

War in the Persian Gulf: Glimpses of the Indirect Approach

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War in the Persian Gulf: Glimpses of the Indirect Approach

Sir Basil Liddell Hart liked war in the desert. He devoted more space to the North African campaigns than to any other aspect of WW II in his seminal work Strategy. He took pride in the fact that one of the great practitioners of desert warfare, Field Marshal Irwin Rommel, was a student (of sorts) and a master of the indirect approach. The Israelis, who considered Hart a latter-day prophet on war, made good use of the indirect approach in the Sinai. Desert warfare, for Hart, combined the best aspects of mechanized combat with "... an object-lesson in the subtlety and variety of the indirect approach" (Hart, Strategy, p.292). With this in mind, it would seem fitting to determine whether the latest desert warriors --- the American commanders in DESERT STORM --- applied any of Captain Hart's military theory to their campaign planning and combat decisionmaking. This becomes an even more intriguing proposition when you consider that all of these officers are graduates of the various senior service schools and had ample time to be introduced to Hart's strategy of the indirect approach. The purpose of the following essay, then, is to look for evidence of the use of the indirect approach in the Persian Gulf War and to critique Hart's military thought using this conflict as a basis for analysis.

The Grand Strategy

Liddell Hart would have looked upon the grand strategy developed

by the Bush Administration with approbation. The political objectives were clearly stated and limited in nature. Furthermore, the objectives were matched to means in a manner calculated to avoid both economic and political exhaustion on the part of Washington. The military commanders were left, by and large, to ply their trade without interference as long as they stayed within the political framework for the conflict established by the policymakers. It is more likely that President Bush and his political advisors arrived at these "truths" as a result of the bitter lessons learned from the Vietnam experience than through any deep study of Hart or any other military theorists. Interestingly, though, the intellectual motivation at work here seems amazingly similar between the President and the British strategist. Hart wished to avoid a repetition of WW I; Bush to avoid any repetition of Vietnam.

In particular, Hart would have applauded the indirect method that was used to implement this grand strategy. Past behavior would have led Saddam Hussein to expect the U.S., as a "conservative " power, to adopt a defensive and unilateral approach in dealing with the problem of Iraqi aggression in Kuwait. Instead Washington opted to pursue the more tortuous and unexpected course of building an international coalition under the aegis of the United Nations and deploying sizeable military forces half a world away to be used in ejecting Iraq from Kuwait if need be. Baghdad found itself condemned not just by the West, but by the entire global community. Iraq was completely isolated economically, militarily and diplomatically. No succor was forthcoming from Moscow. Effective appeals to the

non-aligned movement or even to other radical Arab regimes had been largely shutoff by Washington's moves in the international arena. A major psychological blow had been dealt Iraq before the actual fighting even began.

In many ways Hart's unique contribution to strategic thought is his emphasis on the importance of those factors surrounding war termination and the need for effecting a just and lasting peace. In this regard, Sir Basil would have found U.S. grand strategy somewhat disturbing. Saddam was left with few face saving alternatives to war. He was, in effect, handed an ultimatum. Baghdad's ladder down was designed as a very short and humiliating one. Further, it is not clear that the U.S. has set in motion the forces that will secure a "better peace" in the region or that will serve its interests in the long run (I will return to this issue in greater detail in my conclusion). Hart clearly understood that "acquisitive" states like Iraq and "bully" leaders like Hussein respond only to countervailing force. This significantly complicates the ability to achieve an effective negotiated peace. Hart, however, never satisfactorily resolves this dilemma of the desirability of negotiated peace and the level of force required to bring "barbarians" and "fanatics" to heel.

The Air Campaign

The opening battle for victory in the Persian Gulf began in the skies over Kuwait and Iraq on 17 January 1991. Hart, an early proponent of air power, would have found much to his liking in the way

this campaign was conducted. The air war had the effect of psychologically dislocating the Iraqis as well as causing serious physical damage to Iraq's command and control nodes, infrastructure and war production-related facilities. Moreover, this was accomplished using precision-guided weapons and rules of engagement that attempted to limit the amount of collateral damage (Hart, I believe, would have applauded both these elements of the U.S. air campaign).

The air war was highly successful, in large part, because it was directed against a line of least resistance and because it skillfully played on Arab fears of Western technological invincibility. The Iraqi air defense was clearly a weak link in Baghdad's military chain. For Coalition forces air power was a clear and perhaps decisive strength. Furthermore, the Arabs, psychologically speaking, suffer from an inferiority complex when it comes to the technology of the West -- and especially as it regards American weaponry. The air campaign, as it unfolded, exploited this technological advantage in ways that left the Iraqi military not only physically battered, but psychologically demoralized and awed at the magnitude of Coalition effort. This is amply detailed in comments made by Iraqi officers and soldiers who underwent interrogation.

It could be argued that the air war had already defeated the Iraqi military before a single Coalition soldier stepped-off to the attack. But this only serves to drive home how successful the Coalition air campaign was in dislocating the enemy. Hart would make the case that the hallmark of an effective strategy is that it brings about battle under the most advantageous circumstances which in turn

should reduce the level of fighting required to reach a decision. The path for the quick and easy victory on the ground had been prepared by the "jujitsu" blow the Iraqis received from the air.

The Ground War

On the ground and at sea Iraq was faced with a Coalition strategy that presented The psychological and physical problem of dealing with a variety of plausible alternative objectives. These included an amphibious assault from the Gulf, a direct assault against the KTO, or an attempt at envelopment through the desert on the Iraqi force's right flank. The combined effects of the air campaign, activity in the enemy's immediate front and the threat of amphibious assault tended to fix the enemy's forces in the KTO. This, in turn, set the stage for a very successful and devastating envelopment movement which cutoff the bulk of Iraqi forces from their base of operations around Baghdad. In total, it was a classical example of a "dispersed advance with distributed aim." The result was clear; the Iraqi army was defeated and routed in short order. The Iraqis, already psychologically dislocated and demoralized, put up so little resistance that the ground war seemed almost anti-climactic.

There are aspects of the ground war which would have given Hart pause for thought. The large size of the ground forces employed cannot, at least on the face of it, be considered the minimum necessary to achieve the military objective --- in fact, quite the contrary would appear to be true. One could, however, argue that the

size and composition of the Coalition forces, which included a not insignificant number of Arab soldiers, only added to the sense of psychological dislocation felt by the Iraqis. Further, the enemy did not disperse his forces in reaction to Coalition ground force movements, but remained concentrated. This could, paradoxically, be explained by the overall effectiveness of the indirect approach in psychologically paralyzing the enemy.

Issues such as these point to an inherent problem of circularity in Liddell Hart's strategy of the indirect approach. In the extreme it can be argued that whatever works on the battlefield is a result of adopting this particular strategy. The subtlety and, at times, vague nature of this concept can limit its usefulness.

Conclusion

The Coalition strategy in the Persian Gulf War clearly exhibited many many of the characteristics of Basil Liddell Hart's indirect approach. These included attack along lines of least resistance; development of plausible multiple objectives; concentration of strength against weakness; and, most importantly, exploitation of surprise and psychological advantage in order to throw the enemy off-balance. DESERT STORM clearly achieved Hart's aim of war: "... to subdue the enemy's will to resist, with the least possible human and economic loss to one's self." (Bond, Liddell Hart, p. 39). It would appear that consciously or otherwise Hart's thinking may have had some effect on senior U.S. military planners and operational commanders.

I think it is worth noting that Saddam Hussein (although it is highly unlikely he has ever read Hart) demonstrated that the indirect approach could pay dividends for Baghdad as well. His use of SCUD missiles against Israel was an ingenious attempt to strike at Coalition unity. It did divert some Coalition military and political assets. Fortunately, Washington was able to neutralize this effort. First, by depicting the SCUD attacks as yet another example of Saddam's ruthless irresponsibility and, then, through the fortuitous success of the PATRIOT anti-missile system (which lent further credence in Arab eyes to the technological wizardry of the West).

The dazzling success of our military operations, however, should not obscure the fact that it is by no means certain that the war achieved Hart's greater goal of grand strategy, i.e., a better peace. Behind the raised expectations that surround the Mideast Peace Conference in Madrid lie some other and less comforting results of the war. The stability of the region is by no means assured. Saddam Hussein is still in Baghdad. The forces of Kurdish and Shia separatism have been unleashed anew. In the case of the Kurds this has continuing potential spill-over effects for Turkey and Iran; for the Shia's, this may effect Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, as well as, Iraq. What effect a continuing Western military presence in Saudi Arabia may have on the future security of the Kingdom and the House of Saud is unclear. At best, the Saudis have reacted to this turn of events in an ambiguous fashion; at worst, it has given Arab conservatives and Islamic fundamentalists grist to grind against the monarchy in Riyadh, particularly in regard to its ability and suitability to defend the

holy shrines of Islam. The treatment of Jordan in the recent conflict does not speak glowingly of what kind of treatment former Arab friends of Washington can expect under the "New World Order". Additionally, the tragic results of the abortive uprisings in Iraq and our restoration of an oppressive ruling family to power in Kuwait raise unsettling moral questions. War can indeed change political facts. History will tell whether we have, yet again, won the war only to lose the peace in the end. Hart's lesson is an important even if paradoxical one --- war must always be waged with an eye on the peace that will follow.