U.S. Foreign Policy Failures in Iraq

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The Enemy of My Enemy May Still Be My Enemy, Too.

"Now the 28 countries with forces in the Gulf area…have no choice but to drive Saddam from Kuwait by force. We will not fail" (George Bush cited in Cambridge International Documents Series, 1993: 279).

In his address to the nation on January 16th 1991, American president George H. W. Bush was taking a gamble. On one hand lay the recent U.S. diplomatic history with Iraq, a period defined by Washington's support of Saddam's regime in the waning years of the Iran-Iraq War, followed by a half-decade of "appeasement" through ignorance of the regime's underlying anti-Americanism (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 260). On the other hand lay the combined fear of an Iraq with both the control of 21% of OPEC oil production capabilities and a strategic opportunity to strike at Saudi Arabia, increasing the aforementioned percentage astronomically (Best *et al*, 2008: 490).

Today, the military results of this gamble are well documented. Under the U.S. led coalition "within less than forty-eight hours, the backbone of the Iraqi army had been broken" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 397). Consequently, the 'mother of all battles' Saddam Hussein so keenly propagated as imminent, arguably in the hope of tapping into the "Vietnam syndrome" that plagued the U.S. general public, never came (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 410). Thus, the Gulf War was a military triumph beyond doubt. However, the war was, and remains to this day, a political disaster. Despite U.S. idealism, Iraq had become similar to the very entity that led to the U.S. support of Saddam in the first place: Iran. Rubin writes that "the whole purpose of U.S. support for Iraq had been to stop Iran's expansionism" (Baram & Rubin,1993: 260). Yet four years of political promotion, military support, and economic stimulation after 1986 only resulted in the U.S. observing Iraq grow violent in its quest for hegemony in the region. Again, more blood would be spilled in the sand, and this time from two nations who illusorily seemed to be making headway in the effort for peace. Only when the reports began coming in of Iraqi forces steamrolling into Kuwait did Washington fully realize, to quote Bruce Jentleson, "the enemy of my enemy may still be my enemy, too" (Jentleson, 1994: 171).

To understand this unfortunate reality we must understand the Gulf War in its whole; its origins and effects, its roots and legacies. This essay will first discuss the causes of the conflict to set the stage for analytical purposes. The essay will subsequently offer analysis of U.S. policy prior to the war's outbreak in order to exemplify how politically disastrous the war truly was. The essay will then offer a short recap of the war itself to recognize necessary information in order to complete the third task of the essay: elucidating the catastrophic political consequences of the war. Overall this essay will show that U.S. policy before and after the Gulf War contained two major political ramifications with tragic results. The first was that U.S. policy "in the 1980s helped strengthen Baghdad and lay a basis for the Kuwait crisis" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 270). The second was that U.S. policy after the war, despite all high-command estimations and intelligence reports, failed to recognize the ability of Saddam Hussein to remain in power, subsequently allowing the dictator to retain his brutal autocratic authority for another decade, and thus in essence providing the very foundation for the second invasion of Iraq in 2003.

To begin with we must examine the causes of the conflict. The Gulf War was fought largely in response to the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, so in order to understand the Gulf War we must first understand the background of Iraq's invasion. Three important aspects must be acknowledged: "the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein's need for domestic…stability, and Iraq's quest for regional hegemony" (Best *et al*., 2008: 489). The first aspect, the Iran-Iraq

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War, provides insight into Baghdad's thinking prior to 1990. Baram writes that "the post Iraq-Iran war period was more dangerous for the regime than the war itself" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 6). Moreover, Best *et al* (2008: 489) surmise, "eight years of war with Iran had left the Iraqi regime in a difficult position". The conflict left thousands of Iraqi soldiers dead, and more problematic for the regime, a military-industrial complex that required massive spending on the part of the government. During the conflict it is estimated that Iraq spent an enormous $208 billion on the military (Best *et al.*, 2008: 489). Even its oil production could not prevent the country from nose-diving straight into massive debt, somewhere in the vicinity of $80 billion that Iraq had no economic capacity to pay (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 7). Annual inflation soared between 25-40% a year, as stagnation took its toll (ibid: 8). The economic hardship meant that the regime was "not able to deliver on popular post-war expectations such as reconstruction and better living standards" (Best *et al.*, 2008: 489). Kuwait's oil wealth would provide the Iraqi state with the ability to pay off its international debt, and thus put the Iraqi economy back on its feet (ibid: 490). Taking Kuwait would also wipe Iraq's debt with the country clean, and moreover "by taking all Kuwait…Saddam could…control Kuwait's huge economic assets…estimated at $220 billion" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 25).

Conversely, with a failing economy, Saddam Hussein could not risk the immense demobilization of an Iraqi army numbered at one million strong out of the fear of "large scale unemployment, which, in turn, could result in social unrest" (Best *et al.*, 2008: 489). This leads us to the second aspect noted by Anthony Best and company: Saddam's need for 'domestic stability' (Best *et al*, 2008: 489). It is vital to remember that Saddam Hussein's regime was Sunni, while the majority of Iraqi civilians are Shi'a. Saddam's fear of demobilization was rooted in the fear of sectarian violence erupting from a military largely composed of Shi'as (ibid, 2008: 489). In 1979 he merely had to look at Iran to his east and watch in horror as a popular sectarian Shi'a movement among the masses disposed of the Shah and his government within months; arguably he would eventually go to war with Iran to prevent such a domestic uprising from spreading to his own Shi'a-majority populace. In 1990 the invasion of Kuwait would provide Saddam with a means to remind Iraq's civilians "that a regime ready to confront great powers would not hesitate to repress its own citizens" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 9). Additionally, taking Kuwait would "build the masses' enthusiasm and a sense of Iraqi patriotism" (ibid, 1993: 5). Finally, an invasion of Kuwait would "keep the army busy and far away from the capital" (Best *et al.*, 2008: 490). Thus at the heart of Saddam's plans for invasion lay his need to maintain domestic stability.

Furthermore, we now arrive at the third aspect: Iraq's pursuit of regional hegemony. Annexing Kuwait would give Iraq the ability to "project hegemony across the Gulf" while at the same time obtaining "pan-Arab leadership" (Best *et al.*, 2008: 490). Saddam offered Iraq as "a replacement for the Soviet Union in its capacity as the Arabs' protector" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 8). Through the annexation of Kuwait, Iraq would position itself as a "defensive shield" for the Muslim world; any attack on Iraq from Western nations would be perceived, at least in Saddam's view, as encroaching Western imperialism, and Arab countries would spring up in defense of their protector in Baghdad (ibid, 1993: 16). Combined, the desperate economic situation, the need to restore both national pride and dutiful submission, and the quest to become the hegemonic influence in the Arab world all propelled Saddam to begin mobilization along the Kuwaiti border.

At this point we turn our analysis to Washington to determine the preludes that would eventually lead to the political disaster that was the culmination of the Gulf War and its aftermath. Throughout the aforementioned political developments in Baghdad, Barry Rubin writes that "Washington began idealizing Iraq [although] Iraq did not return the sentiment" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 257). Prior to 1979, the U.S. supported Iran fervently, yet with the Iranian Revolution the U.S. quickly had to take a new stance, deciding to befriend Baghdad over Tehran (ibid, 1993: 257). In the Iran-Iraq War, despite secretly funding Iran, the U.S. shifted its diplomacy in favor of Iraq, eventually deploying naval forces in the Gulf (ibid, 1993: 259). Iraq was a dream-come-true for officials in Washington. According to Rubin, the White House overlooked the despotic regime and saw a modernizing nation with an economy and infrastructure that needed rebuilding (ibid,1993: 255-260). Iraq was to Iranian regional hegemonic influence what Western Europe was to the spread of Soviet Communism; the only thing needed was a Marshall Plan, which eventually followed in the form of American investment to the tune of

"$3.6 billion annually by 1989 [in addition to] $750 million in exports of sensitive US technology…diverted to Iraq's nuclear, chemical, and missile programmes" (Anderson & Rashidian, 1991: 110).

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To the U.S., Iraq became a godsend; a perceived bastion of governmentally secular, open-to-Western-influence, religious fundamentalism-free rule. Baghdad was a necessary ally, especially considering the theocratic emergence in Iran; the enemy of my enemy is my friend as the adage goes. Despite Saddam gassing the Kurds in the north, propagandizing malicious anti-Americanism, and showing time and time again that he did not trust Washington, U.S. policy continued to support his regime (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 261). In fact, despite the end of the Iran-Iraq War, by the time Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990 the U.S. had funded Iraq "to the point where it became the principal threat to the regional balance of power and to U.S. interests in the region" (Jentleson, 1994: 195). What Washington did not understand was that for Iraq "rapprochement with the United States had been a temporary measure…defeating Iran gave Iraq its turn to try seizing the region" (Baram & Rubin, 1993: 259). By the time Washington realized its mistake mechanized Republican Guard units were already occupying Kuwait City.

Militarily however the Gulf War was not disastrous in the least. In total forty-three of the sixty-three Iraqi Army divisions "were committed to the Kuwait theatre" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 387). Of these forty-three, seven were Republican Guard units, while the rest were poorly trained and equipped infantry divisions (ibid, 1993: 388). The coalition plan was simple: The U.S. Marines would push on Kuwait City while XVIII and VII coalition corps delivered a "left hook" along the western border with Iraq in a flanking movement that "would be so fast that allied forces would be on top of the Iraqis before they knew what was going on" (ibid, 1993: 389). Coalition forces "expected a win, but did not expect a walkover", yet "it was apparent after the first day that the land war would be a walkover" (ibid, 1993: 397). The land war lasted one hundred hours, in which coalition forces destroyed or rendered ineffective twenty-six of the forty-three divisions, captured over 73,700 km2 of territory, destroyed 370 Iraqi tanks, captured 30,000 prisoners of war, and killed an estimated 35,000 Iraqi soldiers, all at the cost of 240 coalition soldiers KIA (ibid, 1993: 408). General Colin Powell was correct in his summation that "overwhelming forces gets the job done quickly and saves lives" (Cushman, J. 1994:81).

However, despite how easily coalition forces achieved victory, just as the Gulf War itself was a political disaster in terms of the previously mentioned failure of U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq, the subsequent policy of the U.S. after the war merely managed to make the situation worse. Iraq's "economic and strategic infrastructure was systematically undone", despite Roman Popadiuk, then Deputy White House Press Secretary, stating "we are not in this war to destroy Iraq" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 413). The 'war against Saddam' turned out to be more harmful for the average Iraqi civilian than the regime itself. The war had "wrought near-apocalyptic results upon what had been…a highly urbanized and mechanized society" (Ahtissaari *in* Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 416). Despite a sectarian rebellion in the southern portion of the country among the Shi'a populace, and a Kurdish uprising in the north over self-autonomy, the U.S. "failed to provide support" for either revolt (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 411). Saddam was thus able to brutally suppress both insurrections and, in doing so, achieve one feature he would have gained from successfully annexing Kuwait: the submission of the Iraqi population, fearing his retaliation against dissidence. To obtain his other aim, national unity, Saddam simply painted the war as a symbolic example of Western imperialism and aggression; the very post-war sanctions placed on his regime by the U.S. were then used "as an excuse for the increasing misery of his people" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 426).

The political calamity also continued on the issue of Saddam himself retaining power. Two central concepts came into play. The first was the deluded belief that Saddam would not be able to prevent an internal regime change and would be removed; not *if* but *when*. "In March 1991, Bush was given an intelligence estimate predicting that Saddam would be out of office within a year" (Freeman & Karsh, 1993: 417). Similarly, in a report on the Wilton Park Conference of January 1996, Richard Latter writes that internal "regime change is inevitable", and continues with predictions on the political nature of "future authoritarian Iraqi regimes" (Latter, 1996: 7-9). The second concept was that the U.S. did not have the capability to remove Saddam from power without incurring a costly campaign, with or without such an act being specified in any UN resolution. Richard Cheney said at the time:

"If we'd gone to Baghdad and got rid of Saddam Hussein – assuming we could have found him – we'd have had to put a lot of forces in and run him to the ground someplace" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 413).

In comparison (and ironically) the U.S. did just that in 2003 under Operation Iraqi Freedom, except, and rather significantly, with an invasion force a little more than half the size as that of Operation Desert Storm (Carter, L. 2005:

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1). Furthermore, the U.S. was "apprehensive that a complete collapse of central authority in Baghdad would result in the country fragmenting" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 414). Through U.S. post-war policy Saddam Hussein was able to both maintain authority while simultaneously achieving his domestic aims for invading Kuwait, reminding the Iraqi population of his supremacy by deploying the Republican Guard to crush rebellions, and creating a national sense of American-induced suffering.

In conclusion, while the Gulf War may have been a military triumph, politically it was a disaster for U.S. foreign policy. The war itself was the result of a severe failure of strategy on Washington's part to recognize the true ambitions of Saddam Hussein's regime. In its war against the Islamic extremism found in Iran, the United States seemingly overlooked that it was dealing with an equally zealous and repressive unit in both Saddam himself and the Ba'ath party as a whole. It would appear that the U.S. 'shot itself in the foot' twice; the first being the support of Saddam's regime, the second being the failure to remove him from power. Due to the inability of the U.S. to eliminate the man, who along with Minister Tariq Aziz, managed to fool U.S. officials as high ranking as President George H. W. Bush himself, Iraq was left to simmer for another decade of dictatorial command. The argument can be made that this only worsened conditions and would eventually lay the framework for the future U.S. invasion in 2003; the very idea of perceived "Western imperialism" Washington feared emanating from an assault on Baghdad in 1991 came into full fruition in 2003 with the emergence of the insurgency. Had the head of the snake been aptly detached much earlier, perhaps the nascent rhetorical and ideological foundations for such an insurgency would not have had the time, nor environment, to develop. In the words of then President Bush (Sr.): "We don't want to see a destabilized Iraq when this is all over" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993: 414). Two wars and a military occupation later, destabilization is America's parting-gift to Iraq, ensuring that the enemy of my enemy, remains my enemy through and through.

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