Policy, Strategy, and the President

PERSIAN GULF WAR
A TYPE I APPROACH TO CONFLICTS

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A case study of the George H. W. Bush administration's actions in the lead up to the Persian Gulf War reveals it pursued a particular type of approach that contributed significantly to a quick turn to military force as the outcome of the conflict. This approach, one of several different types employed by US presidential administrations in response to conflicts, included offering coercive alternatives, refusing to negotiate or facilitate a compromise, and identifying a favorable resolution of the conflict as a matter of urgency. This approach will be a factor when an administration prioritizes similar foreign policy objectives.

Less than six months after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the George H. W. Bush administration employed military force to roll back Iraq's conquest. This article is a case study of the Bush administration's actions prior to using military force. It explores connections between those actions and the Persian Gulf War. An analysis of data from policy documents, speeches, and the memoirs of central administration officials addresses the following questions: What approach did the Bush administration take to this conflict with Iraq? Where did that approach originate? How did that approach contribute to the outcome of the conflict?[1]

Theoretical Foundations

Rather than rooting itself solely in realism or geopolitics, economic analysis, bureaucratic politics, or rational actor theory, this study analyzes the actions the Bush administration took to this conflict through the concept of "approach." That is, it asks which alternatives to the use of major military force the administration pursued to resolve the conflict it perceived with Iraq. This article examines how the administration viewed compromises and inducements, analyzes the administration's reasons for

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1. James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Lauren Holland, "The U.S. Decision to Launch Operation Desert Storm: A Bureaucratic Politics Analysis," *Armed Forces & Society* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), https://www.jstor.org/; H. W. Brands, "George Bush and the Gulf War of 1991," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 2004), https://www.jstor.org/; and Atif A. Kubursi and Salim Mansur, "Oil and the Gulf War: An 'American Century' or A 'New World Order,' " *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1993), https://www.jstor.org/.

employing specific alternatives, and outlines the administration's patience when pursuing these alternatives.

Understanding conflicts through this concept is importantly responsive to the literature that addresses the cultural roots of US foreign policy.[2] This study postulates US policymakers are constrained by political traditions when they seek congressional and public support for the use of major military force. The most important cultural artifact relevant to how an administration constructs an approach I refer to as the Necessity Standard.[3] The Necessity Standard provides the generally accepted criteria pertaining to engagement in war. It holds that major military force must be used, and can only be used, if and when alternatives to the use of such force are incapable of protecting any vital American interest or discharging any US duty that is implicated in a conflict.

Thus, this study understands that for political and policy reasons as well as those of rational calculation, an administration must create a systematic method to test whether alternatives to the use of large-scale military force, such as the imposition of economic sanctions, bargaining, or military threats, are viable means of attaining a defined bottom line if it ascertains that US vital interests and/or duties are at stake in a conflict.[4]

This work draws upon presidential studies to embrace the position that members of presidential administrations are the key foreign policy actors in the US system. Presidents and their top advisors create policies that protect vital US interests and allow the United States to discharge its duties. Further, it is through these policies that presidential administrations confront conflicts.[5]

But it is also responsive to the scholarship that describes a pluralist American institutional and political landscape.[6] That literature locates the officials who influence military-force decisions in two formal political institutions whose members are sometimes deeply divided. In this frame, executive branch policymakers responsible for deciding questions involving war and peace cannot implement substantial martial undertakings without support from Congress. To gain that support, they must

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2. Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

3. David J. Lorenzo, *War and American Foreign Policy: Justifications of Major Military Actions in the US* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

4. Lorenzo, *American Foreign Policy*.

5. Christopher Hemmer, *American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); and Richard A. Melanson, *American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

6. Peter Hays Gries, *The Politics of American Foreign Policy: How Ideology Divides Liberals and Conservatives over Foreign Affairs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); and Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, "The Structure of Foreign Policy Attitudes among American Leaders," *Journal of Politics* 52, no. 1 (1990), https://www.jstor.org/.

persuade their fellow elites to accept their decisions with evidence they have applied the Necessity Standard.[7]

In exploring how an administration's approach affects the outcome of a conflict, this study draws from the literature on conflict studies and bargaining to frame an analysis of how conflicts play out. That literature starts with primary questions that assess the chances of an agreement or escalation: Is there a hurting stalemate? Is there a possibility of reaching a deal before the fighting of a war that would closely resemble the terms of an agreement that would be reached following a war? Do the parties have an incentive to escalate? Arriving at those answers entails first understanding each party's approach to the conflict to identify the room for possible agreement, and second, understanding the orientation of each party to the status quo and escalation.[8]

Partial Typology of Historical Approaches to Conflicts

Understanding approaches to conflicts begins with understanding types of approaches. All US administrations construe interactions with other states through their perception of US vital interests and duties. While all US administrations historically have adhered to the Necessity Standard, they may differ when determining whether a conflict exists. Further, all administrations in some form test the viability of alternatives in the context of a conflict. And while these approaches may differ, they can nonetheless be categorized by type. Types of approaches are distinguished by an administration's sense of patience or urgency, willingness to display flexibility, and choice of coercive or noncoercive alternatives. The following describes a sample of approaches that employ limited flexibility and patience:

Type 0 approach: An administration responds to a conflict with an ultimatum that seeks instant compliance from the other party. This approach incorporates no patience or flexibility in its pursuit of alternatives. Absent immediate compliance or capitulation, the administration moves (within days) to the use of major military force. A historical example is the Truman administration's response to North Korea's invasion of South Korea in the spring of 1950.

Type 1 approach: An administration presents a set of demands and applies coercive measures and military threats. This approach employs limited patience and no flexibility. If the other party does not comply within a limited timeframe (a matter of weeks or months), the administration creates an endgame that will generate a war absent capitulation. A historical example is the Kennedy administration's actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.

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7. Miriam Fendius Elman, "Unpacking Democracy: Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Theories of Democratic Peace," *Security Studies* 9, no. 4, (2000), https://www.tandfonline.com/; and Steve Chan and William Safran, "Public Opinion as a Constraint against War: Democracies' Responses to Operation Iraqi Freedom," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2, no. 2 (2006), https://edisciplinas.usp.br/.

8. Fen Osler Hampson, Chester A. Crocker, and Pamela R. Aall, "Negotiation and International Conflict," in *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, ed. Charles Webel and Johan Galtung (New York: Routledge, 2007), http://www.uop.edu.pk/.

Type 2 approach: An administration demands another state to consent to an agreement or actions favorable to the United States. This approach entails limited patience, makes use of coercion and possibly military threats, and could offer some concessions or inducements. If no agreement or action is forthcoming within a limited timeframe (measured in months), the administration creates an endgame that will result in war if the other party does not comply. A historical example is the Polk administration and the conflict with Mexico in the mid-1840s.

Type 3 approach: An administration makes demands of another state, and it pushes those demands through elements of coercion and possibly low-level military actions or deterrence. This approach exhibits little flexibility and substantial patience. Without an event or radical change in conditions, the administration does not create an endgame. Successive administrations adopted this approach to Cuba in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis.[9]

Type 4 approach: An administration makes demands. It employs political pressure and possibly low-level coercive measures but is also willing to provide limited concessions or inducements. This approach entails significant patience and flexibility. The administration does not want to use military force in the medium term except for a major change in conditions and is willing to pursue this approach for a considerable length of time. A historical example is the Grant administration's approach when it confronted Spain over its military operations in Cuba in the early 1870s.

This study argues the George H. W. Bush administration took a **Type 1** approach to Iraq in the early 1990s, and its subsequent inflexibility and sense of urgency led it to a relatively quick resort to major military force.

Iraq and the Bush Administration

The Bush administration perceived a conflict with Iraq because it identified Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as implicating vital US interests and duties. The administration identified the invasion as a threat to a vital interest in maintaining global order and stability. It identified a vital interest in the stability of the Middle East and the security of important regional allies, both of which Iraq appeared to threaten.

Per the Carter Doctrine and associated policies, it identified vital interests in ensuring no state dominated the region, guaranteeing US access to oil in the region, stable oil prices, and preventing any state from controlling the world oil market.[10] The Bush administration also identified as a vital interest eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), given the threat they posed to regional friends and allies. Finally,

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9. Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

10. Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address 1980, transcript, January 23, 1980, The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum (website), https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/; and Michael T. Klare, "Oil, Iraq, and American Foreign Policy: the Continuing Salience of the Carter Doctrine," *International Journal* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2006–2007), https://www.jstor.org/.

it identified duties to protect the citizens of Kuwait from abuse and US citizens from Iraqi interference and violence.[11]

The administration subsequently measured the viability of alternatives to large-scale military action by referencing these identified interests and duties. An alternative or set of alternatives needed to completely remove the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, reinstate the legitimate Kuwaiti government, and ensure that Iraq recognized Kuwait's sovereignty. It also needed to protect American and Kuwaiti citizens, compel Iraq's government to obey all relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, and deter Iraq from embarking on similar military adventures in the future.

The Bush administration responded by employing coercive alternatives, refusing to negotiate or facilitate a compromise and identifying a favorable resolution of the conflict as a matter of urgency. Thus, upon receiving word of the invasion on August 2, 1990, administration officials froze Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets in the United States and embargoed Iraqi oil shipments.[12] The administration then proposed and implemented a series of UNSC resolutions imposing strict multilateral economic sanctions on Iraq under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

The UNSC approved the first of these (Resolution 661) on August 6. After the administration began using military units to enforce a blockade of Kuwait, it sought to broaden that enforcement effort by soliciting UN backing. Resolution 665, approved on August 25, authorized member states to take "all necessary measures" to enforce an embargo against Iraq.[13] The administration continued to employ these coercive measures throughout the conflict and insisted they would not be lifted until Iraq left Kuwait and abided by all relevant UNSC resolutions.

At the same time, the administration was willing to give only limited time to Arab League efforts to negotiate a complete and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal and publicly worried that the League's proposals would fall short of those goals.[14] Its policy dictated that US agents have minimal contact with the Iraqis because it associated substantive diplomacy with undesirable acts of compromise and appeasement.[15]

At no time did the administration propose or facilitate other negotiations, offer its good offices, or suggest a willingness to play the role of mediator or arbitrator to settle the problem between Iraq and Kuwait. Nor did it support any proposal for any party

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11. George H. W. Bush, January 16, 1991: Address to the Nation on the Invasion of Iraq, transcript, Presidential Speeches, University of Virginia Miller Center (website), January 16, 1991, https://miller center.org/.

12. George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 304; and Exec. Order No. 12,722, 3 C.F.R. (1990) Comp., 294–95, https://www.hsdl.org/.

13. UN Security Council (UNSC), Resolution 665 (1990)/adopted by the Security Council at its 2938th meeting, on 25 August 1990, UNS(01)/R3, May 25, 1990, https://digitallibrary.un.org/.

14. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 310–14, 319; George H. W. Bush, remarks to reporters, meeting with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Aspen, Colorado, August 2, 1990; and Bush, telephone conversation with King Hussein of Jordan and President Mubarak of Egypt, August 2, 1990, 12:17–31 p.m. EST aboard Air Force One en route to Aspen, Colorado, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/.

15. Bush, January 16, 1991: Address to the Nation.

other than the Arab League to play such a role. It instead supported Kuwait's immediate submission of the matter to the UNSC.

Diplomacy with Iraq meant making demands and insisting Iraq accept those demands. Consequently, the text of National Security Directive 45, which officially set US policy on the conflict, mentions neither substantive negotiations, mediation, arbitration, nor bargaining with the Iraqis in its discussion of diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.[16] US Secretary of State James Baker's September 1990 testimony to members of the House of Representatives was likewise silent regarding these tools.[17]

Administration officials set out this position as early as August 3.[18] National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft insisted at that day's UNSC meeting "the stakes in this are such that to accommodate Iraq should not be a policy option."[19] In his August 8 national address, Bush argued that compromises and side payments equal appeasement and argued that "Iraq cannot be allowed to benefit from its invasion of Kuwait."[20]

The administration thereafter held that it would not compromise on its initial aims or those contained in successive UNSC resolutions. It also refused to connect those aims with other issues or pursue them by offering Iraq anything in return for quitting Kuwait. Bush reiterated this view at a White House meeting with members of Congress on August 28, arguing that the administration's policy was to make clear to Iraq that "it cannot benefit from this illegal occupation."[21]

Any dialogue with Iraqi officials the administration did initiate consisted of attempts to convey demands and ultimatums. Thus, while the administration had Deputy Chief of Mission Joseph C. Wilson available as a channel of communication, the only reference to him merely reports that on August 5, Wilson "relayed our demand that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait."[22]

While Hussein tried to pass messages to the administration for the next several months and attempted to arrange meetings with administration officials through third parties, the administration steadfastly refused to engage in direct dialogue.[23] The administration reached out to the Iraqis only after the Security Council passed

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16. George H. W. Bush, National Security Directive (NSD) 45: *U.S. Policy in Response to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait* (Washington, DC: The White House, August 20, 1990), https://irp.fas.org/.

17. *Hearing to Report on the Persian Gulf Situation, House Foreign Affairs Committee*, 101st Cong. (September 4, 1990)(statement of Secretary of State James Baker), https://israeled.org/.

18. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 237.

19. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 323.

20. George H. W. Bush, Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia, transcript, August 8, 1990, The American Presidency Project (website), https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.

21. George H. W. Bush, Remarks at a White House Briefing for Members of Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis, transcript, August 28, 1990, The American Presidency Project (website), https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 348.

22. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 337.

23. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 310–14, 319; and Bush, Thatcher; and Bush, memorandum of telephone conversation with King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, August 2, 1990, 6:43–7:21 p.m. EST, Oval Office, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/.

Resolution 678, which set a deadline of January 15, 1991, for Iraq to comply with all
UNSC resolutions.

Bush then decided a direct meeting between high-level US and Iraqi officials would
demonstrate that alternatives had been truly exhausted. But the administration only
came to an agreement to meet the Iraqis in January. This resulted in the January 9,
1991, encounter in Geneva between Baker and Iraq's Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz,
which consisted of an exchange of views in which Baker conveyed demands reiterat-
ing the UN ultimatum rather than undertaking substantive discussions.[24]

The administration directed the bulk of its diplomatic activities at parties other
than Iraq and pursued the creation of the largest possible coalition to support and en-
force UNSC resolutions.[25] It was also dedicated to keeping states supportive of the US
stance that compromises were unacceptable, and only strict and total compliance with
UNSC resolutions would be sufficient to raise the UN sanctions and later to head off
military action. The administration used its Allies and friends to (1) apply pressure
comprehensively; (2) coordinate, enforce, and legitimize sanctions; (3) solicit material
and moral support for possible military action; and (4) demonstrate to the Iraqis that
they were bereft of sympathy, support, and allies during the conflict.[26]

The Bush administration similarly construed the role of the UN as a source of co-
ordination and legitimation for its policy of coercing and pressuring Iraq rather than
as a body that could supply good offices, mediation, arbitration, or adjudication. The
administration immediately identified the UN as a vehicle for obtaining international
support for and participation in its response to Iraq's actions, particularly from the
People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.[27]

By the end of August, the Bush administration formalized its strategy as follows:
the administration would use the UN to confront the Iraqis, impose and enforce sanc-
tions, "keep Iraq isolated," and "build up support for the possibility of using force."[28]
These efforts to work through the UN culminated in the approval of an ultimatum to
Iraq by authorizing members to use "all necessary means" to enforce previous UN res-
olutions addressing Iraq's actions relative to Kuwait and set the January 15, 1991 dead-
line for Iraq to comply with those resolutions.

The administration's policy was also marked by considerable urgency. Administra-
tion officials insisted Iraq must promptly leave Kuwait, and it would judge alternatives
on their capacity to meet that sense of urgency. It established this position in Bush's
initial public remarks on Iraq's invasion, wherein he called for the "immediate . . .
withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait."[29] After that, the administration repeatedly

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24. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 441–42.

25. Baker, *Persian Gulf Situation*.

26. Woodward, *The Commanders*, 226, 237.

27. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 326, 363–68, 408–9.

28. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 303, 355–56.

29. Bush, August 8, 1990: Address to the Nation.

invoked this formula.[30] At the end of September, Bush announced that "Kuwait was running out of time. It certainly wasn't going to be around as a country if they waited for sanctions to work."[31] The administration's position that it had duties to protect human rights also marked a policy of urgency.[32]

These data indicate the administration's approach would not allow alternatives more than a few months to prove their viability. Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell mentioned the possibility of converting the defensive option of defending Saudi Arabia into an offensive option for removing Iraqi forces from Kuwait as early as August 3.[33]

Bush confirmed that by the end of August, he was approaching the conclusion that military action would be necessary to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait. He further records discussions in October involving the search for provocations that would serve as an excuse to initiate military operations. Scowcroft holds that by this time, Bush had become convinced that given the commitment to doing "whatever is necessary to liberate Kuwait," "the reality was that that meant using force."[34] Subsequently, the administration began an endgame in November with the dispatch of an offensive military force to Saudi Arabia and the approval of UNSC Resolution 678, which gave the Iraqi government 45 days to comply with UN demands.

Origin of the Administration's Approach

The administration's broader foreign policy serves as the origin of its approach to Iraq, specifically its embrace of the concept of a "new world order." Some scholars assert this order was founded on opposition to armed aggression, engagement in collective action, and encouragement of great power cooperation.[35] Another account draws its boundaries more expansively as a return to the post-World War II world order the United States created.[36]

Under the terms of this broader order, states respect their neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity and refrain from revisionist aggression. States resolve conflicts through international law and international organizations. The UN coordinates collective

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30. George H. W. Bush, October 1, 1990: Address to the United Nations, transcript, Presidential Speeches, Miller Center (website), https://millercenter.org/.

31. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 374–75, 399–400, 427, 434; and Woodward, *The Commanders*, 282, 297, 343.

32. Dan Quayle, "American Objectives in the Persian Gulf" (speech, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, November 29, 1990), transcript, http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/.

33. Woodward, *The Commanders*, 248–50.

34. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 353, 380–83.

35. Eric A. Miller and Steve A. Yetiv, "The New World Order in Theory and Practice: the Bush Administration's Worldview in Transition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (March 2001), https://www.jstor.org/.

36. Jeffrey Engel, "A Better World . . . but Don't Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George HW Bush Twenty Years On," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (January 2010): 27, https://www.jstor.org/.

security responses to acts of aggression, with the large states taking the lead in imitation of the Concert of Europe. The emphasis is on regional and global stability.[37]

These priorities are evident in the administration's policy objectives relating to the Middle East and in relevant guidance that addressed Iraq.[38] As Bush stated in his address to Congress in September 1990, the role of the United Nations as an international institution that coordinated the response to what Bush termed Iraq's aggression meant that "we're now in sight of a United Nations that performs as envisioned by its founders."[39]

The connection between this larger foreign policy vision and the administration's approach to the conflict with Iraq can be traced to the beginning of the administration. Upon the assumption of office, administration officials began backing away from the previous administration's policy of balancing Iran and Iraq by aiding Iraq. Instead, they began implementing an approach that emphasized stability; opposed the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons; supported human rights; and was dedicated to deterring and reversing instances of aggressive revisionism.[40]

Official documents outline a policy of controlling Iraq by dangling a modest set of economic carrots for good behavior while threatening sanctions if Iraq engaged in any "illegal use of chemical and/or biological weapons" or any "breach of IAEA safeguards in its nuclear program."[41] The administration became increasingly concerned with Hussein's ambitions and his WMD programs and reacted sharply to his speech on April 1, 1990, in which he threatened Israel with WMD.[42]

The administration reacted forcibly to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait foremost because its members perceived the invasion as a fundamental challenge to the administration's commitment to the post-1945 global order that was meant to prevent another world war. The president's line of analysis was founded on the Cold War dictum that failure to quickly oppose aggressive revisionism encourages further adventurism and increases the possibilities of a large future war.

As Bush noted in his initial address on the invasion, "The acquisition of territory by force is unacceptable" and later, that Iraq's action "threatens to turn the dream of a new international order into a grim nightmare of anarchy in which the law of the jungle

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37. Christopher Maynard, *Out of the Shadow: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 17–18; and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "George HW Bush: Conservative Realist as President," *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (2018), https://www.sciencedirect.com/.

38. George H. W. Bush, NSD 26: *US Policy Toward the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2, 1989), https://bush41library.tamu.edu/.

39. George H. W. Bush, September 11, 1990: Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," Presidential Speeches, The Miller Center (website), video, https://millercenter.org/.

40. George H. W. Bush, National Security Review 10: *US Policy Toward the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 22, 1989), https://irp.fas.org/.

41. Bush, NSD 26.

42. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 307; Patrick E. Tyler, "Iraqi Warns of Using Poison Gas," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 305–6.

supplants the law of nations."[43] Iraq's actions were akin to Germany's maneuvers in the 1930s and were "the first test of the post-Cold War system."[44] Bush explicitly notes, "I saw a direct analogy between what was occurring in Kuwait and what the Nazis had done."[45]

Looking back, Bush held that his speech of August 8, 1990 accurately reflected "the similarity I saw between the Persian Gulf and the situation in the Rhineland in the 1930s when Hitler simply defied the Treaty of Versailles and marched in. This time I wanted no appeasement."[46] Officials asserted any compromise would severely damage US credibility and its leadership in the world.[47] These references engrained these understandings into the administration's policy approach while constituting costly acts that made it impossible for the administration to return to a balancing formula or to embrace flexibility.[48]

A similarly aggressive application of the administration's larger policies is evident in the administration's selection of alternatives. The net effects of its selection of coercive alternatives and its quick resort to military force weakened Iraq in relative and absolute terms such that it would be less capable of engaging in destabilizing moves. The administration implemented sanctions and a military blockade that eroded Iraqi military and economic power. It rejected compromises and payoffs to Iraq that would have strengthened Hussein's regime.[49]

Administration officials argued that compromise and side payments would also constitute appeasement and that Hussein must not be rewarded for his aggression.[50] If he were, the administration held, he and others would be tempted to repeat his revisionist actions to reap more payoffs. A vindicated and empowered Hussein would continue acting as a deeply destabilizing force in the Middle East, undermine international laws and rules, and help generate "new dangers, new disorders, and a far less peaceful future."[51] The administration consequently did not allow Iraq to permanently

43. Bush, August 8, 1990: Address to the Nation; and Bush, October 1, 1990: Address to the United Nations.

44. Bush, August 8, 1990: Address to the Nation; UNSC, Provisional Verbatim Record of the Two Thousand Nine Hundredth and Thirty-Fourth Meeting, S/PV.2934 (August 9, 1990)(Statement of Mr. Pickering on Resolution 662), 7, https://undocs.org/; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 323; and Baker, *Persian Gulf Situation*.

45. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 375.

46. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 340; and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

47. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 418, 440; and Bertram Spector, "Negotiating with Villains Revisited—A Research Note," *International Negotiations* 8, no. 3 (2003), https://brill.com/view/.

48. George H. W. Bush, August 8, 1990: Address on Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait, Presidential Speeches, The Miller Center (website), https://millercenter.org/; and George H. W. Bush, March 6, 1991: Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the End of the Gulf War, Presidential Speeches, The Miller Center (website), https://millercenter.org/.

49. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 448,

50. Woodward, *The Commanders*, 317; and James Baker (lecture, Los Angeles World Affairs Council, Los Angeles, October 29, 1990).

51. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 422, 323; and Baker, lecture.

benefit from its invasion of Kuwait while it simultaneously degraded Iraq's military and reduced Iraq's ability to project power.

The administration's decision to treat the conflict with a sense of urgency also actualized an aggressive application of its larger policies. That decision assumed the longer Iraq was allowed to flout the norms of this new post-Cold War order and resist its enforcement mechanisms by occupying and wrecking Kuwait, the weaker that order would appear and the stronger the appeal of aggression to revisionists.

Conversely, that decision was also informed by the judgment that the more quickly the United States and the world community eliminated that challenge, the stronger and more stable the new world order, the more credible the United States and its allies' deterrent against disorder, and the weaker the appeal of aggressive revisionism.[52]

Related factors also pushed the administration toward urgency. It concluded Iraq's addition of Kuwait's oil reserves to its own placed Iraq in a highly advantageous position vis-à-vis the world oil market, allowing Iraqi leaders to threaten and punish whomever they wished. Iraq would possess a "stranglehold over the oil supplies of the industrialized democracies."[53] Iraq could use that power while it destabilized the Middle East and threatened American interests.[54]

In sum, the administration's approach to the conflict operationalized the judgment that minimizing exposure to the threats and costs associated with its preferred world order overrode all other considerations, including resolving the conflict peacefully.[55] Administration officials returned to this judgment continually over the next several months. Because sanctions had not succeeded in forcing Iraq from Kuwait and did not promise to do so in the near future, it was necessary that those measures be abandoned in favor of military action.[56]

Abandoning Alternatives

While the administration kept to the terms of the Necessity Standard, its approach pushed it quickly towards the Standard's imperative side. The administration's construal of US vital interests and duties in the context of a specific world order constructed the conflict as a zero-sum affair that invited the use of force. The administration's insistence on inflexibility and use of coercive alternatives left no room for negotiations.

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52. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 370, 400; and Robert M. Gates, *Exercise of Power: America's Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 201.

53. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399.

54. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399–400; Woodward, *The Commanders*, 226; and *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region: U.S. Policy Options and Implications: Hearings before the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services*, 101st Cong. (December 3, 1990)(statement of Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney).

55. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 353.

56. Bush, January 16, 1991: Address to the Nation.

Bush was publicly committed to making Iraq submit, US credibility was on the line, and the administration would not settle the conflict on any but its own grounds.[57]

This inflexible approach ultimately led the administration to label alternatives that included sustained patience as compromise and the acceptance of an intolerable new status quo. The administration believed waiting for alternatives to work beyond the time necessary to position offensive military forces and gain support for military action was to (1) acquiesce to Iraq's demands, (2) devalue the harm Iraq inflicted on Kuwait, (3) allow Iraq to destabilize the region, and (4) erode US credibility and the credibility of the world order it supported.

Enlarging on their views in their joint memoir, Scowcroft and Bush described designating sanctions and trade embargoes as "an essential first step" that could lead to harsher actions rather than the main means by which they hoped to force Iraq to comply with US demands.[58] This skepticism resulted in the early decision to set an endgame in motion. This sense of urgency is consistent with a **Type 1** approach that demands quick results from alternatives and comes to swift conclusions when judging their viability.

The administration also made moves as a result of its inflexibility and sense of urgency that informed its decision to conclude its endgame early (in January 1991) rather than later because those moves generated significant costs that the administration was unwilling to bear. The military force sent to Saudi Arabia to deter Iraq from invading that country while sanctions operated cost hundreds of millions of dollars to dispatch and more to maintain. The costs of maintaining the additional US military force that the administration sent as part of the endgame to apply supplementary military pressure were even larger.[59]

Other costs of patience included an erosion of US credibility and threats to coalition unity once the administration had issued its own military threats and had pressured the Security Council to set a deadline for Iraq's compliance with a resolution.[60] The administration's acceptance of and continued references to Kuwaiti claims that Iraqi forces were engaged in large-scale destruction, looting, and human rights violations attached additional costs.[61]

The administration's immediate turn to sanctions against Iraq as the main alternative also created many of the costs it referenced in mid-January 1991 to bolster its contention that the current situation was intolerable and military force should be used immediately.

Front-line states lost considerable revenues in foregoing trade with Iraq, while other states were severely affected by the rising price of oil driven by the conflict and

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57. Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (March 2003), https://www.jstor.org/.

58. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 331–33.

59. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 384–85.

60. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 440; and Jeffrey Record, *Hollow Victory: A Contrary View of the Gulf War* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 1993), 40.

61. Bush, January 16, 1991: Address to the Nation; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 392.

embargo. Their economic travails forced the coalition to collect funds to compensate them and created internal and external pressures to end the conflict quickly. The longer the conflict endured, the more likely these states would succumb to internal pressure and defect from the coalition, surreptitiously trade with Iraq, or openly call for a compromise solution.[62]

Finally, the administration's approach significantly narrowed the space available to resolve the conflict peacefully. Because Hussein was offered nothing for agreeing to US demands, he believed he should resist the United States and remain in Kuwait. Scholars point to the economic resources Hussein would have lost if he left Kuwait. They highlight evidence that Hussein believed he would lose credibility and deterrence power in the region if he backed down without a payoff, and thus would have been subject to outside attack and internal uprisings, whereas continuing to resist or even lose a military encounter with the United States would allow him to retain a necessary reputation for aggressively defending his interests.[63]

To summarize, the Bush administration's approach deemed the status quo unacceptable. The administration ruled out compromise as a way of returning to the status quo ante. It deemed waiting any longer for an Iraqi surrender after it had military forces in place too costly and the use of military force a desirable way of escaping those costs, enforcing important norms, and discouraging future aggressive revisionism.

In contrast, Hussein found the status quo the most desirable outcome. He calculated that a continued impasse with the United States over that status quo was acceptable even given sanctions. He deemed a voluntary return to the status quo ante without a significant payoff excessively dangerous and believed that escalating to a war could end in victory and, even if he lost, would contribute to Iraqi deterrence and reputation.[64] He would accept a payoff to leave Kuwait, but none was on offer.

In the parlance of conflict management, neither side experienced the kind of hurting stalemate that would motivate them to end the conflict on mutually acceptable terms.[65] While the Bush administration was under greater pressure to end the stalemate, it had ruled out a compromise. Both sides saw escalation as a way to win or at least not to lose.

The Bush administration's **Type 1** approach to the conflict helped create and reinforce this setting. Scholars have emphasized the effects of the administration's rigid refusal to offer inducements and its reliance on coercive alternatives. Hussein did not acquiesce to US demands and attempts at coercion, partly because he feared that should he do so without inducements, the United States would make additional

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62. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 322, 401, 404–5; and Woodward, *The Commanders*, 319.

63. Record, *Hollow Victory*, 35.

64. Stephen T. Hosmer, *Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was So Weak* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2007), https://www.rand.org/.

65. I. William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000), https://nap.nationalacademies.org/.

demands on Iraq in the future with the confidence that it could obtain compliance without cost.[66]

Without compensation that signaled recognition that Iraq had interests to protect and that buying off Iraq was cheaper than fighting a war, Iraqi leaders believed they had to establish a reputation for resistance to replace the perception that Iraq could be easily intimidated.[67] A similar perception held on the other side of the conflict. The Bush administration perceived Iraq was powerful enough to engage in similar regional military ventures in the future, and would likely do so if it was rewarded for its actions. Hussein must be deterred by being coerced into withdrawing from Kuwait. Using military force would have the added benefit of militarily weakening him.

Conclusion

The approach the Bush administration took to this conflict with Iraq is likely to recur given comparable circumstances. The Bush administration's embrace of a **Type 1** approach is rooted in reasons that are not idiosyncratic but are deeply embedded in post-Cold War security policy.

Future administrations will likely identify vital interests and duties in regional stability, the protection of important markets and American allies, and the maintenance, protection, and credibility of a world order whose constituent norms protect sovereignty and outlaw aggressive revisionism. If a future administration finds itself in a crisis that involves a combination of those perceived vital interests and duties, it will also likely hold similar perceptions of how those interests are to be protected and duties discharged. The crisis must be resolved quickly, alternatives must be limited, and no payoffs may be made. If the resulting menu of coercive alternatives does not deliver quickly, the immediate use of major military force will be deemed necessary.

Still, an administration may take another approach given a different set of fundamental foreign policies. The Reagan administration would have determined Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was undesirable. But given its different foreign policy priorities, the administration would have been open to various ways of achieving its preferred outcome—to prevent Iraq from becoming a hegemonic power but not weaken it so that it could no longer balance Iran. It probably would have favored a **Type 4** approach, facilitated a negotiated settlement, and attained Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait while preserving Iraq as a counterweight to Iran. Different foreign policy priorities shape different approaches to conflicts and help shape different outcomes. Æ

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66. Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (2010), https://www.jstor.org/.

67. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse."