

# The Impact of the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait: The View from Ten Years Later

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Brief Analysis

**O**n July 28, 2000, The Washington Institute hosted a special symposium on the tenth anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, featuring presentations by Lt. Gen. Bernard Trainor, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations; Peter Rodman, director of national security at the Nixon Center; and Daniel Pipes, editor of Middle East Quarterly. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## BERNARD TRAINOR

**T**he role of the U.S. military in the Gulf War should be examined in three parts: going into the conflict, coming out of the conflict, and present day implications.

**Going into the Conflict.** There were two major influences on U.S. military intervention in the Gulf: the Vietnamese experience and the Cold War. The U.S. military was accustomed to dealing principally with the Soviet threat, even during the Vietnam War. For years, the military prepared for a big war, focusing on the question of handling a mass army supported by a nuclear arsenal. To counteract the threat, the U.S. and its allies developed superior military technological, and by the time of the Gulf War began, U.S. capabilities far surpassed those of Iraq.

**Weinberger-Powell Doctrine.** Haunted by the outcome of Vietnam, the U.S. military establishment expressed its views regarding future engagement in this conservative policy. It held that the U.S. should use force only for vital interests and that the military should be the last resort. The doctrine went on to suggest that in the event of U.S. engagement, the political echelon should support the use of all necessary force. Furthermore, Weinberger-Powell insisted that the military keep casualties to a minimum and either generate or maintain public support.

**How did the Gulf War fit into the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine?** Certainly a U.S. vital interest was at stake, namely oil. Furthermore, the coalition lead by the United States operated within the purview of relevant U.N. resolutions, and casualties were kept very low, despite high forecasts. Public support was weak in the beginning, but it grew in concert with revelations about Saddam's nuclear capabilities.

**The Shape of the Armed Forces.** Before the Gulf War, the Army was going through a reconstitution period and its main concern was manpower--how to recruit and retain personnel. The question that bothered the army was how to convince people to fight when the vital interests of the U.S. were not threatened. Another dilemma was that during the Gulf War, there was a battle going on within the Air Force. Tactical forces and the strategic forces were fighting for priority or at least equality. This internal battle went on throughout the entire operation. The Navy was also in desperate shape. It had no serious rivals and its role was reduced to protecting the fleet. Even the Marines fought very little during the war, having to limit their operations to amphibious raids on the Kuwaiti coast. Technology reigned supreme. Precision weapons and laser-guided missiles, although in their infancy, proved to be invaluable.

**Coming out of the Gulf War.** The military reserve system, which is based on volunteers, worked well. Nevertheless, the volunteer force was not really put to the test during the Gulf War. In fact, its effectiveness has yet to be proved. More significant and successful was the debut of women in combat. Less significant but also important was the solid

performance of the Tomahawk missile.

Disappointments are also worth noting. Friendly fire accounted for 25% of all allied casualties. Although over-all intelligence proved to be reliable, the distribution of military intelligence to the proper recipients was disastrous. Target accusation against mobile targets also failed miserably. The Navy for its part did not meet expectations in exploiting the potential capabilities of "in-shore" warfare. Logistics also proved to be a problem--it took too long to get places and once there, servicemen were too vulnerable.

As a result of the war, the Weinberger-Powell doctrine was modified, allowing U.S. forces to participate in operations in Somalia, Bosnia and most recently in Kosovo. High technology continues to be very useful, but a need has arisen to combine all individual systems under one roof and create a "system of all systems."

What Happens Now? The Weinberger-Powell doctrine--the question of when and under what conditions the U.S. should intervene in conflicts abroad--is still being debated, as is the purpose of the military. Should the military use all its force to fight wars, or should it use minimum force in peacekeeping operations? After the Gulf War, the terms of intervention seemed to be ironed out and became more flexible, allowing U.S. armed forces to act under the umbrella of humanitarian aid. However, the Gulf War also led to an exaggerated sense of pride and confidence within the military and American society at large. This pride created a public perception that wars are not bloody, and can be fought from a distance. The outcome of this debate is still unknown.

American supremacy on the field, ascendancy in high-tech weapons, and the concept of clear-war have led civilian leaders to believe that they can use military force as an instrument of policy. Consequently, leaders have decided to use force, especially air power, much faster and with less reluctance than in the past. The Gulf War created hawks in the State Department and doves in the Pentagon. The danger is that civilian leaders may turn to the use of force before fully exhausting the avenues of diplomacy.

## **DANIEL PIPES**

**T**he most influential events that shaped the Middle East during the 20th century have been World War I, which established the Middle East as we know it, the coup d'etat by Gamal Abdel Nasser that introduced Arab nationalism to the region, and the Iranian revolution of 1979 that brought about Islamism. Where does the Gulf War fit into this picture? At the time, it seemed to be an important event that would change the face of the Middle East. It was assumed with the end of the war the American era in the Middle East would begin and Iraq would change dramatically. It looked like Iraq, as a nation, would experience civil war, invasions, and perhaps a change of regime.

Ten Years Later. The impact of the War is moderate and the continuities are more impressive. Today, Iraq is almost unchanged. Despite the fact that Iraq is now a weaker nation, Saddam Hussein is still in power, the borders remain the same, and the aggressiveness of the central government is still felt by the Iraqi people. The oil market--Iraq aside--has also remained unchanged. The grand coalition that the U.S. put together has disappeared. Iran-Iraq relations have also remained the same. Although there have been improvements in Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations, the basic conflict remains the same.

The one major change that has occurred has taken place between the U.S. and the Arab nations. However, this change has been rather ironic. On one hand, the improved military and economic relationships between the U.S. and its Arab partners were beneficial for both sides. On the other hand, the presence of American soldiers has spurred anti-Americanism in the region. It could be said that support for Saddam Hussein has increased as a result of the American presence. The ultimate example for this kind of sentiment would be Osama bin Laden. Hence, these enhanced relations on the state level have diminished popular support in the region.

Had the U.S. not put together the coalition, the invasion of Kuwait would have led to immense consequences. However, the coalition got together and acted against Saddam, leaving the status quo unchanged. Therefore, the Gulf

War, because it did not change anything subsequently, was not one of the greatest events of the 20th century in the Middle East.

## **PETER RODMAN**

**T**here are many important points to be made concerning the Gulf War. First, while the Gulf War certainly confirmed that the U.S. is the sole superpower, the key turning point was really the end of the Cold War. In other words, it was the collapse of the traditional Soviet policy toward the Middle East that enabled most of the positive changes we have witnessed in recent years to take place. One of the most important determinants for peace in the Middle East has been the balance between the moderates and the radicals. Because the Soviets traditionally supported the radicals, the power of the radicals has declined since the Soviets disappeared. The resultant change in balance has paved the way for progress toward peace in the region.

The Gulf War dramatized the American military's technological supremacy and also, to a certain extent, demonstrated the American public's recovery from the Vietnam trauma. Moreover, it demonstrated America's central position in the global political structure. America--as the Gulf War indicated--was capable of working together with other world powers harmoniously in order to achieve peace and freedom.

The utopia of a harmonious world coalition, however, was an illusion. It seemed to many Americans that the traditional power politics were obsolete. However, in reality the rest of the world reacted to American dominance in a very classical way. Post-communist Russia now is more nationalist and eager to restore multi-polarity more than ever. China in 1990 was not very active, but it has since joined Russia in resistance "American hegemony". Furthermore, the progress made by the European Union in recent years could also be interpreted as a European reaction to American dominance. Consequently, the moment of harmony among the major powers during the Gulf War no longer exists.

**Military Implications.** As a result of the resistance to U.S. supremacy, there are now many people who are searching for America's vulnerabilities in order to maintain a multi-polar world. Consequently, asymmetric challenges--which are the means by which a weaker power can defeat the stronger--have become more important. In other words, small and weak states are turning towards weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, or advanced conventional weapons as equalizers or deterrence against American intervention in future crises.

**Assessment.** American influence over global events will depend on America's actual performance over time. The U.S. will have to prove, both to its allies and adversaries, that it is competent, reliable, and trustworthy in its foreign policy. Steady performance over time is the only way to maintain the influence that the U.S. enjoys today. A fiasco, or a failed military intervention, could demoralize the American public and weaken the sense of restraint many states in the international constellation are currently exercising.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Niyazi Günay.



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