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Foundations in Military Thought and Strategy - Course II

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## An "Indirect" Assessment of the War Against Iraq

*We will offset the imbalance of ground combat power by using our strength against his weakness.. Initially execute deception operations to focus his attention on defense and cause incorrect organization of forces. We will initially attack into the Iraqi homeland using air power to decapitate his leadership, command and control, and eliminate his ability to reinforce Iraqi forces in Kuwait and southern Iraq. We will then gain undisputed air superiority over Kuwait so that we can subsequently and selectively attack Iraqi ground forces with air power in order to reduce his combat power and destroy reinforcing units. Finally, we will fix Iraqi forces in place by feints and limited objective attacks followed by armored force penetration and exploitation to seize key lines of communication nodes, which will put us in a position to interdict resupply and remaining reinforcements from Iraq and eliminate forces in Kuwait..*

— CINCCENT, 25 August 1990

### Introduction

Was the 1990-1991 war against Iraq a Clausewitzian style quest for annihilation? At first blush, it may seem so. Did alliance forces not, after all, seek out and annihilate Iraqi forces in decisive battles? General Schwartzkopf's statement of intent reveals that his strategy for the conduct of operations reflected an appreciation for the "indirect approach," of Sun Tzu and his erstwhile protege, B. H. Liddell-Hart. How well did the CINC do in his use of "indirectness?" How would Sun Tzu, who understood the difference between national strategy ("calculations in the temple") and military strategy<sup>1</sup>, view policy and strategic decisions made at the national level by President Bush and other national leaders? My intent is to examine these questions using some of the principles of Sun Tzu as a framework for the assessment.

### War

*The art of war is of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence under no circumstances can it be neglected.*<sup>2</sup>

*Weapons are tools of ill omen.' War is a grave matter; one is apprehensive lest men embark upon it without due reflection.*<sup>3</sup>

*The skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field. With his forces intact he disposes the mastery of the empire, and thus, without losing a man, his triumph is complete. This is the method of attacking by stratagem of using the sheathed sword.*<sup>4</sup>

Sun Tzu, like Clausewitz, understood that the decision to go to war is

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not purely a military matter, to be decided upon by generals. Rather, he saw warfare as one element of a competition between opposing nations, and viewed questions of war or peace as decisions for leadership at the national level. Sun Tzu clearly realized the economic and social burdens imposed on a society by war.<sup>5</sup> He counseled that war is never to be undertaken lightly, and should be used only as a last resort, when all other means of attaining national objectives have failed. As General Samuel Griffith puts it, "Although Sun Tzu may not have been the first to realize that force is the ultimate arbiter of inter-state conflicts, he was the first to put the physical clash in proper perspective."<sup>6</sup>

From the time the first Iraqi tanks crossed into Kuwait, President Bush and the national leadership reacted with exceptional speed to:

- Articulate clear national objectives with regard to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.
- Mobilize a broad panoply of non-military measures designed to induce the Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Iraq and to achieve other U.S. objectives.
- Place sufficient U.S. forces in the theater to deter further Iraqi aggression and insure the security of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

In fact, Operation Desert Shield, which started on 7 August 1990 and ended when the first bombs fell on Baghdad early on 17 January 1992, "...pursued the traditional [U.S.] cold war objectives of deterrence, containment, defense, and restoration of the status quo...by the combination of increasingly painful political and economic pressure, reinforced by the threat of force."<sup>7</sup> It was only after the failure of this effort to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and all the attendant atrocities that the President decided to resort to war.

### Moral Factors

*The Moral Law causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger.*<sup>8</sup>

One of the three elements which Clausewitz proposed as fundamental to success in the conduct of war is the mobilization of public will, or the will of the people. This is the "Moral Law" of which Sun Tzu wrote. He, like Clausewitz, believed that national unity and stability on the home front are components essential to the successful conduct of warfare.<sup>9</sup> While the attainment of unity and stability in a modern democracy may require more of

national leaders than Sun Tzu's prescription of "benevolence, justice, righteousness, and...confidence..."<sup>10</sup> the U.S. experience in Vietnam confirmed the clarity of Sun Tzu's vision.

Concurrent with the exhaustive effort to achieve U.S. objectives by measures short of war, President Bush also worked vigorously to address the "moral factor," and to develop the domestic and international popular consensus required to support military action, should it become necessary. The President early seized the "moral high ground" with his fervent condemnation of the invasion and his declaration that "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." Mr. Bush and the not inconsiderable information assets of the U.S. government quickly and effectively painted Saddam Hussein as a "new Hitler, liar, tyrant, and hypocrite," a role which he (unwittingly?) played to the hilt. During the entire conduct of Operation Desert Shield the President and the national leadership worked carefully and patiently with the Congress to generate support and consensus, including a congressional resolution supporting the use of force. At the same time, and perhaps most significantly, the President, Secretary of State, and the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. worked to obtain international support, first through the U.N. resolution of 2 August 1990 condemning the invasion and mandating an immediate withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The U.N. approved a second resolution on 29 November 1990 sanctioning the use of force against Iraq if it did not withdraw its forces by 15 January 1991.

#### National Strategy

*Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. Next best is to disrupt his alliances. The next best is to attack his army. The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities only when there is no alternative.*<sup>11</sup>

According to O'Neill and Kass, Saddam Hussein viewed the pre-war activities of Iraq's Arab neighbors, western nations, and particularly the United States as a conspiracy "...intended to squeeze and eventually destroy the Iraqi economy..." and consequently as "...a mortal danger to both himself and his nation." His strategy to maintain his power and that of the Baath party was a multi-faceted endeavor in which he "...attempted to garner international support, isolate adversaries,..." and facilitate "...the transfer of highly sophisticated technology to Iraq." He "...provided selective assistance to governments he considered important ...,..." and launched a "...vigorous information effort, directed mostly at the Arab world,..." to "...promote Iraq as a staunch defender of Arab and Islamic interests." He established an

sustained, at great expense, a large and lethal military force which included "...an intended biological and nuclear capability and an existing chemical arsenal and ballistic missile program."<sup>12</sup>

From the day Iraqi forces entered Kuwait, the U.S., led by President Bush launched a concerted and effective effort to attack every aspect of this strategy. Beginning with his declaration that "This will not stand!", the President worked diligently and successfully to negate Saddam's attempt to paint himself as the champion of the Arab world, and driving a wedge between him and most of his potential allies. Diplomatic measures undertaken under the auspices of the U.N. further discredited Saddam and essentially made Iraq a pariah among nations. President Bush and Secretary of State Baker crafted a most improbable coalition which established stringent blockade and economic embargo measures against Iraq. Only after six months, and after becoming convinced that measures short of war were not going to force Saddam out of Kuwait, did the President elect to "attack his Army." In no case did we "attack his cities."

### Military Strategy

*He who knows the art of the direct and the indirect approach will be victorious.*<sup>13</sup>

*If the enemy is taking his ease, harass him; if quietly encamped, force him to move; if well supplied with food, starve him out.*<sup>14</sup>

*Speed is the essence of war. Take advantage of the enemy's unpreparedness; travel by unexpected routes and strike him when he has taken no precautions.*<sup>15</sup>

*Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.*<sup>16</sup>

Sun Tzu's conception of a general skilled in the military art was the leader who sought to fight only on his own terms, at the time and place of his choosing. He clearly understood and abhorred the folly of attacking into an enemy's strength, counseling instead the use of speed, initiative, flexibility, and security in seeking to match the strengths of his own forces against the weakness of those of the enemy. Sun Tzu understood the nature of psychological operations, writing that a principal goal for the commander is to "anger [the enemy] general and confuse him"<sup>17</sup>; and advising that the enemy's troops should be subjected to constant stress to degrade their ability to fight. He also had a solid understanding of the value of shock action for disrupting enemy forces and formations and gaining moral ascendancy in combat.

The campaign plan developed by General Schwartzkopf and the

CENTCOM staff showed absolute mastery of these principals. Saddam Hussein's forces had a number of advantages, among them<sup>18</sup>:

- They had large numbers of troops who had been battle-hardened during the war with Iran-Iraq war.
- They would be fighting in a familiar desert environment to which most coalition soldiers would be unaccustomed.
- They would be fighting from positions prepared in depth, with the capability of rapid reinforcement from large theater reserves.

General Schwartzkopf declined to fight the campaign in accordance with Saddam's expectations. The Desert Storm plan neatly avoided every one of the Iraqi strengths, and very neatly juxtaposed allied strengths to Iraqi weaknesses. The air offensive which commenced on 17 January 1991 totally overwhelmed Iraqi air defense capabilities, then proceeded to subject the enemy forces in the Kuwait Theater of Operations to horrific attrition. The constant pounding insured that it was the rare Iraqi soldier who could be found "taking his ease," and totally obliterated Saddam's C<sup>3</sup>I capabilities. Having thus made certain that his plans were "impenetrable as night," the CINC used the tremendous speed and power of the armored forces at his disposal to execute the movement through the empty quarter and strike the Iraqis where they were totally unprepared..."like a thunderbolt." Secretary of Defense Cheney's final report to Congress stated, in part, that "The ground campaign plan envisioned a main attack coming as a 'left hook' by armor-heavy forces against Iraq's right flank, sweeping in from the west to avoid most fixed defenses...rapid maneuver; deception...The main attack would be supported by an elaborate deception operation, including an amphibious feint, and by supporting attacks along the Kuwaiti-Saudi border to fix Iraqi forces in Kuwait..."<sup>19</sup>

### Intelligence

#### Reconnaissance

*Therefore, determine the enemy's plans and you will know which strategy will be successful and which will not.*<sup>20</sup>

*Probe him and learn where his strength is abundant and where deficient.*<sup>21</sup>

*...to remain in ignorance of the enemy's condition...is the height of inhumanity.*<sup>22</sup>

## Deception and Surprise

*All warfare is based upon deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.<sup>23</sup>*

*If I am able to determine the enemy's dispositions while at the same time I conceal my own then I can concentrate and he must divide. And if I concentrate while he divides, I can use my entire strength to attack a fraction of his. There, I will be numerically superior. Then, if I am able to use many to strike few at the selected point, those I deal with will be in dire straits.<sup>24</sup>*

## Terrain/Weather

*By terrain I mean distances, whether the ground is traversed with ease or difficulty, whether it is open or constricted, and the chances of life or death.<sup>25</sup>*

*Those who do not know the conditions of mountains and forests, hazardous defiles, marshes and swamps, cannot conduct the march of an army.<sup>26</sup>*

Unlike Clausewitz, who was deeply suspicious of intelligence and advocated the use of the commander's intuition and experience to make decisions, Sun Tzu, throughout his text, emphasizes the absolute criticality nature of good intelligence in the conduct of war. Sun Tzu believed that failure to base a plan of operations on the "shape" of the enemy was an invitation to disaster. He dedicated an entire chapter of The Art of War to guidance on the employment of spies. He espoused the active use of deception to mislead the enemy of the true scope, axis, and nature of friendly operations. He viewed the combination of knowledge about the enemy's forces and denial of friendly force information to the enemy as essential to military success. Sun Tzu understood "...the hazards and advantages of weather..." and was "...concerned with the effect of ground." He taught that a competent general "chooses the ground on which he wishes to engage, draws his enemy to it, and there gives battle."<sup>27</sup>

The stunning intelligence successes of the war against Iraq require very little elaboration. CINCENT brought to bear the full capabilities of U.S. military and national level reconnaissance assets, with the result that there was virtually nothing about the disposition and activities of Iraqi forces in Kuwait that he didn't know. The "blinding" of the Iraqi military and by the counter reconnaissance efforts of the air campaign and special operations forces, along with a comprehensive and audacious deception plan, enabled General Schwartzkopf's forces to execute the Seventh Corps' "end run" across "impassible" terrain totally undetected.

## Summary

The war against Iraq resulted in a shattering defeat for the fourth largest army

in the world. Saddam Hussein and his armed forces were defeated at both national and theater levels by the skillful implementation of the "indirect approach" by the President and the "Warfighting CINC." Saddam was outmaneuvered by the skillful diplomacy of the President. Militarily, the coalition successfully "...relied upon the time-tested principle of pitting strength against exploitable weakness."<sup>28</sup> Further, alliance forces employed ...surprise, deception, and operational security; focus on speed, agility, synchronization, and maneuver; fusion of superior battlefield intelligence with precision-guided weapons; and last, but certainly not least, an overarching emphasis on targeting the adversary's mind -- his strategy, his will and his perceived ability to fight -- so as to produce a battlefield decision through strategic dislocation and disruption, rather than through costly attrition.<sup>29</sup>

Total combat losses to U.S. personnel : 147. This is a resounding endorsement of the "indirect approach," and a calculus which, I believe, Sun Tzu would heartily approve.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel B. Griffith, ed. and trans., Sun Tzu THE ART OF WAR. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 71

<sup>2</sup> James Clavell, ed., The Art of War by Sun Tzu. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1983) 9

<sup>3</sup> Griffith 63

<sup>4</sup> Clavell 17

<sup>5</sup> Griffith 74

<sup>6</sup> Griffith 40

<sup>7</sup> Bard E. O'Neill and Ilana Kass, "Comparative Strategy" Course 2: Foundations in Military Thought and Strategy 222 (1992)(Washington, D.C.: National War College)

<sup>8</sup> Clavell 9

<sup>9</sup> Griffith 40

<sup>10</sup> Griffith 64

<sup>11</sup> Griffith 77-78

<sup>12</sup> O'Neill and Kass 218

<sup>13</sup> Griffith 106

<sup>14</sup> Clavell 11

<sup>15</sup> Griffith 134

<sup>16</sup> Clavell 32

<sup>17</sup> Griffith 67

<sup>18</sup> O'Neill and Kass 221

<sup>19</sup> Cheney, Dick "Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress" Course 2: Foundations in Military Thought and Strategy 100 (1992)(Washington, D.C.: National War College)

<sup>20</sup> Griffith 100

<sup>21</sup> Griffith 100

<sup>22</sup> Clavell 78

<sup>23</sup> Clavell 11)



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- 24 Griffith 98
  - 25 Griffith 64
  - 26 Griffith 104
  - 27 Griffith 43
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