
Defense Report

AUSA



Smart Weapons May Help, But Wars are Won by Soldiers on the Ground

In the recent PBS documentary, "The Civil War," one of the more poignant nuggets of military wisdom was in the report of a common soldier writing home to say, "I only shoot the privates." Left unsaid was the reason—privates were engaged in the lethal business of trying to kill him, and his salvation was to get them first. Officers and sergeants—leading, inspiring, communicating, planning—could be dealt with later.

Should the Persian Gulf crisis become a shooting war, the sage counsel embodied in the Civil War soldier's statement must not be lost on our national leaders. It is a historical fact that wars are finally won when soldiers occupy the land or destroy the capabilities that are critical to an enemy's ability to continue the fight.

That is not to say that enemies have not resigned from battle in recognition of an overwhelming threat that is perceived as making their situation hopeless. The Japanese surrendered in World War II for exactly that reason. But, even then, it was the physical occupation of Japan that concluded the conquest and drove home to the Japanese people the realization of their defeat.

But the perception of hopelessness and the recognition of an overwhelming threat are in the eyes of the beholder, and an enemy can never be counted on to reach a logical conclusion that he is faced with such. Adolf Hitler didn't. The Kaiser did. The defenders of the Alamo didn't. Lord Cornwallis did. The North Vietnamese ignored it and won their war anyway.

It is important to realize today that, if Saddam Hussein is not cowed by the overwhelming threat or by the economic war being waged against his aggression, any plans to defeat or destroy him must include the means and methods to "shoot the privates."

Theories, schemes and pronouncements that a war with Iraq can be won relatively cheaply—using only firepower or a naval and air blockade—must be given some credence because they might be enough and Saddam Hussein might be another Cornwallis. But if he is a Ho Chi Minh or Davy Crockett reincarnate, we had better be prepared to couple our firepower with the maneuver of our frontline ground combat forces to achieve our goals in the Persian Gulf.