

'Nightmare Scenario': Urban Combat in Baghdad

by Carl Osgood

Saddam Hussein's threat to bring any war with the U.S. into the streets of Baghdad has competent U.S. military officers asking, "Are we prepared for urban combat?" The urban environment is one of the most difficult for military operations, and Baghdad, in particular, is a large, sprawling city of some 4.5 million people. Baghdad is also the political and economic center of the Ba'athist regime and, therefore, the objective of "regime change" would, almost certainly, require U.S. forces to enter the city and attempt to take control of it by force.

The risks inherent in such an operation were highlighted by Gen. Joseph Hoar (ret.), a former Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Central Command, during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Sept. 23. Hoar, along with former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Shalikashvili, former NATO Commander Gen. Wesley Clark, and former Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Thomas McNerny, were summoned to give their expert opinions.

During his opening statement, Hoar told the committee, "There are people in this city that believe that the military campaign against Iraq will not be difficult, especially because of the enormous advances in technology and the willingness of some groups in Iraq to revolt once the campaign has begun." Instead, he said, there is a "nightmare scenario" that needs to be planned for: That is, "that six Iraqi Republican Guard divisions, reinforced with several thousand anti-aircraft artillery pieces, defends the city of Baghdad. The result would be high casualties on both sides, as well as in the civilian community. U.S. forces would certainly prevail, but at what cost, as the rest of the world watches while we bomb and have artillery rounds exploded in densely populated Iraqi neighborhoods."

Questioned by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), both Shalikashvili and Hoar amplified. "If it gets to urban warfare," Shalikashvili said, "it could get very messy, the collateral damage could be very great, and our own casualties could increase significantly." Hoar was much more stark: "We have to be prepared to fight block by block. In urban warfare, you could run through battalions a day at a time, one battalion, that are just combat ineffective because of casualties." Furthermore, the much-vaunted American advantages in command and control, technology, and mobility, "all of those things are in part given up and you are working with corporals

and sergeants and young men fighting street to street. It looks like the last 15 minutes of 'Saving Private Ryan.' "

Echoing General Hoar was his successor at CENTCOM, Gen. Anthony Zinni—like Hoar, a retired Marine. In remarks to a conference of the Middle East Institute on Oct. 10, Zinni emphasized the unpredictable nature of war, and advised that should war come, it needs to be finished quickly. "If this war drags on," he warned, "it's going to become messy. The opportunity for more bad things to happen inside the country where the combat is taking place, and outside, in many different areas in relationships in politics, street reaction, could disrupt any good that could come of it." He further warned that the enemy will have it in his interest to drag it out and make it as messy as possible, and that means trying to drag U.S. forces into fighting for Baghdad block by block. "Civilian casualties, collateral damage, destruction of the infrastructure, the images that could be created regardless of who causes this, will not sit well in the region, and will cause problems in the long run and add to the difficulties in the aftermath," he said.

Most Complex Terrain

These warnings are a reflection of the fact that the urban terrain is just about the most complex imaginable for military operations. Avenues of approach for attacking forces are limited, fields of fire and observation are restricted by structures, and heavy weapons, such as tanks and artillery, may not be as useful. Command and control of infantry is hindered, when they enter buildings to clear them of defending forces. Ammunition and other supplies are consumed at much higher rates. Indiscriminate artillery barrages and air bombardment can turn large areas into rubble, restricting the movements of the attacking force and giving more cover to the defender. A well-prepared defender, even when vastly outnumbered, can use the urban environment to significantly slow down the offensive. Even if the attacker wins the military engagement, he can lose the war because of the political effect on the region as a whole, as both generals warned.

The U.S. Army's field manual on urban combat also reflects past lessons: "The historical data suggest that it is extremely difficult for modern forces to leverage their technological advantages against a determined adversary in an urban environment." Furthermore, "the city environment, with its high density and multistory buildings, tends to negate the technological advantages, for example, close air support, mobility, communications enjoyed by modern military forces."

No one knows for sure, what will happen if the United States launches full-scale war in Iraq, but it could become far more difficult than the utopians in and around the Bush Administration are predicting. As General Zinni said at the Middle East Institute conference, "In war, 'shit happens,' and it happens often, and you can't predict it." Urban combat can result in outcomes very different from the rosy scenarios of the utopians.