David vs. Goliath: Debunking Realism

Throughout history, relatively small groups of men have triumphed in war through impossible odds against a seemingly invincible enemy. Our own independent nation, the United States of America, was established through these very means. The former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the last week of December in 1979[1]. What Soviet generals and leaders promised to be a short campaign quickly turned into a bloody nine-year conflict. Despite the obvious Soviet military advantage, they left with their tails between their legs in February 1989. Just how does a much smaller force ultimately succeed against such great odds? Surely some men would attest victory to the greatness of their gods but that is over-simplistic. Many political theories address and explain the beginnings and endings of international conflict but truly struggle when it comes down to the physical mechanics of 'why', in the belly of the beast.

Whenever one is talking about a large, powerful nation engaging a weaker nation in conflict it is hard not to think of the realist approach. After-all, according to Realism, how powerful a nation truly is hinges almost completely on the size of the military and the production capacity of a the nation. If this were truly the case, the Afghani people would have been crushed into submission very quickly (as the Soviets anticipated) and most certainly not ended with their victory.

The so-called, "David v. Goliath" conflicts are known as asymmetric warfare. The Random House dictionary defines asymmetric as, "not identical on both sides of a central line; unsymmetrical; lacking symmetry"[2]. Thus, asymmetric warfare is when two (or more) opposing sides differ greatly either in physical strength and size or in tactics, techniques, and procedures

[1] Ali Ahmad Jalali: *The Other Side of the Mountain* (Quantico, USMC Studies and Analysis, 1995), p. vii
[2] Asymmetric. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/asymmetric (accessed: November 20, 2009).

(TTP's).

Prior to the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan spent years fighting their own civil war. When the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized control of the government, the Soviet Union swept in to support it and destroy any opposition[3]. There was certainly bandwagoning on both sides—the PDPA received a very strong ally in the fight and the Soviet Union stood to gain more influence in the middle-east. Ultimately, the revisionist policy of the former Soviet Union ended in failure[4]. There are many other examples in recent history. The United States' massive involvement in the Vietnam conflict is one such example. Despite the opposing governmental systems, there are many parallels between the Soviet-Afghan war and the US-Vietnam war. The origins of the conflict are nearly identical: support a fledgling government against their enemies. Follow that by a long and vicious conflict and finish up with the larger, more powerful nation retreating.

Conflicts like the US-Vietnam war and the Soviet-Afghan war are good examples of a macro asymmetric conflict. The micro level of this type of conflict can be seen with smaller, less powerful nations fighting among each other for a shorter period of time, or by small units in individual battles during larger conflicts. The Yom Kippur war, which was between Israel, Egypt, Syria, and to a lesser-extent, Iraq, is a good example of the micro level. The Yom Kippur was a relatively short conflict which only lasted twenty days[5]. Although the forces were not as disproportionate as the US-Vietnam conflict, individual battles that took place were. The Israeli government postured its defenses mostly on the Sinai Peninsula, anticipating an attack from

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[3] Ali A. Jalali, "Clashes of Ideas and Interests in Afghanistan", Washington D.C., July 1995, page 6
[4] Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, p. 251
[5] Federal Research Division, *Israel: The October 1973 War*, Library of Congress, http://countrystudies.us/israel/, (accessed: November 21, 2009).

Egypt in response to their victory over Egypt six years earlier in the 6-Day war. As such, when the Syrians attacked the northern and southern Golan in eastern Israel, the Israeli forces were vastly outnumbered.[6]

At one point on the eastern front, less than forty Israeli tanks successfully held back an attack of more than five-hundred Syrian T-62 tanks. The Israelis also lacked night vision and even rudimentary binoculars (which the Syrians were equipped with) yet still managed to win the battle. At the same time, two Syrian infantry divisions (approximately 2,000 men) were successfully repelled by around twenty Israeli infantrymen from the Golani Brigade[7]. Similar situations on the micro-level have also occurred in recent US history. During the first battle of Mogadishu in early October 1993, one hundred and eighty American Rangers and Special Forces troops found themselves cut off inside a militia-controlled area of Mogadishu (the book and subsequent movie Black Hawk Down is a re-creation of this conflict). Despite being far out-gunned and out-numbered (estimates of involved Somali militia fighters range from 2,000 to 4,000), the majority of the troops (one hundred sixty-two) managed to escape and survive the conflict.[8] The number of Somali dead have been estimated everywhere from 133 to 1,000 with the truth probably somewhere in between.[9]

Even if one relies on the Somali militia's official report of 133 killed, it is still a 7:1 ratio. American estimates put the ratio at 39:1 killed and 12:1 wounded ratio (84 wounded Americans and an Estimated 1,000 wounded Somalis).[10] According to traditional international relations theories, this should be impossible or at least an extreme outlier statistically.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Howard Blum, *The Eve of Destruction*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 201
[8] Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), p. 271
[9] PBS, "Frontline: Ambush in Mogadishu," 29 September 1998
[10] Ibid

When one measures the physical strength of two opponents in a conflict on the macro and micro level it is most easily accomplished by comparing the Order-Of-Battle (OOB, raw numbers of men and assorted equipment) of each nation.

Here are the numbers from the Yom Kippur War[11]

Personnel and equipment:

	Israel	Syria	Egypt	Iraq
Troops	415000	60000	300000	30000
Tanks	2300	1200	1700	325
APC's	3000	900	2400	500
Naval Craft	38	21	104	0
Aircraft	645	386	540	73
Artillery	945	600	1120	200

[11] Charts were compiled from multiple sources:

Howard Blum, *The Eve of Destruction*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), index

Ami Isseroff, *Zionism and Israel Dictionary*, http://www.zionism-israel.com/, (accessed: November 27, 2009).

Saad Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez, Revised Edition*, (New York: American Mideast Research). P. 244

Hamid Hussain, *The Fourth Round – A Critical Review of 1973 Arab-Israeli War,* Defence Journal (November 2002), p. 46

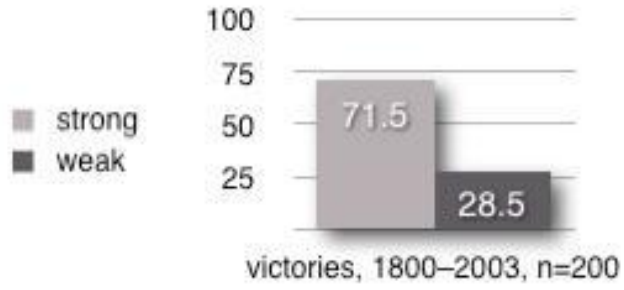
TOTALS	Israel	(combined opposition)	Disparity
Troops	415000	390000	0.939759
Tanks	2300	3225	1.402174
APC's	3000	3800	1.266667
Naval Craft	38	125	3.289474
Aircraft	645	999	1.548837
Artillery	945	1920	2.031746
			1.7

Total killed and wounded:

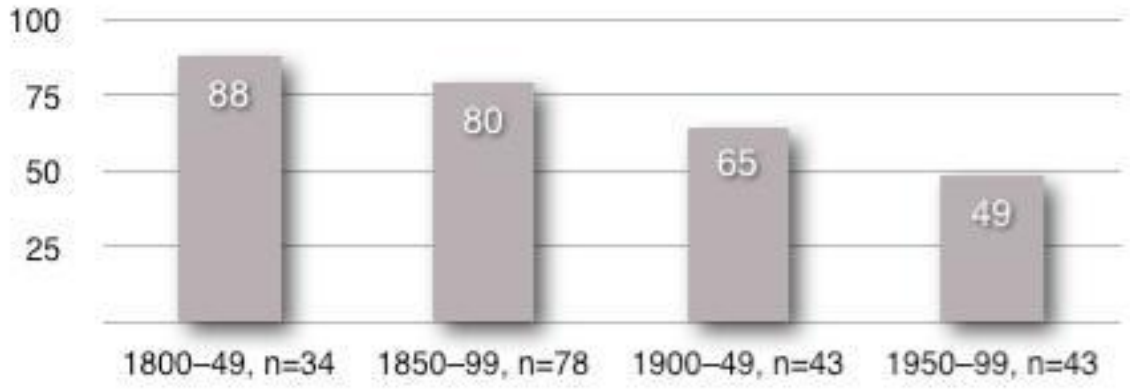
	Israel	Other involved nations
Killed	2728	5000
Wounded	8050	9000

As you can see, the Israelis were outnumbered in every category except one yet they still prevailed. Israel and the Afghanis are not outliers or aberrations when it comes to the weaker parties fighting and winning wars. Below is a graph of all victors in strong v. weak conflicts from 1800-2003 correlated by Ivan Arreguín-Toft, a post doctoral fellow at Harvard University.[12]

[12] Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How a superpower can end up losing to the little guys,* Neiman Watchdog, http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/, March 23, 2007. (accessed November 30, 2009)



Yes, 71.5% of the time, the stronger nation/party was victorious. However, 28.5% of the time, the weaker nation (weaker as far as bodies, bullets and band-aids) was victorious. This is not a statistically insignificant number. The data becomes even more intriguing when the data is spread out over four 50-year periods:



It is clearly depicted that as time goes on, the weaker party in a conflict becomes more victorious.

So, if it isn't all military might and logistics (the bullets, beans, and band-aids), what is it? The physical military logistics still remains and will remain a very important facet of being successful in wars and other conflicts but it is only one part of a dyad. The other half is being able to quickly adapt to changing situations both on the micro level of the battlefield but also on

the macro strategic level.

Traditional warfare consists of uniformed forces with rifles, mechanized equipment, artillery etc, fighting another force with similar resources. As time moves on, what was traditional is no longer typical, hence the increase in weaker party victories.

There is an old adage that the military is, "always fighting the last war". The Soviet Union fell into that trap in Afghanistan as well as the United States in Vietnam. Let us examine the Golan front of the Yom Kippur war one more time. This battle was asymmetric on more than one level: The Syrians far outnumbered the Israelis and, even though the Israelis used conventional direct-weapons (tanks, artillery, aircraft), they used unconventional tactics. The Syrian tactics were largely based around Soviet tactics (who largely trained and supplied Syria at that time).[13] The Israelis countered the massive attack utilizing the concept of maneuver warfare. Maneuver warfare is not based on attrition like wars of the past but on speed, movement, and disruption of the opponent's communication lines.[14]

Democratic nations, as an institution, have a greater capacity for maneuver warfare for several reasons: As documented by Jason Lyall, revisionist governments (which tend to be authoritarian-based) are largely unsuccessful in warfare.[15] Individual soldiers in service under authoritarian leadership are not taught initiative at the strategic or tactical level.[16] At the strategic level under an authoritarian ruler, only a small group of men are making military decisions.

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[13] Ami Isseroff, *Zionism and Israel Dictionary*, http://www.zionism-israel.com/, (accessed: November 27, 2009).

[14] U.S. Department Of Defense, *Warfighting,* United States Marine Corps, publication # MCDP-1, 20 June 1997, p. 30.

[15] Jason Lyall, "Paths of Ruin: Why Revisionist States Die in World Politics", Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, October 2006, p. 1

[16] Aaron D'Amico, SSgt, United States Marine Corps, interview held during meeting of the Urban Warfare Training Center, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, January 2005

Democratic nations, such as the United States, on the other hand, have many more people involved in strategic decision-making. This has been critiqued as being slow and ineffective by some scholars but the redundancy also allows for greater thought to be put into a problem, rather than an authoritarian group-think mentality.

On the tactical level, soldiers from authoritarian governments are less likely to act individually. The militaries of democratic nations, such as Israel and the United States, are more likely to show initiative even though the military itself is an authoritarian regime.[17] The Soviet Union did not fail in Afghanistan and Chechnya because the Afghanis and Chechens were necessarily better fighters but because they failed to adapt to the unconventional tactics used by their opponents.[18] The United States made the same mistake in Vietnam which was also exacerbated by a change in leadership. During the Yom Kippur war, the Israelis were able to quickly adapt from traditional warfare to maneuver warfare with great success. The Syrians, hindered by their authoritarian upbringing, were unable to adapt.

There are several counter-points to this theory as well. Bandwagoning certainly played a part in several of the conflicts that were outlined in this paper. One could argue that the Afghani's were victorious in the Soviet-Afghan war not because the Soviet Union could not adapt but because of the training and materiel support of the United States. The same could be said of the Soviets training and supplying the Vietnamese during the US-Vietnam war.

For the, "stronger" party ("stronger" by sheer size and logistical strength) to ensure victory in modern asymmetric warfare of any kind of duration, they need both the physical logistics *and* the ability to adapt to changing TTP's at the tactical level. The United States is

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ali Ahmad Jalali: *The Other Side of the Mountain* (Quantico, USMC Studies and Analysis, 1995), p. 404

currently involved in a multi-front asymmetric war against Islamic Extremists. Despite what traditional theories of international relations say, unless they (the United States) continue to change and adapt their own training and tactics to counteract the stand-off guerrilla stratagem currently employed, the war is unlikely to be successful. References

Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How a superpower can end up losing to the little guys,* Neiman Watchdog, http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/, March 23, 2007.

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