeth's real armies were these Trained Bands. Theirs was the all-important mission of guarding against the ever-present threat of invasion. The muster of 1588 involved over 40,000 trained troops and perhaps as many untrained levies (Nolan 405) compared to England's full-time army of 11,000 (Nolan 418).

One area where the Queen didn't skimp was her navy. Although smaller than the Spanish fleet, the English ships were far superior. This was due largely to Sir John Hawkins, Elizabeth's treasurer of the navy. Rejecting the accepted tactics of grappling and boarding, passed down since ancient times, the English ships were floating gun platforms able to engage at longer range (McGurk, Tudor 87). In 1588, the Queen had thirty warships but called on port towns to arm merchant vessels. Although this had been rarely used since ancient times, she called on them again in 1589, 1595, 1596, and 1597 (MacCaffrey 32). This allowed for the increase in the size of her fleet with no additional cost to the crown.

The strain on the Monarchy was great. The war

cost England an estimated £4,500,000 (MacCaffrey 64). Over 100,000 men were raised and equipped during the war years (Nolan 408). From 1589 to 1603, taxes both direct and indirect were three times the amount raised in the previous 30 years (McGurk, Tudor 89). Parliamentary subsidies totaled £1,560,000 between 1585 and 1603, with requests becoming larger and more frequent through the 1590s to the end of her reign. Elizabeth had £300,000 in her coffers in 1585 and ended the reign £365,000 in debt (Nolan 413). The financial strain of the Monarchy was great, but Elizabeth's limited war aims closely matched England's limited resources.

Luck may have been Elizabeth's greatest asset. Not only did storms wreck the Armada of 1588, but also wrecked two other Spanish invasion fleets in 1596 and 1597, both headed for Ireland (MacCaffrey 439). MacCaffrey refers to Elizabeth I as "Elizabeth the Fortunate" (574).

Elizabeth took the archaic feudal systems she had inherited and pushed them far beyond their limits. By relying on a large part-time militia and using local governments to pay the costs of raising and equipping troops, England gained a much larger army than the Crown could afford. By arranging for many of these soldiers to be paid by foreign governments, they could be maintained in the field. Elizabeth embraced privateering, which allowed for a self-financing naval war. The expeditions to Spain, Portugal, and the West Indies were run like business ventures in search of plunder, with Elizabeth as a minority shareholder. The expeditions kept the Spanish off balance at a low cost to the English Crown. Elizabeth creatively used conservative feudal systems to wage a war that required a modern state. After her death in 1603, James VI inherited much of the structure of a modern state, but while Elizabeth was alive the entire government and its war machine were still based on time honored feudal traditions and patronage. *Semper eadem*. Perhaps Elizabeth the Unchanging would be a more fitting title.

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