

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

Written by Lars Backstrom

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/17/are-wars-lost-by-politicians-or-generals/>

LARS BACKSTROM, JUN 17 2012

Introduction

The most basic definition of war, I believe, is Clausewitz's: 'War is thus an act of force to compel an enemy to do our will', furthermore, '[...] war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.' Politicians then set the goals that generals must achieve. Therefore, to lose a war means that the attempt to compel the enemy to do ones bidding fails and the political goal has not been achieved.

My hypothesis in this essay is that politicians lose wars either by setting goals that are not achievable by the means available, or by interfering with the military chain of decision-making. To support my hypothesis I will analyse the US war in Vietnam, the 1973 October War and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. I will then compare my analysis with the ideas of Clausewitz, Sun-Tzu, Wiley, Eccles and Hanson.

How To Lose a War: Examples

The war in Vietnam (1965-1973) provides a good example of a war lost by politicians.

The Johnson administration, for fear of escalating the war to the point where it would involve the PRC and Soviet Union, wanted to limit the war to the Republic of Vietnam (RV), and therefore put strict limitations on military actions in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia. The DRV leaders, on the other hand, saw the entire former French Indochina region as one single war-zone. The main effect of this was that it became impossible for the US, RV, and allied forces to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main supply and transportation route for the communist forces operating in the RV. A limited advance into DRV to cut the trail at the Mu Gia Pass choke point could have ended the war decisively and quickly according to NVA officers. The US JCS wanted in 1961 and General Westmoreland again in 1967 to deploy ground troops in Laos to block the trail, but the plans were rejected by the Washington administration.

Instead, the US administration chose to build the so-called McNamara Line, a system of isolated strongpoints inside the RV connected by minefields and sensors. The military commanders in the RV and the marines opposed the plan because garrisoning the strongpoints would drain the manpower and force them into static warfare. Predictably, the isolated Khe Sanh Combat Base, the line's anchor in NW RV, was attacked in conjunction with the 1968 DRV Tet-Offensive. The defending marine and ARVN Rangers successfully endured a 77-day siege, inflicting serious losses on the PAVN units. Despite the successful defence the US military high command ordered its evacuation and destruction shortly after the end of the siege, allowing the DRV to claim victory, since they ended up occupying the base.

Looking at the overall result of the Tet-Offensive from a military point of view it was a crushing defeat for the DRV, with crippling losses both in men and morale. However, in retrospect the offensive has been hailed as a victory for the DRV because it gave the impression that the US did not control the situation. One reason is that before the offensive General Westmoreland had claimed that the war was winding up, giving the appearance that the US could pack up and go home. Then, he requested over 200,000 extra troop reinforcements, shocking President Johnson and his civilian advisers. Westmoreland's request made military sense: more troops on the ground would help secure larger areas against communist infiltration, and mount a counteroffensive against remnants of the communist

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

Written by Lars Backstrom

forces . However, Johnson was not prepared to pay the political cost by granting that request, partly because his own political priority had always been his domestic Great Society . In effect, the prolonged war had broken down the political will of the US administration.

In the end the cost of achieving the political goal had become too high for the US. I would go so far as to say that the political goal for the US, the 'Domino Theory', was not as strong as the official political goal of the DRV, that of a unified homeland. A prolonged struggle would then only benefit the DRV. Finally, the US failed to provide a valid alternative to the communists. They persisted in supporting a series of corrupt regimes lacking legality, and with only minority support . Efforts by RV President Thieu with land reform and the creation of rural militias were too late and halfhearted at best, and beset with corruption .

Even though the US war in Vietnam is a very good example of politicians setting goals and not daring to face the consequences of those goals, it does not provide sufficient evidence to support my hypothesis, since one war does not make a theory. To strengthen my hypothesis I now turn to the Middle East.

In the 1973 October War the Egyptian and Syrian forces achieved strategic surprise against Israel . Despite warnings by the Israeli army Chief of Staff, Elazar, Defence Minister Dayan and Prime Minister Meir refused full mobilisation and preemptive air strikes against Syria because of lack of evidence of an attack . Elazar disobeyed and ordered a larger mobilisation than they had authorised . On the other side, the Egyptian army possessed a very able officer , Shazly, Chief of Staff. He had planned the crossing of the Suez Canal in detail, and the Egyptian army in Sinai quickly achieved their limited strategic goals . The Israeli counterattack bounced with heavy losses on the well-prepared Egyptian defences . However, the Syrian offensive in the Golan Heights had stalled due to spirited Israeli defence . The Syrians called on the Egyptians to commit their reserves in a new offensive in Sinai to ease the pressure on themselves . General Shazly was against it, but was overruled by Minister of Defence Ali and President Sadat . When the Egyptian forces left the protection of their SAM-umbrella, they predictably suffered heavy losses , and could not resist when the Israeli army counterattacked, crossed the Suez Canal, destroyed a majority of the SAM-missile launchers, and partially surrounded the Egyptian army .

There was definitely no lack of professionalism, bravery and gallantry on the side of the Arab countries in the October War, but there was a notable lack of personal initiative at all levels . Looking at the Egyptian and Syrian Order of Battle it is obvious that there was more political influence in the chain of command than in the Israeli army. In Egypt both President Sadat and War Minister Ali were members of the GHQ. In Syria President Assad was also part of the GHQ, and Minister of Defence Tlas, a politically appointed officer, vacillated between his political and military roles, which lead to delays in the Syrian chain of command . In Israel, on the other hand, the cabinet and GHQ were separated , leading to less political meddling in the chain of command.

The opposite can be written about Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. According to Dupuy and Martell , the Israeli Defence Minister, Sharon, also acted as Commander in Chief with the tacit approval of his subordinates. The plan the Israeli cabinet had agreed to was for a limited IDF advance into Lebanon, while Sharon's actual plan was to attack and destroy the PLO HQ in Beirut, and to unite Lebanon under the Christian Phalangists, both against official Israeli policy. When pressured by the cabinet, Sharon postponed the attack, which left the PLO defeated, but still intact to fight another day. Israel was dragged into the civil war in Lebanon from which it could only extract itself in 2000. Here, Sharon acted both as a politician meddling in military affairs and as a general, albeit retired, making foreign policy with poor results. It is noteworthy that Herzog does not mention Sharon's possible deception in his semiofficial history of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

How To Lose a War: Strategic Theory

I now turn to some military thinkers to see whether their theories support my hypothesis.

Fundamental to Clausewitz is his 'three extremes' of war: every action in a conflict is reciprocated , the enemy must be rendered defenceless or put in a position so that that is a likely outcome , and the effort must match both the enemy forces at their disposal and their strength of will . If these three extremes are followed they will lead to escalation of the war . Further to these 'three extremes' Clausewitz argues that the political object of the war decides

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

Written by Lars Backstrom

the effort that will be put into achieving such goal, for example, the degree of force used must be related to the scale of political demands on either side. He continues to write that 'Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.' . That means that if the sides cannot disarm each other, the desire for peace will depend on the possibility of either side achieving the probability of success, and the amount of effort required. If incentive grows on one side it should diminish on the other.

It is obvious that if the overriding goal for the US administration was to prevent the fall of the RV and the Kingdom of Laos to communism, the military effort was not sufficient. The US political leadership was also excessively concerned about escalating the war to a superpower confrontation. Furthermore, when President Johnson understood the domestic political price to pay to win the war he balked. Thus the Vietnam War did not experience Clausewitzian escalation. When victory was in sight the US administration lost political will and started to withdraw .

I would suggest that there existed a similar situation during the October War regarding moral force. Since the Israelis fought for their survival as a nation (not being aware of the limited war aims of the Arab countries), their motivation was very strong. The Arab nations, on the other hand, fought for one goal only: that of recuperating the territories lost in the Six-Day War of 1967 . However, strong morale cannot be the only explanation for the Israeli victory in the October War. The Israelis also won because of superior initiative and individual skill. Here I look to Hanson for an explanation. According to him, military victory is grounded in civil society, arguing that a society with open discussion that allows dissenting voices, individual initiative at all levels, protection by the law (from the head of state downwards), guaranteed property rights, and free enterprise, has an inherent military advantage over other types of society . The Israeli officers and soldiers showed personal initiative to a degree not possible in any of the two Arab dictatorships . Being voters, the Israelis also had a stake in their own country. Eccles, like Hanson, stresses the importance of clear laws, a stable and flexible economic system, and semantic clarity of all communication and language , which the Israelis had.

Eccles also introduces the idea of 'conceptual unity' . Conceptual unity throughout the chain of command is the sole responsibility of the chief executive , who is also responsible for maintaining popular support for military action and for deciding when, if possible, the political aims of the conflict have been achieved and peace can be negotiated. In 1982 Sharon helped break the conceptual unity of the Israeli chain of command by not divulging the full extent of his plan to the Israeli cabinet. President Johnson and General Westmoreland also failed in that in 1968 by sending what appeared to be double messages.

For Sun-Tzu, war is an act of politics , although he stresses that it is a last resort when everything else has failed. According to Sun-Tzu, a war is won or lost already in the planning and preparation stages . Not only are deception, intelligence, logistics, and discipline vital, but also that the people and ruler are united and the army well led , not meddled with by politicians . In the case of the 1967 war, the Egyptian army lost its defensive advantage when Sadat and Ali ordered an offensive that brought their military out of their defensive shield to protect a hard-pressed ally. On the other hand, the US was not united towards the end of their involvement in Vietnam.

In contrast to Clausewitz , Sun-Tzu stresses that long campaigns are wasteful, bad for morale, and can lead to civil disorder , which is what happened in the US towards the end of the Vietnam War . Similarly, the Arabs had only planned for a short war in 1973, since a prolonged one benefitted Israel because of their air superiority and military support from the US. Because of this the Arabs could not sustain a war of attrition, and, if any of their capitals had fallen, their regimes would have collapsed. Last, Sun-Tzu emphasised that people and their ruler should be united , and that the ruler should possess 'Tao', a term not defined in the Art of War, but that could be interpreted as a 'just rule' . This, the US failed to achieve in the RV by supporting a series of illegal and corrupt administrations. Compared to the Arab dictatorships Israel possessed a fair approximation of 'Tao'.

For Wiley, the aim of war is to exercise control of the enemy . To do that it is necessary to identify and control the enemy's centres of gravity, an idea that goes back all the way to Sun-Tzu . Wiley, however, stresses that strategic victory lies not only in achieving goals, but also in having a clear idea of why one wants to achieve such goals, and what to do with them once they are achieved . In this case, the US army chose to win by causing the communist forces unsustainable casualties. According to Wiley's principles this was a valid centre of gravity, although not the

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

Written by Lars Backstrom

best. However, when the goal was finally achieved, the US administration did not really know what to do, or dared finish the work. In the case of the October War, the Arab countries misidentified Israel's centre of gravity. They chose to occupy ground instead of delivering a decisive blow against the IDF. In any case, when the Egyptian army had eventually achieved its goal it had no real back-up plan for what to do next. Similarly, in 1982 the Israelis occupied land, when their real target should have been the PLO, even though the political cost would have been high for Israel.

Conclusion

Looking at the theories, Hanson and Eccles directly claim that wars are lost by politicians. Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz and Wiley, on the other hand, claim that wars are lost by faulty planning. Sun-Tzu and Hanson even go so far as to claim that wars are lost or won even before they begin. Wiley and Clausewitz argue that wars are lost when the political leadership is afraid of the price and consequences of success. They all agree that ultimately, wars are lost by politicians.

This is not to say that there were no military mistakes made by the US in Vietnam or by the combatants in the Middle East, but since it is a nation's government that lays out the grand strategy I find support for my hypothesis that it is politicians that ultimately lose wars. In the case of a dictatorship when there are high ranking active military officers in the government, the mistakes they make in their roles as politicians are much more serious than the ones they make as soldiers. In a dictatorship the strategic decision process and the incitement for individual initiative also tend to be overly influenced, stymied and corrupted by the totalitarian ideology.

Bibliography

- Arnold, James R (1990), Tet Offensive 1968 – Turning point in Vietnam (Oxford: Osprey)
- Bergerud, Eric M. (1993a), The dynamics of defeat – The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province (Boulder: Westview)
- Bergereud, Eric M. (1993b), Red Thunder Tropic Lightning – The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam (Boulder: Westview)
- Brunge, Mario Augustu (1998), Philosophy of Science: From problem to theory (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers)
- CIA (1965), 'Interdiction of communist infiltration routes in Vietnam', Intelligence memorandum SC No. 04966/65, 24 June 1965
- Clausewitz, Carl von (1993), On War (London: David Campbell Publishers)
- Dunstan, Simon (2003), The Yom Kippur War 1973 (1) – The Golan Heights (Oxford: Osprey)
- Dunstan, Simon (2005), The Yom Kippur War 1973 (2) – The Sinai (Oxford: Osprey)
- Dupuy, Trevor N. and Martell, Paul (1986), Flawed Victory: The Arab-Israeli Conflict and The 1982 War in Lebanon (Fairfax: Hero Books)
- Eccles, Henry E. (1979), Military power in a free society (Newport: Naval War College Press)
- Hallin, Daniel C. (2006), 'The 'Living-Room' War – Media and Public Opinion in a Limited War', in Wiest, Andrew, ed., Rolling thunder in a gentle land – The Vietnam War revisited (Oxford: Osprey), pp. 276-291
- Hanson, Victor Davis (2001), Why the west has won – Nine Landmark Battles in the Brutal History of Western Victory (London: Faber and Faber)
- Herzog, Chaim (2010), The Arab-Israeli Wars – War and Peace in the Middle East (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books)

Are Wars Lost by Politicians or Generals?

Written by Lars Backstrom

Katz, Samuel (1985), *Armies in Lebanon 1982-84* Oxford: Osprey)

Prados, John (2006), 'The Road South – The Ho Chi Minh Trail', in Wiest, Andrew, ed., *Rolling thunder in a gentle land – The Vietnam War revisited* (Oxford: Osprey), pp. 74-95

Sawyer, Ralph D. (1993), *The seven military classics of ancient China* (Boulder: Westview Press)

Rottman, Gordon R. (2005), *Khe sanh 1967-68 – Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base* (Oxford: Osprey)

Sawyer, Ralph D. (1993), *The seven military classics of ancient China* (Boulder: Westview)

Smedberg, Marco (2008), *Vietnam-Krigen – 1880-1980* (Lund: Historisk Media)

Sorley, Lewis (2006), 'The Conduct of the War – Strategy, Doctrine, Tactics, and Policy', in Wiest, Andrew, ed., *Rolling thunder in a gentle land – The Vietnam War revisited* (Oxford: Osprey), pp. 174-191

Stroock, William (2011), 'Sinai armageddon', *Against the Odds – A Journal of History and Simulation*, No. 34, pp. 28-32

Tin, Bui (2006), 'Fight for the Long Haul – The War as Seen by a Soldier in the People's Army of Vietnam', in Wiest, Andrew, ed., *Rolling thunder in a gentle land – The Vietnam War revisited* (Oxford: Osprey), pp. 52-73

Wiest, Andrew (2002), *The Vietnam War 1956-1975* (Oxford: Osprey)

Wiley, J. C. (1989), *Military Strategy* (Annapolis: Military Institute Press)

—

*Written by: Lars Backstrom
Written at: King's College
Written for: Marcus Faulkner
Date written: 01/2012*