

The U.S. and Iraq, 1990-1991

By James Kitfield

As is so often the case throughout history, the Persian Gulf War began out of strategic and diplomatic miscalculation. After the 1979 revolution that toppled the U.S.-supported Shah of Iran and led to the taking of American embassy personnel hostage in Teheran, U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf shifted toward support of Iraq as a counter-balance to the possible destabilizing spread of Iran's Islamic revolution. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the American government thus gave trade credits to Iraq and supplied the Iraqi armed forces with valuable intelligence information through Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that Iraq started the war and that Saddam Hussein's forces repeatedly resorted to poison gas attacks to thwart Iran's Revolutionary Guard troops, the United States also dropped its objections to the efforts of allies such as France to give weapons and other supplies to Iraq.

The end of the bloody Iran-Iraq War left Iraq with a massive, well-equipped army of more than one million troops, and a crushing debt burden of more than \$90 billion. Saddam especially blamed his smaller neighbors Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates for his debt troubles, since they had declined to offer Iraq debt relief and had broken oil quotas set by OPEC, driving oil prices down. Saddam also accused Kuwait of siphoning off \$2.5 billion in Iraqi oil from the Rumaila oil field, which the two countries shared.

U.S. strategy failed to adjust to the fact that Iraq had become the most dangerous and aggressive country in the Persian Gulf. Thus when Saddam Hussein began massing troops near its border with Kuwait in July 1990, American Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie told him that "...we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait." Essentially, the Ambassador was signaling that if Iraq moved against Kuwait, it was not the concern of the United States.

No one will ever know whether a sterner diplomatic posture by the American government would have deterred Saddam. On August 2nd, more than 80,000 of Iraq's elite Republican Guard troops poured across the Kuwaiti border. Rather than seize the Rumaila oil field in a limited land-grab, as U.S. intelligence had predicted, the Republican Guard rolled rapidly on to Kuwait City and further south toward the border with Saudi Arabia.

U.S. Interests

After the energy crises of the 1970s and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter issued in 1980 what became known as the "Carter Doctrine." The President declared that any attempt by an outside or aggressive force to control the Persian

Gulf would be regarded as a direct assault on the vital interests of the United States.

After Iraqi forces had solidified their hold on Kuwait, it was certainly not difficult to understand the vital strategic interests in jeopardy. Already Saddam had control over 20 percent of the world's oil reserves. A 30-mile push into Saudi Arabia would quickly bring him another 20 percent. If Saddam could solidify his hold on Kuwait, U.S. officials feared his domineering position would lead other Arab states to start cutting deals and paying extortion, making him the preeminent power broker in the Persian Gulf.

In confronting the Iraqi crisis a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and at the end of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush and some of his key advisers came to believe that an important strategic principle was at stake. Early in the crisis, for instance, the United Nations Security Council had voted 14-0 to condemn the invasion and demand an immediate and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. For the first time in the history of the United Nations, the Soviet Union sent signals that it would stand with the United States and approve UN-backed military action to repel an act of aggression.

At the uncertain dawn of the post-Cold War era, Bush and confidants such as National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft came to believe that a concerted international response to turn back the Iraqi invasion would strike a principled blow against nation-state aggression toward other states, which had been the great scourge of the 20th century. That was the "New World Order" that Bush had talked about, and the strength of the vision was evident when only days into the crisis the President was asked if he was contemplating military action.

"This will not stand," said a grim-faced President Bush, jabbing the air with his finger for emphasis. "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait."

Objective

The initial objective was to deploy sufficient military forces to the Persian Gulf to deter an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia. As early as October 1990, however, it became clear to insiders that the ultimate objective would be to either compel Iraq to withdraw its troops from Kuwait, or else to liberate Kuwait by military force.

Options

Saddam Hussein revealed an almost uncanny penchant for poor timing when he chose 1990 as the moment to provoke a confrontation with the United States and its allies. Freed from Cold War constraints, the Bush Administration was able to isolate Iraq diplomatically, leading to a unanimous vote in the UN Security Council condemning Iraq and the invasion of Kuwait. That, in turn, facilitated the imposition of crippling economic and trade sanctions on Iraq. The UN Security Council

later voted overwhelmingly to approve “any means necessary” to turn back the Iraqi aggression.

That year also represented a high-water mark for the U.S. military, which was riding a 1980s wave of Cold War military spending yet was free of many Cold War concerns. Thus the Pentagon was able to deploy to Saudi Arabia the three heavy divisions of VII Corps in Germany that had been responsible for anchoring the NATO defense against the former Warsaw Pact countries. With two full Army corps, two Marine Corp divisions, assorted allied units, six aircraft carriers, and Air Force fighters and bombers filling every airfield in the region, the military options available to the United States were abundant and overwhelming.

The major limiting factor was one of time. Defense Department officials did not believe they could adequately support such a large force in the barren Saudi desert through one of the region’s brutally hot summers. That meant that the diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions would have to work by spring 1991 at the latest, or U.S. and allied forces would have to choose the military option.

Decision Making

The ultimate success of the Persian Gulf War can be traced in large measure to the experience and competence of U.S. decision makers in the national command authority, beginning at the top with President Bush. As a World War II veteran and former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Bush drew on his deep experience to reach an early decision that Iraq’s aggression in Kuwait “would not stand.” His steady resolve that Iraq’s aggression must be reversed charted a clear course for his national security team to follow through many months of crisis.

As a former Ambassador to China and two-term Vice President, Bush also used his numerous personal relationships with international leaders not only to help isolate Iraq diplomatically, but to help finance the deployment of the nearly one-half million U.S. troops in the allied coalition, aided ably by Secretary of State James Baker. In National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, a retired Air Force general, Bush had an equally experienced national security alter ego. While making the strategic decisions on when and if to go to war, and on what terms, Bush and his White House team studiously avoided the micro-management of tactical decisions that characterized the White House of President Lyndon Johnson, who used to boast during the Vietnam War that, “I won’t let those Air Force generals bomb an outhouse without checking with me first.”

As a former Congressional leader and White House Chief of Staff, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney also revealed a penchant for careful deliberation and decisiveness during Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the names given to first the planning operation and then the implementa-

tion phase of the war. Early on in the crisis Cheney took the controversial step of firing the Air Force Chief of Staff for what he considered imprudent remarks to a newspaper reporter, thus firmly establishing civilian authority in managing the crisis. In Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, a former National Security Adviser in the Reagan White House, Cheney also had a military adviser who was equally steeped in the military and political aspects of the crisis. Finally, as the commander in the field the mercurial General H. Norman Schwarzkopf proved himself an able tactical leader. Schwarzkopf also benefited greatly from the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols reforms that made his subordinate commanders from the other services answerable to him instead of to their service chiefs. Thus the sniping among the services that had characterized earlier crises such as Grenada and Desert One in Iran was largely absent.

Strategy

With Iraq almost totally isolated diplomatically and economically—and with Iraq's static forces outmatched by a U.S. military totaling nearly 500,000 troops and another 200,000 coalition troops—the strategy was to compel Saddam to blink and withdraw from Kuwait. Failing that, the strategy was to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait forcefully by, as General Colin Powell famously said, cutting off the Iraqi army in Kuwait and killing it.

Outcome

After a 40-day air campaign that saw allied air forces launch 41,309 strikes against Baghdad and the Republican Guard and regular Iraqi troops, destroying roughly half of Iraq's armor and artillery forces in Kuwait, U.S. and allied ground forces defeated the Iraqi army in a 100-hour ground war and liberated Kuwait. This was one of the most lopsided military victories in history in terms of damage and casualties inflicted upon Iraqi forces versus those suffered by U.S. and allied forces.

Lessons Learned

It has often been said that military forces learn far more from their defeats than from their victories, and the axiom probably applies to Desert Storm. In many ways, the Persian Gulf War was more the last Cold War confrontation than a preamble to the challenges the American military would confront in the post-Cold War era. The conflict was a classic clash of heavy tank forces, for which the United States had spent decades in Europe preparing. It was fought in an environment that maximized U.S. advantages in standoff weaponry and training (the desert environment, for instance, virtually duplicated conditions at the Army's National Training Center in the Mojave Desert). That is not to denigrate the superb performance of the U.S. military in Desert Storm.

Rather, it is simply to note that the United States is unlikely to face future foes foolhardy enough to want to challenge the American military with conventional forces on a battlefield where it enjoys virtually every advantage.

Even so, the Persian Gulf War suggests a number of important lessons. Although in some ways such naked state-on-state aggression presents an easier choice for leaders than the failed state model so common in the post-Cold War era, President Bush's early and unwavering determination that vital U.S. interests were at stake—and that the Iraqi aggression “would not stand”—provided a clear strategic reference point and infused the national command authority with a sense of common purpose.

The Bush Administration has been criticized for stopping the war too early and leaving Saddam Hussein in power, and the Persian Gulf War does suggest that U.S. leaders need to focus more on their strategy for after the fighting has stopped. Bush rhetorically encouraged the Shite and Kurd minorities to rise up in opposition to Saddam, for instance, and then did nothing to help avert their slaughter by Iraqi Republican Guards. Schwarzkopf mistakenly allowed Iraqi forces to continue flying helicopters as part of the surrender agreement, not anticipating that they would be used as gunships to suppress the uprising. In terms of whether Bush should have sent allied forces to Baghdad to unseat Saddam when he had the chance, however, this was never part of the strategy. Such a move would almost certainly have splintered the alliance and angered the Arab members. The United States was also still concerned that a fragmented Iraq would not be able to serve as a counterweight in the region to Iran.

Although it was regarded as too risky by some of his closest advisers, Bush's decision to finally seek Congressional approval for military action seems wise in retrospect. The Senate debate on the issue was one of most eloquent in memory, and it largely dispelled the specter of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, when after only perfunctory debate Congress essentially ceded its war powers to the Johnson Administration concerning Vietnam. After the close but successful Senate vote endorsing military action against Iraq, no U.S. service member in the Persian Gulf could seriously doubt that the country was united behind the effort.

In many ways, the Persian Gulf War also revealed the wisdom of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols reforms. No longer were the component commanders in the field taking back-channel orders from their service chiefs in the Pentagon that tangled chains of command. Schwarzkopf enjoyed near total authority in the region, and his chain of command to Cheney seemed streamlined and concise.

Although the Goldwater-Nichols reforms envisioned the empowered Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff serving as the Secretary of Defense's primary adviser, it did not view him as being directly in the chain of command in a crisis. However, by de facto serving as the link in

terms of orders and instructions between the Secretary of Defense and the commander in chief in the field, first in Panama and then in the Persian Gulf War, General Colin Powell put himself directly in the chain of command, elevating the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs beyond even what the Goldwater-Nichols reformers imagined. Subsequent Chairmen have adopted that expanded model of their role.

Finally, the ability of U.S. air and space assets to pinpoint targets and effectively strike them with precision-guided weapons during Desert Storm represented a paradigm shift in the importance of air power. The information dominance that Schwarzkopf and his commanders enjoyed in the Persian Gulf—allowing them to see the enemy while at the same time keeping him largely blind to their movements—whetted the U.S. military's appetite for what some have called a "revolution in military affairs."

