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***THE WAR CHANNEL:
PROPOSITIONS ON THE SUBSTITUTABILITY
OF TECHNOLOGY FOR WILL***

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COURSE 5605
SEMINAR I

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***The War Channel:
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*"Technology is not an image of the world but a way of operating on reality. The nihilism of technology lies not only in the fact that it is the most perfect expression of the will to power ... but also in the fact that it lacks meaning."*¹

OCTAVIO PAZ

*"Technology ... the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it."*²

MAX FRISCH

Contextual Matters

Every student of military matters is familiar with a construct described by Karl von Clausewitz, military philosopher of the 19th century. His universe of war is bounded and defined by a "paradoxical trinity" - primordial violence and passion (people) war subordinated to policy and subject to policy and reason (government), and chance and probability influenced by creativity (military). Linked by a mutual interchange of exertions of will, each influences and is in turn influenced by the other two aspects.

The purpose of this essay is to put forward several propositions which, taken together, suggest that *technology* has become the near complete but largely imperfect substitute for *will* as the linkage among the people, the government and the military. If true, this phenomenon bears great

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consequence for military operations. If untrue, it may become true at a later date. This essay assumes that Clausewitz' metaphor is accurate, enduring, and sufficiently descriptive. The essay further assumes that the metaphor is being altered by the intrusion of manifested technology. This change moves along a trendline. The logical end of the line is a distortion of the conduct of war well beyond historical recognition.

The most recent cause for this examination comes through a review of current military operations in Kosovo. The perspective on the Kosovo conflict is really the next stage of a migration begun during the Persian Gulf war. This movement is incremental and, like most such things, is most easily noted and understood in retrospect.

In reference to his paradoxical trinity, Clausewitz avers "our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets".³ This essay seeks a theory, consistent with Clausewitz', that is recast for the modern strategist and, more importantly, for the modern American mind. To do less would be to fall into that intellectual chasm between theory and reality. Though Clausewitz himself was perfectly comfortable with a Kantian duality, one suspects the contemporary populace would be somewhat less comfortable.

*Although our intellect always longs for clarity and certainty,
our nature often finds uncertainty fascinating.*⁴

As is increasingly prevalent and curious in the modern age, the

fascination Clausewitz spoke of can often be a morbid fascination. Our collective appetite to be entertained has not reached its limit. When viewed over a television screen from thousands of miles away, military operations take on a clinical nature. They become a two-dimensional display. Hence, the origin of a series of deductive propositions about the conduct of war today.

Military Operations as Programming Content

Three inferential propositions about military operations as programming content

1. *Technology, particularly as manifested in the broadcast media, serves as both an overwhelming catalyst and an irresistible accelerant in shaping the passion of the people or, as Clausewitz said it:*

"Suddenly war again became the business of the people..."⁵

"...images of distraught refugees pouring out of Kosovo have galvanized public opinion...and fed demand for decisive military action to end the humanitarian catastrophe."⁶

And those images, interviews, and icons have become a seminal force in determining the conduct of our military conflicts. They overpower and they consume. They exhaust and they obsess. And they are still only a reflection of reality – not reality itself.

2. *As so applied, technology acquires a life and momentum of its own, . irrespective of the reality of military operations.*

The demands for "content" (televised footage that has been packaged for presentation) are insatiable. According to Jeff Zucker, executive producer of *The Today Show*, "air time is like oxygen." Since the bombing in Yugoslavia

began, "MSNBC's ratings are up 103 percent, CNN's are up 87 percent, and Fox News Channel's are up 38 percent...(and) 97 percent of MSNBC's programming has been devoted to the Balkans war."⁷

2. *If the foregoing propositions are true, then military operations have become another form of programming content for the broadcast media – bordering upon theater.*

*"War is the supreme drama of a completely mechanized society."*⁸
LEWIS MUMFORD

Slightly updated, Mumford's aphorism might read "military operations are the supreme theater of a globally networked society." The entertainment industry and the engine that drives it – advertising – does not automatically reinforce the virtues that sustain it. Moral vigilance in such a circumstance is "tolerable when the influence of entertainment was softened by the requirements of the real world; it is quite different when entertainment *is* the real world."⁹

Military Operations as a Cultural Barometer

Three inferential propositions about military operations as a cultural barometer -

1. *The near-instantaneous conduct of opinion polls on the conduct of military operations shapes political decisions, alters political objectives, and ultimately derives military objectives.*

Do you approve or disapprove of US and NATO airstrikes?"
Approve – 60%, Disapprove – 32%

Will airstrikes against Serbia be enough to bring about a resolution, or do you think the US will have to send in ground troops to achieve our objective? Airstrikes – 14%; Ground troops – 71%

"Yet the poll also suggests that the administration may face problems in defining success in Kosovo. The administration has shied away from declaring that the goal of its military campaign is to remove Mr. Milosevic from power. As recently as Tuesday, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declined to cite his ouster as a war aim."¹⁰

Yet, questions naturally arise as to what or when or how "war aims"

(a.k.a. objectives) might be defined.

2. *The simultaneity of opinion polls and televised images compels changes in military operations to suit volatile changes in public opinion.*

"This campaign is all about controlled force – controlled by politicians in everything from target selection to level of intensity – and that control is making Clark's (NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Wesley Clark) job more difficult."¹¹

In the superheated cauldron of public opinion (domestic or international), the power of symbology cannot be overstated. In the current conflict, civilian planners initially favored "representational bombing" – largely symbolic bombing to either intimidate Milosevic or give him a convenient excuse for retreat.¹² Ever hypersensitive to mercurial opinion polls, the political leadership finds itself defenseless to a downturn in support.

3. *If the foregoing propositions are true; "spinning the war" and virtual realism may begin to dominate military operations.*

"...it was clear this week that the battle between Belgrade and Washington involved more than aircraft and artillery, F-16 jets, and M-84 tanks. It involved diction, images, and feuding versions of reality."

"NATO and American officials have been alternately reticent or voluble, depending on where their interests lay. Clinton Administration officials have been deliberate in their language, using words like genocide

combined with blurry photographs suggestive of mass graves to conjure up the Holocaust, even when they were not explicitly invoking it. As a result, Americans are getting a view of what is going on in the Balkans that, accurate or not, is managed and subjective."¹³

At some junction, the line is crossed between propagandistic enterprise and the earnest need for operational security. "The NATO briefings are total spin and propaganda...but if you pay close attention you can get information."¹⁴

Military Operations as an Imperfect Mirror

Three inferential propositions about military operations as an imperfect mirror -

1. *Much of the current population of Americans have experienced little of real military operations, and most of their experience with military operations is derived from virtual reality and televised events.*

"The retailing wars just got a lot bloodier inside *Limited, Inc.* Interspersed with rallying cries from top executives are snippets of battle scenes from war movies...in one passage, bombs explode and a weary soldier drags a wounded comrade through the forest. Then comes a clip of Leslie Wexner, Limited's founder and chief executive officer, declaring from a podium, "It is war, and in wars people really do live and people do die."¹⁵

Hyperbole aside, the video is an analog for contemporary attitudes.

Military operations remain a powerful stimulant for the malleable mind.

Somewhere between "infotainment" and fantasy is the reality of the moment.

2. *This inexperience, coupled with nostalgia for the preceding generation's exploits, leads to chronic miscalculation and misadventure in the conduct of military operations.*

In his article "Virtual Patriotism", John Gregory Dunne described the curious patriotism of our time. "You do not have to do anything about it except

express it and wish you had been at the conflict in question. It comes not from the actuality of a war but from a movie about a war... virtual patriotism demands the creation of heroes.”¹⁶ And yet, a political cartoon aptly captures the public’s mood by Kovalic appearing in *The New York Times* on 25 April 1999. In it, the “public” shouts at two bewildered military planners, “I want this war to be bloodless, painless and clean. I don’t want a *single* Allied plane lost, or even *one* civilian casualty. Don’t even think about a ground war. I want CNN to tell me military strategies and secrets, and as soon as I hear about *one* Allied death, I reserve the right to withdraw my support! Oh, yes...and I don’t want politicians to *interfere* with your strategy.” In the endless loop that binds the passion of the people to their government and their military, the perfect replacement of *technology* for *will* brings such a reaction.

Ironically, we appear to have returned to war in Europe just as nostalgia for our last war in Europe crests. The horrible reality of war is the dark twin of the banal reality of life in contemporary America. Neatly packaged for the small screen, US forces have again joined their wartime allies (and wartime foes) to confront a brutal, expansionist regime.

3. *If the circumstances described in the foregoing series of propositions exist, they do so because they represent heroic intimation, and not present reality.*

“The guy next to me in the coffee shop was typical: “I’m not even sure where Kosovo is, or what’s caused all this, but it’s terrible, look at the pictures, we must do something”. “Yeah, blow up another bridge, it can’t hurt.”¹⁷ As

Robert Scheer noted in the cited article, "In War, Ignorance Can Be Bliss", the "eerie accuracy of satellite-guided missiles, so satisfying as a special effect on television" yields greater intimations of mortality.

Potential Implications for Operational Methodology

Some potential implications for Operational Methodology -

- 1 *Clausewitz' historic insistence upon clarity of political objectives (now an article of faith among military professionals), may become defunct.*

No one starts a war - or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so - without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war ..¹⁸

Pressed upon events and buffeted by volatile domestic and international opinion, political leaders will be unable to "stay the course". They will likely be unable to "stay on course". The core problem with this method for determining objectives is that we only arrive at solutions that reflect *data*. Data, being something already given, is incapable of producing action without linkage to reality. *Will*, as an expression of a national ethos, value or virtue, provides such a linkage. *Technology*, even with its infinite capacity to process data, still lacks the capacity to fuse human thought and human action.

- 2 *Military targeting, as well as the subjective legitimacy of those targets, will be refocused and redefined toward the engines of manipulation of public opinion.*

War does not consist of a single short blow.

...one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind.. a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.¹⁹

The presentation of the current conflict moves warily along an uneasy fault line. Truthfulness is one thing, but credibility quite another. Clearly, the center of gravity for the Yugoslav regime has certain fluidity to it. Just as clearly, the fluidity is both physical and metaphysical. Serb targets are “degraded” and “disrupted”, but they are rarely “destroyed”.

The net result is a wafer-thin slicing of American military power, including that large segment known as airpower. Some observers upon the scene have commented “Air power might have persuaded Serbia to yield to American wishes that it accord Kosovo an improbable autonomy without independence – but only if the US and its allies could have stomached the threat and reality of wrecking Yugoslavia’s economy and society, turning out the lights in every major city, blowing up every train, bridge and sewage treatment plant, causing hundreds if not thousands of civilian deaths while taking scores of losses in men and machines.”²⁰ Through lack of imagination, inertia, or bureaucratic sclerosis, the Allies may yet come to this point, but not because they set out to get there.

Examine public reaction to the civilian casualties when a NATO jet inadvertently bombed a train carrying civilians. Despite their best efforts, NATO military briefers could not dissuade reporters from returning to the topic, day after day. The press corps gave them no respite or quarter. NATO was “off message” and unable to get back on.

Finally, note the shift in target sets – from fielded forces, to bridges, to

broadcast towers. Traditional civilian targets, such as television studios, are marked for destruction because they constitute part of the adversary's "propaganda machine".

- 3 *Opportunity for thoughtful reflection upon a proper course of action will vanish, tending to perpetuate reactive behavior that is wholly unencumbered by logic.*

*"From the enemy's character, from his institutions, the state of his affairs, and his general situation, each side, using the laws of probability, for an estimate of its opponent's likely course and acts accordingly."*²¹

Rapidity is the natural enemy of reflection. Absent time for prudent reflection, political and military leadership may be rapidly stripped of any reasonable ability to anticipate events. "All of which suggests that President Clinton and Yugoslavia's President Milosevic each may have made one crucial miscalculation. For his part, Mr. Milosevic probably didn't understand how much a refugee crisis could steel Americans. For his part, Mr. Clinton may have underestimated Americans' willingness to contemplate using ground troops."²² In the face of such a tidal wave of events, leaders might default to timidity and irresolution – or worse, to recklessness and stubbornness. The logical end for such a progression is marked by a fear of risk avoidance and an obsessive search for safety.

"Two wars are underway. In the war the West planned, the air war, things are going mostly splendidly. NATO's machines every day destroy a few more pieces of Yugoslavia, and Yugoslavia can do very little except suffer. But Milosevic is not fighting this war. He is fighting the other war – the ground war in Kosovo. Between the two wars in Yugoslavia lies a great disconnect."²³

A second, more troubling implication comes if and when the public “tires” of its novelty if the bombing campaign drags on. Students of military history long note and long remember that perseverance is a key element to successful military operations. When the political will to sustain operations is replaced by remote control channel changing, further contemplation becomes a lost cause.

Concluding Matters

*"War is not a life: it is a situation,
One that may neither be ignored nor accepted."*²⁴
T. S. ELIOT

Sometimes one must simply acknowledge inescapable, irreversible, and inevitable conditions – something akin to standing knee-deep in a rising tide and wondering whether to wade to shore. The military operations in Kosovo may well be a foretaste of things to come. They may also cause a swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction – hostile reaction to incrementalism in favor of a return to the concept of overwhelming force – with consequences endured and outcomes tolerated irrespective of their televised image. For any number of reasons, the second alternative seems greatly less likely.

There are few things more unnerving than commentators who notice a phenomenon, point to its dire potential, and offer no solution. In their defense (here, clearly in self-defense), some trends cannot be diverted or tethered. It may well be the case that the best we may hope to do is experience these events, endure their consequences, and adjust to their outcomes. Taken at

their best, the foregoing propositions constitute only a theory. Once again, Clausewitz as master theorist offers consolation for the novice:

*"theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of manual for action. It is an analytical investigation leading to a close acquaintance with the subject; applied to experience – in our case, to military history – it leads to thorough familiarity"*²⁵

¹ *Alternating Current*, "The Channel and the Signs" (1967).

² Hanna, in *Homo Faber*, "Second Stop" (1957; tr. 1959).

³ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 89.

⁴ *On War*, p. 86.

⁵ *On War*, p. 592.

⁶ Michael Dobbs, "The War On The Airwaves", *Washington Post*, 19 April 1999

⁷ Howard Kurtz, "NBC's New Machine Marches to War", *Washington Post*, 21 April 1999

⁸ Mumford, Lewis, *Technics and Civilization*, ch. 6, sect. 11 (1934).

⁹ Mark Gerson, "Yahoo! An Entertaining Economy", *Weekly Standard*, 26 April 1999.

¹⁰ Gerald F. Seib, "Americans Still Back NATO Campaign, But are Skeptical On Success, Poll Finds", *Wall Street Journal*, 22 April 1999

¹¹ Mark Thompson, "How We Fight", *Time*, 26 April 1999

¹² George F. Will, "A War of Values", *Washington Post*, 18 April 1999

¹³ Frank Bruni, "Two Dueling Views of Reality Vying on the Airwaves", *New York Times*, 18 April 1999

¹⁴ Ellen Gemerman, "Information About War Is Tightly Controlled", *Baltimore Sun*, 7 April 1999, quoting Patrick Sloyan, reporter for *Newsday*

¹⁵ Rebecca Quick, "Like War, Retail is Hell, According to the Limited", *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 1999

¹⁶ John Gregory Dunne, "Virtual Patriotism", *The New Yorker*, 16 November 1998

¹⁷ Robert Scheer, "In War, Ignorance Can Be Bliss", *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 1999

¹⁸ *On War*, p. 579.

¹⁹ *On War*, p. 79, 595

²⁰ Eliot A. Cohen, "What's Wrong With the American Way of War", *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 1999

²¹ *On War*, p. 80.

²² Gerald F. Seib, "The Public Supports A Call To Arms For Now, Anyway", *Wall Street Journal*, 7 April 1999

²³ Michael Kelly, "Two Wars: Ours and Theirs", *Washington Post*, 21 April 1999

²⁴ *A Note on War Poetry*, st. 5.

²⁵ *On War*, p. 141.