

Bush's 'Double Jeopardy' for U.S. Troops

Editorial
March 17, 2003

If George W. Bush orders U.S. forces to unleash his “shock and awe” onslaught against Iraq without United Nations sanctions, he will be opening American servicemen to a kind of double jeopardy. First, they will be risking their lives in a combat strategy far riskier than is publicly acknowledged. Second, any significant taking of civilian life could leave both officers and enlisted men liable for future war-crimes charges.

Bush, who himself avoided military service in Vietnam and appears to have gone AWOL from his Vietnam-era National Guard duty, is putting young American soldiers and their officers in an unprecedented predicament. They are being told to invade and to conquer a country that is in the process of disarming under U.N. supervision.

Plus, some military strategists see Bush’s war plan as the worst sort of wishful thinking.

'Shock and Awe'

There is, of course, the possibility that everything will go as Bush hopes. On the first two days, a bombardment from 3,000 missiles will shatter Iraqi military targets and leave the Iraqi people in a state of “shock and awe.” On the third day, Saddam Hussein's army will collapse and the Iraqi people will welcome the American troops as liberators.

But more and more military strategists are asking what will happen if this rosy scenario goes awry.

What if the 3,000 missiles end up destroying largely empty buildings or crashing into mosques or civilian centers? Are there even 3,000 military targets worth hitting in Iraq? And after all the war buildup, who would be crazy enough to be sitting in barracks or government buildings waiting to be blown to smithereens? As shocking as the “shock and awe” bombardment might be, it certainly will not come as a surprise.

What if the Iraqi army – instead of making itself an easy target for the U.S. missiles – melts into urban centers and begins coordinating with an armed civilian population to resist a foreign invasion of their homeland? What if the Iraqi people choose to fight the American invaders, rather than shower them with rose petals? Already, Saddam Hussein has begun to implement just such a strategy, concentrating his troops in urban centers and passing out AK-47s to Iraqis, young and old, men and women.

What if U.S. combat infantry forces, which may number only about 10 percent of the total U.S. military personnel in the region, find themselves entering urban strongholds against an enemy that is numerically superior, knows the battlefield and is aided by civilian militias?

As one savvy U.S. military strategist told us, “All those guys sitting off on battleships add to your numbers, but they don’t help you on the ground. There you’ll have about 20,000 infantrymen. They’ll be outnumbered.”

'Rolling Start'

In the last several days, Bush has modified his military plan once again. Frustrated by delays in winning Turkey’s permission to use its territory to launch an attack on Iraq’s northern front, Bush is rushing to start the war possibly within the next few days even with many U.S. forces out of position.

This so-called “rolling start” may not add to the immediate dangers facing U.S. troops since they are not expected to begin major assaults on Iraqi cities in the war's opening days. But the need to build up U.S. forces in Iraq after the war begins may contribute to other dangers by slowing the war's overall pace.

Assuming Iraq doesn’t surrender after the two-day bombardment, the U.S. war will be courting a humanitarian disaster. Once a war is imminent U.N. food centers will shut down and U.N. personnel will withdraw. That will leave many of Iraq's 23 million people, about half of whom are children, without a supply of food. Whatever its other achievements, Bush's “shock and awe” bombardment will certainly disrupt electricity and water supplies as well.

As U.S. forces continue to roll into place and begin to mass forces around the cities, disease and starvation will already be spreading across Iraq.

World Protests

Meanwhile, the U.S. political position around the world is likely to be deteriorating. The anti-war movement, already hundreds of millions strong, is likely to gain momentum and possibly resort to more disruptive tactics.

U.S. intelligence agencies have warned that Bush’s invasion of Iraq is almost certain to touch off a wave of anti-American violence, including new terrorist attacks. If Iraqi operatives or Islamic terrorists have access to biological or chemical weapons, Bush will have increased the likelihood that they will be used, possibly against pro-U.S. Arab states or in Europe or in the United States itself.

The future of Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf could be put in jeopardy. Islamic fundamentalists, who already hold strong positions within his military and intelligence services, could seize on the chaos to unseat the pro-American dictator.

If Mussharraf were to fall, Islamic radicals might have achieved their goal of gaining control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, ironically one of the arguments that Bush originally pushed to justify attacking Iraq.

With anti-Americanism spreading throughout the world, the situation at home is also likely to deteriorate. Failure to win the war quickly would be another body blow to the U.S. economy. American companies with large overseas operations could expect retaliation.

If U.S. antiwar activists intensify their tactics at home, Bush's Justice Department is certain to crack down even more on civil liberties. Attorney General John Ashcroft has already deployed 5,000 FBI agents to "monitor and arrest suspected militants" living in the U.S., the Washington Post reported. [March 17, 2003]

Hellish Scenario

Back on the ground in Iraq, U.S. forces could be caught in a hellish scenario.

Amid the devastation inflicted by 3,000 missiles and facing swarms of desperate refugees, U.S. troops will have to pick their way through a maze of unfamiliar streets. Rather than a heroic replay of the first Persian Gulf War, Bush may find this war to be more like a long-playing version of "Blackhawk Down," only on a much bigger scale. The advantage of U.S. technological superiority may be limited by the close-in nature of the fighting.

Inexperienced U.S. troops, many facing their first combat, can be expected to overreact to the complex and dangerous circumstances. U.S. tactical frustration also may lead to the use of heavy ordnance against urban targets. Civilians will die and possibly in large numbers.

U.S. forces also might be caught up in other tricky predicaments if, for instance, Kurdish rebels claim Iraq's northern oil fields and Turkey intervenes to stop the Kurds from achieving a crucial nationalist goal. Intervention from Iran is also possible. These border conflicts could become multi-sided, making U.S. troops referees keeping apart historic enemies who will be heavily armed.

Eventually, of course, the United States is expected to "win" in Iraq, if for no other reason than losing would be unthinkable for American standing in the world – and for George W. Bush's political future.

But winning a bloody battle for Iraq could be only the first step in a protracted struggle with other nations deemed to be part of Bush's "axis of evil." Battling Iran or North Korea or some other new threat that Bush identifies in the future could be a far less certain affair.

Seeing how Iraq was crushed after agreeing to cooperate in its own disarmament will be a lesson to other nations rushing to develop weapons of mass destruction. These other "enemy" states will recognize that Saddam Hussein's biggest mistake may have been to trust that the international community could restrain Bush from his "gut" instinct, which always favored force over diplomacy.

The Issue of War Crimes

As Bush rushes the United States into this future of near-permanent belligerence, American officers and soldiers must recognize another possible reality. If the international community ultimately decides that the U.S. has been transformed into a super-power rogue state, there will be demands for war-crimes justice against those who carried out Bush's orders.

Right now, America's unquestioned military dominance may make such tribunals against U.S. military personnel unthinkable. But as soldiers and generals have known throughout time, war is the ultimate gamble and no certainty can be assumed. In times of conflict, what seems like the safe political decision today may look very different only months or years into the future. Political changes may come either externally or internally.

Bush, the self-described "gut player," may think that the risky course he has set the nation upon makes sense. After all, his "gut" tells him so.

He also has surrounded himself with people who will not raise too many troubling questions. On one side, he has neo-conservative ideologues, who either flatter his "bold" leadership or warn him not to go "wobbly." On the other, he has careerists who would never dream of putting principle ahead of keeping their prestigious jobs.

But Bush's "crusade" against "evil" will be fought not in Washington but on the front lines of complex, ancient antagonisms where young fighting men and women of the United States will be forced to make snap judgments of life and death. They will go into that battle fearing not only for their own lives, but realizing that this invasion may be waged in open defiance of international law.

It is a "double jeopardy" virtually unprecedented in U.S. history. And it could all end very badly.

Robert Parry, Editor

[Back to Front](#)