

The Bush Administration's Strategy toward the Gulf Crisis

Sep 14, 1990



In-Depth Reports



On September 14-16, 1990, The Washington Institute held its fifth annual Policy Conference at the Wye Plantation. The following is an edited transcript of one speaker's remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=2747\)](#) of the full conference.

We are now seeing not just the outlines of a post-war security order, but the outlines of the post-Cold War defense policy in the United States. It is a lot more robust than many believed.

There is still a Soviet threat in Europe and an enormous Soviet military machine. Admittedly it does not work very well but it is still formidable. We cannot afford to significantly reduce resources directed there. But we have been arguing for some time that there are threats elsewhere that are growing even as the Soviet threat declines. We specifically focused on the Persian Gulf and, for that matter, we specifically focused on Iraq -- although we tried not to say so in public.

In our defense planning guidance we directed the military to shift their focus from planning for a Soviet invasion of Iran to planning for a local country invading the Arabian peninsula. At the time we did it none of us expected to be facing that precise problem as soon as we did. But we were skewered regularly for inventing threats to justify our budgets. That argument has vanished.

The notion that somehow the defense policy of the future can simply rest on light forces of the kind that we deployed for Panama has been given the lie. It is a dangerous myth that we can protect our vital interests in a part of the world like the Persian Gulf solely with air and sea power. The need for substantial airlift resources has been made clear by recent events.

The Saudi Reaction

Saddam Hussein probably thought that as long as the United States was limited to air and sea power, our capabilities to harm him were manageable. He also undoubtedly believed that Arab countries would never allow Americans to help defend them.

There are two basic factors behind the Saudi decision to let American forces on their soil. One is a clear understanding of the threat they face; they realized that temporizing with an enemy as ruthless and determined as Saddam is not likely to work for long. But that conclusion by itself would not have led them to change unless there were an alternative and the alternative required somebody who could counter Saddam's military power.

There is no question that they were impressed by President Bush personally. They also were impressed by the size of the American commitment. When it was first presented to them here in Washington they seemed surprised. We initially thought that the deployment we had in mind might be too much for them to deal with. But it quickly became apparent that they were heartened by the magnitude of the force which made them realize that we were serious.

The Saudis have greatly changed their view of the United States over the last ten years. The very resolve we showed during the Iran-Iraq war -- our policy of containing Iran -- persuaded them that the United States had staying power,

that we would not simply leave when the first casualties began to come in and that we had a fundamental understanding of the magnitude of our interests.

A Decade Military Improvements

American military strength is the product of a decade of sustained buildup; what we are able to do today would not have been possible ten years ago. It is the product of more than a decade of substantial improvements to our forces. Our military clearly was prepared for this crisis. Even in the post-Cold War world it pays to have Cold War military power.

Over the past four weeks we have sent, or have en route, to Saudi Arabia five billion pounds of cargo and equipment. In the first three weeks of this crisis we shipped more to Saudi Arabia and the peninsula than in the first three months of the Korean War.

We are sending forces that are trained for desert combat. We did not forget about the Middle East while we were concerned about Europe. Every one of the ground units out there has been through the national training center in the Mojave Desert in California. They have been in the desert, worn chemical gear and have about as good an idea as you can get in peacetime of what they are heading into.

We have that capability because even when we were deep in the Cold War we paid attention to what really matters about our force: the men and women who serve in it. It takes longer to train and prepare a skilled master sergeant or a major unit commander than to build a major warship.

This crisis demonstrates that in planning our own defense policy, we have to plan on the basis of capabilities, not on the basis of intentions. Defense planners are always accused of doing so in order to justify unpopular purchases, but it is a sound strategy.

American Intelligence

Our intelligence leading up to this crisis was good. This is not to say that key intelligence people in the Pentagon told us the date of the invasion. But in the week or two before the invasion, the experts were saying that the buildup is way beyond anything that pointed toward a peaceful outcome.

However, on the strategic intelligence level, no one was predicting in May of 1990 that there would be an Iraqi military move against Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in three months time. The Senate Intelligence Committee has concluded from this that we need better intelligence. I concluded from this that it is dangerous to rely too much on intelligence. Intelligence about what is in the mind of a foreign leader is almost impossible to obtain with confidence, and in any case intentions can change quickly. Perhaps six months ago not even Saddam Hussein knew he would invade Kuwait.

U.S. interests are simply too large to ever go back to the limited kinds of arrangements that we had to make do with in the past. If we need to return to the region to help our friends someday, we must establish a way to do it faster than we did it this time.

It is essential to take a long-term view of this crisis. There are no quick fixes, but there is room for optimism. We now have assets to deal with some of the fundamental problems in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf that we did not have before. The president has ruled out no options. In fact, we have the greatest chance of making sanctions work if Saddam believes that we are pursuing other options vigorously.

Two Half Truths

We frequently hear two arguments in support of the need for a quick solution. These arguments have some fundamental truth in them but they are, in fact, half truths. One is that if sanctions are prolonged, our coalition will

begin to come apart. The second one is that if the crisis ends with Saddam Hussein's military capabilities intact, he will continue to pose a serious threat to the Persian Gulf and to Israel.

Our coalition is a fragile one and we have to tend to it all the time, but it is not nearly as fragile as people are saying. We may find its strength growing over time, not diminishing -- countries like Jordan may join the coalition. Regardless of its composition, we will still need to maintain an effective coalition at all points throughout this crisis. We will still need that coalition if military force is to be used.

The notion that it is somehow better to use military force early ignores two powerful countervailing considerations. One is that the American people are more likely to support military force if they are convinced that we have tried everything else. Though the patience of the American people is commonly underestimated, years of containment in Europe and Korea demonstrate that Americans have a lot more patience for the pursuit of peaceful solutions than military ones.

Second, the use of force will not free us from the burden of developing a long-term policy for Persian Gulf security. It is true that if Saddam Hussein withdraws from Kuwait he will continue to pose a serious threat to our friends in the Persian Gulf and in the West. But Iraq, with Hussein or with another leader, with his war machine intact or beaten, is going to possess substantial military power. No matter how this crisis ends, Iraq will have the population and the resources to rebuild a military that smaller Persian Gulf states cannot handle. For that matter, Iran has the population and resources to do it if Iraq does not. We must have a long-term policy for dealing with that military power.

If sanctions can work, it would be far better to try to go after that military potential through a concerted international embargo. That may not mean that it will necessarily work. We may have to deal with Iraq's army through military means some day. But the sanctions now in place can weaken Iraq's military significance over time without a shot being fired.

The president addressed some of these issues in his September 11th speech to the Congress: "Our interest, our involvement in the Gulf is not transitory. It predated Saddam Hussein's aggression and it will survive it. Long after all our troops come home there will be a lasting role for the United States in assisting the nations of the Persian Gulf. Our role, with others, is to deter future aggression . . . and to curb the proliferation of chemical, biological, ballistic missile, and above all, nuclear technologies."

Toward that end we have been engaging billions of dollars from many countries including the Japanese, who have now pledged four billion dollars in support. We are beginning to move Jordan towards tighter enforcement of sanctions. We are getting substantial British and Arab ground troops committed. We have not lost the initiative.

Israel

A strong Israel is vital to the United States. I disagree emphatically with those who assert that Israel's role -- or its non-role -- in the present crisis disproves the notion that Israel is a valuable strategic ally.

This thesis can be refuted by citing other circumstances like Jordan's civil war in 1970 or Israel's presence in 1980 when we were afraid of Soviet power in the Middle East. If there are threats in the area in the year 2000 they are going to come from yet another unexpected direction. It is always good to have strong friends on your side.

But our strategic cooperation is also helpful in the present crisis. Israel's low profile is not easy for the Israeli government to sustain in the face of great public concern about the dangers Iraq presents. Israel is able to maintain this low profile because of confidence in its own strength. Cooperation and coordination with the United States, the ability to talk to the Israelis, contributes to our overall purpose.

However, our support for Israel does not depend on whether Israel is a valuable strategic ally or not. Our support for

Israel should rest not on strategic arguments, but on the U.S. commitment to Israeli security. That commitment should be even deeper in the long run given what Iraq did to Kuwait.

There are threats to Israel from this crisis. The threat of missile attack is the most frightening one. But there are benefits for Israel's security in the long term. It is good for Israel that Iraq is now the world's problem, not just Israel's. There is even an important short-term gain to Israel's security from this crisis -- the Iraqi threat is now primarily located in Kuwait and southern Iraq. Iraqi military capability has been diverted. Saddam might at some point decide, because of the political advantages, that he will throw some resources into creating a war on another front. But his resources to do that are at least limited by the pressures exerted by the U.S. deployment.

A New Middle East

The Gulf Crisis will put a whole new set of factors at work in the Middle East. We will see a completely different attitude regarding commercial sales to Iraq in terms of weapons and nuclear technology. We are also likely to see an end of the subsidy protection policy of the richer Gulf states. Enormous sums have gone to building up this Iraqi machine. Those payments have stopped and are unlikely to be resumed easily.

This will likely mean a victory for moderates like Hosni Mubarak over extremists like Saddam Hussein. We are already seeing the shift of those enormous subsidies from the radicals to the moderates. Saddam is seeking a propaganda issue when he talks about rich versus poor. Iraq is a rich country that squandered its resources on weaponry and military adventures.

Two other developments: we will see the kind of confidence in America's commitment to regional stability that has never been there before and this will have a lasting effect. And out of this crisis can emerge a broader recognition in the Middle East of the futility of aggression.

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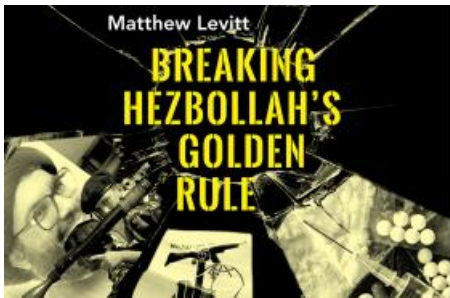
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