

Dynamics of Future War: Complex Terrain and the Indirect Approach

By Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr.

Urban warfare, fighting in cities, war in complex terrain. To the casual observer, the words seem detached, almost pristine. However, to military professionals, images of great destruction, and excessive casualties in cities such as Berlin, Stalingrad, Hue and Beirut come to mind. 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 U.S. Army War College.

The enemy (RED Force) conducted a lightning assault to seize and control a web of complex urban terrain. This enabled them to decapitate the political leadership and control critical lodgment areas. Designed to dismember coalition efforts and collapse American resolve, the Red force dispersed their army within the cities and prepared to wage an attrition-based campaign.

As the National Command Authority was initially reluctant to turn to the military element of power, the friendly force, (Blue) 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 re-establish 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 opposite from what should have been taken. Why? 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 style of inquiry, there has been too quick a leap beyond the more conceptual aspects of war in urban terrain and into the weapons and tactics necessary to fight street to street and door to door. This paper will suggest a measured approach to the study of urban warfare. 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.

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 option 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 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 U.S. 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 an operation.

Urban fighting has always been one of the most destructive forms of warfare. During the Second World War, the Russian Army sustained over 300,000 casualties in their epic struggle for Berlin. American casualties were equally excessive; over 1000 killed in action to regain Manila and more than 3000 in the battle for Aachen. In the Vietnam war, the casualty rates for U.S. marines who fought in Hue exceeded those from the bloody amphibious assault of Okinawa. More recently, the ill-fated Russian attempt to seize Chechnya resulted in the deaths of thousands of soldiers and non-combatants.

But, it doesn't happen all that often. Both sides realize the destructive effects street fighting may cause. Only a desperate enemy, defending at great disadvantage, willing to sacrifice initiatives and willing to sacrifice 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 has shown that as more of the world blankets itself in urban sprawl, the incidents of actual street fighting has declined.

A large urban center is multi-dimensional. Soldiers must contend with subterranean threats as well as from high rises. Every building could contain 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 ranges. The close 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 ever-increasing array of threats from multiple dimensions has a debilitating effect on soldiers, it further hastens the disintegrating process that haunts all units locked in close combat operations.

The proliferating sprawl of urban centers and populations makes the challenge of the 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 demographics continue into the next millennium, we will see the growth of huge urban masses, many exceeding ten 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 with the ruling elite will provide the spark for further unrest and violence.

The future urban center will contain a mixed population ranging from the rich elite, the poor, and the 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 violence.

Military leaders who believe that future warfare will not encompass this unpleasant environment are self-deluding. 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 operating forces and other operatives, others may take place in strategic key terrain of a vital interest. Such an operation would require a major American investment of combat forces.

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 to 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 so much as to avoid losing. The enemy's only ally in these circumstances will be 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 where 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 further allows 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 disadvantage 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 their 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 superior Russian Army. While the different technology and tactical skills of armies are a factor, defensive urban warfare is a great equalizer for a less than 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. If we are patient, time will disadvantage our opponent. 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 force 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 in 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.

Assume that Americans are leading a coalition effort, thus, how should the coalition respond?

The best option is to preempt the enemy from using complex terrain in the first place. Recognizably, a pre-emptive approach would require the political entity to build strong domestic and international support along with developing solid public underpinnings. Moreover, pre-emptive 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. We 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 World War Two campaign like Berlin or Dresden. In Berlin, between February and May of 1945, a third of the total tonnage of bombs were dropped on the beleaguered city resulting in the death of over a hundred thousand 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. It would result in the total dismemberment of basic services, the death of thousands of innocent people along with great collateral damage to homes, hospitals and other structures. These conditions would create 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 United States 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 seek a better solution than physically destroying the 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 from the Gulf War is 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 the American public has little stomach for excessive casualties in future wars.

In our example another viable option exists. If pre-emptive measures fail, rather than initiating a time-consuming, costly attack in complex terrain, this paper suggests 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. Moreover, 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, employ our technologically superior forces to their fullest potential and leaves the enemy with little or no option.

This approach encompasses three fundamental concepts:
Use the indirect approach; Use time to our advantage; let
the city collapse on itself.

Use 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 view applies to urban warfare as
well. The following discussion depicts how.

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

The coalition would use knowledge and speed to seize, control and strike selected decisive points within the city. High endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) orbiting miles above the city will maintain unlimited surveillance with a minimum of manpower. Ground mounted cameras will provide observation of areas susceptible to infiltration. Unless the enemy attacks, coalition forces would not engage in close combat, but would use greater standoff advantages and technology to selectively strike point targets, key leadership and weapons of mass destruction. As history reminds us, a continued, massive use of firepower will often have the opposite effect from what was intended. Thus, the coalition will not attempt to achieve a complete destruction of the enemy force, but would only destroy those targets that would have the greatest impact on the government, the army and the people. The purpose is two fold: demonstrate the futility of further resistance and to create the conditions which will lead to collapsing the enemy will to continue the struggle.

Use Time to Our Advantage. Through the use of psychological operations and control of the media, the coalition will create an environment where 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 will eventually turn the population

against the enemy. In this regard, the coalition will 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 will most likely collect resources to support the establishment of sanctuaries or safe havens around the city. Humanitarian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental will be encouraged to construct protected camps. The population within the city 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 will in time create a refugee problem for the enemy. With the ever-increasing depletion of resources, the remaining population will eventually see the government as an impotent entity that is incapable of providing basic services or providing for the welfare and security of the people. Inevitably, the military forces and their leaders will be seen, particularly among the dispossessed within the city, as the real enemy.

Although this approach has its advantages, this is not to suggest that it will 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 will allow 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 World War Two. The indirect approach enables us to use future knowledge and speed technology to its fullest potential and to achieve our strategic ends with the least cost in terms of human life and the destruction of physical property.