

*Captain May – April 3, 2003 – published essay:*

***“Visions of Stalingrad: Claim victory in Iraq now”***

Houston Chronicle Outlook, by Captain Eric May

As a former Army intelligence officer and Desert Storm volunteer, I am concerned about the course of the war in Iraq. I’m afraid someday we may read something like this:

“Planners thought the invasion should have been launched earlier, but were confident that the world’s best military would shatter enemy resistance before the weather turned foul. World opinion decried their country as imperialist, but national opinion saw the action as a service to humanity, since it would end the bloody reign and long-term threat of a genocidal dictator. The national legislature enthusiastically endorsed the war. Media was embedded.

“It started with shock and awe. Ordnance rained on deep enemy targets, while mechanized infantry and armor sliced off huge chunks of terrain. Special operations units moved behind the lines, and psychological operations dropped leaflets and made broadcasts to urge the prompt cooperation of enemy soldiers and civilians.

“But after a month, it was apparent that the enemy soldiers and civilians were more afraid of their dictator than of their liberators, so they took up arms and said they were fighting a war of patriotic defense. Prewar estimates turned out to be too optimistic. Inhuman, fanatical resistance was making rear and supply more and more difficult. Resistance really stiffened as the invaders neared the capital; the attack stalled within sight of it. The soldiers and the public were expecting more troops and supplies to finish off the campaign, but the bad weather came, the relief failed, and the army withered.

“This was the beginning of the end for the world’s best army, and the nation that sent it.”

I pray that most of this won’t be written about us, but all of it has been written about Germany, after its attack against dictator Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union in 1941.

We might fare worse in the Iraqi summer than the Germans did in the Russian winter. Saddam has likely stockpiled weapons of mass destruction for the grim eventuality of a defense of his capital.

From this we may infer that our troops, if ordered to storm Baghdad, will do so in a dirty battlefield of chemical, biological and perhaps even radioactive contaminants. This means a summer of donning protective clothing and straining to breathe through protective mask filters while engaged in combat in the desert. Such predictions would prostrate our forces and leave them highly vulnerable.

It’s hard to take capital cities. Take World War II cities as examples. London endured years of German bombing; Moscow withstood the German assault, while regional capitals Leningrad and Stalingrad fought back legendary sieges. Berlin was nearly leveled by years of Allied bombing before the Soviet army, hell-bent on revenge, reached it. It still put up a street fight with the Red Army over the rubble. Hundreds of thousands died.

We wish neither to receive nor inflict such heavy casualties. Our plan for a quick knockout – the classic aim of blitz warfare – is disappearing, and a protracted war means more time for

international frictions to spark new conflicts with an irritable U.S. government. Britain has lined up with us, not to forget Italy, Spain and sundry others. But Germany, France, Russia and Turkey seem to have lined up against us, not to forget the public opinion of the Islamic world. NATO is split. The Arab world wants to convene a General Assembly of the United Nations to condemn us. Meanwhile, North Korea is threatening a nuclear tantrum and Japan is leaning toward rearmament. Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, has recently said that the world is at its most dangerous point since the Cold War. A question frightens me: With all this geopolitical jostling, just how many mistakes are we away from World War Three?

We should isolate Saddam's capital, but not cross his so-called "Red Line" – the point at which he will throw every dirty weapon he has at us. He'll just die, like Adolph Hitler before him, in a bunker with a funeral pyre instead of a human city over him. We can't let ourselves be called the new butchers of Baghdad.

I believe that now is the time for the commander in chief to show the utmost flexibility in his war plans. We and our brave ally, Great Britain, should proclaim victory on the basis of our current successes: While we have not deposed Saddam, we have punished him by reducing him from the president of Iraq to the mayor of beleaguered Baghdad. We have liberated the majority of Iraq, and Saddam has cleared it of weapons of mass destruction for us. We have achieved success, albeit limited. Voters in our countries will condemn or praise the war, depending on whether or not they liked the leaders in the first place.

It is important that we share the control of liberated Iraq with a coalition of other nations who are sincere as we are about protecting its people and its resources. That would assuage the errant world opinion that we are fighting a war for oil.

Military intelligence officers are accustomed to being told that their field is a contradiction in terms, and that they are the bearers of bad news and worst-case scenarios. But it seems to me that fortune is no longer smiling on our heroic liberation of Iraq, and I'm afraid we may learn too late that we have stepped into quicksand.

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