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Central but Inadequate:

The Application of Theory in Operation Iraqi Freedom

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Introduction

What good is military theory? Is it relevant in the “real world” or merely the stuff of academia? Does it affect how we plan and conduct war or is it all very interesting, but, in practice, irrelevant? Certainly, these are pertinent questions for a student of Military Thought and the Essence of War. This paper considers the relevance of theory in ground component planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom. It is a limited study drawn from my experience and observations as a member of the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) planning staff from November 2002 to June 2003, specifically, as Chief of Intelligence Planning working within the C5. In that capacity, I participated in the plans and orders development, war gaming, and decision briefings that produced the ground campaign.

One might argue that there is little utility in a study based on experience in a single headquarters in a complex, joint campaign. Or, that this analysis is from too narrow a perspective, undertaken too soon after the event to draw useful conclusions. I disagree. By using CFLCC as a case study, we can gain insight into the role of theory in planning, its implications for future campaigns, and its ramifications for the professional education of our future planners.

I will first discuss how an assumption of a common theoretical grounding permeated CFLCC planning – an assumption well justified by the shared education of the planners and decision makers responsible for developing the ground campaign. Next, I will discuss how the ideas of Clausewitz, Jomini, Boyd, Warden, and others influenced the development of the ground campaign. This will demonstrate that the theory taught in our professional education system is not only relevant to real world planning, but is inevitably determinant of it. It reflects the success of an educational system that inculcates its students with an appreciation for military

theory and equips them to plan stunningly successful military operations. Nevertheless, I will argue that there is a risk inherent in our approach. Our current theoretical constructs yield a *warfare* bias that can produce brilliant military triumphs without achieving decisive, lasting results in *war*. The distinction between *warfare* and *war* is subtle, significant, and largely lost in our approach to planning due to the theoretical legacy we bring to the effort. It is easy to learn from failures that are well understood. It is far more difficult to learn in the wake of unprecedented war fighting success. The first step is recognition of the need to learn. This paper argues that there is such a need.

From a Common Foundation

When I arrived at CFLCC Headquarters in mid-November, I joined a planning process that was well underway. It had begun in late summer, so there was a large body of briefings encapsulating the plan's many iterations up to that point. I found these documents quite familiar for they were characterized by terms and analyses that I could easily understand by virtue of my past military education and experience. I had learned their concepts and terms beginning at the Military Academy, during Command and General Staff College (CGSC), and in the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS).¹

Like my peers on the planning staff, my training and assignments had given me great familiarity with the structure of the military decision making process, as well as, the theoretical vocabulary and constructs that underlay the briefings. There was no explanation of the theoretical concepts found in these briefings, for none was needed. The planning staff assumed universal understanding of concepts like centers of gravity, decisive points, lines of operation, decision superiority, lines of communication, and detailed systemic analysis of the enemy for effects based targeting.

Consequently, like the dozens of other officers who joined the staff planning process in-progress, I had no trouble immediately understanding what had gone before. Nor was I surprised to find the concepts of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Jomini, Warden, Boyd and others explicitly referenced in planning discussions as we worked to select objectives; match ways, means, and ends; assess risk; and design every aspect of the ground campaign. Theory was not a corollary to planning; it was a driving element. That is not to say that every discussion was theoretical. On the contrary, what the planners found unnecessary to say during plans development was as much evidence of the pervasiveness of theory as what was said.

The critical role theory played in planning comes as no surprise when one considers the composition and training of the CFLCC planning staff and decision makers. There were nearly a dozen SAMS graduates in the C5 alone. In fact, the Army had pulled many of them from other assignments to send to CFLCC specifically because of that schooling. Additionally, the C5, Deputy Commanding General for Operations, and the C2 were also SAMS graduates. The other general officers and colonels across the staff were equipped with a similar education in military theory from their war college schooling. Thus, the key planners and decision makers shared a common theoretical grounding that provided the basis for planning. It showed clearly in the development of the ground campaign within CFLCC and the integration of ground operations in the overall conduct of the war. As theory guided planning at CFLCC headquarters, so it did in interactions with CENTCOM and the other components.

There can be no doubt that the CFLCC staff was a product of its schooling and that the plan they produced was a product of the theoretical constructs learned there. We will now discuss some specific aspects of the plan that illustrate the application of theory in the ground campaign.

Theory Applied: Clausewitzian Elements

Clausewitz saw the necessity of identifying the enemy center of gravity and concentrating effort against it,² the effect of moral factors in war,³ the criticality of a correct estimate of the nature of the war to guide action⁴, the theoretical tendency of war to move toward the extreme⁵, and the fact that success in war lies ultimately in its effectiveness in meeting the intended political objectives⁶. Consequently, Clausewitz would find much familiar in the CFLCC approach to planning the campaign.

First and foremost, the planners identified Baghdad as the center of gravity and made it the principal driver of the entire ground campaign. Baghdad was the center of all regime control mechanisms and essential to defeating Saddam Hussein. It was to be the focal point of all ground maneuver. Baghdad, as the center of gravity, drove the scheme of maneuver, weighting of effort, and joint concept of operations. It was “the point against which all our energies were directed” and the CFLCC commander intended to drive to Baghdad and achieve decision as quickly as possible.⁷ Focusing on Baghdad to achieve rapid, decisive results was the organizing principle of the ground campaign and a direct translation of Clausewitzian theory into action – both in the concept of center of gravity and of the decisive nature of battle.

As for moral factors in war, Clausewitz would appreciate the importance CFLCC attached to them. The planners placed as much emphasis on moral factors as physical ones in planning the kinetic strikes and information operations of the targeting campaign. The CFLCC plan made undermining the enemy’s will a key goal of its operations. CFLCC selectively targeted or protected units based on assessments of psychological effect. The planners made co-opting enemy commanders and undermining morale to undercut Iraqi fighting spirit a priority of the

information operations campaign. The plan intended that air component operations and rapid ground maneuver would provide “shock and awe” – clearly an objective in the moral dimension.

Clausewitz would also have approved of the planners’ attention to understanding the nature of the war. The planners never discussed options without considering whether they were consistent with the nature of the war and its political objectives. Whether the planning did this effectively is a question open to continuing debate. However, effective or not, the planners clearly understood the need to evaluate and plan actions in the context of the policy objectives of the war. This understanding governed their approach.

Clausewitz argues that in a pure form of war the application of means would invariably escalate to the extreme, but points out that in reality many factors tend to moderate this. CFLCC paid great attention to estimating what types of actions would drive Saddam to extreme responses (e.g. use of WMD, flooding, oil well destruction) and worked in its planning to set the conditions to moderate or prevent that escalation.

This discussion could continue by taking up matters of offense and defense, the aim of destruction of the enemy army (or lack thereof in this case), and countless other examples of how CFLCC applied or rejected Clausewitzian thought. Instead, we will now turn our attention to examples that show how other theorists influenced CFLCC planning. We’ll begin with Jomini.

Theory Applied: Jominian Influences

Jomini argued that war could be reduced to immutable principles and that from those principles the right actions could be prescribed. As a result, much of his writing focused on battlefield geometry -- the advantages of interior lines, prescriptions for the selection of lines of operation and movement to concentrate forces against decisive points, etc. Today, many reject Jomini’s emphasis on battlefield geometry as irrelevant on a modern, non-linear battlefield.

Nevertheless, CFLCC planners applied some Jominian thought in planning the ground campaign. In some cases, it took the form of a concrete extension of his principles. In others, it was an abstract adaptation that borrowed his terminology and applied it in ways well beyond his original concepts.

The CFLCC Commanding General made setting the “stance” a priority early in the planning process. This involved a thorough analysis of the physical aspects of the theater in order to plan the initial and subsequent bases of operation and array forces and logistics elements effectively. Jomini would have seen in this an application of his fundamental points of strategy.⁸ It took the form of developing the operational graphics: identifying areas of operations, planning supply routes and forward logistical areas, establishing control measures for the scheme of maneuver (routes, axes of advance, initial and subsequent objectives), etc. Jomini would be correct to see in this planning a modern extension of his principles. He would be comfortable with the CFLCC planning process as it worked through the following questions: What would be our initial and subsequent bases of operation? How would they be constrained by geography? What were the natural lines of communication? How would they be vulnerable? Where would we initially position our forces and what would be the scheme of maneuver? What were the decisive points (critical maneuver objectives)? Jomini would have been pleased to see that the CFLCC scheme of maneuver sought to “engage fractions of the hostile army with the bulk of one’s forces.”⁹ It would have sounded directly familiar to him.

A second example would have been somewhat less familiar. CENTCOM and CFLCC adopted an abstraction of Jomini’s concept of “lines of operation.” They identified Security, Rule of Law, Governance and Administration, Infrastructure Recovery, Perception, and Humanitarian Relief and Assistance as “lines of operation” for Phase IV (post-war) planning.¹⁰

Actions within each of these “lines of operation” became the “decisive points” necessary to achieve post-war objectives. Obviously, the CENTCOM/CFLCC concept did not mean a physical path on which to maneuver against a decisive point as Jomini defined it; but it did suggest a conceptual route to follow in operations aimed at achieving decisive results.

Both these examples (building the battlefield geometry and adaptation of the term “lines of operation”) provide further evidence of theory guiding action in the planning process. We could easily continue to cite examples of how classical theorists such as Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and others influenced CFLCC planning. Instead, it is more useful to consider how two contemporary theorists influenced the planning process

Theory Applied: Boyd and Decision Superiority

John R. Boyd developed a model of decision making as a feedback loop consisting of observation, orientation, decision, and action (the OODA Loop).¹¹ In Boyd’s construct, one gains advantage in war by “getting inside the enemy’s decision cycle.” Or in other words, one must act more quickly than the enemy can effectively react. Different methods can accomplish this. The goal is generally to provide the enemy inputs that will be misinterpreted and lead to flawed decision and untimely action.

The CFLCC Commanding General talked about this approach in terms of achieving “decision superiority” -- the ability to understand and act on changing battlefield circumstances faster than Saddam. CFLCC sought to accomplish this through a variety of maneuver, targeting, and information operations. For example, CFLCC worked with the air component to target Iraqi command and control capabilities to prevent Saddam from receiving timely feedback and to sever his ability to direct his forces. CFLCC desensitized the Iraqis to threatening actions before the war (e.g. by preparing multiple border crossings using contractors and by conducting

significant exercises near the border well before hostilities). Perhaps most significantly, CFLCC persuaded CENTCOM to launch the ground war without a lengthy air campaign. This was a dramatic departure from recent American patterns that allowed CFLCC to achieve tactical surprise and seize the oil fields intact. CFLCC followed this with a rapid scheme of maneuver that by-passed the majority of Iraqi forces and reached Baghdad so quickly that Saddam could not effectively react. There can be no doubt -- the ground campaign unfolded well inside Saddam's decision cycle and the application of Boyd's theory succeeded mightily.¹²

In modern warfare, a ground campaign does not occur in isolation. If we were to stop our discussion here, we would omit a significant aspect of the role of theory in the course of the war. Therefore, we will now briefly examine the role of John A. Warden's theory in CFLCC's approach to targeting, ground operations, and cooperation in air component planning.

Theory Applied: Warden and Effects-Based Targeting

People think of Warden's theories principally in terms of the application of air power; however, in Iraqi Freedom they influenced all aspects of targeting and ground operations. To adopt Warden's view is to see the enemy as a series of systems that comprise multiple centers of gravity critical to his ability to wage war. He portrays them as a series of concentric rings with the most critical, the enemy command structure, at the center. Key production, those infrastructure elements essential to sustaining a society (electricity, petroleum, etc) is next, followed by the enemy state's transportation system. The population and food system comprise the next ring, with the military forces as the outer ring. Warden maintains that by attacking critical nodes one can disable enemy systems and win while minimizing casualties on both sides. The most effective attacks are those targeting the innermost rings. Thus, in Warden's view, it is

least effective to concentrate on the fielded military force and most effective to strike at those critical systems which that force exists to protect.¹³

Both CFLCC and the air component applied an extension of Warden's theory in Iraq. Called "effects-based" targeting, it depended on thorough analysis of the systems critical to the Iraqi regime.¹⁴ Targeteers identified the critical nodes to attack with kinetic and/or non-kinetic means to collapse critical Iraqi systems. Consistent with Warden's theory, CENTCOM made the enemy command structure and regime control mechanisms centered in Baghdad the priority targets of air and ground operations while seeing it as unnecessary to destroy the entire Iraqi armed forces. The effects-based targeting objective was to disable systems without completely destroying infrastructures important to post-war Iraq – a clear application of Warden's theory.

By this point in our discussion, it is absolutely clear that theory is more than the stuff of academia. It was the conceptual source of virtually all of CFLCC's planning. Clearly, such a theoretical focus flowed from the education and training of the planners and decision makers who brought to Kuwait a common theoretical grounding developed in SAMS, CGSC, and the war colleges. The result was extraordinary military success and a demonstration of the value of theory in planning. It is tempting to stop here; however, we have not yet discussed the whole story of the campaign. We must consider some additional facts before drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the theories we teach in our professional military education system.

The Limits of Current Theory

Our military victory has not yet yielded a stable, secure Iraq. Despite the planners' success in developing the military operations that brought about Saddam's downfall and the attention they paid to matching operations to the purpose of the war, the planning effort seems clearly to have failed in setting the conditions for success in the immediate post-war period. Furthermore,

the strategic objective of a stable Iraq on its way to peaceful self-rule and democracy may well be in jeopardy. Contrary to popular belief, this is not because of a lack of attention to post-war planning. CENTCOM and CFLCC planned extensively for end-state conditions and the transition to post-war operations even before the war began. The failure was not so much one of omission, as it was of ineffectiveness. The question that must be asked is why was the effort ineffective? It failed because our guiding theories, for all their usefulness, are inadequate. Specifically, our theories fail in that they produce a warfare bias that prevents effective decisions when post-war condition setting conflicts with the immediate requirements of military operations. Let me illustrate this point by describing how CFLCC planners recognized that the plan's successful implementation entailed significant strategic risk, yet failed to influence the Commanding General to adjust the plan.

Over a month before the war began, the Phase IV planning group concluded that the campaign would produce conditions at odds with meeting strategic objectives. They realized that the joint campaign was specifically designed to break all control mechanisms of the regime and that there would be a period following regime collapse in which we would face the greatest danger to our strategic objectives. This assessment described the risk of an influx of terrorists to Iraq, the rise of criminal activity, the probable actions of former regime members, and the loss of control of WMD that was believed to exist. It was not an omniscient assessment; it did not describe all aspects of what came to occur following the war. Nevertheless, it did identify a need to take some specific actions including: planning to control the borders, analyzing what key areas and infrastructure should be immediately protected, and allocating adequate resources to quickly re-establish post-war control throughout Iraq. Adjusting the plan would have created much different transition conditions and left us in a much better position than what we now face.

But, the planners failed to persuade the Commanding General and dropped these issues with little resistance. Why? Because both the planners and the commander had been schooled to see fighting as the realm of war and thus attached lesser importance to post-war issues.

No officer in the headquarters was prepared to argue for actions that would siphon resources from the war fighting effort, when the fighting had not yet begun. To do so, would have been contrary to a career of schooling that makes fighting the determining activity of war. No matter how often post-war issues were raised, they never took on an equivalent importance to war fighting considerations in the eyes of the planners or commanders. Who could blame them? The business of the military is war and war is fighting. The war was not yet started, let alone finished, when these issues were being raised. Only a fool would propose hurting the war fighting effort to address post-war conditions that might or might not occur.

Even the vocabulary used here reveals the theoretical bias. The term “post-war” itself is a misnomer that stems from our theoretical underpinning. Post-war issues, as we define them, are those that come after the fighting. All of the theories of war discussed in this paper, as well as all of those that form the balance of our professional education, focus on fighting as the distinguishing characteristic of war. They begin with the assumption that war is fighting and they develop heuristics for the employment of the military instrument in violence toward the war’s political ends. Even Clausewitz, for all his discussion of war as an extension of policy and his introduction of the paradoxical trinity to help us understand war, devolves to an emphasis on fighting as the decisive instrument.¹⁵ In so doing, his theory, like the others, fails to really provide us a sufficient basis for understanding war in its broader aspects.

War transcends fighting, which is only one of its elements. This is why CFLCC was unable to effectively prepare for the post-fighting actions that would form a fundamental part of

winning the war. Our theoretical constructs caused the military to think incorrectly of the post-*fighting* actions as post-*war* issues. As a result, these issues could not compete for resources or affect priorities in military planning when the fighting was yet to be won. Military commanders fight wars. Under our current theoretical conditioning, if it is not fighting, it is not war.

Therefore, it does not warrant the same attention from the commander; especially when he still has the fighting to win. We must develop theoretical constructs that correctly characterize war. Otherwise, there is little hope of a commander recognizing and acting on the understanding that post-fighting conditions may ultimately determine the outcome of the war. The fighting is only a catalyst to establishing those conditions.

To state the problem another way, our fundamental theories are all, in reality, theories of *warfare*, not *war*. This causes us to give primacy to war fighting considerations in planning and lose sight of the fact that a war is not necessarily won by brilliant military operations. This flaw in our theoretical understanding of war affects non-military strategists as well. Despite much study of the other instruments of power, once we unleash the military instrument our flawed theoretical understanding takes over and makes the application of force the focus of our effort. We need a better theoretical foundation if we are to escape this perennial trap.

Conclusion

CFLCC planning in Iraq clearly demonstrates that theory matters. The success of the ground campaign proves that current theories can be highly effective guides to war fighting. However, shortcomings in the post-fighting planning reveal the need for a better theoretical foundation to guide us in the winning of war in its broader context. If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, our academic attention must be turned to developing an essential theory of war (vice warfare) as a guide to strategic thinking.

NOTES

1. Following CGSC, students compete to attend SAMS and remain at Leavenworth for a second year of study. The course of study entails an extensive exploration of military theory and produces graduates whose specialty becomes planning.
2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595-600, 617-619.
3. Clausewitz, 184-185.
4. “The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” Clausewitz, 88.
5. Clausewitz, 75, 77 and Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52, 53.
6. “Once again: war is an instrument of policy. It must necessarily bear the character of policy and measure by its standards.” Clausewitz, 610.
7. Again Clausewitz would clearly approve having stated that “an offensive war requires above all a quick, irresistible decision (p. 598)
8. Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, translated by G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co, 1862 reprint Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 60-64.
9. Jomini, 63.
10. COL Kevin Benson, “RE: Looking for Some Info,” 29 October 2003, personal e-mail (29 October 2003). COL Benson was the CFLCC C5 during Iraqi Freedom and is now the Director of the School of Advanced Military Studies
11. “Boyd’s OODA Loop”, Defense and the National Interest, <http://www.d-n-i.net/second_level/boyd_military.htm>Loop and http://www.d-n-i.net/fcs/ppt/boyds_ooda_loop.ppt> (30 October 2003).
12. Another good example of CFLCC’s understanding of Boyd can be found in the phrase: “Saddam Hussein needs to think he is winning until he is dead.” That phrase became the shorthand expression of CFLCC’s operational approach to delaying his use of desperate actions (e.g. destruction of the oil fields, use of WMD, flooding, genocide of minority groups). The idea was that by preventing Saddam from correctly interpreting and reacting to our actions in a timely manner, CFLCC could protect itself from Iraq’s most dangerous options.

13. John Warden, “Employing Air Power in the Twenty-first Century,” in Richard H. Shultz, Jr., and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr. Editors, *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1992), 57-69.

14. Very early in the planning process, CFLCC and V Corps solicited assistance from the School of Advanced Military Studies. A team of students and faculty from the school produced a systemic analysis of Saddam’s regime, identifying specifically each system key to his maintenance of power. Over a dozen critical systems were identified and analyzed in detail. These ranged from analysis of his armed forces and regime security services to his electrical, water, and banking systems. These analyses lead to the development of targeting approaches for each system entailing both attack from the air and planned operations on the ground. Toward that end, the ground component developed effects support packages for critical nodes in and around Baghdad and across the country as a whole. The Joint Warfare Analysis Center also performed detailed systems analysis of the power, transportation, and oil production systems that became the basis for key targeting decisions.

15. See Howard, p. 37 – “Political requirements might present a wide array of objects for the strategist to attain, but there was only one means of attaining them insisted Clausewitz: fighting.”

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