

Strategies of Exhaustion -- The insurgents

In his classic book on guerrilla warfare, *The War of the Flea*, Robert Taber argued:

"Analogically, the guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough--this is the theory--the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anaemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws" (p. 29).

Mao described it this way:

"While these units function as guerrillas, they may be compared to innumerable gnats, which, by biting a giant both in front and in rear, ultimately exhaust him. They make themselves as unendurable as a group of cruel and hateful devils, and as they grow and attain gigantic proportions, they will find that their victim is not only exhausted but practically perishing." (*On Guerrilla Warfare*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith II, p. 54).

Lenin, too, wrote about this concept, advocating Engels' famous expression of the process as "withering away the state:"

"The expression 'the state withers away' is very well chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and the elemental nature of the process.... With the removal of [the oppression of the masses], excesses will inevitably begin to "wither away." We do not know with what speed and calibration; but we do know that they will wither away. With their withering away the state will also wither away." (from *The State and the Revolution*, retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch05.htm>)

Gordon Craig credits Delbruck with distinguishing that military strategies "can be divided into two basic forms," strategies of annihilation and strategies of exhaustion ("Delbruck: The Military Historian," In P. Paret (Ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, pp. 334, 341). Craig writes

"The great majority of military thinkers in Delbrück's day believed the aim of war to be the annihilation of the enemy's forces and that, consequently, the battle that accomplishes this is the end of all strategy. Often they selectively cited Clausewitz to support their claim. Delbrück's first researches in military history convinced him that this type of strategical thinking had not always been generally accepted; and that there were long periods in history in which a completely different strategy ruled the field. He discovered, moreover, that Clausewitz himself had asserted the existence throughout history of more than one strategical system, suggesting in a note written in 1827 that there were two sharply distinct methods of conducting war: one which was bent solely on the annihilation of the enemy; the other, a limited warfare, in which annihilation was impossible, either because the political aims or political tensions involved in the war were small or because the military means were inadequate to accomplish annihilation" (p. 341).

This second strategy type, that of exhaustion, appears in history because armies have had some sort of limitations, sometimes occurring as smaller forces, inadequate resources, or political restrictions. It is "neither a mere variation of the first nor an inferior form." As Craig writes, "with limited resources at his disposal the [exhaustion strategist] must decide which of several means of conducting war will best suit his purpose, when to fight and when to maneuver, when to obey the law of 'daring' and when to obey that of 'economy of forces'" (p. 348). Craig also quotes Delbrück directly:

"The decision is therefore a subjective one, the more so because at no time are all circumstances and conditions, especially what is going on in the enemy camp, known completely and authoritatively. After a careful consideration of all circumstances—the aim of the war, the combat forces, the political repercussions, the individuality of the enemy commander, and the government and people of the enemy, as well as his own—the general must decide whether a battle is advisable or not. He can reach the conclusion that any greater actions must be avoided at all cost; he can also determine to seek [battle] on every occasion so that there is no essential difference between his conduct and that of the [annihilation] strategy" (p. 342).

Delbrück's conclusions were not always welcome during his time, as they may not be now, especially when he included Frederick the Great as one of the great exhaustion strategists in history. When his critics "insisted that Frederick was a precursor to [the great annihilation strategist] Napoleon," Delbrück definitively disproved their claims by referring to the hard facts of Frederick's campaigns. Both Delbrück and Craig believe that the animosity toward Delbrück's conclusions was based more on a bias toward the Clausewitzian-annihilation strategy than on hard historical evidence. This bias can be felt even today, especially since Clausewitz "died before he could complete his intended comprehensive analysis of the two forms [of strategy]," leaving most of his contributions centered on annihilation methods (pp. 341-342). Craig relays that Delbrück understood that different eras and different situations require different strategies (p. 343). Thus, insurgencies, limited in resources, professional training, and sometimes even experience, must rely on strategies of exhaustion.

In the future, we will continue this important discussion about these two types of strategies and how they critically pertain to insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. For now, as we enter the holiday season, remember the analogies above: should our insurgent enemies drain our nation or our army's will to fight in this war, we may become the exhausted dog or the perishing giant. If you have the interest to do more than you already do to sustain our initiative against our enemies, please find below a list of organizations that exist to support our troops. I received the below message from the Monterey Chapter of the SF Association. Happy Holidays.

How You Can Help

Many independent organizations are ready and willing to help you support the troops. Although the military services no longer accept 'Any Servicemember' mail, the troops can still receive mail and care packages from patriotic citizens. It simply means finding an organization to help you get that morale-boosting mail to the troops. Here is a short list of organizations that will help you send messages and packages as well as provide other support.

Donate Frequent Flyer Miles
[Operation Hero Miles](#)

Gift Certificates
[Gifts from the Homefront](#)

Help for the Wounded
[Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund](#)
[Wounded Warrior Project](#)
[Wounded Warriors](#)

Homes for Disabled Troops

Phone Cards
[Help Our Troops Call Home](#)
[Operation Uplink](#)

Send Packages
[Adopt a Platoon](#)
[Give 2 The Troops](#)
[Have a Heart/Adopt a Soldier](#)
[Hugs from Home](#)
[My Soldier](#)
[Operation Gratitude](#)
[Operation Military Pride](#)
[Operation Mom](#)

[Homes for our Troops](#)

Letters and Messages

[A Million Thanks](#)

[Give 2 The Troops](#)

[Letters From Home](#)

[Marine Parents](#)

[My Soldier](#)

[Operation Dear Abby](#)

[Send a Message to Our Soldiers](#)

[Soldiers Angels](#)

[Voices from Home Foundation](#)

Tragedy Assistance

[Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors](#)

Video Conferencing

[Freedom Calls Foundation](#)

Veteran Service Organizations

[American Legion](#)

[VFW](#)

[Operation Paperback](#)

[Operation Shoebox](#)

[Operation We Care](#)

[SI Yellow Ribbon Campaign](#)

[Soldiers' Angels](#)

[US Troop Care Package](#)

[USO Care Packages](#)

Service Aid Societies

[Air Force Aid Society](#)

[Armed Forces Relief Trust](#)

[Army Emergency Relief](#)

[Coast Guard Mutual Assistance](#)

[Disabled American Veterans](#)

[Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society](#)

[USO](#)

Other Support

[Adopt a Soldier Ministries](#)

[Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc.](#)

[Blue Star Mothers Chapter 5](#)

[Marine Moms Online](#)

[The Military Family Network](#)