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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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Political Leadership of a Military at War

by

Jason Budde

Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

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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Paper Abstract

Political Leadership of a Military at War. The United States maintains the largest, most powerful military in the world, but the nation has not always been successful in turning military capability into desired political outcomes. This paper examines some of the most successful militaries in history, and evaluates their processes for linking military objectives to political end states. It recommends a formula, based on historical precedent, to ensure that operational level objectives remain properly nested beneath theatre-strategic and national-strategic objectives, and then uses this formula to evaluate the outcome of the 1991 Gulf War. The results of this evaluation form a strong argument in support of active involvement of political leaders in military operations.

“War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.” - On War, Carl von Clausewitz¹

Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz is revered by the American military, yet his teachings on the subordination of military objectives to the political are often resented, and sometimes disregarded, by operational commanders. The dichotomy of venerating Clausewitzian ideas on war-fighting, but begrudging his theories of wartime civilian-military (civ-mil) relations, has been so common in American military history that it begs the question: What effect does the involvement of national political leaders in military operations have on military effectiveness?

In answering this question, history challenges the American military to examine other civ-mil structures, and appreciate their value in comparison with the American way of war. If the U.S. military is able to discard its inherent distaste of subjugation to political ends, and rationally appreciate the proven historical benefits of assertive political involvement in military operations, it will become a more effective fighting force. By combining strong, specific guidance from political leaders; consistent supervision of military actions and objectives at the operational level of war; and implementing policy education for all ranks of the armed forces the United States could create a three tiered defense in depth to ensure that its military objectives are properly nested with its strategic, and in-line with the nation’s desired end state.

Historical Significance

The political system of the United States was set up to be the first of its kind since the democracies of ancient Greece, but the enduring influence of Hellenic government has not extended to military control. Early American revolutionaries fought similarly to the Greeks, using a framework of citizen-soldiers and political generals; however, the U.S. system has evolved over time to mirror that of America's former imperial masters: the British. Today both England and the U.S. maintain a professional military separate from the government, and have sacrificed some attributes of the Greek politician-commander format. The greatest of these lost attributes is a crystal clear understanding by the operational commander of the national desired end state.

Thucydides' grand history of the Peloponnesian Wars provides detailed insight into all levels of war in ancient Greece, and portrays a radically different method for democracies to lead their militaries. At the national-strategic level, the Greek democracies openly debated the merits of their nation's war aims, and the strategies necessary to achieve them. When these Greek senates finished debating, a member of that same democratic body was chosen to lead the armed forces into battle. In both Athens and Sparta it was often the most active citizens, such as the Spartan King Archidamus or the Athenians Cleon and Nicias, that left these debates with orders to take command of the state's fielded forces.² These politician-generals eliminated the necessity for specific political guidance to be explained to operational commanders, and inhibited the natural tendency for operational objectives to become separated from strategic.

The merits of this system are exemplified in the battle for Pylos between Athens and Sparta. In the initial fight, several hundred Spartans became trapped on the adjacent island of Sphacteria. From this disadvantageous position, the Spartans were forced to send a delegation to Athens in order to sue for peace. At the Athenian Senate, the Spartan delegation was outmaneuvered by an eloquent politician named Cleon; who not only convinced his Senate to press on in war, but subsequently sailed to take command of Athenian operations in the Theatre. After assuming command in Pylos, Cleon's forces were able to assault Sphacteria, break the Spartan lines, and pin the Spartans between two Athenian forces. Cleon had his operational objectives in his hand, the Spartan force was a single command away from being destroyed, and Pylos would be Athens for as long as the Athenians desired to keep forces there.³

Cleon, did not accept this assured success, and chanced instead on a scheme to change the dynamics of the entire war. He called for parlay, allowed the Spartans to communicate with their government, and gave them the opportunity to surrender. Cleon the politician knew that a Spartan surrender would be far more valuable than their defeat in combat. The Spartans accepted Cleon's terms, and with their surrender Athens destroyed a Spartan mystique which had inflicted terror throughout the Hellenes since their mighty stand at Thermopylae. Even more importantly, Cleon gained a bargaining chip - elite Spartiate POWs - that Sparta placed nearly unlimited value on. These successes had tremendous strategic ramifications, and may not have occurred if a professional, apolitical soldier had been in charge of Athens' forces.⁴

This historical method for combat leadership seems impractical today. It is almost unimaginable that the honorable Senator from North Dakota would grab a set of fatigues and take command of U.S. forces at war, yet the U.S. should still strive to achieve the type of operational clarity these Greek political commanders provided. Cleon had perfect knowledge of the desired end state, and therefore was well aware of the political ramifications of every military action on Pylos. The island was of dubious strategic value, but because of Cleon's intricate political knowledge he was able to achieve national-strategic effects through battlefield decisions made during an operational level engagement.

Politician-generals are not unique to ancient Greek democracies; some of the most successful militaries in history have utilized similar constructs. The Macedonians under Alexander the Great, the French following Napoleon's coup d'etat, and the Revolutionary Chinese Communists under Mao Tse-tung were all led politically and militarily by the same individuals. All three achieved astounding military successes, and each used diplomacy and kinetic force to support political ends. Of the three, Mao Tse-tung was the only leader who was able to leave the battlefield, and achieve as much success as a political leader as he had as a politician-general. "Chairman" Mao achieved these successes through political maneuver and assertive military oversight, a potent combination in any age of war.

Mao Tse-tung wrote that "War is politics and war itself is a political action", and therefore viewed his military commanders as part of a political force working towards a political goal.⁵ In the Korean Conflict, Mao's political goal was a unified, Communist Korea. He

calculated that he could achieve this by either forcing the U.N. coalition (led by the Americans) from Korea, or through a favorable negotiated peace. Mao believed that the U.N. could be compelled to accept two key points through negotiation: a unified Korea with the right to choose its own form of government, and political participation by the Chinese and Soviets in that new government.⁶ This negotiated settlement became the Chinese national-strategic objective, and Mao never let his Theatre Commander, General Peng, stray from achieving it.

Mao's opposite, President Truman, had a very different national-strategic objective: The prevention of World War III.⁷ Although U.S. forces were introduced to defend South Korea, and eventually attempted to forcibly unify the Peninsula by destroying the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), these objectives needed to be achieved in harmony with the national-strategic goal. Under MacArthur they were not. Truman's supervision of his operational commander was vastly inferior to Mao's, and resulted in operational war plans that were incongruous with strategic objectives.

Throughout the conflict, General Peng continuously communicated his intentions to Beijing; MacArthur did not communicate with Washington nearly as well. As the Chinese prepared to enter the war, Peng informed Mao that his plan was to establish defensive positions above the 38th parallel in order to support guerrilla operations in the South.⁸ This was militarily wise due to significant readiness and supply constraints, but it would do little to advance the Chinese towards their desired end state. Instead, Mao insisted that Peng launch a series of aggressive offensives. The operational results of these offensives were mixed; at first they were

successful in saving DPRK and inducing panic in the U.S. high command, but later resulted in lost battles and high casualties.⁹ However, each offensive, even those that were operationally unsuccessful, applied pressure to the U.N. alliance and advanced the Chinese towards their strategic objective.

General Peng consistently focused on military constraints in the field (fatigue, food, clothing, and ammo), but Mao saw how every offensive would affect interaction at the negotiating table. On four separate occasions, Mao ordered changes to Peng's war plans. In one instance, after vigorous disagreement, Peng was forced to explain to his commanders that they were advancing on orders from the central leadership "because of political considerations."¹⁰ The result of this military subordination to the political was dramatic, and proved to be a key advantage that the Communists had over the U.N. allies.

The intervention of the Chinese in Korea broke the fragile American chain of command. MacArthur had been ordered not to enter North Korea if there were indications that the Chinese would intervene, but he did anyway.¹¹ The massive, though rushed, Chinese response saw MacArthur call for a naval blockade of China, aerial bombardment of Chinese cities, and the use of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists in Korea; all options completely out of line with preventing WWII.¹² MacArthur's desired military escalation proved unnecessary, but it also made it readily apparent that he was not operating in line with national-strategic goals.

The dichotomy in political oversight between the two main belligerents was crucial to the outcome of the Korean War. Mao, in constant conversation with his commander, ensured that

every military action was working towards the desired political end state, even if it meant certain sacrifices at the operational level. Truman, on the contrary, provided inadequate supervision, and let his famous military commander run the war. This lack of supervision continued until MacArthur's military decisions became so blatantly incongruous with political objectives that he had to be relieved of command.

It is impossible for a military leader to read the communications between Mao and Peng and not feel General Peng's frustration. Many might classify Mao's leadership as micro-management, but they would be wrong. The amazing performance of the Chinese, in which they forced the recent victors of WWII out of North Korea and held a superpower to a stalemate, was due in large part to the coordination of military and political objectives. The Chinese had a harmony in civ-mil effort that the U.S. never achieved. Every Chinese soldier, every diplomat at cease-fire negotiations, and every Chinese General were all working under Mao's guidance towards the same ends. That cannot be said of the Americans.

The Chinese Soldiers' efforts in the Korean War, as well as in China's Communist Revolution, were united with Mao's not just because of his close military supervision, but also because each soldier was educated in what their government was trying to achieve. Communist nations have always believed in a level of political indoctrination that western countries generally find "undemocratic", but they shouldn't. If there is truly such a thing as a "Strategic Corporal", then the U.S. would be wise to educate that corporal on strategic objectives.

No nation has politically educated its fighting forces, or achieved a more pronounced victory over the United States, than the Communist North Vietnamese—the two are not coincidental. The Vietnamese extended Mao’s idea of war as “politics with bloodshed” into an all-encompassing theory of conflict known as “Dau Tranh.”¹³ This Vietnamese term literally means “Struggle”, but today’s American warfighter would understand it better as something akin to DIME (the acronym for the Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic aspects of national power). Under the information aspect of Dau Tranh, the North Vietnamese had educational lines of effort directed at the enemy’s population, the enemy’s forces, and towards their own forces as well.¹⁴ The U.S. consistently attempts to “strategically communicate” to the rest of the world, but has no similar form of political indoctrination for its own military.

“I don’t know what we’re doing here” is a quote that has never been attributed to a Viet Minh Soldier, yet is so common as to be cliché when uttered by U.S. Soldiers fighting America’s limited wars on foreign shores. To the Vietnamese Communist, political education was as important as tactical training. Every North Vietnamese recruit received initial training in both armed struggle (Dau Tranh Vu Trang) and political (Dau Tranh Chinh Tri), and they were taught that the two were “the jaws of the pincers used to attack the enemy.”¹⁵ This message was re-emphasized throughout the soldiers career at regular training sessions, where the political reasons for combat and the strategic methods of achieving them would be reviewed. Not unlike General George Washington having Thomas Paine’s Common Sense read to his troops, the North Vietnamese Soldier was instructed in the revolutionary cause, and offered a “larger-than-life

portrait of his meager contribution.”¹⁶ This is exactly the type of education that U.S. Soldiers would benefit from.

The term “Strategic Corporal” is used to communicate the theory that a junior Soldier’s actions can have strategic level effects. In Abu Ghraib, Iraq, a group of American Soldiers photographed themselves abusing Iraqi POWs, and the world-wide dissemination of these photos proved extremely detrimental to U.S. strategic efforts. Dau Tranh style political education could have prevented this. If the Abu Ghraib Soldiers had been acutely aware of their nation’s political goals, and had been firmly indoctrinated to believe in their contribution to those ends, it is extremely unlikely that the prison guard culture at Abu Ghraib could have developed as it did.

Even more importantly than influencing a Soldier’s decision to violate a rule, and possibly hinder larger U.S efforts, political education could help to ensure that U.S. operational objectives remain properly nested. It is easy for a military to do what it is good at, much harder to do what should be done. The two are often incongruous. Recently, there has been debate over the use of U.S. drone strikes against the Taliban on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, and whether they are doing more harm than good. There is no one better positioned to make that decision than U.S Soldiers in the field. The Army’s “Every Soldier a Sensor” concept instructs that Soldiers “actively observe for details for the commander’s critical information requirement (CCIR)”, but with the proper education they could do even more.¹⁷ If American forces were educated in U.S. foreign policy and political goals, every Soldier could also constantly observe for the effects that tactical actions were having towards the greater political ends. These troops

could actually provide operational commanders with real feedback as to the effectiveness of their military actions.

This idea of a politically educated force, along with the lessons gleaned from the Greeks and Chinese on political guidance and supervision, offer operational advantages which could be capitalized on in modern warfare. The 1991 Gulf War is a case in point. It was one of the most dominant victories in military history, but left the U.S. President who orchestrated it unsatisfied with the results.¹⁸ The factors behind this outcome are strong evidence in support of consistent political involvement (guidance, supervision, and education) in the leadership of a nation's armed forces.

Political Involvement in Modern Warfare: The 1991 Gulf War

When diplomacy failed in the early 1990's, Saddam Hussein's Iraq seized Kuwait, and stood poised to invade the other oil-producing Arab nations of the Middle East. It was imperative for the oil dependent economies of the world to prevent Saddam from gaining control of Saudi Arabia's petroleum resources, which would allow one unpredictable dictator an unacceptable level of influence over the global energy supply. Saudi Arabia's defense was therefore a clear imperative, but beyond that national-strategic objectives proved extremely difficult to solidify. The Bush Administration put forth an admirable effort in the composition of National Security Directive 54 (NSD 54), but this authorization for war and list of strategic objectives still ended up short of the mark.

NSD 54 is generally hailed as a prime example of political guidance to an operational commander. The directive provided national and theatre-strategic objectives, and allowed the military professionals to determine how to achieve them.¹⁹ However, it is not as complete a document as it first appears. NSD 54 lacks two crucial points: First, it did not list maintaining the coalition as a primary objective, as the President and Secretary of Defense clearly believed it to be.²⁰ Second, it withheld Iraqi regime change from the desired political end state, which was clearly what the National Command Authority (NCA) actually desired.²¹ These shortcomings in guidance had disruptive effects on the execution of the war. Unlike the Athenian system, the American Theatre Commander, General Schwarzkopf, was not part of the debate to go to war, and some of his operational objectives differed from the course his political leaders desired. This, in turn, required increased supervision of military objectives by political leaders, and eventually led to the unsatisfactory results of a brilliant military victory.

President Bush and his Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, were forced to intervene at the operational level of war on multiple occasions. The timeline to launch the ground war, the SCUD ballistic missile threat, and the cease-fire negotiations were all decision points that required significant political supervision. The civilian leadership's attempts to steer their operational commander's actions at these points met with varying degrees of success, but they were most successful when they were most assertive.

One of the first disconnects between Schwarzkopf's Central Command (CENTCOM) and the national leadership occurred when Russia attempted to broker a peace deal with Iraq. The

Bush Administration saw the Russian effort as a threat; if it achieved its goal of preventing a ground war many of NSD 54's objectives could not be met. Schwarzkopf, on the other hand, saw the Russian proposal as an opportunity to avoid American casualties. The rift between military leaders and policy makers over the Russian proposal was only intensified when it garnered French and even limited Arab support. Schwarzkopf was pressured to accelerate the timeline and start the ground war before a peace negotiation could fracture the Coalition. CENTCOM's commanders opposed this move for military reasons, and Schwarzkopf successfully sided with them against Bush's Administration. The ramifications of this "on-time" start ended up being inconsequential, because the Russians couldn't get their brokered deal through in time, but it could have been a tremendous error. If Saddam had been a more astute leader, or the French had garnered more Arab support for the Russian plan, Schwarzkopf's refusal to accelerate his ground attack could have resulted in a negotiated settlement prior to the ground war. This settlement would have left Iraq's center of gravity, the Republican Guard, largely intact, and prevented the achievement of a primary strategic objective. Considering the amount of U.S. treasure spent in the deployment of half a million troops to the other side of the world, this hypothetical end would have to be considered a tremendous failure.²²

The second and largest disagreement between Central Command and the civilian leadership was caused by Iraq's SCUD ballistic missile attacks on Israel. Keeping Israel out of the war was Secretary Cheney's "number one priority."²³ The President and his advisors were concerned of a doomsday scenario in which Israel's entry into the war caused Jordan to join the

fight, fractured the Coalition, and resulted in a new Arab-Israeli regional war.²⁴ Israel, a state which has fought repeated wars for its continued existence, could not be expected to stand-by if it was not being aggressively defended. Schwarzkopf's opinions on the SCUD threat differed greatly from the Israelis' though, and worse yet he publicly downplayed the significance of the missiles. Every Air Force sortie that was expended to search for SCUD launchers in Western Iraq was a sortie not used to attack Baghdad or the Republican Guard, and the operational commander saw the SCUD threat as militarily insignificant.²⁵

Schwarzkopf's operational objectives for his air power had become incongruous with Washington's strategic objectives. Secretary Cheney was not about to make the same mistakes Truman had with MacArthur, and he firmly inserted himself into the operational commanders duties. When CENTCOM failed to produce enough sorties to meet the Secretary's intent, he assertively addressed his military subordinates and corrected the situation: "Goddamn it . . . the Defense Department will do as I tell them. The number one priority is to keep Israel out of the war."²⁶ Cheney forced Schwarzkopf to use his air assets in an overt attempt to protect Israel from SCUDs strikes, which resulted in positive strategic effects despite the operational commander's disagreement.

Political direction and supervision were not perfect during the build up and execution of the war, but they would likely have been sufficient if the U.S. had terminated the war better. At the cease-fire negotiations President Bush and his advisors failed in all three aspects of civilian leadership: guidance, supervision, and education. The decision to end hostilities was made in

Washington based on the belief that the military objectives were assured and a concern that the continued destruction of a military in full retreat would have negative effects on world-opinion.²⁷

Although the former was not true, and the latter open for debate, the environment was still ripe to achieve the President's major unwritten political objective: regime change.

CENTCOM and Washington had intense, rigorous, debate on the plan for the air war and on the plan for ground combat, but there was no plan for war termination. The cease-fire negotiations were conducted in a tent in Safwan, Iraq by General Schwarzkopf with no political representation and zero guidance.²⁸ This led to a series of concessions by the American General that made military sense to an operational commander, but were in direct contradiction to achieving the desired political end state. Specifically, Schwarzkopf gave authorization for the Iraqis to fly attack helicopters, and he promised that all coalition troops would withdraw from Iraqi soil "as rapidly as we can get them out."²⁹ These two concessions proved crucial to keeping Saddam Hussein in power. The attack helicopters were used with tremendous, brutal effect to suppress revolts by the Kurds in the North and Shiites in the South. The seized Iraqi territory could have been held until Saddam gave political accommodations to these rebels, which would have further weakened the dictators hold on power, but it was not. The territory could even have been retained until Saddam was removed from power, as an incentive to the Iraqi military to take matters into their own hands, but this was obviously not done either. Unfortunately for the U.S., the territory was returned at no cost; a poor political use of combat success.³⁰

These mistakes were not made because Schwarzkopf was a poor general. He was an operational commander focused on operational objectives. To Schwarzkopf, the objectives of war termination were to ensure that American POWs were safely returned (a concern inappropriately exaggerated by his Vietnam experience), that no unnecessary lives were lost after the cease-fire, and that his victorious force was safely re-deployed home.³¹ With no guidance from above, no supervision, and no ingrained education in American foreign policy, the results of the cease-fire are the logical outcome of a military commander operating in a political vacuum.

It would have been quite different if the NCA had been as involved with CENTCOM's plans for war termination as it was with his plan's for war. The lack of guidance and supervision is hard to understand. Nevertheless, if Schwarzkopf's had benefited from a career which emphasized education in American foreign policy, he would likely have made better diplomatic decisions - even without civilian oversight. The Dau Tranh philosophy, which Schwarzkopf himself fought and lost to in Vietnam, educated its soldiers on the unity of the armed and political struggle. It inculcated every warfighter with the fundamental ideas of the political end state; the type of end state CENTCOM should have been focused on.

Promotion of democracy and self-determination have always been bedrock principles of the United States. A clear political education system for the military, one that burned this national philosophy into its war-fighters like the Communists burned Marxism into theirs, would have reaped rewards at Safwan. If Schwarzkopf had entered that tent as an indoctrinated student

of American foreign policy - not educated in the vagaries of various presidential administrations, but a student of the nation's enduring democratic policy ideals - it is hard to believe he would have been focused on anything other than precipitating Saddam Hussein's downfall.

Counter Argument

The rebuttal to robust political involvement at the operational level of war stems from the thesis that political limitations hinder the military's ability to achieve its military objectives.

This thesis is entirely correct. The most efficient, expedient method of achieving a military objective can only be determined by a military professional, and any interference with that professional's desired course of action will reduce the probability of the objective being achieved. In order to avoid this, goal oriented commanders have often attempted to shed political interference when it has been possible. As Supreme Allied Commander, Europe during operations in Kosovo, General Wesley Clark argued for this thesis when he stated that "Using military force effectively requires departure from the political dynamic and following the so-called "principles of war."³² Clark was a professional who understood that the most effective way to achieve his military objectives depended upon mass, economy of force, maneuver, and maintaining the offensive initiative-not the "political dynamic."

The irreconcilable flaw with the very logical thesis purported above is that nations do not go to war to achieve military objectives; nations go to war to achieve political objectives. This fact may not be optimal for professional Soldiers, it certainly was not for General Clark, but it is

the unfortunate reality. Political end states are hard to define, they can evolve, and often require coordination across all aspects of national power; in short, they are difficult. Military objectives are generally clear, concrete, and achievable solely through the application of combat power.

The tendency for operational commanders to concentrate on the latter at the expense of the former is, therefore, natural. However, by forcing the military to keep its objectives nested underneath political goals, even at the expense of freedom of action, civilian leaders ensure that combat power is not fruitlessly wasted. From the American Revolution to Vietnam, the U.S. has repeated first-hand experience fighting wars in which the victors lost more battles than they won, and the losers achieved their military objectives but failed to achieve their desired political end state. America's first General, George Washington, understood that achieving military objectives alone would not assure victory, it would be valuable for America's future commanders to remember the same.

Conclusion

Wars are won by the combined force of all aspects of national power. The military instrument may bear the plurality of the burden to impose a nation's will, but it will still only be effective if its efforts are orchestrated with diplomacy, information, and economics. This orchestration is the responsibility of the military's political masters, and it has always been an extremely daunting task. Keeping military commanders in line with political will takes assertiveness, intelligence, and often greatness, but it is a challenge that modern governments can

meet through the theories outlined in this essay. By providing comprehensive political guidance, intense and assertive political supervision of operational commanders in the field, and recurring political education, the U.S. government can ensure that objectives at the operational level of war remain properly nested under the national-strategic objectives.

The success or failure of the American government in executing this type of political oversight will likely be the key to America's future military success. Even with the rise of some "near-peer competitors", it is nearly indisputable that the U.S. will continue to have the largest, most capable military force in the world for the foreseeable future. The outstanding cadre of American commanders should have little difficulty utilizing this overwhelming force to achieve U.S. military objectives in all American conflicts for decades to come. Will these military successes lead to American victories? The answer to that question lies in the capabilities of future American governments to align their armed forces with political objectives. We shall see.

Notes

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5. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1966) 226.
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27. Ibid, 414-415.
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30. Ibid, 447-448.
31. Ibid, 444, 447.
32. Hew Strachen, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (29 September 2010): 165, quoted in Dayne E. Nix, "American Civil-Military Relations: Samuel P. Huntington and the Political Dimensions of Military Professionalism," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2012), <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/a76922f1-797a-4d61-b30b-28eebd4cb9c2/American-Civil-Military-Relations--Samuel-P--Hunti.aspx>, 97.

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