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A MODEST SUGGESTION

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A Modest Suggestion

On September 20th, President George W. Bush laid out to the country the objectives of our war on terrorism. The Taliban, rulers of Afghanistan, were given a simple choice between handing over the members and the apparatus of the Al Queda organization or facing destruction. The speech was simple, dramatic and forceful. It drew in stark terms the evil forces faced by the civilized world and placed any country that harbored terrorists into the category of “hostile nation.” But President Bush set out conditions that have precipitated military action against Afghanistan and now the key is to prevent the war against terrorism from degenerating into a war against a small, poor, Islamic country. As planners consider the next step, careful consideration of an indirect approach to the problem of terrorism is necessary.

The Indirect Approach

Liddell Hart argued forcefully for an indirect approach in strategy. He had seen the strategic bankruptcy of direct assaults during World War One, where lockstep plans had resulted in murderous stalemate. To avoid such results, the key to victory was to dislocate the enemy’s balance both physically and psychologically. Taking the line of least resistance and avoiding engagement with the enemy front, physical strain could be placed on the enemy. Using the line of least expectation, or appearing where the enemy least expects, would psychologically dislocate the enemy. By upsetting both the physical and the psychological balance of the enemy, victory would follow.

To Hart, the direct approach was flawed not necessarily because it did not result in victory, but that such victory was incomplete and costly in comparison to what an indirect strategy would net. More importantly, the direct approach merely consolidated

the enemy's balance by driving him back toward his bases and reserves. There would be no "shock" and, therefore, no psychological dislocation.

Certainly Hart was not the first to consider the value of the indirect approach or the value of psychological dislocation. Napoleon's maxim that in war, the moral is to the physical as three is to one was demonstrated by the Ulm campaign against Austria. His swift march from the Channel with the Grand Armee was a classic example of the indirect approach. By appearing astride Austrian general Mack's line of communications, where Mack least expected him, Napoleon dislocated the balance of his opponent and won a stunning victory. This indirect approach stands in shining comparison to Napoleon's later frontal assaults at Borodino and Eylau.

The indirect approach applies to higher strategy as well as tactical battles. Here the psychological factor becomes even more important. By upsetting the balance in the mind of one's opponent, one seizes the initiative and creates the conditions for favorable future actions. Rational actors evaluate the situation and take actions based on their evaluation. By taking a line of least expectation, these evaluations are upset and balance is lost. A direct approach follows the expected route and does not create the same dislocation. As a result, while the direct approach may result in victory, it will not be as complete or as cheap in lives as the indirect. For example, the psychological dislocation of the French high command after Germany's thrust through the Ardennes in 1940 led it to sue for peace. Had the Germans used the direct approach through Belgium, they may have been victorious, but it would likely have been at far greater cost.

The Objective is Terrorism

There is value in considering the indirect approach now. While the President outlined a series of demands to the Taliban, the real objective is to defeat global terrorism. The question becomes how to achieve this objective. The Taliban are being attacked because they harbor Usama bin Laden's organization. Implicated in the attacks of September 11th, bin Laden is a deserving target and there is little question that his elimination will result in fewer attacks on the US by his organization. However, Al Queda is only one group of many and the US has vital interests that have to be considered. As the war drifts toward greater involvement in Afghanistan and a direct approach on bin Laden's safe harbor, careful thought must be given to determine whether there is a better way. There is more than one government harboring terrorists. Will a direct attack on Afghanistan change the actions of other governments or is there a way to achieve a more complete result?

The center of gravity for a terrorist organization is the ability to move without harassment. Without this ability, terrorist cells are always looking over their shoulders for the inevitable raid against them. Organization, recruiting and planning all suffer and casualties throughout the ranks of the group create problems in communications and logistics. The group no longer functions as a group at some point and its power disappears.

Having identified the center of gravity, the key to defeating terrorism is to eliminate state acquiescence in terrorists' existence. Only states have both the sovereignty and the native ability to penetrate the organization. The Israelis admit that the only good fortune they have had in their struggle with Hamas is identifying and

eliminating terrorists in that group has been when the Palestinian Authority has addressed the issue. Several organizations conducting terrorist activities against Turkey were headquartered in Damascus until the Turks massed troops at the Syrian border.

Discretion being the better part of valor, the Syrians expelled those groups and now most of their members sit in Turkish jails. The US success against guerillas in Arkansas during the civil war was the result of native Arkansas units fighting for the Union against other Arkansas rebels. Other examples of these types of successes can be found in South America and Africa.

The President recognized that movement and, hence, state support is the lynchpin of the terrorist. But US action does not guarantee achievement of its objectives. The US is attacking Afghanistan because it harbors bin Laden. It is not certain that this attack will result in bin Laden's death or elimination. Certainly, the Taliban have large uncertainties regarding their survival. But given their beliefs that death in the fight against infidels will result in heaven this is not necessarily a disappointing end for them. However, the key objective is to defeat terrorism. While it suits our quest for justice to seek out bin Laden wherever he is hiding, it is a valid question to determine whether there is a better way.

Considerations

The US is facing a foe that taps into a strain of Islamic fundamentalism. The extent to which this religious factor influences considerations is unclear. It certainly was important in the extended resistance of Afghans in the brutal struggle with the Soviet invaders. The Taliban have asked for support against the US and there are reports that they have received volunteers as a result. More critically, the regimes in Egypt, Pakistan

and Saudi Arabia are very concerned unrest among large factions spurred by religious fervor. The US sees these regimes as allies to various degrees and Saudi Arabia furnishes 25% of the world's oil. Creating conditions that could bring down these shaky regimes does not allow for a better peace after this war. Finally, inflaming fundamentalists against the US would create more terrorists and defeat the purpose of the struggle.

Time is also a critical consideration. While the Administration has repeatedly stated that the war will be long and largely unseen, it is not the American public that is the primary issue here. The US has patiently arranged a coalition of varying degrees of support. While America can count on Britain's support over time, that is not the case with other partners. Each day is another opportunity for opposition to coalesce. Musharraf in Pakistan is under the most strain as a large portion of his country supports the Taliban. The fact that Pakistan has nuclear weapons makes a possible fundamentalist uprising take on a new importance.

There has been a great deal of discussion in the US regarding casualties. There is concern that losses could rapidly erode any level of support for an operation and that the real-time news cycle could be devastating to any effort that doesn't meet with immediate success. The lesson of Somalia reinforced the belief of some people that America will not support casualties. While there has been recent debate regarding this belief, there is no evidence about the level of deaths America would tolerate in the age of the 24-hour news cycle. Certainly, given the starting point of this war was the tremendous loss of life on September 11th, this allows far more leeway than in other conflicts.

Currently, the US is bombing targets in Afghanistan using tactics and weapons proven over the past decade. However, the value of bombing in undeveloped countries

has not been proven and has been called into question in the past. The success in Kosovo was obtained at the expense of decades of development and infrastructure in Serbia and reduced the populace to paupers. Air power was not decisive in breaking the enemy in either Korea and Vietnam and the experience of the Russians in Afghanistan should not be dismissed. While US Air Force may be successful in Afghanistan, there is increasing pressure to produce results. This pressure could translate into the introduction of combat troops. Already there have been raids into Afghanistan by elite forces, but the effectiveness of these raids is uncertain. There is hope that the Northern Alliance will advance, but the troops are ill equipped for the most part and Alliance leaders will have the understandable desire to protect their forces for the post-Taliban struggle. The urge for the introduction of ground forces inside of Afghanistan is likely to grow very large as the war goes on.

That there will be a power struggle after defeat of the Taliban is almost certain. Afghanistan is not a country that has known any appreciable unity throughout its history. Its various tribes come together only to repel invaders and then get back to internal strife soon afterward. A salient point to remember is that the Soviets invaded Afghanistan during internal difficulties and left a regime that fought for three years before succumbing to the Mujahadeen. The Taliban defeated the Mujahadeen, many who then became part of the Northern Alliance. This is only a brief recounting of the past twenty-five years. Further study would demonstrate that the recent past is no aberration. Internal strife stops in Afghanistan long enough to drive out any invader who thinks that it might be a good time to drop in. Persian, Hindu, British and Russian armies have invaded in the past to their misfortune. And now, America is poised to enter.

The Soviets had between 80,000 and 100,000 troops in Afghanistan at any one time. The mechanized nature of Soviet forces made employment difficult due to the difficult terrain, but the brutal nature of the occupation made opposition extremely dangerous. Yet, the Afghans did fight and bleed the Soviets until they left. Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's Vietnam and proved that triple canopy forest was not necessary to allow a third world guerilla force to defeat a modern army.

This is not to ignore the qualities of the American military. To compare our military to any other is to be amazed when qualitative and quantitative advantages in weapons systems, training and logistics are considered. But arrogance is deadly in such matters and the US would be operating in a location as far from home as almost anyplace in the world. A review of the relative states of the forces facing off at the beginning of Vietnam would have led to a similar conclusion.

Value in a Direct Approach

The value of the direct approach, that is, fulfillment of the objectives set forth by the President through continued bombing and possible invasion of Afghanistan is significant. The President has patiently built up a coalition of varying degrees of support. By convincing Musharraf to allow US basing within Pakistan and committing most Muslim countries to at least vocal support for the announced US objectives, the President has pulled off a significant diplomatic coup. NATO, China and Russia are unlikely allies against terrorism. The US population, which a day before September 11th was still split in its support for the Bush administration, has rallied behind him with approval ratings in the 90th percentile. Whether such a coalition of support could be maintained if the President strayed from his announced objectives is questionable. With the direct

approach, there is a discernable target and demonstrated effort toward a goal. This is a vital concern in the effort to maintain the initiative. While bombs are dropping on Al Queda, it is difficult for it to plan future strikes and there are certain to be casualties within the organization. Victory against Al Queda and the Taliban would demonstrate to the Afghans that support for those groups was misplaced at best.

However, the direct approach of invading Afghanistan has serious obstacles in the way of its success. The logistical nightmare coupled with winter in difficult terrain make any such operation difficult to say the least. While Afghanistan is not a large country, the combined Soviet/Afghan Army could not hold it against a determined foe. Each day the war continues poses a new chance for the coalition to break under the pressure of a US-led force attacking Muslims. Popular support could dissipate while the US merely forces the Taliban back upon itself. Finally, Sun Tzu's precept that victory is obtained by attacking the enemy's strategy is clearly ignored. Bin Laden strives to divide the world into those who believe and those who do not. Even if bin Laden is killed, without proper superiority in the information realm it will be easy for those of a certain tilt to see US actions against the Taliban as being against all Muslims. Of such beliefs, terrorists are born. Then the loop will begin again.

An Indirect Recommendation

Liddell Hart also stated that the objective of war was a better peace. If the target of the struggle is terrorism and the US aims for a better peace, then expansion of the military effort against Al Queda should be very carefully considered. To defeat terrorism it is necessary to gain state support for elimination of safe harbors. While defeating the Taliban may appear to accomplish this in Afghanistan, this places far too much hope on

the stability of the next regime. There is a very large chance that a weak or lawless regime would replace the Taliban and drift toward fundamentalism. This would change little except for the reduction in forces Al Qaeda suffered during the war. The struggle would do almost nothing for US prestige or power in the region as the Taliban were almost completely isolated before the war and are so geographically separated and financially poor that there is no lesson that other regimes in the Middle East will draw. This is doubly so as Saddam Hussein continues to demonstrate his defiance to American power a decade after his defeat in the Gulf War.

The perception of American power is key in a region, where political control is concentrated in almost every country but Israel and Turkey. The current perception is not a good one in the region. Allowing Hussein's antics can only encourage anti-American sentiment and force rulers to walk a line far closer to fundamentalist faith if only to maintain their own legitimacy. Claims that members of the Saudi royal family are supporting bin Laden and other groups either by choice or coercion are rampant. Given that removal from office from most countries in the region results in serious consequences or even death for the leaders, their primary concern is maintenance of the regime's control. Here is where the insidious results of Hussein's conduct are felt the most. As a walking example that one can fight the US and survive even while poking at the no fly zones and refusing inspection of suspected development sites for weapons of mass destruction, Hussein visibly weakens American power each day he remains in charge. What surprise can be mounted when a Saudi ruler concerned with a large unemployed population whipped up in a fundamentalist frenzy does not fully support an

apparently unreliable ally which may turn its back on a non-democratic kingdom. The Byzantine politics of the region are not so far below the obvious in this case.

To deal with terrorism it is necessary to obtain the support of states in the region. This support must be gained through strong action demonstrated against a foe of the US. While the obvious enemy is bin Laden and the Taliban, such a direct approach would place the US in conflict with Afghanistan. A far better approach would be to address bin Laden with covert and law enforcement means while isolating the Taliban and supporting its enemies. This would allow freedom to conduct an indirect approach and topple Saddam Hussein from his perch. His intransigence and non-compliance with both UN resolutions and the peace agreement merit military action. Hussein is far closer to regional seats of power and action against him would have a far greater shock effect on rulers in the region. Hussein's regime is far more similar to other governments in the region and American resolve in finally settling this problem would change the equations each ruler makes when deciding whether to allow groups within his borders to tweak the US. The psychological impact made upon these rulers as the US did something so long delayed as to be unexpected would be significant. Due to the secular nature of the Iraqi regime, the response of the Muslim world would be no greater than it would be as a result of actions with Afghanistan and military operations would be no more difficult. The opportunity for a dramatic and far-reaching result presents itself. If the objective of the war is global terrorism and not bin Laden, the indirect approach is a real chance to achieve it.

