

## The myth of a clean war - and its real motive

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As the United States and Britain move closer to a pre-emptive war to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime, a central claim of both governments will be that this will be a 'clean' war, using precision-guided missiles and bombs to destroy command headquarters and other military facilities while rigorously avoiding people, especially civilians.

### The precedent

It is worth remembering that exactly the same was said at the time of the 1991 Gulf war [1], and only in its aftermath were the full effects of the war on ordinary people appreciated. The notion of a 'war against real estate' - with TV pictures showing the pinpoint destruction of deserted bridges - was carefully cultivated, with other film of people being killed assiduously kept from view.

Three examples of heavy loss of life during the 1991 war are particularly vivid. First, the bombing of the Amiriya [2] air-raid shelter in Baghdad in the mistaken belief that it was a command bunker; over 300 women and children were incinerated.

Second, at the end of the war, the Mutla [3] ridge on the 'highway of death' out of Kuwait was a scene of carnage where returning Iraqi conscripts were cut to pieces.

Third, one of the US army's tactics during the war was simply to fill in Iraqi trenches, burying soldiers alive in the process. In a move that had been extensively rehearsed, Abrams tanks fitted with bulldozer blades drove parallel to the trenches. This was part of a systematic large-scale action [4] to destroy Iraqi front-line trenches and their occupants in order to minimise US casualties.

It took time for these events to be properly registered and understood. After the war, some coalition states measured casualties in the tens of thousands. A Saudi military source quoted figures of 65,000-100,000 killed; a leaked report from the US Defense Intelligence Agency put the figure at 100,000 dead and 300,000 injured.

In the wake of a critical response to these reports, Washington moved to downgrade the estimates of casualties, but a total of at least 40,000 Iraqi troops and around 4,000 civilians is now widely accepted as something close to the death toll in less than two months of fighting.

The full destructive impact of the war extended to Iraqi civil infrastructure. There had been extensive damage to drinking water supplies, sewage treatment plants, transport links and administration offices. All this contributed to a sharp decline in the standard of living, including the health status, of most ordinary Iraqis. Overall, there was a progressive rise in death rates that was to greatly exceed the actual casualties of war. The behaviour [5] of the regime, needless to say, intensified these effects.

## The human cost

Twelve years on, there are comparable claims that the weapons are very much more accurate than in 1991, and that the civil infrastructure will be left intact as the US and Britain aim their weapons at the regime alone. It is intended to sound reassuring, but is deeply misleading. The only circumstance in which the death toll will not be massive is if the regime collapses almost the moment the war starts. In any other event, there will be many thousands of deaths.

There are at least four quite different reasons why this is so. Two are familiar and even, in their way, obvious – all the more reason to register them. Two more relate to military technology and to the purpose and method of the war; these require more extended explanation.

The first reason to expect large numbers of casualties is that even when weapons are aimed at physical targets, people die. Command centres, communications facilities, power stations, electricity switching centres, government offices and the rest all have people in them, many of them civilians, many of whom will be killed and injured.

This is especially true in the coming war as the US (and Britain) will start it with an extraordinarily concentrated series of air attacks involving as many as 4,000 missiles and bombs on a range of targets stretching across much of Iraq but centred on Baghdad. The idea may well be to shock the regime into immediate capitulation; the effects in any case will be massive.

It has been said that the civil infrastructure will not be targeted, partly to avoid a repeat of the humanitarian disaster that followed the 1991 war. This is simply not believable. If the Iraqi military require any part of that infrastructure to function effectively, including power supplies, bridges and the like, then it is certain that they will be destroyed.

The second reason to expect high casualties is that precision-guided weapons can all too easily be aimed at the wrong targets. This has been demonstrated since the first Gulf war: there were incidents in the war over Kosovo and Serbia in 1999, and in Afghanistan in 2001-02, that killed scores of civilians. The air war against Iraq will be intense and concentrated, but US intelligence has been faulty in the past, and the likelihood of serious errors remains.

## The technology

These two reasons why the war will take many human lives are apparent to almost anyone, but the third and fourth reasons are more complex.

The third reason relates to a vital military development that has accompanied the so-called 'precision revolution'. It is often believed that the production of laser- or satellite-guided missiles and bombs has revolutionised war, making targeting a matter of consummate precision. There is some truth in this; during the second world war, a so-called 'dumb bomb' might land two kilometers away from its intended target, whereas now a 'smart bomb' can get within seventeen metres.

But in parallel with the 'precision revolution', new generations [6] of a class of weapons known as Area Impact Munitions (AIMs) have been developed. These are specifically conceived, designed, and used to kill and injure as many people, and over as wide an area, as possible. The euphemism of 'soft targeting' can smoothly distinguish these from the 'hard' targeting of tanks, other armoured vehicles and bunkers by precision-guided weapons; but the reality is that most AIMs are planned specifically to kill and maim on a very large scale.

Many AIMs were developed initially during the US war in Vietnam, as a replacement for napalm (an early but very crude anti-personnel weapon); they are now used by most of the larger armed forces.

Britain, for example, has a long track record in developing this type of weapon. The standard British cluster bomb, the BL755 made by Hunting Engineering, was used extensively during the Falklands war in 1982 and later exported across the world. A number of refinements have been added but, in basic terms, the design has stayed the same. The BL755 [7] is less a 'bomb' than a canister containing large numbers of 'bomblets', grenade-sized munitions that can be dispersed over an area the size of a football pitch – at least.

Each BL755 contains 147 of these bomblets, designed in turn to explode into around 2,000 high-velocity anti-personnel shrapnel fragments. This means that every cluster bomb produces nearly one third of a million fragments - killing, shredding and maiming anyone caught within range.

Some US cluster bombs function over a much wider area – the American CBU 87/89/97 series contains 202 bomblets which spread their effect over an area measuring 400 x 200 metres. One B-52 bomber can drop at least twelve of these extraordinarily destructive weapons in a single sortie; in the coming war, some may operate from RAF Fairford [8] in Gloucestershire, England. In the 1991 war, the US navy dropped 4,400 cluster bombs, and the US air force (USAF) used thousands more.

Even more devastating are the modern versions of artillery rocket systems, especially when the individual missiles have warheads that are made up of sub-munitions (bomblets) rather than single high-explosive charges. The leading example of this kind of system in the employ of the US army is known as the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS [9]).

Its most common version consists of twelve missiles on a launch vehicle that can all be 'ripple-fired' in less than a minute. The missiles have a range of over forty kilometers, and each contains 644 M-77 bomblets producing high-velocity shrapnel fragments. All the missiles can be targeted on an area of almost 100 hectares, and can thus deliver over 7,500 bomblets on a single extended target. The destruction caused has been likened to that of a small nuclear weapon. During the 1991 war, the US army fired 10,000 MLRS missiles and the British army a further 2,500.

A longer-range version of the same type, the Army Tactical Missile System, fires two much larger missiles across a range of over 60 miles, with each missile carrying 974 bomblets. This, too, will be used in Iraq.

Other area-impact weapons include massive individual bombs such as the 7.5-ton BLU-82 used in Iraq in 1991 and more recently in Afghanistan; and its successor, the newly-developed and even more powerful 9.5 ton Massive Ordnance Air Burst (MOAB [10]).

## **The why and how**

The sheer firepower and destructiveness of all these systems are enough to explain why deaths in the coming war will at least match those of 1991; but there is a fourth and final reason why it will be so costly in human terms.

This concerns the purpose of the war and the way in which it will be conducted. Where the 1991 war was fought to evict Iraqi armed forces from Kuwait, the 2003 war is intended to destroy the Iraqi regime itself. That means going for its Baghdad [11] jugular. Saddam Hussein's forces will

seek to tie down US troops into urban warfare in the capital, yet the US in turn will want to minimise its own losses at whatever cost to its opponents.

What is likely to happen in 2003 is the extensive and more or less continual use of a standard tactic called 'close air support' employing concentrated air power to clear the path for US ground troops as they move forward. If the opposing Iraqi forces are hiding out in urban areas, mixed in with civilians, then the essential requirement to reduce US casualties to a minimum will still stand; it is in these circumstances that the loss of Iraqi lives, both military and civilian, is likely to be high, especially if cluster bombs, multiple rocket launchers and other weapons are used.

(Two precedents are worth recalling here. First, well-armed Israeli forces had great difficulty in combating a few thousand Palestinian militia in the siege of West Beirut in 1982, even though they heavily outnumbered the latter. The Israelis, particularly anxious to limit their own losses, used enormous firepower, leading to a death toll approaching 20,000 in the few weeks of the siege, most of them civilians.

Second, when US forces were trapped - and eighteen killed - in a vicious firefight in Mogadishu during the US's ill-fated intervention in Somalia in 1992-93, massive force was used which killed 500 Somalis [12] in a single night in October 1993).

In the coming war with Iraq [13], the US and British authorities will make strenuous efforts to avoid mention of the range of weapons and tactics actually being used; by contrast, they will place every emphasis on precision and the apparent avoidance of casualties. The truth of how 'clean' or 'dirty' the war actually is will depend crucially on the integrity and knowledge of the journalists reporting it at first hand.

### **The choice**

With all this in mind, and given the overwhelming likelihood of war taking place in the very near future, how do its routine justifications stand up to the light of evidence? If the arguments for war fail to convince, is another course of action feasible?

The balance-sheet of the foregoing argument can be summarised in three propositions:

- The US requirement for regime termination, and the current parlous state of most of the Iraqi population and civil infrastructure, means that immediate and longer-term civilian casualties will be very high. A war is morally unacceptable on these grounds.
- The planned post-war occupation of Iraq by the US, and its subsequent establishment of several permanent military bases, will incite long-term antagonism in the region, increasing substantially the risk of regional instability and transnational terrorism.
- The Iraqi regime must be expected to use all means to avoid termination, including wholesale firing of oil wells and the use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW).

CBW [14] possession and its likely use by Iraq is the core security reason why regime termination by military force is the most dangerous response to this crisis, and why policy-makers need urgently to consider other means of handling the crisis. This is a very uncomfortable conclusion, but to evade it would be a classic and perilous example of 'old thinking'.

Yet even the employment of chemical and biological weapons does not exhaust the terrifying possibilities of the 2003 war. As earlier columns in this series have noted, there are indications of a US preparedness to use nuclear weapons, embodied in its Theatre Nuclear Planning Document for Iraq [15].

The danger here is that *any* consideration of nuclear weapons use [15] would break a 58-year moratorium. Casual talk of their 'usability' omits the reality that low-yield earth penetrating warheads such as the B61-11 tactical nuclear bomb are amongst the dirtiest of nuclear weapons, producing especially high levels of radioactive fall-out.

Moreover, a war that escalated to nuclear use would greatly encourage the subsequent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction across the world. If Iraq were subjected to nuclear attack now, there would in all probability be paramilitary retaliation within three to five years. This might involve destruction of cities such as Washington and New York and, if the UK was implicated, London too.

### **The moral cost**

The violently repressive character of the Saddam Hussein regime supports the moral argument for regime change. But military force can have consequences that are themselves morally unacceptable. In any case, the moral argument is not at the root of current policy – the regime could in principle survive by disarming.

The Iraqi regime is not a regional threat. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan and Syria do not support a war against it, and opinion is divided even in Kuwait.

Evidence of an Iraqi link with al-Qaida is minimal [16] and attempts to demonstrate it have involved clear exaggeration. There have been problems with other claims provided through western agencies, not least the forged documents [17] alleging Iraqi attempts to acquire uranium from Niger.

The Iraqi regime has so far been careful not to give any indication of release of CBW agents to paramilitary groups. The continuing poor levels of security in the former Soviet Union provide far more likely sources of such agents.

Indeed, the use of military force to terminate the Baghdad regime is probably the only circumstance in which the regime *would* release such agents. Thus, military force might be the one action that could make the regime an indirect threat to states beyond its own region. This, if anything, is a further reason for avoiding war.

Yet the twelve-year programme of aggressive containment and sanctions has also been a conspicuous failure, grievously affecting ordinary Iraqis while leaving the elite unscathed and firmly in power. To acknowledge this is to imply recourse to a third way, beyond military action and the status quo.

### **The motive**

The development by Iraq of CBW is indeed a factor in the US aim of regime termination. But it is secondary to the crucial geopolitical importance of the region, and the fact that a radically 'oppositional' regime there has become unacceptable to the United States.

Whatever is said in public, the primary focus of US policy is well understood in Washington, and that focus is oil [17]. In this regard, though, short-term commercial opportunities are far less significant than the long-term strategic situation.

Iraq has one-sixth of regional oil [18] reserves and more than one-tenth of world reserves. These are four times as large as *total* US reserves, including Alaska. The region as a whole has

energy reserves that are globally dominant – in comparison, the Caspian Basin and Siberian reserves are of only short-term importance.

The US was virtually self-sufficient in oil thirty years ago but now imports 60% of its requirements, and the proportion is rising steadily. The Persian Gulf is becoming more important to the US and is an essential source [19] of oil for Europe and the Asia-Pacific states. Whoever controls the region has long-term global leverage.

The strategic aim of control of the region is therefore regarded as essential to US security interests. There is a thirty-year history of increasing military involvement to this end, one that stretches back to the oil price rises of 1973-74, and the successive US military developments of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF [20]) and of Central Command.

A post-war regional order is now sought in which the US has direct security control of the western Gulf, from the Turkish border to the Straits of Hormuz.

The United States leadership sees this as both necessary and sustainable. In practice, it will induce a sustained regional counter-reaction that entails dangerous instability. The strategy will thus be deeply counter-productive to the US and any associated allies.

The advanced preparations for war with Iraq make it difficult to develop different processes and strategies, ones that will open a path to ensuring security, disarmament and justice in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Many people and organisations around the world, like the Oxford Research Group [21] in Britain, are working on precisely this task. Both short-term dangers, and the long-term interests of the region and the world, make it an essential and urgent one.

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