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ALLIED FORCE AND CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF LIMITED WAR

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ALLIED FORCE AND CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF LIMITED WAR

Operation ALLIED FORCE, NATO's 78-day campaign against the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in the spring of 1999, is a good case study to examine the relevance of Clausewitz's theory of limited war. Although NATO possessed overwhelming military advantages, both NATO and the FRY fought this conflict with the intent of getting a negotiated settlement. Each side fought to get better terms, not to overthrow the other. In the end NATO prevailed in forcing Milosevic to accept its demands and hand over control of Kosovo to an international occupation force. This case study clearly shows the continued prescience of Clausewitz's theory of limited war. It emphasizes the importance of the relative values of the political aims involved, and of understanding that actions taken during war can change the war aims of the belligerents, and thus the magnitude and duration of their use of military power.

CLAUSEWITZ AND THE THEORY OF LIMITED WAR

Clausewitz's theoretical writing was based on the idea that understanding the nature of war required understanding the interaction between non-quantifiable moral factors and a physical environment characterized by uncertainty and violence.¹ Clausewitz argued that, in theory, both the political aims and military means to achieve them would spiral towards the extreme use of force. However, having studied both the wars of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, Clausewitz saw that this did not match reality. Thus, one of his fundamental arguments was that there were two distinct types of wars with different war aims. While some wars would end with the overthrow the enemy, others would end through bargaining and peace negotiations. In

¹ Michael Howard, *Clausewitz*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 34.

reality there was a spectrum of war from total wars of extermination to simple armed observations.²

To explain this disparity, Clausewitz noted that his theoretical notion of absolute war required a genuine polarity between the political aims of each belligerent. One side's loss would be a zero-sum gain for the other. However, war was a gamble in which each side placed different values and probabilities on the potential outcomes, and one side's gain could result in a disproportionate loss to the other. Also, neither side could know with certainty how strongly the other might resist. This meant that war would always stop short of the theoretical maximum.³

Clausewitz synthesized his thinking by saying that war "is controlled by its political object," and that "the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*." Thus, "the desire for peace on either side will rise and fall with the probability of further success and the amount of effort these would require." The grounds for peace short of total conquest could be found in circumstances where victory was improbable or unacceptably costly for one of the belligerents.⁴

However, Clausewitz did not believe that one could precisely calculate of the amount of force needed to fight and win a limited war. First, he noted that political aims in war were not static. They were influenced and altered by events in the war and their probable consequences. Also, political aims were interactive. The demands belligerents placed on each other exerted a controlling influence on the conduct of war. Stronger demands would result in stronger resistance. Likewise, there were many factors such as fear, the indecisive nature of humans, and imperfect perceptions that limited the military effort in war and made exact calculations

² Clausewitz, *On War*, 10 July 1827 note, 69; Book 1, Chapter 1, 75-78, 81.

³ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 1, 81-86.

⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 2, 92; Bernard Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of On War," in Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) 646-647.

impossible. Finally, Clausewitz noted that it took two to fight a limited war. Thus, one must always keep the theoretical notion of absolute war in mind just in case the opponent was prepared to exert himself to the utmost to achieve his objective.⁵

ALLIED FORCE: A CASE STUDY IN LIMITED WAR

Operation ALLIED FORCE demonstrates the enduring value of Clausewitz's theory described in the previous section. The opening strategies of each belligerent show that the use of military force was controlled by the value of political aims, and highlight the importance of comparative analysis, or a net assessment of war aims. ALLIED FORCE also highlights the fact that miscalculations at this level can result in unforeseen outcomes.

President Clinton outlined NATO's strategic objectives as NATO began the war on 24 March, 1999. NATO had to act because its credibility was at stake, and ethnic cleansing by FRY paramilitary and police forces in Kosovo threatened the stability of Southern Europe. The primary strategic aims of this intervention were to deter attacks on civilians in Kosovo, demonstrate NATO's resolve in opposition to aggression in Kosovo, create conditions to reverse ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and diminish the FRY's military ability to wage war in Kosovo in the future.⁶ On April 6th, NATO clarified these objectives by outlining five conditions with which Slobodan Milosevic had to comply to stop the bombing:⁷

- Cease all combat activities and killing in Kosovo
- Withdraw all FRY military, police and paramilitary forces from Kosovo
- Agree to an international security force in Kosovo
- Agree to the unconditional return of refugees
- Agree to work towards a political framework based on the Rambouillet negotiations

⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 2, 92-99; Michael Howard, 51.

⁶ Jim Garamore and Linda D. Kozaryn, "NATO Attacks to Stop Kosovo Killings," American Forces Information Service News Article, 24 March 1999; Joint Statement of William S. Cohen, Secretary Of Defense and General Henry H. Shelton, Chairman Of The Joint Chiefs Of Staff before the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing On the Kosovo After-Action Review, October 14, 1999.

⁷ Joint Statement of William S. Cohen and General Henry H. Shelton; Stephen T. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 23.

NATO also had two additional negative objectives that, at least initially, were given overriding priority in the conduct of the campaign. The first was to maintain NATO unity and cohesion at all costs. The second was to prevent military operations in ALLIED FORCE from damaging long-term relations with Russia and China.⁸

On the other hand, the notion that the FRY give NATO control of Kosovo was anathema to Slobodan Milosevic. He was determined to maintain the territorial integrity of the FRY, and maintain the FRY's sovereignty over the province of Kosovo. This meant maintaining FRY military and police forces in Kosovo, limiting any international force to a UN led observer mission, and specifically precluded any NATO military involvement in this observer force.⁹

NATO and the FRY were pursuing irreconcilable political objectives, which explains why the dispute ended in a war. But it does not explain the character and conduct of the war as it unfolded in late March and early April of 1999. This requires a deeper understanding of the emotional attachment each side held for its war aims, and the probabilities they assessed for success. On the one hand, the White House was "tiptoeing into the war, acutely aware of Congressional opposition at home and the fragility of the alliance overseas."¹⁰ There was only lukewarm support for the war in the Pentagon, with many officials such as Secretary of Defense Cohen fundamentally against using military force in Kosovo. Eliminating the use of ground forces was essential to gaining Congressional support for military intervention. Senator Warner, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, stated that he had to eliminate any option for the use of ground forces to get even a small, 50-plus votes in the Senate in support of

⁸ Joint Statement of William S. Cohen and General Henry H. Shelton

⁹ Hosmer, 22.

¹⁰ David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace*, (New York: Scribner, 2001) 423.

ALLIED FORCE. Finally, Gen Ralston, Vice Chairman of the JCS, even wanted to withhold the B-2 from the operation for fear one might be shot down.¹¹

Although NATO had the capability to annihilate the FRY, limited political commitment and the overriding priority given to negative objectives resulted in an extremely constrained use of military force. Only U.S. and NATO air power was used, because only air power provided the capability to strike with precision and limit both losses and collateral damage. Not only were ground forces specifically excluded by President Clinton during his speech on 24 March, but also the U.S. sent its aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf before air strikes began, and had only 1/3 of the total aircraft in place that it would eventually use to win the war.

Perhaps the most visible constraints were the limits placed on initial strikes. There were only a handful of the targets approved, and they were not the ones that Gen Short, the air component commander, thought would be necessary to bring the conflict to a quick termination. Nobody in Washington, or in most NATO countries, was willing to authorize what Gen Short thought was the right use of military power, a short but intense air campaign directed at the FRY leadership in Belgrade.¹²

The NATO strategy was also influenced by a fundamental miscalculation in the strategic net assessment of war aims. The primary error was the prevailing assumption that a short, limited bombing campaign would be enough to get Milosevic to agree to negotiate a solution to the crisis. The assessment among some political leaders, such as Secretary of State Albright, was that Milosevic would cave-in easily, and this would be a short war lasting only 3-4 days. Some in NATO's political leadership may have believed that Milosevic would not defy NATO's

¹¹ Halberstam, 423-425, 458; Senator John Warner, Hearing Of The Senate Committee On Armed Services on Lessons Learned From Military Operations And Relief Efforts In Kosovo, 21 Oct 99.

overwhelming military might, and would only fight long enough to sustain his honor, then sue for peace.¹³ There was some justification for believing that Milosevic was vulnerable to coercive diplomacy. NATO had a history of using limited force to coerce Milosevic. NATO leaders believed that in the fall of 1995 limited air strikes had brought Milosevic to Dayton. Likewise, in the fall of 1998 Ambassador Holbrook and Gen Short had succeeded in threatening Milosevic with air strikes to gain his approval to allow OSCE observers into Kosovo. They believed this tactic worked because Milosevic was terrified by the prospect of being bombed.¹⁴

However, NATO had misestimated how Milosevic viewed his options, and misunderstood how much more important Kosovo was to Milosevic than Bosnia had been four years earlier. By March of 1999 Milosevic was “cocky” about being bombed.¹⁵ Milosevic stood to lose everything if he gave in to NATO demands. The vast majority of ethnic Serbs in the FRY held very strong emotional attachments to Kosovo for historical and cultural reasons. Milosevic had used this emotional attachment to bolster his own political career, and depended on the delegation from Kosovo to maintain his majority in parliament. NATO’s demands at Rambouillet were significantly more intrusive than those made the previous fall, and practically guaranteed Kosovo would eventually separate from the rest of the FRY. In particular, ethnic Serbs viewed NATO troops in Kosovo and Serbia as foreign aggressors. Milosevic ran a strong risk of massive popular backlash if he agreed to NATO’s demands. He could not relinquish Kosovo, the heart of Serbia, and hope to survive.¹⁶

¹² Halberstam, 444-451; Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2000) 210-211. Gen Michael Short, Testimony before a Hearing Of The Senate Committee On Armed Services on Lessons Learned From Military Operations And Relief Efforts In Kosovo, 21 Oct 99

¹³ Barry Posen, “The War for Kosovo, Serbia’s Political-Military Strategy,” *International Security*, 24 no. 3 (Spring 2000) 60; Halberstam, 425.

¹⁴ Halberstam, 400.

¹⁵ Halberstam, 400, 422.; Daalder and O’Hanlon, 211-214; Hosmer, 17.

¹⁶ Hosmer, 8-18.

Milosevic also believed, for good reason, that he had a viable strategy to get better terms from NATO. He had seen President Clinton's limited strike mentality when dealing with Iraq, had a good sense that NATO had limited resolve and wanted a short conflict, and he may have had inside diplomatic intelligence about NATO's plan. Milosevic judged that he could get better terms by resisting NATO using a strategy aimed at winning a war of resolve. One of the primary strategic concepts Milosevic developed was using refugees as a weapon through an aggressive ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo. Creating a humanitarian crisis would show the bombing to be counterproductive, and threaten to destabilize surrounding countries with refugee flows. He also thought he could eliminate the Kosovo Liberation Army and permanently reduce the Kosovar Albanian majority. Finally, he believed he could use defensive military actions to preserve his combat power and protract the conflict to the point that NATO would break.¹⁷

Thus, the character of the opening weeks of ALLIED FORCE was determined primarily by a fundamental miscalculation by NATO concerning the FRY's willingness to accept punishment, and a very astute strategic calculation of NATO's limited will by Slobodan Milosevic. While NATO started the war with a series of limited air strikes against inconsequential targets, FRY paramilitary and police forces accelerated the already on-going ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and created a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportion. From the onset of hostilities on 24 March through about mid May, Milosevic had every reason to believe his strategy was working.¹⁸

However, Milosevic made a fundamental miscalculation that would cost him the war. "His fatal mistake was in not understanding how his own actions might finally unite the countries in the alliance against him rather than divide them."¹⁹ Milosevic made a serious miscalculation of

¹⁷ Hosmer, 19-34; Posen 50-56.

¹⁸ Posen, 66.

¹⁹ Halberstam, 452.

NATO's staying power. If Milosevic hadn't expelled Kosovar Albanians the way he did, NATO could have failed. Germany and Italy, without which the war couldn't be pursued, would have demanded a suspension of the war. As one observer put it, "If Milosevic hadn't solved the problem for us by sending out the Albanians, this war could have ended and been a fiasco."²⁰

U.S. officials were quick to note how people were horrified by what they were seeing in terms of refugees and ethnic cleansing, and European public opinion was cemented early in the war by the media's coverage of the effects of large-scale Serbian brutality in Kosovo. But the turning point for NATO was the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. on 23 and 24 April. Gen Jumper, the Commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, noted that the alliance reached a consensus at this meeting and authorized a major intensification of the air campaign.²¹ On 23 April the NATO Heads of State issued a statement that showed clear changes in their commitment to winning. First, they made it clear that Milosevic's actions challenged the very values for which NATO stood – human rights and the rule of law. Second, they restated the political aims in very idealistic terms, "a peaceful, multi-ethnic and democratic Kosovo where all its people can live in security and enjoy universal human rights and freedom on an equal basis."²² Finally, they restated the five conditions for the termination of the conflict and emphasized that there would be no compromise on this position.

A NATO spokesman emphasized NATO's determination and resolve in a press conference on 23 April, and also revealed that the conduct of the war was changing. NATO was determined to strike at the central nervous system of the FRY, exactly the approach Gen Short

²⁰ Daalder and O'Hanlon, 205; James A. Kitfield, "Another Look at the Air War That Was," *Air Force Magazine*, (Vol 82, No. 10: Oct 1999), 41.

²¹ Robin Wright, "Crisis in Yugoslavia; NEWS ANALYSIS: Early on, Odds Stacked Against NATO's Goal; Military: Reluctance to send ground troops, Milosevic's home advantages made it impossible to prevent atrocities." *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1999, 1; Kitfield, 41; Posen, 66.

²² Statement on Kosovo issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Washington D.C., 23 April 1999.

had recommended six weeks earlier. The target list was expanded, and some restrictions on targeting Belgrade were lifted. There was a “speedy erosion of constraints on NATO’s target selection that began in mid-May.”²³ NATO’s credibility was at stake, NATO’s cohesion was strong, and forcing Milosevic to comply with NATO’s five demands was now the most important objective.

By the end of May Milosevic must have known his strategy had not worked and the probability of serious damage was increasing daily. The FRY’s ethnic cleansing had alienated most of the world and caused the FRY to lose all meaningful political support, including Russia’s. NATO airpower and the possibility of a ground invasion confronted Milosevic with certain defeat. It was obvious his strategy to split the NATO alliance had backfired, and Russia could not save the FRY. In addition, the bombing campaign had changed sentiments in the Serbian populace, who now supported an end to the fighting. Likewise, the leadership of the Socialist Party in the FRY also began pressing Milosevic for a settlement, as they were worried about dismal economic conditions.²⁴ In the end, NATO clearly won. They forced Milosevic to accept essentially unchanged the demands that Milosevic had adamantly refused to accept 78 days earlier.²⁵ As Clausewitz had predicted, the grounds for peace were found in Milosevic’s estimate that circumstances made victory improbable and unacceptably costly.

While this analysis has emphasized Milosevic’s miscalculations as the primary factor in the outcome of ALLIED FORCE, NATO also made some wise decisions on the use of military force. First, Gen Short’s strategy of a short, intense air campaign may have backfired in much the same way as Milosevic ethnic cleansing campaign. While frustrating for the military, the

²³ Halberstam, 469; Posen, 82; Jamie Shea and Col Konrad Freytag, NATO Press Conference, Washington D.C, 23 April 1999.

²⁴ Daalder and O’Hanlon, 200-204; Hosmer, xiii – xv; Posen, 39.

²⁵ Daalder and O’Hanlon, 192-198.

constraints on the use of military force were essential to limit opposition in countries like Italy and Germany whose support was essential to the outcome. Likewise, a more robust bombing campaign may not have brought Milosevic to the table any sooner, and may have hardened Serb and Russian resistance.²⁶

Likewise, NATO's decision to exclude the use of ground forces in the Kosovo campaign was wise. Air Vice Marshal Tony Mason remarked shortly after the war ended that NATO was right to rule out ground forces. His assessment was not based on a limited will to fight or concern for casualties on the part of NATO. He believed that introducing ground forces might have hardened Serbian resolve and precluded a negotiated solution. With a history of invasion and occupation, the introduction or threat of ground forces in Kosovo or Serbia could have led to a hardening of Serbian attitudes towards the war. As Air Vice Marshall Mason stated, "Milosevic really wanted [NATO] to get into ravines and into gorges. He really wanted to relive the Serbian situation [fighting the Nazis] in the 1940s again."²⁷ In addition, this would have made Russian cooperation with NATO impossible.

Whether or not the ethnic Serb population would have gone into the "Serb Heroic mode" based on more intense bombing or a more direct threat of a ground invasion is a matter of speculation. However, this discussion reinforces the point that every action in a limited war affects the enemy's war aims and emotional attachment to them, and can fundamentally change the outcome of the war regardless of the tactical outcome.

CONCLUSION

This brief analysis is not meant to imply that the leaders involved in this conflict were inept or stupid. Certainly the intellectual effort to devise strategies for ALLIED FORCE may have

²⁶ Hosmer, 124-130.

been more difficult than the physical effort to fight it, and some amount of miscalculation was inevitable. NATO would have benefited from a better understanding of how strongly motivated Milosevic was to resist any NATO attempt at coercive diplomacy. NATO could have easily lost this war if not for Milosevic's even greater failure to understand that his ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo would harden NATO's determination and destroy his own strategy. Finally, this short analysis demonstrates how Clausewitz's theoretical concepts about limited war prove to be useful in explaining the character and conduct of ALLIED FORCE.

Historian Michael Howard noted that Clausewitz did not live to fully explore the territory between limited and absolute war.²⁸ If this is so, then how can Operation ALLIED FORCE illustrate the prescience and continued relevance of Clausewitz's theory of limited war? Primarily by highlighting the critical interaction of moral and physical factors in war and the fundamental role of human judgment. Thus, if sweat in training can reduce blood on the battlefield, then the detailed study of limited war and coercive diplomacy should better prepare the future strategist. And although Clausewitz's ideas about limited war may be somewhat incomplete, they can guide the professional military officer in this endeavor. Perhaps Clausewitz's hit the mark exactly as intended. After all, his primary goal in writing *On War* was not to provide a checklist for the future strategist, but to guide future military leaders through a life-long process of studying the entire spectrum of war.

²⁷ Kitfield, 43.

²⁸ Howard, 51.

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