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Compressing The Levels of War: Operation Desert Storm and Operation Allied Force Case Study

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Advances in information and communications technology are combining with the CNN effect to blur the distinction between the strategic, the operational and the tactical level of command. The strategic level of command frequently reaches down through the operational level of command, placing restraints on the operational commander's selection of possible courses of action or limitations on the tactical level of command. The tactical level of command is similarly affected by these same phenomena such that tactical actions may have immediate and strategic ramifications. While there are measures the operational commander may take to mitigate the occurrence of these effects, it ultimately remains up to the operational commander to become adept at integrating the strategic level of command with the tactical level of command and producing the effects required to meet the assigned political objectives.

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Abstract

Advances in information and communications technology are combining with the CNN effect to blur the distinction between the strategic, the operational and the tactical level of command. The strategic level of command frequently reaches down through the operational level of command, placing restraints on the operational commander's selection of possible courses of action or limitations on the tactical level of command. The tactical level of command is similarly affected by these same phenomena such that tactical actions may have immediate and strategic ramifications. While there are measures the operational commander may take to mitigate the occurrence of these effects, it ultimately remains up to the operational commander to become adept at integrating the strategic level of command with the tactical level of command and producing the effects required to meet the assigned political objectives.

"We shoot a whole lot better than we aim."

Senior Navy planner speaking at the beginning of Operation Allied Force, made prophetic by the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Clausewitz, the respected military theoretician, reminds us that war is rightly an instrument of policy.[2] Since military objectives are derived from political objectives, military leaders recognize that the primacy of political policy must be preserved. This means that strategically imposed limitations and interventions are a fact of life for military commanders. However, the age of network-centric warfare brings with it the baggage for increased opportunity of centralized decision-making or micro-management. Leaders at all levels can see at least some of the immediate effects of military activity and receive immediate feedback on successes or failures. Combined with the top-down proclivity to extend the reach of control, the universal accessibility and immediacy of the

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[1] Truver, Scott C., "Operation Allied Force: The Lessons Learned," Sea Power, Vol 43, No. 6, (Washington, June 2000), 35.

[2] von Clausewitz, Carl, Translated and edited by Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret, On War, (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

media can cause the actions of a single soldier to have implications all the way up to the strategic level.

Together, technological changes and media pervasiveness are combining to compress the levels of command such that the boundaries between the operational level of command and the strategic and tactical level of command are increasingly overlapping and blurred. The thesis of this paper is that the operational commander's decision-making prerogative is being increasingly restrained by political mandates and limitations imposed from the strategic level above while also being impacted by the ramifications of events from below the tactical level of war.

This paper will draw evidence from unclassified Congressional and Department of Defense military after-action reports on Operations Desert Storm and Allied Force to support its thesis. Occasionally, to expand on the sometimes one-sided or limited analysis introduced by these official publications, deeper analysis and opposing viewpoints will be proffered from other sources. Finally, conclusions and recommendations drawn from the analysis will be presented so that the operational commander might attempt to moderate some of the effects examined in the analysis.

BACKGROUND

Modern society is undergoing a tremendous technological advance in information availability and dissemination. Improvements in computational and transmission technologies have enormously increased the speed and accessibility of communication while fueling increasing demand for more information. Terabytes of raw and processed data are being indexed in easily accessible online databases. An extraordinary growth in computational power is fueling nearly instantaneous results from complex analyses. Real-time computer simulation and modeling results are reducing wasted time and redundancy of effort. Computer-based and space-based communications are shrinking the factors of time and space by enabling internet-based information dissemination and offering face-to-face collaboration among parties spread over thousands of miles. The spurt of technological breakthroughs is redefining the limits of what mankind can achieve.

The news media is also increasingly playing an important role in the process of carrying out national policy. The influence of the news media has become so pervasive, it is now universally recognized as the "CNN effect."

The impact of these changes is no less important for military decision-makers than it is for political,

commercial and civilian pursuits. Technological advances in information acquisition and transmission have increased both the speed of transmission and accessibility of information, enabling increased interference on the operational commander's decisions and planning. The extent and speed with which the media can cover unfolding events and transmit them worldwide can turn out to be a major influence on the selection of appropriate courses of action. A seemingly small scale incident at the tactical level of war can place the entire operation under intense and unfavorable scrutiny at home or internationally and have profound and immediate effects that limit operational choices or change objectives. These effects may significantly impact the operational commander's ability to accomplish the mission in the most effective manner.

Dr. Milan Vego defines the level of war as "the level at which specific military objectives are achieved in war or low intensity conflict...each level of war is conducted by a corresponding level of command"[3]

Douglas MacGregor suggests in his analysis, "Future Battle: The Merging Levels of War," that the three levels of war--strategic, operational, and tactical--are merging into

[3] Milan N. Vego, Operational Warfare, (Newport, Navy War College, 2000), 637.

a complex integration of air, land, and sea combat operations. He examined past wars and extended these historic trends into the future to propose that the operational level of war will become increasingly less discrete (Appendix A presents two diagrams which MacGregor uses to visualize these trends). Instead, due to technological developments continuing to compress decision cycles and improve the capability to conduct simultaneous and synchronized combat operations, the operational level of war will serve more to integrate the tactical and the strategic level of war.[4]

ANALYSIS

The easiest illustration of this phenomenon is an example of a tactical decision, action, mistake, or error causing strategic consequences. These strategic consequences can result in operational realignment by either of two paths. The operational commander may impose self-restraint to avoid the political imposition of increased restraints. New restraints may also be imparted on the operational commander from above the operational level of command.

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[4] MacGregor, Douglas A., "Future Battle: The Merging Levels of War," Parameters, (Washington, Winter 1992-93), 40-41.

A tactical level mistake in Operation Allied Force had a serious and degrading impact on the conduct of the operation, as well as on the level of national interests and strategic interaction. The accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, was "the result of a failure in the process of identifying and validating proposed targets. The headquarters of the Yugoslav Federal Directorate of Supply and Procurement (FDSP) was a legitimate military target, but the technique used to locate it was severely flawed. None of the military or intelligence databases used to validate targets contained the correct location of the Chinese Embassy. Nowhere in the target review process was a mistake detected."[5] As a result of this incident, the process of selecting targets throughout the theater was modified. A procedure was established to identify and promulgate critical "'No Strike' targets."[6] Elsewhere, under the title of "Target Selection Procedures", the report states,

> During the course of the campaign, NATO developed mechanisms for delegating target approval authority to military commanders. For selected categories of targets — for example, targets in downtown Belgrade, in Montenegro, or targets

[5] Department of Defense. Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report (Washington, 2000), xx.

[6] Department of Defense. Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report (Washington, 2000), xx.

> likely to involve high collateral damage — NATO reserved approval for higher political authorities. NATO leaders used this mechanism to ensure that member nations were fully cognizant of particularly sensitive military operations, and, thereby, to help sustain the unity of the alliance.[7]

The target selection and approval process evolved during the course of the conflict, in effect, to limit the strategic consequences of future tactical errors or mistakes. In fact, after this incident, GEN Clark prohibited further attacks against targets critical to Milosevic or his supporters, power supplies, bridges or roads.[8] Thus, limitations were imposed on the operational commander's prerogative by having to comply with this restrictive target approval process.

Furthermore, the strategic ramifications of this error at the tactical level of operations, which was really an error at the operational level of intelligence and support, went far beyond the limits of the battlefield and coalition cohesion. The Chinese questioned whether the bombing was truly accidental or an intentional action taken to show dissatisfaction with Chinese support in the United Nations.

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[7] Department of Defense. Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report (Washington, 2000), 47.

[8] Parker, Richard. "NATO Strategy Doubted Air Chief Queries Chance of Success." The Denver Post. 23 May 1999. Sec. A, p. A-01.

This mistake had a spillover effect on the legitimacy of America's foreign policy objectives in China. Subsequent to the bombing, China suspended all contact with the U.S. on human rights and arms control.[9]

Critics may point out that targets in Belgrade were chosen specifically for their injurious effect on the regime of Milosevic. Thus it was only a matter of course that political oversight would have a say in the target selection and approval process. However, after this incident, all bombing in Belgrade stopped for a period of several weeks while the reasons for the error were established and corrections put into place.[10] The target approval process tightened because of the strategic ramifications of the mistake, regardless of whether the new restraints were self-imposed by the operational commander to ward off political mandate or imposed by the political leadership as a consequence of this action. In an attempt to prevent further strategic involvement in future target selection, a specific recommendation of the Kosovo After-Action Report was to give particular emphasis to the "development of collection

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[9] Department of Defense. Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report (Washington, 2000), A-9.

[10] Parker, Richard, "NATO Strategy Doubted Air Chief Queries Chance of Success," The Denver Post, (23 May 1999), Sec. A, p. A-01.

strategies that deconflict national policy and theater operational requirements when necessary."[11]

Thus the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy was of little importance in accomplishing the military objectives of the operational commander, but of significant strategic importance to the cohesion and credibility of NATO and the American leadership and the foreign policy objectives of the United States. This is a clear example of how a tactical action can have strategic consequences that blur the lines between the levels of command.

The media plays a significant supporting role in compressing the levels of command. During the initial bombing phase of Desert Storm, the propaganda battle over civilian casualties led to subsequent restrictions on bombing Baghdad.[12] Even in the age of sophisticated precision-guided weapons and focused effects, Desert Storm was not without innocent civilian casualties, albeit fewer innocent civilian casualties than any prior large-scale military conflict. As with the Chinese embassy bombing in Kosovo, the U.S. political and military leadership now found

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[11] Department of Defense, Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report, (Washington, 2000), 59.

[12] William M. Arkin, "Baghdad: The Urban Sanctuary in Desert Storm?" Airpower Journal, Vol. XI, No. 1 (Spring 1997), 12.

themselves having to justify target selection criteria in the wake of media-sparked national and international concern.

Concern for the possibility of unflattering media reports led to development of off-limits targets within Iraq and Kuwait prior to the beginning the first phase of the air war. The Report to Congress illustrates the operational commander's level of concern regarding collateral damage. The political leadership reinforced this concern by assisting the military in developing the off-limits list by providing interagency support.

> Planners were aware that each bomb carried a potential moral and political impact, and that Iraq has a rich cultural and religious heritage dating back several thousand years... Targeting policies, therefore, scrupulously avoided damage to mosques, religious shrines, and archaeological sites, as well as to civilian facilities and the civilian population. To help strike planners, CENTCOM target intelligence analysts, in close coordination with the national intelligence agencies and the State Department, produced a joint no-fire target list. This list was a compilation of historical, archaeological, economic, religious and politically sensitive installations in Iraq and Kuwait that could not be targeted. Additionally, target intelligence analysts were tasked to look in a six-mile area around each master attack list target for schools, hospitals, and mosques to identify targets where extreme care was required in planning. Further, using imagery, tourist maps, and human resource intelligence (HUMINT) reports, these same types of areas were identified for the entire city of Baghdad. When targeting officers calculated the

probability of collateral damage as too high, the target was not attacked.[13]

On February 13, an F-117 attack on the Al-Firdus military command and control bunker in Baghdad caused 204 civilian casualties.[14] The Al-Firdus bunker had been converted from an air-raid shelter into a command and control bunker after the Iran-Iraq War. Coalition authorities were unaware that Iraqi authorities allowed the upper level of the bunker to be used as an air raid shelter by the civilian families of the military personnel who worked in the bunker complex. However, the report confirms that the bunker was a legitimate military target.[15] Nevertheless, this incident and other similar incidents eroded U.S. and international support for bombing downtown Baghdad. After this incident, all potential targets in Baghdad had to be reviewed by the CINC and approved by the

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[13] Department of Defense, Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress, (Washington, April 1992), 100.

[14] Edward C. Mann III, Colonel, USAF, Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates, Vol II, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama, Air University Press, April 1995), 120.

[15] Department of Defense, Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress, (Washington, April 1992), 615-616.

CJCS.[16] Essentially, Washington was now running the bombing campaign.

Keeping Israel out of the war was essential to maintaining the solidarity of the Gulf War coalition. The Secretary of Defense demonstrated his concern for the success of this effort by intervening on the CINC's air war plans. The political goal was to demonstrate that the coalition forces were doing everything possible to protect Israel from the SCUDs. By showing the Israelis there was nothing more that they could contribute militarily that the coalition wasn't already doing, they hoped to keep Israel out of the war. Therefore, the Secretary demanded a larger percentage of the daily sorties be scheduled for SCUD defense.[17] The operational mission of coalition aircraft could have strategic effects solely by the nature of the mission they were assigned, regardless of whether they ever fired a missile.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are several examples in the Kosovo conflict of political mandates that originated not as a ramification of tactical actions but to

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[16] Gordon, Michael R. and General Bernard E. Trainer, The Generals' War, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 326.

[17] Gordon, Michael R. and General Bernard E. Trainer, The Generals' War, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 234.

meet higher political purposes. These restraints also put limits on the operational commander's choice for courses of action. Sometimes, these limits were in conflict with the operational commander's ability to choose the most effective course of action to achieve the desired end-state.

President Clinton's decision not to send ground troops into Kosovo immediately placed the operational commander in a position where he had to consider what military objectives could be accomplished within the politically imposed restraints. GEN Clark, USCINCEUR, realized that if the air option alone didn't have the advertised effect of making Milosevic capitulate, there had to be a backup plan. At some point, any incremental plan of escalation would almost certainly require ground forces if the first levels of air-only escalation proved ineffective.

On the technological end of the spectrum, the capacity of the command, control, communications, and computers (C4) systems established for Operation Allied Force was the greatest yet established for use in wartime.

> The command, control, communications, and computers (C4) systems provided for Operation Allied Force were unprecedented in terms of capacity and variety of services. For U.S. elements in fixed locations, wideband interconnection was the rule, provided by a combination of military and commercial systems. The available bandwidth was nearly double that used during the Gulf War, an operation with far more forces committed. One reason this was

> possible is that the communications infrastructure in Europe, both military and civilian, is among the most robust and flexible available to the United States in any theater of operations. Additional C4 capabilities were brought into the theater, even though this impacted other U.S. military commitments worldwide.[18]

Unfortunately, this massive pipe for information and communications brought new problems. Lack of electronic discipline consumed available capacity. Daily commander's video teleconferences "spanned the chain of command from the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to the Commander Joint Task Force and onward to component commanders. In other words, these commanders' video teleconferences spanned the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of command, thus greatly compressing normal command-and-control processes. As a result, strategic and operational commanders were able to directly influence tactical operations."[19]

Coercive escalation is usually a course of action chosen by the political leadership to initiate action with limited or cautious public support. The very use of the word "escalation" implies that some amount of initial effort will not be enough to influence the opponent. Hence the amount of violence will have to be escalated, requiring increased

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[18] Department of Defense, Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report, (Washington, 2000), 46.

[19] Department of Defense, Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report, (Washington, 2000), 28.

resources, more time and more planning in the hope of discovering by trial and error what level of violence will be enough. Attempting to force capitulation on the cheap can unnecessarily extend the conflict, creating more risk and increasing the opportunity for loss of public support. At the very least, it makes it difficult to conclude the hostilities decisively and allow a short-term exit strategy.

Operation Allied Force was initially conceived as an air battle that would last only two days, focused on targets throughout Yugoslavia to coerce Milosevic to withdraw his forces from Kosovo.[20] After it became clear that Milosevic was not going to capitulate as quickly as was commonly believed, a graduated plan for an escalating air war went into effect. The plan was devised to send diplomatic signals to Milosevic as much as anything else, complete with operational pauses for diplomatic intercourse. The cohesion of the coalition required that each proposed target in Belgrade be reviewed and approved by each member of the alliance. The paradox is that the self-imposed constraints may end up prolonging the bombing, adding to the risk that the alliance may eventually begin to splinter under the

[20] Department of Defense, Kosovo/Operation Allied Force: After-Action Report, (Washington, 2000), 23.

strain.[21] GEN Naumann, former head of NATO's military committee, told NATO they should resist sacrificing the military principles of surprise and decisive force for the sake of approval of the consensus.[22]

The air-only course of action was largely determined by President Clinton's refusal to consider the use of ground troops in Kosovo, as mentioned earlier. But he also blocked the use of American Apache helicopters against Serbian troops. Though they were requested by the CINC, the Apache mission was believed to be too risky by the Defense Secretary and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When they were finally sent in later, it was on the condition that they were not to be used without formal approval from the President.[23]

Although the CINC's pre-invasion OPLAN was eventually approved by President Bush (with some modifications), key players in Washington repeatedly requested alternatives

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[21] Gordon, Michael R, "Crisis in the Balkans: At NATO; Allies' War by Consensus Limiting Military Strategy," New York Times, (4 April 1999), Sec. 1, Late Edition, p.1.

[22] Gordon, Michael R., "Crisis in the Balkans: The Overview; Allied Air Chief Stresses Hitting Belgrade Sites," New York Times, (13 May 1999), Sec. A, p.1.

[23] Gordon, Michael R. with Eric Schmidt, "Crisis in the Balkans: Military Strategy; Pentagon Withholds Copters from Battlefields in Kosovo", New York Times, (16 May 1999), Sec. 1, p.1.

favoring a gradual and measured response for Desert Storm.[24] The operational commander's professional judgment and expertise was nearly usurped by the desire to use military leverage for diplomatic progress.

CONCLUSIONS

Operation Desert Storm and Operation Allied Force both prove ample evidence exists that the traditional boundaries between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of command are becoming increasingly indistinct and overlapping. The tactical level of command can create an immediate strategic or political impact by its actions. Similarly, managing political requirements can lead the strategic level of command to impose restraints and limitations or make decisions which impact the operational commander's course of actions or mission accomplishment. As technological evolution reduces factor time and space in the information domain, the strategic leadership increasingly manages the operational level of war to such an extent that the operational commander's leadership may be rendered ineffective.

Figure 2 in Appendix A graphically shows the development of this phenomenon to the next order of

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[24] Craft, Douglas W, An Operational Analysis of the Persian Gulf War, (Study, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Aug 1992) 16.

magnitude. This future war is marked by continuous, offensive operations. The enemy will be overcome by a rapid and integrated campaign. All the levels of war have merged where success depends less on planning and more on decisionmaking at all levels in response to rapidly changing circumstances.[25]

Given that policy is the domain of the strategic level of command, the operational leader will always have to subordinate his leadership to strategic oversight. However, that does not diminish his responsibility to ensure that he provides the best advice to those policy-makers to ensure that his military objectives are understood and approved by the strategic level of command. If not, he needs to ensure the strategic leaders understand the consequences and risks associated with a less than optimal solution. Alternatively, he needs to refine the mission to one that can be accomplished within the political restraints assigned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mitigating the effects of the compression of the levels of war will require some doctrinal changes as well as a focus on the operational art. Network-centric warfare and

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[25] MacGregor, Douglas A., "Future Battle: The Merging Levels of War," Parameters, (Washington, Winter 1992-93), 42-45.

synchronized/simultaneous operations require a greater capacity for logical thought and intuition than ever before. This is a skill that must be taught and practiced at every level of command.

It is essential to have military objectives that are clear, easily understood, and widely disseminated. Carefully working with the political arm of government to craft military objectives that match the political objectives is the most effective start for the operational commander. As the analysis demonstrates, it is not uncommon to find force structure determined more by political considerations than military analysis. Whenever possible, the operational commander needs to emphasize his requirements to the political leadership if his mission accomplishment is being compromised by political decisions.[26]

Military objectives have to remain flexible to adapt to fluidly changing circumstances. As a general rule, the military disdains the type of escalation inherent in operations where the political policy mandates a gradual escalation for coercive purposes. Coercive escalation is an extremely inefficient method of persuading your opponent to

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[26] Joint Warfighting Center, Joint Task Force Commander's Handbook for Peace Operations, (Washington, 16 June 1997),

capitulate to your will if you don't correctly understand his decision-making influences.

Graduated escalation for the purpose of limiting civilian or friendly casualties can be fallacious as well. As the quote at the beginning of this paper demonstrates, there is no clean solution to military combat. Regardless of how technologically precise weapons can be, there will still be mistakes. Whether those mistakes are from poor intelligence, poor execution, or equipment malfunctions, there is a high risk of unintended casualties in combat. The problem is to convince the political leadership not to place undue restraints on the troops or they may be placed at risk themselves.

There are times when escalating the military objective *can* be in line with political goals and public acceptability. As Desert Storm progressed and Iraq SCUD attacks mounted on Saudi Arabia and Israel, President Bush remained steadfast to his originally stated war aims not to go to Baghdad.[27] Perhaps this was the best opportunity with the coalition allies to enlarge the mission to the removal of Saddam Hussein and prevent the lingering presence of coalition troops in the Persian Gulf today.

Doctrinally, the operational commanders have to refrain from inter-service rivalry and identify the most effective capabilities that meet the requirements to achieve the military goals. Military leaders must resist the inclination to oversell the capabilities or worth of a particular service or platform/weapon system. Maybe airpower can accomplish the mission by itself, but is it the quickest, the most efficient, the most decisive or the best match to the mission objectives? If not, the operational commander needs to step forward and ask for the right mix of capabilities.

Precision weapons are only as precise as their programming, targeting and delivery. Furthermore, no war can be fought without casualties or collateral damage. As the attacks against the Chinese Embassy and Al-Firdus bunker demonstrate, "filling the missile and munitions bins could be counterproductive unless additional resources are also provided for research and development, acquisition, and training--along with the logistic, intelligence, and

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[27] Donnelly, Thomas, "Lessons Unlearned: A Comparison of Three American Wars," The National Interest, No. 60 (Summer 2000), 80.

combat/tactical support systems needed for a 'total systems' approach to future conflicts."[28]

Operational leaders will need to focus on decision-making skills, both for themselves and for their subordinates all the way down to the lowest private. GEN Charles Krulak, former Commandant of the Marine Corps pointed out that, "In many cases, the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy."[29] Rules of Engagement need to be carefully thought out and worded to guide soldiers. The real-time nature of network-centric warfare will tax the decision-making capability of the individual on the battle lines as much as it will tax the operational commander's ability to synchronize the various simultaneous operations under his command.

Military Public Relations needs to be an integral part of operations. Public Affairs personnel should be included in planning processes, daily meetings, and crisis briefings. They need to develop liaison and cooperative relationships with local and international media. They need to have a

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[28] Truver, Scott C., "Operation Allied Force: The Lessons Learned," Sea Power, Vol 43, No. 6 (June 2000), 37.

[29] Krulak, Charles C., GEN, USMC, "Cultivating Intuitive Decisionmaking," Marine Corps Gazette, Vol. 83, No. 5 (May 1999), 18.

quick reaction capability to handle emergent problems. More importantly, they need clear objectives and guidance up front from the operational commander in order to contribute their share to the accomplishment of the mission. Properly prepared, they can serve to influence the local media, the home front, and the international community as events unfold instead of trying to come from behind to perform damage control.

These are just some of the actions an operational commander can take to mitigate the impact of strategic limitations on operational effectiveness and prevent tactical blunders which could result in new limitations. Ultimately, the operational commander will have to become adept at integrating the strategic level of command with the tactical level of command to produce the effects required to meet the political objectives.

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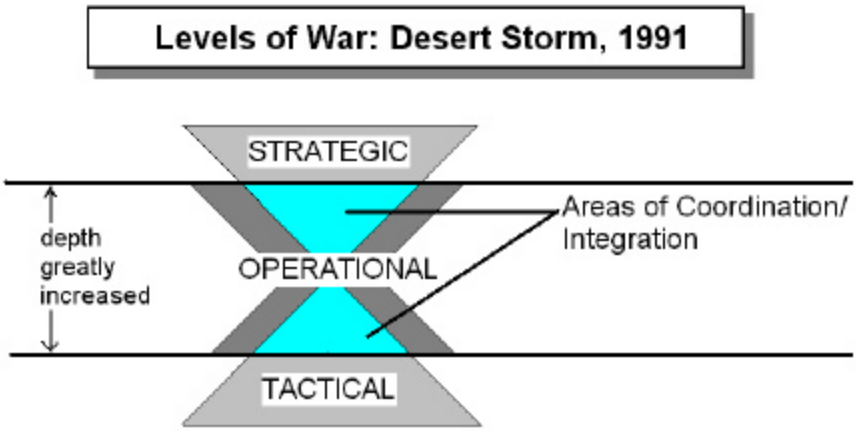
Appendix A



- Strategic and tactical levels interface
- Operational level integrates as well as coordinates

figure 1

- Levels are merged
- Integrative zone represents growing potential for simultaneous attack in war
- Actions at every level instantaneously affect each other

figure 2

Source: MacGregor, Douglas A., "Future Battle: The Merging Levels of War", *Parameters*, Washington, Winter 1992-93, 40-41.