

GULF WAR I

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If you tell your class that "Today, we are going to study the first Persian Gulf War," you will get an unenthusiastic response. That war took place almost twenty years ago, in 1991. Today's students weren't born yet. To them, it's ancient history.

And yet Gulf War I was a watershed in American history, especially American military history. By the time today's students graduate, the stream of events that was set in motion by that War will still be affecting America's youth, who will still be fighting and dying in the deserts and mountains of the Middle East.

Youngsters who are learning history, and particularly military history, in today's academic world see it as a recitation of events almost like a movie script. It starts, it goes through, and then it ends. It's devoid of drama or uncertainty. And yet military history has a human dimension that surpasses any other subject. Human beings are killing one another. Teachers should try to imbue these events with some of their drama.

Gulf War I is a case study of the drama. It was a war of erroneous assumptions and miscalculations on both sides. The end was full of surprises and disagreements that have stayed with us to this very day. This was the first major post-Cold War U.S. military engagement. From it came a new organizing principle. The U.S. has always had to have organizing principles. In the 1930s, it was getting out of the Depression. Then came WWII, the defeat of fascism and the Japanese. During the Cold War, the organizing principle was dealing with the Soviet Union and the possibility of nuclear war.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, there was no organizing principle. Then events in the Middle East took a turn. Since that time, the United States' organizing principle has been dealing with the Middle East, with its many ramifications--fundamental Islam, terrorism, insurgencies, failed states, WMD. It all starts with the Kuwait war. But to understand that, it's well to understand the context of the times.

Through the 1970s, Arab Iraq and Persian Iran both sought hegemony in their own right, but each was somewhat of a satellite of one of the two great powers, with the U.S. supporting the Shah in Iran and the Soviet Union supporting Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Things changed when the Ayatollah Khomeini came on the scene in 1979 and there was the Islamic revolution in Iran, which ousted Shah Reza Pahlavi. Iran under Khomeini turned against the U.S., which they saw as a supporter of the hated Shah. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was waning as a threat.

In a reversal, the U.S. began to support the Iraqis against its former friend Iran. Meanwhile, Saddam decided to take advantage of the weakness he perceived in Iran as a result of the fall of the Shah and the dissolution of the Iranian Army to attack across the Euphrates into Iran. This led to a long, bitter, and enormously costly war that finally came to an unsatisfactory conclusion with millions of casualties on both sides.

The war left Saddam badly in debt. He came to see himself as Saladin in the Arab world, leading the fight against the hated Persians, and felt that Iraq had borne the brunt of the fighting. His campaign had been funded largely by war loans from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Now the bill was coming due, and the Kuwaitis in particular were anxious to be paid back. Saddam

sought forgiveness of the debt, claiming the Kuwaitis were ungrateful. Besides, he reasoned, looking for excuses to get out of paying the debt, Kuwait was not really a legitimate government, but was carved out of the Iraqi portion of the Ottoman empire. It was no more than the 14th of the Iraqi provinces, to Saddam. Moreover, he claimed that Kuwait was stealing oil from the Iraqi Ramallah oil field by slant drilling. That may have been true, but it was largely a pretext.

Saddam was uncertain how the international community would receive his claim that Iraq was entitled to reclaim Kuwait. The Arab states interpreted this as mere saber-rattling. As to the U.S., Saddam called in U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie for a long conversation about Iraq's complaints against Kuwait. In the version published by the New York Times, Glaspie told Saddam the following, which was music to his ears. "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait." Saddam heard that the U.S. would stand clear, interpreting it almost as a green light to go ahead with aggression against Kuwait.

The U.S. government was perfectly aware that Saddam was starting to mass his armies down along the border with Kuwait. Discussions were held in the Pentagon and NSC on whether to send a signal to Saddam to deter him. It was proposed to send some F-15s over to Saudi Arabia and to move an amphibious task force into the Gulf waters. But the Arab leaders told us that sending planes or a fleet might be provocative, so we didn't do it. This, beside Glaspie's comments, convinced Saddam that the U.S. was not going to intervene, because if we were really concerned, we would have deployed some forces to the region signaling him to back off.

It came as an enormous surprise to the U.S. when Saddam made his move in August 1990. The Iraqis took the Kuwaiti capital and then moved toward the Saudi-Kuwaiti border.

The concern in the U.S. was not so much for Kuwait per se but oil--if Saddam had been able to surprise us as he had in Kuwait, he might just surprise us and continue on into Saudi Arabia for its oilfields. Saddam was aware of this and afraid of the U.S. reaction, so he pulled back from the border to a line further back. The area in between became no man's land, and he started to build two unoccupied lines of defense, one a couple of miles back from the first. While it was devoid of troops, it became heavily mined, crisscrossed with barbed wire entanglements and fire trenches.

President George H.W. Bush sent Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell to talk to the Saudi king and princes to convince them to allow American forces on Saudi soil. Saudi Arabia is a holy land, with Mecca and Medina on its ground. Bringing foreign, Christian infidel forces into the country was a very big thing to do. Cheney and Powell had difficulty doing so, but finally their delegation convinced the king that Iraq really was a threat to his nation and the king acceded to our request to land our forces, which we began to do. We flew in aircraft and units of the 82nd Airborne Division. We put in a Marine regiment in what was known as Operation Desert Shield.

These forces dug in as a signal to Saddam that he had best not move against Saudi Arabia (which he had no intention of doing, although he did come up with contingency plans). But he had bitten off more than he could chew. He didn't know the Americans were going to react this way. How would he get out of this? In the meantime his soldiers started to steal anything that was moveable in Kuwait.

The idea of getting involved in Kuwait was not very popular with the American people. We had had the experience of Beirut in 1983 where we'd gotten a bloody nose and an embarrassing retreat. There was no desire to repeat the experience. The Kuwait-Iraqi dispute was perceived in the eyes of many Americans to be about the oil companies' interests. But there were three people in Washington who were of a different view and they controlled

the decision process: President George H.W. Bush, Secretary James Baker, and Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor. (Officials like Cheney and Powell were on the periphery.) The troika was determined to force Saddam to back down. But they could not use force unless a coalition could be built to support direct action--not only a foreign coalition, but a bipartisan American coalition. They would first build up support abroad and then focus on the American people, able to say to them "See, the international community supports our efforts, you should, too."

President Bush worked the outside world and succeeded in gaining support. The UN passed resolutions condemning the Iraqis and told them to withdraw. Once this international community had been built, and it was clear that even Arab states would join a multinational coalition army to face the Iraqis, President Bush went to the Congress to get American support for any military action that he might deem necessary. When it came to giving the President the right to use military force, it came down to a 52-47 vote in the Senate on January 12, and 250-183 in the House, which was pretty close. So the idea that the American people enthusiastically supported the war was suspect.

Even within the DoD and Pentagon, there was great disagreement over how to deal with the Iraqi threat. Cheney was a hawk, and felt we had to do something about the invasion of Kuwait. Powell disagreed, arguing that Kuwait wasn't worth the life of one American soldier. He proposed drawing the "line in the sand" at the border of Saudi Arabia; if the Iraqis crossed it we'd fight; otherwise we wouldn't. Cheney told Powell he was not reading the president very well; Bush had decided that Iraq must be forced from Kuwait, by force, if needed.

Initially, the American forces rushed to Saudi Arabia in August under were small. But the build-up had started and eventually reached half-million troops, backed by an awesome array of air and sea power with the latest in modern weapons and technology.

Saddam made the terrible miscalculation in challenging the U.S., which at that time had a formidable army that was "unemployed"--i.e. the Cold War was ending, leaving us with a big army in Europe with no one to fight. We sent our forces from Germany and from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia not to only defend that kingdom but to prepare for an assault on the Iraqi army in Kuwait if it did not withdraw. So it was not a very smart move on Saddam's part to invade Iraq at this particular time.

The UN sanctions and resolutions were taken, but nothing was happening in Kuwait to convince the president and the coalition that they wouldn't have to resort to force to expel Saddam. Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev sent Yevgeni Primikov, his foreign minister, to Iraq to advise Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait, but Saddam wasn't convinced the Americans would do more than drop some bombs, if that. Knowing that the American public was casualty-averse, he did not believe the U.S. had the stomach for war. After all, it had pulled out of Vietnam and Beirut after some blood was shed. He also believed that in the long run, the Soviet Union and the international community would deter the U.S. from attacking. He was adamant about remaining in Kuwait. Once again, he miscalculated.

There were Cassandras here in the U.S. The Iraqi Army had fought the Iranians for eight years and was battle-hardened, they held. We were sending into war a relatively untested, post-Vietnam all-volunteer force whose quality was unknown. There were dire predictions of American casualties in the range of 10,000 during the first 24 hours. Americans were nervous about liberating Kuwait by force.

In the White House, there was certainty of a swift victory, but concern about Saddam's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs. There was abundant evidence of very active Iraqi

programs aimed at developing those weapons. This was fully acknowledged by the international community. We knew of two particular sites where the Iraqis had nuclear weapons development sites: al Qaim and al Tuwaitha.

We wanted to see Saddam withdraw, but didn't believe he would. Therefore we would invade and drive him out by defeating his field army in Kuwait. The assumption was that he would then probably be overthrown by an internal military coup. The Administration wanted a regime change, but assuming a coup, there was no need to go to Baghdad to oust the Iraqi president. Indeed, the UN resolution which finally authorized force restricted the action to the liberation of Kuwait. It said nothing about regime change in Baghdad.

How were we going to take on the Iraqi field army? The plan according to General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was to isolate it in Kuwait and destroy it with superior firepower and deft maneuver. As was mentioned earlier, the Iraqis had built up the two lines of defenses. But they left the open desert in the west undefended. They did not anticipate an attack coming from that direction. The plan devised by General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of the coalition forces, was to conduct a prolonged air campaign against the Iraqi infrastructure-- political, economic, and military. At the same time a multidivisional armored and mechanized corps would secretly move to the west, blind to Iraqi intelligence and surveillance. Two Marine divisions in the east would directly face the Iraqis. When the order to attack was given, the Marines directly facing the Iraqis were to engage the Iraqis and hold them in place while as planned the western task force cut behind them severing their line of retreat, leaving them isolated and open to either surrender or destruction.

When the air campaign started on January 17, 1991, the Iraqis attempted to draw Israel into the fight by launching Scud missiles at Tel Aviv. Saddam reckoned that the Israelis would retaliate. This, he reasoned, would outrage the Arab members of the coalition and undermine it. Once again he had miscalculated, although, it took great pressure from the White House to persuade the Israelis to stay out of the fight.

As the bombing campaign progressed the Saudi government and CIA conducted a psychological campaign encouraging the Shia population in southern Iraq, always suppressed by Saddam, to "Rise up! Throw off your chains! This is your opportunity to rid yourself of your tormenter! Be prepared for the Hallelujah day." The hope was that between the destruction of Saddam's field forces, an uprising by the Shias, and possibly an army coup it would be the end of Saddam.

Meanwhile, oblivious to an attack from the west, the Iraqis planned to fight the Americans the same way they had fought the Iranians. They established sequential defensive positions behind the unoccupied barrier zone just above the border with Saudi Arabia. The positions were occupied by the regular army, backed up by armored Republican Guards divisions. The Iraqis planned to turn the barrier zone into a killing zone in which to entrap and inflict intolerable casualties on the attacking Americans with their abundance of artillery. Any Americans that made it through the firestorm would be met by Iraqi infantry and counter attacked and destroyed by the Republican Guard. It was exactly what Schwarzkopf hoped they planned to do. His end run behind them from the west would come as a complete surprise.

What the Iraqis also hadn't counted upon was the effectiveness of the prolonged coalition air attacks. Iraq was being devastated. Saddam decided to seize the initiative and start the ground war. He would make Schwarzkopf react to a provocation and draw the Americans into a premature counterattack. To do this, at the end of January, he sent a mechanized task force south across the border into Saudi Arabia to the seaport town of al Khafji, which had been evacuated of civilians. The town was defended by a small Saudi Arabian force backed up by Americans some miles to the south. Saddam planned to bait the Americans.

The Iraqis succeeded in taking Khafji without difficulty, but Schwarzkopf reacted, not with ground forces, but with air power. Saddam had taken the potency of our air power into account, but had equipped his forces liberally with air-defense weapons. He was convinced that he could provide an air defense bubble over his forces that would drive off the Americans. He was wrong. The mechanized corps that went into Khafji was devastated by air strikes.

Faced with prima facie evidence that his air defenses were no match for the Americans he radically changed his strategy. No longer would he attempt to hold Kuwait and bleed the Americans in a brutal defensive battle - whose outcome he assumed would lead to a negotiated settlement. Now he recognized that he was outmatched. He decided that if and when the Americans attacked he would abandon Kuwait, but preserve his army, particularly the loyal Republican Guards. He would conduct a fighting retreat out of Kuwait back into Iraq.

Not aware of the radical turn of events, the assumption was made by Schwarzkopf that the Iraqis would defend in place. Indeed, as we noted, until Khafji, that's exactly what they had planned to do. Schwarzkopf never understood the importance of the Khafji battle and made no analysis on what impact the Iraqi defeat might have on Saddam. He was totally unaware of the dramatic change in Iraqi strategy. His attention was focused on monumental enterprise of positioning multiple divisions in the western desert. He remained committed to his basic plan to hold the Iraqis in place and envelop them from the rear. On February 21 Desert Shield became Desert Storm. The coalition attack went in against the Iraqi forces as planned, with the Marines leading the way to engage their attention and lock them in battle. A day later the surprise corps-sized attack of three armored and a mechanized division in the west was launched against the Iraqi flank and rear.

It turned out that the "battle-hardened" Iraqis weren't battle-hardened at all. They were tired, undernourished, and under-equipped army, largely unwilling to fight. So many had deserted earlier that it was a hollow army. (Managing surrendering Iraqis posed a greater problem than the fighting.) Some of them were even surrendering to helicopters and reconnaissance drones. There was very little fighting. The Iraqis gave up all along the line. Some Republican Guard units fought, but most of the Guard was under orders to flee back to Iraq and let the regular army cover their retreat. The unexpected collapse of the Iraqis upset Schwarzkopf's careful plan. The Marines advanced so fast that instead of holding fast to the Iraqis so that the western attack could trap them, the attack acted like a piston and rapidly drove them north towards escape over the Iraqi border before the American armor engaged them.

Schwarzkopf also had trouble with the heavy armored corps' field commander, Lt. Gen. Frederick Franks, a very cautious man. He didn't realize that the Iraqis were on the run and that he had an opportunity to go hell-bent across the desert and cut the Iraqis off. He was moving very slowly so that all units would be synchronized into a steel fist when they met the Iraqi Republican Guard. The result was that while Franks cautiously advanced, over half the Guard units along with their equipment, were escaping back into Iraq.

Saddam was quickly defeated at an astonishingly low cost to the coalition. But the idea of destroying his field forces was gone; the best and most loyal ones had escaped to pose a subsequent threat.

That was the first undesirable outcome of the war. And while there was a clamor by some to continue on to Baghdad and overthrow Saddam, President George Bush rejected the idea and stuck with the UN mandate, which limited its warrant to ousting the Iraqis from Kuwait. Secondly, the President did not want to get tied down in administering the occupation of Iraq. This decision was to have unfortunate consequences for the Iraqi Shias just across the border.

With the Iraqis fleeing and coalition forces pummeling them, it brings us back to Washington and discussions on ending the war. Bush and his advisors knew that the Iraqis were thoroughly beaten in the fast moving war, but they had little idea of the actual situation on the ground. When asked about it, Schwarzkopf reported that the weather was bad, it was raining, there were sandstorms, units were scattered all over the desert. He confessed that didn't have a clear idea of where each of his units and those of Saddam's army were located. But, as he boasted in a televised news conference, the "gate was closed," meaning that the Iraqi's escape route into their own country was blocked and the Iraqi army was trapped. Of course that was not the case as his field commanders knew. Schwarzkopf had again based his remark on an assumption that was wrong.

Bush presided over an oval-office meeting of his advisers and Douglas Hurd, Britain's foreign minister, whose country's forces were fighting next to the Americans. Although there was utter confusion on the battlefield, it didn't make any difference. The decision to stop the war was a political, not a military one. To continue killing already retreating soldiers was viewed as impolitic and unethical, particularly in light of media accounts of what was happening on the highway from Kuwait City to the Iraqi border. Iraqis in Kuwait city were headed home on the main highway with everything they could loot from Kuwait. There was an endless stream of every conveyance that would move headed north, bumper to bumper. They became a target-rich environment for American aircraft, which flew up and down, blasting away at "fish in a barrel." Scenes of devastation garnered bad press for the administration. This prompted Colin Powell to step out of his military role and recommend a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds because the enemy was already beaten and he was afraid of sullyng the American escutcheon by continued attacks on what was becoming known as the "Highway of Death." With imperfect intelligence of the military situation, the President announced a ceasefire on February 28.

Schwarzkopf was authorized to enter into ceasefire arrangements with the commanders of the Iraqi field forces, not realizing that all decisions would actually be made by Saddam from his Baghdad sanctuary. The general, still ignorant of the opposing troop dispositions on the battlefield, announced Safwan, a small community just inside of Iraq, as the site for the talks. Much to his chagrin he was told that Safwan was still in Iraqi hands. Under threat of annihilation, despite the ceasefire, the Iraqis were finally persuaded to withdraw. Tents were erected for a meeting between Schwarzkopf, his Arab forces counterpart, and three Iraqi generals. Here was an opportunity to use coalition leverage to make substantial demands upon the Iraqi military under threat of resumed violence. But Schwarzkopf received no guidance from Washington. His only concern was cementing the ceasefire on the ground and of recovering the few coalition captives who had fallen into Iraqi hands. Instead of dictating terms as a conqueror, he treated the Iraqi delegation as equals. There were no draconian options presented. Moreover, Schwarzkopf acquiesced to an Iraqi request for freedom to use helicopters for logistic and administrative purposes as the bridges in southern Iraq had been destroyed.

You will recall that the CIA had been urging the Shias of southern Iraq to revolt against the regime. With the defeat of the Iraqi army, they saw their opportunity to do so and expected American support. But the White House had no intention of providing it. As far as the President was concerned the war was over and it was time to come home. When the Shias rose up, the coalition forces did nothing to help them even as refugees fled across the border into Kuwait with horrifying tales. Saddam brutally suppressed the uprising, notably using armed helicopters to attack the insurgents. That use was not what Schwarzkopf had in mind when he authorized the use of helicopters. The Shias were left to a dismal fate. It was another unfortunate consequence and a shameful footnote to a notable American victory.

And so Gulf War I ended. It was marked throughout by a series of miscalculations and faulty assumptions on both sides. It turned out to be a precursor for another war in 2003, the results of which are still with us. In 1991 Saddam remained in power, his Republican Guard was intact, revolt had been suppressed and his quest for WMD, particularly nuclear weapons continued-- at least temporarily. As mentioned earlier, we had identified two WMD sites prior to the war. At its end when UN and IAEA inspectors had access to Iraq, under provisions of the ceasefire and UN authorization they found not two but 19 nuclear sites with 39 separate facilities. So there was no question about Saddam's intent. This was to have a bearing on the events over the 12 years of sanctions on Iraq and the events leading up to Gulf War II.

With the war over, the troops came home, many of them were embarrassed because they saw very little of any fighting. For most ground troops it was little more than a motor-march through the desert. Saddam was discredited in much of the world, but he was a canny survivor and cast himself at home as a hero of the war. He told the Iraqi people that under his leadership the Iraqi army had defeated the Americans and their puppets in the "Mother of All Battles." As proof he noted that the Americans were defeated in their attempt to invade Iraq, something an enemy army would have done if it was victorious. The sacred soil of Iraq was preserved. He liberally handed out medals and awards to the warriors of his victorious army. But beneath the bravado, Saddam was shaken to the core by the performance of his army, the Shia uprising, and the fear of a coup. All three concerns were to influence his postwar decisions and the way he would fight Gulf War II.