

Deadly Mix: Hubris and Cowardice

Admitting failure in Iraq and Afghanistan is anathema to Official Washington, especially to the still-influential neocons whose status depends on maintaining the illusion of “victory” or at least limited success, even at the cost of more blood and treasure. But Daniel N. White says only a frank acknowledgement of failure can free America from even worse calamities ahead.

By Daniel N. White

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There’s an important but little known story from World War II that comes to mind these days. It’s from the days before Hitler’s invasion of Russia in 1941.

It needs telling with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in their current state of failure and with a war against Iran waiting in the wings.

The German Army, the Wehrmacht, was on a roll in late 1940. It had defeated and conquered Poland and France, and had thoroughly whipped the British Army in the process.

Adolf Hitler, a knowledgeable self-taught amateur historian and the most successful German politician ever in both domestic and foreign affairs, gave orders to the German General Staff to study and make plans for an invasion of Russia.

The staff officers, the bright young captains and majors, the older lieutenant colonels with gray hair and experience, went to work, and came up with plans for an invasion for the Wehrmacht General Staff to evaluate and present to Hitler.

Plans for an invasion of Russia were based upon the best intelligence the Wehrmacht had about the Russian armed forces and the Russian terrain and their industrial base’s capabilities. But they were badly wrong on their estimates of all of these.

They were off by about 100 percent on the size of the Russian army, an incredible mistake.

Their maps had the cities, mountains, and rivers where they were supposed to be, but the roads weren’t, and they weren’t the paved all-weather heavy-duty highways the red lines on the maps said they were. They were mostly dirt tracks that turned into impassable mud pits in rain or spring thaw.

Estimates on war materiel production were way off, too. Yet, none of these errors were necessarily fatal to the chances of German war of conquest

succeeding.

The fatal fact was discovered early on by the logistics staff officers, who did the calculations on how to supply all the German divisions that were required to defeat the (vastly underestimated) Russian opponent.

Their calculations showed that it wasn't possible to supply an army the size needed over the distances required. There weren't enough trains, trucks and horses available to move the amount of supplies required.

The logistics calculations were fairly straightforward and were known and accepted by everyone in all the world's militaries and were irrefutable. Germany could not invade and defeat Russia. It simply wasn't possible.

The logisticians made their report to the Wehrmacht senior generals, who proceeded to ignore it. The senior generals knew which way the political winds were blowing, and knew Hitler had his mind made up on invading Russia.

Additionally, Hitler had done a good job on the senior generals over the preceding several years, with a clever mixture of cash and career-reward carrots given to many officers, and by getting rid of the officers he could not browbeat into submission to his own opinions.

Several officers had been purged/retired, and the remainder knew it was career suicide to oppose Hitler on something he really wanted. So they didn't.

And there was also the question of how much good any individual could do standing up to a huge bureaucracy, which always makes it easier to do or say nothing.

The invasion went on, and sure enough, the Wehrmacht failed in defeating Russia, despite the most horrendous mistakes and lack of professional skill by the Russian army.

Anyone who thinks that the Germans could have defeated the Russians that first year, when the Wehrmacht was at its peak and the Russian army at its nadir, needs to look again at the campaign from the logistics side.

Note how often the Wehrmacht had to stop and wait for supplies to catch up, and how weak and undersupplied it was when the army finally got within striking distance to Moscow, pure logistics problems.

Much the same thing has happened in the United States regarding the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan. American generals were confident in their battlefield military prowess, but key war questions were never asked or answered, or were willfully ignored.

All the questions of how the U.S. would govern the two conquered countries were punted by the senior officer corps who followed the political winds blowing from the White House on the key governing issue: "We don't do nation-building" was the refrain, despite obligations under the Geneva Conventions.

Reconstruction issues were ignored, despite the crying need for rebuilding and the strategic/operational need for reconstruction at least to quell anti-American discontent.

Nobody wanted to look at the how vulnerable we Americans, in our vehicular army, are should the locals in these countries be sufficiently dissatisfied with our occupying their countries and running their affairs for them to take up arms against us and dispute the issue.

Everyone who asked how we could run both these countries much less contend with an insurgency without having adequate manpower was told in so many words to shut up and get with the program.

All of these problems were foreseeable, and most probably were foreseen at various levels of the command chain, but nobody in the senior U.S. military fought personally hard enough to risk losing their careers in challenging the White House on its horrendous and obvious mistakes, either before or during the war.

At the most senior levels of command, questions also should have been raised about war objectives, which one assumes, perhaps wrongly, were discussed openly and honestly with the senior generals in a way that never occurred with the U.S. public.

The staggeringly infantile Bush-II goal of transforming the Middle East into some sort of democratic wonderland via wars of invasion is one so obviously at odds with the entire of military history that someone in stars should have said something to the White House, though I'm sure no one did.

Beyond a few questions about cost and force levels, no one went outside channels to inform Congress or the news media of the impending catastrophes.

Nor, once the failures of political policy and military implementation became obvious, have any officers put their careers on the line to take issue with the Bush administration over its attempts to call its vile failures a success, or an impending success if we just keep doing what we've been doing.

And it is much the same with the threatening war with Iran. If that war comes and the Iranians play their cards right, the conflict could well lead to the biggest military defeat of the U.S. Army in its history.

(Again, it's a question of logistics U.S. lines of supply are too long, weak and vulnerable to a well-executed Iranian riposte and any remaining U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan would be susceptible to isolation, starvation or surrender.)

The judgment of history is in on the Wehrmacht general staff, and it is harsh but fair.

They failed in preventing a madman from starting a war they knew they could not win, and once the war started, they continued it knowing that German defeat was certain. They also knew that a political solution should be made as soon as possible on the best terms available.

Fundamentally, they were moral and professional cowards, whose careerism, dishonesty and greed caused the largest and most entirely preventable death and destruction in history.

Much the same must be said of the U.S. military, particularly the Army, for doing the exact same things, under similar circumstances, sixty-some years later.

In defense of the U.S. military officer corps against these well-founded accusations of professional and personal failure and cowardice it is worth looking at what their opposition could have accomplished.

I don't see how any leaks to Congress or the news media, or public resignations and denunciations by outraged officers could have gotten any real attention or traction. Both Congress and the press had signed off on the war, or had made it clear that they didn't have it in them to oppose it.

It is arguably unfair to blame the senior officer corps too harshly for their unwillingness to end their careers in the military when it would have done little to stop the mad stampede to war managed by George W. Bush and company.

Professional integrity and the long-term health and good reputation of the service would have been well served by their doing so, but that isn't motive enough for most any senior member of the U.S. military these days, which is another indictment of them and their institution.

The American political system, including Congress and the Fourth Estate, deserves an even more severe indictment because it's clear that even if U.S. military officers had issued a direct warning of imminent military failure, Congress and the U.S. press corps would have turned a deaf ear.

Nazi Germany is nowadays a poly-sci case study of a broken political system, a

madman's dictatorship floating in a cesspool of corruption as Hitler's lieutenants' jockeyed and backstabbed to succeed him.

How completely politically broken it was is shown by its starting and continuing its doomed and suicidal war with Russia.

Stalin was interested in a settlement. After the battles of Moscow and Stalingrad, there were diplomatic feelers put out by the Russians for a negotiated peace, which the Germans ignored.

Future poly-sci students are going to do well studying the U.S. government's similarly ineptly planned and executed wars and the decision to continue them in the face of clear evidence of their being doomed and lost.

The current political system in the United States, and in Great Britain, will be regarded in the future as another case study in institutional failure.

There was a silver lining in the German defeat. Hitler and his criminal Nazi apparatchiks were consigned to history's trashcan. The German people learned a hard lesson about dramatically reducing the influence and power of their military in their country and their political system.

The political power and influence of the German military has been sharply curtailed, both by law and by custom, since 1945. Germans also learned about the futility of war and military imperialism.

There's almost no chance of some newfangled Hitler coming to power, nor of any German war of choice or aggression happening anytime soon.

The question is whether the American people can learn such necessary lessons from our current military failures, or will we require, like the Germans, a bigger defeat than our current ones to make us honestly face and address our political and institutional failures.

The U.S. press corps may not be shilling for war the way it did during the Bush-II administration, but it isn't facing up to the wars' obvious failures either.

Congress, too, isn't doing anything useful to stop these failed wars, nor is it showing signs of having learned any lessons.

No, it appears any significant change in behavior will have to await more hurt, both physically and financially, from our imperialistic stupidities and bungling.

There's certainly no sign of anyone in authority changing course dramatically from the one that is leading the ship of state toward a shipwreck.

Best keep a life preserver handy, folks, that's my advice.
