

# Power in War

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*The nature of war has been widely misunderstood. Far from being the continuation of policy, as Clausewitz and his present day "neo-realist" followers think, in many ways it follows the rules of sports. In particular, the resemblance to sports ensures that, in a long conflict, in which the strong beat down the weak, the former will lose strength, whereas the latter will gain it. This logic has profound implications for counterinsurgency operations, including those ongoing in Iraq.*

Power, as Mao Tze Dong once said, grows out of the barrel of a gun. It is not difficult to see why this should be the case, and so I shall waste few words elaborating on it. According to another great realist, Thomas Hobbes, life itself is a prolonged struggle for power. War is a violent struggle for power that is waged among organized groups. Unless they live so far away that others cannot get to them, groups which do not keep up will lose first their liberty, then their property, and then, should they still try to resist, their lives as well.

There is, however, another sense in which war is power, and it is that other sense which I wish to address in this essay. Underlying the doctrines of Hobbes, Clausewitz, and countless other "realists," ancient and modern, is the assumption that war consists of killing. Those who kill enough of the enemy to break his will and/or render him incapable of mounting further resistance win and, by doing so, gain power. Those who suffer such losses as to be rendered incapable of mounting further resistance and/or have their will broken, lose and, by doing so, are left powerless. Here it is necessary to add that, as a matter of experience, there have been very few wars in which the killing continued until the losing side was literally incapable of resisting; that, after all, would have required every one of its members to

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be either killed or physically restrained. Take the example of World War II. It is true that, in the whole of history, few countries have been defeated as thoroughly as Germany was. It is also true that, when the conflict ended, there were still several million German troops alive and not captured. Though Hitler had committed suicide and the High Command lay in ruins, many small units remained intact and continued to obey their officers. Even where that was no longer true, still the men were trained soldiers. Though they may no longer have had many heavy weapons, the number of small arms and ammunition at their disposal was practically unlimited and the opportunities for concealment were endless. As the Iraqi insurgency against the U.S occupation proves only too clearly, had they possessed the necessary will they could have engaged in guerrilla warfare and terrorism for years, perhaps forever. Even the frequent claim that the German national character does not readily take to guerrilla warfare is little but a cliché. From the peasants who fought Louis XIV's occupation of the Palatinate all the way to Andreas Hoffer and the Tyrolean uprising of 1809, German history offers many examples of such warfare. In a word: what was lacking in 1945 was not the capability, but the will.

But, one might ask, the will for what? Here, again, I must take issue with the realists. Of course it is true that war is a situation in which the members of one group kill (and are allowed to kill) those of another. However, it is also true that killing on its own does not constitute war. To illustrate the point, consider the case of Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, Germans killed Jews and other people for years on end. Yet few people would consider that what went on there amounted to war; the reason why it did not amount to war was because those who were being killed did not themselves try to kill anybody. As a result, those who did the killing were in no danger of being killed in return. Since they were in no danger of being killed in return, what they were doing was not waging a war but committing a massacre for which those of them who could be apprehended were justly put on trial, convicted, and punished.

Thus, those who think that the essence of war is killing are wrong. What really differentiates war from massacre is the fact that it is *reciprocal*; not so much the killing itself as the fact that, even as they kill, those who do so expect, and are prepared, to be killed in return if necessary. It is even possible to imagine a situation in which war will consist *only* of dying; consider, by way of an extreme example, the young officers who, in World War I, went into battle armed with nothing more than a sword or a swagger-stick. These officers with their symbolic weapons were where they were, not in order to kill but in order that they should expose themselves to the hail of

lead directed at them. And it was by exposing themselves to the hail of lead directed at them that they set an example and led their men.



Thus, in war, as opposed to in a massacre, power does *not* consist simply of the will, and the ability, to kill, or else those who carried out the mass killings in Auschwitz should have been decorated rather than shot or hung.<sup>1</sup> Rather, power in war consists, above all, of the readiness to allow oneself to be killed if necessary. As long as there are enough people prepared to do this, the war will go on. Consider, as an outstanding case in point, ongoing hostilities in Iraq. In Iraq, for every American soldier who dies, between ten and one hundred Iraqis are killed. Given the size of the U.S Armed Forces, during most months American losses in Iraq barely exceed the kind of normal attrition brought about by accidents, disease, and the like. Yet as long as there are Iraqis who are prepared to die, the war will go on, and the Americans will be powerless to bring it to an end.

On the face of things, the willingness to let oneself be killed if necessary is contrary to our most basic instincts; what, then, are the psychological factors that drive people to fight? To answer that all-important question, it is first necessary to discard the notion of "interest." To most people, interest represents the Ark in the Temple of life in general and of war in particular. Both groups and individuals are supposed to pursue their interests. For example, if I am writing this lecture, then presumably that is because (rightly or wrongly) I consider doing so to be in my interest. Similarly, when a group or nation or country goes to war it does so because it is in its interest, be it political or economic or whatever. Conversely, should a statesman or a politician or a commander go to war for any reason other than his country's interest, then most people would consider him to be either a fool or a traitor. In the former case he may expect to be removed from office; in the latter, to end his days in a prison cell or worse.

The trouble with this explanation is that men who are dead, or who look

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<sup>1</sup> In Nazi Germany being an executioner at Auschwitz was not considered a great honor. Those who staffed the concentration camps were known, derisively, as *Judenhelden* (Jew heroes); as is well known, the most disgusting jobs of all were often given to non-German *Hiwis* or *Hilfswillige* (volunteer auxiliaries) or even to Jews. Had Germany won the war, these people still would not have been decorated. The best they could have expected was to live out their lives on some small pension. See Tom Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (1988).

death in the face, do not *have* any interests. As history proves, men have very often been willing to go to war, in other words, to let themselves be killed if necessary, in order to make sure as best they could that faith, country, king, or liberty survive. Still, it would be a travesty of the truth to say that the survival of liberty, king, country or faith is in the interest of men who are dead or who are about to die. The same is even true of the family. For a man to die in order that his nearest and dearest may live is surely a great and noble thing and throughout history there have been countless men who did precisely that. On the other hand, it is equally certain that they did not have any posthumous interest in the fate of their parents, wives, and offspring. Surely there is no reason why we should not call the emotion that is capable of overcoming fear and producing such results by its proper name, i.e. love. Whatever we call it, war is actually the supreme proof that men are *not* motivated solely, or even mainly, by interest.

Considering the number of wars that they waged and the consistent success in doing so, perhaps it is not so surprising that the people who understood this better than anybody else may have been the ancient Romans. Almost everybody knows the story of how, upon entering the arena, gladiators were supposed to greet the Emperor by calling out, "*Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant.*"<sup>2</sup> Few people have reflected on this fact or sought to understand what it might mean, at least in theory and at least as long as, sticking to the ideal that the words express, one disregards every sort of perversion that took place in practice. Since the gladiators were about to die, the Emperor was unable to either punish them or offer them a reward of any kind. Since he could neither reward them nor punish them they were not in his power. By greeting him in spite of the fact that they were not in his power, they expressed a kind of freedom which they alone possessed; of all the Empire's estimated eighty million inhabitants, theirs was the only salute worth having.

To sum up this part of the argument, power in war is of two kinds. On the one hand there is power of the kind that Hobbes, Clausewitz, and the so called American "neo-cons" meant, namely the ability to pursue your interests by killing, maiming, burning, and destroying those who oppose you or refuse to surrender to you. On the other there is the kind that arises from the willingness to *relinquish* every interest even while looking death in the eye; This creates a kind of power that is beyond the reach of, and often greater than, the first kind. Of the two kinds, the first is mainly the outcome of numbers, organization, training, equipment, and so forth. Not so the second, which, as long as there is anybody who is alive and free,

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2 "Hail, Caesar, those who are about to die salute you." Suetonius, Claudius 21.

arises almost exclusively from human will. Now it is certainly not true that the willingness to die — heroism, to call things by their plain name — can always beat the odds and triumph over numbers, organization, training, and the rest. On the other hand, it *is* true that, without this willingness, even the largest, best-organized, and best-equipped army is but a brittle instrument. The finest gems in Clio's bag consist of cases in which small but brave peoples took on, and beat, much larger opponents, who, however strong they may have been, were unprepared to die. So it has always been, and so it will always be.



As stated above, an essential element of war is its reciprocity, the interaction between killing and being killed. Interaction in turn implies that the belligerents should be of roughly equal strength — as is also suggested by the fact that the word *bellum* itself was derived from *duellum*, an encounter of two. By definition, unless there is some kind of equality between the belligerents, interaction is impossible.

Here, I want to consider what will happen in a case in which the balance between the belligerents is skewed. One side has power in the form of numbers, organization, and technology to assist it, whereas the other does not. As a result, each time they meet, one side kills far more opponents than the other does and loses far fewer. Does this mean that the stronger side is bound to win? Not necessarily. There are two reasons that may prevent such an outcome, and both are a direct result of the factors under consideration.

First, imagine a football team that, by the force of circumstances, is condemned to play endless matches against another that is much weaker. At first, the stronger team wins an easy victory in every match. Soon, however, the situation begins to change. In part this is because the players of the stronger team relax their guard; to paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, nothing is more boring than victory endlessly repeated. They hold their opponents in contempt. They no longer train as hard as they should. Being bored, they sometimes engage in silly pranks, caring little what the outcome may be. The players of the weaker team do the exact opposite. To cope with *their* opponents, they carefully study the latter's tactics. Studying those tactics, they find ways to cope. Either they do so by imitation — like any sport, war is an imitative activity *par excellence* — or else they design new tactics to counter those of their opponents. In war, as in football, the very fact that the two teams continue to play each other will ensure that a certain balance is restored. Provided there is enough time, and unless a miracle happens, a very good chance exists that the strong will become weak and the weak, strong.

The second reason that those who are weak, but willing to die, so often overcome the strong is even more fundamental. Imagine an adult who kills a five-year old, even if the child originally attacked the adult with a knife. There is no question that this adult will be put on trial, convicted and punished. This is not because he was originally in the wrong; after all, it was the child who attacked *him*. Rather, the judge responsible for the case will tell our adult that, in using lethal force, he did much more than was necessary under the circumstances. It is, or should be, possible to cope with an aggressive five year old without going to extremes or killing him.

Now, consider the situation of the adult who, to avoid killing the aforementioned five year old, permits himself to be killed instead. Some of us may reserve a certain kind of admiration for such a person, and one can see why. Most of us would consider him a heroic fool, but a fool nevertheless; just as the difference in strength should have enabled our adult not to deal with the five year old without killing him, so that difference should have enabled him to do the same without being killed himself. Thus, he who fights someone who is much weaker than himself is either a criminal or a fool. Not because of his inherent nature, or because the goals he pursues are right or wrong, but simply because the situation makes him so.

An army that fights the weak and commits crimes while doing so will try to conceal those crimes as best it can. An army that fights the weak and loses people in the process will have to explain to others and to itself why this happened. As a result, each time losses are inflicted, or suffered, a commission of investigation is set up. The need to cover up crimes and explain losses will cause people to look for scapegoats. Since some people will be looking for scapegoats, others will be put in situations where they are compelled to lie. Lies will undermine discipline and infect communication-channels, creating situations where subordinates can no longer trust commanders, nor commanders subordinates. Before long, neither the reports making their way from the bottom up, nor the orders that are based on those reports, reflect the true situation any longer; the higher up a commander, the less able he may be to distinguish truth from falsehood. To make up for his lack of knowledge he will almost certainly start inventing stories for himself, as General Westmoreland in Vietnam did when he convinced himself that his troops were winning the war for him. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu put it, a sword, plunged into salt water, will rust.

The situation of the weak is exactly the opposite. Once the fight has begun, the moral dilemmas that surround our adult do not affect the five year old; necessity, as the proverb goes, knows no bounds. Fighting as he does for sheer survival, the weak person can do practically anything. He can kill men, women, and children almost indiscriminately. He can commit the

most horrible atrocities (as, for example, the Palestinians, fighting Israel, have often done) without incurring nearly as much censure as the strong person, doing the same does. As important, when he suffers losses he does not need to explain them either to himself or to others. This is because, being weak, he *expects* to suffer them; in his case they are proof, not of stupidity but of self-sacrifice and heroism. Against the other side's numbers, riches, organization, technology, and other advantages he posits his moral freedom. And, as the historical record shows, positing his moral freedom he very often wins.



The implications of everything said so far are profound. Starting with the nature of war and the best strategy to win it, it becomes clear that Hobbes, Clausewitz, and the American neo-cons have completely misunderstood the nature of strategy and the things that can or cannot be done to win wars. Whereas, in war, the ability to kill is very important, in the end, the readiness to be killed if necessary is even more important. Strength, though, is in some ways its own enemy; owing to the moral dilemmas it creates. The longer the war lasts, the more likely this willingness to be killed is to be found on the side of the weak. As the process takes hold, even the strongest army with the best and most aircraft, helicopters, tanks, satellites, sensors, and computers will become brittle and may lose. Conversely, even the weakest force that has none of these things may win.

Applying this to the Americans in Iraq, it means that they will almost certainly lose. Starting the war, the U.S. Armed Forces were a thousand times as powerful as their Iraqi opponents. A year and a half later, the difference has probably grown to ten thousand to one. This is indeed an asymmetrical war, but not in the sense in which the term is used by the Pentagon and almost everybody else. Instead it is asymmetrical in the sense that the Iraqi insurgents, being weak, can take casualties and commit atrocities without losing their self-respect or the respect of the world; indeed, often it seems that the more atrocities they commit the more support they win. On the other hand, the Americans, being strong, simply by playing the game are bound to be caught in the above-mentioned dilemmas and lose their self-respect. Losing their self-respect, they will stop fighting. Until, as also happened during the last years in Vietnam,<sup>3</sup> thirty percent of the troops are on hard drugs and some of them start shooting their commanders in the back.

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard A. Gabriel & Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command* (1976).

Not all countries have been as foolish as the U.S. was in voluntarily bringing this dilemma upon itself. On the other hand, many of them may not have a choice. In much of the so called developing world, terrorism, guerrilla warfare and civil war have a long history and, are, in fact, more or less endemic. As events in Europe prove, even in the developed world few countries are so rich, so homogeneous, and so immersed in their contentedness as to be immune to these forms of armed conflict. Once the struggles in question break out, the dilemma is inescapable. Experience shows that, unless it is properly handled, it will bring about the defeat of the strong, usually represented by the "forces of order," almost as surely as the earth revolves about the sun. How to resolve this dilemma is perhaps the most important problem facing much of the modern world today; but that would be the subject for a separate paper.