

Bureaucrats with bayonets

Last week, a peaceful settlement of the Gulf crisis looked likely. This week, after the U.S. backed away from talks with Iraq, war is again in the air.

This brings us to a very big question: Is the U.S. expeditionary force in Arabia really ready for a major land war?

By January, the U.S. will have some 400,000 military personnel in or around Arabia. The U.S. Navy, with its powerful carrier battle groups and the U.S. Air Force are clearly combat ready and capable of both destroying Iraq's air power and delivering devastating air-to-ground attacks.

This, however, will not be enough to kick Iraq out of Kuwait or to march on Baghdad. Either mission will require large numbers of ground troops. Here, the U.S. may have a problem.

The U.S. Army will have about six divisions deployed against Iraq by January: Three heavy armored divisions, two mechanized divisions and one light airborne division. This represents about 90,000 men and 1,600 heavy tanks.

The Marine Corps is sending most of its combat units to the Mideast — an entire Marine amphibious force and a Marine amphibious brigade, the largest overseas deployment of Marines since World War II, say 60,000 combat troops.

But the Marines, who are organized to seize beaches, lack adequate heavy armor and artillery for sustained combat or substantial movement without major support from their most hated enemy, the U.S. Army.

What these numbers tell us is that the U.S. may not have enough mobile combat units for a massive, enveloping attack that will sweep to the north around Kuwait and isolate the 500,000 Iraqi troops now in that region. Particularly not since Iraq has massed a powerful armored reserve north of Kuwait whose mission is to counter-attack any such thrust.

Even total U.S. air superiority may not guarantee an easy victory on the ground. Kuwait certainly can be retaken, but it will probably take longer than expected, require frontal rather than flank attacks, and mean heavy casualties.

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Marching on Baghdad is going to require at least twice the current U.S. ground force now in Arabia. Britain's 30,000 troops will fight well and professionally. France's 20,000 regulars and Legionnaires will too — if Paris joins the attack, which is not yet certain. But the combat resolve or capability of the Arab allies is doubtful.

Egyptian and Syrian forces might refuse to fight, or drag their feet. The Saudis are of zero combat value. The U.S. will do most of the fighting and take most of the casualties.

This prospect has black groups in the U.S. up in arms. Some black organizations are claiming a Mideast war for the benefit of the oil companies and for Israel is going to be paid for by black blood.

Thirty percent of the U.S. Army's troops are blacks. About 14% are Hispanics. The rest tend to be hillbillies and poor whites. In other words, the bottom of U.S. society — people so limited they couldn't get jobs in civilian society.

The much-touted all-volunteer U.S. Army has become a glorified job-creation scheme, a vast government agency made up of bureaucrats with bayonets.

There are, of course, warriors somewhere in this mass of time-servers. In combat, some the most unmartial may fight well. But what worries me most is the depressing quality of the U.S. Army's middle-ranking officers. Most are poor whites who, if not in the army, would otherwise be selling used cars or working in the post office.

Don't confuse them with the old southern military class of poor white farmers who rose to prominence in the army. These are largely people too incompetent to thrive in civilian life. Who else, in this day and age, would be attracted to a career in the U.S. Army?

The best armies are made up of smart soldiers. Israel's superb armed forces, in which everyone in that nation of intelligent people serves, are the leading example. The old German and British armies of the 1930s and 1940s drew their officers from the intellectual and social elite.

No such minds have shown themselves in the America's country and western Army. Society boys go into the Navy; math whizzes into the Air Force. The Army gets the high school dropouts and lots of females. This is why I favor the draft — but that's another column.

Meanwhile, back in the Gulf, Army psychological warfare (psy-ops in tanktalk) units are trying to explain, over the din of ghetto blasters playing brainless rap music, just why war with Iraq is a good idea. Or why Hispanics who can't even afford a car should be ready to risk their lives for the price of oil.