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THE INDIRECT APPROACH

How US Military Forces Can Avoid The Pitfalls of Future Urban Warfare

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Urban warfare, fighting in cities, war in "complex terrain." To the casual observer, the words seem detached, almost pristine. However, the words are starkingly real to military professionals who have seen the images of great destruction and excessive casualties in cities such as Berlin, Stalingrad, Hue, and Beirut. Urban warfare, a subject that many military professionals would prefer to avoid, is still with us. Moreover, it may be the preferred approach of future opponents.

Consider one of the key lessons that emerged from the Spring 1998 Army 2025 wargame conducted at the US Army War College. The enemy (Red Force) conducted a lightning assault to seize and control a web of complex terrain (a large urban area). This enabled it to decapitate the political leadership and control critical lodgment areas. Designed to dismember coalition efforts and collapse American resolve, the Red Force dispersed its army within the cities and prepared to wage an attrition-based campaign. Since the National Command Authority was initially reluctant to turn to the military element of power, the friendly Blue Force was unable to prevent Red from occupying the urban areas. However, once Red moved into the urban areas, the political fallout to regain control of the lodgment area and reestablish a legitimate government left Blue with little choice but to wage an urban warfare campaign.

Although successful, the cost was excessive in terms of battle casualties and time. In retrospect, the Blue approach was exactly the opposite from what should have been taken. Why? Because by playing into the hands of the enemy, Blue illustrated one of the key issues for 21st century warfare. How can the force of the future achieve success in complex terrain?

A recent revival of interest in urban warfare has yielded a rich outpouring of intellectual energy and fiscal investment in an effort to exploit interest into a relatively unfamiliar form of warfare. As is often the case in the American inquiry style, there has been too quick a leap beyond the ore conceptual aspects of war in urban terrain and into the weapons and tactics necessary to fight street-to-street and door-to-door. Its premise is that the time-tested tenets of warfare must be applied as rigorously and with the same fidelity in urban warfare as they are applied to other forms of warfare.

NEGATING AMERICAN MILITARY STRENGTHS

In the next century, a future enemy might look to his urban masses as a possible refuge from overwhelming American military power. Technological precision and, more importantly, the will to carry out a strategic plan, may enable him to pursue at least two possible options that might lead to a favorable strategic outcome. Each would seek to nullify American technological advantages of speed and knowledge, while simultaneously pursuing a strategic end state that focuses on the attainment of limited objectives while avoiding defeat.

The first option combines the diplomatic, political, and military elements of power into an operational concept that seeks to delay and disrupt our arrival into a strategic theater. Initially, an aggressor moves swiftly to seize military objectives in a neighboring country. Then, through skillful diplomatic efforts

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and political maneuvering, the enemy disrupts coalition-forming efforts while simultaneously offering a peace settlement. Central to the enemy's concept is the occupation of complex urban terrain that enables him to control key lodgment areas and national centers of gravity.

If the first option fails, the enemy can burrow his force in the urban terrain and prepare for combat operations. This places the US leadership on the horns of a dilemma. An urban assault largely neutralizes American high-tech speed and mobility advantages. With the added risk of excessive casualties and prolonged campaign timelines, many would question a decision to undertake such as operation.

Urban fighting has always been one of the most destructive forms of warfare. During World War II, the Russian army sustained over 300,000 casualties in their epic struggle for Berlin. American casualties were equally excessive: over 1,000 killed in action to regain Manila and more than 3,000 in the battle for Aachen, Germany. In the Vietnam War, the casualty rates for US Marines who fought in Hue exceeded those from Okinawa's bloody amphibious assault. More recently, the ill-fated Russian attempt to seize Chechnya resulted in the deaths of thousands of soldiers and non-combatants (August ***AFJI***).

But urban warfare doesn't happen all that often. Both sides realize the destructive effects that street fighting may cause. Only a desperate enemy, defending at great disadvantage, willing to sacrifice initiatives, his cities, and a large portion of his military force, has taken to defending cities. A casual glance at the last 500 years of major war history shows that as more of the world blankets itself in urban sprawl, the incidents of actual street fighting have declined.

THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

A large urban center is multi-dimensional. Soldiers must contend with subterranean and high-rise threats. Every building could be a nest of fortified enemy positions that would have to be dug out, one by one. Moreover, an experienced enemy could easily create connecting positions between buildings.



With limited maneuver space, the urban environment precludes mobility operations and largely negates the effects of weapons, while minimizing engagement ranges. The proximity of buildings plays havoc with communications, further adding to command and control difficulties. Finally, the psychological effects of combat on soldiers are magnified. While the array of threats from multiple dimensions has a debilitating effect on soldiers, it further hastens the disintegrating process that haunts all military units locked in close-combat operations.

The prolifering sprawl of urban centers and populations makes the challenge of future city fighting even more pronounced. Some estimates indicate that between 60 to 70 percent of the world's population will reside in urban areas by the year 2025. If current global demographic trends continue into the next millennium, we will see the growth of huge urban masses, many exceeding 10 million inhabitants. The enormous problems of infrastructure and the demand for social services that threaten to swamp governing authorities in the urban centers of emerging states will most likely worsen. Moreover, the proximity of the disenfranchised to the ruling elite provides the spark for further unrest and sporadic violence.



The future urban center will contain a mixed population, ranging from the rich elite to the poor and disenfranchised. Day-to-day existence for most of the urban poor will be balanced tenuously on the edge of collapse. With social conditions ripe for exploitation, the smallest tilt of unfavorable circumstance might be enough to instigate starvation, disease, social foment, cultural unrest, or other forms of urban violence.

Military leaders who believe that future warfare will not encompass this unpleasant environment are deluding themselves. A little more than one-third of all deployments by US forces over the past 20 years have occurred in complex terrain. As urban areas continue to expand, they will increasingly encompass regions of vital interest to the United States. Representing geo-strategic centers of gravity, these urban areas will contain all the vital functions of government, commerce, communication, and transportation activity.

While some future urban operations may be limited in scope and capable of being controlled by special operations forces and other operatives, others may take place in strategic key terrain of vital interest. Such an operation would require a major American investment of combat forces.

A GREAT EQUALIZER



The dynamics of knowledge and speed that are ideal for open warfare take on an additional dimension when an enemy chooses to occupy key urban areas. An enemy occupies cities to slow us down and avoid our strengths. Rather than suffer the brunt of American military power, where speed and precision technology can be brought to bear, he understands that his intent must be not to seek a clear victory but to avoid losing. The enemy's only ally in these circumstances is time. If he can delay, disrupt, and diffuse our effort to achieve a quick decision, he might be able to force a campaign of attrition in which disproportionate casualties could induce us to grow weary of the conflict. While he surrenders the tactical initiative, the close terrain offers protection from firepower and surveillance and allows further time to prepare a defense.

In open warfare, time is a disadvantage as the need to achieve a rapid victory pushes commanders to attain decisive results. In urban warfare, just the opposite is true. A premature rush into the city works to our advantage and plays to the strength of the defender.

History is full of examples of armies that tried and failed to seize a city by *coup de main.* The Israeli army performed brilliantly in executing a lightning counterstroke across the Suez Canal during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. However, once Israel's armored columns entered the streets of Suez, the Egyptians were able to inflict a high number of casualties while stopping the Israelis' progress. The recent Russian experience in Chechnya is equally illustrative. There, a semi-trained and poorly-equipped force successfully waged a war of attrition that eventually wore down the larger, technologically superior Russian army.

While the different technology and tactical skills of armies are a factor, defensive urban warfare is a great equalizer for an under-modernized force. A vast body of historical evidence reminds us that urban

warfare is a great casualty producer. Thus, in urban warfare, we must avoid the enemy enticement that lures our forces into such an environment and use time to our advantage.

COUNTERING THE URBAN OPTION



If we are patient, time will place our opponent at a disadvantage. The time advantage reversal occurs due to the enemy's inability to continue to provide for the populace. This will eventually lead to the displacement of the government leadership or hostile action on the part of the populace.

Picture for a moment a conflict against a future enemy state similar to some of our more recent post-Cold War adversaries. After a lightning campaign lasting only days, the mobile formations of our future foe are decisively beaten in open warfare. To avoid total defeat, the enemy rushes his remaining forces into his capital city, a city of sprawling dimensions with millions of people that house his political, cultural, and financial centers of gravity.



As soon as the enemy loses on the open ground and elects to occupy complex terrain, a fundamental shift of battlefield dynamics occurs. He loses the initiative. Time is now solely on the side of the intervening coalition.

Without the capacity to maneuver, the enemy cannot escape. Attacking would only result in his destruction. Thus, he arrays his forces throughout the capital to avoid creating lucrative targets for American precision weapons. He impresses the local citizenry into national service and appeals to the world to watch the impending slaughter of non-combatants.

Assuming that Americans are leading a coalition effort, how should the coalition respond? The best option is to preempt the enemy from using complex terrain in the first place. Recognizably, a preemptive approach requires the political entity to build strong domestic and international support, along with developing solid public underpinnings. Moreover, preemptive measures could come in a variety of forms. In the pre-hostilities phase, political and diplomatic means could be used to discourage future aggressive activity. The coalition could also selectively implement force deployment options, such as increasing the presence of naval or air forces and staging pre-positioned equipment. Once hostilities begin, we could force the enemy to fight his way into the urban areas by isolating his army, blocking the key avenues of approach, and augmenting host-nation forces that occupy friendly cities.

If, despite our best efforts, the enemy is able to fall back on a major city, we must be mindful of the limiting factors of using military power. Americans do not expect their military to wage war in an unconstrained manner. It is difficult to imagine fighting another WWII campaign like Berlin or Dresden. In Berlin, between February and May of 1945, a third of the total tonnage of bombs was dropped on the beleaguered city, resulting in the deaths of more than 100,000 people. In our struggle to seize Aachen, the city was virtually destroyed.

With many of the major global cities experiencing a host of infrastructure and overcrowding

shortcomings, the likely damage from unconstrained urban warfare would require a total rebuilding effort. Such warfare could cause the total dismemberment of basic services and the deaths of thousands of innocent people, along with great collateral damage to homes, hospitals, and other structures, creating a new mass of refugees. Rampant disease and starvation would quickly overcome those lucky enough to survive bombs and missiles.

As the moral beacon for international law, global democracy, and respect for human rights, the US can ill-afford to undertake such costly operations. In all likelihood, the American people would not tolerate the casualties that an urban assault would produce, nor would they tolerate the civilian casualties or extensive damage to the captive city. The trend to exercise constraint is clear. American-led coalitions and military operations must find a better solution than physically destroying a city in order to rescue it from a hostile force.

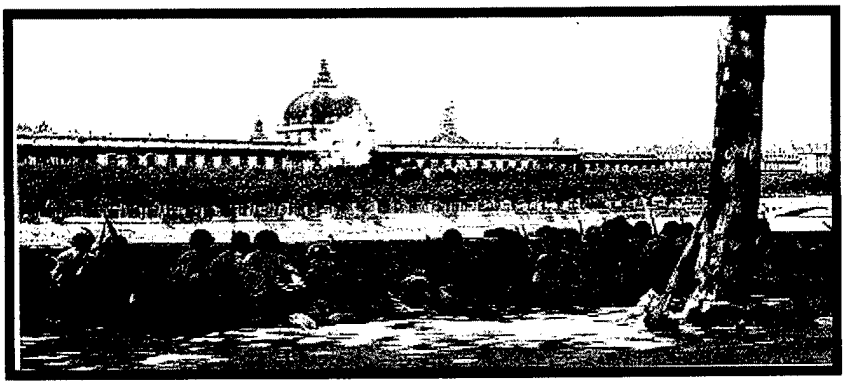
Another limiting factor is the desire for a short conflict. One of the enduring legacies of the Gulf War was the expectation for quick victory with few casualties. While the American people have reluctantly tolerated high numbers of casualties and prolonged military campaigns in the past, events in Somalia and Bosnia indicate that the American public has little stomach for excessive casualties in future wars.

In our example, another viable option exists. If preemptive measures fail, rather than initiating a time-consuming, costly attack in complex terrain, I suggest that an indirect approach would accomplish the strategic end at a much lower cost in terms of human life and physical destruction. Implementing an indirect approach leverages the intrinsic instability of the urban mass to our own advantage. By avoiding a direct assault on an entrenched force, we do not engage the enemy on his terms. The indirect approach enables us to maintain the initiative and employ our technologically superior forces to their fullest potential, leaving the enemy with little option.

This option encompasses three fundamental concepts: using an indirect approach, using time to our advantage, and letting the city collapse on itself.

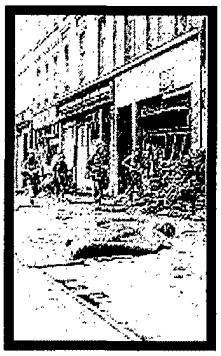
THE INDIRECT APPROACH

In his landmark book on strategy, Liddell Hart contended that in most successful campaigns, the dislocation of the enemy's psychological and physical balance was brought about through use of the indirect approach. This also applies to urban warfare.



Instead of conducting a direct assault and massive strike, coalition forces could establish a loose cordon around the city and control of the surrounding countryside. The cordon would eventually result in complete isolation of the city from the outside world. All avenues, including air, sea, and land arteries,

would be blocked. Moreover, the coalition would seek to control sources of food, power, water, and sanitation services. Any vital natural resources would be controlled. Finally, using technological means, all internal information sources and commercial, financial, and governmental nodes would be suppressed, and only information emanating from the coalition would reach the city's population.



Throughout the cordon operation, coalition forces would demonstrate their absolute mastery of the situation, using knowledge and speed to seize, control, and strike selected decisive points within the city. High-altitude unmanned aerial vehicles orbiting miles above the city could maintain unlimited surveillance with a minimum of manpower. Ground-mounted cameras could observe areas susceptible to infiltration. Unless the enemy attacked, coalition forces would not engage in close combat, instead using greater standoff advantages and technology to strike selected point targets, key leadership, and weapons of mass destruction.

As history reminds us, a continued massive use of firepower often has the opposite effect from what is intended. Thus, the coalition would not attempt to achieve complete destruction of the enemy force, but only to destroy those targets that have the greatest impact on the government, the army, and the population. The purpose is two-fold: to demonstrate the futility of further resistance and to create conditions that will lead to collapsing the enemy's will to continue the struggle.

USING TIME TO OUR ADVANTAGE

Through the use of psychological operations and control of the media, the coalition could create an environment in which the enemy army becomes an unwelcome force. The underlying purpose is to shape the perception that the enemy is a hostile occupying force. This perception eventually turns the population against the enemy. In this regard, the coalition could establish mechanisms to gauge the prevailing moods of the population.

LET THE CITY COLLAPSE ON ITSELF

As the coalition achieves control of the surrounding countryside, it could collect resources to support the establishment of sanctuaries or safe havens around the city. Humanitarian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, would be encouraged to construct protected camps. The city's population would be encouraged to leave, and coalition forces would freely allow refugees passage through the cordon to the relative security and safety of the camps.

For those who stay, the isolation of the city, in time, would create a refugee problem for the enemy. With the steady depletion of resources, the remaining population would eventually see the government as an impotent entity that can't provide basic services or security for the people. Inevitably, the military forces and their leaders would be seen as the real enemy, particularly among the dispossessed within the city.

Although this approach has its advantages, this is not to suggest that it would always work. The following are key considerations before this approach is undertaken. How much popular support does the enemy have? How willing is the enemy's population to accept suffering? To what extent is the city self-sustaining and for how long? Is there some sanctuary nearby that allows forces to rest and recuperate in safety? To what extent are we relying on a coalition and how strong is the coalition? How coherent were the enemy's military forces when they occupied the city? How close was the city to collapse before the initiation of military operations?

Future conditions will force us to fight in complex terrain. We can no longer fight the destructive campaigns of WWII. The indirect approach enables us to use knowledge and speed to their fullest potential to achieve our strategic ends with the least cost in human life and destruction of physical property.