



THE GULF WAR'S AFTERLIFE:

DILEMMAS, MISSED OPPORTUNITIES,

AND THE POST-COLD WAR

ORDER UNDONE

SAMUEL HELFONT



The Gulf War is often remembered as a "good war," a high-tech conflict that quickly and cleanly achieved its objectives. Yet, new archival evidence sheds light on the extended fallout from the war and challenges this neat narrative. The Gulf War left policymakers with a dilemma that plagued successive U.S. administrations. The war helped create an acute humanitarian crisis in Iraq, and the United States struggled to find a way to contain a still recalcitrant Saddam Hussein while alleviating the suffering of innocent Iraqis. The failure of American leaders to resolve this dilemma, despite several chances to do so, allowed Saddam's regime to drive a wedge into the heart of the American-led, post-Cold War order. While in the short term the war seemed like a triumph, over the years its afterlife caused irreparable harm to American interests.

In June 1991, nearly 5 million onlookers enthusiastically welcomed American troops returning home from the Gulf War as they marched in a ticker-tape parade through New York City's "Canyon of Heroes."¹ This image of the Gulf War as a triumph has proved enduring. As two historians of the war wrote a decade later, the Gulf War was "one of the most successful campaigns in American military history."² For many Americans, the war exorcised the demons of Vietnam.³ Others have contrasted the success of the 1991 Gulf War with the failure of the 2003 Iraq War.⁴ Such praise has transcended domestic

American politics. Both the Clinton and Obama administrations admired the way President George H. W. Bush handled the conflict.⁵ Despite some handwringing about Saddam Hussein remaining in power and the fact that there was no World War II-style surrender, the conflict is still remembered as a "good war" or, as one Marine Corps general described it, a "beautiful thing."⁶ Unsurprisingly, it has had an outsized impact on the way Americans think war should be conducted.⁷

Yet, just a few miles north of the June 1991 ticker-tape parade, the difficulties American diplomats were facing at the United Nations offered a quite

1 Susan Baer, "Desert Storm Takes N.Y. 5 Million Attend Ticker-Tape Parade," *Baltimore Sun*, June 11, 1991, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1991-06-11-1991162064-story.html>.

2 Edward J. Marolda and Robert J. Schneller Jr., *Shield and Sword: The United States Navy and the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), xiii.

3 E.J. Dionne Jr., "Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome," *Washington Post*, March 4, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/04/kicking-the-vietnam-syndrome/b6180288-4b9e-4d5f-b303-befa2275524d/>.

4 Richard N. Haass, "The Gulf War: Its Place in History," in *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War*, ed. Jeffrey A. Engel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57–83; and Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Mariner Books, 2014).

5 Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 11; and Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

6 Kirk Spitzer, "25 Years Later, Desert Storm Remains the Last Good War," *USA Today*, Feb. 27, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/02/27/column-25-years-later-desert-storm-remains-last-good-war/81033112/>.

7 Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Long Shadow of the Gulf War," *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 24, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-long-shadow-of-the-gulf-war/>.

different image of the war's place in history. The Gulf War had caused much more damage to Iraqi infrastructure than American officials had anticipated or acknowledged. As a result, the conflict contributed to an acute humanitarian crisis that developed during and after the war. Moreover, the Iraqi regime was carrying out atrocities against its own people and failing to abide by the Gulf War's ceasefire agreement that permitted U.N. inspectors full access to its weapons sites. In response, the United States insisted on keeping economic sanctions on Iraq in place to coerce the Iraqi regime into full compliance. However, these sanctions further deepened the emerging humanitarian crisis in Iraq, punishing civilians for the crimes of a regime that they had little ability to influence. Throughout the following decade, the inability of the United States to find a way out of this dilemma plagued American diplomacy and diminished the country's international standing.

This outcome was not inevitable. Following the war, at least two opportunities arose for finding a formula to hold Baghdad accountable while also alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. As new archival material makes clear, the American failure to seize either of these opportunities caused lasting, and probably irreparable, damage to U.S. interests and to the post-Cold War order that the United States wanted to build. The first opportunity emerged from a plan in the summer of 1991 to separate the humanitarian situation in Iraq from the United Nations' attempt to eliminate illicit Iraqi weapons programs. The second opportunity arose following Bill Clinton's election in 1992. Iraqi records show that once Clinton replaced Bush, Baghdad was prepared to adjust its approach to the United States and the international community. As a result, the United States had a clear chance to

establish a more sustainable policy on Iraq. Both of these opportunities offered a way out of the dilemma that America faced in the wake of the Gulf War and seizing them would have led to more favorable outcomes for U.S. interests and for the post-Cold War system.

Bush had sold the Gulf War as a way to forge the post-Cold War international system into a "new world order" that would unite the globe in a liberal, American-led system rooted in the rule of law.⁸ This was a laudable goal. Yet, the fallout from that war ultimately undermined any hopes for such a system. New archival material from the Iraqi Baath Party's archives and the Clinton Library demonstrates how humanitarian issues in Iraq poisoned American foreign relations and became a weapon for Iraq and other states to undermine American leadership of the international system. The resulting frustration and ill will propelled the United States into the 2003 Iraq War, which only further undermined its international standing.

Most critical analyses of the Gulf War fail to consider the aftermath of the war.⁹ When they do, they often debate whether the United States won the Gulf War but lost the peace.¹⁰ However, that debate artificially separates the war from its political fallout, including the 2003 Iraq War. In fact, most debates about Iraq that occurred in 2003 — including debates about regime change — had their origins in the dilemma that the Gulf War created for U.S. policy. This article explicitly links these events, offering a corrective to historical narratives of the Iraq wars.

These insights stem from new research with Iraqi, American, and U.N. records.¹¹ The Iraqi archives are particularly interesting and have generated a wealth of new literature over the past decade.¹² However, immersing oneself in Iraqi and Arabic

8 George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," Speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 11, 1990, available at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress>.

9 For example, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995); Marvin Pokrant, *Desert Storm at Sea: What the Navy Really Did* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Marolda and Schneller, *Shield and Sword*; James A. Winnefeld, Preston Niblack, and Dana J. Johnson, *A League of Airmen: U.S. Air Power in the Gulf War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1994); and Daryl G. Press, "The Myth of Air Power in the Persian Gulf War and the Future of Warfare," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 5–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092121>.

10 Though he takes a different position than this article, Joshua Rovner provides a good overview of this debate in Joshua Rovner, "Delusion of Defeat: The United States and Iraq, 1990–1998," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2014): 482–507, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.891074>.

11 In addition to some primary documents from the George H. W. Bush administration, archival records used in this article include the Ba'ath Regional Command Collection, housed at the Hoover Archives and Library, Stanford University (hereafter cited as BRCC); the Conflict Records Research Center, formerly housed at the National Defense University, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as CRRC); the Clinton Library Archives, housed at the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum, Little Rock, AR and online at the Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us> (hereafter cited as Clinton Library); and the National Security Archive at George Washington University, Washington, DC and online at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/> (hereafter cited as the National Security Archive). The United Nations records can be found in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/meetings/2020> (hereafter cited as UNSC Records).

12 For example, see Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, eds., *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978–2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Aaron Faust, *The Ba'athification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Samuel Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Lisa Blaydes, *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

sources almost immediately reveals a disparity between the destruction they describe in Iraq during the 1990s and the American narratives of a clean and precise war in 1991.¹³ As the second half of this article demonstrates, this disparity facilitated Iraqi attempts to drive a wedge between the United States and its international partners. Saddam's regime spent considerable time and effort highlighting, in cinematic detail, the suffering that the Iraqi people experienced because of the Gulf War and international sanctions, juxtaposing it against American narratives about the war and its aftermath to devastating effect.

This article first describes the policy dilemma that the United States faced following the Gulf War. It then discusses the opportunities that the United States missed to deal with that dilemma. Finally, the article shows how these missed opportunities weakened the post-Cold War international system and ultimately contributed to the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

America's Post-Gulf War Dilemma

The months following the end of the Gulf War presented the international community with competing images of triumph and despair: triumph for the United States and the United Nations, despair for Iraq and its civilian population. This Janus-faced outcome created a dilemma. How could the international community preserve the gains it had made during the Gulf War in solidifying a post-Cold War system based on the rule of law, while also addressing the acute humanitarian crisis that had engulfed millions of Iraqi civilians?

Triumph

The triumphal feelings that emerged at the end of the conflict surpassed what one might expect from a limited regional war. As the British ambassador to the United Nations argued, the war was "of far greater and of far more positive significance

for all countries in the world, and for [the United Nations] as a whole, than the many regional conflicts with which we have tried to grapple over recent decades."¹⁴ The conflict, he argued, "marked a clear, firm and effective determination of the world community not to allow the law of the jungle to overcome the rule of law."¹⁵ The American ambassador called the war's ceasefire agreement "unique and historic," claiming that "it fulfils the hope of mankind."¹⁶ In a sign of the times, the Soviet Union's ambassador agreed, arguing that the conflict demonstrated "the soundness of the new thinking, the new system of international relations."¹⁷

These sentiments stemmed from the way that the Bush administration sold the war. Shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, Bush began promoting a war to liberate Kuwait by connecting it to visions of a liberal and more humane post-Cold War order.¹⁸ On Sept. 11, 1990, he made his case for war in a widely publicized address to Congress. He linked the Gulf crisis with the end of the Cold War, explaining that the "crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation."¹⁹ He stated explicitly that a "new world order" was one of the objectives of the coming Gulf conflict and he argued that the crisis would birth "a new era — freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace." This was no ordinary foreign policy venture. As Bush explained, "A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor." Yet, the conflict in the Persian Gulf would finally put within reach a "world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak."²⁰

This almost utopian rhetoric about a new world order tapped into the broader *zeitgeist* at the end of the Cold War. A year earlier, in 1989, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously declared the "end of history" on the pages of the *National Interest*. For Fukuyama, the coming victory of

13 For an example of the narratives that emerge from Iraqi records, see Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 35–47.

14 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council," UNSC Records, S/PV. 2981, April 3, 1991, 111, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.2981>.

15 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 112; and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Introduction," in *The United Nations and the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict 1990-1996*, ed. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, The United Nations Blue Books Series, vol. IX, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, 1996, 33–34.

16 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 82.

17 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 99.

18 Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 396; and George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 317–18.

19 George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," Speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 11, 1990, available at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress>.

20 George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress."

liberal democracy in the Cold War represented the end state in the long evolution of political ideology.²¹ Bush himself had made a similar, though less philosophical, argument about the triumph of liberal democracy in his 1989 inaugural address.²² Such thinking mixed and coalesced with other ideas about the evolution of international politics and warfare during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A string of prominent intellectuals claimed that liberal democracy had prevailed and that the connected phenomena of war and authoritarianism were becoming obsolete.²³ These “millenarian expectations,” as one prominent historian has termed them, allowed Bush to argue that a new world order could replace the might-makes-right calculations of previous ages.²⁴

The world order Bush promised was not exactly new. A liberal order rooted in collective security had existed in theory since the advent of the United Nations after the world wars. However, the Cold War had blocked its full implementation. The warming relations between Moscow and Washington in the late 1980s meant a new order could be based on cooperation rather than conflict at the United Nations, making a rules-based system possible. As Bush declared, it would create a world “where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle.”²⁵

Bush is often described as a foreign policy realist rather than an idealist.²⁶ It is difficult to know whether he was influenced by liberal ideas behind a new world order and, if so, to what extent, or whether he adopted such rhetoric simply to sell the war at home and abroad. Either way, his rhetoric clearly raised expectations that American actions would emulate the ideals that Bush had expressed. The United States gained enthusiastic international support for the war, leading to an unprecedented string of binding United Nations Security Council resolutions. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the U.N. secretary-general at the time, argued that

enforcing these resolutions represented a new approach to international relations. He insisted that “enforcement” of Security Council resolutions was “qualitatively different from the way of war” because it emphasized “diplomatic efforts to arrive at a peaceful solution” and strove “to minimize undeserved suffering.”²⁷ As such, while linking the Gulf crisis to idealist dreams of a new world order was useful in rallying support, it also set high and perhaps unrealistic expectations about the amount of damage and suffering the war would cause in Iraq.

On the tactical and operational level, the Gulf War achieved remarkable successes. The American-led coalition quickly expelled the Iraqi military from Kuwait in January and February of 1991. The world seemed to have come together to enforce a new global system and the conflict’s ceasefire sparked the triumphalist, internationalist rhetoric highlighted above.²⁸ Soon after the war ended, however, the sense of triumph was quickly overshadowed by the dilemmas that the war produced.

Despair

The pre-war promise “to minimize undeserved suffering” did not match the reality on the ground for Iraqis.²⁹ The Gulf War was clearly less destructive than other 20th-century conflicts, such as the world wars or the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, in addition to targeting the Iraqi military directly in and around Kuwait, the U.S. Air Force pushed a strategic bombing campaign that was designed to win the war by incapacitating the Iraqi state and its critical infrastructure.³⁰ This strategic bombing deep inside Iraq contributed significantly to the humanitarian crisis after the war and complicated America’s post-war diplomacy. Academic assessments of the war have argued that strategic bombing in Iraq was largely ineffective and that

21 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

22 George H. W. Bush, “Inaugural Address,” Speech, Washington, DC, Jan. 20, 1989, available at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-20-1989-inaugural-address>; and Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 73.

23 See, for example, John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Robert F. Knopf, 1993), 48–49; and John Lewis Gaddis, “Toward the Post-Cold War World,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): 103–4, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-03-01/toward-post-cold-war-world>. It should be noted that Gaddis’ analysis does not suppose that these ideas will succeed, or even that they should.

24 Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), xi.

25 Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress.”

26 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “George H. W. Bush: Conservative Realist as President,” *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (2018): 56–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.001>.

27 “Security Council resolution calling for strict compliance with the sanctions against Iraq and confirming that these sanctions apply to all means of transport, including aircraft,” UNSC Records, S/RES/670, Sept. 25, 1990, [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/670%20\(1990\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/670%20(1990)); and Boutros-Ghali, “Introduction,” 21–23.

28 For an operational history of the war, see Gordon and Trainor, *The General’s War*.

29 See “Security Council resolution calling for strict compliance with the sanctions against Iraq,” 174–75; and Boutros-Ghali, “Introduction,” 21–23.

30 Alexander S. Cochran et al., *Gulf War Air Power Survey, Vol. 1: Planning* (Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 155.

the air campaign would have been equally successful in expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait had it restricted its targets to the Iraqi military and command-and-control systems.³¹

The war damage was compounded by Saddam's crackdown on mass uprisings across the country following Iraq's defeat. The regime deployed its elite Republican Guard to Shia-dominated southern Iraq, where it laid waste to several towns and damaged important religious shrines. In some cit-

The destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and the suffering of Iraqi civilians that resulted from the war and its aftermath contrasted with the idealistic narratives about a clean and precise war that American officials had presented during the conflict.

ies, bodies literally piled up in the streets.³² The regime's counterattack in northern Iraq led over a million Kurds to flee their homes for makeshift camps along the Turkish and Iranian borders. The regime had used chemical weapons against the Kurds in a genocidal campaign known as al-Anfal in the late 1980s, and many Kurds feared Saddam was planning another round of atrocities.³³ Thus, the war not only damaged Iraq directly with bombs but also led to several rounds of unrest and harsh repression from the Iraqi government that further worsened the humanitarian situation.

The extent of the damage that the war and its aftermath caused became clear when several independent survey teams visited Iraq in the spring and summer of 1991. A U.N. team led by Under-Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari claimed "nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now

befallen the country."³⁴ The team argued that the war "wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society." In May, a team of medical and legal experts from Harvard University visited Iraq and completed a peer-reviewed study. They came to largely the same conclusions as the U.N. team, estimating that "at least 170,000 Iraqi children under five years of age are likely to die from epidemic

diseases unless the situation in Iraq changes dramatically for the better."³⁵

As these reports showed, 9,000 homes were destroyed and over 70,000 people were left homeless in the aftermath of the war. Coalition bombing damaged or destroyed 17 of Iraq's 20 power plants. Eleven of them were deemed unrepairable. These power plants were needed to maintain essential infrastructure like water treat-

ment facilities. Without them Iraqis struggled to find clean water. Overall, these and similar reports agreed with the findings of Ahtisaari's team, that "most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous."³⁶

The destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and the suffering of Iraqi civilians that resulted from the war and its aftermath contrasted with the idealistic narratives about a clean and precise war that American officials had presented during the conflict. In April 1991, the *New York Times* reported that the reality on the ground in Iraq "seemed to be at odds with allied military officials' insistence that the damage in Iraq was largely confined to military sites and transportation links."³⁷ In June 1991, the *Washington Post* reported, "The strategic bombing of Iraq, described in wartime briefings as a campaign against Baghdad's offensive military capabilities, now appears to have been broader in its

31 Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 211–53; Press, "The Myth of Air Power."

32 For an overview of these events and the myths that surround them, see Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 13, 65–84, 117–32; Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 135–36; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 264–71; and Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion*, 121–24.

33 Scott Peterson, "Kurds Say Iraq's Attacks Serve as a Warning," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 2002, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0513/p08s01-wome.html>.

34 "Report to the Secretary-General on Humanitarian Needs in Kuwait and Iraq in the Immediate Post-Crisis Environment by a Mission to the Area Led by Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management," in *The United Nations and the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict 1990-1996*, ed. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, March 20, 1991, 187.

35 "Harvard Study Team Report: Public Health in Iraq After the Gulf War," Harvey Study Team, Harvard University, May 1991, BRCC, 2749_0000, 0311–88. Quote found on page 312.

36 Paul Lewis, "After the War; U.N. Survey Calls Iraq's War Damage Near-Apocalyptic," *New York Times*, March 22, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/22/world/after-the-war-un-survey-calls-iraq-s-war-damage-near-apocalyptic.html>; and Barton Gellman, "Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq," *Washington Post*, June 23, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/06/23/allied-air-war-struck-broadly-in-iraq/> e469877b-b1c1-44a9-bfe7-084da4e38e41/.

37 Lewis, "After the War."



purposes and selection of targets.”³⁸

This situation was exacerbated by the fact that American planners had allowed for some excessive damage to Iraqi infrastructure because they assumed that following Iraq’s capitulation or regime change, the United States would quickly move in to rebuild the country.³⁹ However, because the war ended so quickly, a war termination strategy was never completed, let alone coordinated with plans and operations. Thus, the ceasefire did not set the conditions for rebuilding to occur.⁴⁰

Dilemma: Balancing Enforcement and Humanitarianism

Addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq was complicated by the need to enforce Iraq’s compliance with the war’s ceasefire agreement. The Iraqi government agreed to give up its weapons of mass destruction and the programs it had used to produce them. Yet, because coalition troops had left Iraq at the end of the war, economic sanctions were the United Nations’ only real means of leverage against the Iraqi regime. By mid-June, it became clear that Iraq was attempting to limit the actions and effectiveness of U.N. weapons inspectors. The Iraqi regime committed several clear violations of the ceasefire agreement, and the regime continued the brutal crackdown on its own population.⁴¹

Sanctions were a problematic tool for enforcing compliance because they hurt the Iraqi population at least as much as they hurt the regime. Once it became clear how much damage the war and its aftermath had caused, some states and U.N. officials began to call for easing sanctions on humanitarian grounds even if Iraq did not fully comply with the U.N. dictates. The United Nations’ own survey team recommended an immediate end to the embargo on Iraq to prevent “imminent catastrophe.”⁴²

During the ceasefire discussions at the Security Council, the French representative cited the U.N. survey team’s report and argued, “The necessary goal of the restoration of lasting peace in the Gulf should not involve measures that are unnecessarily punitive or vindictive against the Iraqi people. It would be unjust if they were held responsible for the actions of their leader.”⁴³

By June 1991, the Security Council was split. The United States and the United Kingdom demanded that Saddam be removed from power. While the official U.S. objectives in the Gulf War, as outlined in National Security Directive 54,⁴⁴ did not include regime change, the war raised expectations that Saddam’s days as leader of Iraq were numbered. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney later admitted that the U.S. military had Saddam in its crosshairs from the first day of the conflict.⁴⁵ Bush himself claimed to have “miscalculated” in his assumption “that Saddam could not survive a humiliating defeat.” He lamented that Saddam remained in power following the war and later stated that the United States “could have done more” to weaken his regime.⁴⁶ In retrospect, it seems clear that the Bush administration felt uneasy about using the American military to march on Baghdad and overthrow Saddam. However, Bush and his advisers wanted regime change and assumed it would take place through either a precision strike or internal Iraqi actions. These sentiments carried over to the post-war period, with Washington wanting to solve the compliance-versus-humanitarianism dilemma by removing Saddam from power.⁴⁷

Other states at the Security Council were uncomfortable with this approach. The United Nations had never approved regime change in Iraq and the U.S. government’s demand for it seemed like a heavy-handed shift toward unilateralism. Concerns over the humanitarian situation and violations of

38 Gellman, “Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq.”

39 Cochran et al., *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, Vol. 1, 94.

40 For a discussion of alternative plans, see Thomas G. Mahnken, “A Squandered Opportunity? The Decision to End the Gulf War,” in *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered*, eds. Andrew J. Bacevich and Efraim Inbar (New York: Routledge, 2003), 121–48.

41 “Provisional Record of the 2995th Meeting, U.N. Security Council,” UNSC Records, S/PV.2995, June 26, 1991, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.2995>.

42 Lewis, “After the War.”

43 “Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council,” 93.

44 George H. W. Bush, *National Security Directive 54*, The White House, Jan. 15, 1991, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd54.pdf>.

45 “Oral History: Richard Cheney,” PBS Frontline, January 1996, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/1.html>. For analysis, see Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 195–96.

46 James Gerstenzang, “Bush Airs Thoughts on End of Gulf War,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 15, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-15-mn-24868-story.html>; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 487. For analysis of unclear objectives in the war, see Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars*, 195–96.

47 Meir Litvak, “Iraq (*Al-Jumhuriyya al-Iraqiyya*),” in *Middle East Contemporary Survey XV: 1991*, ed. Ami Ayalon (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993), 440–41.

Iraqi sovereignty pushed a majority at the Security Council — led by China, India, Yemen, and Cuba — to press for easing the sanctions.⁴⁸ This divergence began a long process that eventually ended with the shattering of the Security Council's post-Cold War unity.

Missed Opportunities

To avoid a standoff at the Security Council over Iraq in the summer of 1991, member states needed to find a formula that would address the humanitarian situation in Iraq while preventing the regime from skirting binding resolutions and rearming. By mid-summer, the secretary-general presented the outlines of just such an approach to the Security Council. Unfortunately, the United States failed to seize the opportunity.

American Overreach

The United Nations secretary-general appointed the senior U.N. statesman, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, to be his executive delegate for the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. In July, Sadruddin returned from Iraq with a detailed report on the scale of the problem as well as recommendations for addressing it within existing Security Council resolutions. The “impact of the sanctions,” he argued, “had been, and remains, very substantial on the economy and living conditions of [Iraq’s] civilian population.”⁴⁹ At that time, Iraq was only able to generate 25 percent of the electrical power it had prior to the war.⁵⁰ Iraqis lacked access to clean water, raw sewage was flowing in the streets of some cities, and outbreaks of typhoid and cholera had already occurred.⁵¹ Additionally, sanctions had led to food shortages and threatened to “cause massive starvation throughout the country.”⁵²

The biggest impediment to addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq was financial. The report surveyed critical sectors of Iraqi society (agriculture,

medicine, water, electricity, etc.) to estimate their needs. Even the most minimal, short-term effort to supply the necessary humanitarian aid required tens of billions of dollars. These “massive financial requirements” were “of a scale far beyond what is, or is likely to be, available under any United Nations-sponsored programme.”⁵³ After all, the United Nations’ appeal to donors for humanitarian assistance for Iraq, Kuwait, and the border areas with Iran and Turkey had only raised \$210 million.⁵⁴

The only state capable of financing Iraqi reconstruction was Iraq. Its oil resources had the potential to fund reconstruction, but U.N. sanctions prevented Baghdad from selling its oil or importing the materials it needed to rebuild the country. Sadruddin’s report highlighted that existing resolutions permitted exceptions to prohibitions on Iraqi exports and imports to ensure the Iraqi government had “adequate financial resources” to procure “essential civilian needs.” The exceptions could clearly include oil exports and the import of critical goods for reconstruction. However, such exceptions required approval by the Security Council’s Sanctions Committee.⁵⁵

To guarantee that Baghdad used oil revenue to address the country’s humanitarian crisis rather than for other, illicit purposes like rearming, the report argued, existing monitoring mechanisms could easily be expanded “to provide adequate information on the destination and use of the goods in question.” All money would flow through banks in the United States and, as the report detailed, “commercial transactions relating to the export of oil and the import of the above-mentioned goods and services” would be “sufficiently transparent at the international level to allow adequate controls with respect to their shipment and entry into Iraq.”⁵⁶ Before leaving Iraq, Sadruddin received Iraqi assurances that the country would acquiesce to this plan and its monitoring mechanisms.⁵⁷

This proposal was designed to meet the needs of the Iraqi people while maintaining the security architecture to prevent Iraq from rearming in

48 “Provisional Record of the 2995th Meeting, U.N. Security Council;” “Provisional Record of the 3004th Meeting, U.N. Security Council,” UNSC Records, S/PV 3004, Aug. 15, 1991, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.3004>; and Litvak, “Iraq (*Al-Jumhuriyya al-‘Iraqiyya*),” 440–41.

49 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991 on Humanitarian Needs in Iraq Prepared by Mission Led by Sadruddin Aga Khan, Executive Delegate of the Secretary General,” United Nations, July 15, 1991, 11, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/162775?ln=en>.

50 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 13.

51 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 12.

52 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 13.

53 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 15.

54 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 15.

55 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 16.

56 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 17.

57 “Report to the Secretary-General Dated 15 July 1991,” 16.

violation of Security Council resolutions. It also left weapons inspections and more targeted sanctions against the regime in place. In practice, the proposal separated humanitarian issues from international security. The report received enthusiastic support from a majority of the Security Council members. In early August, India lauded its “useful suggestions,” claiming they made “evident that the humanitarian objectives we aim at can be achieved with simple and yet effective arrangements for observation and regular reporting.”⁵⁸ China made clear that it strongly backed the report’s “sound recommendations.”⁵⁹

The United States was less enthusiastic. Washington was not happy that Saddam had survived the war, and it still viewed him as the primary impediment to a cooperative, post-Gulf War Iraq. While the Bush administration could not muster enough support at the United Nations to demand Saddam’s removal, it did not want to allow him to reconsolidate his power. By giving Baghdad the power to sell its oil and provide services for the Iraqi population, this report’s recommendations provided Saddam the means to resolidify his rule. Thus, Washington led a minority effort at the Security Council to block the implementation of the report’s recommendations.⁶⁰

The United States backed a separate plan in which the United Nations would manage the sale of Iraqi oil and use the proceeds to deliver food and essential supplies to Iraqis. Like Sadrudin’s proposal, this “oil-for-food” arrangement provided humanitarian relief to the Iraqi population while limiting Saddam’s ability to divert money to illicit programs. However, it cut the regime in Baghdad out of the equation. States that had backed Sadrudin’s proposal also backed this plan, though several of them voiced reservations about American unilateralism in blocking what they perceived to be a better formula. China, India, and several smaller states worried that the American-backed program would not provide enough humanitarian aid and that it excessively encroached on Iraqi sovereignty.⁶¹

The American-backed oil-for-food program easily passed a Security Council vote, but it immediately

ran into a major problem. The resolution assumed that Saddam cared more about the Iraqi people than he did about his own power. That assumption proved incorrect and he rejected the program even in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe. Despite considerable efforts by senior U.N. officials, including Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who took office at the end of 1991, Saddam continued to reject the resolution as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.⁶²

With Saddam’s refusal to cooperate, the Bush administration blamed him rather than the sanctions for the humanitarian situation. Technically, Bush was right. Saddam could have significantly alleviated his people’s suffering by cooperating. Yet, riding high off what they perceived as the success of the Gulf War, American policymakers failed to comprehend the political power of Iraqi suffering or the damage it could cause to U.S. interests down the road. By contrast, Saddam knew the suffering of the Iraqi people was an important political weapon for his regime. In many ways, he benefited from his people’s anguish and, as more recent research has demonstrated, his regime manipulated international surveys to show that Iraqis were suffering even more than they were.⁶³ In essence, the United States found itself playing a game of chicken with the fate of Iraq’s civilian population. A liberal country like the United States could not win that type of struggle against a regime that cared little for its own people’s anguish.

In hindsight, Washington overreached in rejecting Sadrudin’s proposal. The U.S. government appeared callous to the Iraqi people’s suffering and to be acting in an increasingly unilateral manner at the Security Council. The proposal was far from perfect and Saddam could have attempted to manipulate it to skirt restrictions on his regime. Yet, a unified international community would have been well-equipped to deal with his intransigence. As this article demonstrates below, the unresolved humanitarian situation in Iraq helped break up the cooperative international order that the Gulf War had forged and made U.S. efforts to contain Iraq more difficult.

58 "Provisional Record of the 3004th Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 98.

59 "Provisional Record of the 3004th Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 81.

60 See David M. Malone, *The International Struggle Over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council, 1980–2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 114–6; Litvak, "Iraq (*Al-Jumhuriyya al-Iraqiyya*)," 440–41; and "Provisional Record of the 3004th Meeting, U.N. Security Council."

61 "Provisional Record of the 3004th Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 56, 81–82, 98, 101.

62 See for example, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Document 77. Letter to Jose Luis Jesus, President of the Security Council," July 15, 1992, in *The Papers of United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Hill, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 173–76; and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Document 88. Letter to Tariq Aziz, Deputy Prime Minister, Republic of Iraq," Aug. 4, 1992, in *The Papers of United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali*, vol. 1, 193–94.

63 See Tim Dyson, "New Evidence on Child Mortality in Iraq," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 2 (2009): 56–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278386>.

Iraqi Outreach

The failure of the oil-for-food program in 1991 and early 1992 left Iraq and the United States blaming each other for the plight of the Iraqi people. This standoff continued until November 1992, when Bush lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton. Saddam and other high-ranking Iraqis interpreted the American election as a referendum on Bush's approach to Iraq.⁶⁴ In closed-door meetings following Clinton's election, Saddam and his senior advisers mused that the Clinton administration offered new opportunities. In one discussion, Saddam stated, "I believe that during [Clinton's] reign, a change will occur;" and internal Iraqi documents reveal that Baghdad saw Clinton's victory as a chance to "turn a new page."⁶⁵

The Iraqi regime briefly altered its tone and attempted to open a dialogue with Washington. As a regime report stated in November 1992, the Iraqi press needed, "at least for the time being," to "not write negative headlines" about the American president-elect.⁶⁶ The regime sent cables to every Iraqi mission around the world instructing its representatives to take advantage of the changes in Washington. In addition to holding "solidarity activities with the people of Iraq," they were to meet with American, British, and French ambassadors to convince them that sanctions on Iraq violated international law and human rights. They were to emphasize that these states could make 1993 a year of peace. To the extent possible, the missions were to send similar messages to Clinton, members of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. secretary of state, and other senior American officials.⁶⁷

In another instance, Baghdad reached out to Clinton through the Council of Lebanese American Organizations, which the Iraqi regime believed had

direct contacts with Clinton and widespread political influence in the United States.⁶⁸ The Iraqis also tried to contact Clinton through Oscar Wyatt, who was the founder of the Houston-based petroleum and energy firm, Coastal Corporation. Wyatt worked with the Iraqi-American, Samir Vincent, who was later arrested on charges of corruption related to the oil-for-food program and of operating as an illegal agent of the Iraqi regime.⁶⁹ Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz provided Wyatt and Vincent a letter to deliver to Clinton on behalf of the regime that, the Iraqis hoped, would help establish a better relationship. As an Iraqi official told Saddam, "Samir and Oscar are very optimistic."⁷⁰

These outreach efforts were not simply an attempt to change American policy. The Iraqis understood that they, too, needed to adopt a new approach and to carry out internal reforms. As stated in a report by the Baath Party's bureau that was responsible for foreign relations, Iraq and the United States shared interests in "balancing Iran strategically" and in relation to oil. These interests could form the basis of a new relationship during the Clinton administration. However, it added, Iraq must "keep up with modern times." The report discussed the need to address human rights violations in the country and even to introduce some democratic reforms.⁷¹ This was not the first or last time that the Iraqi regime spoke about the need for democratization, and one should read such documents with a healthy dose of skepticism.⁷² Saddam ruled a brutal, tyrannical regime. It was not on the cusp of becoming a liberal democracy. Indeed, the report's authors clarified that they had "intense reservations" about most forms of democracy and that Western-style democracy was neither good nor viable for Iraq.

Nevertheless, the report stated, "it is not

64 Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Storm,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33, no. 1 (2010): 25–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402391003603433>.

65 "Saddam and Senior Advisers Discuss Clinton's Desire for Talks with Iraq and Impediments to Improved Relations, January 13, 1993," in *The Saddam Tapes*, 44–45; "برقية جفرية" [Cable], Cable from the Secretary General of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 033-4-2, Nov. 23, 1992, 766.

66 For example, see "No Subject," Memo from Member of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Secretary General of the Branch Command, BRCC, 2721_0000, Nov. 25, 1992, 307. Tariq Aziz made a similar recommendation in a meeting with Saddam. See "Saddam and Top-Level Ba'ath Officials Discuss the Causes and Consequences of Clinton's Election Victory and Potential for Improved Relations, circa November 4th, 1992," in *The Saddam Tapes*, 41.

67 "برقية جفرية" [Cable], Cable from the Secretary General of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 033-4-2, Dec. 19, 1992, 717.

68 "برقية جفرية" [Cable], Cable from the Secretary General of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretariat of the Region," BRCC, 2721_0000, Nov. 25, 1992, 130.

69 "Q&A: Oil-for-Food Scandal," *BBC*, Sept. 7, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4232629.stm>.

70 "Saddam and His Advisers Discuss the Decline of the United States and the Possibility of Rapprochement with the Incoming Clinton Administration, circa January 14, 1993," in *The Saddam Tapes*, 47–50.

71 "مقترحات" [Recommendations], Memo from the Secretary General of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretary General of the Region," BRCC, 3187_0001, Feb. 10, 1993, 484–87.

72 Ofra Bengio, "Iraq (*Jumhuriyyat al-'Iraq*)," *Middle East Contemporary Survey XIX: 1995*, ed. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1997), 221–22.

CLINTON'S APPROACH

KILLED ANY CHANCE

FOR REFORM IN BAGHDAD

OR FOR FINDING

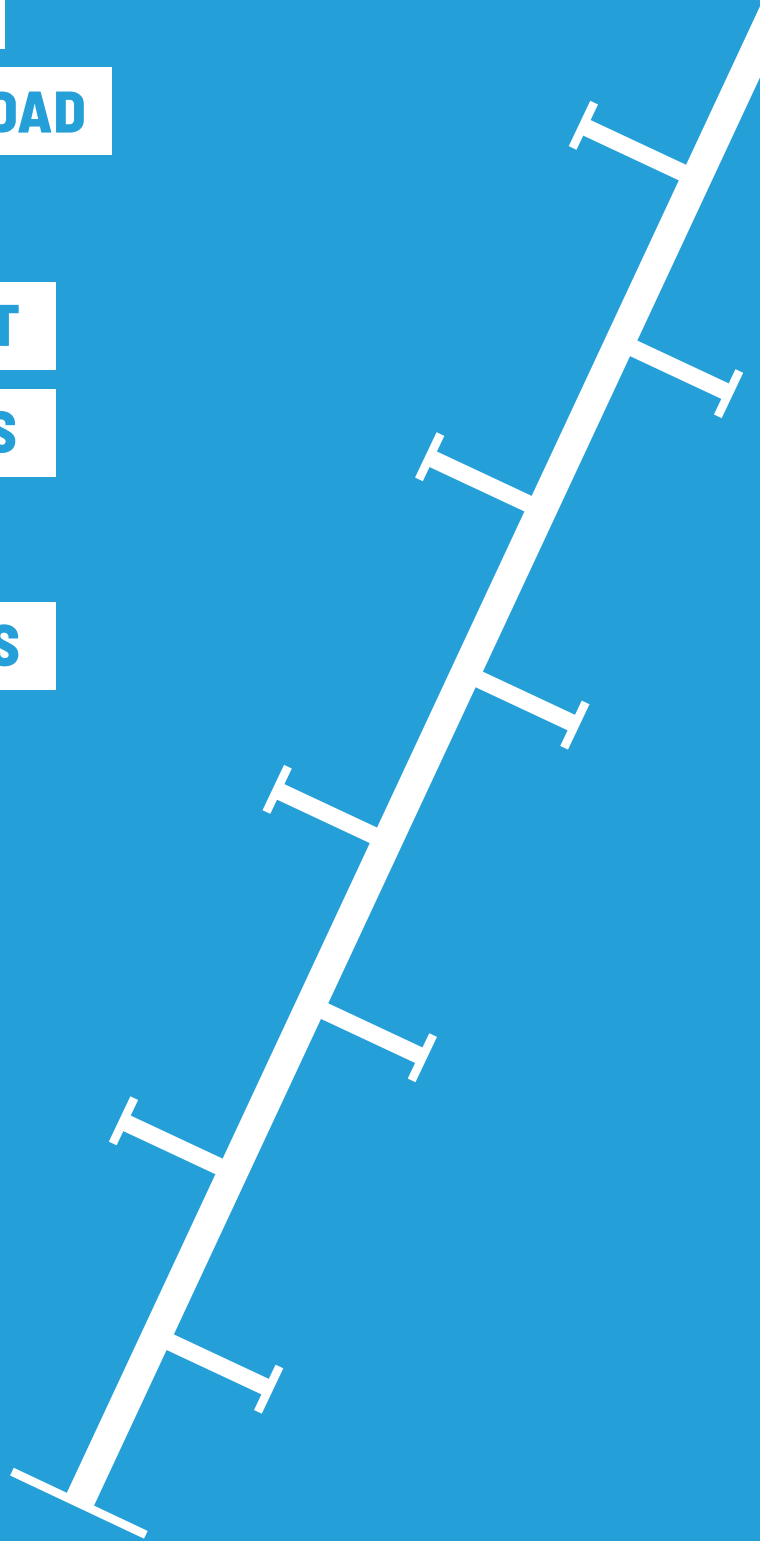
A NEW ARRANGEMENT

THAT COULD ADDRESS

THE ONGOING

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

IN IRAQ.



hidden from the [regime's] leadership that the global orientation is marching toward the realization of democratic practices." Thus, the report suggested the Iraqi parliament discuss the formation of committees representing all slices of society and then arrange "free elections" for these committees in which all Iraqis could participate. The report argued that, in the immediate wake of the Gulf War, the regime could not take these steps without giving the impression that it was succumbing to internal and international pressures. Such an impression would have empowered the regime's adversaries. However, that time had passed. While the report recommended that the regime proceed with "extreme caution," it made clear that calls for democratic reforms would "resonate globally." In taking such actions, the regime could cooperate with "concerned global organizations" at the United Nations and in the United States to improve Iraq's international status.⁷³

This report was not without critics in the regime, especially because it suggested that Baath Party members could lose some of their privileged status to non-Baathists.⁷⁴ There were also limits to Saddam's appeasement of Clinton. "Actually, it is Clinton," he told his advisers, "who is supposed to be willing to carefully handle the relationship with us in a way where we don't get upset with him."⁷⁵ The existence of this and similar reports on Iraqi reforms should not be taken as evidence that Iraq was on the brink of making an about-face. Yet, the report indicates a discussion that was occurring behind closed doors within the regime, and some of its suggestions were later implemented.⁷⁶ In retrospect, the report made clear that powerful voices in Baghdad believed the Clinton administration presented new possibilities and that senior Iraqis were considering difficult measures to seize that opportunity. Had the Clinton administration explored this opening, as difficult as that would have been, it would have had the opportunity to alter

Iraqi behavior and, with it, American policy.

The Clinton administration either missed the signals that Iraq was sending, or it ignored them. From the very beginning, the new administration in Washington indicated that it intended to continue its predecessor's approach to foreign policy issues such as Iraq.⁷⁷ Internally, the administration was divided about how much attention to give Iraq, but as a former National Security Council staffer claimed, "there was a consensus ... that Saddam was evil."⁷⁸ Baghdad seemed to confirm that view when it provoked a military confrontation with the outgoing Bush administration in January 1993 and then attempted to assassinate the former president in April 1993. Unsurprisingly, Washington was not interested in the Iraqi regime's outreach.

Baghdad's interpretation of Clinton's election was almost certainly flawed. The election was not a referendum on Bush's policy toward Iraq. Nevertheless, that misperception opened at least some opportunity for reform in Baghdad and for a reset in its relationship with Washington. Instead of exploring this opportunity, the Clinton administration adopted an unworkable policy that it inherited from its predecessor. Clinton's National Security Council backed the oil-for-food resolution that the Bush administration had sponsored in August 1991 and argued that "Iraq refuses to comply with these resolutions ... because the regime would prefer the Iraqi people to suffer."⁷⁹ Publicly, the Clinton administration introduced a policy of dual containment aimed at both Iraq and Iran, but by 1994, the CIA began running an operation codenamed "DB Achilles," which attempted to overthrow Saddam in a coup.⁸⁰ In 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated, "We do not agree with the nations who argue that if Iraq complies with its obligations concerning weapons of mass destruction, sanctions should be lifted."⁸¹ In 1998, Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act, which had passed unanimously in the Senate and that made regime change the

73 "مقتراحات" [Recommendations], BRCC, 3187_0001, Feb. 10, 1993, 484–87.

74 "مقتراحات" [Recommendations], Memo from the Director General of the Office of the Secretariat of the Region to the Branch Command of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region, BRCC, 3187_0001, Feb. 18, 1993, 473.

75 "Saddam and Top-Level Ba'ath Officials Discuss the Causes and Consequences of Clinton's Election Victory," 44.

76 Bengio, "Iraq (*Jumhuriyyat al-Iraq*)," 221.

77 Christopher, *In the Stream of History*, 11, 28.

78 Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), 56.

79 "Points to Be Made on Iraq," Oct. 11, 1994, Clinton - Iraq/Haiti Insert 10/13/94 for National Association of Broadcasters, Clinton Library, 13, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/9074>.

80 David Ignatius, "The CIA and the Coup that Wasn't," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/05/16/the-cia-and-the-coup-that-wasnt/0abfb8fa-61e9-4159-a885-89b8c476b188/>.

81 Marc Trachtenberg, "History Teaches," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (September 2012): endnote 16,32, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/history-teaches-by-marc-trachtenberg>; and David M. Malone, *The International Struggle Over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council, 1980–2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121.



official policy of the U.S. government.⁸²

Clinton's approach killed any chance for reform in Baghdad or for finding a new arrangement that could address the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Iraq. As Saddam told his advisers on multiple occasions, "We can have sanctions with inspectors or sanctions without inspectors; which do you want?"⁸³ Considering the Iraqi regime's actions over the previous few years, resetting the relationship with Saddam would not have been easy and the outlines of the potential arrangement remain murky because the window of opportunity closed before it could be developed fully. Yet, in hindsight, Iraq's outreach early in the Clinton administration offered a chance to avoid the damage to American foreign relations that ensued.

Effects of Iraq's Unresolved Crisis on World Order

The Bush administration's push for an ultimately unworkable policy in the face of viable alternatives and the Clinton administration's decision to continue that policy left an acute humanitarian crisis simmering in Iraq. This unresolved crisis provided Baghdad with a powerful political tool it could use against the United States. Over the course of the following decade, the suffering of the Iraqi people helped push states such as France and Russia out of the American-led system. America's standing fell considerably, and the post-Cold War order began to fray.

In most ways, the aftermath of the Gulf War was disastrous for Iraq. The Iraqi military, economy, and society were almost completely incapacitated. Widespread uprisings threatened Saddam's regime in the months after the war. Moreover, the Baathists began hemorrhaging senior officials. Iraq's ambassador to the United States had defected to Canada during the war,⁸⁴ and several other Iraqi ambassadors and even the head of Iraqi military intelligence followed suit in the years following the war.⁸⁵

However, there were some silver linings for

Saddam. Unlike most other Arab dictators, he did not rise through the ranks of the army or come to power in a military coup. His position stemmed from his involvement in a populist political party — the Baath — and he viewed his power through the prism of mass politics. The unresolved humanitarian crisis in Iraq and his obstinance in the face of overwhelming Western power provided him the opportunity to seize the mantle of leadership in a bottom-up, global opposition to American hegemony in the post-Cold War era.

During the war, Iraqis and those sympathetic to their suffering began to point out the contrast between the idealist rhetoric of the new world order and the reality that they confronted. As one Iraqi intellectual recorded in her diary after 20 days of bombing, "Bush says, we make war to have peace. Such nonsense. What a destructive peace this is. A new world order? I call it disorder."⁸⁶ Then, a few days later, she wrote simply, "Killing is the new world order."⁸⁷

Saddam first realized the political power of this rhetoric when the United States bombed the al-Amiriyah bunker during the height of the Gulf War's strategic bombing campaign. The American military mistakenly thought the location was a military command center. It was actually an air raid shelter, and the bombing killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians. As news of the bombing emerged, condemnation from around the globe forced the United States to end its strategic bombing in Baghdad.⁸⁸ In that sense, al-Amiriyah did more to curtail coalition military operations than any Iraqi anti-aircraft system. This event, more than anything else, taught Saddam the power of weakness. Early in the crisis, Saddam told his advisers that Iraq needed to appear powerful to attract support.⁸⁹ Consequently, as one American journalist working in Iraq at the time observed, the Iraqi regime initially tried to hide civilian casualties in an attempt to project strength. By contrast, after the bombing of al-Amiriyah, the regime went to great pains to highlight Iraqi casualties. Saddam realized that the

82 Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998, Public Law 105–338, Oct. 31, 1998, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-105publ338/pdf/PLAW-105publ338.pdf>.

83 Trachtenberg, "History Teaches," endnote 16, 32; and *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, September 2004, vol. 1, 61.

84 Muhammad al Mashat, *كنت سفيرا للعراق في واشنطن: حكايتي مع صدام في غزو الكويت* [I was Iraq's Ambassador in Washington: My story with Saddam during the invasion of Kuwait] (Beirut: The Iraqi Institute for Research and Publishing, 2008).

85 For example, see, "هروب السفير من تونس الى لندن" [The Fleeing of the Ambassador from Tunis to London], Memo from the Secretary General of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC 039-4-1, Aug. 15, 1993, 318–19; and Wafiq al-Samarrai, "طام البوابة الشرقية" [Wreckage of the Eastern Gate] (Kuwait: Al Qabas, 1997).

86 Nuha al Radi, *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 29.

87 al Radi, *Baghdad Diaries*, 31.

88 Gordan and Trainor, *The General's War*, 326.

89 "Saddam Appraises American and International Reactions to the Invasion of Kuwait," Aug. 7, 1990, in *The Saddam Tapes*, 176.

narrative of a weak and helpless Iraq being bullied by a neo-imperialist superpower was much more effective than a narrative of a strong Iraq standing up to the United States.⁹⁰

This realization formed the core of Iraq's political strategy to break up the U.S.-led coalition that was enforcing sanctions and inspections following the war. After the ceasefire, Iraq began linking "the new world order and the disaster of the Iraqi children." The Baath Party used the war to highlight the contradictions in the emerging international system. Because of the coalition's "interest in human rights," a Baathist pamphlet argued, "thousands of Iraqi children face death, deformity and vagrancy." It claimed that the "unjust sanctions imposed on Iraq resulted in the death of 14,232 Iraqi children during the first months [after the war], due to contamination, malnutrition and acute shortages of vaccines and medicines."⁹¹ The Iraqi regime also made claims about the United States targeting hospitals and schools that were exaggerated or simply untrue, but there was enough truth in its propaganda to be taken seriously by global audiences. Baghdad paid close attention to the studies conducted by the United Nations and Harvard University that highlighted how the Gulf War and sanctions destroyed the Iraqi economy and the state's essential functions. Iraqi Baathists then distributed the results of these studies widely, including to key sectors in the international community. As internal Baath Party records show, they did so through both open channels as well as in covert operations, which were designed to disguise the regime's role in spreading the information.⁹²

At the end of 1991, Saddam convened a committee consisting of senior regime officials from the Foreign Ministry, the Baath Party, the Iraqi Intelligence Service, the Health Ministry, and the Ministry of Culture and Information to execute a strategy designed to break the international alliance against Iraq. This was done primarily through influence operations, which they termed *taharruk* (movement). These operations emphasized moral and humanitarian arguments like those discussed above to create bottom-up political pressure in key

states, such as those that had seats in the United Nations Security Council or had important geostrategic positions in the Middle East. The operations then combined that political pressure with manipulation of more traditional economic and geopolitical interests.⁹³

It is difficult, and maybe impossible, to disentangle the effects of Iraqi influence operations from other factors that drove international politics in the 1990s. Disapproval of American overreach and the natural attenuation of international political will to maintain sanctions would likely have occurred without any of Iraq's actions. Moreover, the most successful Iraqi efforts reinforced these other, independent forces. Thus, where the effects of one of these other forces ends and the effects on Iraqi influence operations begin is difficult to unravel. Nevertheless, the Iraqi archives reveal vast, previously unknown efforts to manipulate domestic politics in key states around the world. As internal Iraqi documents show, Iraqi Baathists working in dozens of countries spied for Baghdad, ginned up favorable media coverage, and reached out both overtly and covertly to "all people, organizations, unions, associations, political parties and anyone else who has political, popular, union, and professional influence."⁹⁴ They also tried to intimidate and silence anyone who stood in their way.⁹⁵

Iraqi Baathists often worked internationally with people and groups that had little in common with the regime in Baghdad except for the fact that they opposed sanctions on Iraq. Therefore, Baathists regularly used proxy organizations and disassociated with the Iraqi embassy "to provide cover for their [Baath] Party activities."⁹⁶ In doing so, they could avoid divisive political questions about the regime and instead argue that they were merely concerned about the well-being of their families and friends who were suffering in Iraq. Baathists courted people on both the left and the right: academics, student organizations, militant Islamists, pacifists, liberal activists, and conservative isolationists. They found allies in the media and even among some mainstream politicians. Then they attempted to bring these incongruent groups

90 Author interview with Jon Alpert by phone, April 19, 2017.

91 "النظام الدولي الجديد و كارثة اطفال العراق" [The New World Order and the Disaster of the Iraqi Children], BRCC, 2749_0000, 1991, 656–67.

92 See various files in, BRCC, 2749_0000, 1991.

93 "جمعيات وشخصيات" [Associations and People], Memo from the Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz, to the Regional Command/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 3203_0003, Dec. 22, 1991, 355–56.

94 "برقية جغرافية" [Cable], BRCC, 033-4-2, Nov. 23, 1992, 766. For an overview of the Iraqi Baath Party's structure outside Iraq, see Samuel Helfont, "Authoritarianism Beyond Borders: The Iraqi Ba'ath Party as a Transnational Actor," *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 229–45, <https://doi.org/10.3751/72.2.13>.

95 Kevin M. Woods et al., *Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents Vol. 1*, Iraqi Perspectives Project, Institute for Defense Analysis, 2007.

96 "محضر اجتماع هيأة مكتب الامانة العامة" [Proceedings of the Meeting of the General Secretariat Group], BRCC, 026-5-5, Feb. 15, 1989, 207.

together into a loosely organized, yet potent, political force designed to achieve Iraq's strategic goals throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.⁹⁷

The Baathists used these influence operations to push proponents of the post-Cold War order to reconsider their support for the American-led system. The fallout was most evident in France and Russia, both of which supported the United States in the Gulf War and its immediate aftermath, but then used their positions on the Security Council to resist American policies on Iraq later in the 1990s. The Arab states that supported the Gulf War went through a similar transition. As such, Iraqi influence operations drove a wedge into the international system to the detriment of American interests.

France

Senior Iraqi officials understood that different states required different approaches. In December 1991, Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, argued in an internal memo that the political situation and public sentiment in the United States precluded any chance of successfully influencing the U.S. government. However, he mused, "perhaps the conditions for influencing [France] are more favorable."⁹⁸ These observations proved prescient. France was much more sympathetic to the suffering of the Iraqi people. Also, while France supported the Gulf War and sanctions, it avoided presenting its Iraq policies as a harbinger of a new world order. In the United Nations Security Council discussions following the Gulf War, France's representative focused on instituting a ceasefire and "re-establishing regional security."⁹⁹ This focus on regional security differed significantly from the American attempt to link the conflict to grandiose ideas of world order and a new international system. Following the war, France's approach toward Iraq remained much more flexible and Aziz saw that France provided real opportunities.

The supposedly independent proxy groups through which the Baathists worked revealed how different governments viewed Iraq. In 1994, one Iraqi proxy group, representing itself as a humanitarian and cultural organization, presented Clinton with details on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and asked him to lift sanctions. Clinton responded curtly. He argued that Saddam was being investigated for various crimes against humanity, "including genocide," and that sanctions on his regime needed to remain in place. The Clinton administration recognized that Iraqis were suffering, but it blamed Saddam for rejecting the oil-for-food formula.¹⁰⁰ When the same Iraqi proxy group reached out to French President François Mitterrand, he responded that the information it provided on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq had a great impact on him. While Mitterrand did not commit to a change of French policy, Iraqi officials in Baghdad took note of his "positive response," which was generally indicative of the broader sympathy for Iraqis in France.¹⁰¹

By 1994, American diplomats stated clearly that the French were moving away from the United States on Iraq.¹⁰² French policy on Iraq then began to shift more dramatically with the election of President Jacques Chirac in 1995. Chirac felt the American approach was not working. While the U.S. government wanted to compel Saddam through sanctions and air strikes, Chirac recognized that the American policy was unworkable. He told Clinton, "I'm afraid we are working here with an unarmed gun." By this, he meant that for Saddam, the "best way to regain control of the people is to pretend to be a martyr." Thus, the more Chirac and Clinton punished Saddam, the stronger he became.¹⁰³

As a conservative and a Gaullist, Chirac wanted to protect France's traditional diplomatic power against rising American hegemony. Therefore, he pushed back against U.S. policies almost by instinct. Moreover, in 1996, Saddam finally agreed to a modified version of the United Nations' oil-for-food

97 The Baath Party archives contain thousands of pages on the party's influence operations in the 1990s and early 2000s. In addition to sources cited above and below, see the following for a small sampling: "مقترح" [Recommendation], Memo from the Director of the Office of the Secretariat of the Region to the Presidential Diwan, BRCC, 2837_0002, April 1992, 585; "برنامج عمل" [Work Plan], Memo from the Secretary General of the Central Office of Students and Youth to the Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 2749_0000, Dec. 22, 1991, 567–73; and "نشاطات" [Activities], Memo from the Assistant to the Secretary General of the Founding Leader Branch Command to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 2099_0003, Feb. 24, 1999, 505.

98 "جمعيات وشخصيات" [Associations and People], BRCC, 3203_0003, Dec. 22, 1991, 355–56.

99 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting, U.N. Security Council," 93; and Boutros-Ghali, "Introduction," 33–34.

100 "اجابة الرئس الامريكي وزوجته" [Answer from the American President and His Wife], Memo from the General Secretary of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Iraqi Regional Command/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 2847_0002, July 7, 1994, 589–91.

101 "اجابة الرئس الفرنسي" [Answer from the French President], Memo from the General Manager of the Office of the Secretariat of the Region to the Presidency of the Republic – the Secretary, BRCC, 2847_0002, Aug. 10, 1994, 573–79.

102 "Cable: Presidential Call to PM Balladur," Cable from the American Embassy, Paris, to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., Declassified Documents Concerning Rwanda, Clinton Library, 62–63, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/47967>.

103 "Telcon with President Chirac of France," Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between the President and French President Jacques Chirac, Nov. 4, 1998, Declassified Documents Concerning Iraq, Clinton Library, 17–18, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16192>.



program that gave him more control and, as later investigations have shown, Baghdad manipulated this program to funnel money to international actors with influence at the U.N. Security Council. French officials were a major target of that effort. Some of them accepted significant enticements designed to buy their influence or reward political positions that were favorable to Iraq, which may have affected French policy.¹⁰⁴

However, the unresolved humanitarian crisis in Iraq — amplified by Iraqi influence operations — provided Chirac with political options he otherwise would have lacked. Because the French government was much more sympathetic to Iraqi suffering under the U.N. sanctions, it was more open to decoupling sanctions from weapons inspections. As the conflict continued through the 1990s, the United States began to signal that its ultimate goal was indeed to remove Saddam rather than force his compliance with U.N. resolutions. France did

not see that as a viable option or one that was supported by a U.N. resolution. Instead, it wanted to give Saddam a path out of international isolation and sanctions.¹⁰⁵ In essence, Paris continued to favor the policies that the United States had rejected in the summer of 1991. American inflexibility on this issue inflamed opposition in France to U.S. policy toward Iraq on humanitarian grounds and it made it politically possible for Paris to diverge from Washington.

In 1996, the French government began to pull out of the coalition enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq.¹⁰⁶ Over the next few years, it grew increasingly hostile to the U.S. strategy in Iraq and the sanctions regime itself. Although France continued to support arms control in Iraq and remained officially supportive of the United States at the United Nations, French foreign ministry officials told visiting Iraqis in closed-door meetings that, regardless of what happened at the Security Council, they were

104 Paul A. Volcker, Richard J. Goldstone, and Mark Pieth, *Independent Inquiry into the United Nations Oil-For-Food Programme: Manipulation of the Oil-For-Food Programme by the Iraqi Regime*, Oct. 27, 2005, 47–78.

105 Frédéric Bozo, "We Don't Need You': France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991–2003," *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 1 (January 2017): 188, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw011>.

106 Paul K. White, "Crises After the Storm: An Appraisal of U.S. Air Operations in Iraq since the Persian Gulf War," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Military Research Papers*, no. 2 (1999): 41–47.

“working hard to lift the sanctions.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, as a historian of French foreign policy has noted, the Iraq issue began to define Franco-American relations: “[T]he French were tempted to identify the Iraq problem with what Paris, and indeed many capitals around the world, increasingly saw as a U.S. problem—Washington’s increasing unilateralist tendencies.”¹⁰⁸ In that sense, issues resulting from the Gulf War significantly undermined American leadership of the international system.

Russia

The fallout from the Gulf War led other countries to challenge an American-led order as well. The Soviet Union had been an ally of Iraq until the end of the Cold War. Then Moscow sided with Bush in the Gulf War and recognized the war’s role in birthing a new, post-Cold War system of international relations. As Russia emerged from the Soviet Union, it initially embraced American attempts to use the Iraq issue to forge a new world order. For Iraq, the loss of its patron was a disaster. Iraqi diplomats claimed that Russia had fallen under the influence of the United States and “the Jewish-Zionist Lobby in Russia.” Iraqi efforts to restore relations with Russian leaders in 1991 and early 1992 were met with repeated rebuffs. A string of invitations for leading Russian politicians to visit Iraq were ignored or deflected.¹⁰⁹

Later in 1992, the Iraqi regime adopted a new, indirect approach. As the Iraqi ambassador in Moscow reported, “we were forced to extend an invitation to the opposition in parliament [to visit Iraq].” Unlike the leadership, the opposition “responded with enthusiasm” and “when the delegation returned [to Russia,] it undertook numerous activities inside and outside of parliament.” The Russian opposition worked “to explain the truth of the situation in Iraq, it defended the Iraqi view, and it demanded that the Russian government change its position on Iraq and work towards lifting

the economic blockade.” The Iraqi ambassador explained that “wide circles of the Russian people are beginning to understand the just Iraqi position, and to feel that the Russian position toward Iraq is an error.” Russian policies toward Iraq, he argued, “especially intensify the nationalist opposition in its activities inside parliament and the people’s conferences, in the media, and in demonstrations.”¹¹⁰ The Iraqi Baathists in Russia continued to press these issues both among politicians and in the popular press. In doing so, they helped Russian opposition parties turn the fact that Western powers had crushed and humiliated a traditional Russian ally into a wedge issue that inflamed nationalist passions in the country. These domestic pressures forced Russia’s government, led by Boris Yeltsin, to change course. It began defending Iraq and attempting to lift the sanctions.¹¹¹

As with France, there were several causes for Moscow’s moving away from Washington in the 1990s. Russia strongly disagreed with U.S. policy in the Balkans and with NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. Some segments of Russian society also blamed the United States for their economic woes in the 1990s. Most of the literature on Russia’s divergence with America at the time focuses on these issues. However, Iraq played a critical and largely overlooked role in Russian-American relations.

The economic incentives that Iraq offered Russia and Russian officials almost certainly influenced Moscow’s policy.¹¹² Just as important, however, was the lingering damage in Iraq caused by the war and sanctions. When Russia wanted to challenge the United States over its Iraq policy at the Security Council, the Russian representative often led with critiques about the humanitarian situation.¹¹³ This issue also made the Russian opposition’s arguments against American policy in Iraq much more potent than they otherwise would have been. As multiple reports from the period argue, one of the most important catalysts for Russian divergence with the United States at that time was domestic

107 "تقرير" [Report], Memo from Secretary General of the Central Office of Students and Youth to the Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 2699_0000, July 3, 2001, 325–33.

108 Bozo, "We Don't Need You," 192.

109 "التقرير السياسي السنوي لعام 1992" [The Annual Political Report for the Year 1992], Report from the Ambassador (to Russia) to the Foreign Ministry/Third Political Department, BRCC, 033-4-2, Jan. 1, 1993, 663–65. Quote on page 663.

110 "التقرير السياسي السنوي لعام 1992" [The Annual Political Report for the Year 1992], Jan. 1, 1993, 664.

111 For example, see "Letter from the Representatives of Iraq and of the Russian Federation Transmitting the Text of a Joint Communique Containing Iraq's Announcement that It Had Withdrawn Its Troops to Rearguard Positions on 12 October 1994. S/1994/1173, 15 October 1994," in *The United Nations and the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict 1990-1996*, ed. Boutros-Ghali, 695.

112 Volcker, Goldstone, and Pieth, *Independent Inquiry into the United Nations Oil-For-Food Programme*, 22–46.

113 "Provisional Record of the 3519th Meeting, U.N. Security Council," UNSC Records, S/PV.3519, April 14, 1995, 14, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.3519>.

political pressure from the nationalist and communist opposition.¹¹⁴

Iraqi Baathists operated cells in Russia that continued influence operations throughout the 1990s. As internal Baath Party records show, they regularly held meetings with the heads of Russian political parties. They also organized popular demonstrations, published articles supporting Iraq in the Russian press, and, by their own account, contributed to the “erosion of the American-British position.”¹¹⁵ At minimum, these actions amplified political positions in Russia that made cooperation with the United States on Iraq difficult for Russian leaders.

The Russian divergence with America over Iraq created a real dilemma for Washington and had significant implications for world order. The United States felt it was necessary to enforce U.N. resolutions militarily on several occasions in the 1990s. This posed a problem for U.S.-Russian relations. As Clinton explained to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, if the Russian government knew about potential American operations in Iraq, it would likely inform the Iraqi regime and put American lives at risk. If the United States did not tell Russia, the trust necessary to build a cooperative international system would break down.¹¹⁶ More often than not, the administration decided not to tell Russia about American operations in Iraq, thus driving the two sides apart.

The breakdown in the U.S.-Russian relationship over Iraq bled into other important issues as well. As early as 1993, CIA reports claimed that American actions in Iraq were affecting Russian perceptions of the conflict in the Balkans.¹¹⁷ Russian-U.S. tensions over Iraq escalated throughout the decade. Moscow eventually recalled its ambassador to the

United States in response to American and British attacks on Iraq in 1998.¹¹⁸ This was the first time since World War II that the Russians had done this, and it occurred because of Iraq — not the Balkans or NATO expansion.¹¹⁹ In a phone call to Clinton, Yeltsin made clear that “what is at stake is not just the person of Saddam Hussein but our relations with the U.S.”¹²⁰ The Russian-American relationship, which offered so much promise and hope at the beginning of the decade, never fully recovered.

THE RUSSIAN DIVERGENCE

WITH AMERICA OVER IRAQ CREATED

A REAL DILEMMA FOR WASHINGTON

AND HAD SIGNIFICANT

IMPLICATIONS FOR WORLD ORDER.

The Middle East

The aftermath of the Gulf War also proved particularly problematic for Middle East states. Saddam highlighted the suffering of the Iraqi people and his influence operations spread conspiratorial propaganda about nefarious American, imperialist, Jewish, and Zionist actors as well as their collaborators in Arab capitals. The Iraqis found particularly fertile ground for this messaging among Islamists and even some violent extremists from around the Arab world.¹²¹ One of the Iraqi regime's favorite tactics was to provide scholarships for Islamist dissidents from abroad to study at the Saddam University

114 See, for example, “Russia’s Yugoslav Policy Reaching Critical Juncture,” Intelligence Memorandum, Office of Slavic and Eurasian Analysis, Jan. 27, 1993, 1993-01-27B, Office of Slavic and Eurasian Analysis re Moscow’s Yugoslav Policy Reaching Critical Juncture, 4, Clinton Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12302>; “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation,” Conversation Between President Clinton and President Jacques Chirac, Dec. 17, 1998, Declassified Documents Concerning Iraq, Clinton Library, 53–56, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16192>; and “Meeting with Prime Minister John Major of Great Britain,” Memorandum for the President from Clifton Wharton, Jr., Feb. 18, 1993, Declassified Documents Concerning John Major, Clinton Library, 43, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/36622>.

115 “نشاطات” [Activities], Memo from the Assistant to the Secretary General of the Founding Leader Branch Command to the Regional Command of Iraq/Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 2099_0003, Feb. 24, 1999, 505.

116 “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation,” Conversation Between the President and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, Dec. 18, 1998, Declassified Documents Concerning Iraq, Clinton Library, 57–59, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16192>.

117 “Serbia and the Russian Problem,” Memorandum for the Acting Director for Central Intelligence from Roger Z. George and George Kolt, Jan. 25, 1993, 1993-01-25, NIC Memo re Serbia and the Russian Problem, Clinton Library, 4, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12300>; and “Russia’s Yugoslav Policy Reaching Critical Juncture,” 2–4.

118 White, “Crises After the Storm,” 51–64.

119 Ian Jeffries, *The New Russia: A Handbook of Economic and Political Developments* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 587.

120 “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation,” Conversation Between President Clinton and President Boris Yeltsin, Dec. 30, 1998, Declassified Documents Concerning Iraq, Clinton Library, 72–76, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16192>.

121 Samuel Helfont, “Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba’thist Regime’s Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs,” *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 3, (Summer 2014): 361–65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43698590>.



for Islamic Studies in Baghdad, where carefully selected faculty indoctrinated them. The Baathists recruited students from organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Once these students returned to their home countries, they would agitate, sometimes violently, on behalf of Iraq.¹²²

In 1994, Saddam's son Uday initiated one of Iraq's most interesting influence operations when he established contact with Osama bin Laden in Sudan. After several discussions approved by Saddam himself, the Iraqi Intelligence Service agreed to bin Laden's request to broadcast the Salafi-Islamist sermons of the Saudi dissident Salman al Awda into Saudi Arabia. After beginning the broadcasts, Iraqi intelligence officers and bin Laden also agreed to "perform joint operations against the foreign forces in the Hijaz," though it is unclear if they actually did so.¹²³ The relationship ended in 1996 when bin Laden moved to Afghanistan and the Iraqi Intelligence Service lost contact with him.

Arab regimes feared the fallout from Iraqi influence operations and the political narratives the Baathists promoted. By the mid-1990s, local leaders throughout the Middle East began to distance themselves from the United States even as they privately told American officials that they agreed with, and wanted to support, American policies in

though the strikes were already planned and ready for execution."¹²⁵ From that point forward, America's ability to operate from places like Saudi Arabia, which was an essential state in the original coalition against Iraq, was severely constrained. Again, the fallout from this breakdown in relations had global implications.

American Frustrations: Drawing a Line from the Gulf War to the Iraq War

The international fallout from the Gulf War also damaged American perceptions of the post-Cold War international system. The United States never fully came to terms with what had occurred in Iraq during the Gulf War. The U.S. Central Command's after-action report for the conflict did not mention the damage the war inflicted on Iraqi society. Likewise, the U.S. Department of Defense's 500-page final report to Congress glossed over the destruction the war left in its wake.¹²⁶

The most influential report on the conflict was the *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, which brought together leading experts in government, the military, and academia to produce a definitive five-volume study totaling over 3,000 pages. Despite its recognition of wide-scale damage to Iraq's infrastructure and the resulting suffering of the Iraqi population — including tens of thousands dead — the survey ultimately concluded that the "strategic air campaign had not only been precise, efficient, and legal but had resulted in very few [direct] civilian casualties."¹²⁷ The *Gulf War Air Power Survey* had a tremendous effect on the way American leaders

The Baathists had more success organizing an indirect campaign to influence the broader political conversation in the country. They identified journalists who were sympathetic to Iraq's plight and critical of American policy and who could reach large American audiences.

Iraq. It simply was not politically viable for them to do so.¹²⁴ In 1996, the U.S. government wanted to launch strikes against the Iraqi military in response to its move north to intervene in a Kurdish conflict. As a U.S. Air Force officer later lamented, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia denied the United States use of their bases to launch coalition strikes, "even

understood the war. Yet, the notion that the war was fought, as the survey argued, with "a strategy designed to cripple Iraq's military without laying waste to the country" did not reflect the sentiment on the ground in Iraq or in foreign capitals.¹²⁸

One can easily see how official narratives that papered over the humanitarian crisis in Iraq led

122 "Correspondence from the General Secretariat of the Popular Islamic Conference Organization Regarding Nominating Students for Higher Studies in the Baghdad Islamic Universities," CRRC, SH-MISC-D-001-443, 2002.

123 "Iraqi Efforts to Cooperate with Saudi Opposition Groups and Individuals," CRRC, SHMISC-D-000-503, 1997.

124 Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 280.

125 White, "Crises After the Storm," 40.

126 *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, Department of Defense, April 1992, 38, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a249270.pdf>; and "Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm," United States Central Command, The National Security Archive, July 11, 1991.

127 Williamson Murray et al., *Gulf War Air Power Survey, Vol. 2: Operations and Effectiveness* (Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 304–8.

128 *Gulf War Air Power Survey, Vol. 1*, 94.

to political missteps and reinforced perceptions of American callousness. Perhaps most infamously, in 1996, Albright was asked on the television show *60 Minutes* whether “the price was worth it” when a “half million children have died” in Iraq because of U.S. policy. She responded, “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.”¹²⁹ Albright later stated that she regretted the comment.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, her words reflected a genuine sentiment that was increasingly isolating the United States from the rest of the international community.

Members of the Baath Party attempted to exploit America's blind spot with regard to Iraqi suffering. As Aziz predicted, Iraqi Baathists were not successful in influencing the U.S. government directly. Although they targeted members of Congress and politicians such as the former Republican presidential candidate, Patrick Buchanan and the former Democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart, there is little evidence that those efforts were effective.¹³¹ The Baathists had more success organizing an indirect campaign to influence the broader political conversation in the country. They identified journalists who were sympathetic to Iraq's plight and critical of American policy and who could reach large American audiences. Then, Baathists operating in America fed these journalists stories or brought them to Iraq, where they received privileged access to Iraqi officials and, in one case, even an opportunity to interview Saddam.¹³²

Baathist cells in the United States also organized high-profile demonstrations against American policy and worked with local activists from organizations as disparate as the Green Party and the Young Women's Christian Association and who shared the goal of ending sanctions against Iraq.¹³³ Iraqi Baathists were able to work through these sympathetic

organizations to reach wider audiences. For example, they coordinated with a organization based in Germany and the United States called the Committee to Save the Children of Iraq, which published and distributed materials on the plight of Iraqi children.¹³⁴ Through this organization, the Baathists drew in unsuspecting but influential voices that had little sympathy for Iraq's regime but were appalled by the humanitarian situation there. In 1993, the boxer Muhammad Ali held a \$50-a-plate fundraising dinner for 200 people, with all proceeds going to the Committee to Save the Children of Iraq.¹³⁵ The Iraqi regime also succeeded in openly recruiting prominent activists. Louis Farrakhan, who headed the Nation of Islam and had considerable influence among some sectors of the African-American community, visited Iraq several times in the 1990s. In 1995, he was appointed as a member of the board of the Baghdad-based, regime-sponsored Popular Islamic Conference Organization and openly campaigned on behalf of the Iraqi regime.¹³⁶

Baathist operations helped to shift political narratives about Iraq in the United States. The changing mood was perhaps most evident in 1998 when CNN hosted Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, and Albright at Ohio State University for a televised town hall on the administration's Iraq policy. Much of the audience was openly hostile to U.S. policy, and the large, raucous crowd repeatedly interrupted the speakers. Members of the crowd shouted down points they did not like and frustrated the administration officials by accusing Clinton of trying to “send a message” to Saddam “with the blood of Iraqi men, women and children.”¹³⁷

Despite this political pushback, some scholars have argued that, in terms of material effects, the U.S. policy to contain Iraq in the 1990s was a

129 Madeleine Albright, “Punishing Saddam,” Interview with Lesley Stahl, *60 Minutes*, CBS, May 12, 1996. A clip of the exchange can be seen on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbIX1CP9qr4>.

130 Albright, *Madam Secretary*, 276.

131 “جمعيات وشخصيات” [Associations and People], Memo from the Official of the Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region to the Regional Command/ Office of the Secretariat of the Region, BRCC, 3203_0003, Dec. 16, 1991, 360–61.

132 “Untitled Letter,” Letter from Ramsey Clark, Jon Alpert, Maryanne De Leo, and Abdul Kadir Al Kaysi on behalf of HBO to Saddam Hussein, BRCC, 033-4-2, January 1993, 557.

133 For example, “Untitled Memo,” Memo from a Member of the Branch, Official of the Territory to an Official of the Branch (of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region), BRCC, 3835_0000, March 7, 1992, 273.

134 “لجنة انقاذ اطفال العراق” [Committee to Save the Children of Iraq], Memo from Official of the Organization of Iraqis in America to the Regional Command of Iraq – Branch of the Bureau of Iraqis Outside the Region, BRCC, 2837_0002, April 22, 1992, 288–89.

135 Nadine Brozan, “Chronicle,” *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/04/nyregion/chronicle-513793.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap>.

136 “Ministerial Order,” CRRC, SH-MISC-D-001-446, November 1994; “Islamic Popular Conference’ Issues Final Statement,” *Iraqi News Agency*, Sept. 16, 1999, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*; and “Awqaf Minister Meets with Farrakhan,” *Iraqi News Agency*, Feb. 15, 1996, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*.

137 For a transcript, see Madeleine K. Albright, William S. Cohen, and Samuel R. Berger, “Remarks at Town Hall Meeting,” Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, Feb. 18, 1998, U.S. Department of State Archive, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980218.html>.

success.¹³⁸ As evidence for their claims, proponents of such arguments highlight the fact that Iraq remained a poor country, with little economic or military means at its disposal. Moreover, although the United States did not know it at the time, Iraq did give up its weapons of mass destruction and closed the programs that produced them.¹³⁹ However, such arguments focus on Iraqi material means and assume that they were necessary for Saddam to achieve his objectives. Yet, Saddam's strategy was to end the sanctions regime and normalize Iraq's diplomatic situation in order to rebuild more traditional means of hard power. By the end of the decade, he was clearly making progress toward those goals, despite his material constraints.

The system designed to restrain him was falling apart. In 1998, Saddam violated the Gulf War ceasefire agreement by ending U.N. weapons inspections. The United States and the United Kingdom launched air strikes in response, but, by that point, the international community was too divided and lacked the power to force Iraq back into compliance. Saddam was growing richer from corruption in the modified version of the oil-for-food program that the Security Council had endorsed in 1995 and that, as previously mentioned, he finally accepted in 1996. He was gradually normalizing Iraq's diplomatic and economic situation while unabashedly flouting U.N. resolutions. In July 2001, the British Joint Intelligence Council described Saddam as "defiant" and "secure." It argued that "Saddam judges his position to be the strongest since the Gulf War."¹⁴⁰

As a result, American policymakers grew increasingly frustrated. In March 2000, U.S. Senate hearings on Iraqi sanctions showed clear bipartisan disillusionment with the United Nations as well as the trans-Atlantic alliance that was supposed to underpin the post-Cold War system. Then-Sen. Joseph Biden argued that "Saddam is the problem." However, Biden elaborated, "it is clear,

on the part of the French and others, they would rather essentially normalize the relationship."¹⁴¹ Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Edward Walker clarified, noting that "the perception" that sanctions were "responsible for the problems that the Iraqi people face" eroded the ability to enforce them. Biden agreed, adding, "I guess maybe that is what is wrong with the U.N."¹⁴² In the United States, as elsewhere, the unresolved situation in Iraq gnawed away not only at bilateral relations between individual states but also at trust in the post-Cold War system as a whole. This became unmistakably clear following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, when the administration of President George W. Bush began pushing for a more aggressive strategy to implement regime change in Iraq. When Bush first came to office in January 2001, he adopted Clinton's policy on Iraq: His administration was officially committed to regime change, but not inclined to carry it out militarily. The September 11 attacks created new possibilities to rally domestic support for more muscular strategies to pursue regime change.¹⁴³ Although the resulting war later turned divisive, it initially enjoyed wide, bipartisan support among policymakers in Washington. Hillary Clinton voted to authorize the war along with a majority of Democratic senators. Albright later wrote that she found herself nodding in agreement when Bush made the case for war.¹⁴⁴

Such sentiments were not shared internationally. The Gulf War was supposed to cement America's role as the organizer of the international system. By the time of the Iraq War in 2003, the tables had turned. Instead of "Iraq against the world," as George H. W. Bush had argued in 1990,¹⁴⁵ it was the United States against the world. Even stalwart allies like Canada refused to participate. Those international leaders who joined Bush's campaign in Iraq, among them Blair and Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, often paid a significant political price.

138 Rovner, "Delusion of Defeat"; and George A. Lopez and David Cortright, "Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 90–103, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2004-07-01/containing-iraq-sanctions-worked>.

139 "Misreading Intentions: Iraq's Reaction to Inspections Created Picture of Deception," Central Intelligence Agency, Jan. 5, 2006, 16, accessed Jan. 28, 2021, at National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB418/>; Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Cheater's Dilemma: Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Path to War," *International Security* 45, no. 1 (Summer 2020), 51–89, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00382; and Gregory D. Koblenz, "Saddam Versus the Inspectors: The Impact of Regime Security on the Verification of Iraq's WMD Disarmament," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018), 372–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1224764>.

140 "Iraq: Continuing Erosion of Sanctions," JIC Assessment, July 25, 2001, National Archives of the United Kingdom, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20171123124012/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/203196/2001-07-25-jic-assessment-iraq-continuing-erosion-of-sanctions.pdf>

141 "Saddam's Iraq: Sanctions and U.S. Policy," Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 106th Congress, 2nd Session, March 22, 2000, 5, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg67659/html/CHRG-106shrg67659.htm>.

142 "Saddam's Iraq: Sanctions and U.S. Policy," 19.

143 Melvyn P. Leffler, "Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 2. (April 2013): 190–216, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht013>.

144 Albright, *Madam Secretary*, 274–89.

145 Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress."

The 2003 diplomatic crisis over Iraq stemmed from a breakdown in the international system. In the early 1990s, George H. W. Bush's new world order offered hope for compromise and cooperation. For example, while disagreements over Iraq's humanitarian situation at the Security Council were heated in the summer of 1991, member states accepted one another's good intentions and were willing to compromise. They continued to work together to solve international problems, including in Iraq.¹⁴⁶ By the early 2000s, the Iraq issue had embittered these relationships to the point that each side assumed the other was working in bad faith. Washington felt that Russian and European leaders were undermining world order in favor of their pocketbooks and a knee-jerk anti-Americanism. European governments felt the United States only paid lip service to U.N. resolutions and only when they aligned with American objectives. They accused Washington of pushing regime change in Baghdad, something the United Nations had not authorized, and insisting that foreign leaders blindly follow American dictates. No compromise was possible. George W. Bush repeated many of the arguments his father had made about history and world order, but the younger Bush's words fell on deaf ears.

Some liberal theorists of the post-Cold War international order overestimated the system's robustness and underestimated the George W. Bush administration's ability to act outside of it in instances such as the Iraq War.¹⁴⁷ The frailness of the system in 2003 can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that American disillusionment with the United Nations and the international system more generally had been growing steadily since — and to some extent, as a consequence of — the Gulf War. This disenchantment and cynicism propelled the George W. Bush administration's war plan forward in the face of strong international opposition and without a U.N. resolution.

However, these frustrations were not new. Nor were they unique to the George W. Bush administration. As Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, argued, "we invaded Iraq because we believed we had run out of other options. The sanctions were not working, the inspections were unsatisfactory, and we could not get Saddam to leave by other means."¹⁴⁸ These were all issues that

the United States faced in the early 1990s and had the opportunity to resolve at that time. Left unaddressed, they had plagued U.S. diplomacy ever since. The problematic American policies on Iraq clearly predated the George W. Bush administration. In fact, the official, legal justification for the 2003 invasion rested on U.N. resolutions passed during the Gulf War. Thus, the Bush administration made the case that it was simply carrying out the policies it had inherited.¹⁴⁹

The unresolved dilemmas that the Gulf War created were mismanaged for a decade, eventually leading to a 2003 conflict that was waged on shaky legal grounds and with limited outside support. This war quickly descended into a quagmire that cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. As of this writing in 2021, American forces are still fighting insurgents who emerged in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

Predicting the second- and third-order effects of complex political endeavors such as war and diplomacy is notoriously difficult. However, that is no excuse for ignoring the consequences 30 years later. In fact, such post-hoc critical analysis is vital for learning the right lessons from the Gulf War and its aftermath. The United States could have been more cautious during the war, more clear-eyed about the damage that it inflicted, and more committed to alleviating the resulting humanitarian crisis. Most of all, to create a cooperative international system, America needed to be more willing to compromise with its allies. In doing so, it could have been better equipped diplomatically to build and solidify the new world order whose creation George H. W. Bush claimed was one of the Gulf War's primary objectives.

Instead, the fallout from the Gulf War almost immediately divided the international community and challenged U.S. leadership. The United States failed more than once to seize opportunities to change course when they arose. It is impossible to know whether a post-Cold War international system based on collective security, liberalism, and the rule of law was even possible. Scholars

146 Litvak, "Iraq (*Al-Jumhuriyya al-'Iraqiyya*)," 440–41.

147 This puzzle of the international order being less robust than predicted was laid out in the new, 2019 preface to G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), xvi–xix.

148 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2011), 187.

149 Sean D. Murphy, "Assessing the Legality of Invading Iraq," George Washington University Law School Scholarly Commons (2004), 4–6, https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1898&context=faculty_publications.

150 On the rise and enduring legacy of insurgencies in Iraq, see Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion*, 205–33.



cannot replay history to know how events may have unfolded if the war had been conducted differently or the United States had based its post-war strategies on a more realistic assessment of the possibilities in Iraq. Likewise, it is impossible to know the extent to which disagreements over Iraq divided the international community or whether Iraq simply aggravated differences that would have arisen anyway. Nevertheless, in hindsight, the war and its aftermath clearly damaged, rather than facilitated, the work of statesmen and diplomats in their attempts to build a liberal post-Cold War international system or even to pursue American interests more generally. In that sense, the war generated considerable political costs. It was far from the clean, decisive conflict that American narratives depict. [i](#)

Samuel Helfont is an assistant professor of strategy and policy in the Naval War College's Program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He is the author of *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgency in Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2018). His current book project, *Iraq Against the World*, examines Iraq's international strategies from 1990 to 2003 and the impact they had on the post-Cold War order. He holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University and is an Iraq War veteran.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, the Naval War College, or the Naval Postgraduate School.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Galen Jackson, Doyle Hodges, Dom Tierney, Tim Hoyt, Scott Douglas, Don Stoker, Michael Brill, John Sheehan, Mike Jones, and Tally Helfont for their help with this article.