

Better to send commandos, not legions, against Saddam

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There is no question that we must remove Saddam Hussein and his regime from power in Iraq. He has moved to acquire weapons of mass destruction and already may have acquired one or more "special atomic demolition munitions" (SADM) from Islamic republics within the former Soviet Union.

The real issue is how best to remove him. Behind the scenes a quiet argument is raging within the Pentagon over just this question. On one side are many of the civilian bureaucrats, such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, chairman of the Defense Policy Board. A handful of generals with conventional-force backgrounds, chafing at the limited role their forces played in the initial phase of Afghanistan, are backing them. They are pushing for a massive, gulf-war-style conventional military invasion.

On the other side are the majority of senior uniformed personnel who believe a combination of Special Operations Forces (SOFs) and intense targeted bombing would be a more effective and far less risky approach. They point to the remarkable success of this tactic in Afghanistan to support their assessment.

But both sides are ignoring other options that should precede direct military action. To begin with, a comprehensive, coordinated psychological-warfare campaign needs to be mounted, not the current ad hoc effort. Such a campaign would have a broad range of elements but its core would be what is called "white propaganda." In plain English, this means telling the Iraqi people the truth.

Broadcasts in indigenous languages (Arabic, Assyrian, Armenian and Kurdish) over a wide range of both TV and radio frequencies would serve to counterbalance the lies coming from official sources. Also, such broadcasts could be used to encourage local opponents to take direct action against the regime.

For example, one tactic might be to offer a huge reward, say \$250 million, for the assassination of the Iraqi dictator, along with a promise of protection and an offer of U.S. citizenship. Should someone take us up on the offer and succeed, it would accomplish his removal for a cost roughly equivalent to a single day of conventional combat.

A second option is to train select indigenous elements to conduct unconventional guerrilla warfare against the regime. History has shown time and again how relatively small numbers of guerrillas can tie up huge numbers of conventional troops. The guerrillas also can form a core around which larger insurgent groups could be organized. With appropriate U.S. aid and training, these larger insurgent groups might be sufficient to overthrow Saddam. Even if this were not to happen, they would be able to provide invaluable support to any larger military action aimed at deposing the "Butcher of Baghdad."

Immediately prior to any large-scale action, the guerrillas could destroy key command, communications and control facilities, seize isolated garrisons and serve as guides and additional manpower for SOFs. They also would be a critical source of local intelligence regarding opposing forces. The template for such action was drawn during World War II where resistance fighters in France, Belgium and other occupied nations provided exactly this kind of aid.

It is only when such options are exhausted that direct military action should be contemplated. But even then, the first option is to employ SOFs supported by air power rather than the massive invasion planned by some at the Pentagon.

While serving officers have refrained from public comment on this issue, military leaders who recently retired have not. Retired Marine general and Mideast negotiator Anthony Zinni recently told the Middle East Quarterly (Aug. 29) what many serving officers are saying off the record: "It might be interesting to wonder why all the generals see it the same way and all those that never fired a shot in anger are really hell-bent to go to war and see it a different way."

Additionally, the employment of an assassination or special operation to accomplish regime change in Iraq is not a new notion. As retired Major F. Andy Messing Jr., one of the authors of this article, has argued in USA Today [Feb. 17,1998]: "Theoretically, a combined air element, led by AC-130 gun-ships, would neutralize an area for an assault. Then a combined group of Delta Forces, Rangers, Special Forces, SEALs and air commandos would complete the mission."

While this perhaps was the first time the suggestion was raised, others recently have expressed a similar opinion. For example, in a Sept. 16 article in the Washington Times, retired Air Force Lt. General Buster Glossman (who played a major role in planning the gulf war's air campaign) advocated a strategy based on "unrelenting air attacks and SOFs to remove the underpinnings of Saddam Hussein's regime, and covert operatives to create chaos throughout Iraq."

It simply makes sense. Today, U.S. capabilities to mount such an attack are even greater than they were then. Our SOFs never have been better. They also have the experience of conducting a similar mission in Afghanistan--an invaluable asset. Indeed, even if a conventional invasion is to be mounted as in Afghanistan, Special Operations should be employed to prepare the battlefield.

Of course, the gulf war did employ a conventional strategy, and it, too, was a success. So why the debate? One reason is that circumstances today are very different than they were in 1991. In 1991 we were able to marshal 540,000 U.S. troops, six aircraft carriers, 4,000 tanks, 1,700 helicopters and 1,800 airplanes to combat Saddam. Moreover, we did so without ignoring our other military obligations.

But in 1991 we had more than 2 million personnel in uniform. This no longer is the case. Following the gulf war, national defense waned as a priority under an administration obsessed with domestic concerns and blatantly hostile to the armed forces. Congress, too, played a role as concerns over reducing federal spending eclipsed warnings about eroding military capabilities. The result: Our current military establishment is 50 percent smaller than it was in the gulf war.

But that's not all. Since 1991, the military increasingly has been asked to do "more with less"--a phrase that rankles those currently in uniform. Translated into plain English, it means more-frequent deployments, shortages of funds for critical maintenance and repair and dangerous reductions in training. Our armed forces are being stretched to the limit--often in open-ended "peacekeeping" operations such as those in Bosnia and Kosovo.

It also is important to remember that in the 1991 conflict we had the support of other coalition members who added some 316,000 persons to the total force deployed.

Today's soldier is perhaps the most highly trained, educated, motivated and lethal in our history, but the argument is not over quality; it is over quantity. There simply aren't enough of them to do all that is asked. Moreover, Iraq is twice the mission, with half the personnel and resources.

In the absence of a move to expand the size of the U.S. military--an unlikely prospect given current congressional attitudes--there may not be enough manpower to pursue a conventional war against Iraq and sustain other security concerns. So exploring other options not only is desirable, it is virtually a necessity. This necessity is made all the more urgent by the president's message on Sept. 20 calling for pre-emptive action against nations engaged in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or sponsorship of international terrorism.

This "Bush Doctrine of Proactive Counterproliferation" closely follows the first defense and foreign-affairs briefing given to then Texas-governor Bush on July 16,1998, in Austin, Texas, by coauthor Messing. As noted in the briefing document provided to the governor: "The possibility of an NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) attack by a rogue state or terrorist group remains high and must therefore be considered a primary threat to national security. The U.S. must take a more proactive role in suppressing the threat." In short, we need to get terrorists before they get us. But implementing this doctrine requires a better understanding of the capabilities and role of measures used before full conventional ground forces are thrown into a proverbial meat grinder.

The key is to devise a strategy for pre-emption that employs SOFs supported, when necessary, by conventional forces. This finally was implemented fully in Afghanistan when conventional ground commanders realized that regular conventional infantry were not suited for the effort. Accordingly, SOFs are ideally tailored to the doctrine of pre-emption--especially since such a doctrine requires both urgency and economy. They can move fast, address multiple threats and are able to operate with a minimum of military assets, among other features.

A special operation can be mounted far sooner than a conventional military invasion. There would be no need for the massive logistical buildup that accompanies conventional operations. It also is far easier to shift them from region to region. Also, since such operations would, in normal practice, likely be limited to U.S. and perhaps British forces, there is no need to wait for U.N. approval.

A final point is that in the unlikely event that a well-planned special operation fails, the option of an invasion always remains. In fact, it could be used in conjunction with a full invasion to "cut the head off

of the snake." Put simply, contemplating the less costly and less risky option of a special operation can produce much to be gained.

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