

Conference Reports

The Gulf War: A First Assessment

Soref Symposium 1991

The Difficulties Encountered in the Gulf Crisis

The effort that was mounted last August by President Bush to counter Saddam Hussein's aggression now looks, in light of all that has happened since August 2nd, as though it were foreordained. We are all used to dealing with the fact that the United States sent over a half-million men and women halfway around the globe, and that we successfully prevailed in the war against Saddam Hussein and Iraqi forces in order to liberate Kuwait and to destroy Saddam Hussein's offensive military capability. And it is easy now to lose sight of the fact that it was all a very precarious proposition many times along the way. There were numerous points when, indeed, the outcome could have been far different, the policy far less certain, the result less pleasurable from the standpoint of U.S. interests.

The first problem we faced last August was that it was not at all clear that anybody would allow U.S. forces to be deployed to the Gulf, that we might indeed find ourselves in a situation where although we had forces ready to go, and we were prepared to work to roll back Saddam Hussein's aggression, no one would want U.S. forces in the Gulf. That had indeed been the case for many years, and we were always welcome to have an aircraft carrier in the region, as long as it was over the horizon out of sight. Nobody was too eager to have us close on board.

I remember a meeting up at Camp David on the first weekend of the crisis in which we reviewed the military options that were available to us, and General Schwarzkopf briefed President Bush and the rest of the National Security Council. In the middle of the meeting we were informed of a report that the Saudis would not accept U.S. forces to be deployed in the Gulf. If you look at a map, it's clear that without that kind of agreement, without that kind of access, no military option was viable. The only way you could have moved to limit Saddam Hussein's aggression would have been to, in effect, invade Kuwait directly from the Gulf in a very difficult and very problematic amphibious military operation. It would have been extremely costly under any circumstances.

Ultimately, of course, the President was able to persuade our Saudi friends to accept the U.S. forces, and was subsequently able to put together the disparate coalition that did in fact undertake both the economic sanctions and the political efforts that were undertaken in the Security Council, and ultimately influenced some 30 nations to commit forces as well. But again, last August there was no international coalition. There was no agreement that this was, indeed, the kind of effort that warranted that kind of commitment. There was no notion that the UN Security Council would ever do anything more than protest Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait.

But, ultimately, through the good offices of the President, and my colleague Jim Baker, the UN Security Council came to be a very effective forum for addressing the issues before us, both in terms of providing the kind of sanction that was needed to create the international coalition, but also to sanction the use of military force if need be to achieve our objectives.

It was a close-run thing as to whether or not the Congress of the United States would support the endeavor as well. And the debate in January, I think, turned out to be one of the more enlightened and high-quality debates I have seen during my twenty-some years in Washington. But there was some doubt as to whether or not we should even seek congressional approval, on the grounds that it might not be forthcoming, and if it was not forthcoming we did not want to have our hands tied in terms of dealing with the aggression that so clearly needed to be dealt with. It was another key moment of the crisis when the President made the right decision, and things worked well.

Success of our Military

There has been a great deal of talk and speculation since the war itself as to why we prevailed from a military standpoint. A couple of points need to be made; one reason we prevailed, of course, was the decision by the President last October to double the size of the force. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it's useful to look back and to remember that at the time he decided to land the 7th Corps out of Germany and another Army division from Kansas and another Marine division, as well as the six aircraft carrier battle groups, there was a lot of criticism that that was unwise, that it was far too large a commitment of force, that we should give sanctions a chance, and so forth.

It triggered a spate of hearings on Capitol Hill and a lot of analyses around the country, and a fair amount of criticism. But I am personally persuaded that there are thousands of Americans home with their families today, and more on the way home who would not be coming home at all, if it hadn't been for the President's decision to double the force when he did last November to make certain that we could prevail in the shortest possible time

and at the lowest possible cost.

One of the lessons of this operation, I think, is the willingness of the American people to support a resort to force when it's appropriate, when you have a clear-cut objective; that the nation, contrary to some of the expectations early on, responded overwhelmingly to the decision to commit forces. I am convinced that calling up a quarter of a million reservists played a very significant role in all of that as well; that it served not only to give us the capability we needed to undertake the deployment, but also triggered support all around the country, because every community, every state, and millions of families were affected by that decision to commit the forces, and they understood immediately what was at stake.

There was concern that the coalition would never hold. Last fall, we were often regaled with the prediction that if you did anything more aggressive than economic sanctions, if the United States undertook really aggressive action, if we used military force in a meaningful way, that the coalition would come apart. Exactly the reverse was true. What our coalition partners wanted to know, more than anything else, was that we were in fact determined to stay the course, and that we were dedicated to achieving our objectives, and that we would not waffle or vacillate or retreat from the stated goal and objective of getting Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. And as long as it was clear that the President meant business, that he was indeed prepared to go forward as aggressively as he did, the allies were with us all the way. They never vacillated at all. So our assumptions that an aggressive U.S. posture would break up the coalition clearly did not come to pass.

Did We Go Far Enough?

There have been significant discussions since the war ended about the proposition of whether or not we went far enough. Should we, perhaps, have gone in to Baghdad? Should we have gotten involved to a greater extent than we did? Did we leave the job in some respects unfinished? I think the answer is a resounding "no."

One of the reasons we were successful from a military perspective was because we had very clear-cut military objectives. The President gave us an assignment that could be achieved by the application of military force. He said, "Liberate Kuwait." He said, "Destroy Saddam Hussein's offensive capability," his capacity to threaten his neighbors -- both definable military objectives. You give me that kind of an assignment, I can go put together, as the Chiefs, General Powell, and General Schwarzkopf masterfully did, a battle plan to do exactly that. And as soon as we had achieved those objectives, we stopped hostilities, on the grounds that we had in fact fulfilled our objective.

Now, the notion that we should have somehow continued for another day to two is, I think, fallacious. At the time that we made the decision to stop hostilities, it was the unanimous recommendation of the President's military advisors, senior advisors, that we had indeed achieved our objectives, and therefore it was time to stop the killing and the destruction.

Some have suggested that if we had spent another day in combat in the Kuwait theater, we would have changed the outcome of the subsequent conflict between the Shi'a, and the Kurds in the north, against Iraq. I do not believe that is the case. I think it is important to remember that Saddam had better than 60 divisions when the war started; that we destroyed or rendered combat ineffective in military terms about two-thirds of that force, roughly 40 divisions in the Kuwaiti theater. But he had some 20 divisions deployed in Iraq that never were engaged in the conflict. They were up along the border with Turkey, along the border with Iran, but they were never committed to the theater. And they were never there for the target of U.S. military operations. It is that residual force, plus what small force he was able to get out of the theater at the end of the war, that he ultimately used to deal with the Kurds and the Shi'a, but I do not believe one more day in Kuwait would have made that much difference.

Some have suggested that if we had gotten involved just a little bit -- for example, if we had shot down a few helicopters -- it would have changed the outcome of the conflict. Again, I think that is a misguided notion. One of the lessons that comes out of all of this is we should not ask our military personnel to engage "a little bit" in a war. If you are going to go to war, let's send the whole group; let's make certain that we've got a force of sufficient size, as we did when we went into Kuwait, so that we do not suffer any more casualties than are absolutely necessary.

Now, if you're going to deal with the effort to change the military balance inside Iraq, if you want to really neutralize the Iraqi Army, you have to deal not only with helicopters but also with artillery, with tanks and armored personnel carriers, and with the infantry units that clearly make the Iraqi government -- even today with a two-thirds smaller army than they had a few months ago -- significantly an overwhelming presence vis-a-vis the insurgents that exist inside the country.

I think that the proposition of going to Baghdad is also fallacious. I think if we were going to remove Saddam Hussein we would have had to go all the way to Baghdad, we would have to commit a lot of force because I do not believe he would wait in the Presidential Palace for us to arrive. I think we'd have had to hunt him down. And once we'd done that and we'd gotten rid of Saddam Hussein and his government, then we'd have had to put another government in its place.

What kind of government? Should it be a Sunni government or Shi'i government or a Kurdish government or Ba'athist regime? Or maybe we want to bring in some of the Islamic fundamentalists? How long would we have had to stay in Baghdad to keep that government in place? What would happen to the government once U.S. forces withdrew? How many casualties should the United States accept in that effort to try to create clarity and

stability in a situation that is inherently unstable?

I think it is vitally important for a President to know when to use military force. I think it is also very important for him to know when not to commit U.S. military force. And it's my view that the President got it right both times, that it would have been a mistake for us to get bogged down in the quagmire inside Iraq.

Bringing Stability to the Region

Now, there is great interest in the current effort to bring some stability to the region. We have demonstrated in the last few weeks our commitment to try to reduce the suffering that has been caused by the war. Within the next few days we will be able to withdraw U.S. forces from the demilitarized zone along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border as the UN force takes over. We have completed or are close to completing the movement of the Iraqi refugees that were in the buffer zone, down to another location in Saudi Arabia where they will be safe from any prosecution by Saddam Hussein's forces.

In the North, we've mounted a massive and, I think to date, reasonably successful effort that has resulted in saving the lives of perhaps thousands of people. We think we've turned the corner in terms of the food situation in the North. We have medical facilities there, we've got good working camps established. We will get the Kurds down out of the mountains to locations where they can be resupplied by road, and I think all of that is moving along fairly well.

The United Nations has now announced they are about to undertake their first convoy into the area, so hopefully we will soon be able to fly a United Nations flag over those activities in the north, and just as soon as possible, as soon as we are confident that we can withdraw our forces from there, it is our urgent desire that we do so. We are not eager to have U.S. military forces prematurely involved in trying to run that refugee assistance program inside Northern Iraq, but unfortunately, when the crisis developed earlier, there is only one organization in the world that can develop and deliver that kind of capability, kind of food and medical help and supplies to that remote a part of the world, and that's the United States military, so we did the job we were called upon to do. But we are eager to get out of there as quickly as possible.

We're now in the midst, of course, of drawing down the force. We have slightly over 200,000 people in the Kuwaiti theater today, and that redeployment is proceeding apace. Obviously we are also interested in postwar security arrangements in that part of the world. The President has made it clear that we are not interested in a permanent, or long-term U.S. ground presence, a garrison if you will, on the ground in the Gulf in the Saudi Arabian area. But we are interested in enhanced naval presence. We think we can do that safely. We've been operating out of Bahrain since 1949, and will continue to do so.

We think there is a greater receptivity on the part of our friends in that part of the world now to an occasional U.S. presence, a tactical fighter squadron, for example, deployed from time to time on a temporary basis to work out exercises jointly with our friends in the region; prepositioned equipment, both for air and ground forces; those kinds of arrangements we think make sense. A robust schedule, as occasionally we have, for example, with Egypt would allow us to deploy forces into the region from time to time to remind and reassure everyone of our commitment.

Looking Toward the Future

If we look to the future in terms of the situation now in the Middle East and the peace process, clearly we are very deeply interested in trying to get the peace process restarted and reestablished. My friend Jim Baker has an extraordinarily difficult assignment, perhaps more difficult than mine has been over the last few months, because he now has to go try to move some of the players with some historical animosities of enormous complexity, which many of you are far more familiar with than I am, along the road towards resolving some of those differences on a permanent basis.

I think that there are some key points that need to be made as we think about the future in the Middle East. Clearly, the situation from the standpoint of our allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, is that they have been saved and Kuwait has been liberated, not just by U.S. forces but by coalition forces as well. And an international coalition that involved the governments that represent a majority of the Arab world, fighting alongside U.S. forces, was a very significant development.

Saddam Hussein's offensive military capability, his capacity to threaten his neighbors, has been virtually eliminated. This is a very significant development.

Israel, I think, from a military standpoint is more secure today than she's been at any time in the recent past because of the elimination of Iraq's offensive military threat. A very significant development.

I think would-be aggressors, not only in the Middle East but elsewhere around the world, have to pause and reflect before they contemplate the possibility that aggression is a course that holds rewards for them. A significant development.

I think the friends of the United States, not only in the Middle East but around the world, can look to the United States with renewed confidence that we have not only the capacity to protect our friends and observe our commitments, but we have the will to protect our friends and keep our commitments. And that, too, is a very significant development.