A War of Limited Success:
The U.S. Decision Not to Overthrow Saddam Hussein at the end of The Gulf War 1991

On February 27th, 1991 President Bush decided to end the allied offensive against Iraq. Operation Desert Storm liberated Kuwait after defeating the Iraqi forces in the theatre of operations. It did not, however, destroy Saddam Hussein’s regime. When the decision was taken the Americans, as well as other Western and Arab members of the coalition, thought that Saddam’s days were numbered.

Twelve years later, Saddam is still in control and the world faces the prospect of another war with Iraq. The inevitable question, therefore, is whether Bush’s refusal to overthrow the Iraqi dictator can be defended as a successful policy? For a fair evaluation the decision needs to be analyzed without the benefit of hindsight. Instead, the study needs to focus on the information available to the Oval Office and the perceptions of the decision makers at the time.

First it is important to review the historiography on the subject. Then it is necessary to describe the major factors which influenced the decision makers. Once completed, an evaluation of the cases for and against the refusal to overthrow Saddam Hussein is possible, in order to determine which set of arguments is stronger.

---

1. The Kuwait Theatre of Operations will be referred to in this essay as the KTO.
The Historiography

Three approaches deal with Bush’s decision to end the war: (1) the official version, as presented in memoirs, which justifies the decision; (2) the critical analysis by experts claiming that the decision was taken in an irresponsible way, whereas had it been done properly the outcome may have been different; and (3) the alternative view, which questions the official version, arguing that the decision was based on other confidential considerations.

The Official Line

The memoirs of the key decision makers all claim that the objective of the war was to liberate Kuwait, not to destroy Iraq or get rid of its leader. On the night of February 27th, President Bush announced to the nation after he decided to end the war:

“Kuwait is liberated. Iraq’s army is defeated. Our military objectives are met.”

The Bush team, however, hoped that the Iraqi people would take matters into their own hands and topple their leader soon after the war was over. President Bush’s National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft confirms this:

“President Bush repeatedly declared that the fate of Saddam Hussein was up to the Iraqi people.”

---

3. This includes President Bush, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of State James Baker and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell.

4. Bush and Scowcroft, p. 486. The only sign of dissent from this official line, was by the commander of allied forces in the Gulf General Norm Schwarzkopf who appeared shortly after the war on the television show Breakfast with David Frost commenting: “Frankly, my recommendation had been, you know, continue the march. I mean, we had them in a rout and we could have continued, you know, to reap great destruction upon them.” Interesting enough, this discrepancy was soon cleared in a joint public statement by Powell and Schwarzkopf: “General Schwarzkopf and I both supported terminating Desert Storm combat operations at 12:00 midnight, 27 February 1991 (EST), as did all the President’s advisors. There was no contrary recommendation. There was no disagreement. There was no debate.”; Powell, p. 525.
The Analytical Views

The military science approach, as handled by Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner in The Lessons of Modern War: The Gulf War, argues, that while Kuwait was liberated, the decision to end the war was taken without a realistic assessment of the Iraqi losses. A proper analysis, based on a more accurate battle damage assessment exercise, would have revealed that a large portion of the Iraqi war machine was intact, as well as the main security apparatus that Saddam needed to maintain his position. Had the Americans been aware of this, they may have continued with the offensive to weaken the Iraqi leader further.

The decision-making analysts, such Alex Roberto Hybel in Power Over Rationality: The Bush Administration and the Gulf Crisis, question the entire policy making process in the White House. Hybel argues that the Bush team tended to ignore proper evaluation procedures, primarily in order to minimize dissent. Therefore, critical decisions were taken without careful analysis and proper debate.

5. Bush and Scowcroft, p. 489. It is important to point out that all regime changes in modern day Iraq, including the 1958 “revolution” which overthrew the monarchy and the Ba’ath rise to power a decade later, had been carried out by relatively small armed groups. The Iraqi people remained passive fulfilling the role of spectators. Therefore, it was more wishful thinking to expect that the Iraqi people would this time rise against their leader; The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order by Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh (London: Faber and Faber ©1993), p. 415.
7. Roland Dannreuther in The Gulf Conflict: A Political and Strategic Analysis (London: Adelphi Papers © 1991/92) claims that Saddam Hussein had made detailed contingency preparations for any internal revolts after his defeat by deliberately keeping back 22 divisions of his most loyal army units away from the KTO; p. 61.
8. IBID, p. 336.
10. IBID, p. 79.
11. IBID, p. 79. Hybel also claims that in the early phases of the Gulf crisis, Middle East experts were not invited to attend any of the main meetings in the White House to present their views on Saddam Hussein and how he might respond to various U.S. actions; p. 68. Hybel describes how Paul Wolfowitz, the undersecretary of defense for policy, was disturbed by the absence of a process of writing alternatives and implications so that the principal decision makers could analyze them; IBID.
The Alternative View

The alternative view, as presented by Avigdor Haselkorn in *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons, and Deterrence* argues, that the decision not to continue to Baghdad was due to the fear of Iraqi unconventional reprisals should Saddam believe that an end to his regime was imminent. Saddam had already threatened the United States, including during the last meeting he held with the American Ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, on July 25th, 1991:

“We know that you can harm us. But we too can harm you. Everyone can cause harm according to their ability and their size. We cannot come all the way to you in the United States, but individual Arabs can reach you.”

The White House calculated that the price to pay for getting rid of Saddam was too high. Intelligence analysts agreed that as a last resort the Iraqi leader would use weapons of mass destruction, even if it meant suicide. This could have inflicted casualties amongst allied forces on the ground and to major population centers in Israel and Saudi Arabia. By the time Kuwait was liberated, the Oval Office believed that this “last resort” scenario was approaching and it made no sense to risk a doomsday scenario, when a victory declaration ending the war could be made at any moment. Therefore, according to Haselkorn it was the credibility of Saddam Hussein’s mass destruction threat which led Bush to end the war early.

---

13. IBID, p. 67.
16. IBID, p. 84.
Principal Factors Influencing the Bush White House during the Gulf Crisis

Decisions during the Gulf Crisis were taken by the inner circle of President Bush. There were three main factors which influenced their decision making:

The Two Historical Analogies

When dealing with Saddam the team relied on two historical analogies: the Czechoslovakia Crisis of 1938 and the Vietnam War. The former proved that appeasement does not work with tyrants. The latter pointed out, that the United States should not get involved in a major conflict, unless it was going to use overwhelming military power to achieve an impressive victory in the shortest time possible. Both these lessons were applied in Washington. Therefore, when facing the Iraqis in Kuwait, the White House knew, that ultimately only force would liberate Kuwait. Already in August 1990 Bush admitted that:

“The more I thought about it at this juncture, I could not see how we were going to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait without using force.”

Then, once the immediate objective had been achieved in the KTO, the Bush team opted to stop the offensive while the allies had the upper hand without risking a longer Vietnam-like debacle.

---

18. Hybel, p. 9. This doctrine was also stated by General Schwarzkopf in November 1990 when he said “If we go to war, I am going to use every single thing that is available to me to bring as much destruction to the Iraqi forces as rapidly as I possibly can in the hopes of winning victory as soon as possible.”: p. 76.
The Three Guidelines for Global Leadership

With the Soviet Union in decline and the Cold War coming to an end, the Bush administration was determined to fulfil its role as global leader. In its view, this required the use of military power when necessary, a commitment to multilateralism and a preference for order and stability over change. American policy during the Gulf War followed these guidelines. The administration proved its willingness to use force to liberate Kuwait. It went to war backed by probably the greatest international military alliance ever. However, once it was clear that Iraqi control over Kuwait was defeated, the Bush team preferred to stop the war, so that stability in the Persian Gulf would not be shaken by the dismemberment of the Iraqi state. This policy was elaborated by Powell:

“However much we despised Saddam and what he had done, the United States had little desire to shatter his country. For the previous ten years, Iran, not Iraq had been our Persian Gulf nemesis. We wanted Iraq to continue as a threat and a counterweight to Iran.”

The War Objectives

President Bush outlined four main goals for American policy in the Gulf Crisis: (1) the unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait; (2) the restoration of Kuwait’s legitimate government; (3) the protection of the security and stability of the region; and (4) the protection of the lives of Americans abroad. There was no explicit call

---

20. Hurst, p. 11.
22. Powell, p. 490. Powell also quotes a cable he received from Charles Freeman, the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia: “For a range of reasons we cannot pursue Iraq’s unconditional surrender and occupation by us. It is not in our interest to destroy Iraq or weaken it to the point that Iran and/or Syria are not constrained by it.”; p. 527. It is important to point out that in 1990-91 Iran was just recuperating from defeat in the eight-year war with Iraq and could not pose a military threat to the region at the time.
for the overthrow of Saddam. Furthermore, the Bush team was against changing objectives during the fighting as explained by Scowcroft:

“Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives midstream, engaging in “mission creep”, and would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.”

Therefore, it was expected that the White House would stop the war once it believed the four objectives were achieved.

**The Case for the Decision: A War with Limited Objectives**

The defense is based on three main arguments: (1) the UN mandate only applied to the liberation of Kuwait and the international coalition would not support any further action; (2) the Iraqi military was no longer a threat in the region but it was still strong enough to prevent the dismemberment of Iraq; and (3) any attempt to take over Iraq and try to capture Saddam was too complicated, very dangerous, and would have resulted in more casualties.

**Fulfilment of UN Security Council Resolutions by the Coalition**

The primary justification for ending the war right after Kuwait had been liberated was, that the UN mandate had been fulfilled. In their memoirs, the decision makers mainly refer to the successful implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 660 (1990), which called for the unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and 678 (1990), which authorized the allies to use force to evict the Iraqis from the small Gulf state. Powell confirms this:

---

23. IBID.
“The UN resolution made clear that the mission was only to free Kuwait.”

Furthermore, the Americans believed, that with a push on to Baghdad, the international coalition would fall apart starting with the Arab members. The Arab world was shocked by what appeared to be the total devastation of the Iraqi armed forces and continuing the offensive would have jeopardized the close relationship between Washington and the various Arab capitals. This was confirmed by the British General Sir Peter de la Billiere:

“Even our limited incursion into Iraqi territory had made some of them (the Arabs) uneasy. The Arabs themselves had no intention of invading another Arab country. No Arab troops entered Iraqi territory.”

Since Bush was committed to multilateralism, the best way to preserve it would be to end the war at the point when all parties agreed that the objectives had been fulfilled. This was the case once Kuwait was liberated.

The Destruction of Iraq’s Armed Forces

The Bush team believed, that by the end of the war the Iraqi armed forces ceased to be a serious threat in the Persian Gulf. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, it was the fourth largest army in the world and the dominant military power in the region. By February 1991, battle damage assessment reports indicated that, the Iraqi forces had suffered greatly and they were no longer anywhere near to their pre-war potential. This view was shared by other members of the coalition as expressed by General de la Billiere:

---

25. Powell, p. 490. He further claims that: “The UN had given us our marching orders, and the President intended to stay with them.”
26. Heikal, p. 316. It should be pointed out that Heikal, interpreting events from an Arab perspective, uses the words “slaughter” and “massacre” to describe the devastating effect of the allied campaign against Iraq.
“Already there was mounting criticism in the Press that the battle had turned into a turkey shoot: certainly Iraqi servicemen were totally beaten and in a state of rout. Already the power of Saddam’s army had been broken.”

When President Bush made his decision he was confident, that the allies had destroyed Saddam Hussein’s offensive capabilities.

Avoiding another Vietnam

The White House was determined to avoid a never-ending Vietnam tragedy with growing numbers of American casualties. President Bush wrote in his Gulf War diary on February 25th, 1991:

“We don’t want to have another draw, another Vietnam, a sloppy ending. I hope we can avoid it.”

Furthermore, the Bush administration was extremely reluctant to get involved in regime change, which would mean a high-risk manhunt for Saddam, a long term commitment of American forces to Iraq and potentially serious complications of nation building after the war. Cheney best summarized the reasons for not embarking on such a strategy:

“If we’d gone to Baghdad and got rid of Saddam Hussein – assuming we could have found him – we’d have to put a lot of forces in and run him to ground some place. He would not have been easy to capture. Then you’ve got to put a new government in his place and then you’re faced with the question of what kind of government are you going to establish in Iraq? Is it going to be a Kurdish government or a Shia government or a Sunni government? How many forces are

28. IBID., p. 305.
29. Throughout the conflict there was political pressure to stick to limited war objectives. The New York Times editorialized that wider objectives would result in higher casualties and serious political risks: “If Mr. Bush is waging war in the Gulf for the sake of regional stability, then the most sensible war aims are limited ones.” in Lawrence Freedman and Ephraim Karsh, The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order (London: Faber and Faber ©1993), p. 412.
30. Bush and Scowcroft, pp. 482-483. Powell further elaborates on this issue claiming that “He (President Bush) had promised the American people that Desert Storm would not become a Persian Gulf Vietnam, and he kept his promise.”; Powell, p. 536. Schwarzkopf also makes this point very clear: “My gut reaction was that a quick cease-fire would save lives. If we continued to attack through Thursday, more of our troops would get killed, probably not many, but some. What was more, we’d accomplished our mission.” IBID, p. 525; this comment is inconsistent with the nature of a senior military general facing an opportunity to advance directly to the enemy’s base of power achieving total victory. This raises serious questions about the authenticity of this remark.
you going to have to leave there to keep it propped up. How many casualties are you going to take through the course of this operation?“31

The best way to avoid further casualties and complications in a Vietnam-like quagmire was to end the war immediately after Kuwait was liberated. That is exactly what President Bush thought he achieved when he made his decision.

**The Case against the Decision: Triumph Without Victory**32

The case against brings evidence contradicting each of the defense’s points. It argues, that the UN mandate was flexible enough to justify a push to Baghdad, there was no imminent threat to the coalition, a realistic assessment of the Iraqi armed forces was not completed prior to the decision, and Iraq cannot be compared to Vietnam. Though the Bush administration wanted to see Saddam gone and there was a window of opportunity to achieve it within a short period of time, there was no political determination to do the job.33

**The UN Mandate and the Coalition**

While Resolution 660 only dealt with Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait, Resolution 678 had three parts to it. The first two justified the use of all necessary means to enforce the resolutions relating to the crisis. The third part, however, authorized the allies to do what was necessary “to restore international peace and security in the area.”34 The White House opted for the restrictive interpretation of Resolution 678. Yet the Americans

---

32. IBID, p. 439. This was the title of an edition of *US News & World Report* the year after the Gulf War.
33. It is important to point out that senior officers during the Gulf War have confirmed in interviews with them after the war that the U.S. deliberately tried to find and kill Saddam by bombing. The last attempt was carried out during the last night of the war when the leadership bunker at Taji, north of Baghdad, was bombed and destroyed. U.S. intelligence believed Saddam Hussein, who thought it was a safe bunker due the failure of previous raids to destroy it, was likely to be found there. This was not the case; Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 499-500.
could have argued, that as long as Saddam remained in power, there would be no peace and security in the Gulf. After all, he had waged an eight-year war against Iran in the eighties, remained in power by terrorizing his own people, and in both cases he had used weapons of mass destruction. The invasion of Kuwait was a continuation of Saddam’s aggressive strategy and as long as he remained in power, there was a good chance that he would strike again.

There is no definite evidence showing, that the Bush administration was under significant pressure to end the war by the other coalition members. On February 27th Bush writes in his diary:

“Cheney thought this was the last day of operations – perhaps one more at most. Some of the allies were sensing an end to the fighting as well, although there was no pressure to finish it.”[^35]

There was a consensus amongst the allies that they could reach Baghdad in a relatively short time, as confirmed by General de la Billiere:

“In purely practical terms, there is no doubt that British, American and French forces could have reached Baghdad. We would have been there in another day and a half and we would have probably met little resistance on the way.”[^36]

Therefore, not only was there no pressure from within the coalition to stop immediately, the Americans could have achieved militarily much more within a matter of days. By then the coalition members, including the Arabs, would have had to face a new reality with no alternative but to come to terms with it.

**The Iraqi Armed Forces were not Destroyed**

The Bush team operated under an inaccurate assessment, that enough damage had been inflicted to Iraq’s military and unconventional capabilities. Not only was a large

[^35]: Bush and Scowcroft, p. 485.
[^36]: General de la Billiere, p. 304.
percentage of the Iraq war machine intact\textsuperscript{37}, the main corridor in the KTO between Kuwait City and Basra was still open on February 27\textsuperscript{th} enabling large numbers of Iraqi forces to flee unharmed.\textsuperscript{38}

The decision to end the war appears to have been taken without a serious discussion based on detailed supporting analysis. The joint public statement by Powell and Schwarzkopf admits "there was no debate."\textsuperscript{39} Nor is there any evidence to suggest, that intelligence officials were asked to examine different ways to end the war and the consequences of each one.\textsuperscript{40} The Bush team ignored the need to plan for conflict termination and preferred to rely on their judgment.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Iraq is not Vietnam}

The Vietnam analogy was incorrect. The Iraqis, unlike the Vietnamese, were not motivated by a powerful ideology. They were fighting the war of a brutal dictator. The Iraqi population did not support Saddam by choice and, therefore, it was unlikely they would have resisted an overwhelming allied invasion. The nature of desert warfare excluded the use of guerrilla tactics as applied in the jungles of Vietnam. Furthermore,

\begin{itemize}
\item[37.] An example of this is the elite Republican Guards, which during the war were reported to have suffered the most from the air offensive and more afterwards during the ground campaign. Later it became clear that a very high percentage of the surviving equipment in the Iraqi army was in the Republican Guard units, who escaped with 70\% of their tanks undamaged; IBID, p. 336.
\item[38.] A gap of about 30km existed between the US VII and XVII Corps in the north of the KTO. The main corridor north from Kuwait City to Basra was still open and the pontoon bridges across the Shatt al-Basra were operational. At least two Iraqi armored divisions were crossing into safety. In additional, three Republican Guard infantry divisions were escaping to Basra. Better intelligence might have led the decision makers to extend the fighting or authorize an airborne assault to seal off the escape routes north of Basra; pp. 336-337.
\item[39.] Powell, p. 525.
\item[40.] Cordesman and Wagner, p. 337.
\item[41.] IBID, p. 338.
\end{itemize}
Iraq lacked any major diplomatic ties nor did it have an external sponsor, which could re-supply its war effort.\textsuperscript{42}

Public opinion in the United States was different than during the Vietnam era. At one point about 71\% of the American people believed, that toppling Saddam should be an allied goal. In addition, only 29\% of the population thought, that an Iraqi withdrawal with Saddam still in power could be viewed as a victory.\textsuperscript{43} While public opinion could have shifted very fast, the Bush administration did enjoy the support of the people at the critical point when the decision was made.

*The Case in light of the Alternative View*

The main weakness of the alternative view is, that it will only be validated or disqualified in the years to come as and when confidential records, particularly intelligence reports to the decision makers on Iraq’s unconventional threat, are declassified and released to the public. Until then this view rests on assumptions only without significant written primary source evidence, only interviews.

From the information available, however, it is difficult to see that Iraqi deterrence was a major factor which pushed Bush to end the war early. If the allies were deterred from destroying Saddam’s core security apparatus and weapons of mass destruction, then in what context can the following coalition attacks be viewed: (1) 960 strikes on nuclear-biological-chemical facilities; (2) 260 attacks on primary leadership targets, including bunkers where Saddam was believed to be hiding; (3) 58 strikes to central command, control and communication facilities? These are not the actions of a deterred coalition, quite the contrary.


\textsuperscript{43} Karsh, p. 412. The poll was taken by *Newsweek*. 
The Verdict: A Missed Opportunity

Just before Bush made his decision to end the war he wrote in his diary that “Vietnam will soon be behind us.” Yet the Bush team was a prime victim of the syndrome throughout the campaign. The affect was so overwhelming, that it prevented the Americans from seizing the opportunity to really destroy the Iraqi threat in the long term. It is understandable, that the Americans did not want to get involved in the difficult tasks of regime change and nation building. The Cold War was coming to an end and there were greater concerns about the decline of the Soviet Union and its possible effects on global security. For this the Bush administration can be excused. They cannot, however, receive the same treatment for failing to engage in a serious analysis of the situation before making the critical decision. Time was on their side. Had Bush handled the situation in a professional manner by applying his resources correctly, he would have not had to write in his diary on the last day of the war:

“It hasn’t been a clean end – there is no battleship Missouri surrender. That is what’s missing to make this akin to WWII, to separate Kuwait from Korea and Vietnam.”

One must assume that continuing the war effort to Baghdad would have resulted in more casualties, possibly even from chemical or biological weapons. However, there was nothing in the Iraqi arsenal that the coalition could not have overcome nor was the coalition ever deterred from striking at the heart of Saddam’s regime and unconventional capabilities. If Washington had the political will to continue, Saddam Hussein could have been weakened to the point where his power basis would have been destroyed. Regime

---

44. Bush and Scowcroft, p. 484.
45. IBID., p. 487.
change would have then been more than likely feasible by an internal Iraqi effort without
direct U.S. involvement as feared so much by the Bush administration.

The Bush team was influenced by the Czechoslovakia Crisis of 1938. The failure
of appeasement was a great lesson on how wars begin when facing a tyrant.
Unfortunately, they forgot the Casablanca Conference of 1943 where the policy of
“unconditional surrender”, based on the un-compromising end to hostilities, was correctly
identified as the most effective way to rid the world of tyrants. Had President Bush also
remembered this critical lesson of World War II, he would have had the Missouri
surrender he wished for and the world would not have to face the possibility of another
Gulf War with Saddam Hussein in 2003. The refusal to overthrow Saddam Hussein at the
end of the Gulf War, therefore, cannot be defended as a successful policy.

By: Guy Setton – London - 28 November 2002
Bibliography


Hurst, Steven, The Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration: In Search of a New World Order (London: Cassel, 1999)

Hybel, Roberto Alex, Power Over Rationality: The Bush Administration and the Gulf Crisis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993)


Documents: