

# Political Decapitation



Serge Walder

*During the war against Iraq, the United States made two attempts to kill Saddam Hussein and decapitate Iraq of its leadership. One signaled the beginning of ground combat; the other was an attack on Hussein's bunker under a restaurant. Serge Walder argues that attacks to decapitate hostile regimes of their political leadership are effective ways to enfeeble the enemy and pave the way for victory.*

**O**N A RAINY autumn night, four men wearing swimsuits and carrying weapons slip ashore near a large beach house. Two swimmer delivery vehicles, launched from a civilian ship in international waters 12 nautical miles away, have transported the men to this location. An intelligence officer is waiting for them on the shore. He has been in the area for weeks to prepare for the mission. The team's objective is to assassinate a local head of state who is spending the night in the beach house.

Near the capital, five other teams are coming ashore with missions to kill specific targets during the night. On completion of their missions, the teams will have eliminated the political and military leadership of this country prior to a major conventional attack.

The outcome of this special operation is called a coup d'état or a political decapitation. It occupies an important place in modern military planning.

## From Nuclear to Conventional Concept

As dramatic as it sounds, the previous scene could be a realistic mission at the beginning of a major armed conflict. The appeal of such action is found in the simplicity of the idea combined with an effi-

cient outcome. The goal of political decapitation is to annihilate by physical elimination part or all of the key governmental players of a country. These can be listed as the President, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

Two sorts of political decapitation are used. The first is part of an act of war and is used as a strategic move prior to an invasion. The second is carried out during peacetime to influence the political balance of a region. Political decapitation is usually achieved by assassination, but it also can be achieved through kidnapping.

Until the Cold War ended, political decapitation was thought of as a nuclear counter-value strike. The purpose of a nuclear attack was to disable the political and military establishment of an adversary, create a political power failure, and generate chaos at all levels of command and control. It also was a rejection of any political solution that might come about at the end of the conflict.

Although nuclear political decapitation was the best known and most efficient method in terms of destruction, it also was the least popular because of



Drug Enforcement Agency personnel escort General Manuel Noriega to his seat aboard a U.S. Air Force transport after his surrender to the U.S. military.

US Air Force

the weapon, symbolic of nuclear holocaust. Even today, with the Cold War in the past, the use of nuclear weapons would create strong adverse effects that might be harmful to the primary goal of the aggressor. Nuclear political decapitation was a product of the Cold War, part of a game of terror played by both superpowers. In theory, the United States and the Soviet Union only aimed their nuclear missiles at each other. Consequently, the end of the Cold War should have put an end to the idea of annihilating a political power by nuclear means.

The Cold War and the conflicts of decolonization saw a number of political decapitation actions, including those attempted by the United States and

Soviet Union against smaller states or entities. In all of these engagements, regular or special troops played key roles in the operations. Therefore, this practice was already considered an effective way to achieve a designated political or military objective. Today's political decapitation should be seen as the conventional concept of operation. Of course, it cannot be asserted that no country will ever use nuclear weapons. In today's world, however, the use of specialized units trained for this type of operation seems to be the rational way to proceed.

One exception might be found in the volatile situation between India and Pakistan. Both countries are predisposed to employ nuclear power against each other's capital. Even though the political leaders of these countries assure the world that they will never use their nuclear capabilities, their governments are vulnerable to religious extremists who are willing to attempt such madness in the name of God.

The following operations shared a common goal of eliminating the highest authority of a state or a political body. Both assassination and kidnapping was used.

**Ben Bella: Algerian war, October 1956.** During the Algerian war in October 1956, the French intelligence service and the Army kidnapped Ahmed Ben Bella. Ben Bella was a political leader of the Algerian main fighting group, the Front de Libération National (FLN) and responsible for the group's logistics. The kidnapping took place aboard a Moroccan DC-3 airplane headed for Tunis. The pilots and

The scene immediately after a hijacked jetliner crashed into the Pentagon.

US Marine Corps



crew were members from the French Army and landed the plane in Algiers.<sup>1</sup> Ben Bella spent 6 years in French prisons. The goal of this operation was to eliminate a key political figure in the Algerian resistance and to disrupt its infrastructure.

**Allende: Chile, September 1973.** On 11 September 1973, the Chilean armed forces overthrew the government of Salvador Allende in a violent coup. Allende died during the fighting in the presidential palace, and a military junta assumed power. The junta was led by Army Commander in Chief Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. It is assumed now that part of the Chilean military was trained and financed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which assisted in the operation.<sup>2</sup> Even if a foreign hand was involved in this coup d'etat, the desire to overthrow the president and his government came from inside the country and was the result of a political demand for social change. The Chilean Army and police were used against the society they were supposed to protect.

**Amin: Afghanistan, December 1979.** The Soviets accomplished a successful decapitation in 1979 during the first stage of their invasion of Afghanistan. Prior to an attack by Soviet troops, special assault force (Spetsnaz) teams were sent to Kabul to assassinate the heads of the Afghanistan government. Spetsnaz operators and agents from the Committee for State Security (KGB) surrounded President Hafizullah Amin's palace in Kabul. Once inside, they executed Amin and nearly everyone else in the

palace.<sup>3</sup> "The Spetsnaz used weapons equipped with silencers and shot down their adversaries like professional killers," an Afghan survivor said.

After this mission, the teams secured Kabul Airport in preparation for the mass air landing of airborne troops. This operation can be viewed as a perfect political decapitation of a country's government, leaving chaos in the institutional framework.

**Noriega: Panama, December 1989.** On 20 December 1989, the 82d Airborne Division conducted a combat jump onto Torrijos International

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Airport, Panama.<sup>4</sup> This military action was the opening move in a major U.S. operation against the regime of Panamanian President Manuel Noriega. Noriega had become increasingly dictatorial, relied on irregular paramilitary units, and was involved in drug trafficking. It was beginning to be unsafe for U.S. citizens to live in Panama.<sup>5</sup>

After a week of heavy fighting, U.S. troops involved in Operation Just Cause achieved their primary objectives. Noriega surrendered voluntarily to U.S. authorities and is now serving a 40-year sentence in Florida for drug trafficking. The removal of Noriega from presidential office and the establishment of a U.S.-recognized government in Panama were the main goals of this operation. This was a political decapitation implemented by foreign troops through raw force and before the eyes of the world.

These examples show how political decapitation was used during the Cold War and toward the end of the colonial era. Political decapitation was an important factor in those conflicts and is still common in today's news. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Osama bin-Laden were an attempt to disable the U.S. political and financial centers of power. Later, when the United States targeted Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq, it was once more a hostile move against another nation's political leader. These actions, regardless of the perpetrator, had the same goals: to eliminate the heads of state, to induce failure in the decisionmaking process, and to create a power vacuum.

Although kidnapping heads of state seems to be a good solution to avoid bloodshed, as in the Ben Bella operation, it does not offer the same convenience and effectiveness as physical elimination. First, it is unlikely that a whole government could be kidnapped. This inability to kidnap an entire government limits the scope of political decapitation to use against small political or combatant groups. Second, a kidnapping is not a final solution and does not possess the same psychological effect of terror, chaos, and panic on the targeted political structure as physical elimination. Finally, kidnapping is subject to fiasco during the operation and is not reliable.

### **To Assassinate Versus to Protect**

After nuclear weapons, teams of special operations forces (SOF) are the best method for conducting a successful political decapitation. Because of their training, organization, and equipment, SOF are distinguished from conventional units. They can be designed and directed to influence the will of foreign leadership to create conditions favorable to any country's strategic aims or objectives. SOF actions are principally offensive, are usually of high physical and political risk, and are directed at high-value, critical, and often time-sensitive targets.

In the SOF world, political decapitation is categorized as a direct action (DA) operation. DA is a short-duration strike performed by capable units to seize, destroy, capture, recover, or inflict damage on designated personnel or materiel. When conducting these operations, SOF may employ raid, ambush, or direct-assault tactics.<sup>6</sup> Sabotage and precision-destruction operations are part of this form of combat and may be used during a political decapitation operation.

Although the Western world has trained an impressive number of SOF, political assassination has never been a priority. The ethics of such an action is contrary to Western values, at least when directed against other Western societies.

This was not the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Each Spetsnaz land and naval brigade possessed an anti-VIP company. This company's task is believed to have included the assassination of enemy political and military leaders and attacks on enemy nuclear bases and command centers with the intention of creating panic and disruption. Although only Russia is left of the Soviet Union from the great turmoil of the 1990s, the Spetsnaz tradition seems to have survived in the form of a group called *Grom* (Thunder). *Grom* is under the control of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service

Elements of the Finnish Army and Navy training to provide protection to the presidential palace in Helsinki.



Finnish Army

(SVR), and its tasks include assassination and sabotage.<sup>7</sup>

NATO countries possess units capable of performing political decapitations. The U.S. SEALs, Delta, and Special Forces; the British Special Air Service and Special Boat Squadron; the French Hubert Commando; and the Italian Comsubin are trained to operate undercover in high-risk environments. The quality of their training and high professionalism, combined with the technological level of most NATO countries, guarantees a positive operational outcome.

In contrast, a country susceptible of being a target for political decapitation will try to protect itself. Some countries with extensive shorelines are aware of the threat to their political and military leadership. The countries bordering the Baltic Sea, for example, were in the front line during the Cold War.

With the exception of Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, all the other countries have their political capitals situated near a shore. Copenhagen, Denmark; Riga, Latvia; Tallinn, Estonia; Helsinki, Finland; and Stockholm, Sweden, are the hearts of their respective countries. A major strike on these cities could halt most functions of the state. Sweden and Finland have tried to prepare themselves against this kind of attack. The probability of a threat to these countries, however, is considered to be very low in the near future.

Surrounded by an archipelago of thousands of islands, Stockholm is vulnerable to infiltration by small, armed groups coming from the sea. As a result,

Sweden maintains three specialized units that can respond to this specific threat:

- The Coastal Rangers (Kustjägarna). This unit is part of the navy. Its main task is to search and destroy enemy units that have infiltrated the Swedish archipelago.<sup>8</sup>

- The Naval Counter SOF Company (Bassäk). A company-size force, it protects Swedish naval installations from attack by hostile forces. Bassäk teams conduct security and reconnaissance patrols using trained dog teams, small boats, and combat divers.<sup>9</sup>

(Jaegerkorps) and Frogman Corps (Froemandskorpset), backed by the frigates and patrol boats of the Danish navy.<sup>11</sup>

## A Real and Current Threat

Until not so long ago, it seemed that political decapitation was no longer an option in First World nations. Western and Eastern Europe and North America were trying to build an island of stability where these kinds of threats were outdated. The 9/11 attacks, however, shredded the belief of an untouchable political system in the West. This deadly event triggered the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and U.S. President George W. Bush's desire to remove Saddam Hussein from Iraq. This was extraordinary considering the UN's principles that forbid violent intrusion into another country's political structure. The U.S. administration saw political decapitation in Iraq as the principal aim of the war. The result was the disruption of Iraq's political structure and an opportunity for the United States to shape a new government in Baghdad. It was an effective way to wage a major conflict.

Political decapitation is usually preceded by diplomatic and commercial crises, troop movements, and border clashes. These signs of tension often prevent an attack from being a total surprise. Also, international forums, such as the UN or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, monitor politico-military movement around the world to prevent similar actions. However, no one can predict what a politically unstable neighbor might do to calm its population or to satisfy its appetite for power. For example, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Iraq, Kashmir, and North Korea are constantly fighting with neighboring countries to expand their political power.

Political decapitation is the ultimate military answer for a nation whose goal is to reshape a targeted country's existing political structure and its surrounding region. A well-planned political decapitation operation offers a full reward for very little cost. **MR**

□ The Försvarmaktens Särskilda Skyddsgrupp—Special Security Group (SSG). This is a joint service unit. SSG is a relatively new unit within the Swedish armed forces. Recruited exclusively from officers, the unit is trained to conduct prisoner of war rescue missions, hostage rescue operations, and to provide close-protection details for Swedish VIPs.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the Swedish air force and navy patrol regularly in the archipelago area. In the 1980s, one of their tasks was to hunt for Soviet submarines.

Finland has a unit of special rangers whose primary mission is to counter enemy SOF. However, the Finnish army still relies on the guard infantry regiment and on a large framework of coastal artillery (impressive but totally obsolete) for the protection of Helsinki. In addition, the Finnish navy has a sonar surveillance system similar to the North Atlantic Sound Surveillance System line that was deployed on the seabed of the south littoral of Finland. The technology used should be sufficient for good acoustic acquisition.

Denmark also is concerned about the threat. Copenhagen is situated on the bank of the Öre Sund, gateway to the Baltic Sea. Providing security for this important area is the task of the Ranger Corps

## NOTES

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*Serge Walder is a French citizen and a postgraduate student at the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Helsinki in Finland. His current research is about the role of intelligence in multinational counterterrorism activities. Walder has a Masters in History and has studied strategy and military history at the Finnish National Defense College. He is a former French foreign ministry officer and was stationed in Helsinki, Finland, and in Tallinn, Estonia. He has written two articles about the development of the Finnish Navy for Naval Forces Review.*