Power Failure

Why Force Doesn't Buy Order

Josef Joffe

Why are the West's best armies failing against Hizballah, "al-Qaeda of Mesopotamia" and assorted other jihadists? The best answer is also the oldest. For the mother of all asymmetric battles, turn to the Bible (Samuel 1:17):

> A champion named Goliath . . . came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor . . . weighing five thousand shekels [about 125 pounds]. . . . His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels [about 15 pounds].
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> [David] chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.
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> David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty."
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> . . . David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.
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> So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

To recall this tale is not to equate the moral purpose of David with that of the average suicide- or car-bomber, but to lay bare three classical features of asymmetric warfare that have reached forward from mythical antiquity into the contemporary battlefield. The first feature is primitive, cheap weapons—"five smooth stones"—that beat sophisticated and expensive ones: heavy, costly armor and high-tech spear points forged from iron—tips that embodied a clear advantage over the soft bronze weapons of the Israelites. The second feature is tactical surprise: David "ran quickly toward the battle line" and grabbed the initiative. Third, it is about the potency of a mesmerizing ideology, or in David's words: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty."

Change the terminology and we have a compelling account of the insurgency phase of the current Iraq war. It is roadside and car bombs against an army with precision ammunition and space-based surveillance that is superbly trained in the art of "network-centric warfare." It is about an order of battle that, as in southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006, pits small units of irregulars against traditional formations—companies, battalions and brigades. It is about tactics that use dispersal and surprise to hide targets from eyes-in-the-sky and smart stand-off weapons. It is about the concealment of fighters among civilians who offer camouflage, shelter and succor. And it is about an ideology that acts as a mental force

Josef Joffe *is publisher-editor of the German news weekly* Die Zeit *and a member of the executive committee of the* AI*'s editorial board. He is also a fellow of Stanford University's Hoover Institution. This essay grew out of a lecture on "The Changing Nature of War" at All Souls College, Oxford.*

Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*

multiplier, instilling in the insurgents the death-defying conviction of being on the right side of history. Call it the "counterrevolution in military affairs."

A final feature of the current frustrations in Iraq does not properly belong to the art of asymmetric warfare, but it does accentuate its advantages. Iraq is a civil war inside the war against the foreigner. A classic insurgency war has no frontlines; the Iraq war has too many. Who is the enemy? Coalition forces don't know. They send out a patrol and only then, when attacked, learn who is the enemy *du jour*, or even of the hour: an al-Qaeda threesome, a band of Sunnis, a Shi'a militia, common criminals protecting a safe house—or a completely new group. If an army does not know whom to target, its high-tech stuff performs no better than taking shots in the dark.

For another illustration of asymmetric warfare, take this contemporary account of one of the most famous battles in history:

> It is the year 480 B.C. Dawn is breaking over the small Greek island of Salamis, just off the coast of Athens. Thousands of Athenian citizens huddle on slender, wooden galleys. Facing them are hundreds of powerful, hulking warships . . . of the Persian Empire. . . . The Great King of Persia . . . expects that victory will come easily. After all, the Athenians are a ragtag bunch. They do not even have a king of their own to dispense orders.
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> Yet by dusk, the Persian king's grandiose plans are in ruins. The Athenians have successfully carried out a bold and innovative battle plan, using the agility of their lighter ships, together with their deep knowledge of local geography and weather, to outmaneuver and defeat their far more powerful foe. [The Athenians'] superior ingenuity, motivation and commitment carry the day. Against all odds, [they] defeated a colossal . . . military machine.[1]

It is the same old story: agility vs. mass, locals vs. foreigners, surprise vs. set-piece reactions, superb motivation, a better grasp of geography and weather. It wasn't always so. Indeed, the advantages of asymmetric warfare used to be on the side of the West. The history of colonial conquest abounds with such stories—from India

[1]Brook Manville and Josiah Ober, "Building a Company of Citizens", *Harvard Business Review on Motivating People* (Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, January 2003).

to Indochina, from the Americas to Africa. The Battle of Omdurman, today a suburb of Khartoum, Sudan, serves as an emblematic example of asymmetric warfare that favored the West. This is where, on September 2, 1898, 8,000 British troops under Horatio Kitchener defeated an army of 50,000 locals under the leadership of Abdullah al-Ta'ashi, the successor of the self-proclaimed Mahdi, in the course of a single day.

How? With field artillery, gunboats and Maxim machine guns, which had been adopted by the British army in 1889. The Maxim gun, which could fire 500 rounds per minute, was so effective in mowing down the enemy that none of their soldiers ever came closer than 150 to 200 feet to the British lines. An earlier example is the conquest of Algeria. Almost sixty years before, in 1830, 34,000 French soldiers had taken Algiers and then moved on to occupy the entire country over the next 27 years. Again, the advantage was delivered by superior technology and organization, the very essence of asymmetric warfare in the 19th century.

Yet consider the end of that tale. Having conquered Algeria with 34,000 men in the mid-19th century, the French could not hold the country with 600,000 men a hundred years later. So in 1962, they yielded *Algérie française* to the insurgents. What had happened in these hundred years to reduce the utility of force by a factor of twenty? Why could 600,000 not keep what 34,000 had conquered? The answers, of which four stand out, will not only explain the calamities of the Iraq war and the Lebanese "summer war" of 2006, but should also provide some guidelines for Western strategy in the future.

What went wrong? The most important answer is not a military, but a political one. In an indirect but compelling way, that answer comes from *Travail sur l'Algérie* by Alexis de Tocqueville, the greatest of French liberal thinkers. Here is what he had to say about the Algerian conquest:

> [I]n France I have often heard people . . . deplore [the army] burning harvests, emptying granaries and seizing unarmed men, women and children. As I see it, these are unfortunate necessities that any people wishing to make war on the Arabs must accept. . . . I think that all means ought to be used to devastate the tribes. . . . I believe the laws of war entitle us to ravage the country and that we must do this, either by destroying crops at harvest time, or all the time by making rapid incursions, known as raids, the aim of which is to carry off men and flocks.

Can we imagine a Western thinker or general uttering these words today? Deeply ingrained in the Western mind by now is the sacrosanct distinction between combatants and non-combatants, between war against the enemy's forces and against his populations. This distinction was codified in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and for good reason: World War II.

The West will never forget the war of extermination Nazi Germany unleashed in the East against Slavs and other "sub-humans", nor the scores of civilian massacres Japan committed in the Far East. Nor will the West soon forget the wars in Algeria and Vietnam, even though the destruction of civilian lives was not their purpose, as in the Nazi case, but an unintended result—what we have come to call "collateral damage." These memories build on earlier ones rooted in the history of colonialism in Africa and the Americas.

The moral of this tale is that Tocqueville is out, and that is the most critical asymmetry of them all. While Hizballah and Hamas, Sunni terrorists and Shi'a death squads have absolutely no compunction about murdering civilians—indeed, it is an integral part of their strategy—the West strains to avoid civilian casualties and feels deeply troubled when it fails to do so. Thus it did not matter in the summer of 2006 that Hizballah targeted its missiles on non-combatants, that it had concealed these missiles in civilian dwellings, and that it was using civilians as human shields—all of which are strictly *verboten* by the Geneva Conventions. The predominant reaction in the West was that Israeli attacks on civilian settings were illegitimate. Nor were many Israelis exactly cheering the results of these attacks. Naturally, this serves as an enormous constraint on the use of superior force, as it has in the insurgency phase of the Iraq war.

If this first asymmetry is a moral-legal one, a second is socio-cultural: the fading of the imperial vocation in the Western world. In the past, that vocation was a potent ideological force multiplier. When the British conquered India, they carried "the white man's burden" with them as inspiration and legitimation. And after the Spanish-American War of 1898, President William McKinley decided to keep the Philippines in order to "educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them"[2]—never mind that the Spaniards had "Catholicized" them long before.

No more. First of all, an imperial vocation requires an imperial class, on which Rome or Britain could draw for the management of their far-flung empires. What Harvard Law School graduate would rather run the Baghdad school system than pocket a $150,000 starting salary on Wall Street? Today, an ambitious youngster can find booty and glory far less painfully in Mergers & Acquisitions than in an African outpost. And if motivated by idealism, most typical top-school graduates would rather join an NGO than a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan.

Also, the imperial vocation demands an imperial temperament from society as a whole. That disposition may be likened to the spirit of a police force that will be there forever, which knows the neighborhood, which can distinguish the good guys from the bad guys, and which can extract solid intelligence from it. Postmodern democracies, on the other hand, act more like fire brigades. Firefighters smash doors and walls, douse the flames, and then leave—never mind the destruction, let alone the reconstruction that must follow.[3]

In other words, when their physical security is not at stake, democracies like short, bloodless and victorious wars—like the three-week campaign in Iraq in 2003 or the three-month operation in Afghanistan. Yet they will invariably sour on the war if it is long, bloody and indecisive. Insurgents know this. They will be there forever; the intruders will not. This is *their* place, but our home is five or ten thousand miles away. In short, few Iraqis will commit to the Americans or to an Iraqi government because neither of these might be there the day after tomorrow. Once the Israelis had failed to install a sympathetic Maronite government in Beirut after the invasion of 1982, they had to face a sullen, non-cooperative population in their southern security zone, which they abandoned 18 years and hundreds of casualties later.

This leads to a third, non-military asymmetry—the asymmetry of interests. Whose commitment is more sustainable, hence more credible—the insurgent's or the intruder's? The locals have no alternative, but the outsider can always go home. Like Britain in World War II, democracies will fight open-ended wars as fiercely as totalitarians when their existence is at stake. But to pay and bleed *sine die* for the sake of political order or moral obligation in places merely tangential to their core security? Note how quickly the United States and France withdrew from Lebanon in 1983 after a few hundred of their soldiers were slaughtered in truck-bomb attacks. Or how hastily President Bill Clinton called off the intervention in Somalia in 1993 after 18 servicemen were killed in Mogadishu. In such wars of choice, the rationale—usually a variation on the precautionary principle—is abstract, while the costs are obvious. Worse, the timeline is wrong. Victory has no date (and may never come), but the sacrifice is here and now. No wonder that inconclusive wars of (internal) order sooner or later lose their backing at home.

A fourth non-military factor is a systemic asymmetry—the gap between noble political intentions and ugly strategic outcomes. In our era, say, since the Korean War, which was a classical balance-of-power war, wars of choice have usually focused on the nature of domestic regimes, either in order to uphold or to change them. At heart, Vietnam was such a war, and so was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In the 1990s, the campaign against

[2]As quoted in General James Rusling, "Interview with President William McKinley", *Christian Advocate*, January 22, 1903. The meeting had occurred on November 21, 1899, and there is a debate as to whether it was actually McKinley who had uttered these words.

[3]I have borrowed the police force/firefighter distinction from Fouad Ajami.

Serbia was about regime transformation. Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 was a regime-change war, and so, of course, was the Iraq war in March 2003. Israel's march into Lebanon in 2006 had an internal purpose as well: to diminish the power of Hizballah and thus to strengthen the position of the Siniora government.

It worked only once, with the toppling of the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. When it does not work, the intervening power can still be lucky—as in Mogadishu, where failure had no serious effects on the neighborhood or on America's standing therein (except perhaps in the minds of the al-Qaeda leadership, who saw it as further proof that America was a "paper camel"). Yet when an outside power is not so lucky, as in Iraq, its fails not only on the internal front, but also on the external one.

It is hard to think of a crueler asymmetry between reformist intentions and ruinous results than the one exemplified by Iraq.

The United States sought regime-change to stabilize the neighborhood—to re-order the region from the inside out. Instead, the Bush Administration reaped neither and, worse, ended up in a weaker strategic position than before.

In Iraq, the lofty purpose was the "democratic peace" for the entire region. The idea, harkening back to Kant and Tocqueville, was that only despotisms make aggressive war while democracies are, at heart, pacific. Regime change was the means, and peace the end. But beware what you wish for: In strategic terms, which define the classic business of war, regime change in Iraq has turned into a disaster for three reasons.

First, the destruction of the Hussein regime and its army removed a critical barrier to Iranian expansion. Iraq had always been the weightiest counter to Iranian ambitions in the region. Remember how the Reagan Administration surreptitiously supported Saddam Hussein against Iran precisely on balance-of-power grounds during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88? Second, the Coalition intervention liberated Shi'a power from Sunni oppression, paving the way for ideological alliance between the Shi'a of Iraq and the Shi'a of Iran. The historical analogy would have been an American Cold War policy in West Germany that empowered the suppressed pro-Soviet Communist Party in a country bordering on Communist-ruled East Germany—unthinkable! Third, the occupation of Iraq has entangled the United States in an interminable insurgency inside Iraq that Iran can manipulate at will. That was like handing a loaded gun, plus spare ammunition, to America's most dangerous enemy in the region, and then sidling up close to it.

In sum, the United States has acted as an unwitting handmaiden of Tehran's hegemonic aspirations. The consequences for the balance of power have been both obvious and grave. One was the Iranian-Israeli war, a war by Hizballah proxy, which was (and once again is being) armed, trained and led by the Revolutionary Guards. A second fallout has been global in scope. Surely, the Khomeinists would not be reaching as brazenly for nuclear weapons if America's credibility and legitimacy in the region were still intact. A very likely third consequence will be the withdrawal of the United States and United Kingdom from Iraq, thus certifying the ascendancy of Iran, plus the shift of emboldened jihadist forces to Afghanistan, where, *horribile dictu*, they might be victorious for all the reasons already here noted.

It is hard to think of a crueler asymmetry between reformist intentions and ruinous strategic results than the one exemplified by Iraq. To explain this sorry turn, let us return to the beginning: to the limited productivity of even the most sophisticated military in undertaking regime-change wars.

On the Western side, the utility of force is highest in classic engagements—army against army. On this battlefield the accoutrements of network-centric warfare work wonders—eyes in the sky, precision-guidance, stand-off weapons, digital battle-management, round-the-world logistics. This was nicely proven in the 1991 Gulf War, in Afghanistan ten years later, and

in the first phase of the Iraq war. Recall how swiftly and bloodlessly 130,000 Americans and their British allies defeated Saddam's huge army in the 2003 encounter.

Now consider the poor performance in phase two—against the insurgents who are drawing from the ancient repertoire of asymmetric warfare. But the explanation must dig deeper yet, hence unearth the most profound asymmetry of them all—the one between different "currencies" of power. Very briefly, bombs and bullets do not an order make, and sheer firepower buys political influence only at a hefty discount, if at all. The force that breaks an opponent's capability to fight does not make him a willing democrat. Bombs raze buildings; they do not build nations, and crowbars are useless when a chiseling tool is needed.

Man for man, today's American and British armies are the best ever, but only in the demolition business. Precisely because they are so well-trained and equipped in what they do best, they fail when it comes to making and maintaining a political order, for that requires not only different skill sets on the field, but also a different temperament at home. They are wondrously efficient fire brigades, not police forces. They cannot serve an imperial mission; nor will post-modern democracies, unlike Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, ever field such a force.

What policy conclusions follow from this new world? They are quite old. The prescription is for less Kant and Tocqueville, and for a lot more Clausewitz and Lord Palmerston. Here is what Clausewitz had to say about democratic peace theory:

> Suppose the so-called despotism were to disappear completely, so that all peoples were . . . free and happy. . . . Would an idyllic peace then prevail among the nations, would the clash of interests and passions that has always threatened their security disappear? Obviously not.[4]

Add to this diagnosis Palmerston's 1840 counsel: "Watch attentively and guard with care the maintenance of the Balance of Power" so as to prevent the "derangement of the existing balance."[5]

This traditional prescription does not exclude wars of choice in general, for in order to protect vital interests, nations must sometimes fight a small war now in order to avoid a big one later. But here is the key proviso: If fight you must, don't fight wars of internal order, but wars of external balance. The critical question is about security: Does this foe threaten vital interests or vital allies? Will his growing power increase not only his ability, but also his temptation to threaten such vital interests? If so, even preventive war might be the prudent way to go.

But a sensible threat assessment is just the beginning. The next step is again a very traditional one: how to relate means to ends? Can a democracy with a low tolerance for open-ended engagement achieve its goals at a reasonable risk, cost and speed? Can the nation sustain the effort over time, or will the electorate abandon its rulers? Here the key is to look for allies not just as force multipliers, but also as "legitimacy multipliers." Democracies prefer war in the company of others because it signals that their cause is just. Ideally, a Security Council resolution will ennoble might through right, though that body, reflecting the callous interests of nations, should never be confused with the world's conscience. So a consensus between NATO and the European Union, as in the case of the air campaign against Serbia, will also do. But at a minimum, resist the temptation of going it alone because legitimacy grows with numbers.

Above all, do not fall into the traps of military and political asymmetry. Fight where asymmetry favors your own side, where your skill, training and technology will carry the day. Realistically speaking, this means wars not against insurgents and their protective populations, but against other armies. Better still: Don't fight at all. Exploit instead the non-military power of alliance and containment, and the pre-military force of deterrence. These are not very original recipes, but Palmerston, Disraeli and Bismarck would applaud. And so would George F. Kennan, the

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[4]Clausewitz, "Europe Since the Polish Partitions", *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 374–5.

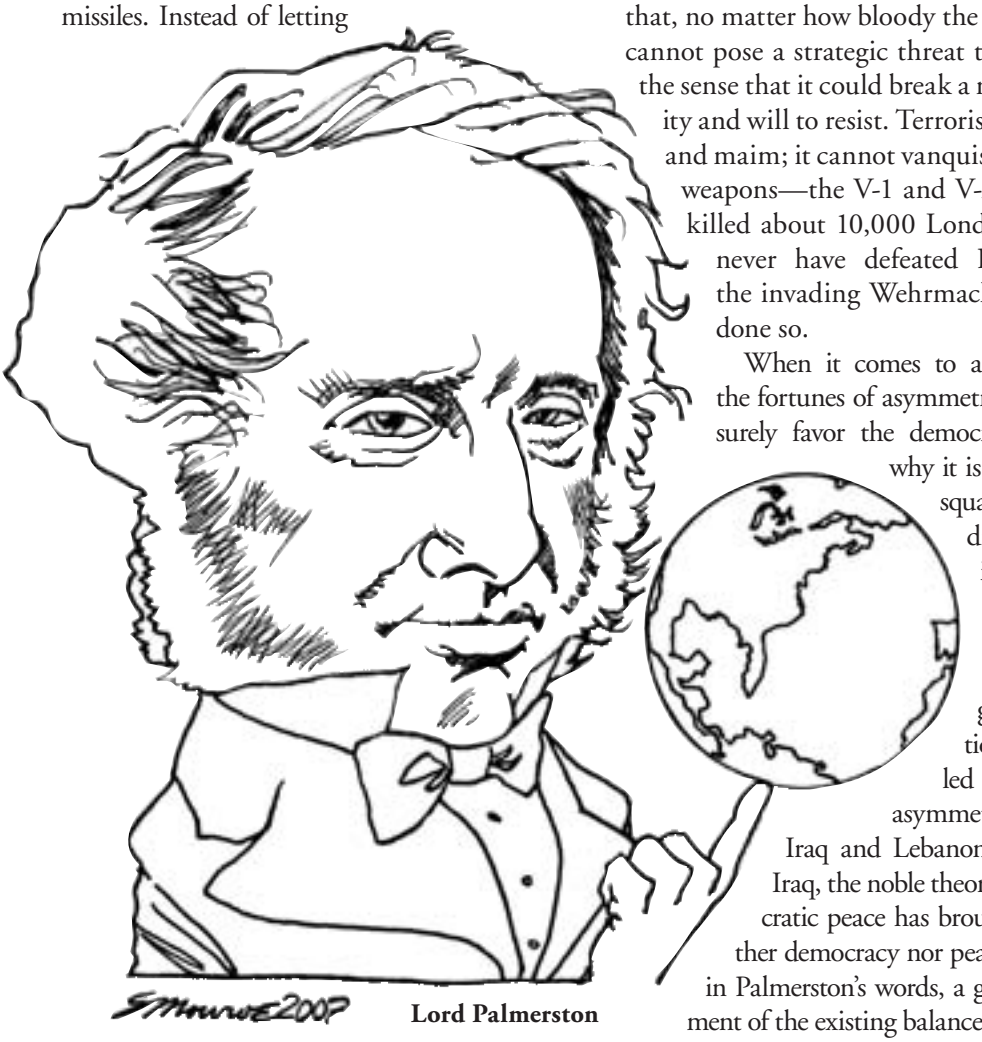
[5]As quoted in J.P.T. Bury, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 10, *The Zenith of European Power, 1830–1870* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 258.

intellectual draftsman of Containment.

What about terrorism and insurgencies, then? Alas, Palmerston *et al.* would be flummoxed, too. There are no good answers. But the worst answer is to meet Hizballah and Hamas on their turf and on their terms: in urban settings or in protective topographies that blunt the best of the West's weapons, except at horrifying moral costs. If you must fight insurgents or non-state armies beyond your border, avoid head-on encounters; keep them off balance by exploiting *your* asymmetric advantage—like wide-area surveillance and high-speed weapons platforms. Against Hizballah-type threats directed against its civilian populations, the West will soon have munitions capable of shooting down very-short range missiles. Instead of letting your foes choose the battleground, attack their supply lines—which requires credible threats against their helpers in neighboring states. No, you can't "win" that way. But since insurgencies are, above all, contests of will, you can make sure they don't win either. How? By settling in for the long haul in a way that minimizes your own as well as civilian casualties. Sustainability is critical, as this struggle might take decades, not just months or years.

Finally against London- or Madrid-type terrorism, war—any kind of war—is not the answer. It is rather patient, slogging police and intelligence work on a global level. There is no certain protection against such home-based threats. There is only the consolation that, no matter how bloody the toll, terrorism cannot pose a strategic threat to the West in the sense that it could break a nation's capacity and will to resist. Terrorism can disrupt and maim; it cannot vanquish. Nazi terror weapons—the V-1 and V-2 rockets that killed about 10,000 Londoners—could never have defeated Britain. Only the invading Wehrmacht might have done so.

When it comes to army vs. army, the fortunes of asymmetric warfare will surely favor the democracies. This is why it is so vital not to squander assets in distant wars of internal order. The road to humiliation is paved with good intentions that have led to the hell of asymmetric warfare in Iraq and Lebanon. Certainly in Iraq, the noble theory of the democratic peace has brought about neither democracy nor peace, but merely, in Palmerston's words, a grave "derangement of the existing balance."



Lord Palmerston

Whatever happens, we have got / The Maxim gun, and they have not.

—Hilaire Belloc, *The Modern Traveller* (1898)