

## **George H.W. Bush's Persian Gulf War: Victory, With Tragedy**

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Most tributes on the passing of George H.W. Bush from across the American political spectrum have used some variation of the word “honorable” or “decent” to describe the nation’s 41st president. By all accounts, in his direct personal relationships, he was both. That he had physical courage was amply demonstrated in his youth as a Navy torpedo bomber pilot in World War II, and in his later years during his occasional parachute jumps on his birthday. My strongest memories of Bush are from the first post-Cold War crisis America faced—Saddam Hussein’s August 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Persian Gulf War. Bush’s actions during that fateful eight months have affected the lives of millions in the nearly three decades since, and mostly for the worse.

I had a unique vantage point to observe Bush’s response to the crisis, being at the time a CIA military analyst who worked what became known as Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The reports we generated at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) on Iraqi military moves were among the stream of alarming intelligence sent to the White House between July 20 and Aug. 1, 1990. That was the period when Saddam Hussein ordered the key armored and mechanized infantry formations of his Republican Guard Forces Command (RGFC) to head for the border with Kuwait.

NPIC and the National Intelligence Officer for Warning at the time, Charles Allen, issued reports chronicling the RGFC buildup. Allen’s office warned the White House that Saddam might try to slice off the northern portion of Kuwait, whose oil fields the Iraqi leader coveted. Instead of listening to Allen and his analysts (or NPIC’s reporting), Bush chose to embrace the “It will all blow over” advice he was receiving from then-King Hussein of Jordan and then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. A former CIA-director-turned-president ignored advice from his own intelligence professionals. Saddam’s tanks rolled into Kuwait early on the morning of Aug. 2.

By the morning of Aug. 5, Saddam’s advance reconnaissance elements had actually briefly crossed the Kuwait-Saudi border. The tracks of the Russian-made BMD reconnaissance vehicles were clearly visible on the imagery I used to help write the high-priority report NPIC issued that morning. Saddam had forward deployed two RGFC divisions to within just a few miles of the Kuwait-Saudi border. If he ordered them across, there was no credible military force on the ground that could stop them.

This time, Bush listened to NPIC, Allen and others in the U.S. intelligence community. He dispatched Vice President Dick Cheney and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin Powell to

Saudi Arabia to brief the King on our ominous findings. Pledging that Saddam's aggression against Kuwait "will not stand," Bush gained clearance from the Saudi government to deploy American troops to the kingdom. My colleagues and I kept close watch on Saddam's forces, looking for signs the RGFC was preparing to invade Saudi Arabia. But instead, the RGFC pulled back and dug in. Bush had stopped the Iraqi advance.

### **Iraq's `19<sup>th</sup> Province'**

Over the next several months, as more U.S. and allied forces poured into the Persian Gulf region, Saddam dispatched dozens of additional divisions to Kuwait. None of us working the Iraqi problem felt sanctions would have the slightest impact on Saddam; he'd already declared Kuwait to be Iraq's "19th province."

Bush's diplomacy during the autumn was masterful; that he and then-Secretary of State James Baker were able to assemble so many nations in support of ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait ranks as one of his greatest foreign policy achievements. The greatest may well have been convincing Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to keep Israel out of the war even after Iraqi missiles started falling on its territory.

The war and its legacy proved far more problematic.

In mid-February 1991, during the height of the coalition air campaign against Iraqi forces, Bush gave a speech at the Raytheon Patriot missile plant. He called on the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam. Once Iraqi forces were ejected from Kuwait at the end of the month, Iraqi Kurds in the north of Iraq and Shiites in southern Iraq did as Bush asked—they openly revolted against the regime and attacked the decimated but still functional Iraqi military. The result was the predictable retribution and slaughter against both minorities by Saddam's forces.

But instead of ordering air strikes to help the rebels, or sending American Special Forces to help, Bush let Kurds and Shiites be butchered. The northern no-fly zone that the U.S. set up with several allies to protect the Kurds wasn't established until after the Kurdish uprising was crushed in the weeks after the war ended. And the no-fly zone in the south wasn't put in place until August 1992 and did nothing to stop the subsequent Iraqi ground operations against the Shiite marsh Arabs.

### **Monitoring the Massacres**

I had the grim duty of monitoring and reporting on the massacres from NPIC. I could see the destruction to Shiite villages; I helped map out the Kurdish refugee encampments for subsequent food drops. In my life, I had rarely seen such a cynical and dishonorable act by an American president as the encouragement, then abandonment, of a people whose only desire was to be free of Saddam's tyranny.

Another group of Desert Storm survivors was abandoned by Bush—sick veterans of that war.

By early 1992, reports surfaced of Desert Storm veterans suffering from a constellation of symptoms that were subsequently tagged in the press as "Gulf War Syndrome." During the last year of his presidency, Bush took no action to direct the departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense to take seriously the veterans' claims that they were exposed to toxic agents during the war.

Thousands were denied disability benefits and did not receive proper examinations or treatments for their ailments. It would be long after Bush left office that the federal government would, haltingly and grudgingly, begin to honor disability claims from Desert Storm veterans. Even then, federal officials continued to deny that a toxic stew of low-level chemical agents and pesticides, the mandatory use of untested nerve agent “pretreatment” pills, and other toxins might be at the root of their medical problems.

The final legacy of Bush’s diplomatic work during and after the war was to draw the United States ever closer to the brutal, corrupt regimes that reside on the Arabian Peninsula. The most vicious of all is the mammoth of the two Bush rescued with Operation Desert Storm, a fact driven home by Saudi Arabia’s barbaric, American-supported war in Yemen and its murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

On a basic human level, all of us who have watched our parents or grandparents leave this world can identify with the raw feelings the Bush family has at this moment. Our empathy should not blind us to the fact that George Herbert Walker Bush’s White House tenure and legacy is a cautionary tale about the long-term human costs of short-term, politically expedient presidential decision making, both in war and its aftermath.

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