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BRINGING LIDDELL HART FULL CIRCLE

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Engines of war have long since reached their limits, and I see no further hope of any improvement in the art.

Frontinus, 90 A.D.

Unlike the Roman engineer Sextus Julius Frontinus, B.H. Liddell Hart seems to have understood the changing nature of war. Indeed, his position regarding air power and the proper strategy in war shifted slightly from post-World War I to post World War II. Following World War I, he believed that air power could prove to be an excellent arm to prosecute his indirect approach strategy. He revised that thinking after witnessing World War II, believing that air power was not advantageous in prosecuting the war against civil objectives. Since that time, however, aircraft have acquired the ability to drop bombs with uncanny accuracy—culminating in a 99.6% “hit” rate in Operation Allied Force, NATO’s 1999 air campaign against Serbia.¹ Drawing on the execution of Operation Allied Force, this paper will argue that the air war against Serbia provides a good example of Liddell Hart’s indirect approach, overcoming the shortcomings he cited in World War II. To fully explore this thesis, we must first look briefly at Liddell Hart’s background and flush out his views on strategy, the objective in war, and air power’s merits relative to the objective. Next, this paper will examine Operation Allied Force, highlighting areas that demonstrate the indirect approach as well as areas that fall short of Liddell Hart’s ideal. Finally, this paper will hypothesize the possible implications for future U.S. military campaigns.

B.H. Liddell Hart

¹ John T. Correll, “Airpower and its Critics,” *Air Force Magazine* 82 (July 1999): 3.

To fully understand Liddell Hart's indirect approach, it is helpful to have an appreciation for his background. Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart (1895-1970) was, like many Englishmen of his generation, greatly influenced by the horrors of World War I. He had finished his first year at Cambridge when World War I began; he volunteered to serve in the army and was sent to France as a lieutenant in the infantry.² He was assigned to the front three times, the last in the Somme offensive of 1916 where he was subjected to a poisonous gas attack. He was also a first-hand witness to the British loss of sixty thousand soldiers in one day.³ The tremendous loss of life in static warfare colored his interwar writings. He dedicated himself to advancing a means to win a war without catastrophic loss of life, leading to his support for an indirect approach to warfare. A prolific writer, he had a tremendous reputation in England until World War II, when many of his policy recommendations were proven wrong. It wasn't until the 1960s that he was again recognized as a brilliant strategist.⁴ While his interwar *policy* prescriptions were proven wrong and adversely affected his reputation, his writing on the *objectives of war and grand strategy* were sound.

Liddell Hart believed the objective of war is to subdue the enemy's will to resist, "with the least possible human and economic loss to itself."⁵ With this aim, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces is only a potential (but not inevitable) means to attaining the goal. Hart believed that all means—military, economic, diplomatic—could be used, the most suitable means would be the quickest, most economic path to victory with the least

² John J. Mearsheimer, Liddell Hart and the Weight of History (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, Paris or The Future of War (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1925), 19.

disruption to one's nation during and after the war.⁶ Implicit in this line of thinking is the idea that victory must be viewed in light of the costs. "Victory at all costs" was not a concept Hart embraced. While he believed in using *all* means, Hart's expertise and writing focused on military means.

Means to the Objective

Hart believed that one had to overcome the enemy's will to resist to achieve victory. This was done by the "fact or threat of making life so unpleasant and difficult for the people that they will comply with your terms rather than endure this misery."⁷ Like Sun Tzu, he believed the perfection of strategy would produce victory without even fighting. For Hart, to win a war in this manner one needed to achieve psychological dislocation of the enemy which would occur when the commander of the opposing force felt trapped. It often results from taking the line of least expectation. When combined with physical dislocation (achieved by upsetting enemy dispositions, endangering his supplies and reducing his ability to move/retreat), the strategy is truly an indirect approach.⁸ In short, the indirect approach is aimed at the enemy's will to resist, which is shaken by psychological and physical dislocation.

To achieve dislocation, Liddell Hart believed that for a modern nation at war, its industrial resources, communications, and command centers were the "Achilles' heel." Therefore, during the inter-war period Hart espoused air power as a unique way to target the will of the people, although he cited two cautions. First, crippling the enemy's industry

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1967), 326-328.

and communications must be weighed against the post-war end state. Despite this caution, he favored the air power approach as he felt that less total damage would occur (compared to a prolonged ground war like WWI). The second concern was ethical—that an attack on the civilian population might “inflict widespread death and destruction [which would] damage one’s own future prosperity, and, by sowing the seeds of revenge, to jeopardize one’s future security.”⁹ While he espoused this concern, he still advocated the use of air power as a way to target the will of the enemy. However, his concern for non-combatants and the post-war state was real and led to his change of heart on the value of air power *following* World War II. He believed the Allies’ strategic bombing against industry was too detrimental to the post-war situation. This is because he “came to realize that an air attack on industrial centers was unlikely to have an immediately decisive effect, and more likely to produce another prolonged war of attrition in a fresh form—with perhaps less killing but more devastation than the 1914-18 form.”¹⁰ It is with this background, then, that we will investigate Operation Allied Force to determine how it fits as an example of Hart’s indirect approach.

Operation Allied Force: Objectives and Results

The military objective set out for the Balkan air campaign was to attack Milosevic’s ability to wage combat operations against either Kosovo or Serbia’s neighbors. The initial NATO *political* objectives which later served the basis for stopping the bombing were: demonstrate NATO’s serious opposition to Serbia’s aggression; deter Milosevic from

⁹ B.H. Liddell Hart, Paris or The Future of War (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1925), 43-44.

¹⁰ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1967), 351.

continuing or escalating attacks on civilians; and finally, damage Serbia's capacity to wage war against Kosovo or its neighbors in the future.¹¹ The military objective was vague and broad; it's hard to imagine how NATO could have failed to achieve it. There was recognition from the very beginning that bombing alone could not stop Milosevic's forces from carrying out attacks against the civilians. Instead, they would have to break his will to prosecute the attacks.¹² In a war with limited aims such as this, it is likely that Liddell Hart would have little tolerance for non-combatant casualties. Given that the United States and NATO had unequivocally ruled out the ground invasion option, NATO was left with the task of bending Milosevic's will through phased air attacks.

The phased air attacks began on 24 March 1999 and were designed to show gradually increasing resolve and inflict ever-increasing pain on a recalcitrant Serbia. Significantly, all targets had to be approved by all 19 NATO countries—a lengthy and sometimes contentious process. The first phase was the battle for air superiority. This phase involved bringing down Serbia's air defense network, crippling its fighter force, and targeting the command and control network. The second phase focused on the Serb forces engaged in Kosovo. The final phase required additional approval by the NATO ministers and would allow NATO to attack military targets in every part of Serbia.¹³ This phased approach differs from current Air Force doctrine in a significant way; Air Force doctrine advocates parallel operations—different campaigns against different targets and at different levels of

¹¹ William S. Cohen and Gen. Henry H. Shelton, Joint Statement on the Kosovo After Action Review, news release of statement presented before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 14 October 1999; accessed 19 October 1999; available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct1999/b10141999_bt478-99.html, p. 1.

¹² Press conference by George Robertson, Secretary of State for Defence, 25 March 1999; accessed 19 October 1999; available from <http://www.mod.uk/news/kosovo/brief250399.htm>, p. 1.

war...conducted simultaneously. While there was some use of parallel operations, the phased approach described above with high-level target approval clearly limited the breadth of potential operations. This point was brought home by Major General Short, head of NATO air operations, as early as May 13th.¹⁴ Particularly contentious was the gradual escalation inherent in the three phased approach. To illustrate, an average of less than 50 strike sorties were flown each day over Serbia during the first two weeks of the campaign, compared to 1,200 strike sorties **in the first 24 hours** of Desert Storm.¹⁵ Through 27 May, daily air strikes on Serbia were only ten percent of Desert Storm's. As a result, the effects of shock and surprise were greatly diminished.¹⁶ Because it was a limited war with limited objectives, there were conditions offered publicly to Milosevic that would lead to a cessation of the bombing. These conditions paralleled the political objectives and were stated on 23 April 1999, the same day the NATO leaders decided to intensify the air campaign by expanding the target set to include military-industrial infrastructure, media, and other strategic targets. Milosevic had to: (1) Stop all violence and repression in Kosovo (2) Withdraw his forces from Kosovo (3) Agree to an international military presence in Kosovo (4) Agree to the unconditional return of all refugees (5) Agree to a political framework similar to (but not necessarily the same as) the Rambouillet accords.¹⁷ On 9 June, 1999 (Day 78 of the war), Serbia acceded to NATO terms.

¹³ Bruce W. Nelan, "Into the Fire," Time 153 (5 April 1999): 31.

¹⁴ Maj Gen Michael Short, New York Times (May 13); quoted in "Verbatim Special: The Balkan War," Air Force Magazine 82 (July 1999): 42.

¹⁵ Phillip S. Meilinger, "Gradual Escalation," Armed Forces Journal International (October 1999): 18.

¹⁶ John T. Correll, "Airpower and its Critics," Air Force Magazine 82 (July 1999): 3.

¹⁷ William S. Cohen and Gen. Henry H. Shelton, Joint Statement on the Kosovo After Action Review, news release of statement presented before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 14 October 1999: accessed 19 October 1999; available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct1999/b10141999_bt478-99.html, p. 5.

Total damage from the war was significant and is highlighted at the adjacent table. But not all damage fits neatly into a table. For example, much of Serbia’s heavy industry was crippled: the four largest industrial sites were totally destroyed while nine more were severely damaged.¹⁹ Much of the energy sector and transportation network were damaged. Citizen morale “crumbled under water shortages and power outages as

The War’s Toll ¹⁸	
Cost to Serbia	\$40 Billion
Cost to NATO	\$3 Billion
Serb troops killed	5,000
Tanks/APCs destroyed	93/153
Artillery destroyed	389
Aircraft destroyed	100+
Bridges destroyed	40
<i>Serb civilians killed</i>	<i>1,200</i>
<i>Kosovar refugees</i>	<i>1 million</i>

NATO hammered the country’s electric grid. Protests broke out in the smashed industrial cities of the south.”²⁰ Five days before the Serb’s capitulated, the Air Force Chief of Staff gave this assessment: “Serbia’s air force is essentially useless, and its air defenses are dangerous but ineffective. Military armament production is destroyed. Military supply areas are under siege. Oil refinement has ceased, and petroleum storage is systematically being destroyed. Electricity is sporadic, at best. Major transportation routes are cut.”²¹

Two things are striking about the results as they will relate to Liddell Hart’s indirect approach. First, from an economic standpoint, a disproportionate share of the costs of war were sustained by the opponent (more than twelve times the cost to NATO). Second, there was a remarkably small loss of life—either for the fielded forces or the non-combatants.

With those points highlighted, let’s look at how well the strategy fits Hart’s indirect approach to warfare.

¹⁸ Johanna McGeary, “Why He Blinked,” Time 153 (14 June 1999): 46. Updated for revised estimates reported by William Matthews, “NATO Scales Back Damage Estimates in Kosovo,” Air Force Times: (27 September 1999): 1.

¹⁹ Johanna McGeary, “Why He Blinked,” Time 153 (14 June 1999): 46, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ John T. Correll, “Airpower and its Critics,” Air Force Magazine 82 (July 1999): 3.

Campaign Assessment: The Indirect Approach

There are many aspects of this campaign that would likely appeal to Liddell Hart. Most notable perhaps, and a clear change from World War II bombing, is the precision of the air strikes. Using precision guided munitions, NATO was able to target key buildings while leaving adjacent buildings (like a hospital) undamaged. For example, they destroyed an aircraft factory with little collateral damage to nearby houses. The 1,200 civilian deaths were all accidental—none were intentionally targeted—and the figures compare extremely favorably to the 42,000 civilians that perished in one night in Hamburg in World War II when 16 square miles of the city were obliterated. Clearly, so few civilian casualties answers one of Hart’s two concerns over WWII-era bombing—that civil targets might inflict widespread death and destruction, sowing the seeds of revenge.

Another aspect of this campaign that would likely have appealed to Liddell Hart was the one-sided attrition—there was enormous destruction to Serbia and their forces with only two lost aircraft for NATO. Hart felt strongly that one should pursue the most economic path with “the minimum disruption of **our** national life during and *after* the war.” (bold emphasis is mine)²² Closely related to this is the quickness with which the war was fought. Liddell Hart despaired over the prospect of stalemate and prolonged conflict. A 78-day campaign would appeal to him. Indeed, he emphasized the relative merits of air power over infantry in his 1925 book, Paris or The Future of War. A 78-day war would be especially appealing compared to how long it would have taken NATO to position the estimated 50,00-100,000 ground troops required to support a traditional ground war.²³ It is possible

²² B.H. Liddell Hart, Paris or The Future of War (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1925), 20.

²³ Michael Evans, “Dark Victory,” United States Naval Institute Proceedings 125 (September 1999): 35.

that the air campaign was concluded sooner than a ground campaign could have begun. Since one of Hart's primary concerns was that air power might end up in a "prolonged war of attrition," the short war over Kosovo would likely have been well-received. More germane to this situation, however, is the fact that NATO ruled out ground forces at the outset, which set up air power's indirect approach.

The air war against Serbia represented an indirect approach because it exploited a dimension—the air—that could be totally denied to the enemy. There was never a question of effective enemy air attacks because Milosevic's offensive capability was rapidly eliminated. However, there was a concern over defensive SAM and AAA threats which the Serbs chose to conserve as a means of delaying defeat. Overall though, the enemy was unable to respond against NATO's force. To Hart, making the enemy leadership feel they are unable to counter an opponent's move was critical to psychological dislocation.²⁴

Unfortunately, due to the phased and limited targeting during the first month, it does not appear that psychological or physical dislocation of the enemy occurred. Instead, there was a sense of defiance from Milosevic and his people, and Milosevic stepped up the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Indeed, this was an indirect response by Milosevic, aimed at creating a humanitarian disaster that would strain the NATO alliance. By avoiding direct engagement with NATO forces, Serbia hoped that either Russian intervention or divisions in the NATO alliance would avoid defeat. Additionally, he hoped that Serbian civilian casualties would erode American public support for the operation.

Once NATO approved a more aggressive campaign with less targeting restrictions, there is evidence that physical and psychological dislocation did occur. Secretary Cohen

concluded that the air attacks made the Serbian forces hide under cover which made them ineffective as a tactical maneuver force.²⁵ He also concluded that the mounting damage combined with Milosevic's "utter inability to cause any notable damage or casualties to NATO forces, had a major impact on Milosevic's decision" [to acquiesce]²⁶ As previously mentioned, his own people were demonstrating in the streets. Additionally, Milosevic had been named as a war criminal, and the only sure-fire way to avoid prosecution was to remain in power. Declaring him a war criminal probably aided in psychological dislocation, but complicated the end state. Once it became clear that neither world opinion, a crack in NATO, nor Russian anger would bring a halt to the campaign, his resolve was broken. All of this represents an indirect way of defeating his objectives, forces, and ultimately his will.

Much ado has been made about the gradual escalation and extremely (and high-level) centralized control over target selection and approval. While Air Force planners universally dislike this type of "micromanaging," Liddell Hart would probably approve of it. This approach provides the best guarantee of minimum civil casualties (Chinese embassy notwithstanding) when compared to a lightning, larger-scale, Desert Storm approach. Gradualism first demonstrated NATO resolve, and it was widely believed by the politicians that Milosevic would cave once he knew beyond reasonable doubt that NATO was serious. Had he caved, the least possible damage would have been inflicted on his

²⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1967), 326-327.

²⁵ William S. Cohen and Gen. Henry H. Shelton, Joint Statement on the Kosovo After Action Review, news release of statement presented before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 14 October 1999; accessed 19 October 1999; available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct1999/b10141999_bt478-99.html, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

people. Because of the gradual approach, NATO's actions mitigate Hart's second concern over air power in the indirect approach—that crippling the enemy's industry must be weighed against the post-war end state. To put this in context, Hart wasn't against force, he just did not want excessive force used. It is probably true, then, that the NATO strategy minimized the damage to industry, even though it took a great deal of destruction to bring Milosevic to terms. What is less clear is whether the damage is commensurate with the end state NATO desires.

Liddell Hart is clear about needing congruence between the desired ends and the employed means. Was there a disconnect in ends and means in Kosovo? The war in Kosovo left nearly 1 million Kosovar refugees that are still being resettled. While the U.S. has never supported an independent Kosovo, it is quite likely that independence is the only possible solution. “It will be impossible for us to live together,” says Rifat Veseli, a young Kosovar—expressing a feeling prevalent among his people.²⁷ Indeed, the Kosovo Liberation Army has been killing Kosovo Serbs and burning their houses, and few Serbs remain in the region. Milosevic is still in power, and the U.S. has stated it will not provide aid to the Serbian people while he remains in power. Without foreign currency, it is estimated that it will take 41 years to return to pre-Milosevic prosperity.²⁸ More importantly, the war has greatly strained U.S. relations with both China and Russia. Additionally, the war may have negative consequences for nuclear non-proliferation as countries seek ways to protect their sovereignty (would we have intervened if Milosevic

²⁷ Johanna McGeary, “Why He Blinked,” *Time* 153 (14 June 1999): 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

had nukes?). But wait a minute; didn't NATO achieve their military objective? Didn't NATO achieve military victory through air power and the indirect approach? While the answer to these questions is "yes," it aptly illustrates the fundamental difference between strategy and grand strategy. As Liddell Hart said, "Whereas strategy is only concerned with the problem of winning military victory, grand strategy must take the longer view—for its problem is the winning of the peace."²⁹ Thus we are left with the disturbing sense that while NATO demonstrated Hart's indirect approach through almost exclusive use of air power, we may have been following a failed strategy; a strategy that did not create a better end state.

Prospect for the Future

It is possible to draw some early conclusions about what the conflict will mean in future wars. Stealth and precision combined to allow penetration of integrated air defenses and the delivery of cheap, precise weapons (JDAMs cost less than \$20,000 each while delivering ten meter accuracy). With unmanned aerial vehicles to fix targets, we will be able to improve our ability to precisely find, fix, and target industrial, communication, and transportation targets with little collateral damage.

It is almost beyond comprehension that NATO did not sustain any casualties in the war. As long as the United States enjoys overwhelming air power superiority, it is likely that our political leaders will expect friendly casualties to be low. This expectation, backed by our experience in the 1990s, might increase the likelihood of choosing the military option. It becomes more "acceptable" to use force when the threat of losing a part of that force

²⁹ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1967), 349-350.

appears negligible. Indeed, that is why cruise missiles have been so popular in the Clinton administration.

Therefore, because of the speed with which air power can deploy to a region, employ with cost-effective precision weapons, and secure military objectives with seemingly few or no casualties, it seems likely that Liddell Hart's strategy of the indirect approach will see wider application in the future. Like Kosovo, political leaders will likely demand close control over target selection. In a limited war, they may insist on gradual escalation (something the Air Force opposes and which met decidedly mixed reviews in Kosovo). As long as we have air supremacy, this approach will probably work although it may hamper effectiveness. At the end of the day, it appears that air power can finally address Hart's World War II era concerns over its use in the indirect approach. Even so, we still have some work to do in connecting our military strategy to our grand strategy.

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