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DIALOGUE: GROUND WAR IN KUWAIT

Will Iraq Fight or Fold Its Tent?; Liberation in Less Than a Week

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It is widely believed that the ground war in Kuwait will last months and cost thousands of American lives. This view is unduly pessimistic. The U.S. military can liberate Kuwait in less than a week and suffer relatively few casualties -- probably less than 1,000 fatalities.

Although the Iraqi Army fights well from fortified positions, it is inept at fighting mobile armored battles, as the clash at Khafji confirms. In contrast, the U.S. Army, which will carry the lion's share of the offensive burden, is well-trained for tank battles, having spent the last 40 years preparing for an armored war against the Soviet Union.

U.S. forces also have superior weaponry. The Soviet-made T-72, Iraq's best tank, is no match for the American M1A1. The M1A1 has a far superior firing system, much better armor protection and, unlike the T-72, can fight well at night. Iraqi artillery cannot rival the U.S. multiple launch rocket system, arguably the world's best artillery weapon. Moreover, U.S. artillery, with its sophisticated radars, can accurately return fire against any Iraqi artillery tube that exposes its location by firing a round. Iraq does not have this capability.

Airpower makes the balance look even more lopsided. With their best planes in Iran, the Iraqis effectively have no air force. The coalition has more than 2,000 tactical aircraft and scores of B-52's, which should prove devastating against Iraqi ground forces moving in open desert.

The deployment of Iraqi forces also increases the prospects for a quick U.S. victory. Iraq has about 14 infantry divisions spread out thinly along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border and along Kuwait's gulf coastline. Iraq's operational reserve of approximately six armored and mechanized infantry divisions is in the center of Kuwait. The Republican Guards, now positioned in southern Iraq, could augment these reserve forces, but that is unlikely.

The U.S. will likely start the ground offensive by concentrating armor and airpower along a 20-mile portion of the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. It should be able to penetrate Iraq's defense line in no more than half a day.

How? First, B-52's will soften Iraqi fortifications in the breakthrough sector. Second, U.S. forces will be concentrated at the point of attack, and thus will have a considerable

force advantage in the breakthrough sector. Third, coalition air superiority will make it difficult for the Iraqis to move operational reserves toward the breakthrough area to seal it off. Finally, U.S. forces have the training and equipment to counter Iraqi mines and chemical weapons.

After the breakthrough, U.S. armored spearheads will drive into Kuwait. They will avoid direct engagements with entrenched Iraqi operational reserves who occupy only a small area of central Kuwait and instead concentrate on cutting Iraqi lines of communication. U.S. air and ground superiority will make it difficult for the Iraqis to confront America's armored spearheads in free-wheeling tank battles.

In fact, Iraqi prospects in such mobile engagements are so grim that the Republican Guards are likely to remain in southern Iraq, while large elements of Iraq's operational reserve now in Kuwait will probably either head for Iraq or surrender.

The Iraqi units cut off and left behind -- including the infantry divisions left on the sidelines during the breakthrough battle -- would be unable to coordinate their efforts, much less receive supplies and reinforcements. Isolated, they would have two choices: surrender or face starvation and air attacks.

This wholesale defeat of a large portion of Iraq's ground forces will have been accomplished without direct engagement. In fact, the breakthrough battle will probably be the only instance of large-scale fighting between American and Iraqi ground forces. As a result, American casualties should be low.

The tragedy that war inflicts must not be forgotten. Fortunately, a quick victory will reduce losses on both sides and allow the U.S. to turn to the more difficult task of helping to construct a lasting political settlement in the region.