



Boxers from West Point and the Air Force Academy compete 4 November 2022 at Globe Life Stadium in Dallas. (Photo by Cadet Hannah Lamb, U.S. Army)

Counterpunching to Win

A Mindset and Method to Defeat First Battle Fears

Lt. Col. Craig A. Broyles, U.S. Army

We cannot know when or where the U.S. Army will again be ordered into battle, but we must assume the enemy we face will possess weapons generally as effective as our own. And we must calculate that he will have them in greater

numbers than we will be able to deploy, at least in the opening stages of a conflict. ... Therefore, the first battle of our next war could well be its last battle.

—Field Manual 100-5, Operations (April 1977)

The U.S. Army's focus is to win the first battle when the next war comes. This means seizing the initiative and launching expeditionary offensive multidomain operations to "break the enemy's will to resist."¹ However, the United States is a member of several defensive alliances like NATO. Those alliances are strictly defensive. They are not built to invade, and they will not act until the enemy throws the first blow. The situation is much like a chess match in which the U.S. Army is playing the black pieces and bound to wait and react to white's opening move.

This situation is not new. During the Cold War, U.S. Army forces were defensively arrayed, facing a numerically superior opponent, and restrained by its membership in defense alliances. However, its capstone doctrine, AirLand Battle, was defensive in nature.

The U.S. Army faces similar circumstances today except its current doctrine, Multidomain Operations, is offensively focused. The U.S. Army might prefer to strike first, but it cannot unless it wants to fight alone. This is not just theoretical; the U.S. military is now defensively postured around the globe in forward locations like Poland, Lithuania, Japan, and Korea. These forces are on a type of leash. They will likely have to absorb the first blow before the leash is taken off. The U.S. Army must come to grips with the fact that it will likely fight the first battle having already yielded the initiative to the enemy. This poses the question, how can the U.S. Army fight offensively from a defensive posture? The answer is by counterpunching.

Counterpunching is a method boxers use to fight offensively from a defensive position. It is quickly turning a defense into an offense. The idea is that when two expert boxers face each other, their defensive prowess makes it difficult to land blows. However, when a fighter throws a punch, it exposes a brief opening for the opponent to land a counterpunch. If repeated, the instigator becomes reluctant to throw punches due to the painful counterpunches.

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This response allows the counterpuncher to go over to the offensive, seize the initiative, build momentum, and dominate the fight. Counterpunching is the optimal way the U.S. Army can win against an attacking enemy who has the initiative at the opening of hostilities.

To understand the argument, this article first explains counterpunch theory and translates it into practical warfighting principles. These principles are the gift system, guard/move/hit, and the liver punch principle. Next, the article uses the historical example of the Battle of Tannenberg to better explain these counterpunching principles.

The article concludes that counterpunching is a dynamic and emergent method that exploits the inherent vulnerabilities in the enemy's first strikes. Rather than fearing the first battle, counterpunch theory asserts that the attacker reveals his Achilles' heel the moment he crosses the forward line of troops. This offers windows of opportunities to deliver a series of liver punches that over time blunts the adversary's attacks, stalls its momentum, and forces it to turn over the initiative. This allows the U.S. Army to seize the initiative, build momentum, dominate the fight, and break the enemy's will to resist.

Counterpunching

Counterpunching is a method to respond to any attack that offers a solution for the U.S. Army to fight offensively from a defensive posture.² The overall concept is that when an opponent throws a punch, that action opens a hole in his defense and affords a brief opportunity to punch back into a vulnerable area. Counterpunching is quickly turning a defense into an offense.

Counterpunching is a "gift system," meaning you take what your opponent gives you.³ There is no need to create vulnerabilities because your opponent gives them to you every time he punches. The counterpuncher concentrates his efforts on exploiting the vulnerabilities, or holes in their defense, created by an opponent's actions.⁴ It is then a matter of filling those holes with punches. This method increases the fighter's striking power because unexpected punches hurt more. Unexpected punches produce knockouts.

Counterpunching slows down a fast opponent. Repeated, well-timed, accurate punches into unexpected vulnerable areas upset the aggressor's momentum. Frustration, pain, and fatigue begin to take its toll. This allows the counterpuncher to take the

initiative, create momentum, and then dominate the fight.

Counterpunching does have its drawbacks. By allowing the opponent to punch first, the counterpuncher cannot always block or evade. He inevitably gets hit. Yet, that is the sport. Seasoned boxers remind novices that trying to box without getting hit is like trying to swim without getting wet. Another drawback is that counterpunching takes significant practice to be able to block or evade a punch, see the opening, and strike back before that moment of opportunity vanishes. The only way to get the timing right is to practice with a sparring partner. It is hard to train counterpunching alone.⁵

Application of Boxing Principles to Warfare

Applying boxing principles to warfare is problematic as boxing has rules, referees, and occurs in a controlled ring. Warfare has none of those things. However, boxing is like war as it is “nothing but a duel,” and both are an art and science with the object of imposing one’s will upon the opponent.⁶ Acknowledging the limitations of comparing boxing to war, there are principles in counterpunching that the U.S. Army can utilize in waging multidomain operations. These principles are the gift system principle, the guard/move/hit principle, and the liver punch principle.

Gift system principle. The gift system principle states that when enemies attack, they gift to their opponent mistakes, open gaps, create holes, and expose vulnerabilities for the defender. There are immediate and unforeseen advantageous circumstances created by the fog, fear, friction, and fatigue of war.⁷ In other words, when the enemy moves and hits, he exposes his Achilles’ heel. Actions uncover weaknesses. It is up to the counterpuncher to find them.

To do this, counterpunchers must learn to fight inside the context the opponents provide.⁸ This means understanding that every war is unique. As warfare mutates over time, the opening of armed conflict is a vulnerable time for both sides. It is the one who recognizes how warfare has changed, adapts to that change, and then leverages those changes in the shortest amount of time that gains the advantage.⁹ Or, as maneuver warfare theorist John Boyd asserted, “Whoever can handle the quickest rate of change is the one that survives.”¹⁰ Fortunately for the counterpuncher, attackers tend to rush into the first battle determined to win before they are truly prepared. The French army did exactly that

at the cost of 260,000 casualties after only the first two weeks of World War I.¹¹

Invasion planners almost always gift invalid assumptions they do not discover were wrong until after the war is underway. Often, they concoct opening schemes based on having learned the wrong lessons from the previous war.¹² Both sides habitually start the war having not fully leveraged emerging technology. Invaders always have tendencies and expectations for how they want the fight to go. All these factors present the defender with plenty of holes for counterpunches. However, just identifying holes is not enough. The counterpuncher must guard, move, and hit, which is the second principle in counterpunch theory.¹³

Guard, move, and hit principle. This principle is all about sequence and timing. Counterpunching is rapidly transitioning from defense to offense and back to defense. It is a back-and-forth sequence to repeatedly guard, move, and hit the enemy to blunt his attack, stall his momentum, and create the counterpunch effect. This is when the aggressor becomes reluctant to take any more offensive actions over the fear of the counterpunches and hands the initiative over to the defender. Rather than delaying operations that trade space for time, counterpunching trades punches for time. Both have the same goal but different methods.

The first part of the sequence is the guard, which implies defensive actions to block, parry, and protect against enemy attacks. Guards are also security missions to destroy, defeat, or cause the withdrawal of the enemy’s vanguard.¹⁴ Guards blind, impede, and fix the enemy while securing the friendly force’s freedom of maneuver. B. H. Liddell Hart clarifies this concept with his example of a man fighting another in the dark. He describes the fighter stretching out his lead hand, reaching to find his opponent while keeping it ready to guard himself against surprise. Touching his opponent, the fighter feels his way to a vulnerable spot (throat) and seizes it. The fighter fixes his opponent’s whole attention by squeezing his throat. This sets up the fighter to deliver the decisive knockout blow with his rear hand from an unexpected direction.¹⁵ Guards prevent “leading with your chin,” and they find, blind, impede, and fix the opponent, allowing all others to move and hit.

Moving means evading, redirecting, and blocking attacking strikes while positioning assets to deliver the counterpunch. Modern detection sensors linked with long-range precision-guided munitions are so effective that current battlefields resemble submarine warfare, and



Spc. Dustin Lara (*left*), a member of the World Class Athlete Program, body punches Pfc. Christian Reyes during their light welterweight bout 9 April 2010 at Barnes Field House, Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Counterpunching to the body, specifically to the liver area, can incapacitate an opponent. (Photo by Master Sgt. Doug Sample, U.S. Army)

the actual destruction of the opponent is almost certain and anticlimactic.¹⁶ “The real battle is about detection.”¹⁷ A boxing truism is the safest way to avoid getting hit is by not being there.¹⁸ The safest way for the U.S. military to not get hit is by moving and dispersing their forces.¹⁹ While moving includes defensive actions to evade, redirect, and block enemy attacks, moving also means positioning forces and assets to hit back.

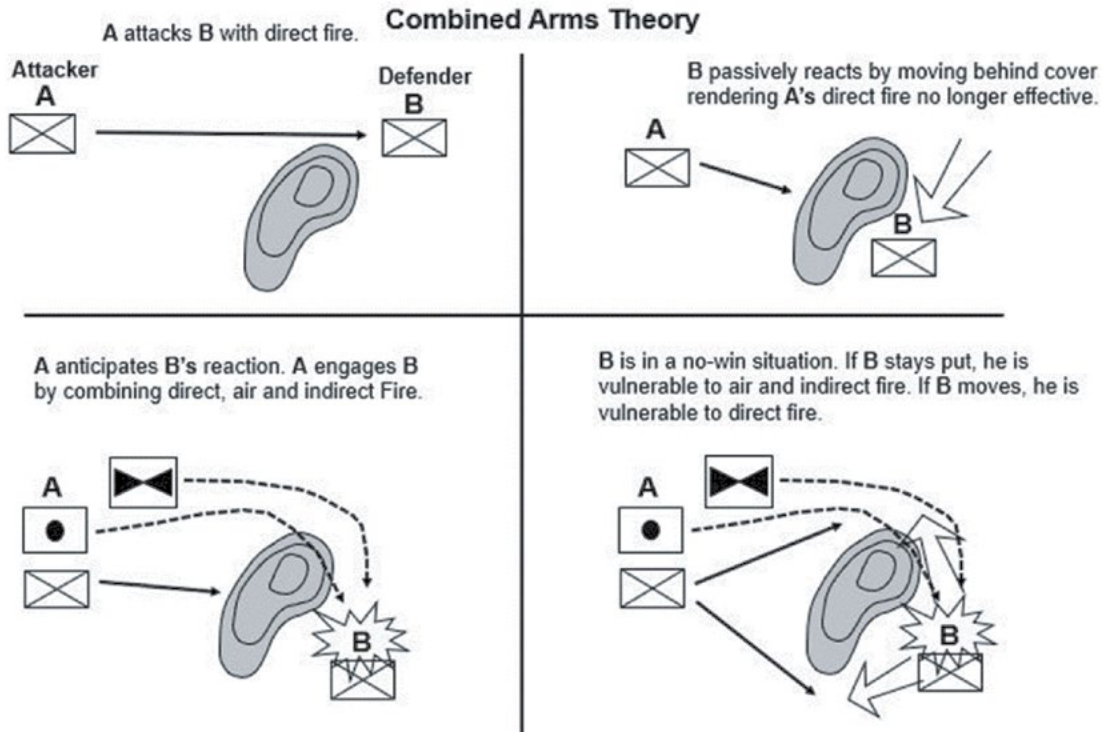
Moving is important because counterpunching requires timing. The defender’s hitting capabilities must be ready and in range when the opponent’s holes present themselves. Once the guard is in place, the defender moves assets into positions for the counterpunch. Realistically, because of timing, the defender may be out of position and unable to take advantage of every opportunity presented. That is okay. The defender is still learning while identifying holes, guarding, and moving for when the timing is right. As Sugar Ray Robinson pointed out, “Knockouts aren’t about power; they’re about timing.”²⁰

The hitting portion of the sequence means filling holes with strikes. It is the moment when defense transitions to

offense. The defender spotted a vulnerability, had the attacker in his guard, moved assets in position, and delivered an accurate strike. Counterpunching requires a bias for action because everything depends on timing. Windows of opportunity are short, and counterpunchers cannot hesitate. Therefore, when the moment arrives to counterpunch, it has got to hurt. This gives us our final principle, called the liver punch principle.

Liver punch principle. The liver punch principle derives its name from a punch delivered in boxing that is so painful it can incapacitate the opponent. Applying this concept to warfare requires understanding and applying combined arms theory. Combined arms theory is about creating a dilemma; the goal is to put the enemy in a no-win situation by combining arms in a complementary manner to create exploitable opportunities.²¹ It combines fires, maneuver, and supporting arms so that “any action the enemy takes to avoid one threat makes him more vulnerable to another.”²²

Combined arms theory is about battlefield reactions: “A weapon system’s most important effect on the battlefield is



(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Combined Arms Theory

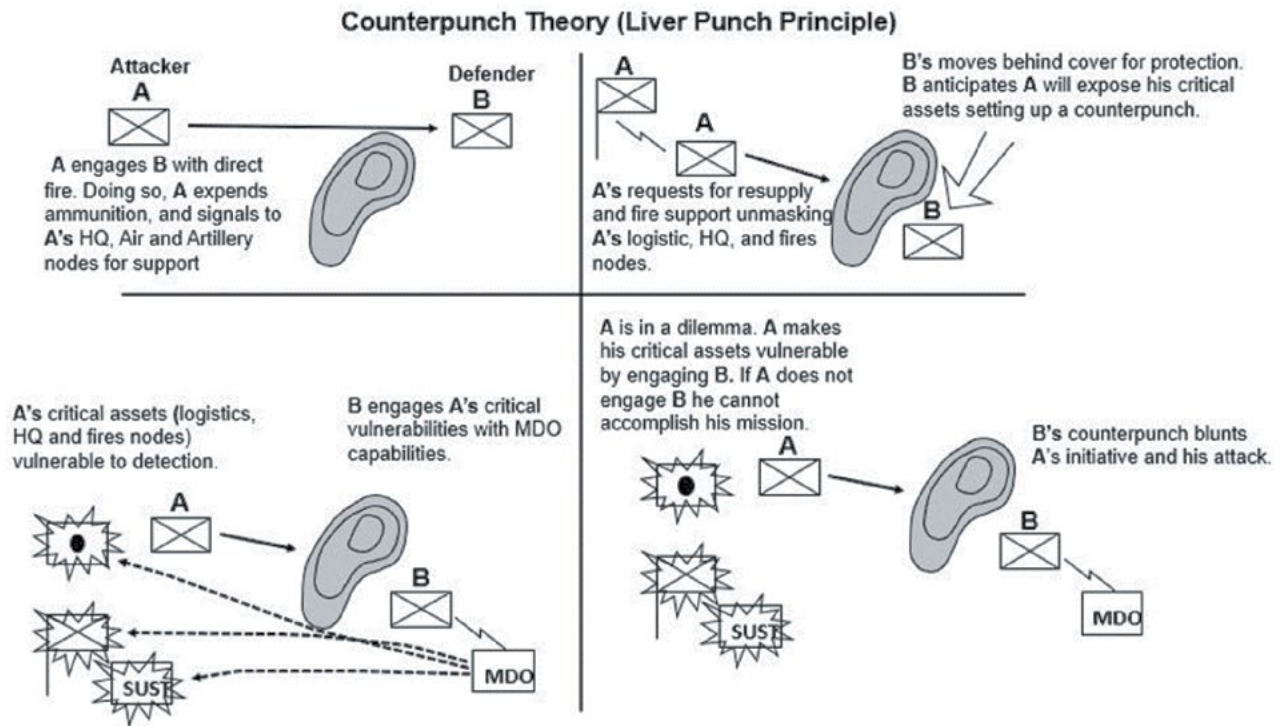
not how much it kills, but rather what reactions it causes.²³ A simple example of combined arms theory is when A attacks B with direct fire. B reacts by returning fire and moving behind cover so as not to die. B's move renders A's direct fire no longer effective. However, A anticipates this and combines arms in a complementary manner by engaging B with air and artillery fire. Now B is in a no-win situation. If B stays put, he is vulnerable to A's air and artillery fire.²⁴ Warfare practitioners who understand this theory can anticipate reactions (see figure 1).

Counterpunch theory builds upon combined arms to establish the liver punch principle. It employs the defeat mechanism of dislocation to render the enemy's dispositions irrelevant.²⁵ The liver punch principle asserts that when an attacker punches, he simultaneously uncovers and exposes a critical vulnerability for a counterblow. A right-handed boxer's strongest punch is usually his right hook or cross. Yet, if he chooses to throw it, he simultaneously uncovers his right-side ribs. The boxer is now vulnerable for his opponent to deliver a painful counterpunch to his liver. A liver punch hurts so badly that, at best, it drops the boxer to the mat or, at worst, it makes the

boxer hesitant to throw more right crosses. The liver punch principle aims to strike the attacker's critical vulnerabilities exposed by his actions. At best, it could defeat the attacker, or at worst, blunt his attack.

A simple example of counterpunch theory is A attacks B with direct fire. A's attack necessitates logistical and fire support coordinated by A's headquarters. These signals for support as well as movements unmask these critical assets. Again, B moves behind cover for protection, but this time, B fights irregularly. B anticipates that A's attack will uncover A's critical vulnerabilities. B locates and engages A's logistical, headquarters and fire nodes using multi-domain capabilities such as space, cyber, and joint fires. A is now in a dilemma. If A keeps attacking, he may lose his critical assets needed for further offensive operations. If A does not attack, he does not accomplish the mission. B's counterpunches were so hurtful, A is reluctant to continue attacking (see figure 2).

The historical example of the Battle of Tannenberg offers counterpunching principles and demonstrates how the U.S. Army can fight offensively from a defensive posture. The Battle of Tannenberg was fought in 1914 in modern-day eastern Poland. This is useful given the current



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Counterpunch Theory (Liver Punch Principle)

context with Russia and NATO. The Battle of Tannenberg involved several hundreds of thousands of soldiers and covered hundreds of kilometers. Weapons technology was revolutionary, and armies struggled massively to cope with the changes. At the opening of hostilities in World War I, Russia held the initiative and attacked the outnumbered German army. What is most valuable is that Germany did not trade space for time. There are stark differences between that fight in 1914 and the situation in Eastern Europe today. However, the growing U.S. defensive posture in that region and increased Russian aggression make the Battle of Tannenberg relevant to counterpunching theory.

The Battle of Tannenberg

[Churchill] especially admired François as a man who knew how to win battles the wrong way while his superiors were losing them the right way.

—Dennis Showalter²⁶

The German strategy to win at the start of World War I was to attack France with all its armies except one. That one German army would defend its eastern front in Prussia against the Russian invasion long enough to force

France to capitulate. Once France surrendered, Germany would then turn all its forces against Russia. For Germany, everything depended upon whether one German army could hold off the entire Russian military long enough until France's downfall.²⁷ Both France and Russia expected this was Germany's intention, so both raced to counter it as the war began in early August 1914. Could the Russians threaten or seize Berlin before Paris fell? Doing so would require the Russians to destroy that one German army. For Germany, could its one army beat the attacking Russians who held the initiative at the start of the war?

That one German army in eastern Prussia, upon which this all depended, was the Eighth Army commanded by Col. Gen. Maximilian von Prittwitz. His superior, Col. Gen. Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, gave contradicting guidance on how Prittwitz was to defend its eastern frontier. According to Moltke, Prittwitz was to protect German territory and preserve the Eighth Army for future operations. Prittwitz must expect the Russians will outnumber him two to one. However, under no circumstances could Prittwitz let the Russians destroy Eighth Army nor trap it into a siege situation. Prittwitz could retreat west of the Vistula River if necessary and trade space for time

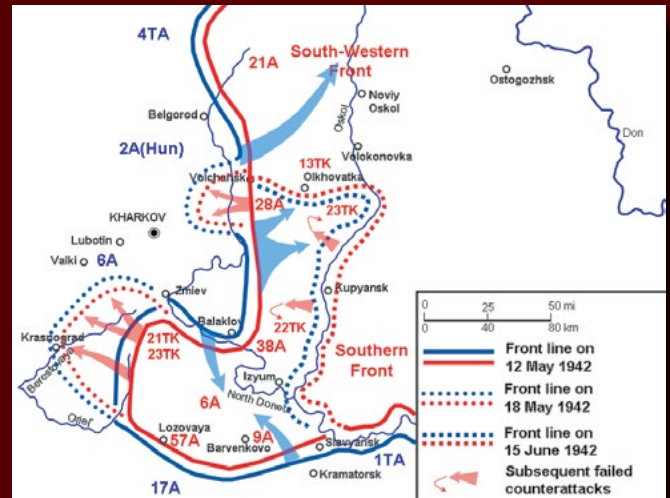
until further German reinforcements arrived. Still, Moltke warned the consequences of doing so would be disastrous.²⁸

Conversely, the Russians intended to mobilize and attack east Prussia as fast as possible, destroy Eighth Army, and threaten Berlin. Doing so would upset the entire German strategy. The Russians would attack east Prussia with their First and Second Armies. The Russian First Army, commanded by Gen. Paul von Rennenkampf, would invade east Prussia first by advancing west, north of the Masurian lakes near Gumbinnen (modern-day Gusev, Kaliningrad). Its aim was to engage the German Eighth Army and pin it down, allowing the Russian Second Army to deliver the decisive blow. Gen. Alexander Samsonov, commander of the Russian Second Army, had this task. Samsonov advanced west into Prussia but south of the Masurian lakes near Ortelsburg (modern-day Szczytno, Poland). Once past the lakes, he was to turn north and enveloped the German Eighth Army from the rear.²⁹ The Russian Empire's pre-World War I boundaries with Germany made that an enticing strategy.

Opposing the Russian invasion was the German Eighth Army. It consisted of six active divisions of the I, XVII, and XX Corps and was reinforced by three reserve divisions.³⁰ Prittwitz directed his corps commanders to wait and concentrate only after intelligence and reconnaissance discovered the Russian intentions.³¹ Prittwitz moved Eighth Army east along the Angerapp line some twenty miles west of the German/Russian border. Prittwitz believed this position afforded him the flexibility to respond to the Russian First or Second Armies.³² Prittwitz anticipated correctly the Russian First Army advance west along the Vilna to Königsberg railroad. This made sense as the Russians needed the railroad for logistical support. Prittwitz's I Corps commander, General of the Infantry Herman von François, considered defending so far west of the border intolerable and took matters into his own hands.³³

On 17 August, the Russian First Army invaded, moving east into Prussia with two hundred thousand men. The Russian First Army's initial objective was to seize the Insterburg railroad hub thirty-seven miles west of the border.³⁴ Insterburg was the ideal location to tie down the German Eighth Army for the Russian Second Army's envelopment. To counter Rennenkampf, Prittwitz cautiously moved the Eighth Army toward Gumbinnen, a town twelve miles east of the Insterburg Gap. However, to his surprise and despite his orders, his I Corps commander had

The Second Battle of Kharkov, 1942: Counterpunch Theory in Practice



(Map by Grafikm via Wikimedia Commons)

On 12 May 1942, Soviet forces launched an offensive (the “punch”) against the German 6th Army in an effort to drive it away from threatening Soviet staging areas. Though achieving some initial success, massive German airstrikes halted the offensive, leaving the Soviets in a highly vulnerable salient. The Soviet leadership had inaccurately estimated the 6th Army's potential for responding to an attack.

German forces responded with Operation Fredericus, a counteroffensive (the “counterpunch”) conducted 12–28 May 1942. The German pincer attack on 17 May cut off and surrounded three Soviet field armies. Confined to a narrow pocket without hope of relief, by 30 May approximately 280,000 Soviet soldiers were killed or wounded by attacks from all sides as well as intensive bombing from the air.

Following the successful counteroffensive, the German-led Army Group South exploited the chaos in Soviet ranks resulting from the disaster, moving successfully to encircle the Soviet 28th Army by 13 June and driving back the 38th and 9th Armies by June 22.

already moved past Gumbinnen and hit the Russians just after they had crossed the border.³⁵

The Russian First Army collided with François's I Corps in the small town of Stallupönen (modern-day Nesterov, Russia). Rennenkampf's forces were not prepared for the Germans to attack them so close to the border. Strategic necessity pressured Rennenkampf to rush into east Prussia. Thus, his forces had become strung out and fell upon François's I Corps at Stallupönen in piecemeal.³⁶ Upon learning his I Corps was decisively engaged at Stallupönen against his orders, Prittwitz demanded François break contact and return to Gumbinnen. François replied, "Tell General von Prittwitz that General von François will break off the engagement when the Russians are defeated."³⁷

As the Battle at Stallupönen developed, one of François's division commanders, Maj. Gen. Adalbert von Falk, was also not waiting on orders. Adhering to the German army's bias toward action, he marched toward the sound of cannon fire. Falk's initiative paid off, and his division slammed unexpectedly into the Russian First Army's southern flank. Falk's action created havoc along the Russian line and stopped First Army's advance.³⁸ At Stallupönen, the massively outnumbered German I Corps had blunted Rennenkampf's attack and dealt him a stunning counterpunch from which the Russian First Army never fully recovered.

The next day, François reluctantly complied with Prittwitz's orders and withdrew west to join the rest of the Eighth Army at Gumbinnen. Upon learning of I Corps' retreat, Rennenkampf tried again to advance toward Insterburg. However, the Russian First Army had used up much of its ammunition at Stallupönen, and his supply system was a mess.³⁹ To sort out the disorder, the Russians sent radio messages in the clear rather than encrypted. The Germans intercepted these radio communications, giving them a marked advantage throughout the rest of Tannenberg



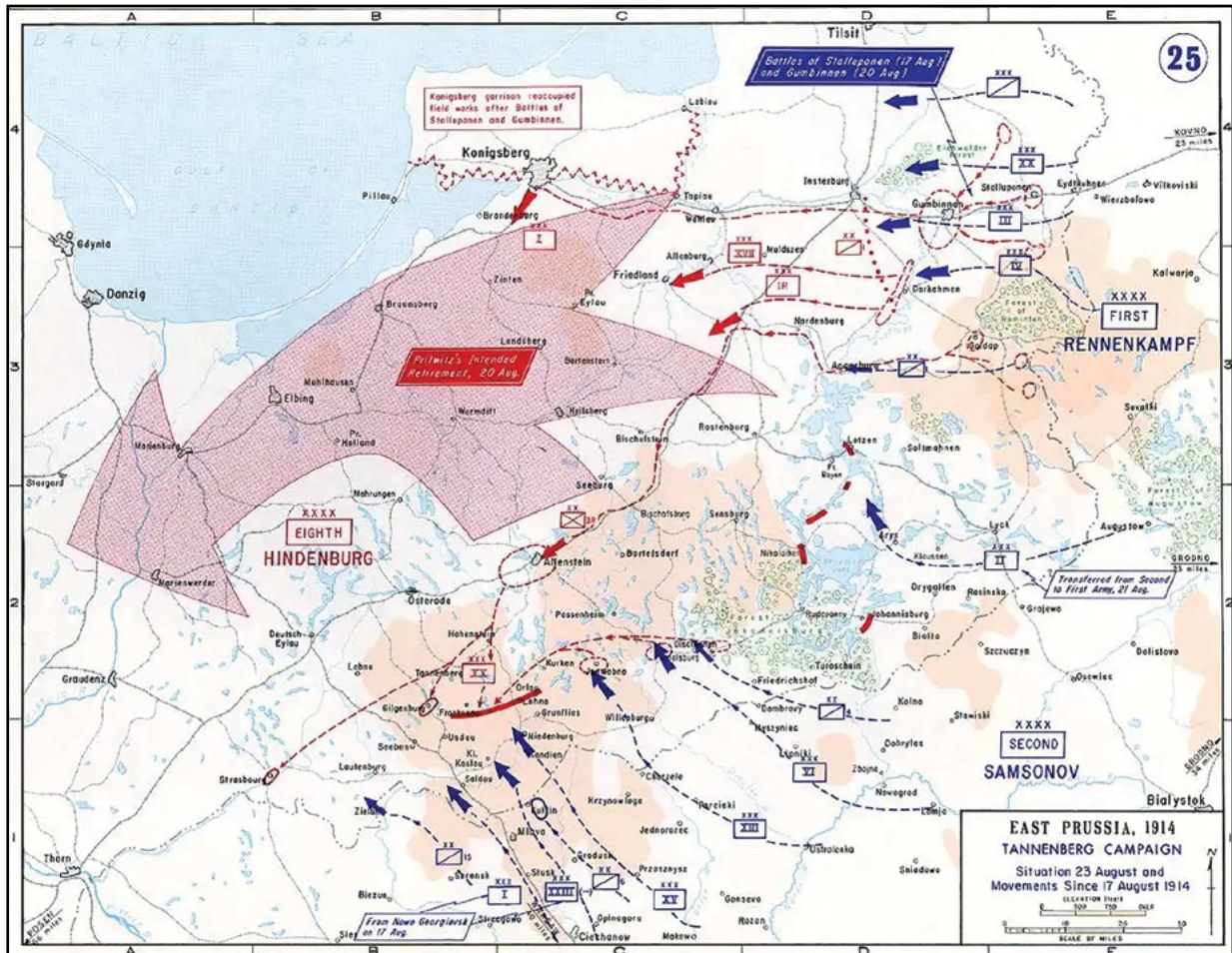
(Map courtesy of West Point Digital History Center)

Start of World War I Eastern Front

Campaign. From these stolen radio transmissions, Prittwitz learned that Rennenkampf halted his advance toward Insterburg on 20 August.⁴⁰

Armed with this intelligence, fueled by his subordinate's success at Stallupönen and hearing reports that the Russian Second Army had crossed the border to his southwest, Prittwitz perceived an opportunity to strike.⁴¹ However, unlike at Stallupönen, the Russians were ready at Gumbinnen. The Germans attacked the Russians in prepared defensive positions. In their haste to advance, the Germans assaulted without waiting for their artillery to prepare the way.⁴² The consequences were catastrophic. Prittwitz, believing his army was close to being destroyed or surrounded, ordered the Eighth Army to retreat west behind the Vistula River, giving east Prussia to the Russians.⁴³

To Moltke, the decision to abandon east Prussia was unacceptable. Moltke fired Prittwitz and replaced him



(Map courtesy of West Point Digital History Center)

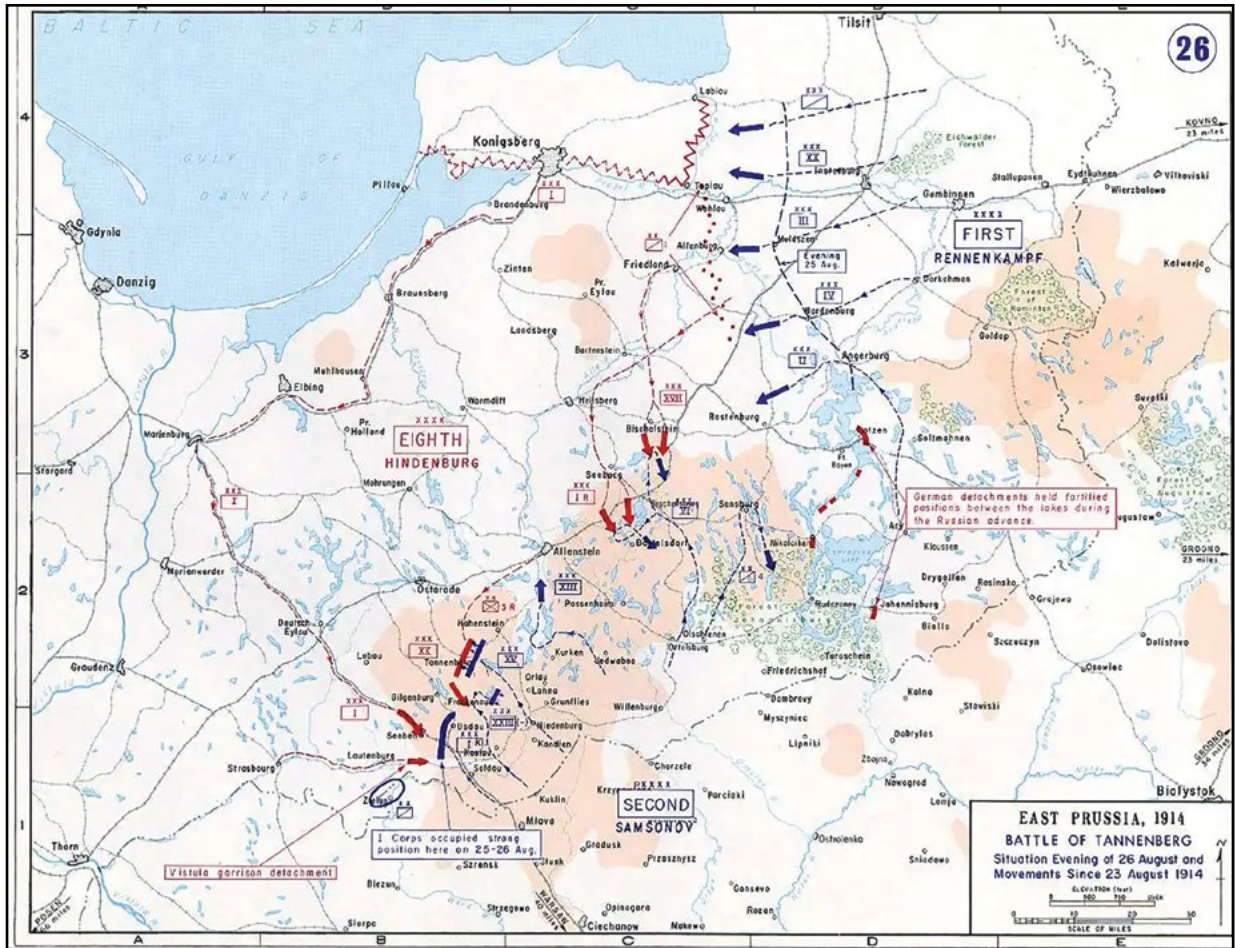
Battles of Stallupönen and Gumbinnen

with Gen. Paul von Hindenburg and a new chief of staff, Gen. Erich Ludendorff. As both men traveled east to assume command of the Eighth Army, its deputy chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Adolf Hoffmann, recognized a great opportunity if the Russian First Army would stay put. The Eighth Army could use its railroads to disengage François's I Corps, load it on trains, and transport it southwest all the way to strike at the Russian Second Army's left wing.⁴⁴ The rest of the Eighth Army would merely do an about face on the Russian First Army and attack southwest against the Russian Second Army. All this depended on if Rennenkampf would stay put and stay put he did.⁴⁵

Rennenkampf did not pursue the German Eighth Army after Gumbinnen because his food and ammunition were almost gone. The change of rail gauge at the German border hindered his railroad resupplies from the east. Plus, his First Army had taken significant casualties after Stallupönen and Gumbinnen. Yet, to Rennenkampf's

surprise, the Germans retreated. Rennenkampf interpreted this to mean he had soundly beaten the Germans.⁴⁶ Rennenkampf feared that should he pursue Eighth Army too vigorously, it would flee west faster than Samsonov's Second Army could envelop it.⁴⁷ Rennenkampf never shook off these beliefs until well after Second Army's destruction by the German Eighth Army.

On 21 August, the Russian Second Army crossed the border, advancing northwest toward Ortelsburg and Neidenburg.⁴⁸ By 23 August, the Russian Second Army had seized Neidenburg and continued northwest until Lt. Gen. Friedrich von Scholtz from the German Eighth Army's XX Corps stopped him.⁴⁹ Ludendorff ordered Scholtz to fight until the last man to buy time for François's I Corps' arrival on the Russian left wing.⁵⁰ Starting on 21 August, François had to load, move, and unload his entire corps by rail from Insterburg to Deutsch Eylau (modern-day Lława, Poland) and be ready to attack the Russian



(Map courtesy of West Point Digital History Center)

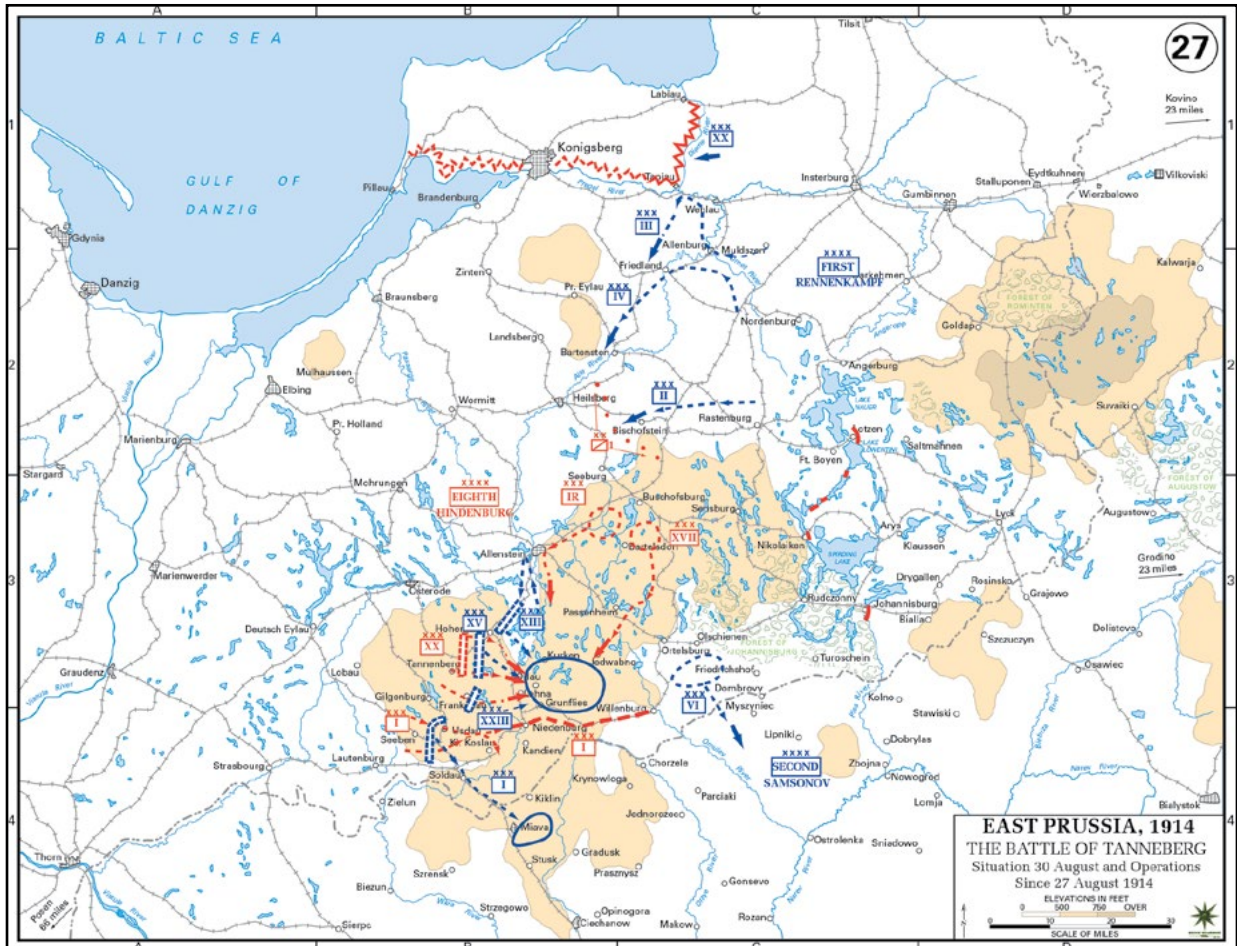
Repositioning of German First Corps

left wing by 25 August.⁵¹ During this time, the situation for the Eighth Army was critical. Its forces were fighting off Second Army's attack, trying to move a corps by railroad, and threatened now by Rennenkampf's First Army, which could move against Eighth Army's rear. Salvation came from an intercepted Russian radio transmission sent in the clear between Samsonov and Rennenkampf. It revealed that both commanders misunderstood the situation.⁵² Both believed the German Eighth Army was trying to retreat west toward the Vistula rather than setting a trap for Samsonov.

Empowered with this rare understanding of the enemy's intent, Ludendorff could be bold. He ordered Eighth Army to execute a double envelopment on the Russian Second Army. The operation would start on 26 August. Two of the Eighth Army's Corps would envelop the Russian right wing, XX Corps would hold the center, and François's I Corps would envelop the Russian left wing.⁵³

After detraining, François advanced east toward Neidenburg. He brushed off Ludendorff's incessant orders to attack immediately, regardless of unavailable artillery support. François had learned from his experiences at Stallupönen and Gumbinnen that attacking without artillery's preparatory fires was the surest way to fail.⁵⁴

As the German XX Corps continued to blunt the Russian Second Army's main advance, they withdrew further northwest further drawing the Russians deeper into the pocket. However, the Russians were close to overrunning XX Corps. As François's I Corps advanced east, he met little resistance. Ludendorff feared XX Corps was on the verge of collapse. Therefore, Ludendorff ordered François to divert half his forces to drive north to reinforce XX Corps rather than continue eastward and attack the Russian rear area.⁵⁵ Again, François rejected Ludendorff's orders. François believed the best way to assist XX Corps was to continue east to seize Neidenburg. Once seized, I



(Map courtesy of West Point Digital History Center)

German First Corps Liver Punch

Corps would sever the Russian supply lines and effectively trap the Russian Second Army. Furthermore, François believed Samsonov would be too concerned that the Germans cut them off to continue to press against XX Corps.⁵⁶ François disobeyed Ludendorff again and continued east toward Neidenburg.

By 28 August, the Battle of Tannenberg was on its third day, with three hundred thousand men battering one another.⁵⁷ Ludendorff learned by midday that XX Corps had repelled the Russian attack into the Eighth Army center, and François's instincts were right. Ludendorff rescinded his previous order to François and instructed him to continue to attack the Russian Second Army's rear by seizing Neidenburg.⁵⁸ By then, François was already there.

By 29 August, the German Eighth Army had trapped Samsonov. With two German corps enveloping his right wing, his center pinned by XX Corps, François's I Corps behind him, and

Rennenkampf nowhere near to assist, Samsonov ordered a general retreat.

The following two days were an utter disaster for the Russian Second Army as they fled, trying to escape the German net.⁵⁹ The battle results were ninety-two thousand Russian prisoners, fifty thousand dead and wounded, and two Russian Corps destroyed with two more severely depleted.⁶⁰ The Russian Second Army ceased to exist, and rather than face the czar, Samsonov committed suicide while trying to evade back to Russia.

With Second Army gone, the German Eighth Army now turned toward Rennenkampf. He was still reeling from Stallupönen and Gumbinnen. Hearing of Second Army's demise, Rennenkampf did not put up much of a fight and withdrew back from whence he came. The Russians turned over the initiative to the Germans. However, Austria's invasion into the Polish salient had been a disaster. The Russians routed the Austrians, and

Hindenburg's diversion of resources to rescue his ally prevented the Germans from exploiting Tannenberg's success. The Germans lost the opportunity to launch a counteroffensive into Russia. However, the German Eighth Army did win against an attacking enemy who held the initiative at the opening of hostilities. The Battle of Tannenberg became legendary, inspiring the German nation for the rest of World War I and World War II.

Applying Counterpunch Theory

The Battle of Tannenberg informs counterpunch theory by demonstrating its dynamic and emergent nature. It also highlights the inherent vulnerabilities in an attacker's first strike. *Rennenkampf* did not expose the flaws in his supply system until after he invaded. When First Army collided with François's I Corps, the friction in *Rennenkampf*'s supply and communication lines appeared. His insufficient ammunition stockage, difficulty transitioning the rail gauges, and other flawed assumptions did not arise until the campaign commenced.

To overcome this friction, Russian leaders communicated in the clear, opening holes the Germans filled with punches time and time again. These vulnerabilities and opportunities did not present themselves until after the Russians invaded. The Battle of Tannenberg shows how attackers expose their weakness when they strike. To counterpunch, the defender must recognize and exploit those moments.

The Battle of Tannenberg demonstrates how a well-timed counterpunch can stun, stall, and even turn the initiative over to the defender. François's unexpected and hard-hitting counterpunch at Stallupönen totally upset *Rennenkampf*'s timing and strategy. *Rennenkampf* never truly understood the situation again after the battle of Stallupönen and Gumbinnen. He never recovered from François's punch in the mouth immediately after the bell sounded. Had he defeated the German Eighth Army? Why did it retreat? Did it withdraw behind the Vistula River, or had it gone to defend Königsberg? With uncertainty mounting, ammunition and manpower depleted, and fearing another Stallupönen, *Rennenkampf* was hesitant to throw any more punches, which is the counterpunch effect.

The Battle of Tannenberg also illustrates the counterpunch theory's liver punch principle. Instead of complying with Ludendorff's orders to reinforce XX Corps and hit directly back at the Russian Second Army, François

chose to strike Samsonov's line of communication hub at Neidenburg. While the rest of the Eighth Army fended off Second Army's blows, François moved and hit Samsonov where it hurt most. Seizing Neidenburg psychologically dislocated Samsonov with the sense of entrapment.⁶¹ The opportunity presented at Neidenburg occurred through an aggregate of repetitive, tactical actions to guard-move-hit that uncovered that momentary vulnerability. This set up François's knockout liver punch.

Furthermore, the Battle of Tannenberg reinforces that counterpunching theory hinges on having a bias for action. Defenders often cannot foresee the attacker's vulnerabilities that emerge from dynamic situational variables. Leaders with a bias for caution fear reprisals and miss opportunities to counterpunch. The German army's culture of initiative allowed it to recognize the holes and fill them with punches. Without it, the battle over the eastern German front and possibly World War I might have turned out much differently.

Tannenberg informs counterpunch theory by demonstrating that defenders can snatch the initiative from the attacker without compelling them to culminate. The German strategic situation at the start of World War I made waging a counteroffensive strategy to trade space for time in east Prussia impossible. Given the circumstances, even Moltke was unsure how to fight in the east. Everything that occurred when *Rennenkampf*'s troops stepped across the German border was dynamic and emergent. Counterpunching does not just account for such factors, it depends upon them. This makes counterpunching ideal when counteroffensive strategies are not.

Finally, the Russian tactical defeat at Tannenberg had a strategic counterpunch effect. Following the battle, Russia hesitated to throw more punches at the Germans, fearing another painful blow. Even though the Russians possessed a two-to-one advantage, and its soldiers were all active units compared to the German half reserve-half active composition, this made it even more crushing to Russian confidence. The Russian war minister Alexander Guchkov admitted in 1917 that after Tannenberg, he had decided the Russians had lost the war.⁶²

Conclusion

Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

—Mike Tyson⁶³

The optimal way to fight offensively from a defensive posture is by counterpunching. Counterpunching takes advantage of war's dynamic and emergent qualities. In a back-and-forth sequence, defenders guard, move, and hit enemy vulnerabilities the attacker created and exposed by each of his offensive actions. Counterpunching does not fear the enemy's first strikes, because an attacker reveals its Achilles' heel the moment it crosses the forward line of troops. This offers opportunities to deliver a series of liver punches that, over time, block the enemy's attacks, stall its momentum, and force it to turnover the initiative.

The Battle of Tannenberg informs counterpunch theory, highlighting that there are inherent vulnerabilities in the attacker's first strike. Exploiting these vulnerabilities required the defenders having a culture of initiative and superb leadership. The German Eighth Army had commanders with the five characteristics the U.S. Military Academy in 1983 identified as held by successful combat leaders: "terrain sense, single-minded tenacity, ferocious audacity, physical confidence, and practical practiced judgment."⁶⁴ Their examples repeatedly inspired their soldiers' will to fight, overcame initial setbacks, overcame numerical inferiority, overcame severe exhaustion, and struck back at the right moments. Without the intangibles of initiative, leadership, and the will to fight, culture will eat counterpunching theory for breakfast.⁶⁵

This leads to several warnings for defenders at the opening of hostilities. Invaders often win; when they do lose, it is usually by a counteroffensive strategy. The Battle of Tannenberg was a close-run thing, and small actions made significant differences that could have easily tipped the scale for either side. Success ultimately comes through the timely arrival of reinforcements. Therefore, counterpunching is not an exclusive method but a complementary one.

As the U.S. Army moves further in the twenty-first century, it acknowledges that uncertainty, degraded communications, and fleeting windows of opportunity will characterize combat operations.⁶⁶ Improving the probability of success necessitates agility. Agility means moving, adjusting, and acting faster than the enemy. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, explains that "the time available to create and exploit opportunities against adaptive threats is usually limited. Agile units rapidly recognize an opportunity and take action

to exploit it. Speed of recognition, decision making, movement, and battle drills enable agility."⁶⁷ Agility means counterpunching, and it best serves the U.S. Army's global defensive posture and its predilection toward offensive warfare.

The U.S. Army wrestles with countering an adversary's antiaccess strategy, and counterpunching theory offers a solution to this problem. Opponents of the United States aim to deny it access to their regions in the event of armed conflict.⁶⁸ The U.S. Army envisions using multidomain operations by employing space, cyber, and joint fire capabilities to create windows of opportunity that will allow the joint force to penetrate the enemy's antiaccess efforts and get into the fight. The moment the adversary launches its antiaccess efforts, it will expose those windows of opportunity that were protected before. U.S. forces only need to react in time. Knockouts are not about power; they are about timing.⁶⁹

The U.S. Army envisions seizing the initiative by imposing dilemmas upon the enemy.⁷⁰ This is counterpunching theory's fundamental aim. If the enemy strikes, it quickly suffers painful consequences. If the enemy does not strike, it cannot achieve its goal. Either way, it loses. This imposition of dilemmas by counterpunching applies at the strategic level of war. The current Russian/Ukrainian conflict exemplifies this concept. Russia's war aim is to rebuild its lost empire and counter NATO's expansion. Its invasion revealed an unforeseen critical vulnerability that NATO reacted to with a political counterpunch. Perceiving they could be next, Finland and Sweden ceased their neutrality and petitioned to join NATO. That hit Russia where it hurt most and imposed a dilemma for other despots to notice.

Counterpunching is a way tacticians, operational artists, and strategists can win, given the U.S. military's global defensive posture and its preference for offensive warfare. Counterpunching does not take counsel from the "first battle" fears but instills confidence in combat leaders at every echelon to look for and find the opportunities presented in every enemy action. It gives combat leaders a mindset and method to overcome opposition by hitting "undefended or ill-defended targets of vital importance to the enemy."⁷¹ U.S. forces can beat an attacking enemy at the start of the war, but success depends on having a culture of initiative and a bias for action. ■

Notes

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