Diplomatic failures concern to retired U.S. commander

Oregonian, 03/27/03

JEFF MANNING

and NORM MAVES JR.

Gen. Merrill A. "Tony" McPeak, retired former chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, said Wednesday the Iraq war is "going remarkably well." But the military's rapid progress toward Baghdad has done little to ease his deep reservations about U.S. policy in the region.

McPeak, who headed the Air Force during the first Iraq war and now lives in Lake Oswego, said the United States will pay a political price for the Bush administration's "maladroit" diplomatic efforts in the region. Turkey's refusal to become a staging ground for the U.S. military hampered war plans, and he predicted a long and turbulent U.S. occupation of Iraq and perhaps other countries in the region.

"We've been in Europe now since 1945. We've been in Japan since 1945, been in Korea since 1950," said McPeak, one of the United States' most outspoken retired generals. "We haven't had a Middle East occupation force, so this is a start of that. This is the way great powers operate; it's the way Rome operated."

McPeak's provocative views don't end there. He said it makes little sense to take over Iraq while a much more vital problem -- North Korea's developing nuclear capability -- is allowed to fester. "This is a problem of global military significance," he said of North Korea. "Iraq is a regional problem."

Here is a condensed and edited version of the conversation Wednesday with McPeak:

What are your impressions on the first week of the war?

There are some things that surprised me a little bit. One is, as a consequence of the political clumsiness, we do not have the help of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. They should have been on our side from the beginning. It's our fault they're not, in my opinion.

The nonparticipation of the Iraqi Air Force is not a surprise. They do have, still, a remnant of a once-pretty substantial air force, now maybe something half the size it was in the early '90s, but still reasonably well equipped and sizable.

I mean, we kept butting into them in the no-fly zones for the last dozen years, so we know they're turning aviation fuel into hot air.

So is there anything working in the Iraqis' favor?

What they've got going for them is that our maladroitness politically and diplomatically has put us in a real bind. There is no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein is an unpopular guy in Iraq, but he's running against George Bush. If you're an Iraqi, you've gotta decide who you're going to vote for here.

General, did you expect, as did the Bush administration, that our troops would be treated as liberators? I hate it when military plans are made with optimistic assumptions of that kind. I never made a plan that relied on the courage of my own troops. You hope that -- and they generally will -- fight bravely. Your plan ought to be predicated on more realistic assumptions.

And if we sent the 3rd Infantry up there naked, by themselves, because somebody assessed that they'd be throwing bouquets at us, that's the worst thing you could say about political leadership, is that they made optimistic assumptions about warfare.

Now I'm not saying they did, and I'm not prejudging this case. We're only a week in here. If we were at a football game, then we're in the first quarter here, and we haven't scored yet, but we're down to the red zone. The fans don't boo at that point. So we've got no right booing what is really quite remarkable progress so far.
Is time on the United States' side in this battle?

Yeah. I really think time is on our side here. This is a fragile society, a little old one-town country, the size of Nebraska, maybe a little bigger, with the GDP about half the Army budget. So if this is a hard problem, we ought to get ourselves some new generals. I mean there's no reason why this shouldn't be a walkover. And the pacing of it should be determined by us. We decide whether this is going to be quick, slow or in the middle.

After the worst of Iraq is over, do you anticipate that the Bush administration will launch military action against North Korea?

My guess is that we will very quickly agree to bilateral talks. What I would expect is as soon as we can gracefully do it, hand off Iraq to some sort of military-slash-civilian administration; then Washington will be ready to turn to the next problem, which is Korea. It's a bandwidth problem in Washington. It can only deal with one thing at a time. The bad part is, the fuse is burning. The (nuclear material) processing is going to be difficult for the Koreans to do and so forth, but (North Korea) has nuclear weapons already, or they're quite close to it. We have to get involved in that. And my view is that there's at least some possibility that the timelines of what we're doing in Iraq are not being driven by the Iraq problem, but by the Korean problem.

You think Korea poses the more serious threat to peace?

Oh, yeah. First of all, this is a problem of weapons of mass destruction. Unquestionably. Don't have to be a genius to figure that out. Second, they're at the nexus of great power politics -- the Chinese have a border; the Russians have a short border. Japan's there. We're there. I mean if this is not a strategic part of the world, what the hell are we doing with 40,000 troops (in South Korea)? So this is a problem of global strategic significance. Any way you look at it, Iraq is a regional problem, and it's an important problem, it ties to a lot of other problems, but it's a regional problem. If I were helping the president decide what we ought to work on today, I would have put Korea ahead of Iraq. The other reason I would have put it ahead is I don't think we have anything like a strategy for the Middle East. (This) has all the aspects of a kind of a slapdash pickup fight. You always call audibles in war, but we're drawing the plays on the ground in the huddle. We don't have a playbook.

There is an argument here, which is that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological and nuclear know-how . . . that the Iraqi government could give these weapons to somebody that's willing to use them, which could wreak pretty serious consequences on the world. Do you buy that?

This reminds me of the story about the guy who said, If I had some ham, I'd make a ham sandwich, if I had some bread. If (Saddam) has munitions of mass destruction, and a decent and a working relationship with al-Qaida, and al-Qaida can figure out how to deliver it in downtown New York City. I'm not saying it's a nonthreat. In fact it's an important threat, and one we have to figure out how to deal with without having the FBI listen to every one of our cell phone conversations. But Saddam, if he has munitions of mass destruction, we haven't found it yet. I mean it's laughable to think he has the delivery capability that can reach outside the region.

And he's a secular guy. He's not an Islamic fundamentalist, by any means. Now his back's to the wall in downtown Baghdad. If he's got them, I expect him to use them against our guys, i.e., a regional use. The Korean case is entirely different. There's no doubt about the weapons of mass destruction. They do have delivery (means?) and can reach out and hit great powers, including U.S. territory with these weapons.
There was a piece in the Washington Post about how we were overconfident going in, that we have put our soldiers in a bad situation because there's not enough of them there, and the supply lines are too long. Any thoughts on that?

Well, I don't agree. My one concern is we don't have enough first-class tactical air support in there; that's a basic problem. If we had F-15s and F-16s in there in large enough numbers, then we can run a pretty thin operation on the ground, and we can succeed. But the Republican Guard forces, who are at the centerpiece of what we have to do now, are a mobile target. They're not highly maneuverable, but they're not stationary. The minute they maneuver, they're certainly attackable by air. Now you can see them.

Does the diplomatic situation in Turkey and Saudi Arabia have other ramifications?

These countries have hit on the problem of legitimacy. What is a legitimate use of American power? This is an overarching problem, that's going to be with us for a long time. I mean we all pray that we'll be the premier world power for centuries. For whatever reason, the Turks and the Saudis have decided that this is not a legitimate use of power. By the way, they appear to be in the majority worldwide. I believe that one of the elements of power is the ethical and moral authority that is conferred on forces when their use is seen to be legitimate. It's as important as bullets, in my opinion.

When we started bombing Kosovo, everybody in the world saw that -- how painful that decision was. They knew we weren't there to make Kosovo the 51st state; they knew we didn't go into Afghanistan to put George Bush's face on the money there. When we act with legitimacy, it gives our military actions a source of strength. I mean for me this is an aspect of the political maladroitness. I mean you just have to say that you wonder if there's anybody in the White House that's an educated adult. But the administration would argue that, in the age of terror, unilateralism is valid, and we can't wait for another Pearl Harbor to make this war legitimate in the eyes of the world.

In my judgment, you can fight a war on terrorism and do it legitimately (and) do it without sacrificing civil liberties in the United States, but it requires a certain intelligence and sophistication be brought to the table. So maybe we ought to start grading presidential candidates for an IQ. Although it's hard to see why anybody that's very smart would want to run.

What do you make of the strategy the Iraqis are pursuing?

I don't know that there's a strategy here on their side. I can't think of one that leads to success. Overall, from a strategic standpoint, we should never want to run our short-range ground power against their short-range ground power. Even though we win that fight, we lose a lot of people in that fight, too. So we should run our long-range air power against his only strength, which is short-range ground power.

There was one projection of 3,000 American casualties. What do you think a reasonable number would be?

I don't have a guess. Quite frankly, we can say what that number is. That number is within our power. If we decide we want street fighting in Baghdad, it's going to be a big number.
Is there an alternative to urban warfare in Baghdad?

We could put Baghdad under siege and sit on the outside.

Would you really think so three years down the road, with stories from Baghdad of people dead and emaciated kids?

Yes. The impact on world opinion is an argument against that approach. It's an argument for finishing this thing quickly. But, nevertheless, it's a decision we can make. And we've already made decisions that said, 'World opinion's not very important to us.'

Is Iraq the last country we confront in the Middle East?

Who wants to volunteer to get cross-ways with us? We'll be there a century, hopefully. If it works right. I'll tell you one thing we should not hope for (is) a democratic Iraq. When I hear the president talking about democracy, the last thing we should want is an election in Iraq. We're not very popular. So I don't think we'll see any open elections in Iraq for a long time. Hopefully over time they can be brought along like Japan and Germany -- Japan and Germany were relatively easy, I think, and South Korea.

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