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## In My View

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# IN MY VIEW . . .

## Desert Storm: 1940 Revisited

Sir,

The extensive and efficient six-week allied air campaign in the winter of 1991 that seriously damaged if not destroyed both Iraqi morale and their national infrastructure was a tribute to allied training and technology. Even this resounding triumph was eclipsed by the swift and decisive ground victory that the coalition ground forces achieved over Hussein's vaunted army in less than a week's time. The world was amazed by the brilliance and originality of the strategists of Desert Storm.

Unlike the previous limited wars and military actions since 1945, however, the ground campaign against Iraq was in effect a classic World War II campaign and was fought according to Second World War strategic guidelines and principles. In fact, the highly successful allied land campaign of February 1991 has a precedent in the strategic efforts of May and June 1940. A student of military history cannot help but notice striking similarities between the Desert Storm land campaign and the German offensive against France in the spring of 1940. Indeed, they are mirror images. A chronological comparison of these campaigns illustrates the similarities.

The German strategic plan against France and the Low Countries in May 1940 comprised two separate and distinct parts. The initial effort would be against the British and French left flank, a thrust into the Netherlands and northern Belgium. Recalling the Schlieffen Plan of World War I, the goal of these forces would be to entice the British and French into committing their main effort to defending their left. While the British Expeditionary Force and French forces were moving northeastward against the Germans in northern Belgium, a large German armored force would strike swiftly and decisively from the Ardennes

Forest in Luxembourg and from southern Belgium against the Allied right flank. The panzers would then surge to the English Channel, trapping the Allied armies in Belgium and northern France.

This is precisely what happened. Unfortunately for the Allies, their defensive plan played right into the hands of the Germans. The Allies had decided that any German offensive would be based on the Schlieffen Plan of twenty-five years before. Thus they had devised their own defensive plan, known as Plan D. This called for the bulk of Allied forces to move northward into Belgium at the first signs of a German offensive. They would meet the main German thrust before it had breached the major central Belgian defenses and fortifications, stopping the assault before it could reach the open plains of Flanders and northern France. It was a competent defense against the Schlieffen Plan; against the mobility of the panzers it would prove disastrous.

The German plan proceeded like clockwork. The offensive began on 10 May 1940 with attacks in the Netherlands and Belgium. The Allies quickly executed Plan D and began moving into Belgium. On 11 May 1940 the main German attack through the Ardennes began; on 21 May the panzers had reached the Channel, encircling the Allied armies. By early June the defenders had retreated into a small area around the French port city of Dunkirk. In late June 1940, France surrendered.

The German victory was crushing and decisive. The panzers had accomplished in one month what the Kaiser's armies had been unable to do in four years. The key to the German success lay in the inherent genius of the plan and in the execution of the armored attack against the French right flank. The panzer forces had not worried about their supply lines or threats to their rear to the point of stopping their advance; only through mobility could they keep the Allied forces constantly off balance. The swiftness with which the panzers moved to the Channel was indeed the key to the victory.

The allied forces under General Schwarzkopf would utilize a similar plan against the Iraqi army in February 1991. The Iraqi defenses on the Kuwaiti-Saudi Arabian border appeared formidable, and any frontal attack against them would undoubtedly result in high casualties to the attackers. The heavy American tank units that would spearhead any coalition ground offensive would have little room to maneuver if used against the Iraqi defenses in Kuwait (the Iraqi "center"). Here, only a determined assault by American and allied infantry, well supported by armor, had any chance of succeeding. This, however, was precisely what the Iraqis were expecting: static, bloody war of attrition, which would be unacceptable to the Americans.

With an assault on the Iraqi center apparently too costly, only the two Iraqi flanks remained as options for a coalition attack. Manstein, Rommel, and Patton, in the armored battle of the Second World War, had proven that mobile armored and mechanized forces could easily outflank and destroy fixed fortifications. In

the wide open expanses of desert west of Kuwait the American command saw its chance. A large armored force deployed against the Iraqi right flank could break through the weak Iraqi defenses on the Saudi border and surge to the Euphrates, trapping the bulk of the Iraqi army in Kuwait and southern Iraq.

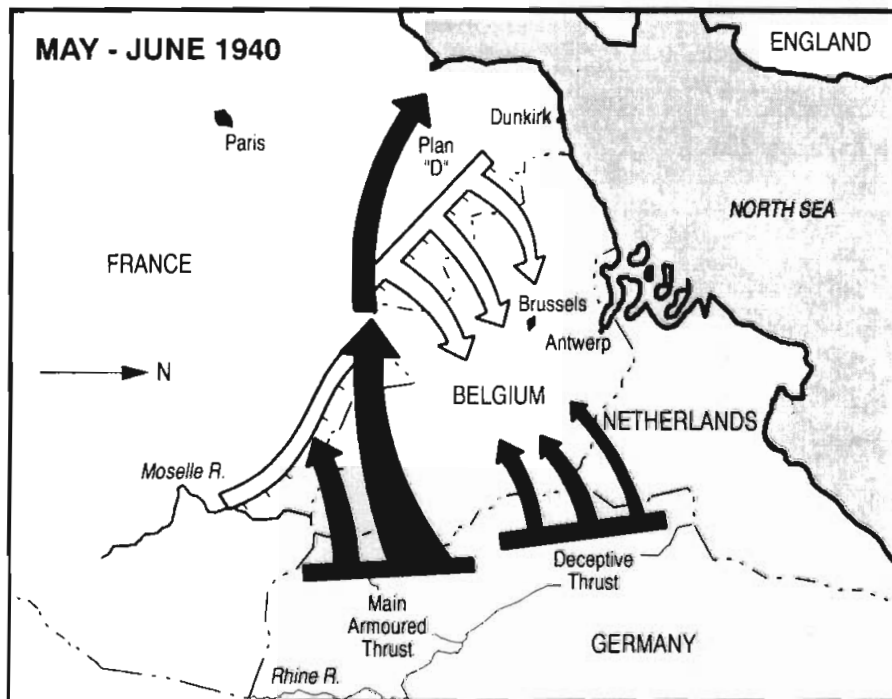
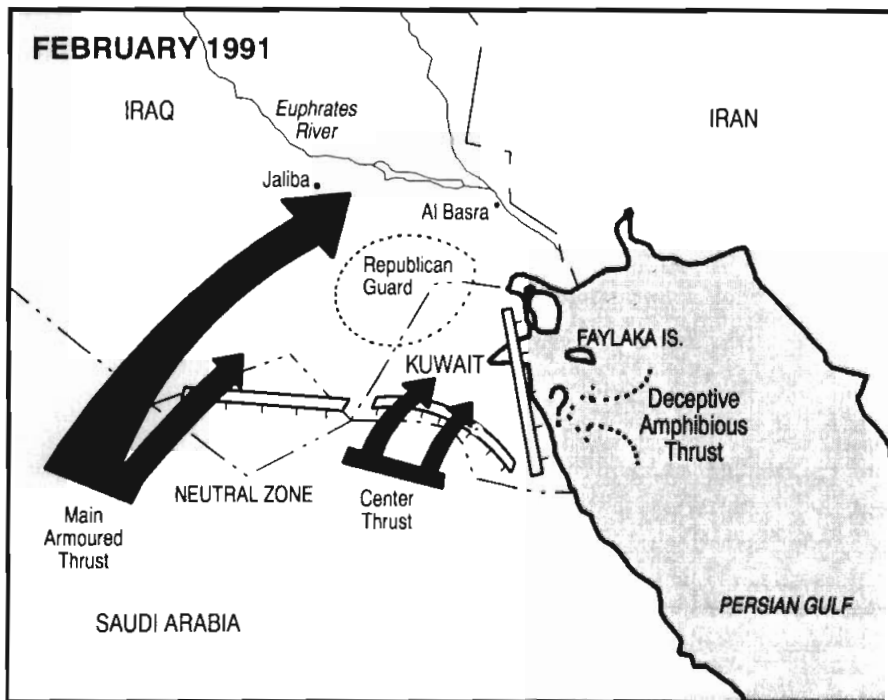
There remained one problem, however: a means had to be found to freeze the Iraqi armored formations in Kuwait and southeastern Iraq. If the Iraqis expected an assault on their right, they could reposition and reorient the Republican Guards and other heavy armored formations to strike quickly southwestward. This could pose serious problems for the allies, who would be forced to turn their tanks eastwards into the teeth of Iraqi defenses to meet the counterthrust head-on.

Fortunately Salerno, Tarawa, Normandy, and other amphibious assaults of World War II offered a solution. A marine amphibious assault group in the Persian Gulf would provide the threat against the Iraqi left flank required to freeze the Iraqi troops in place. Protection for the amphibious group was provided by the largest carrier and battleship force assembled since Vietnam. This naval presence, combined with excellent deception measures and the memory of the major American amphibious assaults of the past, would perhaps convince Hussein and the Iraqi high command that the primary threat to occupied Kuwait would come from the sea and not from the desert. Heavy attacks on Faylaka Island and Kuwaiti coastal fortifications by American naval air forces and naval gunfire would reinforce this suspicion.

The plan for defeating the Iraqi army was now taking shape. The seemingly imminent threat of a major amphibious assault against their left would prevent the Iraqis from adequately opposing the main attack to be made against their right. In addition, attacks by marine ground units on the Iraqi center would serve to distract further the Republican Guards.

The long-awaited allied ground assault began on 24 February and, like the German offensive against France, proceeded like clockwork. Simply put, the coalition plan worked perfectly. The Iraqis, like the French and British of 1940, expected an assault on their left and were therefore thoroughly unprepared to oppose the swiftly moving armored force that appeared suddenly on their right. As with the French, the reaction of the Republican Guards was too little and too late. Within a week the allied forces had reached Basra, effectively encircling the Iraqi army in Kuwait and southern Iraq. There would be no Dunkirk this time; in one week Hussein's once vaunted army had ceased to exist in the theater as an effective fighting force.

The coalition triumph in 1991, like the Germans' in 1940, demonstrates how, given favorable terrain, a swiftly moving armored force striking hard against an enemy flank can complete a single-armed envelopment and encirclement of enemy forces. It is essential, however, that this force be given enough time, through tactical surprise, to gain sufficient momentum and become truly mobile.



gary lamothe

Thus the importance of a deceptive thrust or threat thereof: enemy forces cannot be allowed to react swiftly against the armored force in the early stages of its advance. The logic and necessity of the German attack into Belgium and the threat of an allied amphibious assault against Kuwait are clear; both efforts were required to enable the initial armored advances to get well underway relatively unopposed.

In both cases, the credibility of the respective deceptive thrusts was further improved by the memory of American and German offensives in past wars and campaigns. Memories of the Schlieffen Plan of World War I and of the major Allied amphibious assaults of World War II helped to convince their opponents that any present German or coalition offensive would be along these same lines.

Finally, the allied success in the desert in 1991 showed that, in the proper terrain, large armored forces are still the centerpiece of any offensive strategy. Despite the tremendous leaps in technology and weaponry since the 1940s, the fundamental tactical principles of maneuver remain unchanged. The aggressive use of a mobile, swiftly moving force against the decisive area of an enemy flank always places the initiative in the hands of the attackers. The brilliance of General Schwarzkopf's offensive was not in its originality, but rather in the recognition and use of fundamental principles of warfare that have resulted in victory time and time again.

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### War "without Feelings of Humanity"

Sir,

I offer this response to Major Shaw's comments on Clausewitz, Sherman, and Lee ("In My View," Winter 1992). Major Shaw has distilled Clausewitz's entire treatise down to one out-of-context reference to "total war. . . without feelings of humanity." Considering the breadth of *On War*, consigning his work to the "dustbin of history" seems unjustified. Actually, most of Clausewitz's theories worked quite well during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Karl von Clausewitz sought to identify the political and military framework within which conflict exists and the methodology of decision making. *On War* was never intended as a blueprint for the conduct of hostilities. Though he wrote in the early nineteenth century, a surprisingly large portion of *On War* remains valid today. One important theme stresses the difference between total and limited war. Total war pursues the complete subjugation or destruction of an enemy, while limited war seeks more finite goals. Both types of war, according to Clausewitz, had to be prosecuted "without feelings of humanity." A more

modern interpretation of this lack of mercy relates to national will. Put simply, when the goals of a war are decided, limited or total, they must be pursued with total dedication.

Clausewitz also stressed that the military should always be subordinate to the political leadership. The interface for this relationship should exist at the cabinet level so that military expertise is available to the civilian leadership during policy review. Commanders at the tactical/operational level should be left to fight the war within the guidelines formulated at the cabinet level. War remains the ultimate political tool in international relations and should never become influenced by military necessities outside the political goals. War fought for its own end is ultimately destructive to the country that pursues it, as evidenced by Germany in both world wars.

The last two American wars, Vietnam and Desert Storm, clearly illustrate the continued validity of Clausewitz's theories. In Vietnam, we fought a limited war with limited means and a lack of national will. Civil-military relations often occurred at the tactical level, with a myriad of combat restrictions. This might have been acceptable had those political decisions supported a clear-cut set of goals. They did not. Consequently, arbitrary interference existed in the form of daily target lists, approved at the White House level, and other restrictive rules of engagement. The lack of defined goals and of a dedicated national will would cost us any chance for success in Southeast Asia.

In contrast, Desert Storm faithfully followed the tenets of Clausewitz, with stunning results. Clearly defined political goals existed from the beginning. Modifications to these goals, processed efficiently at the cabinet level by the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided CentCom with timely guidance to adjust and execute the plan. As the political realities changed, new decisions flowed smoothly down the chain of command. Changing target priorities after the initiation of Scud launches against Israel validated the system. The decision to end the war was a political one, made after weighing the political and military options. This whole scenario could have come right out of Book One in *On War*, which should be enough to keep Clausewitz out of the "dustbin."

Shifting to Sherman and Lee, I agree with Major Shaw and Professor Freeman that Sherman was the first modern practitioner of total war and that Lee had a seemingly mystic effect on the Army of Northern Virginia's morale. Considering the altruism of the two, I believe that Major Shaw shows a bias unsupported by the facts. The "timeless Laws of Land Warfare" have really only been around since the eighteenth century. Before that, cities were put to the sword on a regular basis. Since then, those laws have only been followed sporadically, as evidenced by the actions of men like Nathan Bedford Forrest. Had Sherman, or more appropriately Stonewall Jackson, marched through my region sowing death and destruction, I might still detest him after 128 years. I am sure that the

Iraqi nation will detest us for years to come. What the modern aircraft lacks in rapine ability, it more than makes up for in destructiveness. Bombing Iraq into a pre-industrial state, we accomplished with great efficiency what Sherman sought in his Georgia campaign. Both brought about the rapid defeat of the enemy. The effect on the civilian population, in both cases, is also the same.

There are some telling quotations from both Lee and Sherman in two past *Reviews* that illustrate their respective attitudes. On page 24, Winter 1992, Sherman is quoted as saying: "I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell."

Lee, in contrast, is quoted on page 83 of Summer 1991: "It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it!"

Finally, from Sherman, in a letter responding to charges from the mayor of Atlanta that evacuating the city so Sherman could destroy it was cruelty: "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war on the country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out."

It seems that Sherman possessed the more realistic grasp of the consequences of war. It is not a gentlemanly game, played by generals, at the expense of their men. By his own words, Sherman is in no danger of growing "too fond" of war. He keeps war in the context that it belongs in.

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If there is truth to the proposition that knowing the past helps us to understand the present, I believe there is at least as much truth to the proposition that what we know of the present is crucial to our understanding of the past.

Kenneth M. Stamp  
*The Causes of the Civil War*,  
3rd ed., 1991