

A Quick and Decisive War?

Jan 15, 1991



Brief Analysis

At midnight, the January 15 deadline for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait will expire without the slightest hint that Saddam Hussein intends to leave. President Bush's "gut instinct" and the conventional wisdom of Washington's experts have both been confounded. Confronted by a massive array of force, Saddam Hussein has not decided to withdraw at the very last moment. War is now inevitable.

When Will the War Begin?

As the White House made clear yesterday, Saddam is now living on borrowed time. Although the expiration of the deadline does not require an immediate resort to force, it is unlikely that the President will wait more than a few days to order American forces into action.

The Congressional vote to authorize force, the recall of embassy staff from Baghdad and the issuing of travel advisories, have all raised the public's expectation of imminent war. In Saudi Arabia, American forces are keyed up for action. Were the President now to delay, questions would quickly be raised about his willpower, opponents of resort to force would have an opportunity to rally, proponents of diplomatic deals would further sweeten the pot for Saddam, nervous coalition partners might begin to balk and demoralization among American troops would set in. In the Arab world, further delay would allow Saddam to claim that he had called the bluff of the international community with devastating impact on the credibility of those Arab leaders who had stood up to him.

Some operational considerations might argue for further delay. Two heavy armored divisions despatched from Europe are only now being deployed in Saudi Arabia. It will reportedly take another two weeks to prepare them for battle. However, these ground forces are not expected to engage in fighting in the war's initial stages. Rather, because of the overwhelming advantage of the allied air forces, the first two weeks of the campaign are likely to be devoted to the air war. Indeed, some military experts believe it is fortuitous that the ground forces may not be at a full state of readiness. This mitigates against too early a commitment of infantry to a battle which first requires the exploitation of air superiority before risking the high casualties involved in ground assaults.

How Will the War be Fought?

President Bush has repeatedly assured the American people that this will not be another Vietnam, that the war will be quick and decisive. Having raised expectations for a short war, it is likely the President will order the full application of force in the hope of producing a quick collapse of the Iraqi army. Saudi officials believe that this collapse will occur in the first few days as a result of the massive application of air power. They are fond of explaining to guests that Iraq's secret weapon is a white handkerchief.

Israeli officials are less sanguine. They agree with General Colin Powell's assessment that a quick decision will require combined air and ground operations. Nevertheless, the Israeli military believe that the chances for a short war are very high. In their view, much will depend on the effectiveness of the air strikes in the first few days. If allied air power quickly succeeds in dominating the skies and using this superiority to cut lines of communication, disrupt command and control, destroy strategic targets and attack the armored and mechanized divisions of Iraq's elite

Republican Guards, the war should be decided within three weeks. If the Republican Guard, deployed around Basra in southern Iraq, is defeated in follow-up ground operations, it will have a dramatic impact on Iraqi morale and block the reinforcement of the troops in Kuwait.

The Iraqi forces in Kuwait are dug in and have completed their preparations for war. However, their defense lines are 200 kilometers long and are vulnerable at many points. The U.S. forces have the advantage of being able to see the entire battlefield and to prosecute the war at night. Although the Israeli assessment is that the Iraqi forces will stand and fight initially, they believe that morale is low and that once the American ground forces break through, there will be a quick collapse.

If the result is likely to be quick and decisive, the cost in American casualties might nevertheless be high. So much depends on the air war and so much air power will be brought to bear -- perhaps as many as three thousand sorties a day -- that allied air losses are likely to be considerable. Moreover, Saddam's principal objective in this war is to kill as many Americans as possible in the expectation that this will produce a backlash in American public opinion. Thus, on the ground, Saddam has deployed large numbers of artillery pieces between his two lines of defense in Kuwait that are capable of inflicting heavy casualties on advancing ground forces. American forces are concentrated in airfields and other areas where high casualties might be inflicted if Iraq is able to launch long-range missiles in the early stages of the war. Terrorist attacks on American military and civilian targets are also expected.

The quickest way to end the war would be to kill Saddam himself. However, the U.S. Air Force is more confident of its ability to hit fixed targets and it is assumed that Saddam will probably be mobile and difficult to locate. Moreover, while anything above ground can be destroyed relatively easily, it is assumed that Saddam will reside in underground bunkers for the duration of the war.

The Time Factor

If these assessments prove to be wrong -- and much can go wrong in war -- there is a great risk that Saddam could yet achieve a political victory. The longer it takes to defeat his armed forces, the more he will appear as a hero in the Arab world for having stood up to the massive power of the "imperialist infidel." If his armed forces are still fighting after a few weeks, and he has inflicted thousands of American casualties, support for Saddam in the Arab world and opposition to the war in the United States are likely to strengthen his hand should he call for a cease-fire and offer to negotiate withdrawal. As he faces war, this is probably Saddam's calculation. It underscores the need for a quick and decisive victory.

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Policy #57

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