

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

SADDAM, A MASTER STRATEGIST?

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Introduction

In his briefing on 27 February 1991 that declared the end of the Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf proclaimed:

As for Saddam Hussein being a great military strategist, he is neither a strategist nor is he schooled in the operational art nor is he a tactician nor is he a general nor is he a soldier. Other than that, he's a great military man.¹

Who could doubt this assessment? After all, Coalition Combined Arms had routed Iraqi forces and forced them to abandon Kuwait. Saddam was on the ropes and George Bush's "New Hitler," the "Butcher of Baghdad," seemed finished.... Or was he?

In fact, not only has Saddam denied the West a complete victory, he has emerged as one of the strongest of the post-war leaders. Since the 1991 Desert Storm, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, King Hussein of Jordan, and Sheik Isa bin Sulman al Khalifa of Bahrain have passed away. George Bush, Yitzhak Shamir, and Maggie Thatcher were defeated in reelection bids, and Sheik Khalifa bin Hamad al Thani of Qatar was deposed by his son. Nearly every nation of the United Nations authorized, American-led coalition has witnessed a change in leadership.² Yet in October 1999, Saddam Hussein remains firmly ensconced in power in Baghdad directing challenges against the Gulf War cease-fire accords. Iraq's strategy has effectively reduced the UN Weapons Monitoring system to shambles, ebbed world disdain for the Iraqi regime, and eroded fears about its WMD schemes. In this decade-long conflict against the West, of which the Gulf War was merely a phase, Saddam is emerging as the real winner.

¹ General Norman Schwarzkopf, Post Gulf War Briefing, New York Times, 28 Feb 91.

² See Table-1 for a comprehensive summary of the Fates of the Leaders from the Gulf War.

Saddam has become the most feared and powerful leader in the Arab world today. Not only has his post-war Gulf War performance demonstrated his strength as a strategist, it is evidence of Saddam Hussein's own peculiar genius, a capacity for the kind of instinct that Clausewitz called "Coup d'Oeil." After suffering what could have been a permanent defeat, he admitted for the first time in January 17, 1992 that:

Iraq had lost the Persian Gulf war. But while he acknowledged Iraq's military defeat at the hands of the U.S.-led allied coalition, Hussein insisted that his nation had won a moral victory against the forces of "Satan and treachery."³

Although he had initially underestimated the ability of the West to muster the Will to force him to withdraw from Kuwait, Saddam remained focused on his long-term political goals. Saddam wants to be the new Arab power broker and covets a positive and prominent place in World history. The application of Clausewitz's principles as outlined in On War, will reveal how Saddam has not only survived the tremendous effort of the Western world to remove him from power, but has used his early defeat to come ever closer to the achievement of his ultimate objectives.

Nearly every student of war can recount Clausewitz's most famous summary, "War is merely the continuation of Politics carried out by other means." Saddam learned this well. Employing the Clausewitzian principle of seizing territory where there is little risk, Saddam assessed in 1990 that the World did not have sufficient will to challenge his takeover of Kuwait. Confident in his assumption, Saddam worked to dissuade the coalition and prevent an ultimate military encounter. He correctly assumed that the US-led coalition, in spite of its rhetoric, was not going to risk destabilizing Iraq to the point that Iran would become the dominant force in the Gulf. Therefore, the war would remain

³ Patrick Cogburn, The Independent (London), January 17, 1992.

sufficiently "limited." Moreover, he recognized the key vulnerability of the West was its ability to sustain the "Will" to stand up to a long-term challenge. Not surprisingly, Saddam tried every tactic that was available to him to break that Will. After delaying and thwarting every Western peace initiative, he and his people hunkered down and prepared for the worst. Employing Clausewitz's concept that Defense was the stronger form of warfare, Saddam forced the coalition to attack. Meanwhile, he struck the Coalition's center of gravity by employing missile attacks on Israel attempting to draw it into the war, proclaiming that the West would lose the "Mother of all Battles," and continuing the rejection of every Western condition for settlement. After a month of air bombardment and a four-day ground campaign, Iraqi forces seemed totally defeated. Saddam, though, understood that his retreat was merely a prelude to the rest of his campaign to establish himself as the preeminent force in the Arab world. He had learned from Clausewitz that "in war the result is never final."

Following the Gulf War Cease-Fire, Saddam immediately reassessed the situation. With that display of "Coup d'Oeil," he correctly surmised the threats and opportunities available to him. He quickly adjusted to a longer-range view. He would first have to ensure his own survival by stifling any internal challenges, after which he could begin rebuilding Iraq on his own terms. Despite the apparent embarrassment and humiliation he had suffered during the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was now determined to control the Public Affairs arena in the war's subsequent phases. Saddam would employ an "Offensive"-defense that would maintain constant pressure on the West's psychological and humanitarian centers of gravity. From the perspective of late 1999, we can see the broad outline of his sophisticated strategy.

Saddam's New Strategy

Saddam's new strategy can be separated into four parallel phases. First, Saddam has waged a war against non-Tikritis both inside and outside Iraq. His internal objective is to maintain control of the country and contain the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north. Externally, he wants to eliminate any opposition to his regime and regain Arab and Islamic world respect and recognition as the true victor in the Gulf Crisis. Second, he has engaged in a war against UN Sanctions. By breaking down the cooperation among UN member states and minimizing the effects of sanctions on his inner circle, he has ensured that his hold on power remains unchallenged. Third, he has conducted a war against UNSCOM to eliminate the intrusive Weapons Inspection regime, thus facilitating a return to his Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Development program. Finally, he has continued to provoke the West into attacks on the Iraqi homeland in order to exhaust the Western Will, sustain continuous international attention on the inhumane sanctions, and, ultimately, to foster Arab and Islamic resistance to United States' hegemony in the Middle East.

Saddam's immediate concern in March 1991 was survival. As revolution began brewing in both the south and north of Iraq, he reverted to form as the "Butcher of Baghdad." His harsh and immediate suppression of the northern Kurds, whom he had been unable to eradicate before the war, caused the West and the UN to initiate the "Provide Comfort" mission and establish the "No Fly Zone" in northern Iraq. Meanwhile in the south, the size of Iraq's undestroyed armed forces and the rapid redeployment of the West's coalition forces allowed a period of repression against a rising Shiite rebellion. Responding to the Iraqi action against the Shiites, the United

States, Great Britain and France declared a “No Fly Zone” which began the “Southern Watch” mission. With Iraq’s northern and southern airspace confined, the West envisioned Saddam becoming nothing more than the “Mayor of Baghdad.”

Saddam, though, continued his war against non-Tikritis with assassinations of key opposition leaders outside Iraq, even planning attempts on former President Bush during his visit to Kuwait. Although Western powers quickly applied a reprisal strike, Saddam correctly noted the West was becoming less able to confront his aggressive designs. Clausewitz would have understood how Saddam was becoming a master of conceding insignificant points to achieve a decisive victory: an unraveled coalition.

Saddam faced other significant challenges to his objectives. Continued UN Sanctions on imports and exports, increasingly capable and invasive UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspections of his special weapons programs, and further falling respect throughout the Islamic world threatened his regime’s survival. In spite of these threats, he remained capably in command. His army, especially the Republican Guard, was more intact than the West had anticipated. He was also able to delay and deny inspections of his special weapons sites. Additionally, the Iraqi population resigned themselves to endure their suffering. Indeed, Saddam dominated the Public Affairs campaign by railing against imperialism and Western domination, calling out for fairness and humanitarian actions, and damning Sanctions and No Fly Zones as illegal. He put the West on the defensive and earned the grudging respect of Arab leaders in the process.

Let’s look at how Saddam has applied Clausewitz’s principles for the offense in each of his four phases. Once he realized the West was not prepared to accept the cost of

a decisive victory over his regime, Saddam followed Clausewitz's prescriptive guidance of Book 6, Chapter 30 to employ his strategy.

First, Saddam has worked to "seize 'territory' without a decisive engagement."⁴ For each Iraqi objective, he has "nibbled" at the corners. He named a Shia and a Kurd to the inner circle to maintain surveillance on the opposition. His Personal palace guard force continued to reign terror on those who might attempt a coup.

Saddam played the "innocent pain and suffering card" regarding sanctions to focus world attention on the plight of the Iraqi populace thus precipitating the "Western guilt trip." Now nearly every nation of the former coalition has a strong "End or Relax the Sanctions" campaign. When the United Nations responded with Proposition 661, Saddam manipulated the "Oil for Food" program to ensure he controlled access and distribution so that his country remained in his grip. He attacked the Sanctions Export/Import inspections on the edges. The sea route was blocked, but overland routes from Jordan and Turkey supplied his inner circle and strategically placed elements with enough smuggled imports to maintain their comfortable life-styles. He worked to sneak small amounts of oil through the Persian Gulf embargo.

Saddam succeeded in delaying and preventing embarrassing discoveries by UNSCOM. Iraqi agents discovered beforehand where the inspectors were going. Iraqi forces orchestrated an elaborate shell game, deeply frustrating and troubling the leaders of the Inspection regimes. When finally opening a site to inspectors, he often unveiled a legitimate and non-threatening world class medical research program. Saddam further stalled and mitigated any substantial inspection effort by repeatedly claiming "Sovereignty" as an issue in belatedly surrendering various locations for inspection.

Often only a Security Council action would break the deadlock to some well-contested inspection sites.

In each of these confrontations, Saddam captured “territory.” Sometimes it was “Time,” sometimes “Will,” sometimes “Sympathy.” During each confrontation, the West and UN lost ground. Saddam used every tactic and opportunity to drive wedges in between the coalition nations. Despite having been embarrassed by Iraqi actions in the early 1990’s, Russia has begun to back him more and more. The French have withdrawn from both Southern Watch and UN Sanctions Enforcement, and are looking forward to the resumption of a mutually beneficial economic relationship when sanctions do get lifted. The Persian Gulf States barely assist in prosecuting Sanctions violators and have even prevented U.S. or British aircraft originating from Gulf bases from participating in Strikes against Iraqi targets. The once mighty and “multi-national” coalition is down to a “Two Man Show”—the United States and Great Britain.

Secondly, by capturing a stronghold left without cover, Saddam has nearly “legalized” his opposition to Southern Watch. There are a number of well-developed arguments that claim the southern “No Fly Zone” declared by the West violates the UN Charter and International Law. Therefore, all Iraqi challenges-- such as single plane violations of the “No Fly Zone”-- become “legal,” and the West’s actions to punish the challengers constitute illegal aggression specifically prohibited by the UN Charter. Thus while the UN Security Council repeatedly has criticized Iraq for its conduct, the Arab League has readmitted Iraq, and most Gulf nations are petitioning for continued relaxation of Sanctions.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, page 510.

Third, by going for minor victories that are within his military and political capabilities, Saddam has begun resurrecting his status in the Arab and Islamic world and further cementing his hold on power in Iraq. Once he suppressed the immediate challenges to his regime, Saddam engaged the West on the Public Affairs front. Lead News stories have increasingly adopted Saddam Hussein's "spin" on events, decrying the Iraqis' "innocent suffering" due to UN Sanctions, condemning illegal plots by the CIA and MI 7 against Iraq, and questioning the 1997 Iraq Liberation Act. Saddam has enjoyed several Public Relations coups. He was unanimously and "democratic" elected as President. He has successfully argued for regaining Iraqi sovereignty to control Kurd squabbling, dispute Turkish cross-border police actions, and oppose Iranian incursions. Although his timing was horrible, his decision to mobilize in October 1994 vaulted him back into the limelight and demonstrated that he could control how the West reacted to his threats.⁵ He even figured out how to "Win by Losing" as he baited the US to attack nearly meaningless targets. No sooner than the U.S. Tomahawks landed, Saddam demanded that "Fairness" required some concession or the defacto U.S. acceptance of a new "Status Quo" which improved daily life for Iraq and Saddam. Offensively, Saddam has regained the initiative and now controls the time, the place, and the fight.

Saddam was equally adept in employing the defensive actions prescribed by Clausewitz. By keeping his strongholds covered, he prevented full disclosure of his weapons development program. When his son-in-law defected with specific knowledge of the WMD programs, and possibly, began to tell all, Iraq staged an immediate

⁵ In October 1994, I was at a briefing as we decided to reduce the numbers of aircraft assigned to Southern Watch. Additionally, in following the world-wide aircraft carrier rotational deployment schedule, we had three aircraft carriers within two weeks sailing time to the Arabian Gulf. A bold Iraqi move even ten days

production of documents. The magnitude of Iraq's disclosure overwhelmed the capacity of the UNSOCM inspection team, so that even in compliance, Saddam slowed the UNSCOM's momentum. By spreading out his laboratories and concealing facts and capabilities, he has had eight years to recreate a significant portion of his weapons development program. His most recent provocation, which resulted in predictable US strikes, also effectively destroyed the UNSCOM weapons inspection program.

Saddam has also avoided any unfavorable engagements. Properly surmising his enemy, he knew how far to push and when to pull back at the last moment. Often he plans and executes engagements designed to embarrass the West. Every time Secretary Albright can be shown on television fully disheveled and upset about the latest Iraqi nonsense, Saddam's stock and popularity among the Arabs and Islamic peoples skyrocket. His anti-No Fly Zone tactics have included an array of challenges including short single plane penetrations to keep us wary, a "missile trap" to catch a too anxious fighter pilot, and a series of decoy targets to make us attack "desert air."

Saddam and the "Coup d'Oeil"

Saddam has demonstrated the Genius of Command. He has remained in control in spite of making several mis-judgements and decisions that would have led to the fall of less capable leaders. He epitomizes the "Coup d'Oeil" which Clausewitz acclaimed as the genius of leadership.. Clausewitz wrote, "[a]nyone who falls into the habit of thinking and expecting the best from his subordinates at all times, is, for that reason,

later would have caused major consternation in Washington in fighting to reestablish a three aircraft carrier force and not extend the length of deployments.

unsuited to command an Army.”⁶ Saddam knows his people. For the ones who need direction, Saddam controls exactly, giving clear direction when their actions mattered. In other cases, Saddam has used obfuscating and ambiguous or even bogus commands to make extraneous, ineffectual, or overly ambitious persons expendable. When he must, he can be brutal and final. Saddam’s nature is unlike anything that we have imagined in the West, but Clausewitz would have understood the extent to which it has enabled him to assess the timing and opportunity for new pushes against the pressures he faces. With the exception of the Gulf War, Saddam has masterfully gauged the US and United Nations stamina, and seldom has had to back down to the point where he was mortally embarrassed in the process.

Conclusion

Although the US led coalition did win the “Mother of all Battles,” in many ways Saddam is winning each of the subsequent battles in the decade-long Gulf War. The Leaders of the UN authorized coalition are in decline. The dual containment strategy pursued by America is held in low esteem. Iraq still exists as a threat to Persian Gulf stability, and Iran remains a steady and troubling force in the Gulf. The northern Kurds are no longer a threat since they fight as much among each other as they do against Saddam. The “bad” sons-in-law are gone, as well as several others who thought they could get Saddam from the inside, and Iraq is rejoining the Arab world. Saddam’s inner circle remains impenetrable to removal or reform, and Iraqi intransigence continues to exasperate US Foreign Policy leaders. The recent impeachment affairs against President

⁶ Clausewitz, On War, p 510.

Clinton have removed the moral high ground from the Western position making it even more difficult to accuse Saddam of cheating, lying, or treachery.

Clausewitz 's On War has proven to be an excellent model that allows us to analyze the on-going crisis in the Gulf. If Saddam has become a student of Clausewitz, we can expect him to continue to employ limited war as a continuing policy to achieve his real political objectives-- World acclaim of Saddam as the greatest of Arab leaders and the consequent erasure of American hegemony in the Middle East. Iraq will re-attack by agitating for the complete dismantlement of the Sanctions, “No Fly Zones,” and Inspection regimes, pushing for the restoration of Iraq’s “Sovereignty” and, most dangerously, persisting in the revitalization of a WMD program development capability unmatched anywhere in the world. Saddam will remain both unpredictable and obstructionist, continuing to call on the West to honor its commitment to such values as Sovereignty, Dignity, Fairness, Legitimacy and Respect. Eventually, we will have no other option except to relinquish our control over the destiny of Iraq.

Saddam has become a master strategist who will challenge us dramatically in the 21st Century. We must never again underestimate his determination or unflinching allegiance to what Clausewitz called the “unending nature of war.” We should be working to identify the vulnerabilities associated with his desires, develop a comprehensive strategy to employ against his center of gravity, and shape international opinion to prevent him from achieving his alarming and unhealthy political ends.

TABLE 1- FATES OF LEADERS FROM THE GULF WAR 1990-1991

COUNTRY	LEADER IN GULF CRISIS	FATE SINCE 1991
Algeria	President Benjedid	Forced out in 1992
Bahrain	Emir Shiek Isa bin Sulman	Died 1998
Canada	Prime Minister Mulroney	Quit in Feb 1993
Egypt	President Mubarak	Still in power Fall 1999
France	President Mitterand	Ousted in 1994 due to Vichy rumors
Germany	Chancellor Kohl	Defeated in 1998 after 16 years
Great Britain	Prime Minister Thatcher	Defeated in Fall 1990
	Prime Minister Major	Defeated in 1997
Iran	President Rafsanjani	Defeated in 1993
Iraq	Saddam Hussein	Elected President in 1994
Israel	Prime Minister Shamir	Defeated in 1992
Jordan	King Hussein	Died 1999
Kuwait	Emir Shiek al Sabah	Still in power
Oman	Sultan Qaboos	Still in power
Palestine	Yasser Arafat	Still around
Qatar	Emir Sheik Khalifa bin Hamad al Thani	Deposed by son in 1995
Saudi Arabia	King Fahd al Saud	Died 1998
Soviet Union	President Gorbachev	Dissolved 1991
Syria	President Assad	Still in power
Turkey	President Ozal	Died 1993
United Arab Emirates	Sheik Zayed	Still in power
United Nations	Secretary General Cuellar	Replaced 1991
United States	President Bush	Defeated 1992

TABLE 2- SADDAM’S FOUR GULF WARS of the LATE 1990’s

WAR	ELEMENTS of STRATEGY
VS non-TIKRITI s	1. Suppress opposition. 2. Repress baseline opposition constituencies. 3. Eliminate specific threats and people. 4. Conduct reprisals whenever a group makes headway. 5. Rule by coercion, threat and power.
VS SANCTIONS	1. Violate as often and as blatantly as possible. 2. Circumvent when new schemes are introduced. 3. Play the Humanitarian “Pain and Suffering” card. 4. Gain control of the U. N. Oil for Food program. 5. Use the issue of “Sovereignty.”
VS UNSCOM	1. Move factories, hide evidence, block movement. 2. Deny access to unprepared sites. 3. Delay every inspection whether the site had WMD information or not. 4. Consent to inspection or knowledge only when UNSCOM presents irrefutable evidence. 5. Use the issue of “Sovereignty.”
VS the WEST	1. Fight legality of “No Fly Zones.” 2. Inflate and broadcast Anti-imperialist and anti-American Public Relations. 3. Flame pan- Arab sentiment. 4. Fan Anti-Jewish sentiment. 5. Design and conduct “One Blow” vs No Fly Zone. 6. Remember how to “duck.”

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