

The Bitter End: The Case for Re-Intervention in Iraq (1991)

Albert Wohlstetter and Fred S. Hoffman

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The United States and other members of the coalition, having intervened so massively in Iraq, have an obvious moral obligation to see to it that ethnic and religious minorities and the Shiite majority there have some protection against the deadly revenge of the Baath government. State Department and White House spokesmen, in a hopeless attempt to cover the obvious, have been emitting a dense fog of statements justifying first the vacillation and then the reversal of policy on using force to prevent the Republican Guards from training their helicopter gunships, artillery, and other heavy equipment on innocent Iraqis.

They continue to blur easily documented truths: that the president and the U.N. announced aims beyond the retaking of Kuwait, that the U.N. specifically authorized the use of force to implement *all* of its resolutions on Iraq, and that near the very outset of the war, the president plainly said the fighting wouldn't end when we got Saddam out of Kuwait—it would go on until Iraq's cooperation on all of the resolutions was assured. Members of the administration seem unaware that the disastrous direction in policy since the rout of the Iraqi army greatly reduces any chance that we can bring about substantial improvements in the protection of our interests and those of our partners in the region.

A key illusion held by the administration is that the war now being waged in Iraq is an "internal affair" that does not affect our interests or the interests of stability in the region. Yet the chronic disorder and factions in the Near East and Persian Gulf have their roots precisely in the internal violence of regimes there: their use of terror to suppress advocates of conciliation and all reports of violations in the letter or spirit of agreements, the absence of any internal check on the ambition of leaders, and the widespread use of schoolchildren and women as targets and shields. It is naive to suppose that the many arms control arrangements, border adjustments, and sanctions we have in mind can be sustained and would operate effectively without substantial changes in many "internal affairs."

Last week's U.N. Resolution 687 on the cease-fire in the Gulf, to take one example, "decides" that "Iraq shall unconditionally undertake not to use, develop, construct or acquire ... all chemical and biological weapons and all stocks of agents; and all related subsystems and components and all research, development, support, and manufacturing facilities" useful for acquiring components and subsystems of such weapons. For this even to appear to be a serious undertaking would require a permanent and continuous intervention in the internal affairs of an Iraqi government far more extensive than a one-time U.N. supervision of an election arranged by a provisional government. Enforcing such an undertaking by a totalitarian dictatorship is essentially infeasible. Arms control in this area, if feasible, can only occur in a society in which the government can't stop individuals from telling the outside world what's happening.

U.N. Resolution 688, to take another example, condemns Iraq's handling of the rebels and was approved 10-3 by the Security Council including the U.S. representative. It should finally put to rest the U.S. claim that we can't stop the mass killings in Iraq because they are an "internal affair." U.N. 688, over Iraq's protest, states that the mass killings are not an internal matter: they threaten "international peace and security."

The president had remarkably thoughtful aides but deserves the principal credit for the skill with which Desert Storm was prepared and pursued. He deserves this not least for explicitly recognizing, in the course of the muddled debate that followed the invasion, what most of his critics never seemed to grasp: that we had more than one reason and more than one aim in responding forcefully, and that these reasons were mutually reinforcing. It seems incredible that he should now forget what he achieved in leading the U.N. Security Council to authorize the use of force—"all necessary means"—for aims beyond getting Iraq out of Kuwait; and that he should now let the dogma that encouraged Iraq's invasions of Iran and Kuwait—that we need an Iraqi dictator to balance Iran and Syria—cloud everything that he accomplished and wants to achieve.

The president himself intended Desert Storm to serve some longer-term and broader aims beyond the operation's immediate goal—embodied in U.N. Resolution 660—of getting Iraq out of Kuwait. Six days before the U.N.'s January 15 deadline for Saddam to accept all its resolutions, the president said, "I am more determined than ever that the United Nations' resolutions,

including 678, be implemented fully." U.N. 678 authorized continuing force after Iraq left Kuwait, i.e., "to use all necessary means to uphold and implement Security Council resolution 660 (1990) and *all subsequent* relevant resolutions and to restore international peace and security in the area" (our italics).

Thirty-seven hours into Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait, the president said the liberation of Kuwait "would not end the fighting." We would then seek compliance with all the U.N. resolutions. The fighting "isn't going to end short of the total fulfillment of our objectives." General Norman Schwarzkopf, in his now famous strategy briefing during the last hours of the operation, said:

... There's a lot more purpose of this war than just get the Iraqis out of Kuwait [sic]. The purpose of this war was to enforce the resolutions of the United Nations. There are some twelve different resolutions of the United Nations, not all of which have been accepted by Iraq to date. . . .

Moreover, at the outset of Desert Storm, the general reflected the president's view that we would make some sacrifice in overcoming Iraq's powerful military machine because we wanted to "minimize any harm done to innocent civilians." While the president was saying that at a news conference in Washington, the general was saying the same thing in his briefing in Riyadh: "We are doing absolutely everything we possibly can in this campaign to avoid injuring or hurting or destroying innocent people."

The president's decision was right, but also prudent. The myth that we must destroy a country in order to save it paralyzes policy. In Desert Storm, we concentrated, with imperfect but widespread success, on highly accurate, discriminating weapons against military targets, exploiting a cumulative revolution in information technology. Saddam's arsenal, in contrast, was primarily rooted in weapons of mass destruction. We wanted to destroy the Iraqi army as an organized force. Saddam wanted us to destroy Iraqi innocents. He used them as shields at strategic installations because he believed our destroying innocents would cost us essential domestic and coalition support. Killing Iraqi innocents doesn't bother him. He's been doing it himself for years. For us to kill them would blur a defining difference, which we should never lose sight of, between us and him, and his likes.

The revolution in technology made it feasible in Desert Storm to be discriminate. A strong focus on isolating and destroying Saddam's army in and near Kuwait fit well with reducing our killing of Iraqi civilians. With Desert Storm over, we can still discriminate. Using air power selectively now to stop the Republican Guards from killing Iraqi civilians fits very well with our longer-term aim for a stable balance of power in the region.

The president said he wanted to "leave it to the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people" to take care of Saddam. He failed to make the distinction between the Republican Guards (which acts as praetorian guard for Saddam and his Baath thugs) and the regular army (at which the Guard pointed its guns to enforce the army's role as cannon fodder). Yet it is the rebels in the regular army joining forces with the Iraqi resistance who might help bring about some necessary political change in Iraq.

Only a very murky, fantasy realpolitik suggests that the brutal Baath dictatorship, and only it or its murderous Republican Guards, can keep Iraq together as a peaceful "balance" to the power of fundamentalist Iran or Syria. No regional balance will be stable without the West's involvement. Any Baath regime would be not only a potential aggressor but also a continuing major opponent of any Western intervention on behalf of the weaker powers. The same vague delusionary realpolitik about a Baath Iraq seems to be the source of the embarrassing indecisiveness of the last two weeks. The president's instincts to stop the slaughter by Baath thugs would better serve his desire for a stable peace in the area.

In any case, we can't avoid intervening. The president already broadcast worldwide his invitation to the Iraqi dissidents: "[T]he Iraqi military and the Iraqi people [should] take matters into their own hands to force Saddam Hussein the dictator to step aside." We were intervening massively in Iraq's "internal affairs" when we destroyed much of an Iraqi army, whose main function since Iraq gained independence in 1932 has been the repression of Iraqi civilians. And we intervened massively in Iraq's internal affairs when we targeted so large a proportion of our air sorties against Iraqi industry.

The intent of coalition leaders was to avoid killing civilians, and, on the whole, they conducted the campaign with unprecedented care. Some normally quite accurate weapons inevitably went astray. Some targets were mislocated. The choice by the strategic intelligence and target selection bureaucracy of some industrial targets such as electric power, which affects sewage and

water distribution for Iraqi civilians, was questionable. And the repeated strategic bombing of second-and third-order industrial targets in Iraqi cities, in contrast to the use of air power to isolate and destroy Iraqi ground divisions in the Kuwaiti theater of operations, disrupted essential human services as well as political control. If we want medical aid and food restored for civilians, and if we want those civilians to survive assaults and eventually achieve some measure of self-rule and freedom from a tyranny that has been lethal to the outside world as well as to Iraqis, they'll need some help. We'll have to force the Baath government to refrain from its normal practice of slaughtering civilians.

At the end of February, if we had continued the fighting to achieve all our objectives as the president had said we would on January 18, it would not have taken much force. Not with the Iraqi air defense network destroyed. It would have meant continuing for only a few days the rapid destruction of artillery, tanks, and warplanes, continuing a rout that many called an unfairly riskless and inhumane "turkey shoot." They called it that before they understood that these "turkeys" were deadly and intended to slaughter defenseless civilians. Those who now blame the United States for deaths of Republican Guards, civilians the Guards murder, and civilians we tried not to kill are themselves indiscriminate. If the coalition continues fighting, it could have clear-cut aims to complete the rapid rout of a defeated regular military force. Very different from guerrillas under dense jungle canopies. Or a Lebanese terrorist driving a truck loaded with explosives against a U.S. Embassy standing as a permanent target. The Vietnam and Lebanon "quagmires" that those who opposed Desert Storm conjured up near its start, to assure us, by analogy, that Desert Storm would take years and pile up tens of thousands of casualties, turned out to exist mainly in their heads. The analogies should look even more irrelevant after Desert Storm. Desert Storm went more rapidly than even the coalition expected, in part because they underestimated the latent resentment and rebelliousness of the ordinary Iraqi soldier and his readiness to surrender, defect, or turn on his Baath and Republican Guard tormentors.

In the administration's search for another military or Baath party dictator it continues to overestimate the amount of force required to even the odds for the resistance. Even now it will not take a great deal of force. Nothing like restarting a ground war. Nor anything like the full-scale air campaign. The coalition has

been flying combat air patrols unopposed over north and south Iraq. AWACS surveillance aircraft can detect and identify any Iraqi fighters or helicopter gunships in violation of the truce and can guide patrolling aircraft to intercept them. With tanker aircraft over Iraq to refuel tactical reconnaissance as well as combat planes, we can spot and use precision weapons to destroy on the ground Iraqi warplanes and artillery used in violation of the truce. We can airdrop communications equipment that enables the resistance to coordinate their actions and to stay in touch with the outside world. And we can surely deliver medical supplies, food, and other humanitarian aid directly to civilians in territory held by the resistance and to resistance fighters whom the Baath government is starving out.

The last is the most obviously urgent and also the most risky of the above measures. It involves exposing big, vulnerable air cargo planes and their crews flying low and slow over the delivery areas to the large numbers of shoulder-fired missiles and machine guns in the hands of infantry. Yet in a belated reversal of policy, the U.S. government announced that it will fly C-130 cargo planes from Turkish air bases to make air drops of humanitarian aid to the Kurdish resistance. We have warned the Iraqi government not to interfere, and the Pentagon has declared that we will fly combat air patrols with jet fighters as cover for the C-130s. There is a substantial chance that some of the very large number of Iraqi infantrymen who have hand-held and shoulder-fired weapons will use them to bring down a cargo plane and its crew. This amounts to a reversal by the president of his statement that he will not risk the precious life of even one American soldier in the current civil war.

But if we can undertake this risky mission to bring aid to those who have been subjected to mass killing and maiming, why can't we undertake less risky missions in order to reduce drastically the gunships, the artillery, and the like that are doing the maiming? The U.N. coalition has more than enough means to even or reverse the present odds. But serious signals of our intentions have to be clearly made through the clouded media of the press and TV. Signals of our intent have been far too mixed ever to make clear that we really did want Saddam to stop slaughtering Iraqi citizens and to let them pick their leaders. The signals have baffled the press. And maybe Saddam. Saddam simply ignored warnings not to use helicopter gunships. If Iraqi Kurds, Shiites, and ordinary soldiers misunderstood our intention when we said "the Iraqi

military and the Iraqi people should take matters into their own hands," it would be absurd now to make the issue trivial, like deconstructivist literary *explication de texte*. We have an obligation to make such momentous signals clear.

If we are unwilling now to use a minimal amount of force out of the vast air power that still gives us air supremacy in Iraq, how likely are we to use force in the future when we will have neither the power in place, nor as heartrending a cause, nor as urgent an obligation, nor as unified a coalition and domestic support? In the days after victory, public support for continuing the fight to oust Saddam was high. As the genocide grew, Arab members of the coalition—for example, Kuwait and Egypt—were urging "all necessary means" to stop the annihilation by the Republican Guards. While we held back, France and Turkey took the lead in pressing for U.N. condemnation of the Iraqi government's war on the Iraqi people. And British Prime Minister John Major, urged by Mrs. Thatcher, preceded us in announcing plans to send humanitarian aid directly to the resistance. The U.S. government, which led the way into Desert Storm, cannot plausibly attribute its delayed response to its coalition partners.

On the whole, it might be better for government spokesmen to replace the embarrassing noise they have substituted for explanation with total silence. But better still, the administration should think through the implications of our current actions for the longer run in the Gulf and in the Near East. And cast a cold eye on the uncritical assumption underlying its indecision: the view of our diplomats, persisting since the fall of the Shah, that an Iraqi dictatorship would be a lesser evil and the only real alternative to fundamentalist fanatics or the "Lebanonization" of Iraq.

Lebanon is not a convincing analogy. Much of the factional strife there is the heritage of French attempts to preserve the dominance of the Maronites, as demographic trends increased the numbers of Muslims, especially poor Shiite Muslims, and as the Palestinians, excluded from political participation by almost all Arab states as well as by Israel, multiplied in camps like Shatila. What serious parallel is there in Lebanon to Iraq, where a few members of the Sunni Arab minority, making up perhaps one-fifth of the population, preside over a Shiite majority that is mainly in the south, where it competes very little with the Kurds in the northern province of Mosul who form a minority about as large as that of the Sunni Arabs? The Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north oppose their Baath oppressors. The Kurdish opposition

has indicated that it is seeking greater cultural autonomy in a federal structure in Iraq. President Ozal of Turkey has accepted the idea of cultural autonomy in a federal Iraq and is increasing the cultural autonomy of Kurds in Turkey. The Shiite Arabs in the south during the Iraq-Iran war did not respond to Khomeini's appeal to join forces with the Iranian Shiites any more than Arabs in [Iran's] Khuzistan answered Saddam's call to join Shiite Arabs in southern Iraq.

Why is it against the interests of the West for Iraqis to vote on such a loose federal structure? What magic does our own Arabist establishment see in an Iraq unified and dominated by a dictatorship of a few members of the Sunni Arab minority? Yet in many background briefings anonymous officials have been telling reporters that "all-out military efforts to assist anti-Hussein forces may not serve our long-term interests." They may "make Iran dominant in the Gulf." We need the present dictatorship for the balance of power. Of course, Saddam himself is a bit hard to swallow. So the talk is of a Republican Guard general or a Baath Party without Saddam. It's doubtful that we know how to arrange that. Trying to do so would be not only meddling in the internal affairs of Iraq, but micromanaging the selection of personnel in the party or the army.

This bipartisan view of the importance of a Baath Iraq for regional stability has long held sway. In April 1980 Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, on PBS's "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour," responded to many broad Iraqi hints that they could take care of our Iranian problem, and sent two nominally separate but deliberately and ominously juxtaposed messages: "We see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the U.S. and Iraq," and "I make two separate propositions: one that we do not wish to continue the anomalous state of U.S.-Iraqi relations, though . . . the road towards improvement is a long one. Secondly, the Iranians themselves ought to consider the potential consequences for Iran of Iran's continued isolation." Four months later, Baath Iraq invaded Iran. That did not bring about a stable balance of power.

When the Iraq-Iran war ended in 1988, many Western Arabists, including our own diplomats and some key figures in the Reagan and Bush State Departments, held that Baath Iraq, weakened by that war, had shifted permanently toward moderation, cooperation with neighbors like Kuwait, the building of its civilian economy, and avoidance of foreign adventures. It's

no wonder they were surprised in August 1990. Their continuing preference in the current civil war for the Baath party over the present opposition may be preparing future shocks.

There is no reason to believe that preserving the Baath dictatorship or a military substitute is the only way or the best way or any way at all to keep Iraq whole. And there is plenty of reason to believe that if the Baath government does survive and is in charge of Iraq and its oil revenues, Baath Iraq will not remain weak. It will use its oil reserves to revive its strength and its menace to the neighborhood. Supporting a Baath tyranny strong enough to avoid "Lebanonization" but too weak to threaten the stability of the region would be like trying to walk a tightrope in a hurricane—in the wrong direction.

Even if we don't help the resistance, the Baath government might lose control in one place or another. Then the chance of dismemberment by the outside parties who have supported various opposition groups while we stood idly by is greater. But if we take a forthright stance against outside parties dismembering Iraq and in favor of letting the Iraqis vote on their own future, including their own future leaders, the threat of Lebanonization is likely to be quite small.

Neither the United States nor the U.N. has made a change of government in Iraq an explicit "formal war aim." Secretary Baker is right about that. However, both the United States and the U.N. have made formal demands on Iraq that cannot be fulfilled unless there is an Iraqi government whose agreement to comply is credible. If the formal demands are serious, they entail such a change. The president understands that. Time and again he's made clear that he can't conceive of negotiating in the future with the present Iraqi government. He's said that Saddam's "credibility is zero, zilch, zed."

"Leaving it to the Iraqis" does not mean staying neutral in the uneven military struggle between a Baath tyranny armed with jet fighters, helicopter gunships, tanks, and artillery and the spontaneous, poorly equipped, diverse but widespread opposition. Nor does it mean that the only alternative to staying neutral or siding with the Baath dictators is for us to pick the leaders who will rule Iraq—as the British, after World War I, picked Faisal, after his expulsion by the French from Syria, to rule in Iraq. It should mean letting Iraqi citizens have a chance to pick their leaders. No one should expect a Jeffersonian democracy to emerge full-blown from the present chaos, like Aphrodite from

the sea. But even a government selected by a random process would be better than Baath rule.

Political elites in the West, especially those who opposed the U.N. coalition's use of force against Saddam, have talked much about the need for immediate elections in Kuwait. They seem more eager to intervene in the internal affairs of the least repressive country in the Gulf—the victim of a catastrophic invasion—than in Iraq, its perpetrator. It's more urgent to improve the political process in Iraq—to give Iraqi citizens access to information and some opportunity for making informed political choices. Is it likely that Arabs and Muslims, of all peoples in the world, are unable to judge their own self-interest and move toward self-rule? Turkey shows that, contrary to the received wisdom of many Western Arabists, Islam is not incompatible with democratic rule. The disaster visited on Iraqi subjects by the Baath dictatorship, and the avowal of democracy by the resistance groups, are the right occasion for testing the myth about the incapacity of "the Arab street" to make informed choices.

It was essential that the Desert Storm campaign have a clear-cut political and territorial objective that could be accomplished rapidly and decisively. Nonetheless, we have always had other goals, and if we are to bring about useful long-run change toward a moderately stable order in the Gulf and in the Near East, we have to be ready to use discriminate force, and to use some force now, in the service of other clear-cut limited aims. We can slow somewhat the pace with which we bring our airmen home without stopping it; or we could send in some replacements. In any case, no matter how fast our planned withdrawal, the onset of disease and famine produced by the devastation of Iraq's infrastructure and by the prolonged internal fighting is taking place before the eyes of our forces in the region. We and the coalition will still have a massive amount of force in the area, a selection of which can be used for clear, limited ends that are political as well as humanitarian.

What the U.N. coalition needs most is a little clarity about its essential aims beyond U.N. 660's demand on Iraq to get out of Kuwait. Many are embodied in the dozen or so U.N. Security Council resolutions that directed the coalition and empowered it. They include holding the present Iraqi government to account for the enormous harm it has done to other nations. The public accounting of the harm done can be as important as the compensation. And the latest U.N. resolution, U.N. 688, calls for a detailed report to the Council of the harm done by the Iraqi

government to its own people. Just airing the atrocities against innocents, whom the Baath government has used both as targets and shields for its military power, will be clarifying generally in the Middle East, where, for example, a member of the coalition, Syria, and all factions of the PLO have used innocents as both targets and shields. That has been a chronic, continuing source of regional instability. But holding the present Baath dictatorship to account for the harm it has done against innocents is incompatible with trying to preserve it or standing by while it suppresses all opposition.

Paramount among the conditions for getting Iraq to fulfill the demands made in these resolutions is ensuring that individuals in Iraq can freely communicate with each other and with the outside world. Such freedom of information is essential not only for Iraqis to choose leaders whose promises will be credible, but also for the viability of any arms agreements to control manufacturing activities that can quickly be converted to the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction. It is an essential—and not yet adequately understood—prerequisite for the improved order the president seeks in the region.

If we are clear enough about our purposes, we can use military force discriminately in ways that will avoid both chaos and the restoration of Baath totalitarian control. The United States and other members of the U.N. coalition should announce their support for U.N.-supervised democratic elections in a unified Iraq after a period in which the U.N. member nations have made available to Iraqi citizens an accounting of the atrocities of the Baath regime. The allies should also clearly state that they oppose the Baath government's use of helicopter gunships, jet fighters, artillery, rockets, and tanks to suppress opposition, and regard the use of such force as a violation of the current truce; and that they will use air power selectively to compel the present government to live up to the conditions of the truce and to stop the slaughter of innocents.

Members of the coalition should use photo reconnaissance and surveillance by other sensors and other means to verify, document, and publicize any aspects of the war the Iraqi government is waging against its people, such as the reported use of chemicals. And the coalition should air-drop communications equipment to the Iraqi resistance to aid in this process and to help them coordinate their actions.

The allies should also consider inserting some special forces to aid in their use of air power by bringing equipment useful in identifying and locating Republican Guard units and their heavy equipment, and in calling in and directing any use by the coalition of precision weapons against such units, and to help organize and direct the resistance to the Baath government's reimposing its control. In any such use of special forces, Arab members of the coalition should play a most prominent role.

While the present battle goes on between the resistance forces and the Baath government, and as the United States brings soldiers home, the coalition should not hurry to withdraw all its forces from the substantial part of southern Iraq that it currently occupies, nor formally conclude the occupation. Air power based nearby and air patrols over Iraq—"Eyes in the Sky" and the air power to pursue infractions of U.N. demands selectively—are the last things we ought to take out.

It would be a terrible irony if our historic military success were to end in an equally historic political and human disaster.