

## Don't Go Into Iran, George

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Two vignettes that say much about the American way of war. First, two trigger-happy reservist pilots making a lethal attack on a British armored convoy during the initial phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, despite indications that their targets were, in fact, their own allies.

Second, agents of the Coalition Provisional Authority dishing out bundles of shrink-wrapped hundred dollar bills from the backs of trucks shortly before the handover of power to a transitional Iraqi government, despite the obvious risk that the money might end up in the hands of terrorists.

Friendly fire and money down the drain: it is very tempting to say that these two phrases sum up what has gone wrong in Iraq since 2003. The misdirected application of force has alienated not only the millions of Iraqis who initially welcomed the overthrow of the tyrant Saddam Hussein, but also the equally large number of people in this country who used to see the United States as Britain's natural ally.

At the same time, the misdirected expenditure of money has achieved little more than the transformation of a nasty but fundamentally weak rogue regime into a failed state that may yet spread sectarian slaughter across the entire Middle East.

If military efficiency is best measured as the ratio of strategic objectives achieved to money spent - "bangs per buck" for short - then this looks like the least efficient military campaign in modern history.

Yet last week the Bush administration unabashedly asked for yet more money to finance its chronically dysfunctional "War on Terror."

To be precise, Congress was asked to approve a supplemental budget request for \$98 billion on top of budget proposals for 2008 totaling \$145 billion. Although some of this money is supposed to be spent in Afghanistan and other countries, the lion's share is intended for Iraq. And although some is earmarked for training indigenous security forces, for diplomatic operations and foreign aid, 90 per cent of it is for "military operations and other defense activities."

The supplement takes Bush's request for war funding to \$243 billion - about £124 billion - pretty serious money by anyone's standards. It is more than the entire gross domestic product of South Africa. It is also more than 25 times what the United Kingdom has spent on its entire involvement in Iraq since 2003.

But now consider the total amount that the United States has spent on the War on Terror since September 2001 which, according to the Congressional Budget Office, is \$503 billion. Add this figure to the amounts the administration has just requested and you arrive at a total for the entire War on Terror so far of \$746 billion: just shy of three quarters of a trillion dollars.

It gets worse. According to Nobel prize laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, if you include costs of the war not

captured in budgetary figures, and assume (as I do) that the US will be in Iraq until 2015, the final cost of the war could rise as high as \$2.2 trillion.

Hats off to Yale economist William Nordhaus, who estimated back in December 2002 that the cost of a protracted war that went wrong would be as high as \$1.6 trillion.

Even \$2 trillion could turn out to be an underestimate if the men with the medals and ribbons get their way. Last year General Peter J. Schoomaker, the outgoing army chief of staff, successfully sought an increase in the size of the army's budget for 2008. Now senior figures in the Navy and Air Force have taken up his refrain that US defense expenditure is actually too low in relation to gross domestic product.

To be fair, the generals have a point. Compared with the Cold War, the War on Terror is a snip. Between 1959 and 1989, US defense spending averaged 6.9 per cent of GDP. Since President Bush entered the White House, it has risen from 3 percent to just 4 per cent, still a 33 percent increase.

Nevertheless, America's enemies since 2001 have been mere gnats compared with the mighty Soviet bear, while America's economy has enjoyed remarkably rapid growth since 1990. It still seems reasonable to ask why, with an annual budget equal to the entire GDP of Holland, the US military has failed to pacify Iraq.

Is it just a case of gross inefficiency at the Pentagon? Or has something fundamental changed in the character of war, as our own General Sir Rupert Smith has recently argued? According to Smith's book *The Utility of Force*: "War no longer exists as battle in a field between men and machinery." The advent of what he calls "war amongst people" has turned the American Colossus into a big but vulnerable Goliath.

Smith's point is that the Pentagon is still arming American forces for the last war - not so much the Cold War as the very asymmetrical wars fought in the 1990s in Kuwait, Bosnia and Kosovo, where air power played a decisive role. Only very slowly is the military adapting to the new demands of operations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan, which combine elements of economic reconstruction, neo-colonial policing and counter-insurgency.

"War amongst people" turns out to be very symmetrical indeed, since it pits lightly-armed US patrols against irregular local forces. The Americans may have the better weapons and training, but the insurgents have superior knowledge of the terrain.

It will clearly take more time for the US Army and Marine Corps to master this new kind of warfare, though they're certainly trying (hence the current craze for learning the lessons of British success during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s).

There is, however, an alternative option to the hard slog in Iraq - and it is evidently an option that President Bush finds very tempting. Why not revert to fighting the easier kind of asymmetrical war the United States is already equipped to fight, by launching air strikes against Iran?

You can see why the President might be contemplating such a course of action. Strategically, Iran is a threat: pressing on regardless of sanctions with its nuclear weapons program, lending support to Shiite militias in Iraq.

Politically, Mr. Bush has nothing to lose. And militarily he can be sure that the American Air Force will take out at least some of the Iranian nuclear installations in spectacular fashion.

With every passing day of 2007, such a showdown has come to seem more likely. In recent weeks, US forces in Iraq have arrested Iranian agents who, they allege, were involved in attacks on American and Iraqi forces.

Last week the former Iranian president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, retorted with threats of "an all-out reaction towards the aggressors and their interests in all parts of the world" in the event of an American attack.

Yet the risks of such an attack by the United States are sobering. The backlash on the ground in Iraq - and elsewhere - could indeed be ferocious. There is no guarantee that the Iranian nuclear program would suffer more than temporary disruption.

The political effects in Iran (to say nothing of the rest of the Middle East) would be to strengthen the radicals around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the very moment when they seem to be losing popular support.

There is, in short, a real danger that a pre-emptive strike against Iran could turn Goliath into Samson, bringing the temple of Dagon crashing down on everyone in the Middle East, including Samson himself.

The new symmetrical warfare that is now being waged in Iraq cannot be won by Top Gun pilots, nor by trucks full of cash. Only knowledge - not least a knowledge of the other side's language - can now save the American Colossus from a denouement of truly Biblical proportions.

For the strange thing about this Colossus is that the part of its anatomy that appears to be made of clay is not its feet, but its head.

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