

Rubicon for the 1990s

The Story of How the United States
Went to War in the Gulf

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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The date was January 10, 49 B.C. The Rubicon was a river that divided part of Roman Italy from the province of Cisalpine Gaul. Julius Caesar was commanding troops in Gaul and had gained much influence with the people of Gaul and Rome. Gnaeus Pompey and the Roman Senate began to fear Caesar's power, so they ordered him to give up his command. Caesar refused, and instead led his troops across the Rubicon River and into Roman Italy. This was a forbidden action, and it resulted in a civil war that Caesar won to take control of the Roman Empire. The Rubicon has come to mean a dividing line, or the moment of truth in an important matter, especially war. To "cross the Rubicon" means to make a decision that cannot be changed.¹

On January 16, 1991, President George Bush ordered United States military forces to lead a United Nations coalition to war against Iraq. Exactly five and one-half months before, Saddam Hussein had led Iraqi forces into neighboring Kuwait. Saddam claimed Kuwait rightfully belonged to Iraq. George Bush ordered U.S. troops to the region and demanded that Iraq withdraw at once. "Iraq will not be permitted to annex Kuwait. That's not a threat, or a boast, that's just the way it's going to be," said the President.² Bush left no room for positioning in his statement. It could only be interpreted one way: the United States was preparing to do much more than simply condemn this action by Iraq. George Bush was backing his rhetoric with a

willingness to go to war. Conservative columnist Patrick Buchanan wrote, "The Presidency of George Bush is on the line. He has crossed the Rubicon. There is no turning back."³

Even if there was no "room" for turning back, there was certainly time. From August 2, 1990, to January 16, 1991, the United States of America struggled with the notion of going to war. The United States did not have a reputation for eagerly entering conflict. During World War One, it took the loss of the Lusitania and 128 American lives to convince the U.S. to go to war. In World War Two, the bombing of Pearl Harbor finally convinced Americans this was their fight. At Vietnam, the Tonkin Gulf incident gave President Lyndon Johnson the mandate to escalate the war.⁴ President Bush had no evidence of a similar direct attack upon American territory or citizens.

In addition, a November United Nations mandate called for Iraq to be out of Kuwait by January 15, 1991, or face the use of force. This placed the United States and President Bush in an unusual position. America, as the leader of the U.N. coalition in the gulf, had received a diplomatic "green light for war" from the world community. Yet the United States had well over a month to think about the prospects of conflict. Lance Morrow wrote, "Rarely before has a nation had such leisure for premeditation of war--or for premonition of its consequences."⁵

This essay will focus on the "premeditation of war," that is, how the President, opinion leaders, and citizens of the United States reacted to and shaped events in the Persian Gulf between August of 1990 and January of 1991. First, the

President's role in creating the defensive alliance will be examined. Second, the effect of sanctions and the role of the United Nations will be considered. Third, this essay will identify the shift in U.S. policy from a defensive force to an offensive one, and the opposition this change met. Finally, the role of the Soviet Union and the final pre-war positioning of Iraq will be discussed.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi tanks and troops poured into the neighboring country of Kuwait. Within hours, all notable resistance had ceased. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein claimed that Kuwait was actually Iraq's 19th province, and that Kuwaiti oil rightfully belonged to Iraq. President Bush responded swiftly to the invasion, stating, "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait."⁶ On August 7, the President ordered U.S. aircraft, ships, and troops to the region. The 82nd Airborne was among the first units to arrive, along with Navy SEALs and the Army's Delta Force. The initial goal of the U.S. was to have 125,000 troops in the region.⁷

President Bush announced four goals of U.S. policy during an August 8 nationally televised speech: withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait, restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government, stabilization of the gulf area, and protection of Americans in the Middle East.⁸ The President also reassured American people that "the mission of our troops is wholly defensive."⁹ Saddam Hussein responded on August 9 by officially annexing Kuwait and closing the Iraqi borders.

Facing a shortage of soldiers, Bush began activating

reservists for duty at home and in the gulf. According to Newsweek, "The Pentagon began what was clearly the biggest U.S. mobilization since the Vietnam War."¹⁰ President Bush "nationalized" hundreds of civilian aircraft to aid in the mass transport to the Middle East. The strategy seemed to be working. Further Iraqi aggression no longer appeared likely.¹¹ There was little dissent against U.S. policy at this point. In fact, a poll taken on August 8-9 indicated 77% of Americans supported the way the President had handled the situation.¹²

President Bush acted quickly to secure support from allies. Within a week of the invasion he had made 35 phone calls to leaders of foreign countries. The results were impressive: Bush lined up the U.N. Security Council, Japan, the USSR, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the Arab League to join the coalition against Saddam Hussein.¹³ Saudi Arabia's King Fahd agreed to allow U.S. forces to fortify his country. In return for his cooperation, Fahd got U.S. assurances that he would not be abandoned suddenly, but that American forces would leave if he asked.¹⁴ Several Arab nations condemned Saddam Hussein for the invasion.

Another show of support for the U.S. was the monetary aid promised by several countries. Japan and Germany donated billions to the Middle East cause.¹⁵ Saudi Arabia and the exiled government of Kuwait pledged even more money.

It was especially important for Washington and Moscow to show a unified front, so that Saddam Hussein couldn't use Cold War politics to his advantage. To that end, U.S. Secretary of

State James Baker met with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on August 3. Together, they issued a statement condemning Iraq for its invasion.¹⁶ In September, during a hastily-arranged summit, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev declared that they were "united in the belief that Iraq's aggression must not be tolerated."¹⁷

The Middle East crisis also initiated some strange alliances. On September 14, the U.S. agreed to work with Syria to stop Saddam, despite Syrian President Assad's involvement with the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon.¹⁸ This represented a major change in U.S. policy. Yet there was little outcry by the American public.

Saddam Hussein also tried to shore up his alliances. First, he "sued for peace" with Iran, whom he had been warring with throughout the 1980s. Saddam gave up all the land he had taken from Iran during their war. In return, he was able to secure his eastern border and transfer thousands of troops south to the Kuwait area. Saddam also encouraged his fellow Arabs to join a Holy War against America.¹⁹ President Bush insisted this tactic wouldn't work, but the Arab world was not completely unified against Saddam Hussein. Said one senior official of an Arab organization, "Even if Saddam was wrong, we can't allow the United States to simply come and destroy a fellow brother Arab state."²⁰

As he pulled together this international alliance, President Bush also began to pull together the American people. Bush knew he needed to have a good rationale for sending U.S. troops into

harm's way. Something noble had to be at stake. As Strobe Talbott put it, "Every time the U.S. has fought a major war in this century, its goals have included the defense of a principle larger than our own self-interest."²¹ President Bush made the case for principle during his August 8 address to the nation:

I ask your support in a decision I've made to stand up for what's right and condemn what's wrong--all in the cause of peace . . . It is the world's problem . . . Standing up for our principle is an American tradition.²²

President Bush grew up with the World War Two generation. He believed very strongly that the United States had a moral obligation to take the lead in international affairs.²³

Another argument in favor of war advanced by the Bush Administration was that Saddam had to be stopped, and if the world waited, the struggle would be worse later. This argument was also advanced by many commentators and journalists. William Rusher of the National Review wrote, "The goal of the realists is to rid the world of a proven war-starter before he takes more hostages next week and before he gets nuclear missiles in four years."²⁴ Newsweek said simply, "Awful as war can be, failing to fight it can be worse, especially if it means fighting a bigger and nastier war later on."²⁵

The President himself chose to go even further: Bush likened the gulf situation to that of Europe during the 1930s. "The President has . . . compared Saddam to Hitler, who is identified in the public mind as a ruler so vicious that the only

solution is to destroy him," wrote George Church.²⁶ George Bush played to this theme during his August 8 address: "Iraqi tanks stormed in blitzkrieg fashion through Kuwait in a few short hours . . . As was the case in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors."²⁷

A third argument pressed by those who called for war was the need to protect the security of the world economy and oil supply. This was not a new argument: in 1980 Jimmy Carter had named the oil supply of the West to be a matter of national security.²⁸ Saddam Hussein gave this matter renewed importance. Saudi Arabia had 19% of the world's proven oil reserves.²⁹ With the oil he already had in Iraq and Kuwait, Saddam could control a commanding share of the world's oil if he could take Saudi Arabia. President Bush said, "Our country now imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic independence."³⁰ Time writer George Church was even blunter: "What is at stake is the power to shut off heat in millions of homes, freezing the old and frail; to close down factories and utility plants, causing mass unemployment . . ."³¹ The Bush Administration also underscored the importance of jobs in the gulf situation. President Bush said that Saddam's aggression threatened "our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries."³² Secretary of State Baker put it this way: "If you want to sum it up in one word, it's jobs."³³

Another rationale for war given by the Bush team and others was Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons on his own people

(the Kurds), and his potential to someday have nuclear weapons. Saddam was known to have mustard gas (which attacks the lungs), sarin gas (which attacks the nerves and kills instantly), and tabun gas (a weaker form of sarin gas).³⁴ Particularly troublesome for the U.S. military was the desert climate. The troops had been issued chemical suits, but most experts claimed the suits couldn't be worn for more than an hour in the desert heat.³⁵ Shortly after the August 2 invasion of Kuwait, official U.S. government estimates confirmed that Iraq was still five to ten years away from having access to nuclear weapons.³⁶ Still, those supporting war action by the U.S. used the nuclear threat in addition to other arguments. Wrote George Church, "[Saddam] will use chemical, bacteriological and, one day, nuclear weapons. Millions may die."³⁷ Of all the arguments for war, the nuclear threat seemed to be the most effective in generating public support.³⁸

One of the most impressive campaigns by George Bush was his effort to gain international backing for the coalition to stop Saddam Hussein. The focal point of this effort was the United Nations. The U.N. had two fixtures in place that greatly helped the Bush coalition. Article 51 of the U.N charter allows force to be used in self defense of an attack by the nation being attacked and nations coming to its aid. Article 42 of the charter empowers the Security Council to take measures to maintain or restore international peace and security.³⁹ The U.N. also passed two crucial resolutions which made the allied effort possible. On August 25, the Security Council voted to condemn

Iraq and called for U.N. action. This gave Bush early support. Then on November 29, the Security Council set January 15, 1991, as the deadline for Iraq to leave Kuwait. The Security Council authorized the U.N. forces, led by the United States, to use force if this deadline was not met.⁴⁰

President Bush used sanctions early on as a weapon in his campaign against Saddam Hussein. On August 2, the United States cut off trade with Iraq. The President promptly froze \$30 million in Iraqi assets, persuaded Europe and Japan to join him in the embargo, and convinced the Soviet Union to cut off aid to Iraq.⁴¹ On August 5 President Bush began a blockade of Iraq's ports. One day later the U.N. imposed a world-wide trade embargo.

The economic struggle soon intensified. In late August the U.N. approved the use of force to support the trade embargo against Iraq. In response to the embargo, Saddam Hussein threatened to destroy the oil fields of the gulf region. (He would later start several oil fires.) On September 25 the U.N. voted to cut off air traffic to and from Iraq.

Sanctions also provoked the first serious gulf-related policy disagreement within the U.S. The Bush Administration was growing restless waiting for sanctions to take effect. The President didn't feel the embargo was having the desired effect. Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia pressed for more time for the sanctions: "If we have war, we are never going to know whether they would have worked."⁴² Members of the Institute for International Economics felt sanctions would work, writing,

"Iraq's GNP is likely to decrease by 48 percent as a result of the sanctions."⁴³ Even within the Bush Administration, there was some support for sanctions. CIA chief William Webster said he felt sanctions would be seriously affecting Iraq by summer of 1991.⁴⁴

Those who opposed relying on sanctions to beat Saddam claimed there were holes in the embargo. As early as September, Newsweek reported that China, India, and Iran were preparing to sell food and medicine to Iraq under a "humanitarian" purpose clause in the U.N. embargo resolution.⁴⁵ The Wall Street Journal reported that smugglers were common along the Iraqi borders with Turkey and Iran, and that this activity was undermining the U.N. embargo.⁴⁶ George Bush did not seem to be showing patience with sanctions or Iraq. Said the President, "Sand is running through the glass for Iraq."⁴⁷

When the President felt sanctions might not get Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, he began to explore other options. One of these options was a military attack against Iraq. George Bush had plenty of encouragement here. Newsweek reported in early September that "Bush's Arab allies believe that force will eventually be needed to drive Saddam out of Kuwait and end for good his threat to the region."⁴⁸ Richard Perle wrote in the New York Times that what was needed was a "Desert Sword."⁴⁹

During October and November, the U.S. announced new troop arrivals that boosted the desert force to 400,000+. The President also began to speak of a possible military attack against Iraq. Bush said the new troop buildup would give U.S.

commanders "an adequate offensive military option should that be necessary."⁵⁰ The President also made it clear that the gulf coalition had a new objective beyond the liberation of Kuwait: Iraq's warfare capabilities had to be destroyed. "The status-quo ante will not be enough," said the President.⁵¹

This announced switch from a defensive force to an offensive one triggered a wave of dissent from many Americans. Nancy Gibbs wrote, "Bush's switch . . . from a defensive to an offensive strategy has raised all sorts of questions."⁵² There was a feeling in the U.S. that it was not America's job to attack Iraq and liberate Kuwait. Patrick Buchanan wrote:

While the country still supports President Bush's "line in the sand" in Saudi Arabia, it is deeply apprehensive over losing thousands of U.S. troops liberating a Kuwait whose own army ran away without a fight. If they wouldn't die for their emir, why should the U.S. Marine Corps?⁵³

Some were even bolder in their opposition to offensive action. Alex Molnar, a University of Wisconsin professor and father of a Marine in the gulf, wrote an open letter to President Bush in the New York Times: "If, as I expect, you eventually order American soldiers to attack Iraq then it is God who will have to forgive you. I will not."⁵⁴

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported that even the President's key foreign policy advisors, including the Secretaries of State and Defense, were growing skeptical of offensive military action.⁵⁵ The reason for this loss of support

may have been that President Bush was not making the case for war well enough. "Bush has . . . failed so far to answer effectively the war critics," wrote George Church.⁵⁶ A Time poll indicated that only 49% of Americans felt Bush had done a good job telling why U.S. troops were in the Middle East (45% said he had done a poor job).⁵⁷

By late 1990 there was significant opposition to the idea of invading Kuwait to save it. Otto Friedrich noted that "across the nation, a small but growing antiwar movement has started to mobilize."⁵⁸ This group was varied in both background and reason for opposing the attack. Veterans groups challenged Bush to explain the goals of an attack. They refused to support a war without goals. Civil rights leaders criticized military involvement in which one third of the combatants would be minorities. Religious groups claimed that peaceful attempts at resolution had not been exhausted. College students did not protest the gulf involvement as greatly as some people had expected. This may have been due to the fact that the desert force was all volunteer. With no draft, the issue did not quite "hit home" with most college students.⁵⁹ By January, however, students were protesting on campuses and at the U.S. Capitol.

Perhaps the most significant opposition to President Bush's plans for offense came from conservatives. Newsweek wrote: "Traditionally, it has been not liberals but . . . radicans and isolationist Republicans who have most loudly opposed military involvement . . . The gulf . . . is reverting to this historical pattern."⁶⁰ Most liberals were decidedly quiet during the Fall

of 1990, and conservatives tended to dominate the opinion pages because they were arguing opposite sides of the issue.⁶¹ Most conservatives stood squarely with the President, including William Safire, Henry Kissinger, R. Emmett Tyrell, Alan Keyes, Mona Charen, and Thomas Sowell. National Review lent early support to President Bush.⁶² The Wall Street Journal wrote, "The goal of the U.S. and its supporting forces in the Persian Gulf should be . . . to win."⁶³ Still, the conservative "doves" were more vocal than most other war opponents, and they made the clearest case against war that could be found in the opinion pages of the U.S. media. For that reason conservative opposition to the war deserves special mention.

Conservatives who opposed attacking Iraqi forces included Robert Novak, Patrick Buchanan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Wick Allison, and Tom Bethel. The libertarian Cato Institute also stood against war.⁶⁴ These conservatives refuted Bush's claim that principle demanded America take a stand against Saddam Hussein. Patrick Buchanan conceded that Iraq's annexation of Kuwait was brutal but replied, "So was Indonesia's rape of east Timor, China's move into Tibet, Moscow's lunge into Afghanistan."⁶⁵ In none of those three previous cases did the U.S. seriously consider using military force of its own to right matters.

Conservative doves also questioned the "oil" argument, claiming that the U.S. was not dependent upon the middle east to maintain its energy level. Saddam Hussein would not be able to control the price of oil, they said, any more than OPEC during its price-setting attempts.⁶⁶ Newsweek lent support to this

position: "The Soviet Union is the world's largest oil producer, and Kremlin officials think their oil could help make up for the loss of crude from Iraq and Kuwait--if the U.S. provides the technology and investment needed."⁶⁷ Even hawkish National Review admitted, "The United States is comparatively well positioned to do without Middle Eastern oil altogether if it has to."⁶⁸

The conservative war opponents also argued that, with no vital U.S. interest at stake, and no treaty commitment to Kuwait, America should mind its own business, instead of playing the role of global police officer.⁶⁹ Wick Allison argued that the President's plans sounded too much like Wilsonian intervention.⁷⁰ Other conservative doves claimed the U.S. was choosing to be an empire rather than the republic its founders envisioned.

Saddam Hussein's nuclear and chemical threat was dismissed as well. Antiwar conservatives pointed out that the U.S. government had estimated it would be 5-10 years before Saddam had nuclear capability. On the issue of chemical and biological weapons, the doves pointed to remarks by Iraq's foreign minister that he so greatly feared U.S. retaliation that he would not use gas weapons until America had used nuclear weapons on Iraq.⁷¹ Joseph Sobran summed up conservative dissatisfaction with the case of the Bush Administration: "The wise heads have so many rationales for war, pronto. One good one would do."⁷²

Congress did not get into the war debate until late in the Fall of 1990. On October 2, the Senate had voted to back deployment, but that backing did not cover war. Most

Representatives and Senators were not eager to talk about the gulf situation until after the November elections were over. Patrick Buchanan wryly noted that "Democrats, with the election over, have rediscovered their voice boxes."⁷³

Initially, Congress debated whether it even needed to debate the issue of war. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney maintained the President did not need permission to send troops into action in the desert.⁷⁴ Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell disagreed, and so did most of the Congress. Even those on the Hill who supported the President, such as Indiana's Richard Lugar, called for a vote to get congressional approval. George Bush feared such a vote, because he felt there was a chance he might lose.⁷⁵ The President reasoned that even a close victory in the Congress might be encouraging to Saddam Hussein. Debate opened on Capitol Hill in both houses on January 10, 1991. When the Congress finally voted, the result was indeed close. President Bush received approval for war, 250-183 in the House, and 52-47 in the Senate. The conservative Republicans in congress uniformly supported the President, who also picked up some Democratic votes for his margins of victory.⁷⁶

As the January 15 deadline approached, President Bush also met with resistance from the Soviet Union. The Soviets had supported Bush early in the gulf situation, but they soon began to relent. It was not in the best interest of the Soviets to have Iraq destroyed. Newsweek reported that "the Soviets have a vested economic and political interest in Saddam's regime, which owes them billions of dollars for arms purchases."⁷⁷ For this

reason, 193 Soviet military specialists remained inside Iraq after the August 2 invasion of Kuwait.⁷⁸

The President also had to contend with Mikhail Gorbachev himself. On October 28, Gorbachev said that Iraq may be softening, and that force should not be used.⁷⁹ The Soviet President continued to hold out on backing George Bush for an attack in the gulf. Not until days before the January 15 deadline did Gorbachev give Bush his personal assurance that the Soviets were fully behind the U.N. coalition.

Finally, President Bush had to contend with the diplomatic initiatives of Saddam Hussein. Saddam had taken hostages in early August, but he began releasing women and children near the end of the month. On December 6, Saddam promised to release all hostages. This action hurt Bush's case for war. Lisa Beyer wrote, "[this] makes it harder for the Bush Administration to sell an offensive action to the American Congress and public."⁸⁰ Iraq promised "the Mother of all Battles" if Bush decided to fight.⁸¹ President Bush replied, "I am more determined than ever to see that this invading dictator gets out of Kuwait with no compromise of any kind whatsoever."⁸²

In early December President Bush announced a last chance for peace. Iraq's foreign minister would be welcomed to Washington, and Secretary of State James Baker would travel to Baghdad.⁸³ During these talks, perhaps the dispute could be resolved. The results were disappointing, however. The final negotiations between Baker and Iraq's Tariq Aziz broke down in early January.⁸⁴

On January 10, 1991, a Time/CNN poll showed that 45% of the American people favored continuing the sanctions against Iraq. Another 41% said the U.S. should go to war with Saddam Hussein.⁸⁵ However, George Bush had cleared all of the necessary hurdles for starting conflict. The President had the approval of the world community, evidenced by the U.N. votes. He also had approval from both houses of Congress, although the vote was very close in the Senate. The decision was left in the President's hands. On January 16, 1991, George Bush led a divided country across the Rubicon.

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