

# Operation Domestic Storm

## *Military Strategies for the Domestic Front*

By Douglas J. Bersharov

Our military having won the war so handily, Americans have been feeling pretty good lately. After years of collective worry about decline, incompetence and ignorance, there is a renewed feeling that we can, after all, do things right. Now, what about the war at home, the struggle to deal with our pressing domestic problems? Can we deal with them as effectively as we dealt with our desert enemy?

Just as, when the battle ends, we hope to turn the weapons of war into tools of peace — beating swords into plowshares in the biblical phrase — we can do a much better job against our domestic foes if we forge some important lessons from our recent military success. You might call them plowshare principles:

- Start with an enemy who can be beaten easily. This is the Grenada theory of war: There is no better way to build troop morale — and public support — than to show that your forces can achieve an objective. Success, even against a weak opponent, inspires confidence.

On the domestic front, we desperately need a win, any win. When was the last time a headline reported that a government program had been effective in curing or even reducing a social problem? So we need to pick a domestic problem and show how concerted action can lick it.

Childhood immunizations would be a good candidate for first attention. For example, in 1990 more than 25,000 cases of measles were reported — almost 17 times as many as in 1982. Sixty children died. And yet, as many as two-thirds of these cases might have been prevented by a simple inoculation. The total cost would not be exorbitant: \$50 million to reach unvaccinated low-income children. Nor would the strategy be complex: Find the children and inoculate them. And, the outcome would be unambiguously beneficial.

Most domestic problems, however,

will not be eradicated as easily — or cheaply. Further progress requires other lessons.

- Throwing money at a problem can help. Between 1979 and 1990 the United States spent \$2.7 trillion to build up our armed forces. Many opposed such high military spending, but the gulf war would have gone very differently without it. Each of those Tomahawk cruise missiles we saw homing in on its target cost \$1.35 million. We used hundreds of them.

Most of our serious domestic problems are as entrenched as were Saddam Hussein's conscripts (though they're not likely to break as easily). And no cheap fix will reduce high levels of child poverty, drug abuse or crime. To combat them, we must expect to spend a great deal of money. But merely expanding current programs will not do it.

- Nothing works better than a realistic strategy. Strategic thinking is needed to attack domestic problems. The "War on Poverty" was really only a collection of diverse programs that social planners thought, or hoped, might work. Just as we needed a plan to liberate Kuwait successfully, we need a domestic strategy based on the strengths and weaknesses of our forces and those of the enemy.

- Never underestimate the enemy. Wishful thinking should be the first casualty of such a plan. We are kidding ourselves when we ignore the effects that years of personal deprivation and social disorganization have had on the disadvantaged. And we place unfair demands on social policy when we exaggerate the effectiveness of available interventions.

- Expect "waste, fraud and abuse." Remember the \$600 toilet seat? The weapon systems that never seemed to work? The numerous contract improprieties? The current enthusiasm for our military makes it easy to forget the ridicule heaped on the Pentagon for these and other embarrassments.

Mistakes and miscalculations are an unavoidable part of planning and operating any major project. Some people will be on welfare who should not be.

Some people will buy gin with the money they save using food stamps. And many social programs will not work, or at least will not be nearly so effective as their proponents initially claimed. Rather than fret about such mistakes, the trick is to learn from them. And that brings us to the next point.

- Tough choices are sometimes necessary. Hard as it is for critics to believe, even the Reagan Pentagon canceled some weapon systems because — given other claims on the defense budget — the cost-benefit ratio was not favorable enough. Just as we should not buy every weapon system, we can't afford every social program, even without a budget deficit.

Liberals and conservatives often argue over whether particular domestic programs "work." Some programs do indeed fail and should be discontinued, although they rarely are. The tougher questions involve comparing programs that are marginally helpful, that is, those that work "a little" with those that might be much more effective.

Recently, a nationally respected advocate for poor children said that her organization supports increases in any program for children as long as they do not come at the expense of any other program. But domestic programs do compete among themselves for funding. It is the need to make precisely this kind of trade-off that led Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney to cancel the A-12 attack plane and the A-10 "Warhog." In a world of infinite resources, social planners — like generals — must decide where dollars are most needed or would be most effective.

- Technology can shift the strategic balance. A visit to any social agency demonstrates how little the technological revolution of the past 20 years has affected social programs.

Beyond photocopiers and a handful of PCs and fax machines, most social agencies operate in the same way they

did during the Great Depression. More than 20 years after the first computerized airline reservation systems were put in place, few public agencies have computerized management information systems that actually work. Most states, for example, do not even know how many foster children are in their care or for what reasons.

It is hard enough to remedy deep-seated social problems without trying to do so in the absence of reliable data about their nature and scope. Only modern research technology can develop what Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY) calls "post-industrial social indicators" of dependency and dysfunction.

- Leadership counts. Large organizations are dependent on effective leaders at every level. Joint Chiefs Chair Colin Powell and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf sit at the top of a hierarchy of highly trained officers whose judgment is seasoned by extensive experience. Many of their senior field commanders first saw battle as lieutenants in Vietnam.

Social programs desperately lack similar leaders. Few heads of federal, state and local bureaucracies — our domestic generals — are specially trained for their jobs. There is no West Point for domestic leaders.

Worse, few stay on the job long enough to learn from past mistakes. Between politics and poor conditions, turnover among senior management of social service agencies is rampant. Imagine what would happen to the military if, after every election, all the generals and their staffs were replaced by a new crew. We wouldn't run an army this way, and it is no way to run social service bureaucracies of equal complexity.

- In the end, it is the troops who accomplish the mission. Without good men and women on the field of battle, even the best laid plans can fail. One reason the assault on Iraqi positions was able to move so swiftly was that individual units were given great discretion in deciding how to accomplish their assigned goals. As a result, they were able to take advantage of opportunities as they developed.

Across the nation, public agencies are plagued with inadequately qualified staff, leading many to call for better in-service training. But the plain fact is that some employees do not belong in their jobs in the first place and no amount of training will help.

There is no military secret in how the Pentagon revived the quality and professionalism of today's armed forces: It substantially raised the salaries and benefits. In the meantime, social work salaries have continued to fall behind. For example since 1983, lawyers salaries have increased more than twice as

fast as those for social workers. Is it any wonder that few of our brightest young people choose to work with the disadvantaged?

Up to now, our leaders have shown little appetite for taking the same kind of firm steps against domestic problems that have had such apparent success on the military side. But if they don't, we should not be surprised that we can free Kuwait City but not Anacostia, Harlem or East Los Angeles.

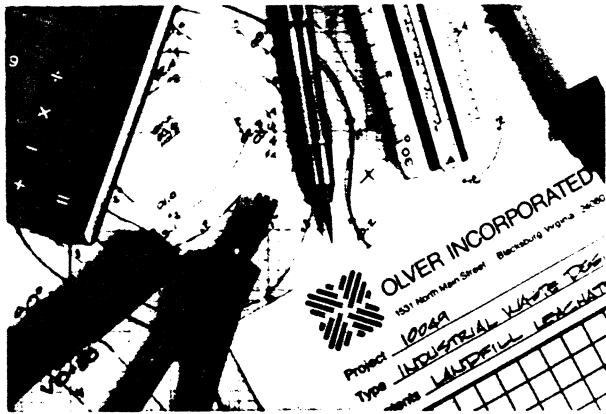
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**About the Author**

Douglas J. Besharov is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. His most recent book is *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned*.

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 703/552-5548 Fax: 703/552-5577