

## GULF WAR LIES - STRICTLY BUSH

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Only a small minority of Americans take offense with President Bush's successful war against Saddam Hussein, but those who do experience pessimism verging on despair. We do not consider President Bush a paragon of effective statesmanship, but in fact an unscrupulous opportunist who probably belongs in prison right now because of his role in the Iran-Contra scandal. We also recall his earlier service as Director of the CIA, when he assembled a special team of intelligence analysts to exaggerate Soviet military capacity in order to justify increased defense expenditures--a strategy that continued to be implemented in later administrations. And we recall that he was probably involved in the Reagan Campaign Committee's secret Paris negotiations with Iranians in October, 1980, to postpone the release of American embassy prisoners in Iran until Reagan's election and inauguration the following year. We cannot forget that Bush's White House office was in steady telephone contact with CIA agents in Central America during the Iran-Contra years, and that it was only because Democrats sought to prevent another Watergate that Oliver North and his superiors, Bush included, were let off the hook in congressional hearings. Nor can we forget how Bush's 1988 presidential campaign strategy linked Dukakis with Willie Horton in undoubtedly the most despicable series of racist television ads in the recent history of electoral politics.

It also seems plain that the invasion Bush launched against Noriega in Panama, described as "Just Cause," was unjustified by normal standards of international diplomacy. Its purpose was supposedly to enforce election results, as if our government guarantees honest elections in all the rest of the dictatorships and military juntas we support worldwide. Our government spokesmen claim to have "liberated" Panamanians, but recent reports indicate that their economy has collapsed since our invasion became an occupation and lost its headline appeal. Bush also supposedly wanted to curtail the drug trade in Panama, but it thrives more than ever now that Noriega is out of the picture. A more likely explanation for our invasion is that Noriega, like his predecessor, Torrijos, pursued ties with Castro unacceptable to our government and that Bush wanted to install a puppet regime in order to restore our authority over the Panama Canal. Also, it seems likely that Bush was conducting a personal vendetta against Noriega, who had boasted that he knew enough about Bush to destroy his chances as a presidential candidate. One takes for granted that Noriega referred to Bush's role in the diversion of Panamanian drug profits to fund the Contras preceding the Iran-Contra connection, but one wonders whether Bush, like the CIA, had prior knowledge of Noriega's probable assassination of Torrijos in July, 1981, when Noriega was his intelligence director and on excellent terms with the CIA. Whatever Noriega's information about Bush, his eradication seems to have been a central objective of the invasion. Does anybody truly think he would be alive today if he had not found asylum in the Vatican embassy? Meanwhile, our military invasion of Panama killed many more civilians than we have admitted--somewhere between one and two thousand.<sup>1</sup> According to Alexander Cockburn in a recent issue of *The Nation*, excess corpses were apparently buried uncounted and unphotographed in mass graves, some at sea, some flown abroad for mass burial in Honduras.

Barely a year later, President Bush has staged a second and much bigger invasion in Kuwait and portions of Iraq, this time resulting from failed diplomacy followed by a strategy that repeatedly entailed imposing on Saddam Hussein the choice between humiliation and the necessity of going to war. During Iraq's war against Iran, we armed both nations--one openly, the other secretly--in the latter instance by cultivating ties already made by the Reagan Campaign Committee. Our purpose, like Chamberlain's with Hitler and Stalin in 1937, was to perpetuate warfare between the two nations in order to eliminate both of them as a regional military threat. When peace erupted because we accidentally shot down an Iranian airliner, there is evidence--spotty but discernible--that we began to focus our hostilities against Iraq, the ostensible winner of the war. Hussein suspected this might have been the reason for our encouragement of Kuwait's rejection of OPEC quotas, thus reducing the price of oil in order to depress Iraq's oil revenue. Especially maddening to Hussein was Kuwait's extraction of oil from the southern tip of the Rumaila oil field, which was otherwise mostly located in Iraq. In effect, Kuwait was using slant drilling to siphon off Iraq's oil, thus reducing its oil supply, and then selling it well in excess of its allotment to depress oil prices, thus preventing Iraq from making any profit from its own oil reserves on the international market. After repeated overtures to Kuwait, Hussein sought to mount a full-scale invasion using armaments acquired from the U.S. during the war against Iran. At this point it seems he primarily wanted to maximize his leverage in final negotiations for settling boundaries--something that might have happened anyway if our Secretary of State, James Baker, had accepted Tariq Aziz's January 9 offer to deal directly with Hussein. But before launching such an invasion Hussein consulted April Glaspie, our ambassador to Iraq, and seems to have thought he had obtained U.S. support, with its opposition limited to relatively tepid public statements by State Department spokesmen. Unfortunately, what Glaspie might have tried to suggest--that a border readjustment could be tolerated that let Iraq annex the southern tip of the Rumaila oil field--could also be interpreted as *de facto* acceptance of a full-scale invasion, and apparently it was.<sup>23</sup> So the question remains whether there was any duplicity involved on the part of either Hussein or the State Department at the time. More likely, one suspects that Iraq's immediate success invading Kuwait produced second thoughts in the Bush administration, especially the President himself during his publicized week's fishing trip supposedly to get away from politics. Wider considerations became obvious, and a different strategy therefore seemed warranted despite promises to Hussein.

In any event, Iraq launched its invasion eight days later, on August 2, and it quickly occupied the entire nation, not just the Rumaila oil fields, and very quickly Bush switched to an entirely new plan by convincing the U.N. to mount a siege, Desert Shield, which could then be converted to an air attack followed by a full-scale invasion, Desert Storm (or Schwarzkopf's "blitzkrieg") once the 1990 midterm election and a U.N.-imposed waiting period had elapsed. In retrospect it seems obvious that Desert Storm was entirely unnecessary if the liberation of Kuwait were our sole concern--which, of course, it was not. Despite Hussein's bluster and unpredictability, a satisfactory negotiated settlement could have been reached any time we wanted if our government had tolerated Hussein's face-saving proclamations of success needed for the purposes of Iraqi domestic consumption. But this it was unwilling to do. When Gorbachev and Hussein finally sought to avoid combat by proposing at the last minute a three-week deadline for troop withdrawal, Bush demanded a one-week deadline and treated it as surrender, with Hussein given exactly twenty-four hours to accept. As in previous exchanges, Bush's counter-offer was obviously made to produce sufficient humiliation to be rejected.

. On February 24, once a day's grace had elapsed beyond our deadline, our troops quickly attacked, and with sufficient dispatch that it seemed Bush wanted to avoid new Security Council deliberations and any further negotiations with Gorbachev and Hussein. When Iraqi troops fled northward, their exit routes were cut off and tens of thousands were slaughtered despite the fact that they were trying to retreat from Kuwait as we had demanded. For they were killed in the process of retreating, and there was very little return fire. Nor did it matter to Bush and his administration that the overwhelming majority were conscripts who had been forcibly inducted into the army. By preventing negotiations, the U.S. government gave itself the opportunity to kill eighty thousand--perhaps a hundred thousand--Iraqi troops and civilians. The exact number we'll never know, since, once again, battlefield corpses were left uncounted--and, with few exceptions, without having been photographed, apparently to avoid a sympathetic backlash. It turns out the entire operation was a wholesale massacre with relatively little danger to our own troops. As one pilot explained, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. We killed primarily in order to kill--this seems to have been as much our objective during the final hundred hours of the war as the destruction of weapons or the capture of territory.

Cicero's cynical query, *Cui bono?* ("Who reaps the benefits?") must be answered in the plural. Winners include, (a) all Republicans, big and little, (b) Washington lobbyists and politicians charged with corruption by the press but thereafter able to obtain "last refuge" as patriots, (c) other nations handsomely paid off for their support--Egypt, Syria, Israel, Argentina, the U.S.S.R., and god knows who else, and (d) Islamic fundamentalism now that another secular Arab state has been bombed into the dark ages. Of course the biggest winner is President Bush, who is now apparently a shoo-in for the next presidential election, and with such momentum that he might even be able to play more of a statesman in his next campaign instead of a Willie Horton-style mudslinger. But his record is frightening. Add up his hatchet jobs over recent years--Dukakis, Noriega, and Hussein--and you have the story of a political opportunist par excellence who has catapulted himself from potential disgrace because of the Iran-Contra arrangement into an international role Hitler or Napoleon would have envied. Two tinhorn dictators down in two years--not a bad record. But who is the next third-world leader to be vilified and driven from power--Castro, Qaddafi, King Hussein, or somebody in sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia? And how might Bush use his popularity to go after others less tarnished by their connection with our government.

Another major winner (proving that old-fashioned imperialism is alive and well, if in a new guise) is the American economy, since our gulf crusade has effectively dismantled OPEC by destroying one of its members (Iraq) and by putting two others (Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) under our thumb, both of them now permanently dependent on our defenses and too much in need of investment capital to abide by the needed OPEC quotas for maintaining higher oil prices. By dominating OPEC, we ourselves can fine-tune the price of oil to suit our domestic economy. A drop of \$10 per barrel can be expected to bring a 1.5% increase per annum in our GNP, though our government can be expected to impose an intermediate price--say in the range of \$18 to \$20 per barrel--to stimulate our economy without too badly discouraging oil production so profitable to the State of Texas and oil investors in particular, including the Bush family. Also of benefit to our economy will be the investments approaching \$100 billion that Kuwait is expected to make in rebuilding itself, most of its contracts going to U.S. corporations such as Bechtel and

Caterpillar tractor. And of course our military-industrial complex has been given a new lease on life. Our “defense”-dependent industries were in desperate straits once the U.S.S.R. abandoned the Cold War. But Congress’s budget cuts early this summer permitted Desert Shield/Storm as an unlimited supplemental expense, and this, it turns out, was the only leverage needed to tilt the economy upwards. Now we must pay to replenish our munitions, and new foreign markets can be expected for hardware whose superiority has so effectively been demonstrated in combat. Moreover, the war will very likely pay for itself. The entire cost of the operation is estimated in the range of \$50 billion, and other nations have promised to contribute as much as \$53.9 billion. If they all pay up, our nation’s economy will profit for the first time from what amounts to a mercenary army--along with Hollywood, it seems, the only American export still fully competitive in world markets. Not bad for having produced at the bargain rate of approximately \$700 thousand apiece a mere eighty thousand corpses, give or take ten or twenty thousand.

However, there are also a few negatives that cannot be discounted. Our preexisting economic dislocations that date from Vietnam and earlier will be perpetuated as long as our government avoids taking the necessary steps to deal with domestic problems that worsen each year. Our racial and cultural minorities will continue to be impoverished, our families divided, our schools in serious difficulties, our crime rate out of control, our industries no longer competitive in normal export markets, and many of our financial institutions on the brink of ruin. As documented by Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, the Cold War has both directly and indirectly helped to bring us to this pass, and with our two gratuitous invasions against Noriega and Saddam Hussein we have merely prolonged the Cold War’s artificial and ultimately harmful benefits for another couple of years. How much longer will it take before we confront our real problems?

Yet another winner is Israel, and this has probably been a major consideration since the very beginning. Now that Iraq has defeated Iran, Iraq has become Israel’s biggest potential enemy in the region; and now that Iraq itself has just been defeated free of charge, Israel is left with no hostile armies east of itself. Voila--total success. Moreover, the U.S. is actually rewarding Israel for having been given the opportunity to make this happen without its direct involvement (which would have antagonized Arab neighbors) by paying perhaps \$650 million in inflated damage costs for a few relatively harmless missile attacks against Israel. But to the point: whether Hussein realized it or not (and he probably did), he at least posed a major threat to Israel after having defeated Iran, and it could only have been considered the highest priority among the Israeli to neutralize Iraq as well. The most strident Zionist journalists such as Rosenthal and Safire of *The New York Times* have accordingly advocated scorched-earth tactics against Iraq, and it turns out they got most of what they wanted. Now Israel can feel entirely secure from military threat while building and defending new West Bank settlements without any necessity to seek and implement an equitable solution to the Palestinian issue. When the time is ripe (despite assurances to the contrary), Israel might even be able to incorporate the West Bank into Israel and expel Palestinians into Jordan without significant military opposition such as Iraq would have been able to provide. Again, it is emphasized that Saddam Hussein might not have anticipated all of these eventualities, but it seems Zionists did, and historic circumstances very likely justify their assessment. Last year, President Mubarak of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan had sought to enlist the U.S. in the difficult but laudable task of beginning negotiations to grant limited territorial privileges to Palestinians. However, their

“peace offensive” was totally rejected by Israel despite the concessions of the PLO and almost everybody else. With the sudden defeat of Iran, however, Hussein would at last have been able to back up Palestinian demands with Iraq’s military threat, the biggest available since the 1978 Camp David Accords, when Sadat successfully negotiated a peace treaty with Israel for Egypt alone. However, even if Hussein has wanted to pursue such a course, he could not even begin to implement this strategy until Kuwait was forced to abide by OPEC oil quotas, thus lifting oil prices to a level (in the range of \$24 per barrel) that permitted Iraq to pursue a guns-plus-butter foreign policy. In his effort to do this, Hussein overextended his authority, giving Bush the opportunity to defeat his army, thus precluding any future threat to Israel, whether intended or not.

To promote solidarity in Desert Shield/Storm, the Bush administration promised friendly Arab leaders that once U.S. troops defeated Iraq it would resume exerting pressure on Israel to negotiate a Palestinian settlement. Israel would supposedly be in a better position to cooperate now that Iraq is no longer a potential military threat. However, Shamir’s arch-conservative coalition can be expected to continue stonewalling such an effort, and Bush, strictly a pragmatist, can be expected to make a half-hearted effort for a few months--long enough to satisfy his oil-producing Arab allies--and then to ignore Israel’s transgressions as it plays out its advantage. This is exactly what Reagan did in response to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon after the Camp David Accords. As many Arabists had predicted, Israel’s normalization of relations with Egypt at Camp David in 1979 permitted its invasion of Lebanon three years later. Sure enough, this is what happened, and it can happen again. In comparable fashion, for example, Israel might now try to take advantage of the total absence of any kind of a military threat on its eastern front by finally imposing its anticipated Diaspora of Palestinians into Jordan within the next few years. If this happens, however, let it be recognized that the entire Near East would be even further destabilized--reduced to perpetual hostilities between Israel’s military juggernaut and the impoverished Arab fundamentalists without any support from foreign armies. All who live in the region would be losers, even Arabs who fought with Americans against Iraq, even (one suspects) the Israeli themselves, doomed to live in a permanent garrison state, surrounded by a sea of permanent enemies into the indefinite future. And Americans would be universally loathed for our role in having helped to bring this about.

And finally we must not overlook the impact upon American politics. What offends me the most about Bush’s victory at the expense of Hussein is the knee-jerk patriotism that has thrived in recent weeks. Our whorish media--and “whorish” is the most appropriate word--seems primarily responsible, since it rather too gladly musters its talent and resources to suit government ends. It chafes about military censorship, but in fact it has long since internalized both the means and ends of censorship. It caters to ignorance by exaggerating patriotic stereotypes that pit good guys (us) against bad guys (them, whoever they might be). Its tone is dripping with righteous irony when referring to the enemy but almost exultant with admiration when referring to Bush and his team of crisis artists. If a Ramsey Clark returns from the war theater with observations embarrassing to the United States, he is universally ignored. On the other hand, if atrocity stories about Iraq might be useful, they are featured, but just as quickly forgotten if they turn out to be false (for example all the incubator babies supposedly killed in Kuwait’s hospitals). If damage control is needed, for example when one of our “smart” bombs kills a couple hundred mothers and children in a bomb shelter, as in fact did happen, the media

patches together the necessary excuses, some of which contradict others: (a) the site served as a secret command center at a lower level; (b) besides, mothers and children were secretly bedded there for propaganda purposes if and when we destroyed the site; (c) besides, Iraq should have anticipated how powerful our bombs were, and (d) besides, only seventy bodies could be removed the first day, so who can tell how many were there. Nobody seems to notice the patent contradictions, the blatant evasiveness--or to care. Public confidence is what matters, not the exact truth. What results is a shared righteousness verging, if for only a couple of months, on what seems a close approximation to the mass psychology of fascism, Amerika-style.

So what is to be done? How may we cope with a demotic timo-plutocratic juggernaut that seems out of control now that the USSR no longer plays a countervailing role? The media-military-industrial complex we find ourselves up against is formidable--perhaps unbeatable for decades to come. The Republican Party is despicable as usual, and its Democratic counterpart is soggy and not to be trusted. We must still pay taxes for purposes we deplore and interact daily with others whose blind chauvinistic loyalty galls us more than they would ever be able to understand. Moreover, though difficult to admit, we ourselves can expect to benefit both directly and indirectly from our nation's adventurist foreign policy as the needed catalyst for kick-starting the end of our current recession. Those of us who continue to be appalled by such a possibility must accordingly speak up when possible and actively boycott all the businesses and politicians who make a flagrant display of their jingoism. Overt resistance might now be counterproductive against a behemoth totally supported by the media, but it must remain clear that the *pax Americana* sought by Bush is obnoxious and its triumph unspeakably repulsive.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Later estimates indicate that at least 4,000 were killed. See Chalmers Johnson's *The Sorrows of Empire* (Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Glaspie's exact words were, "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreements with Kuwait." Secretary of State James Baker later used almost identical wording, and just a day earlier, Margaret Tutwiler, a State Department spokeswoman, said at a press briefing, "We do not have any defense treaties with Kuwait, and there are no special defense or security commitments to Kuwait." On July 31, John Kelly, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, "'Historically, the U.S. has taken no position on the border disputes in the area, nor on matters pertaining to internal OPEC deliberations.'" Asked if there was any treaty commitment that would require the U.S. to

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defend Kuwait against an invasion by Iraq, he replied in the negative. See Kevin Phillips' *American Dynasty* (Viking, 2004), p. 307.