

April 1, 2003

COMMENTARY

A Time to Fight

By BARRY R. MCCAFFREY

The initial success of the CENTCOM attack has been impressive. Gen. Tommy Franks's superb air-land-sea forces have achieved total air dominance, sunk the remainder of the Iraqi navy, and achieved a blitzkrieg success in plunging an Army-Marine three-division task force 300 miles into Iraq up to the gates of Baghdad. Special-operations forces by the thousands infiltrated throughout Iraq, seized the western deserts preventing a potential attack on the Israelis, stabilized the Kurdish front with the support of airborne troops from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and conducted direct action and strategic reconnaissance missions throughout the theater of operations.

There have been setbacks. No plan survives contact with the enemy without significant disruptions caused by enemy action, weather, terrain or miscalculation. But while early criticisms of the Pentagon have been overheated, the American public needs to start looking at Iraq as a war -- like all wars -- that we must fight hard to win.

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Saddam Hussein, if he survived the brilliant first strike on his headquarters, has used every cruel and illegal tool in his menu of options to blunt the attack and seek increasing opposition to the U.S. by the international and Muslim communities. He has used unrestrained terror to keep the oppressed Shiites in the battle, employed thousands of terrorist irregulars to attack our unprotected lines of communication, and used his second-rate regular forces in civilian clothes to pound the flanks of the British and U.S. forces with mortars, artillery, tanks and lightly armed infantry.

The "rolling start" concept of the attack dictated by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has put us in a temporarily risky position. We face a war of maneuver in the coming days to destroy five Iraqi armor divisions with only one U.S. armored unit (the Third Mechanized Infantry) supported by the modest armor forces of the First Marine Division and the Apache attack helicopters of the 101st Airborne. We will succeed in this battle

because of the bravery and skill of our soldiers and Marines combined with the ferocious lethality of the air power we will bring to bear on the enemy force.

This will be risky business. We should be fighting this battle with three U.S. armored divisions and an armored cavalry regiment to provide rear area security. We also have inadequate tube and rocket artillery to provide needed suppressive fires for the joint team. However, the 100,000 troops en route to the battle will give the operational commanders the ability to control the pace and tempo of the fight if we sense trouble.

Given the expected U.S. destruction of the Iraqi mobile forces of 5,500 armored vehicles and 2,000 artillery pieces, the center of gravity of the battle will then move to seizing the urban area of Baghdad, with its 5.5 million people, as well as Saddam's home base of Tikrit. We will face determined opposition from 15,000 Special Republican Guard (SRG) units heavily equipped with tanks, BMP combat vehicles, and artillery.

The toughest problem will be the eradication of the thousands of so-called Fedayeen and the al Kut Army. The war will not be over until the regime is dead or behind barbed wire. To achieve our purpose we must destroy the SRG and thousands of terrorist fighters. This will be bloody work chronicled in brilliant hues by the "embedded" TV journalists of Al-Jazeera.

Taking down this criminal regime will free the Iraqis from a nightmare of repression and leave America and our allies immeasurably safer in the coming decade. But we must draw the Iraqi population in to help with their own liberation. Coalition special-operations units must arm the Shiites. Opposition leadership figures must be heavily involved in the internal struggle.

The hammer in the coming fight for Baghdad must be U.S. Bradley Fighting Vehicle mounted infantry (not dismounted Army or Marine light infantry) backed up by precision weapons of the Air Force and U.S. artillery. If we shrink from using direct and overwhelming violence on the SRG and the Fedayeen, we will risk thousands of casualties in our Army and Marine assault forces and leave in place an unintimidated, even emboldened, terrorist threat that will make our subsequent occupation of the city an unending horror.

There is another political-military decision that must be considered. Much of the deployable ground combat power of the Army and Marines is set to be tied up by the war in Iraq for the next 12 months at least. Other significant forces are already committed to global deployments that simply cannot be broken in the short term, such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Korea, the Sinai, Guantanamo and Afghanistan.

We are overextended and at risk. It is time to call up at least three U.S. Army National Guard Divisions for 36 months service along with significant Marine, Navy, Coast Guard and Air Force reserve elements. Getting these reserve elements truly ready to fight is a six-month training challenge. We are inviting pre-emptive trouble on our strategic flanks if international mischief-makers believe we lack the military power or the political will to

respond to new international provocations. Calling up these reserve forces will be political and economic recognition of the gravity of the situation we face. We must win this second crucial battle of the war on terrorism that was forced on us by the tragedy of Sept. 11.

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Now is a time of self-measurement for America. In the coming weeks we will achieve our short-term military objectives in Iraq because of the valor and dedication of the coalition forces. The construction of an Iraqi civil state at the end of active fighting and the rebuilding of damaged international alliances must consume much of our political energy and resources in the coming several years if we expect to preserve our freedom and our economic position in the world.

The Bush administration and Congress must work as partners to put together the moral arguments as well as the economic aid, diplomatic leverage, covert action, and military might to attain our goals. We will be in great peril if we do not support the president in this time of national crisis.

Gen. McCaffrey is a professor of international security studies at West Point. He led the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division in the Gulf War.