

The Gulf War

Mazarr, Michael M., Don M. Snider, and James A. Blackwell. *Desert Storm: The Gulf War and What We Learned*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993.

Cordesman, Anthony H. *After the Storm: The Changing Military Balance in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO and London: Westview and Mansell Publishing, 1993.

The 1991 Gulf War was, perhaps, the most transparent military encounter in modern history. This was a war in which pilots were shown taking off to bomb an enemy capital — where cameras were waiting to broadcast the results; in which a single news source — Cable Network News (CNN) — was employed in all capitals, with its raw and undigested information transmitted instantaneously around the globe, reaching the public and policy makers at the same moment. This was a war in which the belligerents appeared at times to be waging a media rather than a military campaign, with Saddam Hussein acting as if the key to success lay in unsettling public opinion in the West and creating an heroic reputation in the Arab world, and Western strategy being shaped throughout with one eye on its presentation — diplomatic initiatives to persuade a reluctant Congress that no stones were being left unturned in the quest for peace, military briefings intended to stress that everything was under control.

While the anti-Iraq coalition presented the war as a necessary, indeed a noble measure to enforce international law and order at a defining moment in world history, others cried foul. Western intervention in the Gulf had nothing to do with the liberation of Kuwait from a brutal Iraqi occupation, it was argued, let alone with concern for world order or international norms of behavior. If anything, it was a reenactment of the all-too-familiar “imperialist ploy” to impose US hegemony on the Persian Gulf and the Arab world as a whole.

As Mazarr, Snider and Blackwell demonstrate in their excellent study of the Gulf War, neither of these two paradigms offer a fully satisfactory explanation. Far from being an “imperialist ploy” to impose its hegemony on a hapless Middle East, America’s response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait reflected the muddled state of mind of a superpower on the threshold of a new era in world history, which it had failed to anticipate and with which it was ill-prepared to cope, both practically and intellectually. Having predicated their political and strategic world view for half-a-century on the perceived Soviet threat, with developments in the Third World viewed as a corollary of this global rivalry, Americans were engulfed by an overwhelming sense of relief as the Cold War came to an abrupt end; euphoric visions of a New World Order were outlined, and much-hyped talk of the End of History circulated.

The predatory Iraqi invasion of Kuwait punctured this self-congratulatory mood and forced the West to concede that there was more to world politics than the Eurocentric Cold War axis. True, the orchestration of such a wide-ranging

international coalition against Iraq confirmed the sea change occasioned by the end of the Cold War; had Hussein invaded Kuwait a few years earlier, such an international collaboration would have been inconceivable. At the same time this extraordinary effort was a *sui generis*, made possible only by an unprecedented act of aggression in a geo-politically and economically vital region at a defining moment in world history. As the wars of Yugoslav dissolution clearly demonstrate, the West may not find many conflicts with principles so clear-cut, and enemies so ready to take on Western military power on its own terms and circumstances so favorable to its application as Saddam Hussein.

Indeed, one of the strengths of Mazarr's, Snider's, and Blackwell's analysis is its keen awareness of the changing strategic landscape and the consequent recommendation of a new US military strategy that would substitute a focus on regional contingencies for the traditional preoccupation with the Soviet threat. The need for such a strategy — combining forward-presence forces, modernization of military systems, and a fresh perception of regional contingencies — is also underscored by Anthony Cordesman's exhaustive examination of the Middle Eastern post-Gulf War military balance.

Though the Iraqi armed forces suffered a humiliating setback during the war, their actual human and material losses were significantly lower than initially believed, leaving Iraq perfectly capable of threatening its immediate neighbors in the future, as starkly indicated by Hussein's sudden deployment of troops near the Kuwaiti border in October 1994. Similarly, notwithstanding President Bush's pronounced commitment to a tighter control of the Middle East arms race, many countries have been building up their arsenals. Syria has used the generous handout from the Gulf states, in return for its participation in the anti-Iraq coalition, for large arms purchases from Russia and North Korea. Saudi Arabia has embarked on ambitious military expansion programs with American and British support, while Iran has continued its steady military reconstruction, including a sustained effort to acquire nuclear weapons.

All this does not mean that today's Middle East is a riskier place than it was prior to the Gulf War. To the contrary, the restoration of Kuwaiti independence and the humbling of Saddam Hussein — including the (complete?) destruction of his non-conventional arsenal — has certainly reduced the Iraqi threat to regional stability, which would have become very ominous indeed had Iraq been allowed to retain Kuwait. Moreover, the war helped revive the stalemated Arab-Israeli peace process, which has already produced historic agreements between Israel, Syria and Lebanon. And for these reasons alone, the Gulf War was a war worth fighting.

Efraim Karsh
King's College, University of London