

# Why do Big Nations Lose Small Wars?

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

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PHILIPP SORGENFREI, MAR 5 2010

*Some people think that football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that.*<sup>[1]</sup>

War, like football- two games that are commonly known yet rarely understood. Two games, too often reduced to playing rather than winning, scoring goals rather than attaining them. Precisely because football is so well-established and the game "commonly understood", it is crucially relevant in understanding small wars (a match between professionals and amateurs). Because it is a truism that a team professional in scoring goals is likely to win the match, it is easily forgotten why goals lead to victory in the first place. Breaking with an accustomed image, I will explore the strategy of breaking the rules to create a game, in which the score (dead bodies and torched earth) is no longer central to victory and defeat and to show why big nations tend to lose small wars<sup>[2]</sup>. A weak team might not win through the number of goals but, nonetheless, it might win. <sup>[3]</sup><sup>[4]</sup>

*Der Ball ist rund und das Spiel dauert 90 Minuten*<sup>[5]</sup>

<sup>[6]</sup>The game commonly known as football is defined through a set of rules and regulations. In accepting those rules, a team accepts to play solely within the confines of a 68x105m flat-surfaced pitch, which must not be left by a player throughout the official playing time.<sup>[7]</sup> Players of both teams have to be recognizable by their jerseys which have to be worn at all times<sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore, the size and weight of the ball as well as the equipment carried by each player (i.e. shin pads, shoes, stockings) is exactly defined.<sup>[9]</sup> Both teams have to defend an equally sized, stationary goal and a goal may only be scored using neither hands nor arms. Most importantly, it is equally understood, that victory solely depends on the relative number of goals scored after 90 minutes.<sup>[10]</sup>

With reference to a gross imbalance in military and economic capacities as central feature of small wars, a hypothetical match between the team of FC Barcelona (the world's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest club) and the "Saints" University club shall be imagined. Each team may decide whether to observe the official rules or to deliberately breach them. Assuming both teams playing rule-abidingly, the professional team of Barça is very likely to score more goals within 90 minutes due to their superior fitness, technique and tactics.<sup>[11]</sup> Since by accepting the rules both equally accept the terms of victory, Barça would win. In the same way as the Saints would stand without a chance in a game on equal terms, so did insurgents challenging a vastly superior nation in open battle often pay a tremendous price. Due to superior firepower, discipline and tactics, 50.000 Sudanese soldiers were defeated in the battle of Omdurman (1898) in an open clash of forces by a combined British-Egyptian colonial force of 24.000, leaving more than 23.000 Sudanese either dead or wounded. Joint British and Egyptian casualties numbered 482.<sup>[12]</sup> More than half a decade later, North Vietnamese troops were met by a similar fate in attempting to gain control over South Vietnam in an open battle. The in 1968 initiated Tet Offensive turned into a military disaster due to their exposure to American air strikes who could bring their technological superiority to full bearing. <sup>[13]</sup><sup>[14]</sup>

A completely different image emerges, if the Saints decide not to play football, but to willingly disregard the FIFA rules. Extending the playing field to the terraces and fans. Hiding or destroying the official ball while suddenly producing an alternative ball from among the fans at the far end of the field to score a goal by surprise. Using shoulder pads to tackle Barça players while not wearing jerseys and hence blending in with the audience to avoid penalties and retribution. Recruiting fresh players from among the audience while happily entering even the tenth additional time irrespective of the score. Even though this game could hardly be called a football match, Barça would

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not be able to win, because the Saints wouldn't accept a score-based defeat. Similarly, Barça wouldn't be defeated either, because the Saints rather than scoring goals, focus on not falling behind. Since no team would accept defeat after 90 minutes, the game carries on until one team leaves the field.

Defeated and in exile, Napoleon Bonaparte famously referred to his efforts to control a popular insurgency (referred to as small war or "guerrilla" by the Spaniards) as "the fatal knot" that ultimately caused his downfall. Indeed, in his efforts to control the Iberian Peninsula and fighting an enemy that did not confront him in open combat, but in small mobile forces attacking his army's rear, its supply and communication lines, more troops were lost than in his attempt to conquer Russia<sup>[15]</sup><sup>[16]</sup> Impassable for his cavalry and artillery, the guerrillas operated from- and retreated into the mountainous, northern regions of Nacarre, hiding, being sheltered and supplied by the local population.<sup>[17]</sup><sup>[18]</sup> Even though Napoleon commanded the superior forces and controlled the major cities, he continuously failed to destroy the insurgents who avoided direct confrontations and so the war dragged on to bind and destroy men and material.<sup>[19]</sup>

Facing a weak team that does not honor the rules, frustrated Barça might decide not to leave but to escalate the number of world-class players or even to hire boxers to physically attack everybody deemed to be supporting or playing for the Saints (without jerseys the difference might be hard to tell). However, Barça would face increasingly high wages and an escalating level of brutality in a game that would hardly resemble football anymore. Fans and news networks all around the globe would decry the barbarism of the game and even worse, the extra goals scored by Barca could still fall short of the critical number for the students to admit defeat. Barça's violent behaviour against fans and players might encourage more and more students to join in the team, to help hiding the ball, or just to cheer the players.

"...Bomb everything that moves"<sup>[20]</sup>. These were the orders given to Ethiopian pilots in their war to prevent Eritrean independence(1961-91). The indiscriminate targeting of civilians with Napalm, cluster bombs and chemical weapons constituted the Ethiopian reaction towards an conventionally inferior enemy employing small-scale hit-and-run operations while avoiding direct confrontations. <sup>[21]</sup><sup>[22]</sup> Similar techniques were used respectively by US-forces and the insurgent Viet Cong in Vietnam<sup>[23]</sup>. Operation "Rolling Thunder", a campaign designed to coerce North Vietnam into peace negotiations, saw unprecedented amounts of bombs, Phosphor, Napalm and Agent Orange claiming approximately 52.000 civilian lives<sup>[24]</sup>/<sup>[25]</sup>. 10 years earlier, the same strategy was attempted by General McArthur who ordered to "...destroy every installation, factories, cities and villages" <sup>[26]</sup> in Korea leaving 18 out of 22 cities in ruin<sup>[27]</sup><sup>[28]</sup>. In both cases, it did not compel the enemy to capitulate and increased rather than decreased local support for the insurgents.<sup>[29]</sup> In addition, the United States faced more than just rising economic costs:

Fans in the stadium and worldwide expect to see a "fair game" in which their team wins in accordance to the rules. After Thierry Henry used his hand to assist in scoring the game-winning goal against Ireland, he as a player and his team faced massive international as well as domestic criticism. <sup>[30]</sup> Former World Cup winner Lizarazu stated that "...we are going to the World Cup, but ... with our heads bowed"<sup>[31]</sup>. A big team's image is of central importance to its continued success, because their main revenue and thus their continued existence is generated through advertisement, TV rights and fans paying for tickets.<sup>[32]</sup> Furthermore, a successful team like Barcelona has a stake in the widespread acceptance of the rules, because they protect their players from injury and guarantee that their overwhelming skill bears victory. Thus, disobeying the rules might help to win a halftime, yet it comes at great economical and political costs. In the case of Vietnam, Operation „Rolling Thunder“ sparked a spiral of escalating violence on the ground and increasing international isolation. Throughout the Vietnam war, the successive US-administrations were confronted with ever increasing domestic and international protests with hundreds and thousands of people protesting in and outside the United States. Led to believe in a quick victory and a just cause, the American electorate was shocked by the number of dead soldiers and the destruction caused by the ongoing fight, even when battles (such as the Tet Offensive) were won militarily.<sup>[33]</sup> Similar reactions could be observed after a German-US aerial attack on two fuel tankers in Afghanistan. The vehicles captured by the insurgent Taliban were destroyed by an air strike killing more than 100 insurgents and bystanders.<sup>[34]</sup> In its aftermath, German inspector general Schneiderhahn as well as German defense secretary Jung had to resign.<sup>[35]</sup>

However, Barca is not doomed to be defeated. It could also decide to send its youth team to St.Andrews and thus

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greatly reducing its costs. Strictly obeying the rules and distributing food, drink and fan articles to the audience, the Saints would find it increasingly hard to muster the support crucial to sustain the additional playing time. Such an approach was successfully realized by US-forces during an uprising of the Hukbalahap movement on the Philippines (1946-54). Relying on small detachments of combined US and native forces, treating captives well and offering amnesty to enemy fighters while running schools and hospitals in local villages, the insurgents finally had to succumb due to the absence of popular support.[36]

As exemplarily demonstrated, in choosing the right strategy a weak actor can avoid defeat in fighting a superpower. On the other hand, a strong nation trying to break this stalemate by resorting to barbarism finds itself confronted with unbearable political and economic costs. Thus, in understanding why big nations tend to lose small wars it is important to analyze how a stalemate translates into the insurgent's victory.[37] Barcelona and her supporters, being the outstanding favorite, will expect an easy victory and since it would come at no surprise, would gain little in money and prestige. What really matters for Barcelona is the Champions League. The Saints' players however, faced with their lifetime opportunity to play the famous FC Barcelona would be motivated to perform over their physical limits or even risk injury. It was even assumed, they would disregard the rules and so the game goes into overtime with a rising level of brutality. Both teams will find themselves confronted with ever rising monetary and physical costs. Since Barcelona, has less to gain and more loose, they might finally withdraw leaving the Saints to celebrate their victory. So, in breaking the rules and successfully avoiding defeat, the game is decided by the will to keep playing no matter what the costs.

„How do you beat an enemy who is willing to fight helicopters with bows and arrows?“[38] In an US attempt to stabilize Somalia, their opponents even used slingshots against Blackhawk helicopters, women and children as human shields and hence bore tremendous costs in human lives.[39] Between 1992 and 1994, US troops suffered 30 casualties, while killing an estimated 3000 in an intervention President Clinton termed „a vital humanitarian mission“.[40]<sup>[41]</sup> The difference to a mission „defending US core interests“ became clear after 18 US casualties in the streets of Mogadishu arguably caused the US retreat in 1994.[42] In the final analysis, the local militias were willing to suffer losses at a far greater rate without accepting them as decisive or appealing for peace.[43] Similarly, 20 years earlier, the North Vietnamese' vastly superior will to continue a war with horrendous casualties forced 500.000 US troops to leave the country[44]. Although undefeated in battle, 54.000 dead US-soldiers, \$686 billion in total costs of war and the pictures of Napalm bombing raids on CNN seemed finally to stand in no proportion to a war not centrally threatening US-survival. In the height of the Cold War, there were greater battles looming elsewhere. On the other hand, the death of 5.1 million Vietnamese was not able to force the North into surrender.[45]

In conclusion it was argued, that weak actors tend to win small wars when they are able to successfully avoid defeat. The strong nation's advantage in killing capacities may only lead to victory, when applied in open and decisive battles. However, as soon as the weak actor alters the terms of war and avoids direct confrontation while engaging in continuous and indecisive small-scale attacks, the „contest of killing“ turns into a „contest of endurance“. Both sides face ever rising costs as the war drags on so that ultimately the willingness to sustain them becomes decisive. However, since insurgents tend to fight for their very survival while the strong power's existence is not at stake, the strong may ultimately withdraw leaving the field to the weak. Although the weak does not win on the battlefield, nonetheless, he wins because goals are not everything that matter.

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[4] “victory”: achieving at the end of the conflict the “political goals that led to the outbreak of hostilities”: Shaohua, p.337

[5] “The ball is round and the game lasts 90 minutes”, Sepp Herberger quoted in: David Gordon Smith, *German football's greatest sayings*, (Oct 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,558638-2,00.html>), p.2

[6] This passage relies broadly on *Ivan Arreguín-Toft's idea of “asymmetric strategy”*. He argues, that each actor in an asymmetric conflict can either choose to employ a strategy aimed directly at the enemy's military capacities (direct strategy) or at his will to continue the struggle by avoiding decisive military action and escalating brutality (indirect strategy). He further argues, that an asymmetry of strategies (i.e. direct vs. indirect strategies) greatly increases the weaker actor's chances of victory: Arreguín-Toft, pp.93-128

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[8] *ibid*, p.41

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[10] *ibid*, p.28,54

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[16] Anthony James Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History And Politics Of Counterinsurgency*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2004) p.2

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[19] Mao Tse-Tung later described this technique as core tenet of guerrilla warfare: "When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws": Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith, (University of Illinois Press, 1961), p.46

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[21] *ibid*, p.16

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[23] Major American involvement 1965-73 and marked by a gross imbalance in power, Toft, p.21

[24] Pape, *Coercive Air Power*, p.105

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Written by: Philipp Sorgenfrei  
Written at: University of St. Andrews  
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