

The Gulf Crisis

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Contents

Aggression and Response	3
Narrowing the Options	4
High Principle	7
The Guardians of the Gulf	12
The New World Order	14

Aggression and Response

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 evoked a strong response from the industrial powers; in fact, two rather different responses. The first was an array of economic sanctions of unprecedented severity. The second was the threat of war. Both responses were initiated at once, even before Iraq's annexation of the invaded country. The first response had broad support. The second is pretty much limited to the U.S. and Britain, apart from the family dictatorships that had been placed in charge of the Gulf oil producing states. As leader of the two-member coalition, the U.S. moved quickly to ensure that sanctions could not be effective and to bar any diplomatic initiative.

Two questions at once arise: What explains the unprecedented actions? What lies behind the tactical division over generally shared objectives?

The second question is rarely raised explicitly, except in the course of complaints about our faint-hearted and money-grubbing allies, who lack the courage, integrity and sturdy national character of the Anglo-American duo. The general question, however, suffers from no shortage of answers, including impressive phrases about the sanctity of international law and the U.N. Charter, and our historic mission to punish anyone who dares to violate these sacred principles by resorting to force. President Bush declared that "America stands where it always has, against aggression, against those who would use force to replace the rule of law." While some questioned his tactical judgment, there was widespread admiration for the President's honorable stand, and his forthright renewal of our traditional dedication to nonviolence, the rule of law, and the duty of protecting the weak and oppressed. Scholarship weighed in, adding historical and cross-cultural depth. A noted Cambridge University Professor of Political Science wrote in the Times Literary Supplement (London) that "Our traditions, fortunately, prove to have at their core universal values, while theirs are sometimes hard to distinguish with the naked eye from rampant (and heavily armed) nihilism. In the Persian Gulf today, President Bush could hardly put it more bluntly...." Others too basked in self-adulation, though it was conceded that we had not always applied our traditional values with complete consistency, failures that we are sure to rectify as soon as we have finished with the business at hand. These past lapses are commonly attributed to our understandable preoccupation with defense against the Russians, now of lesser urgency with the U.S. triumph in the Cold War.

The issue was raised to cosmic significance, with visions of a New World Order of peace and justice that lies before us if only the new Hitler can be stopped before he conquers the world — after having failed to overcome post-revolutionary Iran with its severely weakened military, even with the support of the U.S., USSR, Europe, and the major Arab states. "We live in one of those rare transforming moments in history," Secretary Baker declared, with the Cold War over and "an era full of promise" just ahead, if we can avoid "the self-defeating path of pretending not to see." Commentators marvelled at the "wondrous sea change" at the United Nations, which is "functioning as it was designed to do...for virtually the first time in its history" and thus offering "a bold pattern of peacekeeping for the post-Cold War world" (New York Times). The standard explanation is that with the U.S. victory in the Cold War, Soviet obstructionism and the "shrill, anti-Western rhetoric" of the Third World no longer render the U.N. ineffective.

Narrowing the Options

Professing high principle, Washington moved vigorously to block all diplomatic efforts, restricting its own contacts with Iraq to delivery of an ultimatum demanding immediate and total capitulation to U.S. force — what George Bush called “going the extra mile to achieve a peaceful solution.” Europeans were warned not to deviate from the firm U.S. rejection of any form of diplomacy or any hint of willingness to negotiate. Washington also sternly rejected any “linkage” with regional issues, expressing its moral revulsion at the very thought of rewarding an aggressor by considering problems of armaments, security, and others in a regional context. The effect was to minimize the likelihood that Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait might be arranged without the threat or use of force. It is difficult to imagine that this was not the purpose of the rejection of “linkage,” also an unprecedented stand.

These solemn declarations of high principle were generally accepted at face value, leaving unchallenged the pretexts offered for war. Debate was therefore limited to tactical questions of U.S. interest. In this limited frame, the Administration is sure to prevail, and did. The rhetorical stance, in contrast, could not have survived the slightest challenge. The general abdication of critical standards was thus a matter of no small importance — not for the first time.

Some did express concern, and a degree of wonder, over the inability of backward sectors to perceive our nobility. “Perhaps most troublesome for Bush in his effort to create a ‘new world order,’” one reporter observed plaintively, is the fact that “a surprising number of Europeans believe that the United States is in the gulf not to free Kuwait or punish Saddam Hussein but to bolster its own influence and power.” A poll reported in the same paper the same day (Boston Globe, Jan. 13) revealed that a surprising number of Americans share these delusions, believing that control over oil is the “key reason” for the U.S. troop presence (50%), not “liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation” (28%) or “neutralization of Iraq’s weapons capabilities (14%). Such confusions are even more rampant in the Third World, apart from the wealthy and privileged elements which, like their counterparts here, have a proper understanding of our innate virtue and benevolence.

Washington’s explicit rejection of any form of diplomacy was welcomed as a “sensational offer to negotiate” (in the words of a British loyalist), a forthcoming willingness to “explore any diplomatic avenue,” along the “diplomatic track” that had been effectively blocked. There was eloquent rhetoric about Iraqi human rights abuses, and the anguish they caused George Bush, who “keeps copies of Amnesty International’s reports on Iraqi torture in his office” (Daniel Yergin) and whose soul had been seared by the experience of fighting to stop Hitler and Tojo, after the cowardly appeasers had let them go too far.

Rejection of diplomacy was explicit from the outset. New York Times chief diplomatic correspondent Thomas Friedman (in effect, the State Department voice at the Times) attributed the Administration’s rejection of “a diplomatic track” to its concern that negotiations might “defuse the crisis” at the cost of “a few token gains in Kuwait” for the Iraqi dictator, perhaps “a Kuwaiti island or minor border adjustments” (August 22). Anything short of capitulation to U.S. force is unacceptable, whatever the consequences.

Diplomatic options opened shortly after Saddam Hussein realized the nature of the forces arrayed against him, apparently with some surprise, though we cannot evaluate their prospects because they were barred at once by Washington’s rigid rejectionism. On August 12, Iraq proposed a settlement linking its withdrawal from Kuwait to withdrawal from other occupied Arab

lands: Syria and Israel from Lebanon, and Israel from the territories it conquered in 1967. Two weeks later, about the time that Friedman warned of the dangers of diplomacy, the Times learned of a considerably more far-reaching offer from Iraq, but chose to suppress it. A similar (or perhaps the same) offer was leaked to the suburban New York journal Newsday, which published it very prominently on August 29, compelling the Times to give it marginal and dismissive notice the next day. The Iraqi offer was delivered to National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft by a former high-ranking U.S. official on August 23. It called for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait in return for the lifting of sanctions, full Iraqi control of the Rumailah oil field that extends about 2 miles into Kuwaiti territory over a disputed border, and guaranteed Iraqi access to the Gulf, which involves the status of two uninhabited islands that had been assigned by Britain to Kuwait in the imperial settlement, thus leaving Iraq virtually landlocked. Iraq also proposed negotiations on an oil agreement “satisfactory to both nations’ national security interest,” on “the stability of the gulf,” and on plans “to alleviate Iraq’s economical and financial problems.” There was no mention of U.S. troop withdrawal or other preconditions. An Administration official who specializes in Mideast affairs described the proposal as “serious” and “negotiable.”

Like others, this diplomatic opportunity quickly passed. Where noted at all in the media, the offer was dismissed on the grounds that the White House was not interested; surely true, and sufficient for the offer to be written out of history, on the assumption that all must serve the whims of power. Iraqi proposals continued to surface, along with others. As of January 15, the last known example was made public on January 2, when U.S. officials disclosed an Iraqi offer “to withdraw from Kuwait if the United States pledges not to attack as soldiers are pulled out, if foreign troops leave the region, and if there is agreement on the Palestinian problem and on the banning of all weapons of mass destruction in the region” (Knut Royce, Newsday, Jan. 3). Officials described the offer as “interesting” because it dropped any claims to the islands in the Gulf and the Rumailah oil field, and “signals Iraqi interest in a negotiated settlement.” A State Department Mideast expert described the proposal as a “serious prenegotiation position.” The U.S. “immediately dismissed the proposal,” Royce continues. It passed without mention in the Times, and was barely noted elsewhere.

The Times did however report on the same day that Yasser Arafat, after consultations with Saddam Hussein, indicated that neither of them “insisted that the Palestinian problem be solved before Iraqi troops get out of Kuwait.” According to Arafat, the report continues, “Mr. Hussein’s statement Aug. 12, linking an Iraqi withdrawal to an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was no longer operative as a negotiating demand.” All that is necessary is “a strong link to be guaranteed by the five permanent members of the Security Council that we have to solve all the problems in the Gulf, in the Middle East and especially the Palestinian cause.”

Two weeks before the deadline for Iraqi withdrawal, then, the possible contours of a diplomatic settlement appeared to be these: Iraq would withdraw completely from Kuwait with a U.S. pledge not to attack withdrawing forces; foreign troops leave the region; the Security Council indicates a serious commitment to settle other major regional problems. Disputed border issues would be left for later consideration. Once again, we cannot evaluate the prospects for settlement along these — surely reasonable — lines, because the offers were flatly rejected, and scarcely entered the media or public awareness. The United States and Britain maintained their commitment to force alone.

The strength of that commitment was again exhibited when France made a last-minute effort to avoid war on January 14, proposing that the Security Council call for “a rapid and massive

withdrawal” from Kuwait along with a statement that Council members would bring their “active contribution” to a settlement of other problems of the region, “in particular, of the Arab-Israeli conflict and in particular to the Palestinian problem by convening, at an appropriate moment, an international conference” to assure “the security, stability and development of this region of the world.” The French proposal was supported by Belgium, a Council member, and Germany, Spain, Italy, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and several non-aligned nations. The U.S. and Britain rejected it (along with the Soviet Union, irrelevantly). U.N. Ambassador Thomas Pickering stated that the proposal was unacceptable, because it went beyond previous U.N. resolutions on the Iraqi invasion.

The Ambassador’s statement was technically correct. The wording of the proposal is drawn from a different source, namely, a Security Council decision of December 20, adjoined to Resolution 681, which calls on Israel to observe the Geneva Conventions in the occupied territories. In that statement the members of the Security Council called for “an international conference, at an appropriate time, properly structured,” to help “achieve a negotiated settlement and lasting peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict.” The statement was excluded from the actual Resolution to prevent a U.S. veto. Note that there was no “linkage” to the Iraqi invasion, which was unmentioned.

We do not, again, know whether the French initiative could have succeeded in averting war. The U.S. feared that it might, and therefore blocked it, in accord with its zealous opposition to any form of diplomacy, and, in this case, its equally strong opposition to an international conference that might lead the way towards a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict that the U.S. has long opposed. In this rejectionism, George Bush was joined by Saddam Hussein, who gave no public indication of any interest in the French proposal, though doing so might possibly have averted war.

The U.S. at once dispatched a huge expeditionary force to the Gulf (even before the annexation, which was therefore not a factor in this decision). That force was virtually doubled after the November elections. While a deterrent force could be kept in the desert and offshore, hundreds of thousands of troops cannot be maintained in the desert for long, and withdrawal of this military force without victory was ruled out by same lofty rhetorical stance that blocked the diplomatic track. The predictable effect of this decision — and, presumably, its purpose — was to undercut the reliance on sanctions, which could only have an impact over an extended period.

We might take a moment to review the standard arguments against sanctions. Advocates of force observed somberly that there is no guarantee that sanctions would work. That is quite true; there is also no guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is, however, a strong probability that in this case sanctions would have been effective, if only because of their extraordinary severity, and because — for once — the usual “sanctions busters” (the U.S., Britain, and their allies) happen to be on board, a simple truth that plainly cannot be expressed.

It was also argued that we cannot delay until sanctions have an effect. Why can’t we wait? One reason offered is that the coalition would not hold — a tacit concession of the lack of support for the U.S. stance. Another is that it would be too costly for us. But the costs of a deterrent force would, in fact, be slight. The main argument is again high moral principle: it offends our sensibilities to stand by while the aggressor remains unpunished. That is not very convincing, to put it mildly. As Edward Herman discussed in the January issue of *Z* magazine, for two decades South Africa defied the U.N. and the World Court on Namibia, looting and terrorizing the occupied country and using it as a base for its aggression against neighboring states, exacting an awesome toll. In the 1980s, the cost of South African terror just to its neighbors is estimated by

the UN Economic Commission on Africa at more than \$60 billion and 1.5 million lives. No one proposed bombing South Africa, or withholding food. The U.S. pursued “quiet diplomacy” and “constructive engagement,” insisting upon “linkage” to a variety of other issues, with thoughtful consideration of the interests of the occupiers. Exactly the same was true when George Shultz attempted to broker Israel’s partial withdrawal from Lebanon, also with ample reward for the aggressor, who had been the beneficiary of U.S. material aid and Security Council vetoes as it battered the defenseless country in the course of completely unprovoked aggression that opened, symbolically, with bombing of civilian targets leaving over 200 killed, including 60 patients in a children’s hospital.

Avoidance of “linkage,” whatever the merits of this stance, is another diplomatic innovation devised for the present case. Obviously, it reflects no high principle. In fact, no argument whatsoever was presented for this radical departure from normal procedure — and none was needed, given the reflexive obedience of the educated classes.

From the outset, then, policy was carefully designed to reduce the likely alternatives to two: war, or Iraqi capitulation to a display of armed might. Crucially, the peaceful means prescribed by international law must be barred. On that fundamental principle, the U.S. and Britain have been adamant, standing almost alone.

The moral level of debate was illustrated by the reaction to an influential interview with the commander of the U.S. forces, General Norman Schwarzkopf, featured in a front-page story in the New York Times, which opened as follows:

“The commander of the American forces facing Iraq said today that his troops could obliterate Iraq, but cautioned that total destruction of that country might not be ‘in the interest of the long-term balance of power in this region.’”

The warning was elaborated by others. In a typical example, Times Middle East specialist Judith Miller, under the heading “Political Cost of Victory Questioned,” wrote:

There are few who doubt that if there is a war in the Persian Gulf, the United States and its allies can “turn Baghdad into a parking lot,” as an American diplomat in the Middle East recently put it. But many analysts are increasingly concerned about the probable effect of such a victory on longer-term American interests in the region. William Crowe, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned last week that “many Arabs would deeply resent a campaign that would necessarily kill large numbers of their Muslim brothers...”

In short, we could slaughter 17 million people and wipe a country off the face of the earth, but mass extermination might be tactically unwise, harmful to our interests. This wrenching moral issue was thoughtfully discussed in many articles. Those who have expressed concern over the decline of our traditional values may rest assured.

High Principle

As noted, the largely uncritical acceptance of Washington’s rhetorical stance by articulate opinion was no insignificant matter. Its effect was to undercut reliance on sanctions and to bar exploration of the diplomatic track, on the grounds that “aggressors cannot be rewarded” — in this unique case. The effect, then, was to leave violence as the only policy option: Iraq might

succumb to the threat, or pay the price. Restricting the options to these was no small achievement, given the unprecedented character of the U.S. stance and its narrow base of real support. The rhetorical stance assumed by the White House, and accepted uncritically by its mainstream critics as well for the most part, therefore merits some attention. Not a great deal of attention is required, however, because the rhetorical stance cannot withstand even a moment's scrutiny.

As a matter of logic, principles cannot be selectively upheld. As a matter of fact, the U.S. is one of the major violators of the principles now grandly proclaimed. We conclude at once, without ambiguity or equivocation, that the U.S. does not uphold these principles. We do not admire Saddam Hussein as a man of principle because he condemns Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights, nor do his laments over human rights abuses in the occupied territories encourage our hopes for a kinder, gentler world. The same reasoning applies when George Bush warns of appeasing aggressors and clutches to his heart the Amnesty International report on Iraqi atrocities (after August 2), but not AI reports on El Salvador, Turkey, Indonesia, the Israeli occupied territories, and a host of others. As for the "wondrous sea change" at the U.N., it has little to do with the end of the Cold War, or the improved behavior of the Russians and Third World degenerates, whose "shrill, anti-Western rhetoric" commonly turns out to be a call for observance of international law, a weak barrier against the depredations of the powerful.

The U.N. was able to respond to Iraq's aggression because — for once — the U.S. happened to be opposed to criminal acts, as distinct from its own invasion of Panama in the first post-Cold War act of aggression, the Turkish invasion and virtual annexation of northern Cyprus, Israel's invasion of Lebanon and annexation of the Golan Heights (sanctions vetoed by the U.S.), the Moroccan invasion of the Sahara (justified on grounds that "one Kuwait in the Arab world is enough"; it is unjust for such vast resources to be in the hands of a tiny population); and much else. As for the unprecedented severity of the U.N. sanctions, that was a direct result of intense U.S. pressures, cajolery, and threats, and the considerations of self-interest that motivate other powers, great and small.

Saddam Hussein is a murderous gangster, just as he was before August 2, when he was an amiable friend and favored trading partner. His invasion of Kuwait is another crime, comparable to others, not as terrible as some; for example, the Indonesian invasion and annexation of East Timor, which reached near-genocidal levels thanks to diplomatic and material support from the two righteous avengers of the Gulf. The truth was revealed by U.N. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his memoirs, describing his success in implementing State Department directives to render the U.N. "utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook" in response to Indonesia's aggression, because "the United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about." It was stated with equal frankness by Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, explaining his country's acquiescence in the forcible annexation of East Timor: "The world is a pretty unfair place, littered with examples of acquisition by force...." Saddam Hussein's aggression, in contrast, called forth Australian Prime Minister Hawke's ringing declaration that "big countries cannot invade small neighbors and get away with it." If Libya were to join the Butcher of Baghdad in exploiting Kuwait's oil riches, we would be hearing calls to nuke the bastards. The reaction was slightly different when Australia joined the Butcher of Jakarta a few weeks ago in development of the rich petroleum resources of the Timor sea.

U.N. peacekeeping efforts have regularly been frustrated by the United States. The first post-Cold War U.N. session (1989–90) was typical in this regard. Three Security Council resolutions were vetoed, all by the U.S. Two condemned George Bush's murderous invasion of Panama, the

third condemned Israeli human rights abuses; the U.S. vetoed a similar resolution the following May. Britain and France joined the U.S. in blocking one of the resolutions on Panama; the other, condemning U.S. violations of diplomatic rights, was voted 13–1, Britain abstaining. The General Assembly passed two resolutions calling on all states to observe international law. The U.S. voted against both, alone with Israel. The first condemned the continuing U.S. support for the contras, the second, U.S. economic warfare against Nicaragua — both declared “unlawful” by the World Court, but irrelevantly, by the standards of the U.S. and its allies. A resolution condemning the acquisition of territory by force passed 151–3 (U.S., Israel, Dominica); this was yet another call for a political settlement of the Arab-Israel conflict, which the U.S. has blocked for 20 years.

The U.S. is far in the lead in the past 20 years in Security Council vetoes. Britain is second, France a distant third, and the USSR fourth. The situation is similar in the General Assembly, where the U.S. regularly votes against resolutions on aggression, international law, human rights abuses, disarmament, and other relevant issues, often alone, or with a few client states. That has been the pattern since the U.N. ceased to serve as a virtual instrument of U.S. foreign policy. There is no reason to expect that the Soviet collapse will induce the U.S. and Britain to end their campaign against international law, diplomacy, and collective security — a campaign that had little to do with the Cold War, as a look at cases shows. The record offers no prospects for a bright new era.

The actual stance of the U.S. was made clear during the debate over its invasion of Panama, when U.N. Ambassador Thomas Pickering lectured the Security Council on the meaning of Article 51 of the Charter, which restricts the use of force to self-defense against armed attack until the Council acts. These words permit the U.S. to use “armed force...to defend our interests,” Pickering explained to his backward students. The same Article permits the U.S. to invade Panama to prevent its “territory from being used as a base for smuggling drugs into the United States,” the Justice Department added. Washington has even claimed the right of “self-defense against future attack” under Article 51 (justifying the terror bombing of Libya). In brief, like other states, the U.S. will do what it chooses, regarding law and principle as ideological weapons, to be used when serviceable, to be discarded when they are a nuisance. We do no one any favors by suppressing these truisms.

Washington’s rejection of “linkage” in this particular case is readily understandable when we dispense with illusion. The U.S. opposes diplomatic resolution of each of the major issues; therefore it opposes linking them. Simple enough.

There are two crucial regional issues, apart from Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, a fact underscored by the Iraqi proposal released by U.S. officials on January 2. The first is the Arab-Israel conflict, the second, the matter of weapons of mass destruction. On both issues, the U.S. has been consistently opposed to the diplomatic track.

Consider first the Arab-Israel conflict. There has long been a broad international consensus on a political settlement of this conflict. The U.S. and Israel have opposed it, and have been isolated in this rejectionism, as the recent General Assembly vote of 151–3 indicates. The President likes to tell us how James Baker has labored to advance the peace process, but he remains silent about the terms of the famed Baker plan, with its unwavering support for the Israeli government “peace plan.” Its basic principles ban an “additional Palestinian state” (Jordan already being one); bar any “change in the status of Judea, Samaria and Gaza other than in accordance with the basic guidelines of the [Israeli] Government,” which preclude any meaningful Palestinian self-determination; reject negotiations with the PLO, thus denying Palestinians the right

to choose their own political representation; and call for “free elections” under Israeli military rule with much of the Palestinian leadership rotting in prison camps. Unsurprisingly, the official U.S. position is kept carefully under wraps, and diplomacy is not a policy option.

Another of the President’s favorite slogans is that “it is the world against Saddam Hussein.” It is even more true that it is the world against George Bush and his predecessors, as the recent U.N. vote again illustrates. For this reason, the U.S. has consistently opposed an international conference on the Middle East. The excuse offered now is that we must not reward aggression. But that cannot be the reason. The U.S. is commonly quite happy to reward aggression, and it opposed an international conference long before Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, and continued to oppose a call for such a conference even when it was not “linked” to Iraq, as noted above. The real reason is that at an international conference, the U.S. would be isolated. Such a conference could only lead to pressures for a political settlement that the U.S. rejects. Therefore, Washington opposes an international conference. For the same reasons the U.S. has vetoed Security Council resolutions calling for a political settlement and blocked other diplomatic initiatives for the past 20 years.

The same is true with regard to weapons of mass destruction, surely an issue that must be considered on a regional basis, hence with the dread “linkage,” as in all similar cases. In April 1990, Saddam Hussein, then still George Bush’s friend and ally, offered to destroy his chemical and biological weapons if Israel agreed to destroy its non-conventional weapons — including its nuclear weapons. The State Department welcomed Hussein’s offer to destroy his own arsenal, but rejected the link “to other issues or weapons systems.” Note that these remain unspecified. Acknowledgement of the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons would raise the question why all U.S. aid to Israel is not illegal under congressional legislation of the 1970s that bars aid to any country engaged in clandestine nuclear weapons development.

The story continues. In December, speaking at a joint press conference with Secretary of State Baker, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze proposed a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East if Iraq withdraws from Kuwait. Baker gave “qualified support,” the press observed, but “carefully avoided using the words ‘nuclear-free zone’ ” — for the reason just noted. A week later, Iraq offered to “scrap chemical and mass destruction weapons if Israel was also prepared to do so,” Reuters reported. The offer seems to have passed in silence here. Iraq’s more recent call for “the banning of all weapons of mass destruction in the region” as part of a negotiated settlement of its withdrawal from Kuwait has already been mentioned.

We gain further understanding of the high principles inspiring the U.S. and its British partner when we look at the forces assembled, however ambiguously, under their flag. It has been hard to overlook the fact that there is little to distinguish Saddam Hussein from Syria’s Hafez el-Assad, apart from current service to U.S. needs; in fact, prior to August 2 their rankings were often reversed within the doctrinal system. An inconvenient Amnesty International release of November 2 reported that Saudi security forces tortured and abused hundreds of Yemeni “guest workers,” also expelling 750,000 of them, “for no apparent reason other than their nationality or their suspected opposition to the Saudi Arabian government’s position in the gulf crisis.” Apparently George Bush, though an avid reader of AI reports (so we are told), somehow missed this one. The press also looked the other way, though in the case of Arab states, there is no shortage of commentators to denounce their evil nature.

It was also necessary to overlook Turkey’s abysmal human rights record, not to speak of its conquest and virtual annexation of northern Cyprus, with thousands of casualties and hundreds

of thousands of refugees after an orgy of killing, torture, rape and pillage to extirpate the last remnants of Greek culture back to classical antiquity. Nonetheless, few winced when George Bush praised Turkey for serving “as a protector of peace” as it joined those who “stand up for civilized values around the world,” opposing Saddam Hussein.

The alliance with Turkey also required some fancy footwork because of the question of the Kurds in northern Iraq. It is difficult not to notice that Iraqi forces facing U.S. troops would be severely weakened if the U.S. were to support a Kurdish rebellion. Washington rejected this option, presumably out of concern that a Kurdish rebellion in Iraq might spread to Eastern Turkey, where the huge Kurdish population (subjected to torture and other severe punishments for the crime of speaking or writing Kurdish or otherwise identifying themselves as Kurds) suffer brutal oppression. In a rare notice of the issue in the press, the Wall Street Journal observed that “the West fears that pressing the ‘Kurdish question’ with Turkey, Syria and Iran...could weaken the anti-Iraq alliance.” The report adds that “the U.S. administration pointedly refused to meet with an Iraqi Kurdish leader who visited Washington in August” to ask for support, and that “Kurds say Ankara is using the Gulf crisis and Turkey’s resulting popularity in the West as cover for a crackdown” — while Western commentary now laments Iraq’s vicious treatment of the Kurds, whose grim fate has been cynically exploited by the West for many years. Other reports confirm new population transfers in the regions near the Iraqi border, with several hundred villages either partially or totally evacuated, though increased press censorship — the most severe since 1925, according to an informed Turkish source — leaves the matter obscure.

The avoidance of this topic is particularly remarkable because of its relevance to the sole issue that is supposed to concern us, in accord with our traditional values: saving American lives. Evidently, this concern was outweighed by the higher priority of protecting Turkey’s right to repress its Kurdish population.

Proceeding through the list, the plea that Washington is inspired by any wisp of principle can hardly be sustained. Inquiry will reveal nothing beyond the usual reasons of state.

It is child’s play to demonstrate that Saddam Hussein is a major criminal, who would be subjected to the judgment of Nuremberg in a just world. Many others would stand beside him before the bar of justice, among them many of his most passionate accusers, some well within the reach of U.S. law enforcement. The arguments advanced to justify the bombing of Baghdad might be taken seriously if they were put forth by people who had also been calling eloquently for the bombing of Jakarta, Ankara, Tel Aviv, Cape Town, and many other capitals, not excluding Washington.

Returning to the two questions raised at the outset, the answer to the first is straightforward: the response to Saddam Hussein’s aggression is unprecedented because he stepped on the wrong toes. The U.S. is upholding no high principle in the Gulf. Nor is any other state.

Let’s also be clear about a further point. Since the justifications for war are based on an appeal to principle that is clearly fraudulent, it follows that no reason at all has been given for going to war. None whatsoever. Doubtless there are reasons, but not the ones that have been offered, because these plainly cannot be taken seriously.

The Guardians of the Gulf

Let us turn now to the second question raised: Why have the U.S. and Britain insisted on the threat or use of force to attain the ends generally shared, instead of sanctions and diplomacy? Why do we find two major First World military forces in the Gulf, the U.S. and Britain, while other powers declined to give more than token support – even financial? Furthermore, even after extensive U.S. pressures, the Security Council could not be moved beyond an ambiguous resolution authorizing “all necessary means” to secure Iraqi withdrawal: diplomacy, sanctions, or military action by those intent on undertaking it. As noted by David Scheffer, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the resolution “neither requests nor commands the use of military force” and “avoids the terminology of war and such explicit terms as ‘armed force’ or ‘military measures’.” When the history of this period emerges, if it ever does, it may well turn out that, in reality, the U.N. record did not deviate much from the standard pattern of attempts at peacekeeping frustrated by U.S. veto; in this case, attempts to pursue the course of sanctions and diplomacy, blocked by U.S. threats and pressures, leading the U.N. in effect to wash its hands of the matter, never pursuing the procedures by which the Security Council may make “plans for the application of armed force,” according to the Charter.

At this point, one can only speculate about the reasons for the U.S.-British insistence on force, but there are relevant factors, including the historical background and the nature of the emerging world order.

The U.S. and U.K. largely established the post-war settlement in the region. A principle guiding U.S. policy has been that the incomparable energy resources of the Gulf region, and the enormous profits reaped, must remain under the effective control of the U.S., its corporations, and dependable allies and clients. Britain viewed matters in a similar light. In the early post-war years, there was considerable conflict between the U.S. and Britain over the terms of the imperial settlement, resolved by the 1950s within the global order dominated by the United States.

Iraq challenged Anglo-American privilege in 1958, when a nationalist military coup overthrew a dependent regime. There is, of course, an earlier history, including British terror bombing of civilians and the request of the RAF Middle East command for authorization to use chemical weapons “against recalcitrant Arabs as experiment.” The request was granted by the Secretary of State at the War office, who was “strongly in favour” of “using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes” (Winston Churchill) – another illustration of the “universal values” that animate our traditions.

In his history of the oil industry, Christopher Rand describes the 1958 coup as “America’s biggest setback in the region since the war,” “a shocking experience for the United States” that “undoubtedly provok[ed] an agonizing reappraisal of our nation’s entire approach to the Persian Gulf.” Recently released British and American documents help flesh out earlier surmises.

Kuwait was a particular concern. The “new Hitler” of the day was the secular nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and it was feared that his pan-Arab nationalism might spread to Iraq, Kuwait, and beyond. One reaction to the 1958 coup was a U.S. Marine landing in Lebanon to prop up the regime, and apparent authorization of use of nuclear weapons by President Eisenhower “to prevent any unfriendly forces from moving into Kuwait” (in his words). Britain considered several options for Kuwait, the least harsh being a grant of nominal independence, but with acceptance of “the need, if things go wrong, ruthlessly to intervene, whoever it is has caused the trouble” (Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd). Lloyd stressed “the complete United States solidarity

with us over the Gulf,” including the need to “take firm action to maintain our position in Kuwait” and the “similar resolution” of the U.S. “in relations to the Aramco oilfields” in Saudi Arabia; the Americans “agree that at all costs these oilfields [in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar] must be kept in Western hands.” Six months before the Iraqi coup, Lloyd summarized the major concerns, including free access to Gulf oil production “on favourable terms and for sterling,” and “suitable arrangements for the investment of the surplus revenues of Kuwait,” a matter of no little significance.

Declassified U.S. documents outline British goals in similar terms: “the U.K. asserts that its financial stability would be seriously threatened if the petroleum from Kuwait and the Persian Gulf area were not available to the U.K. on reasonable terms, if the U.K. were deprived of the large investments made by that area in the U.K. and if sterling were deprived of the support provided by Persian Gulf oil.” These British needs, and the fact that “An assured source of oil is essential to the continued economic viability of Western Europe,” provide some reason for the U.S. “to support, or if necessary assist, the British in using force to retain control of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf.” In November 1958, the National Security Council recommended that the U.S. “Be prepared to use force, but only as a last resort, either alone or in support of the United Kingdom,” if these interests are threatened. In January, the National Security Council had advised that Israel might provide a barrier to Arab nationalism, articulating the basis for one element of the system of control over the Middle East developed in the years that followed.

The concern that Gulf oil and riches be available to support the ailing British economy was extended by the early 1970s to the U.S. economy, which was visibly declining relative to Japan and German-led Europe. Furthermore, control over oil serves as a means to influence these rivals/allies, a fact noted in the internal record in the early post-war years. One of the major architects of the New World Order of that day, George Kennan, advised that Japan should be helped to reindustrialize within the U.S.-dominated global framework, but that the U.S. should keep control of its energy system, which would give the U.S. “veto power” if some time in the distant future, Japan might get out of hand. That “veto power” is not as strong today, with the decline of U.S. hegemony; but influence over oil production, prices, and access is still not a negligible factor in world affairs. And as the U.S. and Britain lose their former economic dominance, privileged access to the rich profits of Gulf oil production is a matter of serious concern.

Capital flow from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other Gulf principalities to the U.S. and Britain has provided significant support for their economies, corporations, and financial institutions. These are among the reasons why the U.S. and Britain have often not been averse to increases in oil price. The issues are too intricate to explore here, but these factors surely remain operative. It comes as no great surprise that the two states that established the imperial settlement and have been its main beneficiaries and guarantors are now girding for war in the Gulf, while others keep their distance.

Also worth noting is a division in the Arab world. By and large, support for the U.S. military initiative tends to decline as the influence of the public increases. Commentators have occasionally noted that support for the U.S. military initiative was least in the governments that had “nascent democratic movements”: Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, and Tunisia (Judith Miller, *New York Times*). Administration analysts expressed concern that if U.S. troops were kept in place too long, the “Islamic religious periods” (the Hajj and Ramadan) would allow more expression of popular feelings and “could set off protests and perhaps coups” that “could topple western-oriented governments in the region and cut the diplomatic ground out from under US-led troops facing Iraq”

(Peter Gosselin, Boston Globe). Similar concerns are regularly voiced about the home front. The standard conclusion is that the U.S. must therefore strike fast. Fear of the public is a normal feature of statecraft, as familiar as it is instructive.

The New World Order

Secretary Baker's comments on the new "era full of promise" raise another issue relevant to explanation of the U.S.-U.K. stance. The New World Order that has become a virtual cliché since August is real enough, though the lovely phrases about peace and justice are another matter.

Basic elements of the New World Order were coming into focus 20 years ago, with the emergence of a "tripolar world" as economic power diffused within U.S. domains. The U.S. remains the dominant military power, but its economic superiority, though still manifest, has declined, and may well decline further as the costs of Reagan's party for the rich fall due. The collapse of Soviet tyranny adds several new dimensions. First, new pretexts are needed for Third World intervention, a serious challenge for the educated classes. Second, there are now prospects for the "Latin Americanization" of much of the former Soviet empire, that is, for its reversion to a quasi-colonial status, providing resources, cheap labor, markets, investment opportunities, and other standard Third World amenities. But the U.S. and Britain are not in the lead in this endeavor. A third important consequence is that the U.S. is more free than before to use force, the Soviet deterrent having disappeared. That may well increase the temptation for Washington to transfer problems to the arena of forceful confrontation. The United States intends to maintain its near monopoly of force, with no likely contestant for that role. One effect will be exacerbation of domestic economic difficulties; another, a renewed temptation to "go it alone" in relying on the threat of force rather than diplomacy, generally regarded as an annoying encumbrance.

These factors too help to clarify the varied reactions to the Gulf crisis. War is dangerous; defusing the crisis without a demonstration of the efficacy of force is also an unwelcome outcome for Washington. As for the costs, plainly it would be advantageous for them to be shared, but not at the price of sacrificing the role of lone enforcer. These conflicting concerns led to a sharp elite split over the tactical choice between the threat of force and reliance on sanctions, with the Administration holding to the former course.

In the New World Order, the Third World domains must still be controlled, sometimes by force. This task has been the responsibility of the United States, but with its relative economic decline, the burden becomes harder to shoulder. One reaction is that the U.S. must persist in its historic task, while others pay the bills. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger explained that the emerging New World Order will be based on "a kind of new invention in the practice of diplomacy": others will finance U.S. intervention to keep order. In the London Financial Times, a respected commentator on international economic affairs described the Gulf crisis as a "watershed event in US international relations," which will be seen in history as having "turned the US military into an internationally financed public good." In the 1990s, he continues, "there is no realistic alternative [to] the US military assuming a more explicitly mercenary role than it has played in the past" (David Hale, FT, Nov. 21).

The financial editor of a leading U.S. conservative daily puts the point less delicately: we must exploit our "virtual monopoly in the security market...as a lever to gain funds and economic concessions" from Germany and Japan (William Neikirk, Chicago Tribune, Sept. 9). The U.S.

has “cornered the West’s security market” and will therefore be “the world’s rent-a-cops”; the phrase “rent-a-thug” might be more accurate, if less appealing. Some will call us “Hessians,” he continues, but “that’s a terribly demeaning phrase for a proud, well-trained, well-financed and well-respected military”; and whatever anyone may say, “we should be able to pound our fists on a few desks” in Japan and Europe, and “extract a fair price for our considerable services,” demanding that our rivals “buy our bonds at cheap rates, or keep the dollar propped up, or better yet, pay cash directly into our Treasury.” “We could change this role” of enforcer, he concludes, “but with it would go much of our control over the world economic system.”

The British right has added its special touch as well. The editor of the London Sunday Telegraph writes that the “new job” for “the post-Cold War world” is “to help build and sustain a world order stable enough to allow the advanced economies of the world to function without constant interruption and threat from the Third World,” a task that will require “instant intervention from the advanced nations” and perhaps even “pre-emptive action.” Britain is “no match for Germany and Japan when it comes to wealth creation; or even for France and Italy. But when it comes to shouldering world responsibilities we are more than a match.” England will thus join the U.S., with its similar configuration of strengths and weaknesses, in “rising to this challenge.” The offer is welcomed by American neoconservatives, happy to have support in the mercenary role.

That role is also welcomed by the local administrators of Gulf riches. A high Gulf official quoted in the Wall Street Journal sees no reason for his son to “die for Kuwait.” “We have our white slaves from America to do that,” he explains with a “chuckle” — not having looked too closely at the skin color of his mercenaries, and forgetting momentarily that those who have the guns will call the shots, if he forgets his responsibilities.

The “new job” to which the editor of the Sunday Telegraph refers is actually a very old one, though it needs a new guise. George Bush has been much criticized for his failures as a “communicator,” unable to articulate the reasons (necessarily noble) for the attack on Panama and the insistence on force in the Gulf. But the criticism is unfair. The reflex appeal to “defense against the Russians” had lost its last shreds of plausibility, and new constructions are not so simple to devise.

This vision of the future helps illuminate Washington’s reaction to the Gulf crisis. It implies that the U.S. must continue to enforce obedience (called “order” or “stability” in the doctrinal system), with the support of other industrial powers. Riches funnelled by the oil-producing monarchies will help prop up the troubled economies of the guardians of order. To be sure, force is only a last resort. It is more cost-effective to use the IMF than the Marines or the CIA if possible; but it is not always possible.

Parallel domestic developments add another dimension to the picture. Studies by the U.S. Labor Department and others predict serious shortages of skilled labor (everything from scientists and managers to technicians and typists) as the educational system deteriorates, part of the collapse of infrastructure accelerated by Reaganite social and economic policies. The tendency may be mitigated by modification of immigration laws to encourage a brain drain, but that is not likely to prove adequate. The predicted result is that the cost of skilled labor will rise and transnational corporations will transfer research, product development and design, marketing, and other such operations elsewhere. For the growing underclass, opportunities will still be available as Hessians. It takes little imagination to picture the consequences if such expectations — not inevitable, but also not unrealistic — are indeed realized.

For the traditional victims, the New World Order is not likely to be an improvement on the old, and the prospects for citizens of the mercenary states are also less than attractive, if they permit this scenario to unfold.

Let's return finally to the initial questions raised. Choice of policy is determined by the goals that are sought. If the goal had been to secure Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, settle regional issues, and move towards a more decent world, then Washington would have followed the peaceful means prescribed by international law: sanctions and diplomacy. If the goal is to firm up the mercenary-enforcer role and establish the rule of force, then the Administration policy of narrowing the options to capitulation or war has a certain chilling logic.

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