

Report on urban warfare points to US plans to destroy Iraqi cities

Patrick Martin
30 October 2002

A new report on urban warfare by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff is a blueprint for the use of America's overwhelming military and technological supremacy to brutalize and terrorize a far weaker opponent into submission. It suggests that in any invasion of Iraq, American military planners are prepared to use massive firepower to destroy Iraq's major cities.

At the same time, the military brass would prefer to treat cities like Baghdad and Basra as targets to be devastated from afar, rather than as prospective combat zones. The document emphasizes the obstacles which urban combat places before an attacking force, raising as cautionary examples such bloody urban battles as Stalingrad, Hue (Vietnam) and Grozny (Chechnya).

The report, dated September 16, 2002, was made available on the web site of the *New York Times*, which described the document in an article October 21. The study, which can be accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/international/021021dod_report.pdf, is entitled "Doctrine for Joint Urban Operations." (In Pentagon terminology, "joint" designates an operation combining air, naval, ground and special operations forces under a single command).

The *Times* article is fundamentally dishonest, portraying the new strategy as aimed at bypassing cities, avoiding combat losses and minimizing civilian deaths. A careful reading of the report suggests the opposite conclusion: despite occasional lip service to such humanitarian concerns, it makes a case for using advanced weaponry on a massive scale—with an inevitably catastrophic impact on the civilian population—as a substitute for the perils and difficulties of house-to-house ground combat.

The military planners note that urban combat is costly for both attackers and defenders, extremely time-consuming, and fraught with risks. The report states: "Ground combat ... is the most difficult and costly type of military urban operation. All those aspects of urban ground combat that have historically extracted a terrible price on attacker, defender, and noncombatant alike remain present today, multiplied by the increased size and complexity of urban areas and increase in the number of inhabitants ("Doctrine for Joint Urban Operations," II-14).

The complex physical environment restricts the power of space-based reconnaissance systems and reduces the leverage of the side possessing more advanced technology. According to the report: "Cities reduce the advantages of the technologically superior force. The physical terrain of cities tends to reduce line of sight (LOS) and the ability to observe fires, inhibits command, control,

and communications capability, makes aviation operations more difficult, and decreases the effectiveness of naval surface fire support and indirect fire support. It also degrades logistics, and often reduces ground operations to the level of small unit combat. In addition, the constraints imposed by a need to minimize civilian casualties and preserve infrastructure further reduce technological advantage" (I-7, I-8).

It is significant that the document frequently cites three historical examples in which superior attacking forces met strategic defeat, even when they enjoyed initial or sustained tactical success. In the battle of Stalingrad, the Nazi offensive against the Soviet Union met shattering defeat after a Soviet counteroffensive trapped the German Sixth Army and forced it to surrender. In Hue, the largest city captured outright by the Vietnamese liberation forces during the Tet Offensive of February 1968, US Marines took heavy losses recapturing the city, while public opinion in America turned sharply against the war. In Grozny in 1994-95, four attacking Russian army columns were fought to a standstill by Chechen guerrilla fighters, and anti-war sentiment within Russia grew rapidly.

US military planners are clearly concerned that a bloodbath in Basra or Baghdad could produce the same effect within the United States.

The answer to this problem, according to the document, is the use of firepower and the isolation of targeted cities prior to assault. It singles out the importance of what is called, in Pentagon jargon, "shaping the battlespace." The military commander of an urban assault "shapes the battlespace to best suit operational objectives by exerting appropriate influence on adversary forces, friendly forces, the information environment, and particularly the elements of the urban triad" (II-10).

Translation from military jargon is again required. The "urban triad," according to the report, consists of the physical terrain, population and infrastructure of the city. "Exerting appropriate influence" on the urban triad means decisively shifting these three factors in a direction that favors the attacker. In plain English, it means leveling buildings to improve mobility, destroying the infrastructure to deny water, electricity and other systems to the defenders, and driving out (or killing) the civilian population so that they don't get in the way.

The document calls for "the use of fires to create conditions favorable for operation movement maneuver" and "the use of operational movement and maneuver to create conditions for

employing fires.” The Joint Chiefs insist there should be no limitation on US commanders in terms of the weaponry employed: “In any urban combat maneuver, the best approach is to use the full range of combined arms technology and weaponry available to the joint force” (III-15).

The report recommends operations to achieve the physical, moral and informational isolation of the urban area by surrounding it prior to any assault. In the context of a heavily populated urban area, that means depriving civilians of food, water, electrical power and access to adequate medical care—essentially starving the population into submission through siege methods.

These tactics may not suffice, leaving the attacker ultimately no alternative but a frontal assault. According to the report, “The joint force’s chances of success in executing this form of maneuver can be greatly enhanced by its ability to apply overwhelming combat power against specific objectives with speed, firepower, and shock” (III-17).

While the report suggests that precision weapons make attacks on specific urban targets more effective, it also concedes that the urban terrain is the least favorable for the use of such weapons, because of the difficulty in obtaining accurate fixes using satellite equipment such as GPS, and because of the large number of noncombatants who will be in close proximity to most targets.

Given the inevitable carnage that would ensue, the report advises careful planning of public affairs operations “to produce maximum cooperation between the media and joint forces ... successful engagement of the media can aid the dissemination of information in the operational area and help produce and maintain domestic and international support” (III-37).

Again, translating from this bureaucratic language, the US military is counting on the servile American media to whitewash the upcoming devastation of Iraqi cities, to downplay the casualty toll, and to obediently retail such official lies as the claim—frequently made after US atrocities—that civilian victims were being used as “human shields” by the enemy.

Underscoring the premium which the military places on the collusion of the media—especially in light of the American debacle in Vietnam—the report notes that the US military defeated the Vietnamese attacks on urban areas in the Tet Offensive, but lost the “information battle” and, ultimately, the war itself.

The report cites approvingly the political lessons learned by the Russian military in the first Chechnya campaign of 1994-1995, with the result that “during the second Chechnya campaign of 1999-2000 the Russian government made every effort to control the media and ensure that the Russian view of the war dominated public opinion. Russia won this information war from day one of the fighting.”

The report speaks in Orwellian terms of a “strategy of reprogramming mass consciousness,” denoting the techniques that are to be used to justify American conduct of a new war against Iraq (III-40, III-41)

The *Times* article makes no mention of the document’s focus on public relations as a key battlefield—a clear indication that the newspaper, like the rest of the corporate-controlled media, is anxious to play the role of cheerleader and propagandist for the war effort.

Pentagon planners are acutely aware that the methods required for the conquest of Iraq will make American commanders and soldiers potentially liable to prosecution for war crimes. A section of the report on urban warfare is aimed at reassuring military personnel that the US government will defend their actions as justified and legal under the US interpretation of the laws of war.

The report states: “Although civilians, noncombatants, and civilian property may not be specifically targeted, incidental injury and collateral damage are not unlawful if: caused incident to an attack on a lawful target, and the incidental injury and collateral damage are not excessive in light of the anticipated military advantage from the attack” (III-51).

Not only the killing of innocent civilians, but the use of chemical and incendiary weapons can be justified, the document declares. While acknowledging that the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which the US is a signatory, “prohibits the use of all chemical weapons, including riot control agents,” the report goes on to declare, “the United States holds the position that use of riot control agents to control prisoners of war or civil disturbances is not a method of warfare and therefore not covered by the convention” (III-52). In other words, the US cannot gas enemy soldiers, but it reserves the right to gas prisoners and civilians!

The same section of the report declares: “Incendiary weapons are lawful so long as they are not employed so as to cause unnecessary suffering. Weapons with incidental incendiary effects are exempted, as are munitions with a combined effect.” This language is so loose as to constitute not a restriction, but rather a license to burn down cities.

Finally, the Joint Chiefs’ document takes up the treatment of noncombatants in the aftermath of victory, i.e., once the military takes on an essentially police role in urban areas. The report contrasts the failure of Israeli methods during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, when brutality toward Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians sparked protracted guerrilla warfare, with what it presents as a model for “success” in such police actions: the role of the British military in Northern Ireland.

The report makes the astonishing suggestion that “the British have been generally successful in exercising control of the urban population without provoking popular backlash by their presence” and that “British performance in Belfast provides a model of both inter-Service and inter-agency cooperation.”

By placing the future American occupation of Baghdad somewhere on a continuum between Israeli conduct in Beirut and British conduct in Belfast, the report demonstrates that the Pentagon envisions a brutal colonial-style dictatorship, not the creation of a democratic renaissance in the Middle East, as Bush administration propaganda pretends.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact