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Gulf War II a Bush Disaster? So was Gulf War I

Deceit and Disaster

by BARRY LANDO

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In light of the shocking advances of the Islamic State, the sense that Iraq is coming apart at the seams despite the huge toll of lives and treasure squandered over more than a decade, it's clear that George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was the most fateful foreign policy blunder ever made by an American leader.

What's remarkable, however, is that critics of George W.'s actions overlook the fact that it was his father, George H.W. Bush, who, in 1990, set the stage for his son's disastrous moves 13 years later.

It was Papa Bush, after all, who sent American troops half way around the world to launch the First Gulf War—an error of tragic proportions; responsible in its own way for much of the horror that afflicts the Greater Middle East (and America) to this day.

Ironically, it happened just as the U.S. seemed about to become king of the global roost—the greatest military power the planet had ever known. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no power around to challenge U.S. hegemony. It was left to America to blight its own future.

(I wrote about this in my book, “Web of Deceit, The History of Western Complicity in Iraq, from Churchill to Kennedy to George W.Bush.”)

What is also extraordinary about the First Gulf War is that—like the outbreak of World War I—it was all so unnecessary—the result of feckless leadership, inept diplomacy and shocking miscalculations by both leaders—Saddam Hussein and George H.W. Bush.

Saddam’s ignorance can be understood: a brutal dictator, surrounded for the most part by sycophants, the Iraqi president knew little of the outside world. George H.W. Bush on the other hand, had been Ambassador to China, head of the CIA, had an impressive stable of experienced advisors and could draw upon the U.S.’s vast intelligence capacities.

The problem, however, in the summer of 1990 was that Bush and his top aides were obsessed by the disintegrating Soviet empire. They were largely oblivious to the political storm that was brewing in the Gulf between Saddam Hussein and the leaders of Kuwait.

Saddam had just “won” an incredibly bloody nine-year war with Iran, only to find himself in a mounting feud with his immensely wealthy Gulf neighbor, Kuwait. Saddam’s charges against the Kuwaitis were not at all unreasonable.

For starters, they were beggaring Iraq’s ravaged economy by manipulating the price of oil. They were also demanding that the bankrupt Iraq pay back huge loans Kuwait had made to help finance Baghdad’s sanguinary war against Iran.

As Saddam saw it, by attacking revolutionary Iran, he had been defending Kuwait’s interests as well. But now that Iran was defeated and Iraq was bled white, the Kuwaitis wanted their money back.

The Kuwaitis dismissed Saddam’s claims and continued to demand their loans be repaid. Riled by what he saw as their arrogant, aggressive stance, Saddam became increasingly belligerent.

At the same time, however, as he was mobilizing his troops, the Iraqi dictator was attempting to figure out how the U.S. would react if he actually proceeded to invade Kuwait. He never got a clear signal.

The blame for that is usually laid at the feet of America’s ambassador at the time, April Glaspie. Saddam called her to the Foreign Ministry, railed about the Kuwaitis, and made vague references to his aggressive plans. She replied with the standard line, that the U.S. had no interest in border disputes between Iraq and Kuwait. Washington hoped that everything could be settled peacefully.

But by not flashing a red light, Ambassador Glaspie was simply relaying the very confused and self-contradictory policies of the George H.W. Bush administration itself.

That's also something of an irony, since Papa Bush is lauded by many to this day for his supposedly incisive, pragmatic skills, particularly when contrasted with his impetuous, hair-trigger son, George W.

But in the summer of 1990, the elder Bush and his advisors had no clearly defined views on how the U.S. would react to an invasion of Kuwait. Indeed, officials much more senior than Glaspie made it clear that the U.S. had no military commitment to defend Iraq's oil-rich neighbor.

Those officials included George H.W. himself. He'd been muddling along for years trying to deal with Saddam, at first seeing him as America's ally in the war against Iran and a market for American goods; at other times as a corrupt, untrustworthy and incredibly brutal megalomaniac. In the summer of 1990, he was still unsure how to handle the Iraqi dictator.

Thus, on July 27, 1990, as Saddam's threats against Kuwait became ever more strident, President George H.W. Bush wrote a letter to the Iraqi president—a letter so bland and conciliatory, that Paul Wolfowitz, attempted—unsuccessfully—to have it cancelled.

The upshot, as Congressman Lee Hamilton, former chairman of the House International Relations Committee told me:

“We did not draw a firm line in the sand. It's not difficult. What is clear to me is at the highest levels of the U.S. government we did not convey strongly and clearly to Saddam Hussein that we would react militarily if he went across that border.”

But, that's only the half of it.

Incredibly, even as some American officials were adamant that the U.S. had no commitments to Kuwait, other senior Americans were reassuring top Kuwaitis that the U.S. was totally in their corner, and urged them not to buckle to the Iraqi leader's demands.

One of those was General Norman Schwarzkopf, then American commander for the Gulf region, who personally told Kuwaiti officials that the U.S. had their back. The director of the CIA was also encouraging Kuwaiti them to keep the economic strangle hold on Saddam.

When it finally came, Saddam's August 2, 1990 invasion of Kuwait caught President George H.W. Bush and his team flat-footed. The American president scrambled for some kind of response. Though he condemned the invasion, Bush told a reporter “We're not discussing intervention.”

But, once he had finally made the decision to send in the troops, George H.W. Bush spurned serious negotiations. According to a later investigation by the U.S. Congress, a diplomatic solution satisfactory to the interests of the united States may well have been possible in the period following the invasion—had the White House been interested in diplomacy. It wasn't.

No longer deterred by the now crumbling Soviet Union, the U.S. president felt free to deploy America's massive military might half way across the globe.

He would rid the world, he grandly declared, of a tyrant “worse than Hitler.” This, mind you, was the same leader that the U.S. had backed with battlefield intelligence and weapons in the war against Iran.

At the beginning, in an eerie fashion, Papa Bush’s fierce determination to destroy Saddam Hussein in 1990 matched George W’s obsession with Saddam thirteen years later.

And just as George Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003, would turn out to be an unmitigated disaster for the United States, so was George H.W. Bush’s decision in August 1990 to dispatch more than 150,000 troops to Saudi Arabia.

It was that act, more than anything else, that provoked Osama Bin Laden to declare al-Qaeda’s war on America—the “distant enemy.” It led directly to al-Qaeda’s attacks on U.S. targets in the Gulf, in Africa, and then in New York on 9/11.

The reason the Saudi rulers finally reluctantly agreed to accept those “infidel” foreign troops was their fear—encouraged by the Bush administration—that Saddam’s troops in Kuwait were poised to invade Saudi Arabia.

To convince the Saudis of that threat, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney flew to Riyadh. He took with him satellite photographs that supposedly showed Iraqi armored forces massed in offensive positions, ready to strike the Saudis.

But were they? Or did the administration of George W. Bush (and Dick Cheney) use the same kind of trumped up scare tactics in 1990 to justify deploying U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia, as George W. Bush (and Vice President Dick Cheney) employed to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003?

Or was Saddam Hussein really planning to attack Saudi Arabia? As soon as that charge was raised, Saddam and his top officials insisted to anyone who would listen that he had no intention of going beyond Kuwait. Indeed, he made it clear, as soon as he understood that Bush was serious, that he was planning to withdraw from Kuwait as well, as soon as he could find a face saving exit. His statements, however, were ignored by the White House and most of the mainstream U.S. media.

What serious evidence did the U.S. have that Saddam was planning to invade Saudi Arabia? It’s not at all clear they had any.

After the invasion, a number of news organizations obtained commercial satellite photographs of Iraqi forces in Kuwait and had them examined by skilled photo analysts, veterans of the U.S. intelligence community. They found no signs of the supposed massive Iraqi troop build up anywhere near the Saudi border; nor for that matter anywhere in Kuwait.

Indeed, on August 9, 1990 Defense Department spokesman Peter Williams admitted that the Iraqi forces in Kuwait “seem to be in a defensive posture.” And at the end of the first week after the invasion, U.S. military analysts were surprised to see that Saddam had already begun moving

his elite Republican Guard units north, back to Iraq. “They were headed out of Kuwait,” one American expert said.

After the Gulf War, two expert military authorities concluded that, apart from the case of one defector who claimed to have a sketch of a battle plan, “there is no other evidence that Baghdad ever intended to do anything other than hold what it had already captured.”

Neither the CIA nor the Defense Intelligence Agency thought it probable that Iraq would actually invade Saudi Arabia. As Colin Powell himself later conceded, if Iraq had wanted to invade Saudi Arabia, it had a long border with that country; there was no need to go through Kuwait.

Afterwards, a top American commander admitted to Newsday that the Pentagon had seriously exaggerated the number of Iraq troops. “There was a great disinformation campaign surrounding this war,” he admitted.

The deceit and woeful blunders didn’t end there.

With Saddam’s forces trounced in Kuwait, on February 15, 1991 George H.W. Bush called for the Iraqis to rise up and overthrow Saddam. But, when the Shiites and Kurds responded, and it looked as if their revolt would be successful, Bush not only turned his back on the rebels, but, by allowing Saddam’s ‘defeated’ forces to continue to fly their helicopter gunships, while forbidding U.S. forces in Iraq to aid the rebels in any way, the U.S. actually helped the Iraqi dictator crush the uprising with horrific results.

Eventually, because of dramatic TV coverage of the Kurd’s plight, George H.W. Bush was obliged to establish a no-fly zone in the north to protect the Kurds. Since there were no TV cameras in the South, he did nothing to prevent the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Shiites.

As the killing was still going on, the American president would also deny—falsely—that he had ever called for the revolt.

The reason usually given for his spurning the rebels was fear that, if the Shiites took power, it would dangerously increase Iran’s influence. Bush wanted Saddam out. But he wanted him replaced by a military backed regime amenable to American interests.

There were later leaks by the administration that the Saudis and Turks also warned Bush not to back the uprising because of their fears of Iran. Later, however, many Saudis and Turks have denied that version.

Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein remained in power.

Thus, it was that in 2003, George W. Bush, encouraged by Vice President Cheney and other neo-con advisors, used the 9/11 attack by al-Qaeda, which was based in Afghanistan, as an excuse to invade Iraq and complete the Bush family’s unfinished business of ridding the world of Saddam Hussein—a mission that the younger Bush felt his father didn’t have the guts to carry out.

He showed the old man.

And today, almost a quarter of a century after the first Gulf War, after a horrific waste of millions of lives and trillions of dollars, today a Shiite government rules Iraq with some ties to the United States, but even closer ties with Iran. Many of those Iraqi Shiite leaders still hold bitter memories of what they view as America's betrayal of their uprising in 1991.

And now al-Qaeda has morphed into ISIS or ISIL or DAESH, if you prefer, and America remains mired in its never ending, budget-draining, globe-spanning War Against Terror.