

## WAR IS PERSUASION

ABSTRACT: *Persuasion is communication that has the potential to change the recipient's behavior. War can be very persuasive. However, fighting is not persuasive unless it carries a persuasive message—one that changes the enemy's behavior. Thus, the battle to persuade the enemy can be more important than the battle to destroy the enemy. Superior force of arms can lose to superior persuasion.*

Clausewitz believed that war is a continuation of politics by military means. But war as a political act does not fully capture its essence. When war is said to be the continuation of politics by military means, what is really being said is that war, like politics, is a form of persuasion.

Communication is the transmission of information. Communication is necessary but not sufficient for persuasion. Persuasion is information that results in a mental activity that may change the recipient's behavior. Animals communicate, humans persuade.

A persuasive message causes a person or group to act differently than if the message had not been received. Persuasion does not necessarily make the recipients act in the way intended by the sender; rather, it means that the recipients act differently than they would have otherwise.

It may be thought that “propaganda” is the only form of persuasion in war, but this is too narrow a view of persuasion. Everything a combatant does, if known to the other side, is a form of persuasion. Until one realizes that war is persuasion, one cannot defeat the enemy, one can only fight the enemy.

Although the force of arms can transmit a message, there is a great deal more to persuasion than simply fighting. Naked force of arms, fighting without a concomitant persuasive message, will not achieve a meaningful end. To the extent that one side is more persuasive, that side is winning the war.

When a combatant lacks an underlying persuasive message, war can be a futile exercise because it will not change the enemy's actions—although it may exhaust both sides' resources. Conflict without persuasion leaves both sides weaker but unchanged, and the conflict will either continue or reignite after temporarily subsiding.

It has been suggested that persuasion must be based on voluntary messages; that getting people to change their behavior by putting a gun to their head is not persuasion. But this is incorrect. Persuasion includes any actions, including coercive actions, which have the effect of making the recipients behave differently. Moreover, even under duress, people have the option of not changing their behavior.

War is goal-directed behavior, and therefore is "rational." Although not always begun for rational reasons, once started, war is a means to an end, where the goal is a change in the enemy's behavior, and the means is presenting the enemy with choices regarding its future.

But the goal of war is never what those who entered into it thought it would be. The goal changes as the combatants select and actualize the behaviors they believe will lead to their desired goals. In other words, the object of war changes as the war progresses. What would have been an unacceptable goal at the beginning of a war may become acceptable as the war progresses. Further, the message, its transmission, and how it is understood changes as the war progresses.

There are two extremes of war that must be acknowledged. At one extreme, one side possesses such overwhelming force that it simply kills all of its enemies, including noncombatants. In this situation no persuasion is required; the weapons are fired and destroy their targets, and there is no need to persuade the enemy of anything. At the other extreme, one side is unwilling to use force as a form of persuasion, but this is itself a form of persuasion: it may persuade the enemy to fight—and almost certainly win.

Persuasion is not always a conscious process; much of persuasion is unintentional. One side may be unintentionally sending a message of weakness. The unintended message can, many times, seem more genuine to the other side than the intended message. In this situation, the

unintended message overpowers the intended message and the war is being lost without the sender's even knowing it.

Wars are won or lost by persuasion, where force of arms is only one aspect of the persuasive message. Superior force of arms can lose to superior persuasion. The battle to persuade the enemy can be more important than the battle to destroy the enemy. In the end, the side that best marshals all of its persuasive weapons wins the war.