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Special Report from the IBPP Notional Archives: Sun Tzu's Perspective on Operation DESERT STORM in 1992

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Introduction. With two weeks left in the 1992 United States (US) Presidential campaign--what the British might call the silly season--Operation DESERT STORM is a recurrent, if minor, issue. President Bush's supporters point to the operation as proof of their candidate's foreign policy expertise. Governor Clinton's supporters point to decisions leading up to the operation as serious blunders and even illegalities--as indicative of foreign policy failure.

Conflict is not an aberration, but the common currency of power relations. The presence or absence of war is not commensurate with the presence or absence of conflict, only the presence or absence of a certain kind of conflict. Thus, winning a war does not necessarily increase power, even though armed force is the ultimate arbiter of conflict. (See Griffith (G), p. 63, #1). In the wake of DESERT STORM, then, who has more power? The mighty alliance formed against Saddam Hussein is no more, while Saddam Hussein still stands. The forger of the alliance, the US President, may well lose his political power--his political life--in several weeks, while Saddam Hussein will in all probability still stand. With all that is happening in the world, all the crises and potential crises in the Balkans, Somalia, Cambodia, Angola, the Republic of South Africa, and Afghanistan, pressures from creditor governments and companies desiring Iraqi payments (and resumption of exporting oil), pressures from Arab countries perceiving ethnic mistreatment at the hands of the West, how long before residual military operations of the Allies are discontinued or are relegated to tertiary importance?

Do not achieve military objectives which are difficult to exploit and protect in light of changing political realities. And remember that political power is most effectively achieved without going to war. Yet the Allies marshaled over half a million men and women and countless tons of supplies. This caused significant wastes of equipment, perishables, and money and induced economic and psychological burdens among many of the operation's participants and the governments that they represented. Before war, it would have been advisable not just to implement economic sanctions, but to sow dissension within Iraq and with Iraq and its neighbors, break its alliances, subvert its power structure, frustrate its plans, create cleavages in its power hierarchy, shape its behavior, so that it ineluctably acted in a manner more supportive of Allied desires, much as water naturally conforms to the terrain. (Rebuttals that political and intelligence assets were not available, adequate, or competent is a poor reflection on the Allies' leaders.)

The tragedy and waste of Allied intervention is underlined by noting that its political objectives--to force Iraq to cede Kuwaiti territory, to extinguish Iraqi nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile assets--were righting realities created by the Allies themselves. Realities created at times by illegal and short-sighted economic and political behavior. The political leaders who created the need for war and decided to prosecute war with mammoth expenditures of assets should be beheaded, as were the favorite concubines of Ho-lu, King of Wu.

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Only an enlightened sovereign and worthy general are able to use the most intelligent people as secret agents to achieve significant objectives. (See G, p. 149, #23). Because of domestic political considerations in the US, ramifications from the Banco Nazionale de Lavoro scandal, short-falls in human intelligence assets, and inadequate conceptualization of long-term strategic assets, this was not possible. Is it any wonder that not fighting did not become a significant option, that intelligence on the Iraqi military threat was so inaccurate?

The general in the field need not and should not listen to the sovereign, once troops cross borders. In this way the general can take advantage of momentary vulnerabilities in the enemy with quick, ruthless action, if necessary. (See G, p. 113, #11; p. 112, #8; p. 63, #3). In DESERT STORM, some data suggest the senior US general controlling Allied forces was overruled on when the air and ground war were to begin, whether Saddam Hussein should be seized or killed, how long the war should be prosecuted, and what portion of the Iraqi military threat had be destroyed. This should not have happened.

One should seek to achieve victory in a manner that inflicts on the enemy the least number of casualties, the least destruction of material, the least expenditure of treasure. In the way these assets can become part of one's own power. Yet the Allies, especially the US, seemed to go out of their way to accomplish the obverse. Note the unknown thousands of Iraqis killed; the tonnage of equipment destroyed even as the US has since introduced new, more lethal weaponry into the region; the US practice of continuing to pay debts to international banks partly owned by Iraq and its allies, e.g., Libya; the significant impediments set up by the US to prevent it own private companies and citizens from recouping loans, profits, and damages from frozen Iraqi assets.

War should not occur without national unity. (See G, p. 64, #4). In one sense the Allies--especially the US--complied with this admonishment. For there was little opposition once the war began. However, there was much controversy leading up to the war , with very close votes in the US Congress about the use of military force, with a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocating solely for economic sanctions. (Of course, for some of our other allies, totalitarian, e.g., Syria, or feudal, e.g., Saudi Arabia, the compliance aspect of unity among the people was much easier to effect.) Again, after the war, unity fragmented in the US, at least partially due to the Presidential campaign and greater publicization of US economic and foreign policy toward Iraq before the war began.

The primary target of any military intervention--especially deception operations and techniques of indirection--is the mind of the enemy. And with that, the primary import of successful deception operations and techniques of indirection. (See p. 66, #7). Although much has been made of the left flanking maneuver of US Army forces, and the right feinting maneuvers of US Marine forces, deception and indirection had little to do with the Allied military victory. Instead victory was due to overwhelming technological superiority. This does not so much belittle the victory, as point out how easy it is to deceive oneself that one has deceived the enemy in a significant way. It also makes it less likely that deception operations and techniques of indirection will be successful, if they are really needed or will be perceived as being really needed in the future.

Conclusion. To be fair, some of my tenets do not seem salient for Operation DESERT STORM. For example, bringing the enemy to you, not going to it (G, p. 96, #1), inducing the enemy to prepare everywhere so he will be weak everywhere (G, p. 98, #15), and having superior knowledge of terrain, environmental, and weather factors were seemingly not followed by the victors. Tiring out the enemy before the battle begins (G, p. 68, #24) can in retrospect be interpreted in different ways--e.g., were the real enemy, Saddam Hussein and his strategic coterie, tired out? The tenet of identifying and exploiting

the strong (G, p. 65, #7) and weak character traits (G, p. 114, #s 17-24) in political and military leaders is still being assessed. Others like infatuating the enemy with young boys and women and providing the enemy with jades and silk to excite ambitions probably seem irrelevant (G, p. 68, #23). Taken all in all, Saddam Hussein's continuation of awarding medals to soldiers who fought in the mother of all battles, his public statement of victory, should not be taken as futile propaganda or whistling in the dark. For he who defends must merely survive, while he who attacks must overcome. (See Griffith, S.B. (Tr.) (1980.) Sun Tzu: The Art of War. NY: Oxford University Press. (Originally published c. 500 B.C.)) (Keywords: Leadership, Perception Management, Sun Tzu, Iraq, Operation Desert Storm, Iraq War, Saddam Hussein.)