

# 1 A Hope, Not a Policy

## Containment and Regime Change during the Gulf Crisis, 1990–1991

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### Introduction

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, sounded the death knell for the US policy of constructive engagement toward Iraq. This policy had continued US support for Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War in an attempt to moderate Iraqi behavior. In the long run, the failure of engagement ingrained the “lesson” in US thinking about Iraq that any attempt to incentivize Saddam to change his behavior was pointless. George H. W. Bush responded to the invasion by mobilizing US forces to deter an invasion of Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield, forming an international coalition to impose sanctions on Iraq, and demanding that Saddam leave Kuwait. The United Nations Security Council resolutions passed in the fall of 1990 defined the coalition's main goals as ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and restoring full Kuwaiti sovereignty. Resolution 678 in November 1990 authorized the use of “all necessary means,” including the use of force, if Iraq did not withdraw by January 15, 1991.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, President Bush received widespread support for rallying the international community behind this strategy. Americans across the political spectrum agreed that Saddam threatened the US ability to maintain the free flow of oil from the Middle East, and they were shocked by Iraq's brutalization of Kuwait. The fact that this invasion came in the waning days of the Cold War made this crisis especially important in terms of setting a precedent for how the United States, its allies, and the United Nations would deal with aggression in the post–Cold War world. Secretary of State James Baker aptly summarized the case for intervention: “A very dangerous dictator, armed to the teeth, is threatening a critical region at a defining moment in history.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 678 (November 29, 1990), in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Christopher Cerf and Micah Sifry (New York: Times Books, 1991), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., December 5, 1990, 110.

This domestic consensus began to falter after November 8, 1990, when Bush announced that the United States would double its conventional forces in Saudi Arabia to create a “viable offensive option” to force Iraq out of Kuwait.<sup>3</sup> At this point, Americans divided along more partisan lines over how to achieve the UN’s goals. Most Congressional Democrats argued that the use of force against Iraq was unnecessary and risky, preferring to stick with sanctions. In contrast, the Bush administration, Republicans, and some Democrats supported the shift to an offensive option as the only guaranteed way to force Saddam out. They contended the coalition might fray and Saddam might consolidate control of Kuwait before the sanctions compelled Iraq’s withdrawal.

Alongside these debates about how to liberate Kuwait was the difficult problem of Saddam as a long-term threat to US interests in the region. Most policy-makers and commentators agreed that it was not enough for the United States to allow a return to the status quo ante after the crisis. Even if Saddam Hussein agreed to all the Security Council’s demands, he would retain a massive military machine, advanced weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, and possibly vengeful intentions.

This problem led the United States to consider a host of goals beyond the Security Council mandate. A minority of commentators, mostly outside the government, argued that the United States should directly seek to overthrow Saddam and his regime. The Bush administration unanimously rejected this idea. Nevertheless, the White House believed that the United States needed to severely weaken Saddam during this crisis and contain him afterward to ensure the destruction of his WMD programs, among other goals. One question that generally went unanswered in this debate was whether the United States could stabilize the region and prevent Iraq from threatening its neighbors if Saddam survived the war.

Historians Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh call this question about how to deal with Saddam in the long run the “Saddam problem.” They distinguish it from the Kuwait problem: the short-term question of how to eject Iraq from Kuwait.<sup>4</sup> Some solutions to the Kuwait problem, such as compelling Saddam to freely withdraw his forces, would do little to address the Saddam problem. The United States would still need a policy after the Kuwait crisis to prevent future Iraqi aggression. The fear was that if the United States permitted the world’s relationship to Iraq to

<sup>3</sup> George H. W. Bush, “The President’s News Conference in Orlando, Florida,” September 11, 1990, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum Public Papers, accessed November 12, 2016, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2381>.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), xxxii.

return to pre-August 1990 normalcy, Saddam would rise again as a nuclear-armed power, rebuild his military, and try to dominate the Gulf. At that later point, he might be unstoppable. The United States would have to contain Saddam Hussein at the minimum and engineer his overthrow at the maximum to preclude this nightmare scenario.

During the Gulf Crisis, the debate between the minimalist and the maximalist approaches to the Saddam problem bubbled beneath the more immediate argument over how to liberate Kuwait. For the Kuwait problem the ends were clear; the only debate was over the means. The Saddam problem was about both means and ends. Supporters of the maximalist approach, a minority during the Gulf Crisis, believed that US interests in the Gulf would never be safe without the removal of Saddam and the entire Baathist regime. These mostly neoconservative figures argued that the United States should declare his ouster as a major goal for the conflict.

The minimalist approach to the Saddam problem held sway in US politics during the Gulf Crisis, including within the Bush administration. The Bush team welcomed Saddam's ouster as a by-product of sanctions and war, but they contended that the United States could still achieve its goals in the region by containing and enfeebling him. If, as the administration expected, the devastation inflicted by sanctions and war prompted disgruntled Iraqi generals to remove Saddam, the United States would welcome this development and try to get his successor to accept UN demands.

The Bush administration decided against directly pursuing regime change because it believed the United States might become mired in an occupation, the coalition might fracture, and the region would become even less stable. They also doubted that Saddam's removal would make the handling of postwar Iraq significantly easier. Thus, regime change remained a vague hope throughout this crisis, not a policy. Instead, the policy was to hit Saddam as hard as possible during Desert Storm and then organize a multilateral containment regime that would use sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the threat of renewed military force to box in Iraq until Saddam or his successor fully conceded to the UN's demands.

### **Constructive Engagement: From 1988 to August 1990**

The Persian Gulf War has its roots in Saddam's efforts to maintain his domestic hold on power and his geopolitical status in the region after the bloody Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). The United States supported Iraq in this conflict to prevent Iran from becoming the dominant power in the

Persian Gulf. This policy became known as “the tilt” because it was never an overt alliance. US assistance began in 1982 in response to major Iraqi setbacks in the conflict. Over the next six years, the United States provided agricultural and Export–Import Bank credits, licensing for dual-use technologies, and military intelligence on Iranian forces.

Through Operation Staunch, starting in 1983, the United States sought to limit international arms sales to Iran even as US allies like France and West Germany sold billions in arms to Iraq. The United States removed Iraq from the terrorist state sponsor list in 1983 and restored full diplomatic relations in 1984. Lastly, from 1987 to 1988, the United States deployed naval forces to the Gulf to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers from Iranian attacks. This move benefitted Iraq by protecting Kuwaiti shipping, a key source of revenue for Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

When the war ended in a bloody stalemate in August 1988, Iraq emerged as the preeminent military force in the Gulf and Iran had been drastically weakened, which raised a crucial new question for US policy: Should the tilt to Iraq continue? Many in Congress and the media argued that the strategic rationale for supporting Iraq ceased with the end of the conflict. These critics of engagement pointed out that Iraq had not in fact stopped its support for terrorism after 1983 and that Saddam had become the new threat to stability in the Gulf. Moreover, outrage erupted after Iraqi forces killed thousands of Kurdish civilians with chemical weapons in the city of Halabja in 1988. Both houses of Congress, with significant bipartisan backing, passed legislation in the fall of 1988 to sever aid to Iraq and impose sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the Bush administration solidified the tilt under a policy it called constructive engagement. In October 1989, Bush signed a new policy directive called National Security Directive 26 (NSD-26). This paper emerged from an interagency review of Iraq policy led by National Security Council analyst Richard Haass. The paper concluded: “Normal relations between the United States and Iraq would serve our longer-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East. The United States Government should propose economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior.”<sup>7</sup> This policy aimed to bolster Iraq

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 42–67. See also Zachary Karabell, “Backfire: U.S. Policy toward Iraq, 1988–August 2, 1990,” *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 30–31.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Dewar and Don Oberdorfer, “Senate Votes Sanctions against Iraq,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 1988; Robert Pear, “House Approves Sanctions against Iraq,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> “National Security Directive 26,” October 2, 1989, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum Public Papers, 2, accessed October 21, 2016, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd26.pdf>.

as a bulwark against Iranian and Soviet power in the region and expand trade ties while downplaying criticism of the regime to incentivize moderate behavior. The Bush administration also assumed that Iraq was so exhausted and indebted from the Iran–Iraq War that it would focus on reconstruction, creating an opening for the United States to nudge Saddam toward restraint.<sup>8</sup> NSD-26 recommended warning Iraq that the United States would respond with sanctions to the use of chemical or biological weapons or the pursuit of nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup> However, in practice, the policy became more carrot than stick, despite mounting evidence of Iraqi development of WMD and its abuse of US export credit programs.<sup>10</sup>

Constructive engagement shaped US policy toward Iraq from its inception to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. It also sparked a tense public debate on how to deal with Iraq. Critics in Congress and the press blasted the policy as inhumane and unrealistic. Columnists like Jim Hoagland and William Safire as well as legislators as varied as Claiborne Pell (D-RI) and Jesse Helms (R-NC) accused Iraq of committing genocide against the Kurds and continuing to build WMD.<sup>11</sup> Congressional opposition, however, was inconsistent and often hypocritical. Efforts to sanction Iraq frequently died because of procedural and partisan squabbles. Furthermore, lawmakers from agrarian states whose constituencies benefitted from agricultural credits for Iraq either opposed or watered-down bills that punished Iraq.

Doubts about constructive engagement accelerated in the spring of 1990 in response to a series of troubling Iraqi actions. In March, the Iraqi government executed British journalist Farzad Bazoft on false charges of espionage. Later that month, British and American agents halted the export of specialized equipment for the production of nuclear weapons and a “supergun,” an experimental long-range artillery piece. On April 2, Saddam threatened to strike Israel with chemical weapons if it launched a preemptive attack on Iraqi weapons facilities, saying “we will make fire eat half of Israel if it tries to do anything against Iraq.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, the State

<sup>8</sup> Jentleson, *With Friends Like These*, 97. <sup>9</sup> “NSD 26,” Bush Public Papers, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Stieb, “U.S. Financial Aid for Iraq under the Engagement Policy, 1988–1990,” *International History Review*, published online September 21, 2018, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07075332.2018.1504226](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07075332.2018.1504226).

<sup>11</sup> Jim Hoagland, “Iraq is the One Place Where Sanctions Might Work,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 1988, A25; Julie Johnson, “U.S. Asserts Iraq Used Poison Gas against the Kurds,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1988, A1; Editorial, “Too Tough on Iraq,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 1988, A20. William Safire, “Free the Kurds,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1989, A27; Editorial, “Hardly a Peep on Poison Gas,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1988, A26.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Gerth, “Atom Bomb Parts Seized in Britain En Route to Iraq,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1990, A1. Alan Cowell, “Iraq Chief, Boasting of Poison Gas, Warns of Disaster if Israelis Strike,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1990, A1; Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 34.

Department issued several reports in the spring of 1990 determining that Iraq's human rights practices had not improved since the end of the Iran–Iraq War.<sup>13</sup> Critics of constructive engagement in Congress and the media responded to this string of provocations by labeling Bush's policy as appeasement, calling for sanctions, and challenging the policy's core assumption that Saddam could be moderated.<sup>14</sup>

Internally, the Bush administration made minor adjustments to constructive engagement in the spring of 1990. On April 10, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and his assistant Richard Haass wrote a memo to Bush arguing that although the policy had not pushed Iraq toward moderation thus far, the United States had little choice but to continue this approach. Cutting off economic links would barely hurt the Iraqi economy since other states would simply fill those gaps. In addition, punishing Iraq might backfire by feeding Saddam's sense of a US-led conspiracy against him.<sup>15</sup>

At the State Department, Secretary of State James Baker, Policy Planning Director Dennis Ross, and Under Secretary of State Robert Kimmitt concluded in early April that engagement was failing and that the United States needed to shift to punishing Iraqi misbehavior. They instructed April Glaspie, the ambassador to Iraq, to inform Saddam that additional threatening behavior would put Iraq "on a collision course" with the United States and compel the withdrawal of US aid. In late May, the United States suspended agricultural credits for Iraq, but the administration explained this move as a response to allegations of Iraqi misuse of the credits instead of reprimand for foreign policy misbehavior.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these mild alterations to engagement, in public the administration continued to defend the policy in the spring and early summer of 1990, thereby undermining warnings to Saddam. John Kelly appeared before several Congressional hearings to defend the administration's policy and push back on renewed calls for sanctions. While he admitted that Iraq's actions were troubling, he argued that sanctions would have little impact because no allies would join the effort, which meant that sanctions would only hurt US exporters. In line with NSD-26, he added,

<sup>13</sup> Jentleson, *With Friends Like These*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> William Safire, "Country of Concern," *New York Times*, April 9, 1990, A19; Jim Hoagland, "Soft on Saddam," *Washington Post*, April 10, 1990, A23.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum, Brent Scowcroft to George H. W. Bush, April 10, 1990, OA/ID CF00209-011, National Security Council, Peter Rodman Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 268–269; Telegram, James Baker to US Embassy in Baghdad, April 12, 1990, OA/ID 45486-001, White House Counsel's Office, George Bush Presidential Library.

“Sanctions would not improve our ability to exercise a restraining influence on Iraqi actions.”<sup>17</sup> Secretary Baker likewise told a Congressional hearing that sanctions were “a bit premature” and that US allies in the Middle East continued to support a flexible approach toward Iraq.<sup>18</sup>

The official policy may have been creeping toward a tougher line on Iraq, but it remained tethered to the assumptions of NSD-26 as Iraq escalated its threats against its neighbors in the summer of 1990. On July 15, Iraqi troops started to deploy on the border with Kuwait. The next day Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, accused Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates of intentionally overproducing oil in order to cripple the Iraqi economy. He demanded the raising of oil prices, a moratorium on Iraq’s massive wartime loans, and the creation of a fund through which the Gulf States would repay Iraq for defending them against Iran.<sup>19</sup>

Critics of the administration pointed to this escalation as evidence for the failure of engagement. The House and Senate passed bills on July 27 to cut off economic aid to Iraq, but the administration continued to oppose these efforts.<sup>20</sup> Republican Senator Alphonse D’Amato (R-NY) cried, “We’ve waited for Hussein to take a more humane course and it has not been done. He is a butcher, a torturer, a manipulator.”<sup>21</sup> Many former opponents of severing aid to Iraq now voted to punish Saddam, including Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS) who said that despite her reservations about hurting food exporters, “there comes a time when I think we have to stand up and be counted.”<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the administration generally assumed that Iraq was blustering in order to exact concessions from Kuwait but did not want a conflict because of its exhaustion from the Iran–Iraq War.<sup>23</sup> Saudi Arabia and Egypt encouraged this view and asked the United States to let them handle Saddam.

Critics of Bush’s handling of preinvasion diplomacy later condemned Ambassador Glaspie for her conciliation of Saddam in a meeting on July

<sup>17</sup> Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *United States–Iraqi Relations*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., April 26, 1990, 2–4; Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *United States Policy Toward Iraq: Human Rights, Weapons Proliferation, and International Law*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., June 15, 1990, 5–9.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 270.

<sup>19</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 47–50.

<sup>20</sup> Guy Gugliotta, “Trade Sanctions Voted by Senate Against Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 1990, A15.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Holmes, “Congress Backs Curbs against Iraq,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1990, A5.

<sup>22</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., July 27, 1990, 19806.

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum, Richard Haass to Brent Scowcroft, July 25, 1990, OA/ID CF01937, National Security Council, Richard Haass Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library; Telegram, April Glaspie to James Baker, July 18, 1990, OA/ID 01937-003, National Security Council, Richard Haass Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

25. Glaspie offered the dictator multiple assurances of the US desire for good relations with Iraq and issued no clear warning of what the United States would do if Iraq invaded Kuwait. In a message to James Baker on the meeting, she noted Saddam's emphasis that he "wants peaceful settlement is surely sincere."<sup>24</sup> Whatever her faults in this meeting, she was following a policy that required officials to pepper nebulous warnings with reassurances that the United States still sought Iraqi friendship. For example, a cable from Bush to the Iraqi government on July 28 read: "We believe that differences are best resolved by peaceful means and not by threats involving military force or conflict. My administration continues to desire better relations with Iraq."<sup>25</sup> US messages repeatedly stated that the United States had no defense treaties with Kuwait or positions on Iraq–Kuwait border disputes.<sup>26</sup> Two days before the invasion, John Kelly reiterated the administration's desire for good relations with Iraq while refusing to speculate on what the United States would do if Iraq invaded Kuwait.<sup>27</sup> Despite some internal reconsideration of engagement, the Bush administration stuck to NSD-26 and missed any chance to deter Saddam.

### **Responding to the Invasion of Kuwait, August–November 1990**

The Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990 shattered every assumption underpinning constructive engagement: that Iraq was too exhausted from the war with Iran to try to dominate the Persian Gulf; that Western and conservative Arab support for his war effort had mellowed Saddam in the 1980s; and that Saddam could be positively incentivized to align with US policies. Bush immediately started building an international coalition to condemn the invasion, stop further Iraqi aggression, and create a legal basis for action against Iraq. This effort led to the passing of a number of Security Council resolutions in the early fall that established the UN's demands for Iraq and the tools to enforce them. Resolution 660 on August 2 called for Iraq to "immediately and unconditionally" withdraw its forces from Kuwait and allow the restoration of

<sup>24</sup> Telegram, April Glaspie to James Baker, July 25, 1990, OA/ID 011937-002, National Security Council, Robert Gates Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>25</sup> David Hoffman and Helen Dewar, "State Department, Panel, Spar Over Envoy," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1991, A1, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990–91: A Failed or Impossible Task?" *International Security* 17, no. 2 (October, 1992): 150–152.

<sup>27</sup> Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Developments in the Middle East: July 1990*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., July 31, 1990, 2, 14.



the Kuwaiti government. Four days later, Resolution 661 froze Iraqi assets and imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, with exceptions for food and medicine.<sup>28</sup>

The United States also forged a military and political response to the invasion, starting with the deployment on August 8 of naval, air, and ground forces to the Gulf to protect Saudi Arabia from Iraqi forces menacing its border. In a speech announcing the deployment, Bush called for the “immediate, unconditional, and complete withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait” and the restoration of the Kuwaiti government. He committed the United States, “as has been the case with every President from President Roosevelt to President Reagan,” to the “security and stability of the Gulf.” He framed the deployment of US forces as a measure to defend Saudi Arabia and enforce the sanctions but emphasized that the United States would demand the full implementation of the UN demands.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of August, Bush had established the basic policy of using sanctions and diplomatic isolation to coerce Saddam into leaving Kuwait. In making the case for action, he identified several core interests and values at stake. One interest was the free flow of oil from the region to global markets. Maintaining access to the energy resources of the Gulf had been a declared policy goal since World War II. By seizing Kuwait, Saddam gained control of about one-fifth of global oil reserves, and he could compel the Gulf States to obey his commands on oil prices.<sup>30</sup> Defense Secretary Richard Cheney warned that this situation “gave him a strangle hold on our economy and on that of most of the other nations of the world as well.”<sup>31</sup> A surge in oil prices could lead to a global recession that might threaten recent trends toward democracy in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Moreover, Saddam would use these gains to feed his military machine and aggressive ambitions.

Another major part of Bush’s argument for action was the possibility of bolstering collective security, international law, and the United Nations as the primary mechanisms for stopping aggression in the post–Cold War

<sup>28</sup> Security Council Resolutions found in Cerf and Sifry, *The Gulf War Reader*, 137–143.

<sup>29</sup> George H. W. Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia,” August 8, 1990, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum Public Papers, accessed November 12, 2016, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2147>.

<sup>30</sup> Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America’s Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 46–47; Michael Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America’s Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1883–1992* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region: U.S. Policy Options and Implications*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., September 11, 1990, 11.

world. Bush labeled this vision the “new world order,” which he defined as the “community of nations” cooperating “to condemn and repel lawless aggression.”<sup>32</sup> To the White House, the world in 1990 was in “a critical juncture” between the Cold War and a new, undetermined order. James Baker called the Gulf Crisis “a political test of how the post-Cold War world will work.”<sup>33</sup> In Bush’s words, Saddam had launched “a ruthless assault on the very essence of international order and civilized ideals.”<sup>34</sup> Allowing Saddam to keep Kuwait would signal that the international community was willing to accept the violent eradication of a UN member, encouraging more aggression around the world. If, however, the United States and its allies thwarted Saddam, it could be the first step in creating a more peaceful, lawful, and cooperative international system.

The USSR’s support for early US actions against Iraq further raised the administration’s hopes of bolstering collective security in the post-Cold War world. The superpower rivalry had usually prevented the Security Council from enforcing international law, but the Cold War had faded by the time Saddam invaded Kuwait. Mikhail Gorbachev’s government promptly denounced Iraq, accusing their former clients of acting like “feudal lords.”<sup>35</sup> If the United States and USSR could collaborate in foiling Iraq, Bush believed this would open new options for the cooperative management of international affairs. As he told Gorbachev in early September: “I want to go to the American people tomorrow night to close the book on the Cold War and offer them the vision of this new world order in which we will cooperate.”<sup>36</sup>

The Bush team believed the goal of setting precedents for a new world order made it vital to maintain multilateral consensus throughout the crisis. In pragmatic terms, the United States needed wide participation in the embargo from Iraq’s neighbors and major trading partners to give the threat of force any teeth. Allied forces needed bases in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere. Bush also aimed to set a precedent for multilateral

<sup>32</sup> George H. W. Bush, “Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 29, 1991, The American Presidency Project, accessed April 18, 2017, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19253](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19253).

<sup>33</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., September 4, 1990, 7.

<sup>34</sup> George H. W. Bush, “Remarks at the Annual Conference of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Baltimore, Maryland,” August 20, 1990, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum Public Papers, accessed November 14, 2016, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2171>.

<sup>35</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 78–79.

<sup>36</sup> George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 364; Minutes, Meeting of George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, September 9, 1990, OA/ID CF 01478-021, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 2.

responses to aggression that would seek UN approval and use force only after pursuing nonviolent means. Getting Iraq out of Kuwait by any means was not adequate. The United States had to achieve this goal in a way that demonstrated the effectiveness of collective security. One crucial element of this effort to create a “model for the use of force” was that Saddam must gain nothing from his crimes: no concessions, no incentives, no deals.<sup>37</sup> Only a full denial of any gains for Saddam would firmly establish the principle that aggression does not pay. This would set a powerful precedent that would deter future conquerors and offer a model for responding to aggression.

The fall of 1990 brought a whirlwind of diplomatic, political, and military action that left little time for long-term thinking about how to address the Iraqi threat beyond the Kuwait problem. Key officials, including US Ambassador to the UN Thomas Pickering and CIA Director William Webster, identified an important dilemma in the stated policy: If sanctions and military pressure convinced Saddam to leave Kuwait voluntarily, he would escape with his military machine and WMD programs intact. The Kuwait problem would be solved for the moment, but the United States would have done little to solve the Saddam problem. He would retain his ability, and probably his intention, to bully his neighbors once again. On August 2, Pickering argued that the US needed “to find a broader basis to ensure that Iraq does not return to the status quo ante in a position where its considerable military muscle can be a source of intimidation and threat to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or other states in the region.”<sup>38</sup> In October, Webster warned that the region would not be secure unless Saddam was overthrown, “some countervailing force” in the area contained him, or his WMD programs and military strength were decimated.<sup>39</sup>

The Bush administration consequently aimed to weaken Saddam during this crisis and/or impose a set of strictures on him afterward to prevent him from keeping or reconstituting his military strength. In effect, from the beginning the United States had committed itself to a new, higher standard of success, one that the Security Council had not endorsed nor had the administration publicly stated as a goal. The lead conceptual developer of this early iteration of a postwar containment strategy was Richard Haass, who served as Senior Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs for the NSC, working closely with Brent Scowcroft.

<sup>37</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 491.

<sup>38</sup> Telegram, Timothy Pickering to James Baker, August 2, 1990, OA/ID CP 01478-028, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Mossberg and Andy Pasztor, “CIA Director Says Gulf Can’t Be Secure as Long as Saddam Hussein Rules,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 1990, A16.

Haass bookends the history of the containment of Iraq because he later served as Director of Policy Planning for the State Department under Colin Powell in the second Bush administration, where he privately criticized the rush to war. Haass was a key original developer of the containment strategy within the Bush administration, and he continued to defend it as a viable alternative up to the 2003 invasion. A Rhodes Scholar and a Ph.D. in international relations, Haass served in the Defense and State Departments under Carter and Reagan before joining Scowcroft's staff. Haass supported a US foreign policy that sought to construct a multilateral international order built on rules like state sovereignty and nonaggression and backed by US leadership.<sup>40</sup> He also demonstrated realist tendencies; he believed that geopolitical competition would persist after the Cold War, that global institutions ultimately could not restrain this competition by "governing" international politics, and that the United States should use force to protect well-defined national interests rather than to spread its ideals.<sup>41</sup> For these reasons, he described the Gulf War as a "war of necessity" because it both reinforced the principle of sovereignty and served a specific US interest. The 2003 Iraq War, however, he opposed as an unnecessary "war of choice" motivated by the fantasies of democratic crusaders.<sup>42</sup>

In August 1990, Haass spelled out the core conundrum of the Gulf Crisis: "It is not clear that an outcome that leaves Saddam in power and Iraq's industrial and war-making capability intact constitutes a viable much less optimal outcome from our perspective." Haass noted that if the situation in the Gulf returned to the status quo ante, Saddam would return to aggression in a few years, but this time he would have nuclear and biological weapons. In this case, coping with Saddam 2.0 would require at the minimum a full containment strategy and a permanent military presence in the region.<sup>43</sup> Haass' reasoning suggests that some kind of containment strategy was already percolating through the administration's thinking as it dealt with the Gulf Crisis. Bush and his top advisors entered the crisis believing that the containment of the Soviet Union had been "extraordinarily successful." A February 1989 National Security Review signed by Bush declared: "Containment is being

<sup>40</sup> Richard Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States after the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Books, 1997), 6–8, 69–70.

<sup>41</sup> Haass, *Reluctant Sheriff*, 43–44, 50, 61–63.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 111.

<sup>43</sup> Working Paper, "The Gulf Crisis: Thoughts, Scenarios, Opinions," Richard Haass, August 19, 1990, OA/ID CF00946, National Security Files, Subject Files, Robert Gates Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 1–3.

vindicated as the peoples of the world reject the outmoded dogma of Marxism-Leninism in a search for prosperity and freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

Haass and other top officials envisioned an Iraqi containment strategy as requiring a peacekeeping force on the border, a naval presence, the repositioning of military equipment, regular exercises in the region, the elimination of Iraq’s ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs, and “covert efforts designed to keep the regime in Baghdad on the defensive.”<sup>45</sup> Bush suggested this kind of post-crisis structure to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on October 18, saying: “we are talking about containing Iraq.”<sup>46</sup> Bush believed that the new factors in the post-Cold War world would make multilateral containment feasible, especially the new cooperative potential between the United States and the USSR and the international community’s recognition of Iraq as a manifest threat to the global economy.<sup>47</sup>

In an odd twist, the need for a future containment strategy led many US officials to see war as preferable to a diplomatic solution. In Haass’ words, a punishing war “would greatly ease the post-war challenge of containing Iraq and maintaining security in the Gulf” by allowing the United States to degrade Saddam’s military and WMD programs.<sup>48</sup> Scowcroft concurred, saying that if the United States had to use force to eject Saddam from Kuwait, it should “reduce the Iraqi military as much as possible” in order to “reduce the threat Saddam posed to his neighbors.”<sup>49</sup>

The administration anticipated that many European and Arab allies might see this policy as “moving the goalpost” on Iraq, but they nevertheless believed they had to pursue this goal while preserving the sanctioning coalition, knowing that any unilateral containment regime would fail.

This exploration of the Saddam problem led the Bush foreign policy team to consider a new question: Would the Middle East ever be stable as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power? Top officials were usually pessimistic on this question, but they did not definitively decide if Saddam had to be removed for the United States to achieve its objectives

<sup>44</sup> Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 277.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum, Richard Haass to Brent Scowcroft, August 27, 1990, OA/ID CP 00946, National Security Council, Subject Files, Robert Gates Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Talking Points, “Themes for Call to PM Thatcher,” October 18, 1990, OA/ID CF 01584-031, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, “Neutralizing Iraq’s Threat: For Bush, Toppling Hussein Isn’t Required,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1990, A1.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum, Richard Haass to Brent Scowcroft, August 27, 1990, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 383.

beyond the current crisis.<sup>50</sup> There were hints that top policy-makers thought that United States might not be able to achieve its goals while Saddam was still around. In an August 4 NSC meeting, Baker said, “Our strategy is threefold: to keep Saddam out, to make him a pariah, and to topple him through sanctions and covert actions.”<sup>51</sup> On August 6, Bush told the NSC: “All will not be tranquil until Saddam Hussein is history.”<sup>52</sup>

The Bush administration believed the removal of Saddam Hussein would probably make Iraq easier to control after the crisis but never identified regime change as a policy goal. They framed it as a hope rather than an objective even though they expected that Saddam would have to be removed eventually for the region to return to stability. For example, when Senator Al Gore asked Cheney if the removal of Saddam was a US goal, Cheney said no but added: “I think it would be fair to say, Senator, we probably would not have any objection were that to occur.”<sup>53</sup> As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, said after the war: “We hoped that Saddam would not survive the coming fury. But his elimination was not a stated objective. What we hoped for, frankly, in a postwar Gulf region was an Iraq still standing, with Saddam overthrown.”<sup>54</sup> Instead of regime change, the administration focused on enforcing the Security Council resolutions and weakening Iraqi military capabilities in the process.

While the administration had decided early in the crisis to not pursue regime change directly, statements of those like Powell and Cheney show they cautiously welcomed the toppling of Saddam as by-product of the war for Kuwait. The NSC Deputies Committee, including Richard Haass, concluded in the fall of 1990 that the United States might be able to create the conditions in which regime change could happen via a military coup.<sup>55</sup> They reasoned that if the coalition pounded Iraqi forces, destroyed key pillars of the regime like the Republican Guard, and crippled the Iraqi communications system, these actions, combined with

<sup>50</sup> Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 202.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes of NSC Meeting on Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, August 4, 1990, OA/ID 01478-029, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of NSC Meeting on Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, August 6, 1990, OA/ID 01478-030, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>53</sup> See Cheney and Baker testimonies in Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, September 11, 1990, 13; House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, September 4, 1990, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 363.

<sup>55</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 383–384.

sanctions, might prompt top generals to remove Saddam. Robert Gates, then the Deputy National Security Advisor, described this approach as such: “We wanted to create circumstances that would encourage the Iraqi military to take Saddam out.”<sup>56</sup> A more pragmatic successor might concede to UN demands in order to avoid further destruction and to solidify his domestic position. Bush also ordered the CIA to develop a covert component to the coup option that would cultivate sources of discontent with Saddam within the regime.<sup>57</sup>

Although the Bush administration was thinking about how to weaken or indirectly topple Saddam in the long run, they tried to minimize open discussion of broadening the war’s scope. They wanted to avoid scaring the public, the Democrats, and the international coalition into thinking the administration planned to expand US objectives beyond those of the Security Council resolutions. In the fall of 1990, Bush had not yet convinced the American people, Congress, or the coalition that a war to liberate Kuwait was necessary, much less a war to cripple Saddam Hussein. Bush’s sanctions-based strategy had broad public backing, with one poll from after the invasion showing 83 percent support.<sup>58</sup> Sanctions were also popular in both parties in Congress, although Democratic leaders like Sam Nunn (D-GA) and George Mitchell (D-ME) warned Bush that they opposed offensive military action for the time being.<sup>59</sup>

By the late fall of 1990, the basic structure of US policy on the Saddam problem had emerged. If Saddam relented without violence, the United States would install a containment regime to ensure that he could not rebuild his WMD and military strength. If war became necessary to oust him from Kuwait, the United States would strike hard at Iraqi forces, essential pillars of the regime, and WMD programs in order to force him out of Kuwait and weaken him in the long run. If sanctions and/or war led to his overthrow, the United States would welcome this outcome, but they did not see it as necessary for achieving their short- or long-term goals.

### **The Debate Heats Up: November 1990–January 1991**

By late October 1990, the Bush administration had started to doubt that sanctions alone would compel Saddam to leave Kuwait. President Bush held a Cabinet meeting on October 30 to decide whether to stay with the

<sup>56</sup> Christian Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 192.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 237, 282.

<sup>58</sup> Rosita Thomas, *American Public Opinion on the Iraq–Kuwait Crisis until January 15* (CRS Report No. 91–109) (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 1991), 17.

<sup>59</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 389.

sanctions-based policy or start building an offensive military option. The Cabinet noted that sanctions had been in place for almost three months and appeared to be having little effect on Saddam's decision-making. The CIA had reported in late September that sanctions would not force Iraq from Kuwait nor cause the shutdown of vital industries "in the short or medium term."<sup>60</sup> Most of Bush's foreign policy advisors agreed that sanctions might force Saddam's hand eventually, but not within an acceptable time frame. The United States could not sustain hundreds of thousands of troops in the desert indefinitely, and the best time period for offensive ground operations would end around March of 1991 when the heat started to increase.<sup>61</sup> The political climate in the Middle East posed an equally difficult problem. Recent fighting between Israelis and Palestinians opened the possibility that Saddam might use this crisis to divide the coalition. The haj was set to begin in the spring, and the mere presence of US troops posed political dangers for Saudi Arabia.<sup>62</sup> All of these factors militated against a strategy of sanctions and attrition.

On November 8, Bush announced the addition of another 200,000 troops to the Desert Shield force to "ensure that the coalition has an adequate offensive military option." The Cabinet simultaneously agreed to pursue a new Security Council resolution that would authorize the use of force against Iraq. They hoped that the creation of a viable offensive force and the setting of a deadline would convince Saddam of the coalition's resolve and get him to back down.<sup>63</sup> After several weeks of negotiations, the Security Council passed Resolution 678 on November 29. The resolution determined that Iraq had refused to comply with the Security Council's previous demands and offered Iraq "one final opportunity" to do so. If by January 15, 1991, Iraq did not begin the full implementation of these demands, the coalition would be authorized to use "all necessary means" to force Iraq from Kuwait. This resolution also called for the restoration of "international peace and security" in the region, a general enough goal to justify the broader US goal of weakening of Iraq through military action.<sup>64</sup>

One noteworthy skeptic of the push away from sanctions was Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Powell was a combat veteran of the Vietnam War and a believer in using force only as a last

<sup>60</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 196.

<sup>61</sup> Brent Scowcroft's Notes, Meeting on the Gulf, October 30, 1990, OA/ID CF 01584-031, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 1-2; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 394.

<sup>62</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 234.

<sup>63</sup> Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 302.

<sup>64</sup> Cerf and Sifry, *The Gulf War Reader*, 155-156.



resort and only in defense of precisely defined national interests. He was not opposed to the use of force against Iraq, but he feared that Bush might not be hearing the full case for sanctions from advisors like Cheney and Scowcroft, who had expressed their skepticism of this route early in the crisis. Powell later explained: “My thinking was that it would be great if sanctions would do the job because then we would avoid a war with unknown consequences and therefore we should give sanctions as much of a ride as was politically possible.”<sup>65</sup> State Department personnel remembered Powell as “a very reluctant warrior” who advocated the sanctions strategy to Bush and other top civilian officials.<sup>66</sup> Powell told Bush in late September: “There is a case here for the containment or strangulation policy. ... It may take a year, it may take two years, but it will work some day.”<sup>67</sup> Bush, Cheney, and Scowcroft all disagreed, saying that there were too many risks in waiting that long, and Powell did not press his point once Bush decided to take the offensive route.

In late 1990 and early 1991, administration officials accelerated a campaign to convince Congress and the public that the United States could not wait indefinitely for sanctions to work and had to prepare for war. They sought Congressional authorization for the use of force before the January 15 deadline. James Baker told a Congressional hearing that sanctions were not having the desired political effect: “so far, all available evidence suggest they have had little, if any, effect on his inclination to withdraw from Kuwait.”<sup>68</sup> Cheney and Webster noted that Saddam could endure the sanctions for years by directing resources to power bases like the Sunni population and the military while starving the rest of the population.<sup>69</sup> Adding to this urgency was the sense that, as the world waited for sanctions, Iraq was dismantling the nation of Kuwait to the point where there might be no country left to save.

The administration also argued that waiting for sanctions to work posed great risks to the coalition’s unity. They emphasized that sanctions hurt countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Eastern European nations that relied on trade with Iraq. The longer the sanctions regime lasted, the more

<sup>65</sup> Colin Powell, interview by Frontline, PBS, 1995, accessed January 25, 2017, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/powell/1.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/powell/1.html); Woodward, *The Commanders*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Dennis Ross, interview by Andrew Carpendale, February 9, 1994, Box 173, Folder 8, MC 197, James A. Baker III Papers at the Seeley G. Mudd Library, 12; Robert Zoellick, interview by Andrew Carpendale, July 27, 1993, Box 173, Folder 8, MC 197, James A. Baker III Papers at the Seeley G. Mudd Library, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Woodward, *The Commanders*, 41–42, 300–303; Powell, *My American Journey*, 467.

<sup>68</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Update on the Situation in the Persian Gulf*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., December 6, 1990, 5.

<sup>69</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Situation in the Persian Gulf*, 5; Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, December 3, 1990, 647–648.

that cheating would increase. Moreover, many Arab members of the coalition felt growing pressure from large segments of their population that sympathized with Saddam's challenge to the West and the wealthy Gulf States.<sup>70</sup> The contingency of Israel being dragged into the conflict, possibly by Saddam's own actions, would make it politically impossible for these states to stay in the coalition. The United States also feared that the longer the standoff lasted, the more likely that the Soviets, Arabs, or Europeans would offer Saddam some kind of incentive or partial reward for complying with the United Nations.<sup>71</sup>

As the January 15 deadline approached, the Bush administration increasingly stressed the long-term threat of Saddam as a nuclear power to defend the shift to an offensive strategy. Speaking to coalition forces in Saudi Arabia on Thanksgiving, Bush claimed: "Those who would measure the timetable for Saddam's atomic program in years may be seriously underestimating the reality of that situation and the gravity of the threat. Every day that passes brings Saddam one step closer to realizing his goal of a nuclear weapons arsenal." Bush then said that no one knew exactly when Saddam would acquire nuclear weapons but warned that "[h]e has never possessed a weapon that he didn't use."<sup>72</sup> Bush, a World War II combat veteran, peppered these warnings with comparisons of Saddam to Hitler. He contended: "A half century ago, our nation and the world paid dearly for appeasing an aggressor who should, and could, have been stopped. We are not going to make that mistake again."<sup>73</sup> Bush and others emphasized that the United States could either defeat Saddam now without nuclear weapons or fight him later when he had a nuclear arsenal.

These claims advanced a much more alarmist view of the Iraqi nuclear program than the intelligence community's assessments. An interagency review estimated in the fall of 1990 that Iraq was five to ten years from a large nuclear weapons program and that it could build a small nuclear weapon at some point between a few months and a few years.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the growing emphasis on nuclear weapons bolstered the case for war. A CBS News Poll on November 19 found that 54 percent of

<sup>70</sup> House Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf: Sanctions, Diplomacy, and War*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., December 14, 1990, 525–526.

<sup>71</sup> Telegram, Chas Freeman to James Baker, October 29, 1990, OA/ID CF 01584-032, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 5.

<sup>72</sup> George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to United States Army Troops Near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia," November 22, 1990, The American Presidency Project, accessed March 13, 2017, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19088](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19088)

<sup>73</sup> R. W. Apple, "Bush Invokes U.S. Values: Confrontation in the Gulf," *New York Times*, August 16, 1990, A1.

<sup>74</sup> W. R. Doerner and J. O. Jackson, "When Will Saddam Get the Bomb?" *Time*, December 10, 1990, 38.

Americans thought preventing Saddam from building nuclear weapons was a good reason for war. In contrast, 56 percent found restoring the Kuwaiti government and defending Saudi Arabia to be an inadequate reason, and 62 percent thought protecting the source of much of the world's oil also did not justify the use of force.<sup>75</sup> The Hitler comparison also played well in public, with one poll in August 1990 reporting that 61 percent of Americans agreed that Saddam was like Hitler and the United States needed to stop him quickly.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, some top officials believed that this rhetoric raised expectations beyond the defined set of objectives. After all, the United States fought the war against Hitler with total means and for total ends, in marked contrast to the planned war against Iraq. Haass, for one, believed that "making the comparison would add pressure on us to go beyond our mission and remove the regime."<sup>77</sup> Powell later recalled similar unease with comparing Saddam to Hitler because "in so demonizing him ... you raised expectations that you would do something about him at the end of the day."<sup>78</sup> Haass and Powell feared that the mismatch between rhetoric and policy might tarnish whatever the United States achieved in the conflict, and later events would bear out this prediction.

The massive troop surge in November 1990 intensified domestic opposition to Bush's Iraq policy. Democrats in Congress had backed the sanctions-based strategy, but they believed this shift, combined with the January 15 deadline, altered US strategy in perilous ways. Led by Sam Nunn and Claiborne Pell, Democrats invited prominent foreign policy figures to speak in a series of Congressional hearings on behalf of the sanctions strategy and against a shift to the use of force.<sup>79</sup> Defenders of the sanctions-based approach came from many backgrounds, including several former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former Defense Secretaries James Schlesinger and Robert S. McNamara, and former Carter National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Democrats and these allies contended that war against Iraq was premature and that the United States should give sanctions more time. They agreed with Bush that Saddam should receive no rewards or incentives for withdrawing from Kuwait in order to reaffirm the principle that aggression does not pay. They also acknowledged the importance of establishing precedents of effective

<sup>75</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 227.

<sup>76</sup> H. W. Brands, "Neither Munich nor Vietnam: The Gulf War of 1991," in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 81–86.

<sup>77</sup> Haass, *War of Necessity*, 77. <sup>78</sup> Powell, interview by Frontline, 1995.

<sup>79</sup> Other prominent figures who argued for sticking with sanctions included Frank Carlucci, William Crowe, David Jones, McGeorge Bundy, Paul Nitze, Richard Murphy, Arthur Schlesinger, Edward Luttwak, and Kenneth Waltz.

collective security, countering Saddam's bid to dominate oil resources, defending human rights and state sovereignty, and stripping him of his WMD programs.

Democrats argued, however, that sanctions were still the best means of achieving those ends. They believed the sanctions would deny spare parts to the military, shut down key industries, drain Iraq's cash reserves, and force the rationing of food.<sup>80</sup> Saddam could only shuffle resources around so much before he became unable to pay off the key constituent groups that sustained his regime. At that point, projected by sanctions advocates to be between six months and a year, he would have to choose between withdrawing from Kuwait and facing internal revolt.<sup>81</sup> If the embargo failed and the United States had to use force, Iraq would be even weaker due to this extended economic isolation.<sup>82</sup> Democrats believed the coalition had time on its side and a chance to defeat Saddam without a risky conflict. Some Democrats pointed to the containment of the USSR as a model for how to deal with Iraq, claiming that if the United States outlasted this superpower, they could also wear down Iraq.<sup>83</sup>

Democrats and their allies also condemned what they saw as Bush's heedless rush to war. They contended that a war would cause thousands of American casualties, break up the international coalition, and turn Arab public opinion against the United States. Vietnam in particular loomed large over the Democrats' anxieties on Iraq. Many Democrats had personal connections to Vietnam, either as veterans or as politicians who opposed the war. As Congressman Richard Durbin (D-IL) put it, "We are products of the Vietnam experience. ... We are really touched by the possibility that we may be repeating that experience."<sup>84</sup> Vietnam veterans like John Kerry and Robert Kerrey, the latter of whom lost part of his leg in combat, cited their experiences as a warning against rushing into wars, particularly when the United States seemed to be fighting for countries that would not protect themselves.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, December 4, 1990, 1–2.

<sup>81</sup> See testimony of Senator Sam Nunn and Claiborne Pell: Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, November 27, 1990, 108–109; *Cong. Rec.*, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., January 4, 1991, 330; David Rogers, "Pro-Defense Nunn Counsels U.S. Not to Let Slip too Quickly Those Hard-to-Stop Dogs of War," *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 1990, A20; Editorial, "How to Choke Iraq," *New York Times*, December 7, 1990, A34.

<sup>82</sup> See argument of Senator George Mitchell, *Cong. Rec.*, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., 409.

<sup>83</sup> See testimony of William Quandt and Senator Paul Sarbanes: Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf, Part 2*, December 12, 1990, 128–130.

<sup>84</sup> E. J. Dionne, "Gulf Crisis Rekindles Democrats' Old Debate but with New Focus," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1991, A16.

<sup>85</sup> See testimony of Senators Robert Kerrey and John Kerry: *Cong., Rec.*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., October 24, 1990, 33377; *Cong. Rec.*, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., January 11, 1991, 846–849.

In legal terms, Democrats claimed that Bush had exceeded his constitutional authority by doubling the number of troops and signing Security Council Resolution 678 because these steps effectively put the country on a course for war before Congress had authorized the use of force. They demanded that Bush seek Congressional approval before launching a war to liberate Kuwait.<sup>86</sup> Democrats also argued that in spite of the broad international support for Bush's policies, the United States would end up bearing a disproportionate share of the fighting and the casualties given the small military contributions of most coalition partners. Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE), for instance, argued that this burden-sharing problem undermined Bush's push for collective security, saying: "A New World Order in the United Nations and collective security adds up to 'We will hold your coat, United States. You go get them; we give you the authority to do it'."<sup>87</sup>

On the issue of WMD, Democrats emphasized that the United States could keep sanctions on Iraq after the withdrawal from Kuwait to compel Saddam to undo these programs. They and other critics of Bush also objected to his portrayal of Saddam's nuclear program as an imminent threat to the United States. The United States had to be concerned with Iraq's WMD, but this was not an immediate *casus belli*. For instance, Zbigniew Brzezinski contended that even if Iraq built a small nuclear weapons program in spite of sanctions, the United States could deter them just as they had deterred far more powerful nuclear states. Furthermore, nuclear experts noted that Saddam would still be five to ten years away from a large nuclear arsenal even if trade restrictions were not in place.<sup>88</sup>

In the meantime, Saddam could create a crude, Hiroshima-sized device, but nuclear experts emphasized that he could neither test this device nor deliver it with ballistic missiles. These specialists also doubted that Saddam Hussein was irrational enough to use a nuclear weapon and bring destruction down upon his head.<sup>89</sup> They and experts on Iraq such as Phebe Marr and Efraim Karsh portrayed Saddam as a

<sup>86</sup> Ruth Marcus, "Congress and the President Clash Over Who Decides on Going to War," *Washington Post*, December 14, 1990, A46.

<sup>87</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, December 4, 1990, 27. See also the testimonies of Robert Kerrey and Zbigniew Brzezinski: Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, December 3, 1990, 751; Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, December 5, 1990, 168.

<sup>88</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf, Part 1*, December 5, 1990, 156.

<sup>89</sup> See testimonies of Gary Milhollin and Leonard Spector as well as letter from Union of Concerned Scientists: Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, December 3, 1990, 33–35.

power-hungry, ruthless, but mostly rational survivor who lacked a “Masada complex.”<sup>90</sup> Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait was a gamble, they argued, but it was not irrational because the conciliatory US engagement policy gave Saddam good reason to think he could get away with the invasion. Saddam’s life was “a ceaseless struggle for survival” in which he always prioritized domestic power. Even if he could acquire nuclear weapons, the odds were exceedingly small that he would throw his lifelong struggle away by using them.<sup>91</sup>

A large minority of Democrats, however, broke with their party and supported Bush’s case for war. Many of these legislators were members of the Democratic Leadership Council, a political organization whose members included Senators Al Gore and Chuck Robb, representatives Stephen Solarz and Les Aspin, and the then Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. The DLC’s official purpose was to pull the party back toward the political center after the leftward tilt of the 1970s.<sup>92</sup> While the DLC was more focused on domestic affairs, in foreign policy its members were more hawkish, conservative, pro-free trade, and pro-Israel than the average Democrat, and they tended to support tougher lines on Iraq. They particularly wanted to shed the Democrats’ post-McGovern and post-Carter image of weakness on defense by embracing more active military interventionism.<sup>93</sup>

DLC member Les Aspin shifted many Democrats toward the administration’s side through his position as the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, which published several reports declaring the low likelihood that sanctions would force Saddam out of Kuwait. Aspin thought that the United States would have to contain Iraq for years to come and that this task would be easier if the Kuwait crisis was resolved through force rather than diplomacy.<sup>94</sup> Since Democrats controlled both houses of Congress, these defections were crucial to the passage of the authorization to use force in January 1991. In the Senate, the vote was 52–47 in favor of authorization, with ten Democrats crossing the aisle. Eighty-six Democrats voted for the authorization in the

<sup>90</sup> See testimony of Phebe Marr: House Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, December 4, 1990, 24, 39; Efraim Karsh, “Myths about Hussein and Iraq,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1990, A15.

<sup>91</sup> Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, “Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait,” *Survival* 33, no. 1 (January, 1991): 19, 29.

<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2000), 36–93.

<sup>93</sup> Julian Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 378–379.

<sup>94</sup> See the reports of the House Armed Services Committee under Les Aspin’s name: House Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, January 8, 1991, 852–917.

House, enabling that resolution to pass by a more comfortable 250–183.<sup>95</sup>

Possibly the most significant Democrat who supported the war was Representative Stephen Solarz of New York. Solarz was a DLC member and staunch supporter of Israel who saw Saddam as an irrational tyrant on the brink of attaining nuclear weapons. He viewed the Gulf Crisis in stark moral terms, drawing the memory of World War II to conclude that “the great lesson of our time” is that “evil exists and when evil is on the march, it must be confronted.”<sup>96</sup> He had advocated a policy of punishing Iraq since the chemical weapons attacks on the Kurds in 1988. He also warned Democrats against looking like the weaker party, writing: “The Democrats must ponder the political consequences of a reflexive refusal even to consider the use of force.”<sup>97</sup>

Solarz and the neoconservative intellectual Richard Perle led the formation of the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf in the fall of 1990. This organization’s main goal was to secure endorsements from a diverse mix of politicians and intellectuals to help convince the public and other Democrats to support Bush’s policy. They particularly emphasized the need to destroy Saddam’s ability to threaten Israel.<sup>98</sup> Janet Mullins, James Baker’s assistant for legislative affairs, later declared that Solarz and this committee were “[t]he single greatest force to gather up the conservative Democrats who ended up voting with us in the House.”<sup>99</sup>

The political debate throughout the Gulf Crisis centered on whether the United States should give sanctions more time to drive Saddam from Kuwait or shift to the use of force. The Democrats and other critics put forth a policy of sanctions and isolation to address both the short-term Kuwait problem and the long-term Iraqi threat. Bush and the Republicans countered that the United States could not indefinitely wait for sanctions to work and had to shift to the use of force. Although they diverged on how to tackle the Kuwait problem, these camps agreed

<sup>95</sup> “H. J. Res.77 (102nd): Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution,” GovTrack.us, accessed March 16, 2017, [www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/102-1991/h9](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/102-1991/h9).

<sup>96</sup> Stephen Solarz, *Journeys to War and Peace: A Congressional Memoir* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 200.

<sup>97</sup> Stephen Solarz, “The Case for Intervention,” in Cerf and Sifry, *The Gulf War Reader*, 282.

<sup>98</sup> Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, “Why We Are in the Gulf,” December 10, 1990, OA/ID 03417-002, Kristen Gear Files, White House Office of Public Affairs, George Bush Presidential Library, 1–4.

Same Box, Folder: Supportive Groups/Persian Gulf OA/ID 03417-002, Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, “Why We Are in the Gulf,” December 10, 1990, 1–4.

<sup>99</sup> Janet Mullins, interview by Andrew Carpendale, September 28, 1993, MC 197, Box 173, Folder 6, James A. Baker III Papers at the Seeley G. Mudd Library, 6.

that Saddam needed to be weakened over the course of this conflict and then vigilantly contained in the aftermath.

### **Planning for Containment during Desert Storm: December to February 1991**

President Bush made one last-ditch effort to avert war by sending James Baker to meet with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz on January 8, 1991. Bush expected the Iraqis to stonewall, but he believed that a final public effort at a nonviolent resolution would help rally domestic and international opinion to his side. Baker delivered a letter to Saddam through Aziz that communicated the coalition's insistence that Iraq fully comply with the Security Council's demands and that there would be no negotiation on any terms. The letter clarified that the coalition would use force to expel Iraq from Kuwait if the withdrawal did not start before January 15. Aziz called the letter an insult to a sovereign nation and refused to even take it back to Saddam.<sup>100</sup> On January 12, both houses of Congress voted to authorize the use of force to fulfill the Security Council resolutions. On January 15, the deadline set by Resolution 678 expired. The next day, Operation Desert Storm commenced with a massive bombing campaign against Iraq.

As the war began in the winter of 1991, the Bush administration expanded its thinking and planning for long-term policy on Iraq. In January 1991, the administration issued National Security Directive 54 (NSD-54), which set out objectives for the war and its aftermath. It identified the goals of the conflict as pushing Iraqi troops out of Kuwait, restoring Kuwait's government, and promoting "the security and the stability of the Persian Gulf."<sup>101</sup> The administration derived legal sanction for this last objective from Security Council Resolution 678's call for the restoring of "international peace and security in the area."<sup>102</sup>

NSD-54 then stated that "to achieve the above purposes" the United States would seek the destruction of Iraq's WMD programs, its "command, control, and communications capabilities," and the Republican Guard as "an effective fighting force."<sup>103</sup> The assault on these pillars of the Iraqi state aimed to liberate Kuwait and seek the postwar goal of

<sup>100</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, "Confrontation in the Gulf: Text of Letter from Bush to Hussein," *New York Times*, January 13, 1991, A1.

<sup>101</sup> "National Security Directive 54," George Bush Presidential Library and Museum Public Papers, accessed November 27, 2016, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd54.pdf>, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Cerf and Sifry, *The Gulf War Reader*, 156; Bob Kimmitt, interview by Andrew Carpendale, October 14, 1993, MC 197, Box 173, Folder 4, James A. Baker III Papers at the Seeley G. Mudd Library, 13.

<sup>103</sup> "NSD 54," Bush Library Public Papers, 2.



weakening and containing Iraq. In addition, NSD-54 defined the conditions under which the United States would pursue regime change. It would “become an explicit objective of the United States to replace the current leadership of Iraq” if Iraq used WMD, supported terrorist attacks on United States or coalition partners “anywhere in the world,” or destroyed Kuwait’s oil fields.<sup>104</sup>

As the United States planned for the aftermath of the war, top officials discussed how to build a containment regime under the legally sanctioned goal of restoring stability in the region. This goal would require eliminating Iraq’s WMD programs and restraining its military strength. Richard Haass and Assistant Secretary of State Richard Clarke wrote that if the war did not destroy Iraq’s WMD facilities, the United States had to demand access to those facilities after the war to render them inoperable.<sup>105</sup> Because this goal was not explicitly covered by the UN resolutions that authorized Desert Storm, the United States would have to seek a new resolution that would maintain sanctions until Iraq was disarmed. Moreover, US officials saw recreating the regional balance of power as essential for containing Iraq. In fact, Haass and others viewed the collapse of this balance at the end of the Iran–Iraq War as a precondition of Saddam’s bid for regional supremacy.<sup>106</sup>

To achieve this regional balance, the United States would have to foster cooperation among the Gulf States and strengthen their militaries so that the United States would not have to play such a direct security role.<sup>107</sup> In addition, the United States needed to maintain the military capability to intervene rapidly in case of renewed aggression by Iran or Iraq. The Bush administration preferred to minimize the US presence in the postwar security system because of expense and the political pitfalls, both at home and in the region, of maintaining ground forces in the Gulf.<sup>108</sup> The pre-positioning of equipment, stationing of naval and air forces, and occasional joint exercises with the Gulf States would maintain the ability to respond to emergencies while limiting the US presence. Nevertheless,

<sup>104</sup> “NSD 54,” Bush Library Public Papers, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Memorandum, Richard Haass to NSC Deputies, January 19, 1991, OA/ID CF 00946, National Security Council, Subject Files, Robert Gates Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 3; Memorandum, Richard Clarke to NSC Deputies, January 21, 1991, OA/ID CF 00946, National Security Council, Subject Files, Robert Gates Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 1; Memorandum, Richard Clarke to Reginald Bartholomew, September 20, 1990, Digital National Security Archive, Iraqgate, 1980–1994 Collection, 2–4.

<sup>106</sup> Working Paper, “Post-War Security Structures in the Gulf,” Richard Haass, February 8, 1991, OA/ID CF 01584, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>107</sup> Memorandum, Richard Haass to NSC Deputies, January 25, 1991, 1, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Haass, “Post-War Security Structures in the Gulf,” February 8, 1991, 1, 7; Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 148–150.

they acknowledged the need for an increased level of US involvement, or as Haass put it: “As the current crisis makes painfully clear, the era of keeping the Gulf at arm’s length or managing its security on the cheap is over.”<sup>109</sup>

As early as December 1990, the United States had announced that it would keep sanctions in place to enforce Iraqi disarmament after the resolution of the Kuwait crisis, whether it ended through war or voluntary withdrawal.<sup>110</sup> Policy staff in the State Department and NSC envisioned that the United States would seek a new Security Council resolution that would link the lifting of sanctions to progress in the disarmament of Iraq. Scowcroft and Haass recommended this approach throughout the winter of 1990–1991.<sup>111</sup> Haass spelled out the conditions for lifting sanctions:

We could also make clear what would be required from Iraq—Iraqi payment of reparations and signing of an Iraqi-Kuwait peace treaty, reductions in its conventional arms, pull-back of remaining arms away from the Kuwait border, elimination of chemical and biological arms, inspections of all nuclear facilities, and so on—in order for sanctions to be phased out.<sup>112</sup>

Richard Clarke echoed this thinking in counseling that the United States “develop a plan for a phased lifting of sanctions in response to Iraqi steps toward dismantlement of these programs.”<sup>113</sup> Policy planners thus envisioned a flexible postwar policy in which Iraq, whether or not Saddam remained in charge, could earn the “gradual phase-out of sanctions” by disarming and cooperating with the United Nations, which would be taken as evidence of his changed intentions.<sup>114</sup> The United States would also have to convince the coalition that the destruction of Iraq’s WMD and the limitation of its conventional strength were necessary for achieving postwar stability. Planners predicted that many members of the coalition would see this shift as “moving the goalposts” on victory in Iraq, which might cause difficulties in sustaining the coalition.<sup>115</sup> With this flexible approach, they

<sup>109</sup> Working Paper, “Post-Crisis Security Arrangements in the Gulf,” Richard Haass, December 28, 1990, OA/ID CF 00946, National Security Council, Subject Files, Robert Gates Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>110</sup> “U.S. Said to Want Sanctions Kept after a Pullout,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1990, A29.

<sup>111</sup> Memorandum, Brent Scowcroft to George Bush, February 25, 1991, OA/ID CF 01584-005, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Haass, “Post-Crisis Security Arrangements in the Gulf,” December 28, 1990, 3.

<sup>113</sup> Memorandum, Richard Clarke to NSC Deputies, January 21, 1991, 5, 8.

<sup>114</sup> Working Paper, “Arms Control after the War,” Richard Haass, February 8, 1991, OA/ID CF 01584-006, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 3; Haass, *War of Necessity*, 142.

<sup>115</sup> Haass, “Post-Crisis Security Arrangements in the Gulf,” December 28, 1990, 3; Memorandum, Richard Haass to NSC Deputies, January 19, 1991, 2.

argued that the United States could avoid rupturing the coalition with an overly punitive “Versailles”-style peace.<sup>116</sup>

As the administration planned for the war’s aftermath, they reaffirmed the decision to not seek regime change directly. Top US officials recall no significant dissension on this point.<sup>117</sup> Their basic position on regime change was that Saddam’s demise might be desirable if it made dealing with postwar Iraq easier but that it was irresponsible to pursue this goal directly. Officials repeatedly said the United States “would not weep” if Saddam fell from power but that this was not an objective.<sup>118</sup> The only way to guarantee this outcome seemed to be an occupation of some or all of Iraq, and Bush officials overwhelmingly rejected this option. They believed US troops would likely face guerrilla resistance from Baathist elements, what Robert Gates called “the Vietnam scenario.”<sup>119</sup> Scowcroft summoned the ghost of another intractable war, Korea, to highlight the dangers of expanding objectives once the original set of goals had been achieved.<sup>120</sup> The military leadership echoed this concern, preferring the pursuit of limited, well-defined war aims over the nightmare of occupying Iraq.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the United States could actually capture Saddam Hussein, who could hide out in his labyrinthine security system. Scowcroft and Powell, for instance, recalled how difficult it was to capture Manuel Noriega in Panama during the previous winter, a leader of a smaller country with a weaker security apparatus.<sup>122</sup>

In addition, if the United States occupied Iraq, it would face the complex task of nation-building in a devastated society that Americans knew little about. In the meantime, the administration predicted that Arab public opinion would turn against the United States as imperial occupiers, fueling instability and extremism in the region.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the administration had not prepared Congress, the public, or the coalition for a major expansion of war aims. The administration believed that invading Iraq would shatter the coalition and the domestic consensus around the conflict, undermining the goals of bolstering multilateralism and the United Nations as problem-solving mechanisms of the post-Cold War world.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Haass, “Arms Control after the War,” February 8, 1991, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Haass, *War of Necessity*, 131. <sup>118</sup> Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 408.

<sup>119</sup> Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 145.

<sup>120</sup> Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 415.

<sup>121</sup> Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Mariner Books, 1994), 299.

<sup>122</sup> Powell, interview by Frontline, 1995.

<sup>123</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 433, 464.

<sup>124</sup> Powell, interview by Frontline, 1995; Peter Cary, Brian Duffy, and Joseph Galloway, *Triumph without Victory: The History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 142–143.

Another reason for the Bush administration's rejection of regime change was concern about the territorial integrity of Iraq and its place in the regional balance of power. The administration believed that a debilitated Saddam who nonetheless remained in power could preserve the political unity and territorial integrity of Iraq, albeit by brutal means. Many in the administration feared that if Saddam fell from power, his successors might not be able to keep the country intact, especially if restive Kurds and Shias launched rebellions. Scowcroft and Haass voiced this concern often, saying that Iraq could collapse without Saddam at the helm because no one else had his cult of personality and proven ability to sustain civil order.<sup>125</sup> The administration knew it would be hard to extract US forces from an Iraq mired in chaos, which made them doubt whether the demise of Saddam would really serve US interests.

A weakened but intact Saddam could also preserve enough Iraqi strength to balance Iranian power, a long-standing US objective in the region. If Iraq collapsed into civil war, it would be unable to check Iranian expansion. In addition, Iran would be poised to interfere in the conflict by backing Shia forces. As an NSC memo warned in January of 1991: "Political and military collapse could make Iraq vulnerable to the predatory ambitions of its immediate neighbors."<sup>126</sup> This contingency could bring about the ascension of a pro-Iranian Shia government in Iraq that would upend the regional balance of power, forcing the United States to protect allies like Saudi Arabia from a powerful and hostile Shia bloc. The CIA repeatedly warned that the Shia had threatened the stability of Iraq since the tribal revolts in the 1920s and that a Shia Iraqi government would probably align with Iranian policies.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other regional allies preferred a defanged Sunni regime, even one under Saddam, to the rise of a Shia-dominated Iraq. They wanted the Sunni to remain in charge of Iraq in order to stifle Shia political forces that might empower Iran and destabilize the Gulf States domestically. They encouraged Bush's tendency toward restraint on the regime change question.<sup>128</sup> The administration

<sup>125</sup> Minutes, National Security Council Meetings, August 3, 1990, OA/ID 01478, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 9; Working Paper, "Immediate Post-War Requirements," Richard Haass, January 21, 1991, OA/ID CF 01584-020, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 6.

<sup>126</sup> Haass, "Post-War Requirements," 8; Sparrow, *The Strategist*, 416.

<sup>127</sup> CIA Report: Political and Personality Handbook of Iraq, January 1991, CIA.gov, accessed February 6, 2017, [www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000227795.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000227795.pdf), 2.

<sup>128</sup> US News and World Report, *Triumph without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 395; Norman Friedman, *Desert Victory: The War for Kuwait* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 58.

wanted Iraq to emerge from the crisis with enough strength to defend itself but not enough to threaten its neighbors, a balancing act they referred to as “Goldilocks outcome.”<sup>129</sup> A cable from US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman to Baker captured this approach, saying the United States should: “preserve its [Iraq’s] capacity to defend itself in the post-crisis environment and thereby avoid the destabilizing vacuum of power in Iraq.”<sup>130</sup>

Pessimism about Middle Eastern politics also contributed to the dread of becoming bogged down in Iraq. The Bush administration viewed Iraq and the entire Middle East as awash with religious and secular radicalism, ancient ethnic and religious conflicts, anti-Americanism, and political violence. All sides of the debate before Desert Storm shared the sense that the Middle East was a hostile, unstable place that the United States did not understand. James Schlesinger, an opponent of the war, told Congress that Saddam’s overthrow would not address the deeper problem of the region: “The Middle East is quite unstable inherently. If Saddam Hussein were to be removed lock, stock, and barrel, the Middle East will not be stable.”<sup>131</sup> Another opponent of the war, the liberal intellectual Arthur Schlesinger portrayed the region as “characterized from time immemorial by artificial borders, tribal antagonisms, religious fanatisms, and desperate inequalities.”<sup>132</sup> Martin Indyk, a supporter of Desert Storm who later served in the Clinton administration, reasoned that the United States should shape its policy with minimal regard for Arab public opinion because “[t]hey all hate us anyhow. I mean, they always did, they always will.”<sup>133</sup> Most players in the Iraq debate concurred that the United States should remain distant from this strange, violent region, further dampening enthusiasm for regime change.

This skepticism toward the Arab world’s potential for democracy enhanced the Bush administration’s desire to avoid the nation-building project that regime change might require. A CIA handbook published just after Desert Storm described Iraqis as having a reputation among Arabs for being “self-confident and proud,” “stubborn,” “loath to

<sup>129</sup> Haass, *War of Necessity*, 126.

<sup>130</sup> Telegram, Chas Freeman to James Baker, December 15, 1990, OA/ID CF 08514-025, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, November 27, 1990, 135.

<sup>132</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, December 4, 1990, 9.

<sup>133</sup> House Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, December 6, 1990, 242.

change their opinion,” “suspicious,” “conspiratorial,” “brutal,” and “persistent.”<sup>134</sup> Back in February 1991, Haass wrote: “The prospects for democratization in the Arab world must be assessed as bleak.”<sup>135</sup> To support this assessment, he later contended: “the lack of civil society, the lack of experience with democracy, the sectarian divisions, none of that suggested to me that Iraq was poised to become democratic if the lid was taken off.”<sup>136</sup> US diplomat Edward Djerejian also described the chances of democracy in Iraq as “very improbable,” pointing to obstacles like “the brutal repression of the regime” and “the lack of civil society.”<sup>137</sup> Iraq historian Phebe Marr supported this reluctance to consider political transformation in Iraq, telling Congress: “Our knowledge to undertake social or political engineering – such as ‘replacing Saddam’ – is really extremely difficult. ... The fact that we would have a finger in a pie such as this is disturbing to me.”<sup>138</sup>

The administration’s enthusiasm for the demise of Saddam was further dampened by the belief that any successor who seized power, most likely a general, would have emerged from the same corrupted political culture as Saddam. Thus, he would most likely share Saddam’s hatred of the United States, his Baathist ideology, and his expansionist goals for Iraq. For instance, a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report suggested that any successor “would resume pursuit of weapons of mass destruction to support its ambitions” and be hostile to the United States, Israel, and the Gulf States.<sup>139</sup> As a high official in the Baathist system, he would also be implicated in human rights abuses.

Working with this kind of leader would create problems in domestic politics and lend an unsavory taste to the war’s end. Powell and Scowcroft both doubted that any of Saddam’s likely successors would be more reasonable, although they expected him to be weaker, which posed problems for Iraq’s territorial integrity and the regional balance of power.<sup>140</sup> Powell mocked the idea that if Saddam fell “he would have necessarily been replaced by a Jeffersonian in some sort of desert democracy where people read *The Federalist Papers* along with the Koran.”<sup>141</sup> The United States would demand that any successor to Saddam adhere to the

<sup>134</sup> Political and Personality Handbook of Iraq, January 1991, CIA.gov, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Paper, “The Middle East in the Post-War Period: Political Stability and Openness,” Richard Haass, February 8, 1991, OA/ID 01584-003, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 2.

<sup>136</sup> Richard Haass, phone interview by Joseph Stieb, October 4, 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Edward Djerejian, phone interview by Joseph Stieb, October 20, 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, *U.S. Policy Options and Implications*, November 29, 1990, 346.

<sup>139</sup> Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 156. <sup>140</sup> Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 68.

<sup>141</sup> Powell, *My American Journey*, 513.

Security Council resolutions, but they had reason to doubt that Saddam's overthrow would ease the postwar management of Iraq enough to justify the risks of directly seeking regime change.

The expectation that Saddam would fall from power soon after the war further dissuaded Bush from seeking regime change directly. They struggled to imagine how Saddam could overcome an overwhelming military catastrophe on top of sanctions and the recent costs of war with Iran. For instance, Bush wrote in his diary on January 31:

Seeing their troops and equipment getting destroyed, they've got to do something about it. ... It seems to me that the more suffering the people of Iraq go through, the more likely it is that somebody will stand up and do that which should have been done a long time ago—take the guy out of there.<sup>142</sup>

A DIA report from January 1991 likewise anticipated that military defeat of Iraqi forces would probably “lead to the fall of Saddam Hussein.”<sup>143</sup> The expectation of Saddam's imminent demise also bolstered the administration's view that containment would suffice to fulfill US goals after the conflict. If Saddam was likely to be toppled, the United States could deal with a weaker successor who would need to end Iraq's isolation in order to survive at home, making him more likely to comply with the United Nations.

Nevertheless, most of the predictions that Saddam Hussein would be overthrown after the war were based not on hard evidence but on incredulity at the idea that Saddam could put his country through these catastrophes and not be overthrown. There was, in fact, little evidence from August 1990 to February 1991 that Saddam's grip on power was in jeopardy. Intelligence agencies and the State Department repeatedly noted that the opposition was weak and fragmented by ethnicity and ideology. Opposition groups also lacked a real presence in Iraq because of Saddam's effective security apparatus.<sup>144</sup> Over the previous two decades, Saddam had weeded out potential rivals with incredible severity and surrounded himself with dependent lackeys.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, the CIA reported in January that despite the damage inflicted by bombing and sanctions, “the regime appears fully in control. There have been no credible reports of unrest since the war began.” This report noted that Saddam had put only his most loyal forces in

<sup>142</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 464; Haass, interview by Frontline, 1995.

<sup>143</sup> Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 156.

<sup>144</sup> Glenn Frankel, “Suppressed at Home and Dismissed Abroad: Prophetic Iraqi Opposition Considered Too Far-Flung, Fractious to Engineer Saddam's Overthrow,” *Washington Post*, August 27, 1990, A13.

<sup>145</sup> On Saddam's methods of rule, see Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 2002).

Baghdad, mostly from the Republican Guard, to reduce the chances of a coup or rebellion.<sup>146</sup>

The Bush administration steeled themselves for a messy, less than satisfying ending to Desert Storm. As Haass told Bush in January: "I don't think we're going to get our battleship Missouri here." On February 20, Bush expressed the central dilemma of the aftermath of the conflict: "Our goal is not the elimination of Saddam Hussein, yet in many ways it's the only answer in order to get a new start for Iraq in the family of nations."<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, Bush dreaded the consequences of this removal occurring too precipitously, wanted to keep the United States out of Iraq, and did not see Saddam's ouster as a panacea for postwar problems. The ousting of Saddam thus remained a vague, qualified hope rather than a policy objective. The policy was to prepare a multilateral containment regime that would keep Iraq from threatening its neighbors and compel Saddam or his successor to comply with the United Nations, especially on the destruction of his WMD.

### Regime Change Advocates during the Gulf Crisis

Most members of the political and policy establishments agreed with Bush that the best way to deal with Iraq beyond the crisis over Kuwait was to focus on enforcing the Security Council resolutions and weakening Saddam in the process. There were, however, some prominent figures, mostly conservatives and neoconservatives, who argued from the start of the crisis for the pursuit of regime change as a direct objective. Most major newspapers had at least one prominent writer who called for regime change, including A. M. Rosenthal and William Safire of the *New York Times*, Jim Hoagland and Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post*, and the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>148</sup> The editors of the *National Review* called for regime change as an explicit policy goal, as did several prominent neoconservative intellectuals such as Richard Perle, Joshua Muravchik, Frank Gaffney, Laurie Mylroie, and Norman Podhoretz.<sup>149</sup> A fair number of Congressmen and Senators joined this

<sup>146</sup> CIA Report, Iraq: Domestic Impact of War, January 25, 1991, CIA.gov, accessed February 6, 2017, [www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/iraq-domestic-impact-war](http://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/iraq-domestic-impact-war), 1–2.

<sup>147</sup> Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 167.

<sup>148</sup> A. M. Rosenthal, "Making a Killer," *New York Times*, August 5, 1990, E19; Jim Hoagland, "Stopping Saddam's Drive for Dominance," *Washington Post*, August 5, 1990, D1; Charles Krauthammer, "It's Not Just Oil: If Saddam Hadn't Shot His Way into Kuwait, We Wouldn't be in Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, August 17, 1990, A27.

<sup>149</sup> Editorial, "Quick on the Draw," *National Review*, September 3, 1990, 11. Frank Gaffney, "Get It Over With," *New Republic*, December 10, 1990, 19–20.



crowd, including Alphonse D'Amato, Richard Lugar, William Dickinson, and Mark Sanford.<sup>150</sup>

Regime change advocates identified the same basic Saddam problem as the Bush administration, but they concluded that in order for the United States to achieve its goals in the region, Saddam absolutely had to be toppled. As Congressman Dickinson (R-AL) put it, "Achieving long-term stability in the region ultimately means removing Saddam Hussein and his power base, because Saddam Hussein is not a man capable of making fundamental changes in himself or his national policy goals."<sup>151</sup> This definition of victory meant that regime change should be a specific objective in the Gulf Crisis, not merely a by-product of the effort to liberate Kuwait.

The main reasons why early regime change advocates believed Saddam must be removed during the crisis were his WMD and ballistic missile programs as well as his record of aggression. They believed that even if this crisis ended with the liberation of Kuwait and the degrading of the Iraqi military, Saddam would eventually return to regional prominence with nuclear weapons, making his next act of aggression far harder to stop. Imagine, they argued, if Israel had not destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981: the United States would be facing a nuclear-armed Iraq in the current crisis, maybe making the liberation of Kuwait impossible.<sup>152</sup> The only way to prevent a nuclear-armed Saddam from dominating the Gulf in a few years was to ensure that he did not survive the current crisis.<sup>153</sup> As William Safire concluded: "We must rid ourselves of Saddam Hussein before he achieves the means to rid himself of us."<sup>154</sup>

Another important difference between regime change advocates and the Bush administration centered on what kind of regime change each side would accept. Bush preferred a coup that would put a more pliable authoritarian in charge, fearing the pitfalls of pursuing deeper political transformation in Iraq. In contrast, most regime change advocates

<sup>150</sup> Alfonse D'Amato, "Yes, Hussein Must be Ousted," *New York Times*, August 24, 1990, A29; David Hoffman and Gwen Ifill, "Bush Wins Support on the Hill: Mideast Mission Has Lawmakers Anxious," *Washington Post*, August 29, 1990, A1.

<sup>151</sup> House Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf*, December 4, 1990, 6.

<sup>152</sup> Alfonse D'Amato, "Saddam Must be Ousted," *New York Times*, August 24, 1990.

<sup>153</sup> For representative regime change arguments, see Editorial, "The Stakes in the Gulf," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1990, A8; Charles Krauthammer, "The Case for Destroying Saddam," *Washington Post*, November 25, 1990, C7; Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1991); Richard Perle, "In the Gulf, the Danger of a Diplomatic Solution," *Washington Post*, September 23, 1990, E21.

<sup>154</sup> William Safire, "The Phony War," *New York Times*, October 1, 1990, A21.

wanted not just to topple Saddam but also to root out the entire Baathist system and replace it with a democracy.

The concept of “the regime,” especially Iraq as a totalitarian regime, played a crucial role in this maximalist desire, especially among neoconservatives and liberals. Within these traditions, the root source of a state’s external behavior was the nature of its political system and ideology, or its regime. Different regime types affected both state behavior and the cultural and moral character of the population.<sup>155</sup> Democratic regimes that possessed mechanisms of accountability for their leaders and embraced liberal values were highly likely to act cooperatively rather than aggressively. In contrast, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes almost inevitably acted belligerently because their leaders embraced messianic, bellicose, or Manichean worldviews and were not accountable to the people or other branches of government. In addition, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes states often started wars to justify or distract from oppression at home.<sup>156</sup>

The idea of the United States as a champion of liberal democracy against the unique menace of totalitarianism had deep roots in its political culture, especially in liberal and neoconservative discourses. The political theorist David Ciepley treats totalitarianism as the “defining Other” of US political culture since the mid-twentieth century and a sort of photographic negative of whatever values and institutions are defined as “American.”<sup>157</sup> While US scholars have contested the definition of totalitarianism since the term’s inception, Ciepley contends that most Americans involved in this conversation define totalitarianism as “state control of both body and mind” or regimes that acknowledge no limit to their authority over politics, economics, social life, and thought.<sup>158</sup>

The concept of totalitarianism itself derives from the 1920s, but it first became popularized in the United States shortly after World War II. For thinkers like Arthur Schlesinger and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,

<sup>155</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 108–109; Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>156</sup> For overviews of neoconservative thought on the concept of the regime, see MacDonald, *Overreach*, 107–110; Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 120–121; Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 25–29.

<sup>157</sup> David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1–2.

<sup>158</sup> Ciepley, *Shadow of Totalitarianism*, 2. For other influential theoretical treatments of totalitarianism, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951); Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Rienner Publishers, 2000).

Nazi fascism and Soviet communism could be understood as two versions of a historically unique phenomenon of governments that sought total control over their populations.<sup>159</sup> Liberal groups like Schlesinger's Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) fervently backed the Cold War as a struggle to defend liberalism against Soviet totalitarianism. Influential novels like Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and George Orwell's *1984*, widely read intellectual works by Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Hannah Arendt, and widespread usage by politicians including President Truman embedded totalitarianism into the US political lexicon. In the 1960s, the New Left increasingly criticized this idea as politically loaded, but it was revived by neoconservatives and some liberals in the late 1970s and 1980s as the Cold War reheated.<sup>160</sup>

Prominent among these was the political thinker Jeane Kirkpatrick, who served as Ronald Reagan's Ambassador to the United Nations from 1981 to 1985. In an influential 1979 essay for *Commentary* magazine, Kirkpatrick made a hard distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Totalitarian regimes could be revolutionary theocracies like Iran or communist dictatorships like the USSR. They held in common the desire to bring about utopian transformations of politics, society, and ordinary life through the use of terror and mass reeducation. Totalitarian states sought to "cure the false consciousness" of their citizens and convert them into atomized, loyal ideologues. According to Kirkpatrick, they were also incapable of transforming themselves into more liberal, democratic states; they had to either collapse from within or be defeated from without. Authoritarian states like Iran under the Shah, in contrast, generally respect "habitual" ways of life, family relations, and religion, and they used violence mainly to stay in power rather than to revolutionize society. Citing Spain and Portugal as examples, Kirkpatrick held that because authoritarian regimes leave room for civil society, they are capable of evolving into democracies over time, unlike totalitarian states. The lesson for US foreign policy was that totalitarian states had to be uncompromisingly opposed while it was justifiable to work with authoritarian states.<sup>161</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 51–67; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1960).

<sup>160</sup> Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35–42, 72–76, 129, 180–192. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael Geyer, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–8.

<sup>161</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1979, accessed January 17, 2019, [www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/dictatorships-double-standards/](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/dictatorships-double-standards/).

Kirkpatrick's essay epitomized a deeper discourse among neoconservatives and many liberals in the 1970s and 1980s about regime type as a determinant of foreign policy behavior. Writers like Richard Perle, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz portrayed totalitarian states as uniquely, almost pathologically aggressive abroad and extreme at home. They employed these concepts in their criticism of détente by arguing that no compromise was possible with the totalitarian Soviet Union.<sup>162</sup> This discourse carried over into the Iraq debate in the 1990s. For Iraq to be labelled as totalitarian meant that it was ideologically fanatical and incapable of internally generated change. For regime change advocates, this meant that more hands-off strategies like containment could not address the heart of the problem: the regime. The framing of Iraq as totalitarian, moreover, appealed to a long-standing narrative of the United States as engaged in an ongoing struggle against totalitarianism, whether it came in the form of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or modern "rogue states" like Iraq.

Regime change advocates also drew heavily on the work of Arab intellectuals like Kanan Makiya and Fouad Ajami about Arab political culture to support their case. Makiya had a particularly personal connection to the cause of regime change in Iraq. Born in Baghdad but trained as an architect at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Makiya published the book *Republic of Fear* in 1989 under the pseudonym "Samir al-Khalil" to protect his family members in Iraq from retaliation. This book denounced the Baathist regime as genocidal and totalitarian, and it surged in popularity after the Gulf Crisis began. During the 1990s, he published two books on Baathist crimes and helped create and translate an archive of documents on the regime at Harvard.<sup>163</sup> A secular Shia and self-described political "universalist," Makiya became a prominent liberal voice for the Iraqi National Congress, the lead exile opposition group, after the Gulf War, and he exerted enormous influence on the public discourse on Iraq up to the 2003 invasion.<sup>164</sup> Makiya strongly believed that the United States must help Iraqis topple Saddam, eradicate the Baathist regime, and enable democracy to take root. Containment, for

<sup>162</sup> John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs: 1945–1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 115–116; Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 190–193.

<sup>163</sup> Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

<sup>164</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Regrets Only," *New York Times*, October 7, 2007, E52; George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 11–12, 68–74.

Makiya, was not merely ineffective but an immoral “realpolitik” that meant “accepting that there will always be a dictatorship” in Iraq.<sup>165</sup>

Makiya and Ajami argued that the core cause of Iraq’s aggression was “the enormous, uncontrolled capacity for violence of the modern police state of Iraq,” which they called “the warfare state.” Iraqi politics, in Ajami’s words, were defined by a swollen, totalitarian state at home, a cult of personality, self-delusion, utopian dreams, and extreme violence. Saddam was both a product and a producer of this milieu. The sickness of Iraqi politics reflected the “rotten” nature of a Middle Eastern world still under the sway of the false, dying hopes of Arab nationalism. In this political culture, force had become the ultima ratio of politics, and totalitarian ideologies had swallowed the rights of the minority and the individual. Ajami and Makiya pointed to the popularity of Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait among many Arabs as evidence of the sickness of Arab politics, the enduring appeal of the strongman figure, and the desperation of the impoverished, humiliated Arab masses. Although they later changed this argument, they claimed during the Gulf Crisis that no “foreign savior” could pull the Arabs or the Iraqis from this morass. Nevertheless, they hoped that Saddam’s fall might yield an improvement in Iraqi politics that would act, in Makiya’s phrasing, as a “the fragile, razor-thin wedge of freedom” that could upend the authoritarian Arab order and empower democratic forces in the region.<sup>166</sup>

Within the frame of mind set by these ideas about regime type and political culture, the best and possibly sole way of eliminating the Iraqi threat was to transform its regime, which could not happen with Saddam or any other Baathist still in power. Regime change advocates in the United States echoed Ajami and Makiya’s arguments to make the case that until its regime was transformed, Iraq would remain a source of trouble. Laurie Mylroie argued that Iraq needed push around its neighbors in order to justify domestic oppression and extort the wealth required to sustain authority at home.<sup>167</sup> The *New Republic* editors, major boosters of the Gulf War and regime change, saw Iraqi aggression as part of a deeper rot in Middle Eastern politics: “The distinctive aggression against

<sup>165</sup> Kanan Makiya, phone interview by author, November 1, 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Samir al-Khalil, “In the Mideast, Does Democracy Have a Chance?” *New York Times*, October 14, 1990, SM30; Fouad Ajami, “Into the Dangerous Twilight,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 11, 1991, 24; Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), especially 169–171, and “The Summer of Arab Discontent,” *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 5 (Winter, 1990): 1–20; Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence*, 231–253.

<sup>167</sup> Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (New York: Times Books, 1990), 53–54.

Kuwait is an expression of deep resentments in an Arab body politic that has never found a way to channel resentments into realistic hopes and reasonable programs.”<sup>168</sup>

Regime change boosters identified democracy as the solution to this problem, which meant that the United States should seek to remove Saddam and the Baathist system. For example, columnist Flora Lewis of *The New York Times* argued that “a prerequisite for achieving the longer-range goal of a security balance in the region” entailed “ousting the regime and opening a chance for victims of one of the world’s nastiest dictatorships to develop democratically.”<sup>169</sup> A. M. Rosenthal reasoned that the United States should break the cycle of Arab violence and tyranny by implanting democracy in Iraq.<sup>170</sup> Many politicians and commentators recommended that Bush expand contacts with the Iraqi opposition to start building an alternative leadership.<sup>171</sup>

Furthermore, many regime change advocates believed the United States had to pursue regime change now because any attempt to contain Saddam after the crisis would be doomed from the start. Charles Krauthammer contended that the states surrounding Iraq were too weak and quarrelsome to rely on as part of a containment policy. The United States would have to take the lead in watching Saddam, which would require leaving a large force in the region.<sup>172</sup> Senator D’Amato and others argued that the United States could never get Saddam, an inveterate deal breaker, to commit to an arrangement that would destroy his WMD and limit his military.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, regime change advocates noted that containment would rely on deterring Saddam from aggression, but they doubted that Saddam was rational enough to be deterred. For instance, William Safire argued: “A threat from us of massive retaliation is meaningless; a deterrent to a rational leader is an incentive to a martyr.”<sup>174</sup> In keeping with the regime concept, advocates of this approach concluded that the United

<sup>168</sup> Editorial, “Tough Duty,” *New Republic*, December 10, 1990, 9.

<sup>169</sup> Flora Lewis, “Eliminate Saddam Hussein: The Best Way to Long-Term Peace,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1991, A23; Jim Hoagland, “Back Democracy in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, February 26, 1991, A21.

<sup>170</sup> A. M. Rosenthal, “Neither God nor Infidel,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1991, A35.

<sup>171</sup> Mark Sanford, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf*, December 5, 1990, 162; Flora Lewis, “Embolden Hussein’s Opponents,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1990, A21; Laurie Mylroie, “Post-War Issues: The Future of Iraq,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch Paper 71, February 27, 1991, accessed January 21, 2017, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/post-war-issues-the-future-of-iraq](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/post-war-issues-the-future-of-iraq).

<sup>172</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “Why Containing Saddam Is Not Enough,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 1990, A15.

<sup>173</sup> D’Amato, “Hussein Must be Ousted,” *New York Times*, August 24 1990.

<sup>174</sup> Safire, “The Phony War,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1990.

States could not devise a policy of constraints, threats, or incentives that would change Iraqi behavior. Iraq's actions stemmed inexorably from the nature of the Baathist regime and the psychology of its leader, and only uprooting that regime could address that core problem.

During the Gulf Crisis, regime change advocates rarely spelled out how the United States would achieve these ends. Among major media outlets, only the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board recommended that the United States "take Baghdad and install a MacArthur regency."<sup>175</sup> Neoconservative activist Frank Gaffney also went far beyond the norm in calling for the United States to start arming Shiites, Kurds, and disaffected military personnel in order to start an internal rebellion against the Baathists.<sup>176</sup> Nonetheless, even regime change advocates mostly shared Bush's reservations about involvement in internal Iraqi affairs and did not advocate anything close to an invasion. Richard Perle did not even like the idea of a ground war, preferring the less risky use of air power to undermine the regime.<sup>177</sup> Like these regime change boosters, the US public pined for grand outcomes in Iraq but did not identify clear ways of achieving these goals. A Gallup poll in August 1990 found that 73 percent of respondents thought that removing Saddam's government from power should be a coalition goal.<sup>178</sup> This outlook held steady throughout the crisis, as two polls in February 1991 found that 90 percent thought Saddam should be brought to trial at the conflict's end and 70 percent favored assassinating Saddam. Nevertheless, polling data also suggest that Americans did not want to occupy Iraq after the conflict.<sup>179</sup> Not until after Desert Storm, when Saddam appeared to be teetering on the brink of overthrow, did regime change advocates start to level a more effective argument against the Bush's policy in terms of how regime change could be achieved.

### Conclusion

Regime change advocates during the Gulf Crisis contended that the real imperative was preventing a nuclear Iraq from dominating this vital region. Saddam's gamble of invading Kuwait gave the United States the

<sup>175</sup> Editorial, "Goals in the Gulf," *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1990, A10.

<sup>176</sup> Gaffney, "Get It Over With," *New Republic*, December 10, 1990, 19–20. For similar calls, see Mylroie, "The Future of Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 27, 1991; Krauthammer, "It's Not Just Oil," *Washington Post*, August 27, 1990.

<sup>177</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region*, November 29, 1990, 374.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas, *American Public Opinion on the Iraq–Kuwait Crisis*, 5.

<sup>179</sup> Polling data from Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, 412.

opportunity to eliminate him once and for all; that was the priority, not the liberation of Kuwait. In Krauthammer's phrasing: "Liberating Kuwait is the means. Defeating Saddam is the end."<sup>180</sup>

The *casus belli* of regime change advocates inverted Bush's thinking. Bush fought the war primarily to liberate Kuwait, prevent Saddam from controlling energy resources, and shape the post-Cold War international system in a positive manner. Bush also sought to degrade Saddam's strength in order to make him or his successor easier to contain after the war. However, his administration avoided pursuing this ancillary goal too openly or directly lest it jeopardize more important priorities, such as bolstering a multilateral approach to countering aggression or staying out of Middle Eastern politics. Unlike with regime change advocates, weakening Saddam was not the single priority but one of many goals that had to be balanced. Bush prepared to contain Iraq and enforce the writ of the United Nations regardless of who held the reins of power in Baghdad. The focus was, in Haass' words, on the "external behavior" of the Iraqi state rather than the "domestic trajectory" of Iraqi politics.<sup>181</sup>

The argument for regime change during the Gulf Crisis is nevertheless important to the broader story of Iraq policy in the later 1990s. Regime change advocates put forth the problem of the regime as a powerful argument against the administration's pursuit of limited ends during the conflict as well as their budding containment strategy. The Bush administration had not yet answered to itself or the nation whether Saddam, much less the Baathist system, had to be removed to satisfy US goals.

In a sense, this uncertainty inhered in the administration's realist approach to global politics. It aimed not to transform the politics of a region or a state but to restore balance and stability, sustain international cooperation, and minimize the expenditure of lives and resources. While it acknowledged the brutal nature of Iraq's regime, the enormous task of reconstituting a nation's political system, especially by force, was anathema to its worldview.<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, to Bush's chagrin, the war itself and its messy aftermath would only bolster the suspicion that the root of Iraq's misbehavior was the regime itself, a problem that neither the toppling of any given leader nor a containment policy could resolve. The regime problem would form the heart of the argument against containment in the coming years.

<sup>180</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Rush to Diplomacy: How to Disguise Defeat," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1991, A17.

<sup>181</sup> Richard Haass, interview by Joseph Stieb, October 4, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> Sparrow, *The Strategist*, 555–556; Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 68, 158–163.