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Foundations in Military Thought and Strategy

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Ghoulality in War

The Application of Liddell Hart in DESERT STORM

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An eerie silence settled over the battlefield of the Somme...the ugly yellow cloud around him dissipated slowly as the light breeze swept it inexorably along. Gone were the sounds of battle: the screams of the wounded, the roar of the guns. All that remained was the scalding pain in his lungs and throat...and the mud...always the mud...

Medic, over here! I found Captain Hart. He didn't get his mask on in time."

What a waste...it's always the same...so many dead...all for a few more yards of mud...and now I join them....

As consciousness slipped away, his vision seemed to clear...the perpetual gray clouds and the endless sea of mud melted away from around him. He was alone in an empty world...alone except for the shadowy figure with the ornate uniform and vaguely familiar face...

Clausewitz! This is your fault...they believed in your absolute war...and they've died by the millions...look at them!

With the anger came consciousness...and the pain...

Guess he's the Ghost of Campaigns Past...huh...must make me the Ghost of Campaigns Present....

As they rolled him onto the stretcher, his body surrendered again. He lay in the same empty world...straining against an expectant silence...

"Hello Captain"...the voice was powerful, as was the uniformed figure behind it. "Don't be alarmed, I'm a friend...name's Norm."

Let me guess...the Ghost of Campaigns Future?...

"If you like...", then reassuringly, "Relax, it's not your day to die--you have too much left to do. I'm here to show you the future face of war. But you must promise to tell others, so the senseless horrors you've seen here will never be repeated."

With that, time stood still as the shadowy general described a desert campaign of magnificent proportions and success. He spoke in detail of surprise and maneuver on an unprecedented scale; of massed firepower beyond the imagination; of combined arms operations which put constant physical and psychological pressure on the enemy; of unbelievably low friendly casualties, and massive attrition of the enemy. When he finished...

I knew there was a better way!

"Of course you did Captain...you taught me..."

The preceding account may or may not be an accurate reflection of history. But it does serve to illustrate my belief that coalition military strategy during Operation DESERT STORM validated Captain B.H. Liddell Hart's teachings on the principles of war. His overriding theme--the indirect approach--can be seen in virtually every stage of the campaign. This essay will highlight the major components of that theme:

1. Diminish the possibility of resistance.
2. Maximize physical and psychological dislocation.
3. Emphasize/utilize the duality in war.
4. Cut communications

It will also discuss how coalition strategy followed them precisely. I'll close with a brief description of Liddell Hart's "master strategist" and suggest that General Schwarzkopf be granted the title.

Diminish Resistance

The single defining event that shaped Liddell Hart's strategic thinking was his experience in World War I.¹ The stagnant fronts, trench war of attrition, and unwillingness to adjust to new technologies left him with a total disdain for those who refused to change old methods.² They also left him with the conviction that the purpose of strategy was to diminish the possibility of resistance, thereby making the battle easier for the good guys and minimizing friendly casualties. The Gulf War offers

two major examples supporting his belief that the best way to diminish resistance is to exploit maneuver and surprise.³ The allied air campaign is a superb illustration of strategic maneuver. Essentially a vertical flanking maneuver on a very large scale (3000 sorties a day), its success allowed coalition air forces the freedom to attack and attrit Iraqi forces and resources virtually at will. This gave General Schwarzkopf the ability to "shape the battlefield" for subsequent phases of his strategic campaign plan. The attack around the Iraqi western flank--the now famous "Hail Mary"--is yet another example of maneuver on a grand scale which changed the entire complexion of the battle. It offered opportunities for indirect attack of Iraqi units, bypassed the heaviest defenses, and completely disrupted any planned scheme of maneuver for Iraqi forces throughout the depth of the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations (KTO). Both of these examples also support Liddell Hart's belief that "maneuver, in and of itself, generates surprise."⁴ Iraqi leaders certainly never anticipated a massive flanking maneuver in the west, nor did they expect 40 days of an air campaign that paralyzed their own air force, rendered their transportation network useless, disrupted their command and control network, and heavily damaged their fighting forces before the first bugle call in the "Mother of All Battles."

Dislocation

Liddell Hart believed every commander should seek to create a

strategic situation "so advantageous that if it does not in itself produce the decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this."⁵ The key to this effort is his concept of dislocation, which he felt was the ultimate aim of strategy.⁶ Physical dislocation occurs when you force the enemy to change fronts; separate his forces; endanger his supplies; menace his lines of operation; or cut off his lines of retreat.⁷ It's best achieved through maneuver along the lines of least resistance and expectation, and requires some form of distraction to occupy the enemy while you accomplish that maneuvering. The extensive coalition air campaign of the Gulf War isolated the Iraqi forces in the KTO and specifically targeted their ammunition and supply storage facilities. Destruction of the Euphrates river bridges prevented large-scale reinforcement or resupply from the Baghdad area, and a 24-hour a day effort to identify and immediately target any forces moving within the KTO severely limited Iraqi ability to utilize internal lines of operation. The air war also provided distraction in the form of non-stop assault on the Republican Guard, the key to Iraq's defense of their position in the KTO.

The "Hail Mary" tactic mentioned earlier forced the Iraqis to reorient toward a significant additional threat on their flank and rear. It captured and sat astride the main Iraqi supply lines and severed the only major line of retreat available to forces in the KTO. The result was the piecemeal destruction of the vaunted Republican Guard and the so-called "Highway of Death" shown so graphically on CNN.

Psychological dislocation targets the mind of the enemy commander and the will of the army to fight--Liddell Hart believed it to be at least as important as physical dislocation on the strategic level. It is the direct result of the enemy commander, and his army, feeling that they are trapped.⁸ Here again, the air war was successful. Interviews with Iraqi deserters and prisoners of war paint a very clear picture of an army under siege. Allied propaganda efforts, including leaflet bombs dropped daily during the air campaign, added to the equation. Buried in the sand for weeks, the speed and fury of the ground offensive caught them completely off guard. Combined with the sudden physical dislocation mentioned above, it reduced the Iraqi army to individual, uncoordinated units fighting for survival...when they chose to fight. The ever-present threat of an amphibious operation, and the deception effort aimed at highlighting that threat, were further distractions for the Iraqi national command and undoubtedly kept them strategically off balance.

Duality in War

Duality, the idea that every principle has two sides, is at the core of Liddell Hart's teaching. It is based on the fact that every conflict has opposing forces; the potential actions of those forces can obviously have a significant impact on the success of your own operations. During DESERT STORM, coalition troops

concentrating in mass directly south of the Kuwaiti border led to the Iraqi's doing the same north of the border. This, of course, opened the door for the last minute move to the west and the end run once the ground offensive began. Conversely, during the execution of the "Hail Mary", and the main armor attack in the center of the theater, Iraqi forces remained dispersed due to uncertainty about allied objectives and plans of maneuver. The lateral dispersion of the allied front, coupled with Iraqi fear of the constant air attacks, allowed friendly maneuver units to concentrate mass when desired to engage an enemy unable to concentrate mass in the defense. In Liddell Hart's own words, "effective concentration of force is best achieved by maneuvering so as to disperse the enemy."⁹

Liddell Hart also said a strategist should "always retain the flexibility afforded by alternative courses of action."¹⁰ Coalition strategy certainly afforded those alternatives. The armor thrust in the eastern part of the KTO could easily have become the main attack in the event the main thrust in the center stagnated. Highly mobile mechanized, airborne and air assault forces on the western flank allowed the luxury of adjusting objectives and timing as required once the operation began. Availability of Marine amphibious forces made an actual assault from the sea a viable hip-pocket alternative if the situation really went sour. And total air supremacy meant that ground forces could pause if necessary to consolidate and reorient, while the aerial bombardment continued to take the fight directly to Iraqi

ground units.

Cutting Communications

In Liddell Hart's view, the critical decision in planning any move to cut the enemy's lines of supply or operation is whether it should aim at the immediate rear of the enemy force, or even deeper into his territory. He believed that the closer the cut was to the enemy force, the more immediate the impact, while the deeper the cut, the more significant the impact. During DESERT STORM the air campaign and the "Hail Mary" maneuver combined to effectively achieve both conditions. The air campaign spent 40 days interdicting lines of communication from Baghdad to the Kuwaiti border. According to virtually every source on the Gulf War, this had an undeniable impact on the Iraqi army's ability to fight the ground war. The "Hail Mary" was designed to seal Iraqi forces into the KTO. Its objective was the Euphrates River Valley, behind the deepest deployed Republican Guard units. Its operational success was immediately reflected in the attempted mass retreat by nearly every Iraqi unit in the region. In fact, the only thing which allowed the northernmost Republican Guards to escape before the "Hail Mary" units slammed the door, was an almost unheard of change in wind direction on the morning the ground offensive began. The prevailing northwesterly wind had been blowing the dense smoke from the oil fires out over the northern Gulf and into Iran. When the wind shifted to the southeast, the smoke was blown back up the

Euphrates River Valley towards Baghdad, obscuring the first retreating Republican Guard units from allied aircraft and allowing them to leave the KTO before the "Hail Mary" forces reached their blocking position. I'll skip the obvious "fog of war" line...Liddell Hart wouldn't appreciate the irony.

And So...

Coalition planning and execution during Operation DESERT STORM superbly illustrate Liddell Hart's major strategic principles in action. In Hart's learned opinion, the master strategist could achieve victory with a minimum of actual conflict, and the resulting friendly casualties. As he put it, "Of what use is decisive victory in battle if we bleed to death as a result of it?"¹¹ The incredibly low number of allied casualties can be attributed to many factors, but behind all those factors was the campaign strategy developed by General Schwarzkopf and his staff. From the beginning, allied planning emphasized the maximum possible firepower at the point of contact, with the minimum necessary force exposed to hazard elsewhere. Liddell Hart himself would have taken exactly the same approach.¹²

Perhaps Liddell Hart's most insightful comment on strategy is that the master strategist must always "look beyond the conflict to the subsequent peace."¹³ Although it can certainly be argued that U.S. national leaders didn't do too good a job of that before stating the political objective of Operations DESERT SHIELD and

STORM, I believe General Scwharzkopf knew the key to real peace and stability in the region lay in the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. Within the constraints of the stated (and limited) national political objectives, he attempted to achieve that end through persistent targeting of command and control centers, command bunkers, Ba'ath Party and national military headquarters, etc. He gave Saddam every possible chance to be in the right place at the wrong time. Beyond that, his hands were tied.

"Stormin' Norman" met every standard Liddell Hart set for the master strategist. He joins Guderian and Sharon as "Graduates Emeritus" of the Indirect School.

You learned well....

Major Breault (USAF) and Major Cranston (USAF), ed., Foundations of Modern Strategic Thought, USAF Air Command and Staff College publication, 86.

²Breault 83.

³B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, (New York Press: 1954), from The Art and Practice of Military Strategy, (National Defense University Press:1984) 142.

⁴Breault 88.

⁵Liddell Hart, 143.

⁶Liddell Hart, 143.

⁷Liddell Hart, 144.

⁸Liddell Hart, 144.

⁹Breault 89.

¹⁰Liddell Hart, 146.

¹¹Breault 87.

¹²Liddell Hart, 146.

¹³Breault 87.