

Irregular warfare required

The Washington Times

March 03, 2005

F. Andy Messing Jr. and Adam C.M. Solove, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

North Korea publicly announced its nuclear arsenal and surveillance continues on the Iranian weapons program. It is increasingly obvious America has no effective strategy to deter weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation.

The invasion of Iraq, intended to demonstrate the threat of regime change against proliferating governments, instead exposed the high costs - in human lives, economic effects and diplomatic capital - of using America's conventional military might. Resolving the current crises will require immediate and tough diplomacy because conventional military threats will inevitably ring hollow. In the long term, preventing weapons proliferation will require a workable, low-cost regime-change capability.

The consensus about Iraq has been the military "won the war, but is losing the peace." Insurgents clearly benefited from the lack of public security, basic utilities and border guards after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government. An astronomical number of soldiers (more than 750,000) and an infinite supply of timely intelligence might have allowed the Coalition to control these conditions by absorbing most of the responsibilities of the former Iraqi state. Yet this ignores the obvious conclusion: America and its allies needed to take control of the government and its institutions, not destroy them. As Colin Powell warned the president: "You break it, you bought it." Far better to capture a state mostly intact.

Rather than base its regime-change strategy on conventional forces still stuck in the tank and infantry combat mentality of the World Wars, America should adopt "irregular" warfare, exploiting the U.S. unique technological edge to empower intelligence-gathering and Special Operations forces.

In Iraq, this strategy would involve synchronized surgical bombing and raids to assassinate or capture Saddam, his sons and top military political officials. This, while disabling the loyal forces of the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard, hopefully through concerted psychological operations, and neutralizing known weapons caches. A temporary skeleton Cabinet of Coalition experts, Iraqi exiles and cooperative Iraqis would have moved in to spread around American largess, taking over and improving government operations. Most Ba'athist officials, more loyal to paychecks than particular rulers, could have initially continued to run the government, as in Japan and Germany after 1945.

This strategy would have been inexpensive compared with our present course. A similar plan was briefed to Karl Rove, to be relayed to the president, on Sept. 30, 2002. However, it was ignored as the Pentagon successfully lobbied for a conventional invasion to maintain its relevance after the overwhelmingly successful, irregular war in Afghanistan.

By destroying the Iraqi government without considering the postwar implications, the Coalition put its forces on an equal playing field with the diverse political and ethnic elements within Iraq, which naturally coalesced to oppose the outside power. Taking over the existing state would have strengthened the incentive for political parties to work within rather than against Coalition efforts. The

various factions would have focused on one another, and their respective power balance in the new Iraq, rather than uniting against the seemingly weak new governmental system.

It is too late to try such a strategy in Iraq, but not too late to contemplate the role of irregular warfare in America's national security tool kit. The first defense and military affairs briefing given to then-Gov. George W. Bush, on July 16, 1998, discussed the need for these irregular warfare tactics in "pro-active counterproliferation" and counterterrorism. When applied in Afghanistan, this advice led to a quick and cheap victory; when ignored in Iraq, it cost thousands of American lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

An irregular strategy for regime change would be more effective than conventional invasion, both in practice and as a deterrent. Threatened regimes could no longer rely on WMDs or an insurgent resistance to protect themselves. Washington would have an undeniable advantage in negotiating with proliferators, even when U.S. troops were deployed elsewhere and public opinion opposed the costs of a full-scale invasion.

If America is serious about limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, it must find more efficient ways to pressure belligerent regimes.

Irregular warfare tactics will not simply allow the president to act more effectively, but may make America's diplomacy more credible and eventually help curb weapons proliferation without the use of force. This option cannot be ignored again.

F. Andy Messing Jr., a retired major in the U.S. Army Special Forces, is executive director of the National Defense Council Foundation (NDCF). Adam C.M. Solove is an NDCF fellow.