

# A Post-Gulf War Assessment

Sep 13, 1991



In-Depth Reports

**W**hat I hope to offer here is a Congressional perspective on the Persian Gulf War, the end of the Cold War, and what these developments may mean for the Middle East peace process.

## The Gulf War in Retrospect

First, to the Persian Gulf War: there were many articles and retrospectives on or around August 2, 1991, the one-year anniversary of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent deployment of American troops in Saudi Arabia. In these retrospectives there was a certain amount of malaise in the air, essentially that the results seemed to look a little disappointing. Saddam Hussein was still in power; the peace process seemed bogged down; there was trouble with the Kurds -- in short, a lot of loose ends. I would like to analyze this malaise and ask whence it arose and what it is all about.

First of all, I think it important to say that whether there is cause for malaise depended on one's point of view and on what one is looking at. From the standpoint of what our objectives were in August of 1990, I think that the war looks, at the time and now, to have been very, very successful.

The Bush Administration is strangely inarticulate, seemingly unable to explain what it is that they are doing or trying to do. And I think they had a terrible time at the beginning of August explaining exactly what it was our objectives were. But sifting through it, our objective essentially was threefold: simply, and perhaps simplistically put, they were: aggression, oil, and nukes.

Our worries over Saddam Hussein invading Kuwait were the fact of his aggression, his threatening the world's oil supply and being able to dictate the prices of the oil supply, by taking over the oil in Kuwait, and by threatening the oil in Saudi Arabia, and finally, of course, his nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction.

The argument for taking military action was this trio of aggression, oil, and nukes. I do not think the administration ever really explained that, but I think that eventually, it kind of soaked in to the American public. Looking back at whether those objectives were achieved, I think you'd say: "Pretty good. Not too bad." Aggression has been dealt with; oil has been dealt with; a big dent has been made in Iraq's nuclear program, and the prospects for its ultimate disposal look pretty good.

What is difficult, though, is that, from the point of view of March 1991, things do not look as good. By March, we had won the war very, very quickly, and, all of a sudden, a lot of other expectations came up on the screen, beyond oil, nukes, and aggression.

The reason for this is that in March, right at the end of the war, it looked like a lot of other things were possible. It looked like Saddam Hussein was going to be removed from Iraq. It looked like we were going to have democracy in Kuwait. It looked like we were going to have peace in the Middle East. And, in August, in the light of March expectations, things do not look as good today.

In other words, I think that the malaise of August 1991 was due to a time warp in perceptions; it was based upon how

we looked at the world in March rather than how we looked at it in August.

One way of examining this cluster of issues is by thinking for a moment about the question of sanctions. I do not think that anyone who opposed maintaining sanctions at the outset now believes that sanctions would have been a better policy. Although people say that we do not know what would have happened had we tried the policy of sanctions, I think the general perception among most people in retrospect is that they would not have worked.

Two things that have happened have changed people's perceptions about sanctions, besides the fact that we won the war so nicely and handily. First, in light of Saddam Hussein's ability to refrain from withdrawing from Kuwait after six weeks of pounding from the air and his ability to stay in power although we have imposed sanctions and taken other measures since the end of the war, we see that Saddam Hussein himself has managed to insulate himself from the effect of sanctions, and he does not care what happens to his people.

Second, we now know that Saddam Hussein was a lot closer to nuclear weapons than we thought at the time, and that, if we had had a sanctions policy that would have taken time to work, presumably, he would have been able to produce some kind of a nuclear device during the time.

#### The American Public's Need for A Victory

So while I do not doubt the feeling of malaise, I do not think people are genuinely arguing that we should have pursued a different policy. It does not matter what columnists and pundits write about how we did not achieve our goals, these arguments just flat out did not catch hold with the American public. Something I did not realize until I only began to see it unfold is the extent to which the American public wanted this victory, they needed it psychologically, because of Vietnam and a whole host of issues.

It is not as if the United States military has not had its successes. The Libya bombing was a success. Grenada was a messy business but a success. Panama was certainly a success. But those military victories never struck the American public, and I guess that this is perhaps so because they never really came to grips with those engagements before they happened. These events came up on the radar screen and were over before people had ever really thought about them happening.

By contrast, the Persian Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield were operations that were thought about and people agonized about. They all came to grips with it themselves, thought hard about whether they would vote to use force or not use force.

There is no way that anybody can come out now and say to the American people that the war was not worth it. They are not going to listen. Those folks wanted that war. They wanted it like a man out in a desert for days grabs at a glass of cold water. They wanted that victory, and they wanted it really bad.

#### Beyond the Cold War

Another critical dimension of the victory was the end of the Cold War, but, of course, since the recently failed coup in Moscow, we have seen more than the end of the Cold War. Actually, what has happened is that the coup, because it was attempted and failed, has ended up pushing the whole thing beyond the Cold War. It has done more than restore the status quo ante; it has in fact changed geopolitical calculations in really very, very fundamental ways.

Actually, the Cold War ended -- and I'm now giving you the perspective of all of this from the United State -- in one dramatic year. And I'd say that the war ended in a year that began December of 1988 and ended November of 1989. It was the year that began with Gorbachev's dramatic speech to the United Nations, pledging unilateral cuts in conventional forces in Eastern Europe, and ended with the Berlin Wall coming down in November 1989.

During that year, there were enormous changes, in terms of unilateral reduction in conventional forces and a tremendous forthcomingness on arms control arrangements. And much more important, of course, were the

complete changes that went on in the governments of Eastern Europe, the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, the forming of government that now elected new, democratic leaders; it was a year of really dramatic changes.

Bringing a little history to bear on a big argument that we have been having here in this country, one may ask what is the impact of all of that on our defense, defense expenditures and on American security? And in truth, the events of that year, from December of 1988 to November of 1989, set off a big debate in the United States all through the spring of 1990 over what it all means for the defense budget of the United States?

Here in Washington, the debate essentially boiled down to Dick Cheney arguing that you ought not take all of this for granted, it could be reversed, that somebody might emerge in the Soviet Union who has the United States' interests less at heart than Mikhail Gorbachev.

We, on the House Armed Services Committee, managed to smoke out an enormous debate, because we invited William Webster, the head of the CIA, to come and give testimony to the House Armed Services Committee. He offered some dramatic testimony (as it turned out, on the same day Dick Cheney was up testifying at another place on the Hill) and said: "The changes that have taken place are irreversible." Essentially, what he was saying was, yes, there might be a different ruler in the Soviet Union, but there are certain changes that have taken place such that it does not matter who rules the Soviet Union. You can't put that Warsaw Pact threat back together again. Those changes are irreversible, and there is no chance that whoever rules in Moscow can resurrect the old Warsaw Pact threat.

#### Changes in U.S. Defense Policy

Eventually the current U.S. policy on defense came out of that debate. The base force concept, the 25 percent reduction in American forces over five years, and the budget deal which set in place the U.S. defense budgets all flowed, that summer and fall, from that general acceptance of the fact that certain things had changed in an irreversible way.

So Cheney and Powell put together the base force concept of what you would build down to, a 25 percent reduction in forces, and we entered into a negotiation between the Administration and Congress over where we set the defense budget for the next five years. All of that happened, in the summer of 1990 and the fall of 1990, based upon the irreversible changes in the USSR.

Those parts of the budget that were set turned out to be pretty stable -- because when the war with Iraq came along, it did not change those numbers. Interestingly, there were a lot of people talking at the time of the war that we were going to have to increase defense expenditures. After we won the war so handily, people said, well, we can cut defense expenditures; this was easy. But, the basic fact was, the war did not change anything. The five-year defense plan stayed. The budget agreement stayed. The base force concept stayed.

My guess is that we're going to have another debate this fall that is going to be like the debate in the spring of 1990 about what all the changes in the world mean. It is not just changes in the Warsaw Pact that we're talking about now; we're talking about changes in the Soviet Union itself.

All these events the Gulf War and the end of the Cold War -- will probably entail reopening the budget deal; we're going to reconsider the base force concept and have a second look at the 25 percent five-year reductions.

#### Impact of the Gulf War and End of Cold War on the Middle East

What does it all mean for the Middle East? Let me say that I think that the combined impact of these two events, or phenomena, are going to put enough pressure on the parties in the Middle East to get to the negotiating table, but not enough to get an agreement.

First of all, clearly, the United States' credibility and influence have been strengthened. That helps get people to the

table. Secondly, the rejectionist Arab states have lost their principal backer, and instead the Soviet Union has cooperated with the United States. Third, the PLO has messed up in a very big way, more ways than we can count. This also helps the peace process, because it reduces the pressure to counter the Israeli interest in excluding the PLO.

And, of course, the military strength of Iraq has greatly been diminished, which ought to make it easier for Israel to enter into negotiations and to perhaps agree to things.

So, because of the successful Gulf War and because of the end of the Cold War, all of these kinds of negotiation-producing things have come together. And they have put the constellation of forces in such a way that make this the time to have a Mideast peace conference and make it likely that everybody will be inclined to show up.

Incidentally, there are some genuine factors that had nothing to do with the Cold War or the end of the Gulf War -- for example, the fact that the intifada has burned itself out -- but nonetheless clearly make it more likely that we will get to the table.

Of course, the evidence of real change and the action that made the idea of negotiations possible was the announcement by Syria in July that it would come to a peace conference, when this combination of pressures succeeded in convincing Syria that it had no other choice. Of course, there is a genuine argument as to whether the Syrians have changed fundamentally or whether they have just changed their tactics. At the very least, their tactics have changed considerably.

Here again one can see how the events we have been discussing have affected Syria's decision. Suppose Saddam Hussein had in fact been deposed. It could then have been argued that Syria and Iraq could put together a rejectionist front in the Middle East. Suppose the coup in the Soviet Union had succeeded; in that case there would be a military government in the Soviet Union, which would, at the very least, not be pressuring Syria to join in the peacemaking. You could have seen a set of circumstances, I believe, under which you would have given Syria another option, a different way to proceed.

In other words, the combination of events flowing out of the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War just cornered Syria, and they could not figure out anything else to do, and had to at least change tactics.

#### How Far Can the Peace Process Go?

Is there enough pressure from the events of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, if it brings them all to the table, to bring about an agreement? I think not. First of all, it is entirely possible that Syria believes that once having attended all they have to do is wait for the United States to deliver Israel for them. And the Gulf War and the Cold War do not create enough pressure on Syria to make the necessary concessions.

Secondly, in order for Israel to agree to anything here, it -- unlike the other countries involved -- is going to have to give up something very, very tangible: land. It is hard for Israel, and especially a Likud government, to give up land.

So, what the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War have done is to remove all of Israel's enemies. The intifada poses no real problem for Israel right now, nor do Syria or Iraq; thus there are no real pressures on Israel to deal at this point. And it may be hard for Israel's supporters in the United States to come to the conclusion that Israel ought to deal.

Earlier, Michael Mandelbaum said that the United States had always been interested in peace in the Middle East because, of course, it was worried about Soviet expansion in the region. The U.S. thought the Arab-Israeli conflict offered a chance for the Soviets to take advantage of the problem and move in; therefore, we were interested in peace in order to eliminate the possibilities or the openings for the Soviets to take advantage of the situation.

We're not worried anymore about the Soviets moving into the Middle East; the questions then arise, are we going to

have the necessary perseverance, patience, and everything else it will take, to see the process through?

Is the United States now, in the time of post-Cold War, post-Desert Storm, now looking inward? To what extent are we going to put domestic concerns over foreign policy? That is a second reason that maybe the United States might not have the necessary patience, the necessary perseverance to see it through on a deal in the Middle East.

We now have a lot of people out there thinking that foreign policy is a breeze; things just happen, and we do not have to do anything. People increasingly think that the old days when foreign policy was thorny, and many problems were difficult to solve, are a thing of the past. These people are not going to have patience for this thing. An unbelievable series of events have raised everybody's expectations and I think there's going to be frustration. I just see all of these things, and I worry, essentially, about whether in fact we're "going to have the necessary stick-to-it-iveness."

In sum, as I said earlier, the Persian Gulf War and the end of the Cold War, have combined to produce a situation where everybody gets to the table, but they have not produced a situation where we can see a solution or an agreement without an awful lot of work. These events have set up the meeting; they have not set up the solution.

### The Issue of Loan Guarantees

I will conclude with an example of some of the things that can go wrong here -- this big, enormous brouhaha about the \$10 billion loan. Specifically, I will offer a Congressional view of the situation.

I must say, there is enormous puzzlement in Congress as to what exactly is going on. What has caused this loan guarantee to become the issue of the moment?

It had been well understood that this request for loan guarantees for Israel was going to be coming up and that this was going to be a fairly quiet deal, that it was going to be put into the appropriations bill that was going to be marked up, that it was going to be accepted in the House and Senate conference, and that this was kind of a done deal. Lots of folks in Congress are asking, why, in the name of God, did that not happen, and what's going on here?

The Administration's argument has shifted during the last couple of days, which is always a bad sign.

First the administration was arguing that this deal would be the straw that broke the camel's back, that, yes, the Arabs had agreed to attend the conference without any precondition on settlements, without any freeze on settlements, but it was big, heavy lifting to get them to agree to that. And it is one thing for them to agree to attend the conference without any freeze on settlements; it is another thing to have the United States agree to a \$10 billion housing loan deal at this time.

So they argued that that somehow was the straw that would break the camel's back. Lots of other experts in the Middle East said they did not see that there was going to be any straw breaking the camel's back.

So today the argument has changed. And, as Richard Haass pointed out just a little while ago, the argument now is that it is the acrimonious debate that is going to cause the problem. Put my understanding was that the debate was pretty well organized and was not going to be very acrimonious.

At any rate, Congress is not happy and does not like the options at this point. Now that the issue really is public, essentially what they are worried about is, no matter how Congress votes, it is going to send the wrong signal to somebody on something.

If we vote not to delay, but rather vote in favor of the loan guarantees right now, we do two things: First, we risk seeming to undercut the President. Nobody wants to do that when we're about to go into important negotiations. Second, Congress has a horrible feeling that they're being set up on this. In other words, George Bush figures out that this peace process is going to be a hard deal and might not work out, and if the administration sets this thing up, and we vote for aid, and then Bush does not get the peace, he gets to blame Congress, particularly, of course, the

Democrats, who control both houses of Congress.

So, for those reasons, people just flat do not want to vote in favor of the loan guarantees right now. But, on the other hand, if they do not, and we vote to delay the package, we have then voted for a precedent of using the leverage of humanitarian aid on a political process. And even then there's no guarantee, of course, that it will not happen again, because the President will not pledge that he will not use the leverage again in 120 days, and so we've got a big problem.

There is an additional question here: whether the United States, by doing this, loses its credibility as an honest broker, inasmuch as this was a deal that was put together as part of the end of the Gulf War, such that, at this point, to agree with the President and vote to delay is to essentially take sides in the peace process before it even starts.

So, let me tell you, you've got a lot of unhappy congressmen, looking at the choices and not liking them at all, and hoping that somehow this thing gets settled out. In the meantime, of course, everyone is wondering in whose interest this is? It is a fascinating topic of discussion, but if it were not so serious, it would be a lot more fun.

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