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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WAR IN ATTAINING  
NATIONAL POLICY OBJECTIVES

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Seminar A

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This essay recommends criteria for determining the effectiveness of war in attaining the objectives of national policy. While I draw on the writings of Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, and B. H. Liddell Hart, my conclusions are not necessarily theirs, although I do not believe they are inconsistent.

A few words at the outset about what this paper does not do. Sun Tzu's statement that "to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill" (The Art of War, p. 77) is perhaps the earliest theoretical underpinning for deterrence strategies. I subscribe to this view of the ultimate purpose of armed forces. However, both because, realistically, wars must be fought in order to give a nation's warfighting capabilities the credibility needed for deterrence, and because the topic of this essay explicitly deals with the act of war rather than its avoidance, I do not deal with the effectiveness of deterrence beyond this brief comment. Neither do I concern myself with what national policy objectives are or should be. While this has presented some intellectual problems -- I firmly believe that the correctness or morality of specific national

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objectives cannot be separated from the appropriateness of military action -- I have tried to frame my arguments at a general level. Thus, I am not prescribing criteria for determining the effectiveness of war in achieving what I think should be United States national security objectives in the 1990s (although that is a tempting subject), but rather trying, in Clausewitzian fashion, to draw up some general principles which can be used to judge the usefulness of war within the context of any country's national security objectives.

My point of departure is Clausewitz's famous conclusion that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means" (On War, p. 87). Clausewitz's point was to deny that warfighting and military strategy had objectives of their own, unconnected to the basic political processes that characterize all relations between peoples and nations. He did not attempt a hierarchy of political means to national ends, of which war was one. However, given his recognition of the inherent violence and destructiveness of war, I believe it is appropriate to conclude from Clausewitz's analysis that war should be the last means of policy, i.e., it should be used only when all other, non-violent tools of policy have been exhausted. This, then, is my first criterion for determining the effectiveness of war: that it be used only as a last resort.

As an instrument of policy, Clausewitz tells us that the use of war must be related to national political objectives. As he clearly states, "No other possibility exists...than to subordinate the

military point of view to the political." (p. 607) This unmistakably means that the success of a military operation, per se, is not a sufficient criterion to define its effectiveness. Just because a country has sufficient military force to use it successfully in a particular situation does not legitimize the use of that force or make it an effective instrument of national policy. Might does not make right; the means do not justify the ends. Therefore, to be effective, wars must be fought as a means of achieving true national objectives, not merely as a reflection of the military capabilities or "power" of a particular combatant.

An additional point that should perhaps go without saying is that the objectives sought must be enduring, long-term objectives of strategic importance. As such, war should enhance other elements of national power -- the "soft power" factors described by Joseph Nye in his book Bound to Lead. These include economic influence, role in international institutions, and perhaps most importantly, the positive projections of one's values in a regional or international context. For war to be effective, its objectives must be such that, if successfully achieved, they correctly anticipate the nature of the post-war situation from the standpoint of the country's long-term objectives. In other words, the use of war to gain short term advantage but in a manner which decreases long term economic resources, diplomatic influence, or the extent to which one's values are shared internationally -- or which creates an inherently unstable new balance of regional power -- would not be an effective instrument of national policy. Again, I believe Clausewitz recognizes this when

he concludes that "even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final" (p. 80).

These considerations primarily relate to determining whether or when war should be used as an instrument of national policy, and how that choice affects the effectiveness of war in attaining national objectives. In addition to these criteria, there are several points which follow from the theories of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu and Hart that relate to how war is carried out which have an important bearing on its effectiveness.

The scale of war must be commensurate to the importance of the issue(s) over which it is being fought. Thus, Hart states "Strategy depends for success, first and most, on a sound calculation and coordination of the end and the means" (Art and Practice of Military Strategy, p. 141, author's emphasis). Likewise, Clausewitz concludes (and the U.S. Marine Corps in its manual on Warfighting reflects) that the political object will determine the amount of military effort required to achieve it. Contrary to Samuel Huntington's conclusion in his 1985 Nimitz lecture at UC-Berkeley, Hart warns that "an excess (of military force) may be as harmful as a deficiency" (p. 141). While an obvious economic argument can be made in support of this principle, over-kill could also be damaging in a political sense, particularly if it is inconsistent with those other, non-military sources of national power, especially values and beliefs. Similarly, however, you must be able to accomplish the objectives you

set forth. To quote Hart again, "It is folly 'to bite off more than you can chew', and the beginning of military wisdom is a sense of what is possible" (p. 149).

How can warfare be limited to the minimum amount of effort, violence and casualties consistent with the accomplishment of national objectives? Sun Tzu's prescription to "attack the enemy's strategy" (p. 77) and Clausewitz's concept of directing all energies at the enemy's center of gravity (pp. 595-6) provide excellent insights on this matter. Both ideas relate to understanding what is important to one's opponent, and directing the war effort at those things. Thus, destruction of armed forces or conquest of territory, or other political or economic gains are not necessarily effective ways of defeating the enemy's means or will to resist achievement of your policy objective. Only when you understand what makes your opponent tick, what his objectives are, and how he intends to pursue them, can you effectively use war. In short, you have to be able to view the situation from his vantage point as well as your own. This logically leads both theorists to conclude that one needs to know and understand both the enemy's and one's own capabilities and situation in order to determine an appropriate military strategy for carrying out the war.

To sum up the points of the last two paragraphs, to be effective, the scale and ferocity of war must be commensurate to the importance of the issue which is being pursued. One's policy and

strategy must be based on a thorough knowledge of the enemy's objectives, situation, and strategy, as well as one's own capabilities; and it must be aimed at defeating both those things that are most important to your opponent's policies and people and the way he is fighting the war against you. From this should come a clear, identifiable, and achievable statement of the objectives of the conflict, and an objective evaluation of the chances for succeeding and the costs of failure to act militarily to accomplish them. A country's forces must be well suited to the objectives established and the demand that these objectives place on the armed forces. Without the proper match of objectives and capabilities, war is not likely to be successful.

As with all general principles, these criteria will need to be applied to the unique and "foggy" circumstances of each potential or actual conflict. However, if war is chosen as the ultimate policy instrument to achieve a valid and enduring national security interest, if it is waged on a scale commensurate with the importance of the policy objective, and if it is carried out based on a complete knowledge and understanding of the opponent's situation, objectives and strategy, it can be effective in achieving national policy objectives.