

LESSONS OF THE GULF WAR

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WARS FOR some reason are normally deemed to be deeply educational exercises, each a key point on some strategic learning curve. Hence the frequent references to the "lessons" they are supposed to generate. In practice, of course, every war is *sui generis*, with its character determined by a collection of unique features. The practice of drawing lessons should therefore be treated with extreme caution. By and large the lessons that can be drawn with confidence tend to be those that have already made their appearance in previous conflicts.

Yet while it is necessary to be sceptical with regard to the exercise, the extent to which earnest post-mortems do follow major wars is itself of significance if only because the expectations with regard to a coming war do tend to be based on an extrapolation of the more notable features of the last, or, as the crisis intensifies and it becomes apparent that the imminent war will be quite different from the one before, dimly remembered features of some notionally similar episode in the past. The first part of this article, therefore, will look at the influence of past "lessons" on the conduct of the Gulf War, before moving on in the second half to discuss what if anything might be gleaned from this experience for the conduct of future wars.

The Past

In the deliberations over the preparations for and conduct of the Gulf War regular reference was made to past conflicts. At different times proponents of alternative strategies called in aid American experiences in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, Beirut, Grenada and Panama, as well as British experience with Suez and in the Falklands and the Israeli experience in the Lebanon. Even the American civil war had some relevance as American television was showing a much acclaimed documentary on this war at the time, and it is said to have had a sobering effect on all concerned.

I concentrate here mainly on the United States as its deliberations were the most important and its experience was therefore the most relevant. The British were most relaxed of all the coalition members, largely, one might suspect, because of the national assumption that one of our

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roles is to take on aggressors and defeat them – normally against the odds. The Falklands largely confirmed this self-confidence. The plentiful resources and full support with which Britain went to war in Iraq in 1991 meant that those with an historical turn of mind were hard put to think of a regular conflict in which the odds so favoured “our side” from the start.

The American experience was more uncertain. Vietnam still loomed large. The last major intervention in the Middle East – the Lebanon in 1983/4, had ended in a sullen withdrawal with disproportionate casualties and nothing achieved and the guns of the *USS New Jersey* blasting away in futile anger. This had been taken to confirm the perils of getting involved in another’s civil war – a lesson influential in confirming Bush’s determination to stay well clear of an Iraqi civil war.

The Lebanon experience – of the Israelis in 1982 as much perhaps as the multinational force in 1983 – carried another lesson, which was the danger of escalating political aspirations as soon as the initial stated objectives were in reach, or else of allowing these objectives to become confused. This partly explains why both the British and American governments resisted extending the original objective of liberating Kuwait and removing any residual threat to that country to one of changing the regime in Baghdad. Although after the war, and the Kurdish tragedy, there was much criticism of the coalition for not continuing with the military campaign after the “100 hours” of land war, that was not the view taken generally at the time.

The problem of flexibility in political objectives is a serious one, as during the course of a major conflict aims can change for legitimate reasons. Because of the fragility of the ties binding the disparate parts of the anti-Iraq coalition together, the question of objectives was extremely delicate from the start, so that governments were able to retain for themselves far less flexibility than might otherwise have been the case, especially in responding to the post-war insurrection in Iraq. Washington and London were accused so often of having a “hidden agenda” that they had to go out of their way to demonstrate that this was not the case – even where a hidden agenda would have been quite appropriate! If they had in fact extended war aims when they had promised not to, then that would have undermined the credibility of official promises in comparable situations in the future.

The lesser escapades in recent American military history – in Grenada and Panama – had left lingering doubts as to the professionalism of the American armed forces and its tendency to be muscle bound, riven by inter-service rivalry and obsessed with technological gimmickry. There was certainly in the build-up to the Gulf War plenty of evidence of the traditional American reliance on overwhelming firepower rather than strategic subtlety. Nonetheless, the military leadership in the United States in this instance was impressive, and suggests a genuine learning from past mistakes and not simply the reflection of the extra time available to sort out such matters as lines of command and tactical concepts. The critical feature of the Gulf campaign was that the Americans were

able to devise a military strategy in accord with the demands of domestic politics. In achieving this they undermined Saddam's basic hope – that for the United States there was an inevitable mismatch between the requirements of military success and the tolerance of public opinion.

This judgment, of course, reflected the profound influence of the Vietnam experience which was referred to time and time again by commentators and politicians. There were no obvious similarities between Vietnam and the Gulf – not in political cause, geographic conditions nor historical context. Among the “lessons” drawn was that support for a war would wobble once the losses mounted. It was suggested that the United States became unable to prosecute the war in Vietnam because public opinion could not stomach nightly scenes of battle on television and the mounting lists of casualties. However, this was something of a myth: discontent over Vietnam had not been so much stimulated by the absolute level of casualties nor their depiction on television – but by a flawed strategy. The problem was not the costs of war in themselves but the lack of an attainable political objective worth these costs. The critical variable would be not casualties but confidence that the allies had reasonable and realistic objectives and were being generally successful in achieving them.

This myth of intolerance of casualties may have helped mould Saddam Hussein's strategy in that this appeared to be one of gambling on allied resolve to evaporate during a prolonged vicious ground war. Hence his famous statement to US Ambassador April Glaspie that the United States was not a society capable of losing 10,000 men in a single battle – as if the fact this might be the case with Iraq was a point in its favour.

Another supposed “lesson” of Vietnam was that politicians must not interfere with the detail of military operations. The conduct of the air war in Vietnam, according to many military critics, had been mismanaged by key civilian officials in the Johnson Administration. It was a lesson that the British also accepted as a result of their Falklands experience when the Prime Minister had been generally content to leave the military commanders to get on with the job once the broad outlines of policy had been agreed. This policy had been reinforced then by the problems of distance and communications which would have accompanied any attempt at micro-management.

In general this lesson was also respected. President Bush made a point of refusing to interfere with the detail of military planning and the choice of targets for the air campaign. However, the conduct of the war did illustrate the difficulty of distinguishing between political and military responsibilities. The course of the air war, for example, raised a number of potential problems with regard to international support. When the Amiriyah bunker was bombed the political leadership all of a sudden took an interest in target selection. Before that they had been obliged to elevate the “Scud hunt” to a higher priority than would have been warranted by purely military considerations. President Bush and other coalition leaders had become extremely dependent upon the political good sense and sensitivity of their generals. It was in some ways unfair on these generals to

expect them to take account of all the political as well as the military dimensions of this conflict for it was conducted in one of the world's politically most complicated regions.

The generals did not, of course, complain for they are always irritated by political interference in their professional tasks and are pleased to be left alone. Nonetheless it is worth recalling in the Vietnam case that a reason for special concern was that the military determination to get at the enemy would override broader considerations that would become critical at the time of the post-war settlement. During the Korean War the Truman Administration had been shocked by China's entry into the war, and became fearful that it could be widened further by drawing in the Soviet Union. Similar considerations led the Johnson Administration to confine air attacks on North Vietnam away from Hanoi and the areas adjoining China during the bombing campaign which began in 1965.

One of the consequences of this fear in Vietnam had been the elaboration and implementation of the concept of graduated response. This approach is based on incremental pressure designed to force the opponent to choose between compliance and further pressure which eventually became intolerable. From the first troop movements into Saudi Arabia in August 1990 following the invasion of Kuwait, this notion was rejected by the US military following an argument that had been developed over the previous two decades of Vietnam retrospectives, that it allowed the opponent time to adjust so that the shock value of the first intensive blows were lost.

Political conditions were much more relaxed in 1991. The Soviet Union and China were both accomplices in the passage of Security Council resolution 678 which allowed the allies to take "all necessary means" to dislodge Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

The Gulf War

The allies fought a war against Iraq based on concepts and equipment originally designed for a war which never happened – against the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe. Unlike Central Front scenarios, however, in this case the allies could be confident of air superiority and a qualitative if not a quantitative superiority in ground forces. Despite alarming stories of Iraqi military prowess, it turned out that in most respects Iraqi strength had been overestimated.

In part because of fears of the "Vietnam syndrome", minimal allied casualties were a key requirement of strategy. In addition, there was concern that civilian casualties should also be minimized. The prevailing concepts of limited war, along with the whole "Just War" tradition, stressed the importance of sparing non-combatants. To the extent that there was a trade-off between friendly and enemy casualties, the need to limit the former may have exaggerated the requirements to impose the latter, even if this included civilians. However, the technologies of preci-

sion guidance created options for a modern air force that were unavailable to their predecessors. Although this technology had been available for some time there was general scepticism about its reliability in practice prior to the start of hostilities, and also concern that a preoccupation with technology distracted the United States from a rounded view of its strategic options. Both of these fears were eased considerably by the experience of the Gulf War.

A basic conclusion from this experience must be that there is an unbridgeable gap between advanced military powers and those merely aspiring to this status *so long as the war is fought on a wholly conventional basis*. This gap had been hidden because engagements between advanced military powers and the third world often took the form of guerilla warfare. Superpowers could be humbled, as the Americans in Vietnam or the Russians in Afghanistan, by an irregular enemy refusing to engage regular forces on their own terms. It would always make sense for a third world country to attempt to fight on *unconventional* terms and seek to undermine the enemy's will through terror.

This was the way of Saddam Hussein. He sought to achieve this by Scud attacks, which were launched to undermine the will of the Saudi people and to extend the conflict into Israel and, hopefully from Saddam's perspective, to transform the conflict into an Arab-Israeli War; by ecological warfare, attacking oil storage tanks in Saudi Arabia, opening the valves on oil terminals, dumping tankers' cargoes into the Gulf, setting oil fields and storage facilities on fire; and by terrorism, to cause disruption to civilian life at home in the western nations.

None of these methods worked. The Israelis were persuaded to exercise restraint and the allies were able to counter the ecological warfare. For terrorism, Iraq was largely relying on enterprise by sympathizers. Its own missions were ill-suited to terrorist activity because they could be closely monitored by the security services. It was further hampered because Syria, with its rather full knowledge of the Arab terrorist network, was a member of the coalition, and lastly because the PLO was unwilling to add to the political costs already incurred by supporting Saddam by being seen to engage in terrorist activity. As a result, the level of terrorist activity was remarkably low, especially in the light of widespread fears. In practice, *fear* of terrorism was much more significant in its effects, such as abandoning air travel, than the actual practice.

It is worthy of note that despite Saddam's interest in extending the war he failed to do so in one key respect where he had the capability: chemical warheads on Scuds or indeed any chemical munitions. Technical difficulties provide one explanation. However, when Secretary of State James Baker met his Iraqi counterpart Tariq Aziz at Geneva on the eve of the war he gave a clear warning that use of weapons of mass destruction would provide justification for a formal extension of the war aims to include the elimination of Saddam's regime. Given Saddam's preoccupation with his survival this would have been a formidable deterrent threat.

Lessons for the Future

There was little doubt in the minds of most commentators that the Gulf War saw the return of the United States to a self-confident and an effective role at the heart of international affairs. While the "Vietnam syndrome" might always have been exaggerated and misinterpreted, the display of US power in the Gulf had the effect of creating an image of overwhelming power, thereby displacing a previous image which drew on either Sergeant Bilko or Rambo. Nevertheless, we should beware of drawing too many conclusions from this image.

There was still a reluctance to get embroiled in civil wars. The war was followed by an involvement in what might have been expected to be the "quagmire" of an Iraqi civil war of uncertain duration. Though the involvement was of a circumscribed nature, and carried few risks of casualties, it illustrated the political complexities normally associated with this sort of activity including local suspicion, UN resistance and problems with defining objectives. The reluctance to get involved in another's civil wars has been confirmed in the former Yugoslavia.

The risk of terrorism and the nature of the media coverage meant that the war touched people at home directly. Along with the more basic reasons of blood and treasure, it reinforced the requirement in democratic societies that any use of armed force must have extraordinary justification. This was found through the United Nations. It is worth recalling that the prominent role of the United Nations was helpful but by no means an anticipated feature of the crisis during its initial stages, and a formidable coalition could have been built outside of it, although its role became significant domestically in all western countries. This role was made possible by active cooperation with the West by the Soviet Union and more passive acquiescence from China. Whether these conditions will obtain in the future depends upon the general state of political relations with these countries and their own internal development. Uncertainty on this latter point helps explain why there were difficulties with measures which could be seen to violate the principle of "non-interference", as with the protection of the Kurds.

Though this may be something of a tangent, I do believe that there is a lesson in this conflict for area specialists when offering advice about developing conflicts in their own region. Many "Arabists", perhaps especially those who issued dire warnings in the media of how western policy was inevitably going to become unstuck, need to recognize how the dynamics of crisis and the raising of stakes following involvement by external powers in a regional conflict can completely change the normal rules of the game. The interests of the Arab members of the coalition were completely bound up with the success of Desert Storm. It would have taken the most enormous provocations from the Israelis or shifts in American objectives to get them to defect. The Syrians, Egyptians and the Saudis even made it clear that they could tolerate a limited Israeli attack on Iraq. Many commentators, however, gave undue prominence to the

views of intellectuals and activists, often in countries that either constituted a special case, as in Jordan, or were largely irrelevant, as in the Mahgreb, and accepted that the "Palestinian question" transcended everything else, despite evidence of its secondary importance to most Arab governments when their own survival is at stake.

The crisis demonstrated that the West now has the power to shape international responses to major crises, but that this will depend on a conviction that Western principles and interests are at stake (which in the Gulf was clear but elsewhere may be ambiguous) and that something useful can be done (which may be largely economic).

An obvious limit on American power is in Washington's reluctance to commit substantial resources to economic assistance. Thus, while the United States now stands alone as a "super" power, this power is still qualified and this could become more important in the future if regular military strength is of marginal importance to the critical crises of the moment.

Without local regional interest and burden-sharing arrangements it is unlikely that western states, and in particular the US, will be very adventurous in the future. While future adversaries may be less crude than Saddam Hussein it is probably also fair to assume that action will only be taken against a regime behaving in an unusually outrageous manner. It may be suspected that this will reinforce the basic predilection to stay clear of civil wars, rely on air superiority and fight land wars with the maximum mobility. Where there may be doubt is in the readiness to stick to limited objectives if faced with a Saddam-like figure in the future. One can imagine demands that this time we must not let the rascal escape.

However, the more demanding the objectives the greater the military risks involved. Despite its scale, or perhaps as a result of its scale, the coalition military operation could be geared to the minimization of risk by dedicating immense military resources to the attainment of a very clear objective. This had the inevitable consequence that the political conclusion was not as decisive as the military one, but at least what was achieved politically was important on its own. The uncertain lessons from this conflict result from the fact that the generality of future conflicts are likely to be politically much more complex from the start and, in consequence, carry with them a higher military risk. Yet, as the case of Yugoslavia demonstrates, there can still be major costs incurred by keeping clear. It is unlikely that the West will find many conflicts in the future in which the principles are so clear cut, or many enemies in the future so ready to take on western military power on its own terms and in circumstances so favourable to its application.