

Saddam Hussein and the US

Origins of the First Gulf War

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On July 25, 1990, April Glaspie was summoned to the presidential palace in Baghdad for a meeting with Saddam Hussein. She had been assigned the post of American Ambassador to Iraq two years earlier, but the meeting at the sweeping palace was the first time she faced Saddam on her own.¹ She wore a beige jacket. He sported full olive-green military garb.

The day before, the US Department of Defense had announced its intention to execute a joint military exercise in the Persian Gulf, at the request of the United Arab Emirates.² Things were heating up in the region. Saddam had taken an extremely aggressive posture with his OPEC partners, especially his southern neighbor Kuwait, threatening violence if the benchmark price for oil was not raised. US satellite images showed Iraqi troops massing on the Iraq-Kuwait border—ostensibly to provide credibility to Saddam’s threats. Though American diplomats did not anticipate any actual fighting, Saddam’s move had the DoD worried.³ In response, the joint exercise was launched as a decoy. The real aim was to provide cover for sending American surveillance planes to the UAE, in case Saddam’s bark turned out to have bite. But just like the Iraqi troop movements had American diplomats worried, the prospect of a joint military exercise had the Iraqis worried. So Saddam sent for April Glaspie, demanding an explanation.⁴

The purpose of the meeting, by its very nature, put Glaspie on the defensive. In his usual manner, Saddam launched into a tirade about American ill will towards Iraq in general and Saddam personally. The meeting lasted a full hour and a half during which Glaspie largely responded to Saddam’s accusations by pandering—she was quick to agree that US media had treated him unfairly and praised his efforts to rebuild Iraq.⁵ But

the critical moment came when Gaspie tried to explain US policy concerning a potential Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. *The New York Times* published a transcript of the fateful meeting that quotes Gaspie saying "...we have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait...the issue is not associated with America."⁶

Later, Gaspie would claim that much of the transcript (leaked by the Iraqis) had been cut or falsified, and that she had repeatedly warned Saddam against the use of force in his dispute with Kuwait. "We did not realize," she testified before a sub-committee of the House of Representatives, "he would be so foolish as to ignore our repeated and crystal-clear warnings."⁷ But the damage was done. In the leaked transcripts, Gaspie came across as weak at best, and downright accommodating at worst. So when 300 Iraqi tanks rolled over the border into Kuwait at 2 a.m. on Thursday, August 2, 1990, it was easy to blame Gaspie's encounter for Saddam's aggression.⁸

"It seems far more likely that Saddam Hussein went ahead with the invasion because he believed the US would not react with anything more than verbal condemnation. That was an inference he could well have drawn from his meeting with US Ambassador April Gaspie on July 25..." Edward Mortimer wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in November 1990.⁹ "Clear as a wink and a nod..." Flora Lewis said of Gaspie's interaction with Saddam in *The New York Times*. "He thought he had a green light..."¹⁰ "The US ambassador was delivering not a stern warning, but warm sympathy...Hussein had read her diplomatic language as expressing American indifference to his war plans," Sidney Blumenthal wrote in the *New Republic*.¹¹

Gaspie was certainly meek in her encounter with Saddam on July 25. But she was largely a scapegoat. To frame the narrative preceding the First Gulf War around her weakness is to focus on the subplot and miss the main story line.

The conventional scholarly wisdom on the subject is more nuanced than simply ascribing blame to April Gaspie, but it follows the same general trajectory. That is, US policy dating back to Saddam's rise to the presidency, was so lenient that he thought he could get away with invading Kuwait with little more than a slap on the wrist. This line of reasoning focuses exclusively on US policy: how American diplomats pursued US interests in the Persian Gulf in the decade before the First Gulf War. It gives almost no agency to Saddam. He is a mere pawn on an American chessboard. In this version of the story, it is US policy rather than any independent political calculations that convinced him to invade Kuwait. However, this US-centric perspective is out of date.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, American and coalition forces recovered millions of pages of Iraqi state records and over 200 hours of recorded conversations between Saddam and his top officials.¹² These sources reveal an entirely new perspective. They suggest that US policy toward Iraq affected Saddam's strategic calculations far less than the conventional wisdom posits. "What is remarkable about Saddam's view of the United States is how consistently and virulently hostile it was," Hal Brands and David Palkki, former member of the Institute for Defense Analysis, and Deputy Director of the Conflict Records Research Center respectively, write in reviewing the captured records.¹³ Instead of merely being swayed by US policy, it appears that Saddam held some independent and deep-seated convictions that influenced his political decisions—

including the decision to invade Kuwait. American diplomats acted like he was a pawn. Saddam had other ideas.

The recovered Iraqi documents indicate that Saddam was never lulled into a false sense of security by indulgent US policy. Instead, he knew full well that the US would respond with speed and force to his invasion of Kuwait. He did not seek to avoid this confrontation and instead saw it as the beginning of a battle royal between the West and the Arab world. In this narrative, Saddam casts himself as the standard bearer of Arab pride, grandeur, and power. Saddam had long felt that his regime was on a collision course with the West—a feeling that no amount of opportunistic cooperation between the two sides could assuage. While US policy was part of Saddam’s political calculations, it did not dictate his worldview.

There are two stories behind the run up to the First Gulf War: the US story and the Iraqi story. Standing alone, neither furnishes a complete historical picture. The order of the stories told here is important. The US story comes first. Understanding American policy in the decade before the war is foundational to unraveling political developments in the Middle East, and has been the subject of much academic attention. The Iraqi story is second. Saddam’s regime was mostly run in secret, which made it difficult for analysts to decipher Iraqi intentions. Since 2003, that has changed. The new information adds an important twist to the first story, and gives a more nuanced look at what really caused the First Gulf War.

The US Story

The saga of Saddam Hussein represents one of the most muddled, paradoxical episodes of American foreign policy in recent history. It is tragic and puzzling in equal parts. It is both a cautionary tale and a lesson in cunning statecraft—although not on the part of American diplomats. The nearsightedness of US policymakers in the decade leading up to the First Gulf War helped produce one of the world's most ruthless tyrants, and in the end, shook the foundations of the Middle East. But in the beginning, the relationship between Saddam and the US was utterly unfocused on Iraq. Indeed, that was at the root of the problem. In a bipolar, Cold War era, the US failed to give Saddam agency, until it was too late.

US policy on the Persian Gulf during the 1980s focused almost exclusively on keeping the spread of communism at bay and securing a steady and cheap outflow of oil. In order to achieve those aims, American policymakers prescribed a harsh dose of realpolitik—policies focused on results rather than moral or ideological considerations. Saddam became little more than a means to an end. That meant Washington had no qualms about ignoring Saddam's transgressions, or flipping their stance and condemning the same transgressions, when it was convenient. The result was that Iraq was at the receiving end of a diverse array of diplomatic approaches—apparent friendship one moment and apparent hostility the next. Maintaining consistency was of little concern to American diplomats who tended to look past Iraq and instead focus on the issues they found most pressing, namely, Soviets and oil. Indeed, it took another country to get the US to even notice Saddam. For Washington, the link between Saddam and the US started with Iraq's longtime enemy: Iran.

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was immaculately dressed. He often showed up to parties and gatherings in full military attire—golden epaulets, sky-blue sash, and more medals than could properly fit on the breast of his jacket.¹⁴ But his dapper clothes belied his true political circumstances.

The Shah seized control of Iran in 1941 with the help of Western powers who aimed to cultivate a close (and lucrative) relationship with Iran. Throughout his reign, the Shah was a dutiful puppet of the West. Western powers overlooked the brutality of his secret police and extravagant spending—in addition to his lavish wardrobe he reportedly shelled out \$100 million to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian monarchy—as long as he remained a loyal arm of Western influence in the region.¹⁵ On that score, he excelled. The Shah linked Iran to Western oil companies, stocked up on American-produced weaponry, and even made several visits to Washington during his reign.¹⁶ By the 1970s, the US had come to rely on the Shah as a major pillar of stability and protector of US interests in the Persian Gulf. So, when the Iranian Revolution of 1979 forced him into exile, the Carter administration was deeply alarmed.

Most American policymakers viewed the revolution in Iran as a major setback to US interests in the region.¹⁷ When a group of Iranian students, furious that the exiled Shah had been allowed to seek medical care in the United States, overran the US embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage, US animosity towards Iran was cemented.

Americans viewed the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis with horror. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, saw the revolution in Iran as an opportunity. He had formally ascended to the Iraqi presidency just months earlier, and although he had been calling the shots in Iraq for almost a decade, the decision to invade Iran was the first important act of his presidency.¹⁸ He seized the initiative to attack Persian Iran (a historic enemy of Arab Iraq) when it was still in political transition. By taking advantage of the political upheaval, he hoped to catch the new fundamentalist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini off guard. Such a move would quash any hope of a Shi'a rebellion in Southern Iraq, where Khomeini's propaganda agitated for the overthrow of Saddam's Ba'ath regime, and win him the title of Arab champion.

Although the US did not encourage Saddam to invade Iran (a theory that later became commonplace), US policymakers were generally happy that someone was fighting what they felt was a dangerous, fundamentalist regime that had ousted their man from power. It didn't matter that Saddam, still in the first months of his presidency, had already accrued a reputation for brutality—owing to his frequent purges of Iraqi elites via firing squad. The US was laser focused on Iran, and anything was better than the Ayatollah.

“At first there was relief that he was taking on America's great Satan, Iran,” Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie write in their book *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf*. “Unlike the Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam, for all his ruthlessness, seemed to be a man with whom Washington could deal...”¹⁹ As deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, head of the security services, and the real power in Iraq during the 1970s, Saddam had indeed achieved some remarkable and heartening progress. Using

Iraqi oil revenues, he managed to lift half of the country's population into the middle class and made Iraqi universities a hotbed of learning in the Arab world.²⁰ He also ignored Soviet concerns over the destruction of the Iraqi Communist Party—an encouraging sign for the US.²¹

In the eyes of American diplomats, who were willing to overlook the human cost of Saddam's progress, Iraq became a model Arab country. American nearsightedness on this score would come to haunt Washington. At the time, however, the US needed a new bastion of stability and influence in the Gulf region. Saddam fit the bill. Thus, US policymakers embarked on a tumultuous, unscrupulous, and often covert relationship with the Iraqi dictator.

“It wasn't that we wanted Iraq to win the war, we did not want Iraq to lose,” Geoffrey Kemp, head of the National Security Council's Middle East Section under Reagan commented. “We really weren't naïve. We knew he was an S.O.B., but he was our S.O.B.”²² The US would play out this notion—that Saddam could be corralled into serving American interests—for the decade preceding the First Gulf War. The first step in the process was dealing with the Iran-Iraq War. For the Reagan administration, the implications of making sure that Saddam didn't lose the war were twofold: subduing a hostile and fundamentalist regime in Iran and buffering the region from the influence of the USSR. An Iranian victory would be “a strategic disaster for the United States,” Secretary of State George Shultz warned.²³ Nothing, however, went as Saddam, or the US, hoped.

At first, the Iraqi military made decisive gains. The Iranians were indeed caught off guard by Saddam's sudden act of aggression.²⁴ But the early successes were short-

lived. Iraq's soldiers were not the elite forces Saddam had imagined them to be. They had little combat experience beyond fighting Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq and burning villages as retribution for disloyalty.²⁵ And while the Iranian troops struggled in the immediate wake of the attack, they quickly rallied and set themselves to the task of pushing the invaders out. There was an air of patriotism and sacrifice amongst the Iranians. Many of the top Iranian officers, even those who disliked Khomeini, threw in their lot with the Iranian army, deciding that their duty was to defend their country above all.²⁶ Saddam and his ill-prepared troops quickly found themselves on the defensive. By 1982, Iraq was in dire straits. In response, the Reagan administration, which had adopted the Carter administration's official policy of neutrality in the conflict, quietly stepped in to help prop up the Iraqi dictator.

The US Airborne Warning and Control Aircraft looks like a work of science fiction. It is a hulking jet mounted with giant sleek black flying saucers. The saucers are capable of using pulse-doppler radar. That means they can track targets over 200 miles away, pick out otherwise indistinguishable movements, and detect enemy aircraft before any other system.²⁷ These American flying saucers, stationed in Saudi Arabia, were used from the outset of the Iran-Iraq War to covertly supply Iraq with information about Iranian military movements.²⁸ Merely assisting the Iraqi military was in direct violation of both international law and official US policy. But the Reagan administration went even further than that.

During the initial phases of the war, the CIA sponsored Iranian opposition groups in an effort to destabilize the Khomeini government.²⁹ For all their covert efforts,

however, the US could not turn the tide against the Iranians. Iranian boys, imbued with a spirit of self-sacrifice, ran ahead of the troops, showing them the paths through the minefields.³⁰ In contrast, the Iraqi troops were despondent.

That left the Reagan administration, which was dead set against an Iranian victory, in a sticky situation. Iraq had acted illegally by invading Iran, and outright support for Saddam would constitute assisting an illegal act of war under the UN Charter. Moreover, there was an international embargo on weapons sales to either of the warring countries.³¹ So, the US opted for a more circuitous route to aid Saddam. The Reagan administration exchanged high-level official visits with Iraq, the first since diplomatic ties were officially severed in 1967. In March 1982, Iraq was removed from the official list of states providing support for international terrorism. Never mind the fact that there was almost no evidence that Iraq had changed any of its policies in this arena.³² Unscrupulous dealings with Iraq on the part of American policymakers intensified as the war progressed.

Removing Iraq from the list of terror-sponsoring states opened the door to commerce between Saddam and the US. It was still illegal to provide weapons to the Iraqi dictator, but the sale of dual-use equipment and technology became legally (if not morally) permissible. For example, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense was allowed to purchase helicopters from American companies. Though not explicitly designed for military use, the Iraqis quickly converted them into troop transporters. And when asked if the 2,000 five-ton trucks sold to Iraq were for military purposes, a State Department official replied, “we presumed that this was Iraq’s intent, and had not asked.”³³ So, while

official US policy maintained neutrality in the conflict, Washington consistently favored Iraq. However, by 1983, the US position grew even more tenuous.

Iranian diplomats had long complained that Iraq was using chemical weapons in direct violation of the Geneva Protocol. At first, few outside of Iran were inclined to believe the accusation—this wouldn't make the first time the Iranians were espousing harebrained theories. But by 1983, the evidence was undeniable. In a memo to the Secretary of State, Johnathan Howe, Director of the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, conceded the "almost daily use of CW" by Iraq against Iran.³⁴ The Iraqis were using yperite, commonly known as mustard gas. It burns exposed skin, causes giant blisters, eats away at the lungs and swells the eyes closed. Iranian soldiers exposed to the deadly gas had to be trucked away from the battlefield, wheezing, moaning, and swaying with pain.³⁵ In the same memo, despite Saddam's blatant violation of international law banning chemical weapons use, Howe mentions "a number of measures we might take to assist Iraq."³⁶ The Reagan administration had no moral or legal qualms. Iraq's use of chemical weapons was merely an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of the desired result. It was a cruel example of realpolitik. In a 1983 National Security Decision Directive, Reagan laid out his priorities: "strengthen regional stability," and "improve economic conditions."³⁷ In other words, amp up US military capabilities in the Gulf and keep the oil flowing. Taking a stance on Saddam's brutal use of mustard gas was not on the agenda.

However, by March 1984 Saddam's chemical warfare was too egregious to ignore. Under intense international pressure, the US publically condemned Iraqi use of chemical weapons.³⁸ Predictably, this move soured the relationship between Saddam and

the US. Donald Rumsfeld called attention to the downturn. He had held official positions in both the Nixon and Ford administrations, including Secretary of Defense under Ford, and at the time headed the multinational pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle & Co. Rumsfeld, a confidant to the Reagan administration, served as a key intermediary between Washington and Baghdad. Briefings from his second visit to Iraq noted that “bilateral relations were sharply set back by our March 5 condemnation of Iraq for CW use, despite our repeated warnings that this issue would emerge sooner or later.”³⁹ To buffer the setback, the State Department directed the US delegation to the UN to support a motion of “no decision” on the Iranian draft resolution on the use of chemical weapons by Iraq.⁴⁰ They also blasted Iran for failing to end the war.⁴¹ The Reagan administration was still more interested in securing US interests in the Persian Gulf by using Saddam as an ally than taking on Iraq’s deplorable human rights violations.

Evidence of US priorities emerged in full just months after the administration took a formal stance against the use of chemical weapons. In November 1984, the US officially restored diplomatic relations with Iraq. “Aware that establishing formal diplomatic relations with Iraq might create the impression that Washington is now taking sides in the four-year-old war between Iran and Iraq,” A *New York Times* article, reporting on the development said, “Administration officials insisted today that there was no change in their official policy of neutrality.”⁴² Neutrality, however, was a farce. While there was no change in official policy, there was no change in the Reagan administration’s de facto policy either. With diplomatic relations restored, American aid to Iraq expanded to include intelligence, high technology exports, Operation Staunch (an effort to stem the tide of weapons going to Iran), pressure in the UN, and efforts to help

Iraq build a new oil pipeline.⁴³ However, all these efforts to curry favor with Saddam and prevent an Iranian victory would soon be thrown for a loop.

At 8:01pm on November 13, 1986, Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office.⁴⁴ “I want to take this time to talk to you about an extremely sensitive and profoundly important matter of foreign policy,” he began.⁴⁵ Reagan had previously denied allegations that his administration was bargaining with Tehran, but leaks to two Lebanese newspapers blew his administration’s cover. Reagan went on to reveal that the US had indeed been secretly selling arms to Iran, first through Israeli middlemen, then directly, in what came to be known as the Iran-Contra Affair.⁴⁶ The move was in direct violation of the administration’s official policy of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War, and in contradiction to the tacit policy of supporting Iraq.⁴⁷

Despite appearances, Reagan never deviated from his adamant stance on preventing an Iranian military victory over Iraq; he loathed Khomeini’s regime. The sale of arms to Tehran was not aimed to turn the tide of the war in the favor of Iran. It was a diplomatic move. By the middle of 1985, the White House was seriously considering the idea of a diplomatic approach to Tehran.⁴⁸ With Khomeini’s health declining, the perceived threat of Soviet influence in Iran, and US hostages still held by Iranian terrorists in Lebanon, several top White House advisors saw extending an overture to Iran as a means to several ends. It would be helpful for the US to establish ties with Iranian leaders who might succeed Khomeini, extending aid to Iran could check Soviet influence in the country, and if the hostage crisis were resolved, the administration would emerge heroic. In an attempt to achieve these aims, Washington developed a horribly muddled

and covert policy of supplying arms to Tehran. The result was that the US was left supporting two countries at war with each other.⁴⁹

That made Reagan's speech particularly difficult. How could he explain to an American audience, who had been fed a steady diet of anti-Khomeini rhetoric, his administration's decision to sell weapons to Tehran? His solution was to downplay allegations that Washington had bartered weapons for hostages. Reagan described his administration's overtures to Tehran as part of a broader diplomatic strategy to gain a foothold in Iran. He pronounced a relationship with Iran a geopolitically important aim. But again, American diplomats had assumed that the players in the Middle East were mere pawns, and played their cards accordingly. This time, they were caught cheating. Moreover, they ignored the diplomatic impact that supporting two warring countries at the same time would have on the loyalties of those countries.

Over the course of the episode, the US delivered to Tehran some 2,000 TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire guided) antitank missiles, 18 HAWK anti-aircraft missiles (plus several shipments of spare parts), and US military intelligence.⁵⁰ Reagan de-emphasized the importance of these shipments, calling them purely defensive arms that would not significantly alter the course of the war.⁵¹ Independent reports from the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, however, called the shipments "crucial to Iran's war efforts against Iraq," and provided Iran with "significant striking power."⁵²

Either way, the shipments didn't have the desired diplomatic effect. US influence in Iran was still meager after the weapons were delivered (US contact with moderate Iranians merely discredited the moderates) and attempts to bring home all of the hostages failed. When the Iranians realized that hostages could be exchanged for weapons,

Tehran's Lebanese allies merely took more US hostages.⁵³ All the US got out of the debacle was embarrassment. It should have been a lesson in Middle Eastern politics: using carrots to achieve US goals in the region has serious limitations. But nobody in Washington was ready to change tack.

The Reagan administration in fact stepped up its support for Saddam, this time in order to make amends for the humiliating revelations. Damage control included both apologies and increased efforts to support Iraq militarily. One such strategy was the controversial reflagging program. Kuwaiti ships were responsible for transporting much of Iraq's oil, which Saddam relied upon to fund his war efforts. When Iran threatened to attack the precious cargo, Washington announced that it would reflag Kuwaiti ships with the stars and stripes to protect them from Iranian aggression—any attack on Iraqi oil shipments would be tantamount to an attack on the US.⁵⁴ With Kuwaiti ships carrying Iraqi oil under an American flag, any pretense of US neutrality in the conflict went out the window. “We should not only be supportive of Iraq, but should be seen to be supportive,” Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger argued at a National Security meeting in January 1987. “This is an opportunity to recoup some of our standing in the region and regain credibility with the Arab states.”⁵⁵

American policymakers seized what they felt was an opportunity to restore good faith with Iraq and were appreciative of Saddam's muted response to the incident. The upshot was that in addition to the reflagging program, Iraq received substantial assistance from the US after 1986. For example, the US Commodities Credit Corporation approved the single largest credit in its history to Iraq, totaling over \$1 billion to help finance the war.⁵⁶ Saddam also benefited from increased intelligence sharing, US backing in the UN

Security Council, and more high-tech exports from the US. By 1987, with help from the US, Iraq was estimated to have approximately 500 combat aircraft compared to Iran's 65.⁵⁷ The benefits Saddam reaped from US attempts to make amends were a significant factor in helping him shore up the Iraqi military and force Iran into a truce.

With Iraqi missiles raining down on Iranian cities, a surprise attack that recaptured the strategically important Faw Peninsula from Iranian occupation, and the accidental (though Iranians believed it was intentional) destruction of an Iranian passenger jet carrying 290 civilians on July 3, 1988, by the American warship USS Vincennes, the Iranian leadership decided to end the war.⁵⁸ On July 18, 1988, UN secretary-general Javier Perez de Cuellar received Khomeini's formal acceptance of Resolution 598. The Resolution called for "an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of all forces to the internationally recognized boundaries without delay and a comprehensive exchange of prisoners of war."⁵⁹ Seeing as Khomeini had vowed to topple Saddam's regime, Saddam could plausibly claim he had won a victory in the eight-year war. He could not, however, have done it without US support.

The Reagan administration's fixation on blocking Soviet influence and protecting US oil interests in the Persian Gulf played out in Saddam's favor—at least as long as the Iran-Iraq War lasted. With the end of the war however, US policy flipped. With the evil Khomeini regime restrained, the US had little reason to continue its policy of ignoring Saddam's human rights record. He had, in the eyes of many American diplomats, been a useful tool. But to continue to overlook the brutal suppression of opposition, use of chemical weapons, and vehement anti-American rhetoric would be embarrassing. So

once again, the US adopted a policy toward the Iraqi dictator that gave him almost no agency.

Washington turned its focus toward its own international image. The only thing consistent about American policy choices was that they continued to exemplify realpolitik—emphasizing nearsighted ends. Only now that the war was over, the practical thing to do, as far as American policymakers were concerned, was to follow international opinion and condemn Saddam’s legal and moral transgressions. Washington was hardly ready to take any real action against Saddam—but they were willing to use strong rhetoric. It was a turning point in US relations with Saddam. As John Simpson, longtime BBC correspondent in the Middle East put it, “now that [Saddam] was victorious and newly invigorated, Washington performed one of those remarkable about-faces of which it is capable from time to time, without the slightest warning.”⁶⁰

On September 8, 1988, Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, went to Washington to visit Secretary of State George Shultz. Given the friendly relationship between Saddam’s regime and the Reagan administration over the course of the 8-year Iran-Iraq War, Aziz assumed the meeting would be pleasant and relaxed.⁶¹ He was in for an unpleasant surprise.

Two hours before Aziz was scheduled to meet with Shultz, the Secretary of State made a fiery speech condemning Saddam’s brutal suppression of Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq.⁶² Saddam had used chemical weapons to quell the unrest brewing in the often-troubled north, and Shultz attacked him for it. The Iraqis were utterly taken aback. Saddam had been using chemical weapons for years against Iran while American

diplomats looked the other way. Now, Washington was taking a stance. Saddam was furious.

As it turned out, there was little substance to Shultz's condemnation of Saddam's attack on the Kurds. For Washington, it merely reflected the appropriate political stance to match public opinion. The US went on providing tacit support to Iraq while occasionally denouncing Saddam's gross human rights violations. The idea was that if the US employed a two-pronged approach to Iraq—carrot and stick—Saddam would eventually become more moderate and mold his policies to Washington's liking. Strong rhetoric like Shultz's speech was the stick. Economic ties were the carrot. John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, recalled that the idea was “through the ‘economic carrot’ we would try to ameliorate the regime's behavior.”⁶³ That approach didn't change with the end of the Reagan administration. The election of George H. W. Bush (who had served as Reagan's vice president) in 1988 brought more of the same policy toward Iraq. In fact, for almost the first full year of his presidency, Bush paid no attention to Iraq at all. When he did get around to addressing the Gulf region in the summer of 1989, he simply adopted Reagan's approach. “It wasn't really a new policy paper that the Bush administration drafted,” New York Representative Stephen Solarz commented on the Bush administration's National Security Directive on Middle Eastern policy. “It was more of the same under a new number.” In their memoir, President Bush and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft affirmed that the goal of their policy toward Iraq was “to encourage acceptably moderate behavior on the part of Saddam Hussein.”⁶⁴ And that meant employing far more carrot than stick.

By 1990, Washington had approved 480 licenses for shipments of nearly \$730 million worth of sensitive technology to Iraq. Loans to Iraq from the US Commodity Credit Corporation grew from \$547 million in 1987 to over \$1 billion. Annual trade was expanding rapidly and the US was purchasing oil as fast as it could manage from Iraqi wells.⁶⁵ Saddam's human rights record was still deplorable, but he entered into cooperative agreements with Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen—all of which had close ties to the US.⁶⁶ That convinced some American officials that economic carrots were indeed moderating Saddam. American diplomats were aware that occasional public condemnation of some Iraqi policies didn't sweeten the relationship between Saddam and the US, but as far as the Bush administration was concerned, as long as the two countries maintained mutually beneficial economic ties, what could go wrong? Then, on the morning of August 2, 1990, everything went wrong.

When Iraqi tanks steamrolled into Kuwait, most of the West was caught with their pants down. Saddam had been threatening to use force against his southern neighbor ever since the end of the Iran-Iraq War left him with crippling war debts. He felt that the billions of dollars provided by Arab nations like Kuwait during the war were not loans but contributions to the defense of all Arabs against Iranian fundamentalism and should therefore be forgiven.⁶⁷ However, nobody in Washington had taken these threats particularly seriously. April Glaspie, the American Ambassador to Baghdad, was on vacation on August 2nd. Secretary of State James Baker was on a trip to Mongolia. President Bush was just getting packed to leave for his vacation home in Kennebunkport, Maine—the invasion of Kuwait didn't stop him.⁶⁸ But had American policymakers paid

closer attention to Iraq and taken Saddam's threats seriously, they may well have been at their desks on the morning of August 2nd.

US policymakers were unprepared for an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in part because they thought they had Saddam under control. The US used him as a tool to protect American interests in the Persian Gulf—an arrangement that could be achieved as long as the US provided enough carrots and threatened to use a few sticks. The conventional treatment of the build up to the First Gulf War rests on this assumption. The only mistake, according to this line of reasoning, was that American diplomats didn't play their cards quite right. If only the US had been clearer about the consequences of Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, Saddam would have backed down.

Indeed, it's easy to follow this logic. In the decade preceding the First Gulf War, the US was extraordinarily accommodating to Saddam. Aside from a few harsh words about human rights violations in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, Washington indulged the Iraqi dictator. The Reagan administration not only looked the other way when Saddam employed chemical weapons against Iran but also provided crucial aid to his war effort. The Bush administration picked up where Reagan left off—after the Iran-Iraq War, economic ties between the US and Iraq expanded markedly. So when Saddam invaded Kuwait, American analysts concluded that US policy was to blame. If only Washington had been more aggressive, employed a few less carrots and a few more sticks, and made US interests perfectly clear, Saddam would have bent to US will. Working from the foundational assumption that Saddam was a pawn on an American chessboard, it didn't make sense to conclude anything else. The problem was that there was an enormous disparity in thinking between Saddam and the US.

American diplomats may have viewed the Iraqi dictator as a pawn, but he saw himself as a king. The First Gulf War didn't occur simply because the US failed to properly manipulate its pawn (although US policy toward Iraq was often shoddy); it occurred because the two sides weren't even playing the same game. A close look at Saddam's background, his personality, and his reactions to US policy reveals the divide in thinking between the Iraqi dictator and Washington. While US policy was indeed a critical element of Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait, it was not critical in the way conventional wisdom suggests.

From an American perspective, the history of US relations with Iraq started a decade before the invasion of Kuwait, with the Iranian Revolution and the downfall of the Shah in 1979. For most Americans, the First Gulf War came out of the blue. However, in order to include the Iraqi perspective and get a full picture of what caused the First Gulf War, the story needs to start half a century before Iraq invaded Kuwait, in a dusty village tucked into a bend in the Tigris River.

The Iraqi Story

Saddam Hussein was born in a mud-brick hut in the tiny village al-Awja on April 28, 1937. "My birth was not a joyful occasion," he remarked bitterly to one of his biographers.⁶⁹ Nor was his childhood. As a boy, Saddam was taunted for his illegitimacy and brutally beaten by his stepfather. "His later patterns of behavior were all established during his violent, unhappy childhood," Simpson writes in *The Wars Against Saddam*. "The delight in compensatory violence, the feeling (often justified of course) that he couldn't trust anyone, however close, the constant need to reassure himself that in spite of

everything he had undergone in his formative years, he was braver, better, tougher, more intelligent than everyone around him.”⁷⁰ Indeed, these traits would reemerge time and again in Saddam’s later life and influence some of his major diplomatic decisions.

Saddam was also imbued with Ba’ath party ideology early in life. At 10 years old, after his family refused his plea for an education, he ran away from home in the middle of the night to live with his uncle, Kairallah, in the nearby city Tikrit. Kairallah was a veteran of the nationalist Iraqi uprising against Great Britain in 1941 and had spent five years in prison for his efforts to achieve Iraqi independence.⁷¹ So, in addition to teaching him to read and write, Kairallah instilled in Saddam his own sense of Arab grandeur and a deep hatred of foreigners, both staples of Ba’athism.

Founded in 1940, Ba’ath party ideology hinged on the creation of a single united Arab nation capable of defeating imperial powers (the West and Israel by Saddam’s time) and achieving Arab independence and glory.⁷² Saddam, whose name literally means “the great struggler,” took these lessons to heart.⁷³ He grew up identifying with Arab heroes like Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia, who conquered Jerusalem in 586 BCE, and Saladin, the great Sunni sultan who defeated the Crusaders in 1187.⁷⁴ When Saddam was 15 years old, a contemporary Arab hero arrived on the international stage. In 1952 Gamal Abdel Nasser led the Free Officer’s Movement, a bloodless coup that toppled the British-ruled monarchy in Egypt and aimed to unite Arabs by improving the conditions of the peasant majority. “Raise your head fellow brother,” Nasser said, “the end of colonialism has come.”⁷⁵ It was the first military coup in the post-WWII Arab world, and it set the stage for many more. According to Jerrold Post, professor of political psychology and international affairs at George Washington University, Nasser’s vision taught Saddam

that “only by courageously confronting imperialist powers could Arab nationalism be freed from Western shackles.”⁷⁶ Already primed to despise foreigners and fight for Arab independence, Nasser’s lesson struck a chord with Saddam.

At 20 years old, Saddam officially joined the Iraqi Ba’ath party. After participating in a failed coup in 1958, he narrowly escaped to Syria, first on horseback, then by swimming across a river, or so the story goes. While in exile, Saddam remained loyal to the party and studied law in Egypt, thereby rising through party ranks from abroad.⁷⁷ He returned to Iraq in 1963. Four years later, he helped orchestrate the coup that permanently brought the Ba’ath party to power in Iraq.⁷⁸ With his party in power, Saddam’s steadfast loyalty paid off. He was awarded two influential positions in the new Iraqi regime: deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and head of the security services. He used these posts to whittle away at president Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr’s power (Bakr was also from Tikrit and a relative of Saddam’s) until he formally seized the presidency in July 1979. His patience in building a support base and accumulating power during the 11 years of Bakr’s presidency was a testament to his political cunning. The frequent execution of Iraqi elites in the first days of his presidency, even those in his innermost circle, was a testament to his insecurities.⁷⁹

Iraq had been rattled by one coup after another in the wake of British imperialism. Thus, fear of conspiracy sculpted Saddam’s political education, including his own ascension to the office of president. With little experience outside of the Middle East to augment his political outlook, Saddam took the lessons he learned both in his childhood and in his early political career into the arena of international politics. “I know that there are scores of people plotting to kill me,” he told a confidant less than a year after he

became president, “and this is not difficult to understand. After all, did we not seize power by plotting against our predecessors?”⁸⁰ The mistrust Saddam exhibited from the beginning of his rule became of staple of his regime. “The role of conspiracies in policy-making for this regime cannot be overstated,” Saad al-Bazzaz, former head of the Iraqi News Agency said of Saddam’s government. Saddam would “turn to disaster for silly reasons; they base their policy on conspiracy theories.”⁸¹

Thus, from the outset, Saddam was inclined to see conspiracies against him lurking in almost every corner of his diplomatic dealings. And as a staunch believer in Arab unity and anti-imperialism, he was inclined to channel his mistrust and hatred towards America, which he saw as an imposing outsider on Arab independence. In doing so, he often miscalculated the degree to which US policy was explicitly aimed to harm his regime. For example, he viewed the close relationship between the US and the Shah of Iran as a direct attack on Iraqi independence, since Persian Iran was a traditional enemy of Arab Iraq. For their part, American policymakers were actually completely uninterested in Saddam at the time, and saw him as only a small player in the Middle East. But to Saddam, who saw himself as an Arab king and therefore the center of all foreign policy aims, US policy looked like a direct threat. The disparity in thinking between the two sides was fatal from the start.

Saddam also frequently revisited the notion that the only way to achieve his goals of Arab unity and glory was through direct confrontation. The records uncovered during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 suggest that no matter how many carrots dangled or sticks threatened by Washington, Saddam never deviated from that conviction.⁸² “You cannot express your beliefs without colliding with eight others,” he told his top advisors

in September 1980, “that is part of our principles.”⁸³ However, as his patience in ascending to the presidency displayed, he was not just the “madman of the Middle East,” hell bent on destroying all things Western.⁸⁴ That’s how the American media characterized him during the First Gulf War. Yet, Saddam was often a shrewd diplomat. In dealing with the US, Saddam didn’t let his deep-seated hostility or persistent suspicions stop him from taking advantage of a strategic partnership when the opportunity arose. That opportunity turned out to be the Iran-Iraq War, even though according to Saddam “the removal of the Shah was a complete American decision,” aimed to allow the US to “re-organize the gulf region according to their established laid out plan.”⁸⁵

By 1982, with his plan to crush the new Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini in tatters and the Iranians on the offensive, Saddam had little choice but to accept aid from Washington in order to keep his regime intact—Iraq was in no position to be choosy in its friends.⁸⁶ So against all his anti-American inclinations, Saddam took up a charm offensive. In August 1982, Saddam told US Congressman Steven Solarz “Iraq is not pro-Soviet and does not hate America.”⁸⁷ To highlight these points, he toned down his public anti-American rhetoric and allowed increased links between US and Iraqi intelligence. At the same time, members of his regime approached American diplomats, asking for more military assistance.⁸⁸

Both parties made efforts to connect. Tariq Aziz, Saddam’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense and confidant of the Reagan administration, met repeatedly, starting in December 1983, with the aim of fostering a closer relationship between Washington and Baghdad. After the

initial meeting, Washington received a cable from the US interests section in Iraq saying, “The Iraqi leadership was extremely pleased with Amb. Rumsfeld’s visit. Tariq Aziz had gone out of his way to praise Rumsfeld as a person.”⁸⁹ All the niceties seemed to have the desired effect on Washington—a 1987 study by the Iraqi General Military Intelligence Directorate noted that Washington had indeed aided the Iraqi cause in numerous ways.⁹⁰ But none of the opportunistic cooperation stopped Saddam from calling America “the arch-Satan” behind closed doors.⁹¹ He was willing to work with the US as a temporary wartime ally, but continued to view the US as a long-term strategic threat to both his regime, and his dream of powerful Arab unity.⁹² “The Americans,” he remarked in 1985, “are still conspiring bastards.”⁹³

Then, in November 1986, all of Saddam’s worst fears about American treachery were confirmed. Even though he had never trusted Washington, the revelation that the Reagan administration was secretly selling advanced weapons to Tehran—the same weapons that had been denied Iraq—had a jarring effect on the Iraqi dictator. Saddam dubbed the episode “Irangate” and called it a “stab in the back.”⁹⁴

From the beginning of his presidency, Saddam saw nefarious US influence in even the most unlikely circumstances. He viewed the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 as an American scheme to consolidate power in the Middle East. In fact, the US was horrified by the Iranian Revolution and lost considerable influence in the Persian Gulf when the Shah was ousted. Later, Saddam incorrectly alleged that the US was providing Iraq with faulty military information in order to undermine Iraqi operations and prolong the war.⁹⁵ Both of these claims were baseless. But in November 1986, with Washington’s clumsy

covert relationship with Iran exposed, Saddam the conspiracy theorist became Saddam the prophet.⁹⁶

“We have been monitoring the Americans and that is why I tell you that I am not surprised,” Saddam told his top advisors in the wake of Reagan’s televised speech officially disclosing Washington’s illicit sale of weapons to Tehran. “However, the low standard of immoral behavior at this level is new.”⁹⁷ Indeed, Washington’s embarrassing behavior gave Saddam a unique opportunity to claim the moral high ground in his relationship with the US. So instead of publicly lambasting the Reagan administration for betraying Iraq, Saddam prescribed a remarkably restrained diplomatic response. He astutely realized that lashing out at Washington could have dire implications for his military and political survival—Iraq was still in many ways reliant on US support. The goal, he told advisers, was to “not provide America with the opportunity to become angrier with us.”⁹⁸ That meant taking a moderate public line and increased cooperation with the US. For their part, American diplomats saw Saddam’s response as a sign that the Iraqi dictator was willing to forgive the episode. They were appreciative of his mild public rhetoric and stepped up aid to Iraq in order to make amends. David Newton, American Ambassador to Iraq during Irangate, assumed it took about six months to rebuild America’s relationship with Iraq following the revelation of secret arms sales.⁹⁹ He was wrong.

For the US, the Irangate controversy was an embarrassing blip in relations with Iraq. But for Saddam, it marked a decisive turning point. The duplicitous American policy confirmed all of his predispositions toward America. “US interventions interacted dynamically with the ideological proclivities of Saddam and his advisors,” Hal Brands,

former member of the Institute for Defense Analyses, said, “providing them with seemingly incontrovertible proof that Washington was indeed a dangerous strategic foe given to conspiring with Iraq’s worst enemies.”¹⁰⁰ That view was a key part of Iraqi policy toward the US in the run up to the First Gulf War. It didn’t stop Saddam from accepting strategic partnership with the US when it benefited his regime, but it cemented his mistrust and loathing for the US, and pushed him toward increasingly risky and aggressive behavior.¹⁰¹

Before the US was caught double-dealing in the Iran-Iraq War, his intention to confront America was abstract. “There is no escape from the responsibility of leadership,” he told his inner circle in 1981, “Iraq can make this nation [the Arab world] rise and can be its center post of its big abode.”¹⁰² In order to achieve Arab grandeur with Iraq leading the way, Saddam advocated eliminating US influence in the region in a grand, but fantastical showdown, in which he imagined “each meter of land...is bleeding with rivers of blood.”¹⁰³ After Irangate, Saddam’s vision of confrontation with America was no longer abstract and fantastical.

In 2004, the CIA published a “Comprehensive Report of the Special Adviser to the Director of Central Intelligence on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction.” Based on interviews with Iraqi officials and research in captured Iraqi records, the report concluded, “After Irangate, Saddam believed that Washington could not be trusted and that it was out to get him personally.” The immediacy of the threat Washington posed skyrocketed in Saddam’s estimation. Thus, regardless of increased US support in the wake of Reagan’s speech and expanded economic ties between the US and Iraq, Saddam

felt that only way to settle the score, and thereby keep himself in power, was through direct confrontation.

US attempts to restore credibility in the Gulf by increasing military and economic aid to Iraq were integral to forcing Khomeini to accept a ceasefire with Iraq and end the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. Saddam claimed the ceasefire, which he could not have achieved without US support, as a glorious victory for Iraq. But it also marked the end of the tacit wartime alliance between Iraq and the US. For the US, that meant heeding international opinion and publicly condemning Iraqi chemical weapons use. In early September 1988, the State Department called Iraqi chemical weapons attacks against the Kurds “abhorrent and unjustifiable.”¹⁰⁴ It was just good policy for American diplomats to publicly criticize violations of international law. To Saddam, it looked like further evidence of American duplicity. US Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie recalled that top-level Iraqi officials were “quite convinced the United States...was targeting Iraq. They were very, very worried about that. They complained about it all the time.”¹⁰⁵

Just months after the Iran-Iraq War ended, Saddam told Iraqi officials that with the war over “they are no longer able to tolerate us.”¹⁰⁶ From the Iraqi perspective, the developments in their relationship with the US since 1986 amounted to direct aggression on the part of Washington. Instead of focusing on expanded economic ties and the relatively mild rebuke of his chemical weapons and human rights abuses, Saddam focused on any instance of ill will. In other words, whereas Washington aimed to employ more carrots than sticks in its relationship with Iraq, Saddam saw only sticks.

For example, in February 1989, the Voice of America broadcasted an editorial blasting Saddam’s regime. It grouped Iraq with several other dangerous police states and

barely concealed an appeal to Iraqis to overthrow Saddam's regime.¹⁰⁷ Saddam was furious with the broadcast and considered it hard evidence of an attempt by Washington to incite revolution. An official apology and explanation that the editorial had not been cleared by the State Department did nothing to appease Saddam.¹⁰⁸ In response to the VOA editorial, Saddam publicly called for the withdrawal of US warships from the Gulf, an aggressive move that alarmed Washington. The episode was a prime example of misunderstanding on both sides: on one hand, top US officials paid little attention to what the VOA was broadcasting; on the other, Saddam saw the VOA broadcast as a direct threat from Washington.¹⁰⁹ The result was that American behavior, albeit unintentional, pushed Saddam to extreme measures. That story would play out again a year later, on a grand scale, when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

By 1990, Brands and Palkki write in their essay, "Conspiring Bastards," Saddam was caught in a dangerous spiral. Perceived threats led Saddam to engage in increasingly erratic behavior. He amped up his anti-American rhetoric and in April 1990, threatened to burn half of Israel.¹¹⁰ His intention was to strengthen the Iraqi position. The result was increased anxiety in Washington. American diplomats responded to the threats by issuing increasingly vehement warnings. When Senator Robert Dole traveled to Baghdad later that year to meet with Saddam, he expressed Washington's desire for friendship, but also warned that Iraq's weapons program and threats against Israel were cause for alarm in the US.¹¹¹ Predictably, Saddam honed in on the warning. A week after Dole's visit, he told Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat, that he expected direct military confrontation with the US in the near future, and that Iraq was ready.

As you said when you prayed in Beirut and you said, 'It is time to die, and now I can smell the breeze of heavens,' it is the same for us. As long as the small

players are gone, and it is time for America to play the game directly, we are ready for it. We are ready, we will fight America, and with God's help we will defeat it and kick it out of the whole region... We have to get ready to fight America. We are ready to fight when they are. When they strike, we will strike..."¹¹²

With the US on increasingly high alert, and Saddam convinced that his epic clash with the West was fast approaching, the stage was set for conflict. Kuwait provided the perfect theater.

Iraq had emerged from the Iran-Iraq War with enormous debt. Kuwait was one of Iraq's major creditors and after the war tension over war debts combined with Kuwait's close ties to the US, strained relations between the neighboring countries. When Kuwait started producing more oil than its OPEC quota in January 1990, Saddam was livid. Plummeting oil prices seriously undercut his ability to repair the Iraqi economy. Saddam correctly claimed that the US had a hand in Kuwait's increased oil production, although Washington denied it at the time.¹¹³ Kuwait's overproduction combined with Saddam's long-held belief that he had defended Arab countries like Kuwait against Shi'a fundamentalism, and his suspicion of a combined US-Kuwaiti conspiracy against Iraq, created a dangerous mixture. "Wars can be started by armies," Saddam said at a meeting of the Arab League in Baghdad in 1990, "and great damage can be done through bombing, through killing, or by attempted coups. But at other times a war can be launched by economic means. To those countries which do not really intend to wage war against Iraq, I have to say that this is itself a kind of war against Iraq."¹¹⁴ The message was clear: Kuwait was in Saddam's sights.

Despite the Bush administration's policy of using more carrot than stick to moderate Saddam, American diplomats were getting nervous. The US was interested in keeping the flow of oil out of the Gulf steady and cheap. If Iraq attacked its tiny,

enormously wealthy southern neighbor, it could upset the world's supply of oil. Together, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait contained 40 percent of the world's known oil reserves.¹¹⁵ In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Secretary of State James Baker drove this point home. He noted that "perhaps, most obviously what is at stake economically is the dependence of the world on access to the energy resources of the Persian Gulf...It is not just a narrow question of the flow of oil from Kuwait and Iraq. It is rather about a dictator who, acting alone, could strangle the global economic order, determining by fiat whether we all enter a recession or even the darkness of a depression."¹¹⁶ To prevent such a nightmare, the US started getting tough on Saddam.

In October 1990, US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, publicly pronounced Washington's commitment to Kuwaiti security. To back up the claim, CENTCOM offered to send US ships on port calls in the Gulf.¹¹⁷ The purpose of these measures was to display American firepower and deter Saddam from attacking Kuwait. Yet again, they had precisely the opposite effect.

For Saddam, all the stern rhetoric and military operations merely proved that the US was working with Kuwait to bring down his regime. Taking into account Iraq's miserable economic situation, suspicion of a US-Kuwaiti scheme to undermine his regime, and his own desire to lead the Arab world against the West, Saddam ordered Iraqi troops to the border of Kuwait in July 1990.

"Saddam apparently believed that his historic opportunity to unite the Arab peoples and deal with the conspiracies of his enemies would come only through war," Kevin Woods, defense researcher and historian at the Institute for Defense Analysis notes.¹¹⁸ But Saddam's aggression wasn't just a product of his desire to drive Western

influence out of the Persian Gulf. He felt compelled to defend his regime against what he called “this corrupt society that bears a grudge towards the Arabs, progress, and patriotism.” Americans, he declared, “...don’t want to see honorable men in the world but they want them all to follow their wishes.”¹¹⁹ Saddam wasn’t terribly off base in this claim. The US wanted a moderate, conciliatory Iraq, not a powerful Iraq. By 1990, Saddam’s aims and American aims were visibly irreconcilable.

Given his steadfast belief that conflict with the US was inevitable, Saddam may have concluded that a swift, decisive strike against Kuwait was in the best interest of his regime’s survival. If Washington and its allies posed a mortal threat to his government, it made good strategic sense for Saddam to seize the initiative and wage the battle royal on his own terms—taking Kuwait would both end any Kuwaiti conspiracy against Iraq and put Saddam in a stronger economic and geopolitical position.¹²⁰ It also wouldn’t be the first time Saddam took preemptive action by attacking a neighboring country; he did just that by invading Iran in 1979. Indeed, it appears that Saddam calculated that he had little choice but to take decisive and aggressive action against Kuwait. “The Americans didn’t give us any rest,” he told a visiting Soviet delegation in October 1990. “Even if we did not have a historical background with Kuwait, we would have done this same thing because our only choice that was presented to us was to collapse, so the Americans and the backward ones can do what they wished. Our only choice was to go after the circle of conspirators tasked with this mission.”¹²¹

Thus, in the course of trying to mold a moderate Iraq, ensure a steady flow of oil, and promote stability in the Persian Gulf, the US helped convinced an already hostile Saddam that causing international upheaval was his only recourse. The failure of

American policy was both a product of American nearsightedness and Saddam's own blinding prejudice. Neither party was able to see beyond their own narrow worldview.

The First Gulf War is popularly remembered as an overwhelming triumph for the US and coalition forces. John Keegan, celebrated military historian, deemed the war “a triumph of incisive planning and almost faultless execution.”¹²² Indeed, when Saddam failed to comply with the UN deadline to withdraw from Kuwait by January 15, 1991, the US employed stunning force.¹²³ American fighter jets bombarded Iraqi targets with near pinpoint precision. Then, American tanks crushed their underprepared and often defenseless Arab adversaries. Iraqi soldiers, faced with overwhelming odds and state-of-the-art American military technology, surrendered in droves. The Iraqi troops who did not surrender fled north towards Baghdad or were buried by American military-grade bulldozers in the scorching Kuwaiti sand. It took coalition ground forces a mere 42 days to force Saddam's troops out of Kuwait.¹²⁴

In the wake of such a decisive military success, the American media was quick to forget the long, vexing string of events that led up to the First Gulf War. However, the lessons of the war run deeper than military achievements. Bumbling covert policies and unsuccessful attempts to influence Saddam marred American policy on the Persian Gulf. These policies highlight the limitations of American power to coerce in the region. They also shed light on the importance of the deep-seated convictions that shaped Saddam's worldview—convictions with roots predating any individual actor in the run up to the First Gulf War. American failure to shape policies according to the unique conditions that governed Saddam's Iraq precluded any chance at a successful relationship with Iraq during the 1980s. Saddam's characteristics combined with the strategic importance

American diplomats placed on Iraq created a difficult foreign relations puzzle. But instead of working to solve the puzzle by targeting Saddam's key interests—Arab advancement and his regime's survival—the US was presumptuous in dealing with Saddam. Just days before the US launched the first air strikes against Iraq, *Newsweek* ran an article asking whether Saddam was a “madman,” or “a calculating student of power...?”¹²⁵ The answer was both. But he was not a pawn. However, by treating Saddam as a pawn and refusing to recognize Iraq as a key player in the Gulf, the US pushed Saddam to make a gamble. American diplomats aimed to create a stable, friendly Iraq. Instead the US helped throw the Middle East into chaos.

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