

A war the U.S. can win—decisively

By John J. Mearsheimer

Many Americans fear that throwing Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait would be a very tough job for the American military, with U.S. casualties ranging into the tens of thousands. For example, Anthony Lewis of The New York Times claims that a land assault against Iraqi forces in Kuwait is likely to produce ghastly American casualties and resemble the brutal and prolonged trench warfare of World War I.

This pessimistic view is incorrect. In fact, the U.S. military is poised to clobber Hussein's forces and score a stunning victory in Kuwait. If diplomacy fails to resolve the present crisis, the American military will sweep Hussein's forces from Kuwait quickly and easily. The campaign should be over in a week or less and probably fewer than 1,000 Americans will die in combat, a very low number for a large army fighting a major armored war.

The marked qualitative superiority of U.S. forces is the first reason for optimism. The American army is an advanced fighting force equipped with the best weaponry money can buy. For example, M-1A1 tanks and U.S. artillery, especially the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), are far superior to their Iraqi counterparts and would thus give American fighting forces an important advantage on the battlefield. Furthermore, the U.S. military has spent the last 40 years preparing for a major armored war. The fact that it takes place in the Persian Gulf instead of Europe matters little, especially since the American army has trained its forces in recent years in the California desert. If Erwin Rommel, the renowned "Desert Fox" of World War II, could easily make the adjustment from the battlefields of France to fighting in North Africa, there is no reason the United States cannot do likewise in the Gulf.

The Iraqi army, on the other hand, is a Third World military that is incapable of fighting mobile armored battles. This crucial Iraqi shortcoming in tank warfare was demonstrated often in the recent Iran-Iraq war, a conflict in which the manifest deficiencies of the Iraqi military were laid bare. In fact, even by Third World standards, the Iraqi army is a below-average fighting force. It is certainly not in the same league as the North Vietnamese army, and it does not even measure up well to the Egyptian and Syrian armies. If the Israelis can consistently score impressive victories over the Egyptians and Syrians, even after being completely surprised in 1973, why should we not expect the U.S. military to rout the Iraqis?

The balance of fighting power looks even more lopsided when you consider airpower. The Iraqis effectively have no air force. Yes, they have a couple hundred front-line combat aircraft, but those planes are not likely to come up into the sky to engage the Americans. The reason is simple: If they do, U.S. fighters like the F-14, F-15 and F-16 will quickly shoot them down. The Americans, on the other hand, have a massive air force at their disposal. The United States and its allies have more than 2,000 tactical aircraft in the theater, as well as scores of B-52s, each capable of carrying up to 50,000 pounds of bombs. This armada will have little trouble finding and hitting targets, since it will be operating in an open desert with cloudless skies. Also, the Iraqis have few ground-based systems capable of knocking significant numbers of American planes out of the air. And those systems are vulnerable to electronic jamming and direct attack from the air. Thus, our pilots will be free to roam the skies of Kuwait and wreak havoc on Iraqi ground forces and other key targets.

The prospects for a quick and decisive American victory look even better when one considers how the rival ground forces are deployed and how the war is likely to be fought.

The Iraqis have approximately 26 divisions in Kuwait and southern Iraq. About 14 of those divisions are standard infantry formations with little mobility. As one would expect, these infantry divisions are dug in along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border and along Kuwait's gulf coastline. These forward deployed forces comprise Iraq's Maginot Line, as they are dug into the ground and cannot shift positions along the line. The remaining 12 Iraqi divisions are mainly armored and mechanized infantry divisions that serve as Iraq's operational reserve. They are deployed well behind the frontline divisions—about 6 of the 12 divisions, the so-called Republican Guards, are reported to be in southern Iraq—and are expected to reinforce the frontline divisions that come under attack.

The key point is that the bulk of Iraqi forces are spread out along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. Consequently, they are vulnerable to the type of attack the U.S. military is most likely to favor: a classic armored blitzkrieg. U.S. commanders will start by concentrating armored forces and air forces along a 30- to 45-kilometer sector of the Saudi-Kuwaiti border so as to achieve a decisive force advantage (3 to 1 or more). That superiority will allow our tank forces to overwhelm the outnumbered Iraqi infantry divisions in the breakthrough sector. Since the Iraqis cannot know where the Americans will choose to fight the breakthrough battle, they must spread their forces out along the entire Saudi-Kuwaiti border. This will enable the Americans to gain a decisive force advantage in the breakthrough sector.

Before American armored forces smash into the one or two Iraqi divisions sitting in the breakthrough sector, American airpower will be unleashed against them as well as the Iraqi divisions immediately adjacent to the breakthrough sector. Concentrated

B-52 attacks will wreak enormous destruction on those forces, as many North Vietnamese veterans can attest. There has been much handwringing in the press over the fact that the Iraqis are dug in along the Kuwaiti border. Iraqi fortifications may be impressive, but they can be badly damaged, if not torn apart, by "Arc Light" attacks—massive raids by B-52s dropping hundreds of tons of high explosives from 30,000 feet. During the Vietnam War, B-52 Arc Light attacks destroyed enemy tunnels located 20 to 30 feet below the ground. The Arc Light attacks will not only rip apart the actual defenses in the breakthrough sector, they are also likely to have a profound psychological effect on the frontline Iraqi forces, which are widely reported to suffer morale problems to begin with.

Once the air force has completed its attacks, the U.S. armored wedge would move forward. American numerical superiority in the breakthrough sector, coupled with the qualitative superiority of U.S. forces, would quickly decide the battle in America's favor. Especially important would be the disparity in artillery, a weapon the Iraqis hope to use to great effect in their planned killing zones. U.S. artillery has the capability to rapidly return accurate fire against any Iraqi artillery tube that fires a round and thus gives away its location. Iraqi artillery does not have this "counter-battery" capability. American artillery is therefore likely to quickly reduce the size and effectiveness of Iraq's artillery forces in and around the breakthrough sector. It should not take the U.S. army more than half a day's fighting to rip open a hole along the Iraqi front.

After breaching Iraq's Maginot Line, the armored spearheads supported by airpower would in all likelihood drive deep into Kuwait. The aim would not be to directly engage and destroy Iraq's remaining armored forces in battle, or to enter Kuwait City and engage in street-to-street fighting, but instead to cut the lines of communication among Iraqi units so that they could not coordinate their efforts and therefore would have to surrender without a fight.

Specifically, American armored forces would probably drive north toward the vicinity of Al Jahra, a city less than 100 kilometers north of the Saudi-Kuwaiti border and just to the west of Kuwait City. U.S. troops would then be in the center of Kuwait. Iraqi operational reserves—those 12 armored and mechanized infantry divisions—are hardly likely to stop the U.S. armored spearheads from reaching that location. First, while the breakthrough battle is taking

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place, the huge American air force will be battering those mobile divisions. They will be easy targets, since they must move in open terrain, where they are visible and vulnerable. Second, those elements of the Iraqi operational reserve that manage to reach the American armored forces would then have to fight mobile battles of the kind the Iraqis are ill-suited to fight. Iraqi prospects are so grim in open armored warfare that there is good reason to think that Iraqi forces in southern Iraq will remain there and not come into Kuwait, and the elements of the Iraqi operational reserve now in Kuwait will head for Iraq once they feel the white heat of American airpower.

In short, the American ground forces should reach the center of Kuwait a day or two after making the initial breakthrough. Once this goal is achieved, the Americans will have effectively cut off and isolated all of Iraq's 14 forward deployed divisions plus any forces that might be in Kuwait City. None of those Iraqi forces would have the firepower and mobility to undo their encirclement and they are therefore likely to surrender in short order. Very importantly, this wholesale elimination of more than half of the Iraqi force in Kuwait will have been accomplished without directly engaging most of those forces. In fact, U.S. breakthrough forces should not have to attack more than 2 of Iraq's 14 infantry divisions, although they will end up removing all those divisions from the Iraqi lineup. As a result, American casualties will be low.

The principal remaining task for the American military will be to move north from Al Jahra to the Iraqi border. If the Iraqis choose to stand and fight, the ensuing battles will again be out in the open where American tanks and an unchallenged air force should have a field day against the remaining Iraqi units.

With the Jan. 15 deadline upon us, and with no diplomatic solution to the gulf crisis in sight, Saddam Hussein should understand that the American military is going to inflict a devastating defeat on his military forces in Kuwait. He will be left in much the same position that Gamal Abdal Nasser was in after Israel destroyed his Egyptian army in the Six-Day War. The American public, on the other hand, should recognize that although there is certainly cause to be concerned about casualties, the United States is not about to become involved in a war of attrition with high casualty levels. In fact, American forces may suffer as few as 500 fatalities, roughly the same number of troops the Israelis lost against Egypt and Syria in the Six-Day War.

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