

Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq; Officials Acknowledge Strategy Went Beyond Purely Military Targets

By Barton Gellman / Washington Post

(June 23, 1991) — The strategic bombing of Iraq, described in wartime briefings as a campaign against Baghdad's offensive military capabilities, now appears to have been broader in its purposes and selection of targets.

Amid mounting evidence of Iraq's ruined infrastructure and the painful consequences for ordinary Iraqis, Pentagon officials more readily acknowledge the severe impact of the 43-day air bombardment on Iraq's economic future and civilian population. Their explanations these days of the bombing's goals and methods suggest that the allies, relying on traditional concepts of strategic warfare, sought to achieve some of their military objectives in the Persian Gulf War by disabling Iraqi society at large.

Though many details remain classified, interviews with those involved in the targeting disclose three main contrasts with the administration's earlier portrayal of a campaign aimed solely at Iraq's armed forces and their lines of supply and command. Some targets, especially late in the war, were bombed primarily to create postwar leverage over Iraq, not to influence the course of the conflict itself. Planners now say their intent was to destroy or damage valuable facilities that Baghdad could not repair without foreign assistance.

Many of the targets in Iraq's Mesopotamian heartland, the list of which grew from about 400 to more than 700 in the course of the war, were chosen only secondarily to contribute to the military defeat of Baghdad's occupation army in Kuwait. Military planners hoped the bombing would amplify the economic and psychological impact of international sanctions on Iraqi society, and thereby compel President Saddam Hussein to withdraw Iraqi forces from Kuwait without a ground war. They also hoped to incite Iraqi citizens to rise against the Iraqi leader.

Because of these goals, damage to civilian structures and interests, invariably described by briefers during the war as "collateral" and unintended, was sometimes neither. The Air Force and Navy "fraggers" who prepared the daily air-tasking orders in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, took great care to avoid dropping explosives directly on civilians -- and were almost certainly more successful than in any previous war -- but they deliberately did great harm to Iraq's ability to support itself as an industrial society.

The worst civilian suffering, senior officers say, has resulted not from bombs that went astray but from precision-guided weapons that hit exactly where they were aimed -- at electrical plants, oil refineries and transportation networks. Each of these targets was acknowledged during the war, but all the purposes and consequences of their destruction were not divulged.

Among the justifications offered now, particularly by the Air Force in recent briefings, is that Iraqi civilians were not blameless for Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. "The definition of innocents gets to be a little bit unclear," said a senior Air Force officer, noting that many Iraqis supported the invasion of Kuwait. "They do live there, and ultimately the people have some control over what goes on in their country."

"When they discuss warfare, a lot of folks tend to think of force on force, soldier A against soldier B," said another officer who played a central role in the air campaign but declined to be named. Strategic bombing, by contrast, strikes against "all those things that allow a nation to sustain itself."

For the Air Force, the gulf war finally demonstrated what proponents of air power had argued since Gen. Billy Mitchell published "Winged Defense" in 1925: that airplanes could defeat an enemy by soaring over his defensive perimeter and striking directly at his economic and military core.

For critics, this was the war that showed why the indirect effects of bombing must be planned as discriminately as the direct ones. The bombardment may have been precise, they argue, but the results have been felt throughout Iraqi society, and the bombing ultimately may have done as much to harm civilians as soldiers.

Pentagon officials say that military lawyers were present in the air campaign's "Black Hole" planning cell in Riyadh and emphasize that the bombing followed international conventions of war. Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney, at a recent breakfast with reporters, said every Iraqi target was "perfectly legitimate" and added, "If I had to do it over again, I would do exactly the same thing."

A growing debate on the air campaign is challenging Cheney's argument on two fronts.

Some critics, including a Harvard public health team and the environmental group Greenpeace, have questioned the morality of the bombing by pointing to its ripple effects on noncombatants.

The Harvard team, for example, reported last month that the lack of electrical power, fuel and key transportation links in Iraq now has led to acute malnutrition and "epidemic" levels of cholera and typhoid. In an estimate not substantively disputed by the Pentagon, the team projected that "at least 170,000 children under five years of age will die in the coming year from the delayed effects" of the bombing.

Military officials assert that allied aircraft passed up legitimate targets when the costs to Iraqi civilians or their society would be too high, declining for instance to strike an Iraqi MiG-21 parked outside an ancient mosque. Using the same rationale, the critics argue that the allies should not have bombed electrical plants that powered hospitals and water treatment plants.

"I think this war challenges us to ask ourselves whether or not the lethality of conventional weapons in modern, urban, integrated societies isn't such that . . . what is 'legitimate' is inhumane," said William M. Arkin, one of the authors of the Greenpeace report.

A second line of criticism, put forth by some outside analysts of air power and prevalent in not-for-quotation interviews with Army officers, questions the relevance of some forms of "strategic" bombing to a campaign in which the enemy will not have time to regenerate military strength.

Historians Robert A. Pape Jr. and Caroline Ciemke, noting that the U.S. Central Command planned for only 30 days of bombing, say the vital targets were existing stocks of supply and the system of distribution. A campaign to incapacitate an entire society, they say, may be inappropriate in the context of a short war against a small nation in which the populace is not free to alter its leadership.

"If you're refighting World War I or II, where literally years of combat are required to defeat your adversary, then destroying industrial infrastructure makes some sense," Pape said. "When you destroy the industrial infrastructure, the effects on the opponent's military power don't show up for quite a while. What shows up immediately is losses to the civilian sector, because that's what states sacrifice first."

Among the remaining questions about the air strategy is the extent of the administration's top civilians' participation in planning the bombardment. President Bush stressed during the war that he left most of the fighting decisions to the military. Cheney, for his part, rejects any talk of second thoughts on the bombing.

"There shouldn't be any doubt in anybody's mind that modern warfare is destructive, that we had a significant impact on Iraqi society that we wished we had not had to do," he said. Once war begins, he added, "while you still want to be as discriminating as possible in terms of avoiding civilian casualties, your number one obligation is to accomplish your mission and to do it at the lowest possible cost in terms of American lives. My own personal view is that there are a large number of Americans who came home from the war . . . who would not have come home at all if we had not hit the strategic targets and hit them hard."

Preliminary planning for the bombing campaign began before Iraq even invaded Kuwait last Aug. 2. A war game last July at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, based on a notional "Southwest Asia contingency" with Iraq as the aggressor, identified 27 strategic targets in Iraq, according to a senior intelligence official. Revisions by analysts beginning five days after the invasion built the lists to 57 and then 87 strategic targets, not including the Iraqi forces in Kuwait.

By the time the gulf war started on Jan. 17, according to sources with access to the target list, slightly more than 400 sites had been targeted in Iraq. They were heavily

concentrated in a swath running northwest to southeast between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

With the benefit of additional intelligence gathered during the war and additional bombing capacity -- the number of B-52 bombers was increased twice and the number of F-117A "stealth" fighters grew to 42 -- the list expanded to more than 700 targets. They were divided into 12 sets: leadership; command, control and communications; air defense; airfields; nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; railroads and bridges; Scud missiles; conventional military production and storage facilities; oil; electricity; naval ports; and Republican Guard forces.

Most of those target sets were not controversial. Recent questions have centered on two categories: electrical and oil facilities.

Of the 700 or so identified targets, 28 were "key nodes" of electrical power generation, according to Air Force sources. The allies flew 215 sorties against the electrical plants, using unguided bombs, Tomahawk cruise missiles and laser-guided GBU-10 bombs.

Between the sixth and seventh days of the air war, the Iraqis shut down what remained of their national power grid. "Not an electron was flowing," said one target planner.

At least nine of the allied attacks targeted transformers or switching yards, each of which U.S. analysts estimated would take about a year to repair -- with Western assistance. In some cases, however, the bombs targeted main generator halls, with an estimated five-year repair time. The Harvard team, which visited most of Iraq's 20 generating plants, said that 17 were damaged or destroyed in allied bombing. Of the 17, 11 were judged total losses.

Now nearly four months after the war's end, Iraq's electrical generation has reached only 20 to 25 percent of its prewar capacity of 9,000 to 9,500 megawatts. Pentagon analysts calculate that the country has roughly the generating capacity it had in 1920 -- before reliance on refrigeration and sewage treatment became widespread.

"The reason you take out electricity is because modern societies depend on it so heavily and therefore modern militaries depend on it so heavily," said an officer involved in planning the air campaign. "It's a leveraged target set."

The "leverage" of electricity, from a military point of view, is that it is both indispensable and impossible to stockpile. Destroying the source removes the supply immediately, and portable backup generators are neither powerful nor reliable enough to compensate.

Attacks on some electrical facilities, officers said, reinforced other strategic goals such as weakening air defenses and communications between Baghdad and its field army.

But two weeks into the air campaign, Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, who commanded allied forces during the gulf war, said "we never had any intention of destroying 100 percent of all the Iraqi electrical power" because such a course would cause civilians to "suffer unduly."

Pentagon officials declined two written requests for a review of the 28 electrical targets and explanations of their specific military relevance.

"People say, 'You didn't recognize that it was going to have an effect on water or sewage,' " said the planning officer. "Well, what were we trying to do with [United Nations-approved economic] sanctions -- help out the Iraqi people? No. What we were doing with the attacks on infrastructure was to accelerate the effect of the sanctions."

Col. John A. Warden III, deputy director of strategy, doctrine and plans for the Air Force, agreed that one purpose of destroying Iraq's electrical grid was that "you have imposed a long-term problem on the leadership that it has to deal with sometime."

"Saddam Hussein cannot restore his own electricity," he said. "He needs help. If there are political objectives that the U.N. coalition has, it can say, 'Saddam, when you agree to do these things, we will allow people to come in and fix your electricity.' It gives us long-term leverage."

Said another Air Force planner: "Big picture, we wanted to let people know, 'Get rid of this guy and we'll be more than happy to assist in rebuilding. We're not going to tolerate Saddam Hussein or his regime. Fix that, and we'll fix your electricity.' "

Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner, who had overall command of the air campaign, said in an interview that a "side benefit" was the psychological effect on ordinary Iraqi citizens of having their lights go out.

Attacks on Iraqi oil facilities resulted in a similar combination of military and civilian effects.

Air Force sources said the allies dropped about 1,200 tons of explosives in 518 sorties against 28 oil targets. The intent, they said, was "the complete cessation of refining" without damaging most crude oil production.

Warden, the Air Force strategist, said the lack of refined petroleum deprived Iraq's military of nearly "all motive power" by the end of the war. He acknowledged it had identical effects on civilian society.

Among the targets were: major storage tanks; the gas/oil separators through which crude oil must pass on its way to refineries; the distilling towers and catalytic crackers at the heart of modern refineries; and the critical K2 pipeline junction near Beiji that

connects northern oil fields, an export pipeline to Turkey and a reversible north-south pipeline inside Iraq.

Of Iraq's three large modern refineries, the 71,000 barrel-a-day Daura facility outside Baghdad and the 140,000 barrel-a-day Basra plant were badly damaged early in the war, according to a forthcoming report by Cambridge Energy Research Associates. But James Placke, the report's author, said in an interview that the 300,000 barrel-a-day refinery at Beiji in northern Iraq -- far from the war's main theater of operations -- was not bombed until the final days of the air campaign.

Horner, the three-star general who was ultimately responsible for the air campaign, said the bombing's restraint was evidenced by the decision not to destroy crude oil production, "the fundamental strength of that society." Even so, he said, the impact of the war on Iraqi civilians was "terrifying and certainly saddening."

"To say it's the fault of the United States for fighting and winning a war, that's ludicrous," he said. "War's the problem. It's not how we fought it or didn't fight it. I think war's the disaster."

Staff writer R. Jeffrey Smith contributed to this report.
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