

John Boyd and his Gulf War

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the critical role that United States Air Force Colonel John Boyd played in the Gulf War of 1991 leading to the Coalition's swift victory over Iraqi forces. John Boyd's presentations to U.S government officials several years before the Gulf War would eventually prove to be a critical, if not unheralded moment in the development of the modern American military strategy. Boyd's theorems about military strategy proved to be revolutionary as one writer has claimed that John Boyd is one of the great military strategists of all time, comparing him to the likes of Sun Tzu and Carl Von Clausewitz. Indeed, Boyd may be partly responsible for injecting the American war doctrine with a fresh perspective following the debacle known as the Vietnam War. Alongside his development of a modern doctrine of war, Boyd was responsible for helping develop the F-15 and F-16 aircrafts. Clearly, the efforts of Colonel Boyd played an important role in the revitalization of the American war machine.

KEYWORDS: combat, Desert Storm, Iraq, military strategy, war history

Operation Desert Storm in early 1991 stands as an impressive military victory for the United States-led Coalition against Iraq. The allied Coalition quickly gained the upper hand using their aerial capabilities, and then engaged the Iraqi army on land, routing the enemy within four days (“The Gulf War, 1991” n.d.), with the campaign itself lasting only forty-two days. The seeds of this victory were sown by Colonel John Boyd. Colonel Boyd’s work on military strategy in the 1970’s proved to be invaluable to Operation Desert Storm. In this paper I will argue that Boyd’s 1976 presentation *Patterns of Conflict*, a seminal work on military strategy, greatly influenced Operation Desert Storm and that a victory in such a short period of time with so few allied casualties, would have been impossible without Colonel Boyd.

Born in 1927, Colonel Boyd’s early life was dominated by the need to be a productive member of society since his father died early on in his life (Brown 2018, 5). He enlisted in the Air Army Corps at the end of World War II, and later gained a limited amount of experience serving as a fighter pilot in the Korean War (Brown 2018, 6, 9). He made a name for himself in the 1950s as a fighter pilot. Nicknamed “Forty-Second Boyd”, he challenged and defeated any opponent under forty seconds in simulated air combat (The Aviation History On-Line Museum 2002). Eventually he re-wrote the book for fighter-pilot tactics because he was so good at these practice dogfights. (Greene 2006, 132). In 1972, he served as the Vice-Commander of Task Force Alpha in the Vietnam War (Brown 2018, 24). By 1975, Colonel Boyd retired from active service, but arguably his most important contributions lay ahead (Brown 2018, 29).

Colonel Boyd’s *Patterns of Conflict* emphasized speed and unpredictability to induce an internal collapse of the enemy’s system. According to Frans Osinga, Colonel Boyd’s goal was to have the enemy’s system collapse due to the ambiguity caused by your actions, which is only possible in a fluid environment that gives little time to react and a lack of good options at hand for your enemy (2007, 156). Colonel Boyd argues that the key to this strategy is through, “variety, rapidity, harmony, and initiative” (Boyd 2014, 12). Variety is the means of actions you can take, rapidity is at the speed you can achieve those actions, harmony is the co-operation between separate units to prevent lost time, and initiative is the ability to act and adapt as the situation requires (Boyd 2014, 12).

The key pillar of Iraq’s system was their air force. To incite panic and confusion amongst Iraqi command, the Coalition targeted and destroyed Iraqi control and communication centers (Tucker-Jones 2014, 41). Colonel Boyd emphasized that speed combined with numerical mismatches would cause a sufficient amount of chaos that will lead to a quick collapse of enemy resistance (Boyd 2014, 24). The Coalition’s adherence to Colonel Boyd’s theory proved to be decisive as the Coalition achieved air-dominance within a day, as Iraq lost fifty-percent of their holdings and nearly two-hundred aircraft (Tucker-Jones 2014, 41). Through following Colonel Boyd’s advice, the Coalition destroyed Iraq’s air force with a variety of attacks like sorties and bombing missions, demonstrating that the key Iraqi system was shattered early-on, which caused widespread panic and defections within their own army (Tucker-Jones 2014, 42). This forced Saddam Hussein into an impossible situation leading to his downfall, as he could no longer rely on his air force to help him. (Tucker-Jones 2014, 42).

Next, Colonel Boyd emphasized using maneuver warfare as the prime strategy for future campaigns. Colonel Boyd’s theory about using speed and unpredictability to foster internal chaos works seamlessly with the intent of maneuver warfare. As a result of this, Colonel Boyd viewed frontal assaults as unimaginative bloodbaths (Boyd 2014, 42). According to Colonel Boyd, the aim of maneuver warfare is to, “disorient, disrupt, or overload those that adversary depends upon, in order to magnify friction, shatter cohesion, produce paralysis, and bring about his collapse” (Boyd 2014, 117). When General Schwarzkopf went to then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney with plans of a frontal assault, Cheney promptly dismissed Schwarzkopf (Kelly 2003).

Cheney credits Colonel Boyd with the critical “left hook” maneuver of the campaign which devastated Iraqi forces and saved many American lives (Kelly 2003). Now, a “left hook” is a military term where an army attacks the enemy’s flank, and eventually surrounds the enemy’s forces. Initially, Schwarzkopf wanted to conduct a frontal assault through the Kuwaiti oilfields, despite the Iraqi plans to set minefields and ignite 600 oil fields on fire. (Tucker-Jones 2014, 77). The Iraqi plans would cause an environmental disaster and create a situation where Coalition forces would struggle to push through the mess, leading them vulnerable to Iraqi counterattacks (Tucker-Jones 2014, 77). If successful, the Iraqi plan could have demoralized Coalition efforts and led to the mass media questioning Western involvement in the war. Colonel Boyd theorized that a force who was committed to attrition

warfare wanted to break the enemy's will and hold the terrain. In order to achieve victory, Iraq attempted to use attrition warfare to their advantage. (Boyd 2014, 113). The only way to defeat an entrenched enemy was to move with speed, unpredictability, and a well-placed maneuver. Colonel Boyd theorized that this maneuver, if it was done correctly would, "tie up, divert, or drain away adversary attention and strength in order to expose as well as menace and exploit vulnerabilities or weaknesses elsewhere" (Boyd 2014, 114).

To Colonel Boyd, maneuver warfare would result in, "the widespread onset of confusion and disorder, frequent envelopments, and high prisoner counts" (Boyd 2014, 114). Allied commanders tested Colonel Boyd's theory. They had convinced Iraqi commanders that a frontal assault would come from the south, which thereby tied up enemy attention and allowed for the "left hook" (Citino 2004, 281). By the end of the first day, progress was achieved almost everywhere, as some Iraqi soldiers had already surrendered. (Citino 2004, 284). The right flank drove north to the city of Basra, where they cut communications, and found themselves twenty-five miles into Iraq undetected (Citino 2004, 285). The "left hook" of the plan went virtually unopposed as the Coalition swept through the unguarded western Iraqi desert and into Kuwait so the Coalition could surround the Iraqi forces. As a result of this, the Coalition gained thousands of prisoners of war (Citino 2004, 286). Coalition forces found unprepared Iraqi divisions with their flanks exposed and as a result, destroyed them without suffering many Coalition casualties. (Citino 2004, 286). The U.S VII Corps and XVIII Airborne Corps, who were responsible for the "left hook," caught Iraqi defenders by surprise, since some of them were facing the wrong way when Coalition forces emerged (Citino 2004, 287). The U.S Corps involved managed to destroy multiple Iraqi divisions, including the Iraqi reserve and some of the Republican Guard (Citino 2004, 287). In one encounter with a Hammurabi Republican Guard force, the 24th Infantry surprisingly, despite the result of the attack, only had one wounded (Citino 2004, 288).

Colonel Boyd's theories on maneuver warfare achieved its goal because, "Coalition forces destroyed more than thirty divisions, captured or destroyed nearly four thousand tanks, and took almost ninety thousand prisoners in less than four days of fighting" (Citino 2004, 288). Despite the pre-war estimate of possible casualties in the tens of thousands, only less than 300 American deaths occurred" (Citino 2004, 288).

In this paper I have argued that Colonel Boyd's 1976 presentation *Patterns of Conflict* greatly influenced Operation Desert Storm and that a victory in such a short period of time with so few allied casualties, would have been impossible without Colonel Boyd. His theories on variety, rapidity, harmony, initiative, and on the broader themes of maneuver and attrition styles of warfare, gave Coalition commanders an example from which they could overwhelm and surround Iraqi forces without suffering high losses. Through the use of Colonel Boyd's theories, Operation Desert Storm ended with a low amount of American casualties and a Coalition victory in just forty-two days. Indeed, Colonel Boyd's seminal *Patterns of Conflict* presentation may have contributed to his need to be a productive member of society based upon the impact that his theories had on American war strategy.

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