

Follow WWII's Torch into Iraq

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As the chance of war with Iraq grows, we should pause today to recall the 60th anniversary of Operation Torch, the American-British invasion of North Africa during World War II.

Thanks to Torch, the momentum began to swing against Nazi Germany, an evil regime that used what we now call "weapons of mass destruction" to kill millions.

Three lessons from Torch have special resonance today:

- We need clear war aims, which Washington and London lacked in November 1942.

Despite Torch's military victory, the Allies opted against demanding surrender from Vichy France. Instead, they allowed the regime to keep control of North Africa as long as Allied troops were permitted free movement through the region. Proponents contended that this deal hastened the war's end. Yet it also gave Vichy license to increase the persecution of Jews, even after "liberation." Not until the summer of 1943 were all Jews finally freed from Vichy slave labor camps in North Africa.

The Allies, however, learned their lesson. Two months after Torch, President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill for the first time decreed their war aim to be "unconditional surrender."

In any war with Iraq, an opportunity to negotiate is likely to emerge, perhaps with a high-ranking Iraqi general or maybe a cousin from a marginally less bloodthirsty branch of Saddam Hussein's family. He will promise stability, forswear aggression, promise to respect any future Israeli-Palestinian peace and commit to weapons inspections. And he will hint broadly at pumping lots and lots of oil.

For many, this would be as good as it could possibly get.

Yet just as Roosevelt and Churchill eventually opted for clarity over expediency, so too must we fight the urge for a simple solution to today's Iraq problem. While such a deal might provide a smooth "exit strategy" for U.S. troops, it would almost surely come back to haunt us and might even necessitate another foray into Iraq.

Without the full removal of Hussein's clique and his party, we will have bought merely time, not peace or security.

- A small band of partisans can contribute much.

In 1942, on the evening before the Allies' arrival, 377 members of the Algerian underground, more than 300 of them Jews, spread out across Algiers in one of the war's greatest exploits in sabotage. Armed only with knives, hunting rifles and World War I relics, they cut phone lines, intercepted telegraph messages and even forcibly detained senior Vichy commanders to ease the entry of Allied troops.

Thanks to their courage and cunning, many American and British lives were saved. In cruel irony, many leaders of the Jewish underground were soon imprisoned by Vichy, with little protest from their Allied "liberators."

In today's Iraq debate, many experts disparage the possible contribution that opposition forces could make to the war effort. This view is often offered by alumni of past ignoble episodes of U.S. failure to keep promises to anti-Hussein Iraqis.

These analysts fail to take into account the connection between U.S. resolve and the opposition's prowess.

In Torch, when the Algerian resistance learned that the Allies were truly committed to the battle against Vichy, they performed remarkable deeds of heroism.

In Iraq, resistance fighters exude skepticism because they have no confidence in Washington's resolve. Convince them that the U.S. will fight a war to end Hussein's regime and they too might perform remarkable deeds.

- We must remember to fight for people, not just interests.

One week after the Torch landings, when it was apparent that Washington was doing nothing to ease Vichy's persecution of local Jews, a number of U.S. Jewish soldiers organized an ad hoc protest group and called on Roosevelt's personal envoy in Algiers to ask why the U.S. government wasn't helping the Jews. They were rebuffed.

How brave those soldiers were. This was 1942, after all, just days after the first American shots against an enemy heretofore thought invincible and on behalf of coreligionists who spoke a different language and followed different customs.

Let us honor the memory of the Algiers protesters by resolving that brave American Muslim soldiers never have cause to ask why we failed to translate victory over Iraq into a victory for the people of Iraq. ❖

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