The Rise and Decline of Strategic Paralysis

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A distinct backlash against technology in favor of the "human element" is a primary driver of recent military ideas--with General James Mattis' stinging 2008 dismissal of Effects-Based Operations (EBO) as the exemplar. Since then, the rhetoric of new military concepts has embraced social science, a corresponding focus on the human factors, and reflexive skepticism about technology's ability to achieve strategic decision or lift the ever-present "fog of war." The problem with this narrative is that technology alone does not explain why the operational concepts that emerged from late 1990s were ineffective. And it doesn't point the way towards creating new joint operational concepts in an era that may once again foreground high-intensity informatized war and put manpower-intensive counterinsurgency on the back burner.

EBO and related concepts did not fail because they were high-tech or utilized standoff firepower. Rather, we can better understand their failure through the concepts of annihilation and attrition. Strategic paralysis, a subset of annihilation, was at the heart of contemporary operational concepts. Joint doctrine will continue to develop for a future of conflict beyond counterinsurgency. Any future framework for operational adaptation must incorporate the effects of technological change, while avoiding the seductions of strategic paralysis theory.

Annihilation and Attrition

First, as an ordering principle it is important to understand two very misunderstood terms, *annihilation* and *attrition*. These terms are often conflated, and attrition is completely misunderstood altogether as a meaningless attempt to win by sheer dint of numbers. The German historian Hans Delbrück divided strategy into these two fundamental forms. [1] There are other ways of classifying strategy, but Delbrück's century-old classification is still often employed for analysis.

Strategies of annihilation use a single set-piece battle or a short lightning campaign to rapidly disarm or destroy the opponent. Classically, the endpoint occurred when the short and violent employment of force destroyed the opponent's forces, leading to the fall of the capitol and the distribution of troops into the enemy's heartland. In a modern context, a strategy of annihilation would be a single blow or set of carefully targeted moves that either paralyze the enemy's ability to resist or demoralizes them enough to surrender. [2] A strategy of attrition (also known as a strategy of erosion or exhaustion) aims to produce the impossibility of victory for the opponent by steadily raising the moral and material costs of resistance until the opponent scales down his goals. [3]

There are subtle (but important) differences between different types of annihilation and attrition as employed by different arms of national power in different political and military contexts. But the two definitions used here are broad enough to be generally employed for the duration of this discussion. Strategic paralysis theory, the primary subject of discussion, is a subset of annihilation theory developed

principally in the "modern" (post World War I") era and based mainly on warfare that uses targeting and careful maneuver to cause "moral" collapse of the opponent. James D. Kiras and others have dubbed airpower, special operations, and maneuver concepts that fit this template "strategic paralysis" due to the neutralizing effect these military methods supposedly have on their targets. [4] They all share the characteristic of being inherently tactical and operational but nonetheless are applied to the strategic level of war.

A key point to bear in mind is that theoretically pure definitions also sometimes break down in practice. A campaign intended to be one of annihilation is always a matter of placing a bet. An attempted annihilation attack that does not succeed with an initial knockout punch is likely to decay into an attritional conflict once things go awry. The classic example of an unsuccessful attempt at annihilation was Germany's failure to rapidly destroy the French in the West at the outset of World War I.

Additionally, a limited set of political goals does not necessarily translate into a limited military strategy. For example, even if the political goal is limited, it may be advantageous if possible to quickly annihilate the opponent's forces in theater, especially if the opponent will continue to resist as long as he has means to do so. Lastly, an overall war can have different theaters with different theater strategies. A warring party may seek annihilation in one theater, while pursuing an attrition strategy, or even a ground-holding, economy of force strategy elsewhere. Strategy is always bound not only by goals, but also by availability and means as well.

Annihilation as a strategy is obviously desirable, for a party strong enough to contemplate it in the first place. Why wouldn't you want to crush your opponents instantly? But it has grown more difficult over time even for a very strong state to successfully execute a strategy of annihilation. The capacity of states to stave off annihilation has grown over the course of the modern era. Nationalism fuels the will to fight on, even in the face of utter disaster, and army sizes have increased. For example, German forces in 1941 repeatedly encircled and destroyed vast Soviet armies, only for more to emerge from the depths of Russia, as every man who could carry a rifle was pressed into the fray. The Iranians suffered horrific losses in the opening battles of the Iran-Iraq war, only to later rebound and expel the Iraqis from their soil.

The concept of successive operations in the post-World War I science and theory of operational art, for example, evolved as a means to deal with the decline of the idealized (as opposed to the reality of) Napoleonic battle. For every lightning campaign like the 1940 German conquest of France, there are ten campaigns that swiftly degenerated into slugging matches. The theorists of operational art, most notably the Soviet Alexander Svechin, based their ideas on the explicit presumption that "ideal" annihilation was dead and that military planning must adapt beyond to this new reality.

So the problem becomes not only one of "what to do" but "how to do it." A nation that is strong and has the potential to carry out a strategy of annihilation will usually attempt to instantly crush the enemy. But it faces the daunting risk that the strategy will fail in practice, dragging on into a costly attritional struggle without a clear exit, where the cost of the war will soon exceed any hoped for gain. To put it simply, General James Mattis once said "no war is over until the enemy says it's over. We may think it over, we may declare it over, but in fact, the enemy gets a vote." [5]

A Search for Strategic Paralysis

What has come to be known as "strategic paralysis theory" has its roots in attempt to avoid any recurrence of the nation-slaughtering attrition of World War I. These ideas, however, led in practice to *more* and in some cases worse attrition among both attacker and defender.

The First World War's carnage led to revulsion and a search for alternatives to the poor generalship and

strategy which, many theorists believed, caused it. The popular image of the conflict, largely nurtured by the writings of J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell-Hart, is one of a brutal and senseless slog between "lions led by donkeys" into slaughter. In this caricature of the actual history, Generals obsessed with re-enacting Napoleonic decisive battle and ignorant of modern weapons' sheer killing power led millions to their deaths for the "ideology of the offensive." [6] This simplistic view tends to be echoed in popular culture, most significantly novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the anti-war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

More recent historians, however, have challenged this simplistic view and pointed out that from the Boer War up to the 1940 conquest of France military theorists and practitioners were struggling to manage distributed campaigns of massive armies. Increased defensive firepower was only one problem—command and control (C2) and logistical difficulties were equally important. The solution lay in the development of a "modern" system of tactics and combined arms warfare that could effectively find, fix, strike, and exploit to create and expand breakthroughs into operational penetrations. [7] As Citino notes, this system in action in 1940 looked remarkably like the Moltkean operational concept of the 19th century, with some modern innovations, like tanks, aircraft and radios. [8]

The perception of strategic, operational, and tactical ruin in World War I motivated strategic theorists to try to get around the process of force depletion. One can see the beginnings of strategic paralysis in operational art in J.F.C. Fuller's idea of striking at the "brain" of an army. Brig. Gen Justin Kelly and Dr. Michael Brennan make the argument that Fuller and Liddell-Hart created an "English School" of operational art rooted in the usage of shock and clever maneuver to create cascading moral and organizational failure in the enemy lines. This is apparent in Fuller's conception of Plan 1919, in which fast-moving tasks supported by gas bombardment targeted enemy headquarters in order to create chaos and demoralization across the entire front. [9] That being said, as Christopher Bellamy notes, it was still a combined arms concept, albeit one oriented towards "deep attack." [10] But it was first here that Fuller visualized the idea of a shot to the opponent's brain. [11]

As Kiras observes, Fuller came to imagine the opponent existing as a biological system with a brain, arms, and legs. The use of armored maneuver and other means of attacking was to unnerve the brain through operational dislocation, and as Fuller's views grew more extreme this meant buying into the idea that the people would submit once deprived of their leaders. The purpose of operations, in this scheme, was a series of carefully targeted strikes against military leadership and the civilian population, which would paralyze an army and people from resisting. What this required was a corps of specialists who understood how to properly utilize operational science to carry out strategic paralysis—a recurring theme in strategic paralysis concepts. [12] Fuller's theory was founded on a biological metaphor that did not match up well with reality.

It is worth noting that there is no such thing as a "brain" per se in an army, just as a corporation and a nation does not have a "brain." It is an extended metaphor that draws from crowd sociology and a rather crude conception of biology and extends it to the military field. As Jay Luvaas notes in his history of British military thought, Fuller also saw technology as an enabler of this operational thinking, both in "science" in the broad sense of a new view as well as a positivist one. Fuller was enthusiastic about the revolutionary power of gas, planes, and tanks to enable his expansive military concepts as well as his idea of creating a true science of war. [13] The old notion of winning wars by destroying the enemy would be replaced by "the imposition of will at the least possible loss." [14]

Kelly and Brennan point out that Basil Liddell-Hart, a contemporary of Fuller, saw the turning movement as the key to realizing an operational effort of moral annihilation, a crucial part of the dislocation he saw as the object of his operational methodology. [15] In his most mature work, *Strategy*, Liddell-Hart also

saw dislocation in the abstract as the aim of strategy. [16] "An examination of military history," Liddell-Hart noted, "[N]ot of one period but of its whole course, points to the fact that all decisive campaigns the dislocation of the enemy's psychological and physical balance has been the vital prelude to his overthrow." [17] There was more to Liddell-Hart's thought besides the turning movement, however. In his book *Paris, Or the Future of War*, he looked at the possibility of compelling the enemy to resist through the breaking of his political, industrial, and social systems through terror bombing and gas attacks. [18]

Fuller and Liddell-Hart, by attempting to find a way to "work around" the need for a nose-to-nose attritional confrontation, were precursors of modern strategic paralysis theory. However, ground power was not the only venue for strategic paralysis theorists. Airpower soon became part of the strategic paralysis gospel.

Airpower theory provided fertile ground for strategic paralysis. Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and William "Billy" Mitchell all shared Liddell-Hart's faith in the idea of strategic bombing to bring the opponent to heel without large-scale ground action. Intellectual faith in airpower's ability to cause strategic paralysis took two operational forms: warfare against the enemy's military-economic potential and war against the enemy's morale. In the former, as Milan Vego notes, the "Industrial Web" theory of targeting created an idea that a targeted strike against key industrial nodes in Germany could possibly preclude the need for an invasion of Europe. [19] In the latter, air forces' attacks on population centers would erode morale by collapsing social and political organization.[20] While enemy morale was adversely affected by population-center bombing and military-economic bombing did have tangible effects on the enemy's ability to resist the cross-channel invasion, neither led to the systemic collapse that prewar prophets predicted. It is true that strategic bombing was crucial to the war's progress, and more important than airpower critics often admit. But airpower theory did not measure up to its own standards in World War II.

Later airpower theories, such as John Warden's concepts of the Five Rings and Parallel Warfare, sharpened the operational core of airpower's strategic paralysis. In his article "The Enemy as a System," Warden wrote of the opponent as a biological system comprising multiple targetable layers. [21] In many ways, this bore many similarities to J.F.C. Fuller's concept of the "brain" of the Army, but it was considerably more sophisticated. Warden's chief innovation was to make the micro-targeting of various arms of the State and its armed functions much more precise. Warden's ideas had a lasting influence on the Air Force, especially in operationally innovative 1990s and early 2000s conventional air campaigns. These concepts--well as the operational element of airman John Boyd's theories, to some degree--laid ground for the effects-based strategic paralysis ideas that Mattis detested.

Mature Theories of Strategic Paralysis

Modern joint-service ideas on strategic paralysis, while sharing aspects of the early strategic paralysis pioneers, went beyond the early and crude understanding of crowd psychology and biology rooted in the interwar theories of strategic paralysis. They were based instead on ideas borrowed from complexity science's understanding of a whole formed by a series of self-organizing, self-cooperating agents. An example of such a system in nature is a flock of birds, an ant, or a beehive. Antoine Bousquet notes that this image was at the core of many network-centric warfare theories. [22] Of course, as Bousquet argues, the idea of a common operating picture is not equivalent to self-synchronization in a natural context, especially since U.S. military culture is culturally and organizationally centralized.

Network-centric warfare also borrowed extensively from the corporate world, with the concept of "lock-in," something entirely new in the theories of strategic paralysis. Borrowing from corporations who exercised an asymmetric advantage to totally deny competitors from accessing the market, network-

centric warfare envisioned a volatile "market" in which advantage shifted rapidly. Decentralized networked shooters and a logistical and information advantage rooted in speed and information power had the possibility of creating a decisive advantage that could "lock out" the opponent from competing. [23] This departed somewhat from the traditional theories of strategic paralysis because it was rooted in improvement of speed and tempo rather than a precise method of targeting the killing blow. Organizational form, not technology per se, was also the method of enabling strategic paralysis.

Improving strategic effectiveness with network-centric technologies was useful as a goal (with important caveats), but the concept of "lock out" certainly marked network-centric warfare as a strategic paralysis concept. Moreover, there is a world of difference between the original intentions of network-centric warfare pioneers and the much more expansive form it would later take. [24]

The much-maligned (but little understood) book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* was also an intellectual attempt to examine the sources of dominance and competitive advantage. It examined different types of violent shocks that decisively broke the enemy's will to resist, and sketched out a methodology for utilizing decisive operations to violently warp the will, perception, and understanding of an adversary. Not only was the notion of "shock and awe" well-defined, but it was also sketched out through historical analysis and a detailed guide for operational and technical implementation. [25] While all of these methodologies and the both historical and contemporary rapid dominance effects they described were useful, strategic paralysis again produced the erroneous assumption that information had once again unlocked annihilation as a viable military operating concept.

EBO is interesting as a case because it bridges the old and new theories of strategic paralysis. Effects-based strategic paralysis concepts echoed the biological systems concepts that had inspired J.F.C. Fuller and John Warden, without the nuances and focus on physical destruction that made Warden's theories superior to traditional strategic bombing concepts. Army Major Ketti Davison's description of EBO describes this in more detail: "[EBO] reflects the second stage of systems theory, a biological view of a uni-minded system. The disparate parts of a uni-minded system react in a predefined manner to events in their environment, while a single command center, acting like a brain, controls the operation of the system as a whole." The elements of national power are put into the operational level and cause needed effects in the enemy's system. Davison criticizes this for assuming a level of predictability in second and third-order effects that is not characteristic of complex systems. [26]

To sum up, these various schools of strategic paralysis theory all seek to strike directly at the Brain of the State and the heart of the Army and bypass the bloody process of force depletion. As Kiras notes in his description of strategic paralysis theory, "[i]f [victory without fighting] cannot be achieved, the next best thing is to inflict a crippling, decisive blow to win an ideal victory." [27] J. Boones Bartholomees Jr. notes that the goal of strategic paralysis is to "to produce moral forces powerful enough to either lead to the immediate surrender of the enemy or cause moral strategic paralysis so complete that even if a subsequent battle is necessary, its outcome is essentially preordained. Shock and awe operational concepts aim to psychologically disarm the enemy and make him incapable of continuing the fight." [28]

However, there is a defect embedded in most of these theories: strategic paralysis theory, in its concrete methods, not its aspirational goals, is not really *strategic*. Rather, it proposes a set of methodologies which are in fact heavily tactical and operational. The theory then defies the record of post-Napoleonic military history in claiming that these methods can achieve strategic effect *without* the crucial process of force depletion. After striking a tactical or operational blow, the theory then curiously forecasts a leap to strategic effect. As Antulio Echevarria has pointed out time and time again, this was not really a way of war but a way of *battle*. [29]

In his monograph *The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations*, Israeli thinker Ron Tira highlights this flaw in strategic paralysis theory, which attempts to make a direct leap from tactical to strategic effect. Tira describes how Israeli and US conceptions of "standoff firepower-based operations" imagine that an enemy can collapse cognitively through effects-based methodologies implemented on the tactical level. However, as Ron Tira explains: cognitive collapse, in fact occurs when the *physical* destruction of the enemy matches up the mental picture we want him to have. That is why some of the best combinations of cognitive collapse and force depletion, such as the Chinese Communist's Beiping-Tianjin campaign in the Chinese Civil War, involved the simultaneous and reinforcing employment of informational and physical means. [30]

Unlike in 1918, in 1945 only a fool could deny that the wasted cities and fallen armies of the Axis meant that they had been defeated. There would be no opportunity for a *dolchstross* myth of an undefeated army stabbed in the back by politicians when Hamburg and Dusseldorf and Berlin were heaps of rubble and the Red Army's tanks were parked in front of the Reichstag. [31] The Germans had no need to make a mental leap to reach cognitive awareness of defeat.

Thus while paralysis is a battle-winner, it is not a war-winner. This unfortunate reality can be glimpsed even in the 19th century heyday of decisive Moltkean operations. German operational victory in the Franco-Prussian War did not break French resistance or end the political crisis simply because even the breaking of the main French forces was not enough to convince the French themselves that the war was lost.

Moving Away from Annihilation

Across time, the sources of strategic paralysis on the operational level are remarkably similar. From Fuller onward they tried to find the secret to collapsing the enemy by drawing off of various concepts purportedly based on science. Azar Gat has written, for example, about the role of early concepts of crowd psychology in shaping ideas about how populations might respond to airpower. [32] J.FC. Fuller's use of biological metaphors would later be echoed by EBO's uni-minded biological system. When operational drivers of strategic paralysis did not use scientific metaphors, they looked at innovative organizational forms from the civilian world. All of these methods, the theorists hoped, might finally unlock the old Napoleonic victory of annihilation that modern warfare had made increasingly rare, through moral collapse.

Against a brittle regime, with a shell of a military, constrained by paranoia, corruption, poor leadership, and flimsy morale strategic paralysis may be superficially effective—as it was in 2003 against Saddam Hussein. But future adversaries are unlikely to make Hussein's numerous mistakes. The reason why 2006 Lebanon proved to be such a shock for Western analysts is that Hezbollah, though its battlefield success was exaggerated, was able to put up a decent fight. A competent opponent, even with the most meager of resources, can effectively utilize force to deplete force. [33] Strategic paralysis did not cause the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it is not a viable foundation for future American strategy and operations.

So what should a framework for future, post-COIN operational art for "hybrid" future wars look like? For one, it should obviously avoid falling into the trap of strategic paralysis. But it also should work to think earnestly about what technology, standoff firepower, and economy of force operations can achieve. Technology will continue to change, and the COIN-era backlash against informatized war does not change the reality of a maturing Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that will continue to change tactical and operational warfighting concepts. [34] Technology, enhanced networking, and new standoff operational concepts play a key role in enhancing the strategic effectiveness of American forces—which was intended

by network-centric warfare's early pioneers. [35]

James Kiras also provides a useful concept, originally designed for special operations warfare, but applicable to discussions of new capabilities that leverage strategic paralysis. Kiras advocates a concept of "strategic attrition." Instead of aiming for a complete cascading moral collapse, a thousand little cuts using niche capabilities can augment the efforts of regular forces. This process weakens the moral and material resolve of an adversary in order to break his will. "The process of strategic attrition, which may involve the annihilation of fielded forces or critical infrastructure through skillful and/or economy of force operations at the tactical or operational level, drives the adversary to the [breaking] point while preserving one's own strength," Kiras notes. Although the cost of an individual special operation is difficult to measure, the net effect of "discrete, distributed actions against an adversary's vulnerabilities" will have deadly cumulative and non-linear effects that can lower the cost of attrition. [36]

Special operations, Kiras writes, also achieve disproportionate moral results and highlight the vulnerability of an adversary's prized assets and symbols. The adversary could ignore this threat and face further moral and logistical attrition, or waste energy confronting it and make himself vulnerable to a conventional attack. [37] Special operations, Kiras argues, also improve overall strategic performance by targeting vulnerabilities, lines of communication, and generally doing what is thought to be impossible. [38] The duel role of aiding conventional performance and acting as a driver of non-linear moral attrition is the key contribution of special operations forces to strategy.

Kiras wrote to dispel misconceptions about special operations serving the operational role of strategic paralysis. Since many of the concepts surveyed in this paper share similar assumptions, his overall recommendations provide an excellent framework for the integration of new technologies, methodologies, and concepts. General David Petraeus said in an interview with *Wired* magazine's Noah Shachtman, that although he was skeptical of the overall thrust of network-centric warfare concepts, he does appreciate having the ability to use technology to find, "effectively determine who the enemy is, find them and kill or capture, and have a sense of what's going on in the area as you do it — where the friendlies are, and which platform you want to bring to bear. …[Field Manual 3-24] says *sometimes* the best weapons don't shoot. Sometimes the best weapons *do* shoot." [39]

It should not be forgotten that nonlinear attrition lay at the heart of the Offset Strategy for countering the Soviet conventional threat in the 1980s. Precision-strike capabilities that attacked Soviet armored forces in their assembly areas did not obviate the need for strong ground forces to fight the Soviet hordes. All of the technological enablers that ground forces have grown accustomed to in Iraq and Afghanistan enhance their effectiveness rather than replace them altogether. And while the expansion of information warfare and precision-strike capabilities since the Offset Strategy and over the coming decades may require revision of long-held beliefs about the roles of air, land, and sea power that may upset traditional service partisans it is unlikely that they alone will create an technological Austerlitz or Jena-Auerstedt. [40]

Technologies, concepts, and methodologies that indirectly attack the opponent should be used, as per Kiras, to enable stronger direct attack and produce cumulative moral and material attrition on the opponent. A combination of strength and agility—and an avoidance of the seduction of strategic paralysis—can help develop the operational concepts of the future.

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[3] Ibid, 9.

[4] James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism,* New York: Routledge, 2006, 17.

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[14] Fuller, quoted in Luvas ibid.

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[27]Kiras, 17.

[28] Bartholomees, "The Issue of Attrition," 8.

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[33] See William F. Owen, "The Toyota Horde: Examining a Lost Military Capability," *Small Wars Journal*, 7 April 2010, **http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/04/the-toyota-horde/**

[34] See Barry Watts, *The Maturing Revolution in Military Affairs*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2 June 2011. http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2011/06/the-maturing-revolution-in-military-affairs/

[35] Lawson, ibid.

[36] Kiras, 77.

[37] Kiras 76.

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[39] Noah Shactman, "How Technology Almost Lost the War: In Iraq, the Critical Networks are Social," *Wired*, 27 November, 2007 **http://www.wired.com/politics/security/magazine/15-12/ff_futurewar?currentPage=all**

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