

The Relevance of Carl Von Clausewitz in Operation Iraqi Freedom

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Abstract

This article is a comparative essay intended to illustrate the similarities and differences between the theories of Carl Von Clausewitz and Operation Iraqi Freedom. It looks at the relevance of Clausewitz, the general operational plan in Iraq, and the vital Clausewitzian theories such as the Importance of Political Will, Policy Makers Shaping Military Strategy, Center of Gravity, Economy of Force, Offense, and Surprise.

The theories of Clausewitz addressed in this article are relied on by the planners and theorists of today's military, as well as to the modern Air Force leaders who will guide their fellow Airmen into battle some day in the not-so-distant future. This article is intended to initiate discussion amongst readers as to whether or not today's technologically advanced military should still look to the past in order to prepare for the future.

Analyzing the strategic relevance of a war that has not ended can be risky, yet to anyone who understands the military theories of Carl Von Clausewitz - theories that significantly impacted warfare throughout the 20th Century - it is tempting to see if the planners of Operation Iraqi Freedom sought leverage from Clausewitz for this successful campaign or if they rewrote the book on warfare. Were the theories of Clausewitz used to topple the Iraqi government, or is his textbook, *On War*, now obsolete? If the military leaders who created the overall plan to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime did in fact use the teachings found in *On War* as a foundation for their successful strategy, then it can be said that Clausewitz is indeed relevant in the 21st Century.

The relevancy of Clausewitz has been debated ever since Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the Prussian general staff, first applied Clausewitzian theory to the battlefield in 1871. In the late 20th Century many historians and strategists debated the usefulness the 19th Century Prussian Officer's writings in a world of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the Cold War, Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), and the technological revolution within the military. In the aftermath of the First Gulf War of 1991 many believed that Clausewitz was once again validated due to the overwhelming victory achieved with using Clausewitzian theory in liberating Kuwait.

Yet Clausewitz continued to attract critics. Military historian John Keegan, a long-time critic of the relevance of Clausewitz and his theories, used the outcome of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 to discount the validity of Clausewitzian ideals when applied to non-western regimes:

"In the Gulf War a Clausewitzian defeat was inflicted by the forces of the coalition on those of Saddam Hussein. His refusal, however, to conceded the reality of the catastrophe that had overtaken him, by recourse to a familiar Islamic rhetoric that denied he had been

*defeated in spirit, what-ever material loss he had suffered, robbed the coalition's Clausewitzian victory of much of its political point."*¹

Whether deliberate or accidental the United States, along with most other nations in the western world, has modeled its political and military relationships on a foundation that closely resembles that which is described in *On War*. Clausewitz stated that "*a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy*,"² and that "*The only sound expedient is to make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet*."³ Since Clausewitz based his ideas about warfare on the cornerstone that "*war is nothing but the continuation of policy by other means*,"⁴ he theorized that it was a basic necessity to closely align those who make policy (politicians) with those who implement policy (military). Clausewitz knew that the stronger the trinity of the *people*, the *military*, and the *government*, the more successful the nation would be at waging war.

To the benefit of the U.S. Military (and Clausewitzian theory) the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 rearranged the chain of command so that the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff became the top military advisor to the Commander in Chief. The act allowed the U.S. to enhance the political and military aspects of waging war, which, according to Clausewitz, is one in the same. If the U.S. leadership followed the advice of Clausewitz in arranging their military and political chain of command, any planning for military actions would almost certainly revolve around Clausewitz' theories on warfare.

Since the operation in Iraq is ongoing, several assumptions must be made about the plan to wage war against the Iraqi government to determine whether or not *On War* was used in the planning. Observing what has occurred up to this point, it is safe to assume that Operation Iraqi Freedom consists of three phases. The first phase is obviously the combat plan aimed at disarming and removing the tyrannical regime ruling Iraq. The second phase is to stabilize Iraq through the establishment of order, an influx of humanitarian relief, reorganization and reactivation of the civil infrastructure (water supply, electricity, commerce) and the establishment of a temporary government to oversee this process. The third phase is to establish a stable democratic government. The end result should be the creation of a democratic foothold in the Middle East, stabilizing the region and changing how the Arab world views the U.S. and the West. The first phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom will be the primary focus of this essay since it is most applicable to *On War*.

The Clausewitz Plan

The U.S. Army, as with most western militaries, has admittedly relied heavily on Clausewitz's teachings for most of the 20th Century and has built itself upon a foundation based heavily on the strategies found in *On War*. Many Army leaders can recite Clausewitz without reference. Who then in the U.S. government was tasked with creating the battle plan for the liberation of Iraq? General Tommy Franks, an Army General and Commander of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), was tasked with replacing an existing, outdated military plan that had been sitting on the shelf at the Pentagon for several years. Gen. Franks oversaw the creation and implementation of the new plan that is now being called one of the most successful military operations ever.

Franks is undoubtedly an expert on Clausewitzian strategy due to his experience as an infantry battalion commander, graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College and Army War College, and beneficiary of 35 years of military training and experience.⁵ Due to his long Army career and exposure to Clausewitz' theories, he presumably influenced the war planners at USCENTCOM to use the framework described in *On War* when developing the combat plans.

Each chapter in *On War* deals with a different and vital aspect of military organization, planning and waging war, and the repercussions of failure. By comparing each chapter with the rapidly changing events taking place today it is easier to illustrate the similarities and differences between Operation Iraqi Freedom and the theories of Clausewitz.

Importance of Political Will

Clausewitz emphasized the importance of military morale and how high and low moral affected the outcome of the battle. His comments on *political will* are just as applicable today as they were in the early 19th Century.

*"Once it has been determined, from the political conditions, what a war is meant to achieve and what it can achieve it is early to chart the course. But great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind, is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry our plan, and not be thrown off course by thousands of diversions."*⁶

Policy Makers Shape Military Strategy

Clausewitz suggests that political leaders and their policies are intertwined with the conduct and ultimate outcome of a war.

*"No one starts a war or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is the political purpose, the latter it's operational objective."*⁷

The U.S.-led coalition forces announced their intentions and justifications for waging war 48 hours prior to the start of combat actions. By stating their *political purpose* that the war was not against the Iraqi people and pledging to help the citizens after combat actions ceased, the coalition defined their *conduct* of operations and bound themselves by their word. The Coalition would make every effort to not inflict civilian casualties while avoiding destruction of religious, historical, and civilian building and infrastructure. By adhering to this ideal of stating a clear objective and not deviating from it (an ideal taken directly out of *On War*) the Coalition is attempting to change the international assumption that they are there to conquer as opposed to liberate Iraq.

Center of Gravity

According to Clausewitz, there "*is no higher and simpler law of strategy,*"⁸ then to focus your military force on the most vulnerable part of your enemy's defense, dubbed his "*Center of Gravity.*"

*"One must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics 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."*⁹

To the dismay of international observers and 'Armchair Generals,' the brunt of U.S. forces swept up the Western Half of Iraq, passing most cities and towns between Kuwait and Baghdad. This push northward and inattention to enemy forces protecting the towns and cities along the route was dubbed irresponsible and dangerous. Criticism from the press and military strategists reached its apex one week after the beginning of hostilities. There were talks of crumbling supply routes and difficulties in communications between advancing forces and military leaders. Some even feared Coalition forces would be cut off and encircled by elite Iraqi troops. In reality, the U.S. was following Clausewitz' rule of engagement and taking aim at the enemies *Center of Gravity*, the Regime in Baghdad.

What critics failed to grasp was that if U.S. forces toppled the Regime in Baghdad the Iraqi people would stand up and join coalition forces in the fight for their own liberation, validating Clausewitz theory on the enemy's *Center of Gravity*. As the Regime quickly fell the domino effect of freedom quickly followed and the remaining government strongholds and enemy armies dissolved. This collapse incited Iraqi citizens to tear down the last fascist vestiges of the Hussein government and allowed the world (most importantly the Arab world) to witness once again what freedom was like for those who desired it. The U.S. strict adherence to this Clausewitz rule of warfare saved countless lives and greatly shortened the amount of time needed to free Iraq.

Economy of Force

In adhering to his idea of proper focus of military force on the enemy's center of gravity, Clausewitz determined that *economy of force* was a vital part of waging war. As Clausewitz stated, "*Any unnecessary expenditure of time, every unnecessary detour, is a waste of strength and thus abhorrent to strategic thought.*"¹⁰ In studying the U.S. war plan as it unfolds, economy of force is indeed being applied throughout the war. The number of Coalition troops used to overthrow the Regime reached approximately 300,000 strong before the start of the Operation. This was just over half of the force used in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. Airpower used in Operation Iraqi Freedom is nearly two thirds of that used in the first Gulf War of 1991. With a significantly smaller force than that which was used in 1991 the Coalition was able to defeat the military defenses throughout 450,000 square miles of Iraq, taking Baghdad in 21 days and freeing nearly 24 million citizens. The proper application of *economy of force*, a core theory of Clausewitz, played a vital role in the successes of the Operation.

Offense

*"No rules exist for maneuver, and no method or general principal can determine the value of the action; rather, superior application, precision order, discipline, and fear will find the means to achieve palpable advantage in the most singular and minute circumstances."*¹¹

According to Clausewitz, no battle plan is final or unchanged due to the uncertainty of war. The same can be said about the size of force used in combat. The best way to guarantee victory is through "*superior application, precision, order, and discipline,*" in the use of force.

There is no doubt that the superior application of hardware and personnel, use of precision-guided weapons (16000+ used in Operation Iraqi Freedom as opposed to 1500+ used in the first Gulf War)¹² and the discipline of the U.S. soldier in their application of force made the difference in this battle. "*The best strategy is always to be very strong; first in general, and then at the decisive point.*"¹³

Surprise

*"It is still more important to remember that almost the only advantage of the attack rests on its initial surprise. Speed and impetus are its strongest elements and are usually indispensable of we are to defeat the enemy."*¹⁴

From the initial bombing of the leadership bunker to the sight of U.S. *M1A2 Abrams* tanks rolling through the streets of Baghdad, the surprise inflicted upon the Iraqi Regime and its supporters was essential to defeating the morale and will of the Iraqi forces. The rapid advance helped ensure the quick defeat of Iraq and again helped in saving countless human lives on both sides by shortening the war. The swift *Blitzkrieg* to Baghdad surprised both Iraq and the world, and the shockwaves it created will be felt in Iran, Syria, and North Korea for many years. "*Battle is the bloodiest solution,*" Clausewitz wrote, aimed at "*killing... the enemy's spirit [rather] than his... men.*"¹⁵

Conclusion

Many modern day strategists and historians have questioned the relevance of Clausewitz in today's battlefield of technologically advanced weapons and WMD. Indeed Clausewitz' 19th Century philosophy is incomplete, ambiguous and contradictory, yet the basic aspects of warfare, no matter how sophisticated, seem to go unchanged, making *On War's* 19th Century teachings as relevant today as they were throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. Operation Iraqi Freedom, a war fought with the most technologically advanced weapons and troops is no exception to the most basic rules of warfare. By comparing and contrasting the battle plan with the theories of Carl Von Clausewitz', and after witnessing the overwhelming victory of the first phase, it is fair to say that the war planners intentionally built the framework for the operation from the teachings of a 19th Century Prussian soldier and scholar. This modern adaptation illustrates the relevance of *On War* for the 21st Century.

As long as General Franks and the U.S. military leadership continue to be educated in U.S. Military institutions that base their teachings on the philosophy of Clausewitz, then the future U.S. war planners will always build their plans upon the foundation of *On War*. This strategy may work against large standing armies, but it may fail against Terror Cells and organizations that wage wars by other means. Only time will tell if Clausewitz can hold it's own against the new warfare of the 21st Century.

Notes

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