

# Bush faces bloody war of attrition

by Leo F. Scanlon

The Bush administration began its war against Iraq with the most ferocious air bombardment campaign in history. Within hours of the onset of the attack, news media were reporting that the air raids “had achieved complete tactical surprise . . . decimated the Iraqi Air Force . . . destroyed the command and control apparatus of the Iraqi military,” and generally dealt a fatal blow to Iraqi air defense capabilities. Within days, each of those claims has proven hollow, and at the end of one week of war, it is clear that this air campaign—which has destroyed much infrastructure and decimated civilian neighborhoods—is merely the beginning of a bloody war of attrition.

The first glimpse of this reality was provided by Viktor Sakharov, a Soviet military expert who was interviewed on U.S. television on Jan. 19. Sakharov has trained both the Egyptian and Iraqi military in defensive war-fighting tactics. As he explained, it is Iraqi doctrine never to respond to an aerial bombardment or attack by an overwhelming force, but rather to protect vital aircraft and air defense systems until they can be employed in defense of the ground army.

Sakharov pointed out that these Iraqi assets have not been used because they are safely bunkered underground. A U.S. expert who inspected part of this system, and who had also studied the Japanese fortifications in the Pacific, reported that the Iraqis have engineered one of the most sophisticated systems of its type in the world. And the weapons held in reserve are formidable: over 100 radar guided Roland systems—recognized by U.S. experts as the premier low-level air defense weapon in the world today—and thousands of 23-millimeter ZSU self-propelled guns—which destroyed over 40% of the Israeli planes sent against Syria in 1973.

The key to this strategy is the fact that the officer corps of the Iraqi Army considers the land battle to be the key to warfare, and will not sacrifice air defense capabilities until the U.S. engages its tanks. At that point, U.S. planes must fly low—within range of these weapons—in order to protect U.S. armor. That is when the war of attrition begins. Iraq has no hope of militarily defeating the superior U.S. force, but the casualties that will ensue once this phase of war begins, will puncture the aura of invincibility which grips Washington.

Bush is attempting to postpone the onset of higher U.S. casualties by using strategic bombing—hoping to “break” the Iraqi people. The damage is occurring against Iraqi civilians.

This is clear even from heavily censored U.S. media reports, which show Baghdad residential neighborhoods and power and sanitation facilities demolished. But the one undisputed lesson of air warfare is that population bombing steels the will of the target nation—and in this case, that potentially includes millions of Arabs and Muslims throughout the world.

## Buying time threatens wider war

U.S. planners persist in the belief that the Iraqi military does not have the depth to conduct a prolonged war; but time is critical, and as the Soviet crisis worsens, the threat of a wider conflict grows. Under such circumstances, attrition becomes a major factor.

According to Maj. Gen. George B. Harrison, writing in *Air Force* magazine, “judgments about attrition can only be made in the context of an overall loss rate for an entire air campaign.” Harrison points out that from the standpoint of the industrial base, “Even seemingly low attrition rates have a surprising long-term effect. . . .

“Assume that the United States begins the campaign with a 2,000 aircraft combat force and that it suffers a 5% per sortie attrition. Even if each plane flies just one sortie per day, the overall losses would quickly get out of hand. To sustain the original 2,000 plane force size in the face of such losses, U.S. aircraft makers would have turn out no fewer than 1,560 aircraft *each month*.

“Even at 1% per sortie attrition rates, the force size could be maintained only if industry produced 520 fighters per month—30 times today’s production rate.”

General Harrison’s article shows attrition rates for a force of 100-planes flying 60 sorties, and shows that a 1% attrition produces a 45% loss of aircraft at the end of the cycle. In practical terms, losses must also include problems caused by lack of spare parts. A reasonable guess is that 50% of those planes not in the Gulf have been cannibalized for parts already, and the U.S. industrial base is in no condition to support a production surge.

The rates of attrition in this campaign are hard to determine, since the Pentagon is reporting only the total number of sorties flown, with no break-out of the actual combat missions. In spite of that distortion, the reported figures are interesting. According to Gen. Thomas Kelley, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as of 7 p.m. on Jan. 18, the U.S. had flown 2,107 sorties, dropping 18,000 tons of bombs, and admitted the loss of four aircraft and their crews. This does not include the sorties and losses of the European and Arab aircraft.

These figures show an attrition rate of 0.2%—roughly equal to the loss rate in Korea. The attrition rate in Vietnam was 0.69%, but this included high-level bombing raids by B-52s, which were not often shot down. Thus, in spite of the claims that Iraqi defenses have been “minimal,” the attrition rate is negligible only in the context of a short war.