

Why the U.S. Military Resists War in Syria

by Carl Osgood

Aug. 30—When Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey issues warnings against U.S. military intervention in Syria, he isn't just presenting his own professional military judgement, as competent as that may be. He is also reflecting an institutional resistance that is based, in large part, on the experience of the ground forces in Iraq. That experience, and the deeply rooted desire not to repeat it, expressed itself during a three-day seminar that concluded on Aug. 28 at Fort Belvoir, Va. The seminar was not about Syria, or even any larger geographical region of the world, but it, nonetheless, provided insight into the broader process of analysis taking place within the military and the role that recent history is playing in it.

The purpose of the seminar was to further develop a new concept that the Army is developing, in collaboration with the Marine Corps and Special Operations Command (SOCOM), called "Strategic Landpower." Some regard this as the ground forces' answer to the primarily Air Force/Navy concept of Air-Sea Battle, while others see it as an attempt by the Army to maintain its relevance in a time of austerity and the Asia Pivot. Embedded within it, however, is an effort to institutionalize the lessons learned from the failure of the U.S. military adventure in Iraq, which has scarred the Army deeply, and has certainly affected the other services as well.

The purpose of this newest effort is to "improve the military's ability to advise policy makers on how best to employ military capabilities to achieve human outcomes, human behaviors, and improve our recent record in achieving policy outcomes with military force," said Col. Bob

Simpson, the acting Director of Concepts Development at the U.S. Army Capabilities Integration Center (ArCIC) at Fort Eustis, Va. The second objective, which is internal to the military, is to make changes in doctrine, training, and military education so that the military itself understands how military operations are intended to achieve human outcomes. The military is used, Simpson stressed, because other means of influencing behavior—diplomacy, sanctions, and other such measures—have failed.

So, what is strategic landpower? "Landpower," Simpson went on, "does not equal land forces. Landpower is the ability to control resources, land, and people. Air forces and sea forces contribute to that. We [the Army, Marines, and SOCOM—ed.] are the forces that operate on the land. We operate daily among the people. We're the ones who integrate the effects of the other forces when they affect land. Our vision is that this is a joint problem." That requires getting the foundation and getting the theory of landpower right. "Operationalizing it is a joint effort," he said. "We're responsible for getting the theory right."

The Iraq Disaster

What role does the Iraq experience play in this effort? "We designed a military operation to accomplish certain things. We accomplished those things very early in the



U.S. Army/Staff Sgt. Charles B. Johnson

U.S. soldiers on patrol in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. The Army is trying to learn from its mistakes in the Iraq War, which it went into without knowing the nature of the society.

operation and we did not achieve the strategic outcome we wanted,” Simpson said. “So the whole theory that you can, through violence, destroy the system, failed. We went in there without understanding the nature of the society we were entering into. We didn’t forecast accurately how they were going to react to the invasion. We were wholly unprepared for what transpired in 2003-04. And so we want to do an examination of, ‘Okay, if we were going to do this again, how would we do it differently?’”

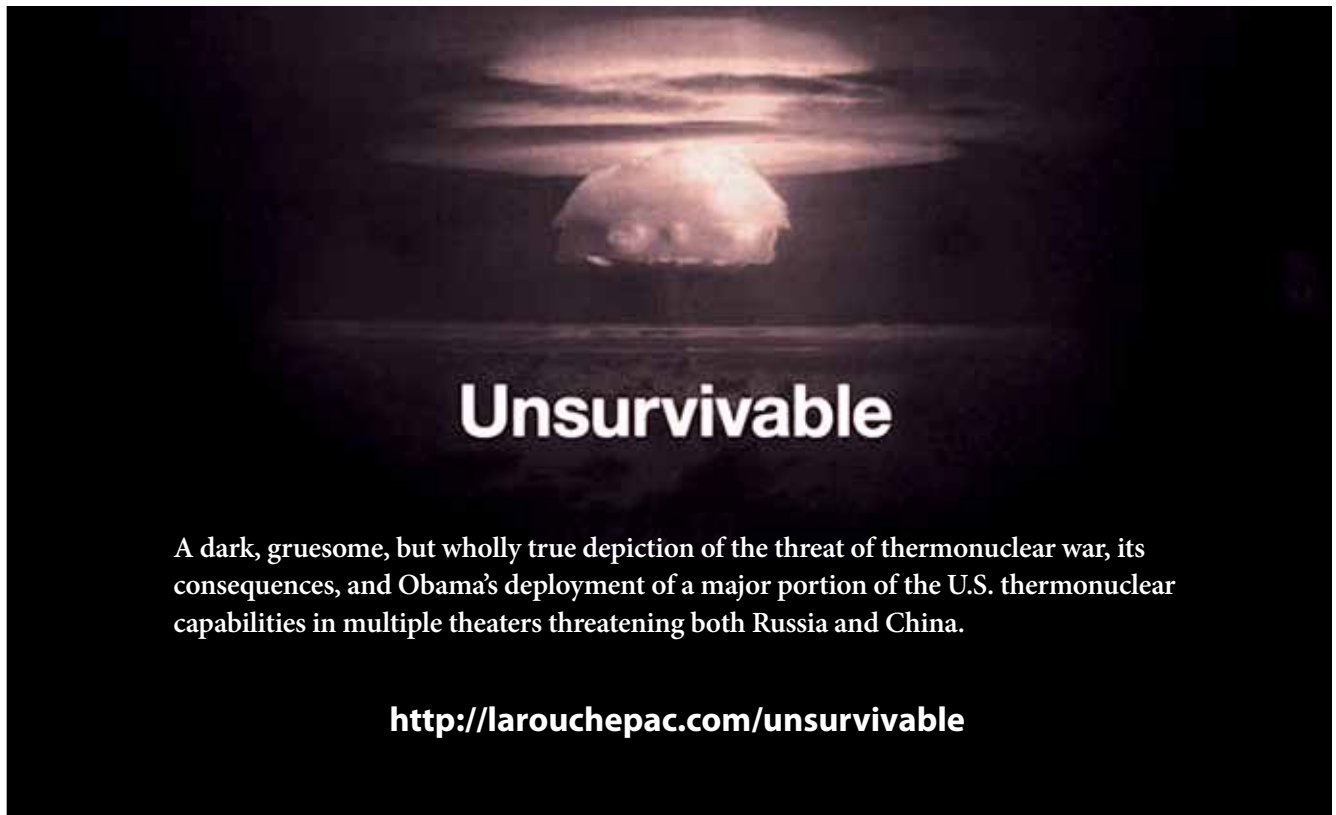
It came up exactly this way during the seminar discussion as well. A senior Army officer told the participants that the lessons of the past wars have to be institutionalized, so that the military can adapt more easily to future situations. Imagine if we had understood these ideas in 2003, he said. Would we have invaded Iraq with the plan that we did? Would we have disbanded the Iraqi Army? In both cases, he said, “No.” We would have done it differently if we had understood strategic landpower, he said.

The fact is, the Army and the other military services were as much victims of the ideologically driven policies of the G.W. Bush Administration in Iraq as they were of their own shortcomings. When confronted with that issue during the media roundtable that followed the

seminar, Lt. Gen. Keith Walker, the director of ArCIC, said that “our primary purpose in developing a concept—and a concept is a statement of a military problem and a solution to that problem—and the reason why we do that is so that we can say, in order to make that concept a reality, what capabilities do we need? And we have a framework. What do we need to do to adjust our doctrine? What do we need to adjust our training, organization, material, leader development, etc., and policy? So, we don’t make policy, but when we do that analysis, we can make recommendations if there’s a policy we think needs to be changed in order to enable that.”

In a broader sense, the military has done that analysis with respect to Syria, incorporating the lessons of Iraq, among other things, and that is reflected in General Dempsey’s advice to the President, Congress, and the public. So, when Dempsey says, as he wrote in his letter to Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), on Aug. 19, that even a limited attack on Syrian forces would commit the U.S. decisively to the Syrian conflict, he is, in part, reflecting this broader institutional analysis, incorporating the lessons of the Iraq experience.

cjosgood@att.net



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