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November 8, 1991

OPERATION DESERT STORM AND  
THE THEORIES OF B.H. LIDDELL HART

Operation Desert Storm lasted little more than a thousand hours, but the lessons it holds for strategists will be remembered as long as there are military historians who chronicle the glories of the armed forces of the United States. Operation Desert Storm will be remembered by many historians as a classic example of the use of the indirect approach, and as a further validation of the theories of Sir Basil Liddell Hart.

Liddell Hart, who saw a generation of British, French and German soldiers meet a bloody and pointless end at the battles of the Somme and elsewhere on the Western Front in World War I, is generally remembered as the strategist who inspired the great generals of tank warfare in World War II. General George S. Patton, for example, said that Liddell Hart's books on strategy had nourished him for twenty years.

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Generals Guderian and Rommel called themselves his pupils. Consciously or unconsciously, Liddell Hart's strategic teachings were reflected equally well in Operation Desert Storm, and in the decisions made by American commanders in the field, in the Pentagon, and in the White House.

The core of Liddell Hart's strategic theory boils down to ten maxims:

1. The true aim of strategy is to seek a situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce a decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this.
2. The aim of strategy is first to create physical and psychological dislocations in the enemy, and then to exploit those dislocations to his maximum discomfort.
3. Any strategy should have a clear end, and adequate means to attain that end.
4. The object of strategy should be kept constantly in mind.
5. The best strategy chooses the line of least expectation.
6. The best strategy exploits the line of least resistance.
7. The best line of operation offers alternate objectives.
8. The best strategy is adaptable to circumstances.
9. Do not throw your weight into a stroke while your opponent is on guard.
10. Do not renew an attack along the same line after it has once failed.

This paper will analyze the conduct of Operation Desert Storm in terms of each of these maxims, and assess how closely actual operations paralleled the theories of Liddell Hart. Emphasis will be placed on military strategy at the operational level (or the strategic level, as Liddell Hart calls it), but some mention will also be made of the political, economic and diplomatic decisions that dictated the terms of battle, which Liddell Hart assigns to "Grand Strategy."

Maxim 1: The true aim of strategy is to seek a situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce a decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this.

From the day Saddam Hussein's army marched into Kuwait City, the Grand Strategic approach taken by the Bush administration was clear: to seek all possible leverage to obtain Iraq's peaceful withdrawal from Kuwait, but in so doing, to ensure that if war was necessary, Iraq would be alone and bereft of meaningful defenses. Diplomatically, the Bush administration put together a coalition of 36 states that ultimately fielded a force of 750,000 men and women in and around the Kuwait Theater of Operations (KTO). At the U.N., opinion solidified in favor of the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, and several punitive sanctions were approved. By the time Desert Storm kicked off, Saddam was down to four allies: Yemen, Cuba, Sudan, and Libya, with most of the rest

of the world, including the Soviet Union and China, arrayed against him. Domestically, President Bush mobilized U.S. public opinion and the Congress behind efforts to oppose Saddam's aggression. Economically, the President used the U.S. and allied navies to enforce strict U.N.-mandated sanctions against Iraq, and later used allied air forces to shut down Iraq's means of resupply by air.

Maxim 2: The aim of strategy is first to create physical and psychological dislocations in the enemy, and then to exploit those dislocations to his maximum discomfort.

Once Desert Storm began at 0230 on January 17, coalition forces used a number of stratagems that resulted in the severe dislocation of Iraqi forces. By the time ground operations began at 0400 on February 24, Iraqi units in the KTO were already paralyzed, demoralized and largely ineffective. Massive air operations established air supremacy. This, coupled with heavy bombing of command and control facilities and interdiction of major supply routes deprived the Iraqis of the ability to detect coalition military movements and to react to them. The Iraqi air force was neutralized, the navy sunk, and the frontline units of the army forced into immobility. All the objectives for

achieving physical dislocation of the enemy's forces (upsetting Iraqi dispositions, separating Iraqi forces from each other, endangering supply lines, menacing routes of retreat) were achieved by airpower alone in the first days of the operation, though the effects intensified when the ground phase began. Massive use of airpower was also able to achieve psychological dislocation of Iraqi forces both at the command and the tactical levels. Liddell Hart calls this the "sense of being trapped." This was certainly the case for frontline Iraqi troops, who in some instances surrendered en masse to approaching Apache helicopters, so great was their terror of air bombardment and subsequent ground attack. This was also the case with many Iraqi commanders in Kuwait City, who were so spooked at the prospect of combat that they panicked and ran upon the outbreak of ground operations without bothering to inform the troops they commanded. This psychological dislocation greatly intensified once coalition ground forces penetrated deeply into Iraq and into the rear areas of Iraqi forces in the KTO. The extent of this psychological dislocation became clearer after the operation, when it was found that large numbers of Iraqi troops had deserted their front line units. Distraction of Iraqi forces was also achieved, another of Liddell Hart's criteria for successful operations. The best example of this was Operation Imminent Thunder, the threatened Marine

invasion of the Kuwait coastline, which froze many Iraqi units in static positions on the beach, when the real ground stroke was to come at the other end of the front, deep in the Iraqi desert. As General Schwarzkopf jokingly acknowledged in "the mother of all briefings," the western press was successfully manipulated into theorizing about beach landings, and these speculations played a key role in convincing Saddam's commanders that a major threat would come from the sea.

Maxim 3: Any strategy should have a clear end, and adequate means to attain that end.

Maxim 4: The object of strategy should be kept constantly in mind.

At the Grand Strategic level, there was never any doubt in President Bush's mind that the sole end of Operation Desert Storm was fulfillment of the U.N. Resolutions that bound the anti-Iraq coalition together. He never deviated from this stand. The sixteen relevant U.N. resolutions specified that Iraq should be expelled from Kuwait, that the legitimate government of Kuwait should be restored, that Iraq should compensate Kuwait and others for damages, and that Iraq should satisfy various cease-fire terms (including surrender of its weapons of mass destruction). The President would have made a fatal error if at any time he had deviated from the provisions of the U.N. resolutions. For example, going to Baghdad to take out Saddam Hussein would have



immediately destroyed Security Council unity, would have had unpredictable effects within the Soviet Union and could have led China and the USSR to renew their support of Iraq. Additionally, it would have involved the U.S. more deeply in internal Iraqi affairs than American public opinion may have been prepared to sustain over the long run. Another possible objective, that of promoting the dismemberment of Iraq and the establishment of independent Kurdish and Shi'a states, would have instantly alienated Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia, led to the breakup of the coalition, and made a continuing U.S. presence in the region unsustainable.

With regard to matching ends and means, the U.S. and its allies made certain that sufficient military forces were in theater to achieve U.N.-mandated objectives before embarking on military operations. One of the largest airlifts and sealifts in history was mobilized to transport U.S. troops and equipment to the Gulf. In the event, a three quarters of a million U.S. and coalition troops, over 2,000 aircraft of all types, six carrier battle groups and several score coalition vessels proved to be quite sufficient to handle the "fourth largest army in the world."

Maxim 5: The best strategy chooses the line of least expectation.

Maxim 6: The best strategy exploits the line of least resistance.

Maxims 5 and 6 were strictly observed in both the opening phase of the air war on January 17, and in the opening phase of the ground war on February 24. The massive air attack that began Operation Desert Storm in the early hours of January 17 funneled through a gap opened in the chain of radars guarding the Iraqi interior and resulted in complete tactical surprise, the quick establishment of air supremacy and the blinding of Iraqi intelligence. Similarly, as General Schwarzkopf pointed out in his now-famous February 27 press briefing, the "Hail Mary" strategy eventually adopted by the allies for the ground campaign was also completely successful. Deploying XVIII Corps and VII corps secretly to the Western flank enabled deep penetration into the rear of the Iraqi army within hours of the initiation of ground operations and sealed the fate of Iraqi forces in the KTO. The Iraqi high command was completely fooled, and forces in the area of initial penetration were quickly overrun.

Maxim 7: The best line of operation offers alternate objectives.

Once coalition forces had established themselves deep inside Iraq, Maxim number 7 came into play. As General Schwarzkopf himself pointed out, by the end of the first day of ground operations, XVIII and VII Corps were in a position

to threaten both the encirclement and annihilation of Iraqi forces in the KTO, and the seizure of Baghdad, only 150 miles to the northwest. It should be noted, however, that catching the Iraqi army on the horns of such a dilemma was not as useful as it could be in the strategic sense. Iraqi forces in the KTO were already panicking and running; also, the U.S. had no intention of marching on Baghdad, and in any case it is likely that at this point Saddam Hussein was neither aware of the gravity of his situation nor capable of stopping whatever ground moves the allies chose to make.

Maxim 8: The best strategy is adaptable to circumstances.

Since there were very few things that went wrong in the coalition's conduct of the war, there were very few opportunities to observe the adaptability of our military strategy or its flexibility in the face of failure. Three military failures were of some significance: first, the failure to convince Israel from the outset to rely on U.S. Patriots for defense against Saddam's oft-heralded and easily predictable attempts to bring them into the war via Scud strikes; second, the inability of the U.S. to suppress completely Scud attacks on Saudi Arabia and Israel during the air phase of Operation Desert Storm; and third, the inability of the coalition to find and destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. As it turned out, vastly increased U.S. strikes

into western Iraq, coupled with hurried Patriot deployments to Israel and severe arm-twisting to prevent the Israelis from following their natural instinct to strike out, kept the lid on the Scud/Israel problem long enough to conclude the war with the coalition intact. The failure to find and destroy weapons of mass destruction did not become a significant factor because Saddam wisely refrained from using what weapons he had -- one of the few intelligent moves he made during the Gulf war.

Maxim 9: Do not throw your weight into a stroke while your opponent is on guard.

Maxim 10: Do not renew an attack along the same line after it has once failed.

Since Iraq was blinded from the outset of Operation Desert Storm, there were few instances in which the coalition attacked when Iraqi forces had adequate tactical warning. The Iraqis were on their guard, but rarely knew when and where the attack was coming. Similarly, since there were no significant coalition defeats in the war, the question of attacking a position a second time to make up for an attack that had failed did not arise very often. There were two cases in which repeated attacks by coalition forces failed to achieve their objectives, but nonetheless resulted in no changes in overall strategy. These were coalition airstrikes against command and control facilities, which proved impossible to wipe out totally, and against airfields, which

were repaired more quickly than anticipated. In neither instance, however, did these failures have a significant impact on the course of Operation Desert Storm. In the case of surviving command and control links, it became evident after the war that Iraqi commanders used their surviving net only very sparingly, operating under the assumption that the U.S. could hear everything they said. Furthermore, it is clear that most Iraqi commanders had no idea of what orders to give: their military situation was hopeless. Therefore, the survival of some Iraqi command and control links posed no serious danger to coalition forces. With regard to Iraqi airfields, although many airfields were repaired quickly, they were little used. The Iraqi air force was very quickly demoralized and neutralized, and after January 25 the Iraqis mounted no significant offensive air operations, concentrating instead on moving as many aircraft as possible to Iran.

#### CONCLUSION

Liddell Hart's strategic theories fit quite well with coalition, and especially American, conduct of Operation Desert Storm. Whether by chance or by design, American commanders in the field and at home adhered closely to the precepts taught by Liddell Hart, and in so doing ensured overwhelming victory for their forces. The indirect

approach has proved to be a winning formula for generals throughout history, from the ancient China of Sun Tzu, to the commanders of Allied and Axis armies in World War II, to the conflicts of the present day. It should remain equally valid for future conflicts in which the United States finds itself.