

Keynote Speech

The International Politics of the Gulf War¹

Lawrence Freedman

The Persian Gulf War came at a transitional moment in international history and was part of that transition. It was shaped by the past while suggesting, erroneously as it turned out, how the future might unfold. Although presented as the first act of a new world order, in practice it was more the last act of an old order that was coming to a close. It was, despite its drama and violence, the start of an optimistic period in international affairs, marked by multilateralism and international cooperation. It was a period which came to an end just over a decade later, with the attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001.

The aftermath of the Gulf War shaped the response to 9/11. It brought the United States much more intimately into the affairs of the Middle East, aggravated relations with Iran, provided part of the inspiration for the formation of al Qaeda, and generated divisions in the Security Council over weapons and inspections and sanctions. My argument is that all of these events reflected a broader trend - the steady loosening of the colonial ties that had once bound weak states to stronger states, of which the dismantling of the Soviet bloc in Europe was a critical step, and the build up to the Gulf War a striking symptom.

The first move in the crisis, when Iraq occupied Kuwait in August 1990, was not long after the fall of a succession of East European communist regimes. In November 1989 the Berlin Wall was breached. The next month at a summit between Presidents George H W Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev the cold war began to be spoken of in the past tense. Before the war began to liberate Kuwait the formal end of the cold war was marked in November 1990 by a conference in Paris to confirm German unification. In the months after Desert Storm, Yugoslavia began to fall apart, as did the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

The disintegration of these states into separate republics reflected similar processes that animated all post-1945 decolonization. It was the same yearning for self-determination, first in the Communist satellites in Central and Eastern Europe and then in the republics of the Soviet Union, saw the rapid dismantling of Moscow's continental empire. The sudden evaporation of Soviet power shifted the international balance of power. This was presented as a triumph of liberal capitalism and the creation of an effective American hegemony. The United States was suddenly in a category of its own, no longer a mere superpower but now a hyperpower.

The new configuration of forces and the more relaxed geopolitical setting meant that traditional concerns about the global balance of power appeared to be far less pressing. The military relationship between the shrinking Soviet Union and NATO appeared irrelevant. Soviet armed forces were hollowed out, demoralised by their failure to win in Afghanistan,

¹ I covered the war in a book published no long after, co-authored with Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf War: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (London: Faber, 1993). A much earlier version of this chapter appeared in Jeffrey Engels, ed., *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War* (New York: OUP, 2012).

undermined by the dire state of the economy, and isolated by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact.² Central and East European countries now looked to the West. This was the start of the process that would eventually lead to the “Partnership of Peace” and on to full membership of NATO and the European Union. As it risked being marginalized in Europe, Moscow accepted concessions that allowed it special consultative arrangements with NATO, and took to emphasizing the UN Security Council as a place where its position was unassailable as one of the “permanent five” with veto rights.

This appeared as the end of the “great power” era, in which the dominant and most pressing security concerns were about whether rival great powers were on the rise and had hegemonic ambitions, and in which the dominant scenario was a major war. American military planners developed capabilities that would allow them to prevail against “peer competitors” but there were no obvious candidates. Germany and Japan were put in the frame in 1990³ but both stagnated economically during that decade, and it took some time before China started to become taken seriously as anything other than a regional power. The struggle for territory that had characterized the great power rivalry for the past was long over. Meanwhile, with peace and goodwill breaking out between Washington and Moscow after decades of antagonism, there were hopes that other conflicts that had long vexed international politics, such as apartheid South Africa or the Arab-Israel dispute, or Iranian isolation, might now be addressed productively.

While President George H Bush might have been considered slow in acknowledging just how fast and how far events were moving during the course of 1989, once it all became clear his Administration moved decisively yet sympathetically to manage the processes of German unification and the effective decline of the Soviet Union. It took time for all this to work itself through the international system, but the broad hopes and expectations of the immediate post Cold-War era provided the background to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait at the start of August 1990.

The Middle East was a region of strategic importance, not least because of its oil. It was also subject to the growing fluidity of international politics and alignments, challenging attempts by all outsiders to influence the course of events. At the start of the 1960s, for example, Britain could still act to prevent Iraq making a grab for Kuwait. By the end of that decade it had decided to give up on a role “East of Suez.” In the 1950s the Soviet Union had supported radical, anti-socialist secular regimes, of which Nasser’s Egypt was the first. Yet Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, switched his allegiance to the United States. Before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, France was a close supporter of Israel, to the point of helping it develop a nuclear capability.⁴ After this war, France decided to abandon Israel to improve relations with the radical states, only made any progress with Iraq. The United States sought to build up Saudi Arabia and Iran as separate “pillars” to look after western interests in the region. But their interests included a higher oil price. They also had their own long-standing political and

² See for example Charles L Dick, ‘A Bear Without Claws: The Russian Army in the 1990s,’ *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 10:1 (March 1997), 1-10.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,’ *International Security*, vol. 15, no. 1, Summer 1990.

⁴ Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

religious tensions. Then, at the end of the 1970s Iran turned away from the West following its revolution and allowed its relations with Saudi Arabia to take on the form of a cold war.⁵

For all these reasons, Middle Eastern conflicts had increasingly become detached from the Cold War and developed their own trajectories. Both reflecting and accelerating these trends was Iraq. A pro-British monarch was deposed in the 1950s and at first Iraq followed the Nasserite path of close association (short of formal alliance) with the Soviet Union. It then took advantage of overtures from France during the 1970s to develop an alternative supplier of arms and nuclear technology. At the start of the 1980s it went to war with Iran, reflecting traditional Persian-Arab tensions, with an overlay of Shia-Sunni and clerical-secular antagonism. External powers dabbled in this conflict, largely on behalf of Iraq, but a stalemate was not seen as a big problem. With a glut of oil in the 1980s and the oil price at rock bottom the region seemed less vital than in the previous decade when OPEC states had pushed the price to artificial highs.

This was the context for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The reasons included that Iraq's belief that Kuwait was part of its inheritance after the end of the Ottoman Empire, and so have no claim to sovereign status, along with the immediate problem of its refusal to forgive Iraq's debts built up to pay for the war with Iran. The collapse in the oil price intensified Saddam Hussein's economic predicament, just as it had been an important factor in undermining the Soviet Union. Iraq blamed Kuwait for failing to adhere to OPEC production costs which had been intended to boost prices.

For President Saddam Hussein of Iraq the changing configuration of power was also relevant. If the wave of democratisation and human rights was to extend into the Middle East he was vulnerable. There were stories of videos of the December 1989 summary execution of the Ceausescu in Romania being circulated around Baghdad. He was also becoming edgy as his nuclear and chemical weapons programmes began to attract international attention. The occupation of Kuwait had economic motives, as a way of solving the challenge of indebtedness, but the urgency came because indebtedness was aggravating Saddam's overall strategic predicament.

NATO countries were distracted as this crisis developed. When Iraqi forces began to mobilize close to the Kuwait border in late July Washington accepted assurances from other Arab states that this was largely a bluff. As a result the Iraqi invasion came as more of a shock than it need have done. American policy-makers had commented on their limited security commitments to Kuwait and their desire to be friends with everyone, without ever reminding Iraq that a blatant disregard of the most basic international prohibition against aggression was bound to trigger some sort of response. If there had been a defence treaty with Kuwait (something which it along with the other Gulf states had hitherto been reluctant to contemplate) that might have helped deter Iraq. The issue became irrelevant after the invasion because the issue was now whether the international community could rise to the challenge of aggression.

Two factors ensured a quick response. First was the failure of Iraqi forces to capture the

⁵ Far more on the context see Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

Emir and other key members of the al-Sabah family before they escaped to Saudi Arabia. If they had been able coerce the Royal Family into accepting a new status under Iraqi “protection” then the international response might have been more muted. Second was recognition that the Iraqis would try to gain access to Kuwait’s wealth, which required urgent action, especially from Washington and London, to freeze Kuwaiti assets held by overseas banks. Both factors made it possible for the Security Council to consider the invasion as a breach of the peace under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, thereby making possible tough action “to restore international peace and security.”

In this way the crisis made the transition from the strategic perspectives of the Cold War era even sharper than it might otherwise have been. The discourse switched naturally and immediately from realism to idealism, from the traditional preoccupation with the integrity of alliances to one of maintaining the norms of international order. Note the contrast with the lack of response in the UN when Iraq had aggressed against Iran almost exactly a decade earlier.

Yet the United States and the Soviet Union were not on opposing sides in the Iraq-Iran war. Moscow had tried but failed to exploit the Iranian revolution of January 1979. The clerics in Teheran would not embrace an atheistic communist state engaged in an anti-Muslim campaign in Afghanistan. So despite being the victim Iran was friendless. By contrast Iraq had broadened its international support, beyond its established relations with the Soviet Union and France, by playing on anxieties about Iranian intentions. Baghdad improved relations with western countries, including the US, which extended, through the acquisition of dual-use technologies, into the military sphere. These relations were barely affected by Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against Iran and its own people. The West persisted with Saddam, because of the trade benefits and some hope that his pragmatism might lead to moderation.⁶

By 1990 however the problems with his regime had become too hard to ignore, while Kuwait was much closer to the west. There might be no direct defence relationship the US had spent the previous few years protecting Kuwaiti oil tankers from Iranian attacks (ironically because of Kuwait’s support for Iraq in the war with Iran). Kuwait had also, unusually for a Gulf state, reasonable relations with the Soviet Union.

The main geo-strategic difference between 1980 and 1990, however, lay in the attitudes of other Arab governments. In 1980 they had urged support for Iraq, pointing to the deeply subversive behaviour of the Iranian government. In 1990 Arab governments felt misled by Saddam about his intentions. The Saudis understood that whether or not they were next in line for a military invasion, if Iraq could occupy and annex Kuwait the new regional balance of power would leave them at a disadvantage. The Saudi reaction set the terms for other Arab countries. They not only supported economic sanctions but were prepared to contemplate military action. If the Saudis had decided that the Kuwaitis deserved their fate and that some modus vivendi could be found with the new Iraq/Kuwait combine then there would not have been a lot that the United States could have done. If the Saudis had not accepted US forces on their territory, then the liberation of Kuwait by means of armed force would not have been

⁶ Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

possible.

At first the coalition military moves were presented as being precautionary and defensive. It was well into October before the possibility of offensive action, designed to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait rather than just blunt their further aggression, began to be seriously considered. Up to that point the crisis was seen as a test case for coercive economic sanctions. This test was abandoned not because of doubts about how well sanctions might work, or Iraq's use of hostages as a form of counter-coercion, but because of the speed with which Kuwaiti infrastructure and society was being dismantled by the Iraqi occupation.

Once the Security Council recognized Kuwait's grievance and established a sanctions regime under Chapter Seven, there was no need to refer back to the Council. Further measures, including military action, could have been undertaken under Article 51 of the Charter which recognizes the inherent right to self-defense. Bush, however, saw the opportunity to maintain a broad consensus of international support by working through the Security Council. There were 12 resolutions covering all aspects of the crisis in 1990, culminating in Resolution 678 of 29 November authorizing the 'use of all necessary means' to implement previous resolutions. It was only in this last resolution that one of the Permanent Members (China) abstained. This helped when putting the issue to Congress.

The key to this approach was making sure that Mikhail Gorbachev was supportive at each stage. He used his lines of communication with Baghdad to try to persuade Saddam to back down prior to each escalation. Initially it was supposed, not always enthusiastically, that Moscow and Baghdad might come to some arrangement. Once the commitment had been made to forcing Iraq out of Kuwait and Saddam had not backed down, it was the US-Soviet partnership that sustained the international consensus. This was not a partnership of equals. The main Soviet contribution was not to cause difficulties.

Yet it was this partnership that gave Bush his notion of the potential implications of the management of this crisis for long-term international policy. Initially the President's line was that Iraqi aggression had jeopardized the hopes generated by the end of the cold war. In early August 1990 he spoke of how without a response a 'new era,' which was 'full of promise, an age of freedom, a time of peace for all peoples' would be put at risk. It took until 11 September 1990 before he set out the potential longer-term implications of the conflict in an address to Congress. In this speech "a New World Order" was set as the fifth objective of American policy (after immediate and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government, assurance of security and stability in the Gulf, and protection of American citizens). He spoke of a "unique and extraordinary moment" which offered a "rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of co-operation."⁷

After Desert Storm Bush sought to spell out the implications of this New World Order. He offered the following definition:

"The New World Order does not mean surrendering our national sovereignty or forfeiting our interests. It really describes a responsibility imposed by our successes. It refers to

⁷ President George Bush, Address to Congress, 11 September 1990 (US Information Service).

new ways of working with other nations to deter aggression and to achieve stability, to achieve prosperity and, above all, to achieve peace. It springs from hopes for a world based on a shared commitment among nations large and small to a set of principles that undergird our relations - peaceful settlement of disputes, solidarity against aggression, reduced and controlled arsenals, and just treatment of all peoples.”⁸

This vision was actually conservative. He wanted to build on a regional conflict that had not served as a proxy for superpower confrontation, and when the United Nations Security Council had functioned as intended, and there was a coordinated response to aggression. The hope was that the international community was now better able to cope with challenges to its basic norms.

The management of the conflict was close to the hopes of those who wrote the UN charter during the closing months of the Second World War. The Permanent Five worked together in the Security Council to deplore Iraqi behaviour and then work through the options allowed under Chapter Seven to reverse the original aggression. The terms of international law were respected and military action was limited to what was necessary to deal with the matter at hand, and no more. The US accepted limited objectives, based on the status quo ante bellum. The aim was very clearly the liberation of Kuwait and not of Iraq. In SC Resolution 687 terms were set for the cease-fire which allowed Saddam Hussein’s regime to stay in power but also set stringent requirements for disarmament and general international behaviour. It would be up to Iraqis to bring Saddam Hussein’s rule to an end. By putting every move through the Security Council and pulling together the broadest possible coalition, involving both familiar allies, in Britain and France, and Arabs, with the Saudis, Egyptians and Syrians, the US avoided an over prominent position. It stuck to the terms of UN resolutions and avoided acquiring new missions during the campaign. This fitted in with the generally cautious approach of Bush’s team that was evident throughout his Presidency.

Multilateral diplomacy required compromises. China, with its veto power over Security Council resolutions, could use the crisis to end its post-Tiananmen Square isolation. Syria, also condemned for state terrorism, became a valued member of the anti-Iraq coalition who could represent the more radical Arab states. Iran remained a country with whom relations were poor but had to be persuaded against any temptation to form some alliance of convenience with its erstwhile Iraqi enemy. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had poor human-rights records. The stand taken might be principled in terms of its opposition to aggression. It was about the rights of states rather than human rights.

The idea that if only the major powers could consult and cooperate then the problems of the world could be managed satisfactorily and without major upset depended on ignoring issues of humanitarianism and justice and concentrating on security. The Bush Administration’s realist approach meant that invading another country mattered more than oppressing one’s own people.

⁸ President George Bush, Speech at Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, 13 April 1991 (US Information Service).

The upheavals of the early 1990s encouraged the view that however dangerous in principle the Cold War might have been, in practice it had given structure and stability to international politics. From this perspective, the most urgent requirement was to provide something comparable for whatever was going to follow. The most important aspect of President Bush's outline of the New World Order was not so much its goals as the fact that its character would be defined by the United States. It was best placed to decide what counted as an issue to be addressed by the international community. The Administration's ambitions may have been modest and conservative, with little interest in meddling in local affairs around the globe, but with a position clearly at the top of the international hierarchy should it opt for a much greater ambition then it was not clear how it could be stopped. This was reinforced by its economic and diplomatic strength. This was the time of the 'a unipolar moment' of unprecedented American predominance.⁹ In the Pentagon there was consideration of how to maintain the predominance that the United States now enjoyed as an objective in itself. Whatever the language in which it was couched the core issue was one of American power.

This was something of a turnaround. Only a couple of years earlier the talk had been of American decline as a result of imperial overstretch.¹⁰ The Americans, it was argued, had been trying to do too much and risked going the way of past great powers, while the more nimble Asian producers, such as Japan and South Korea, forged ahead economically. Even in 1990-91 the US economy was not in great shape, and arguably some of the most serious risks accepted were economic as much as military. If the rise in the price of oil occasioned by the crisis had persisted then this could have aggravated the recession. In the event low oil prices followed the successful conclusion of the war. If the war had gone badly it could have undermined American economic as well as military confidence.

Prior to Desert Storm the doubts had also extended to the military prowess of the United States. In 1990 many questioned the competence of the armed forces. One of the achievements of Desert Storm according to the President was that the United States had got over "the Vietnam Syndrome" by which he meant the US had shown that it was prepared to use force and prevail, even at risk of casualties. Certainly there had been a lot of loose talk about how the Americans would give up as soon "as the body bags come home," and this was undoubtedly Saddam Hussein's hope.¹¹ There were regular claims, which turned out to be poorly founded, that there would be serious losses among coalition forces. The growing qualitative strength of the US armed forces, at least when it came to regular warfare, had been obscured by previous encounters involving either jungles or cities, and in such politically complex situations such as Vietnam or Lebanon. Victories in Grenada (1980) and Panama (1989) or the bombing of Tripoli (1986) did not really count because of the weak nature of the opposition. Even then, there were elements of incompetence in the American performance, which led to the argument that a focus on the procurement of major weapons systems had diminished the ability to grasp

⁹ Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment,' *Foreign Affairs*, 70:1 (1990/1991), 23-33.

¹⁰ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

¹¹ Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of all Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008).

the fundamentals of the military art. When it came to Desert Storm the US took seriously in its military preparations, amassing a large force and a plan that any suggestion of a muscle-bound and bumbling military was eradicated. The image of American power was enhanced and reinforced.

This sweeping victory undermined any notion that less developed countries could compete with the West in the military sphere, at least when fighting a regular war. Whatever arms acquired from western states, sophisticated intelligence, command and control, and training was still lacking. There was no question that the United States was in a different military class because of the sheer size and range of its military establishment. It was hard to imagine any government picking over the details of the Gulf war and working out how the US could be defeated in a regular war. The logical response was to prepare for irregular war, and by the end of the 1990s that response was well understood, and during the 2000s the harsh reality of irregular war had to be confronted in Afghanistan and in Iraq again.

The reference to “just treatment for all” in Bush’s presentation of the New World Order pointed to the humanitarian intervention of the 1990s. Up to this point the rights of states (noninterference in internal affairs) had taken priority over those of individuals and minority groups. After this point the balance shifted, with the action on behalf of the Kurds just after the war taken as the start of the trend. Issues of justice regularly made appearances in lists of this sort, if only to avoid an illiberal and state-oriented impression, without being taken too seriously. The issue of intervention was always complex and controversial, raising issues of sovereignty, double standards, and unintended consequences. Given the evident reluctance of this Bush administration to engage in humanitarian intervention it is doubtful if this was being marked out as a core feature of the New World Order.

Yet there were already reasons for a sharper focus on this issue. “Realist” reasons for ignoring the internal behavior of repressive states were subsiding. The issue came up in an awkward and conspicuous fashion in the form of the post-war insurrection in Iraq. Although Bush went out of his way to insist that the US would not get involved in an Iraqi civil war (the experience of getting caught up in the Lebanese civil war in 1982-3 were still fresh, along with those of Vietnam) it turned out to be difficult to stand aside. As Saddam’s forces pushed desperate Kurds to flee towards Turkey, only for them to be blocked and trapped at the border, passivity appeared as insensitive. The media were still in the region in numbers, reporting back on the plight of the Kurds, and there were reminders of Bush apparently encouraging them to rebel during the later stages of Desert Storm.¹²

The European response to the developing tragedy was quicker than the American.¹³ From France and Britain came proposals for safe havens for the Kurds, within northern Iraq. The Americans felt they could not block action. In terms of its objectives, which was to stop Kurds fleeing into Turkey by enabling them to live more or less safely in northern Iraq, the safe havens policy was successful. But it also drew the Americans into Iraq’s internal politics.

¹² Christian Alfensi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 154-162.

¹³ Bush observed that ‘I do not want one single soldier or airman shoved into a civil war in Iraq that’s been going on for ages.’ *New York Times*, 15 April 1991.

Though it was possible to reduce the level of commitment, relying on a “no-fly zone” rather than troops on the ground, so long as Saddam remained in power the issue could not be resolved. The initiative divided the international community: the Soviet Union and China both saw this intervention in domestic Iraqi matters as a potentially dangerous precedent, with their own Baltic and Tibetan situations in mind. Within months similar issues about whether outside powers can have a responsibility to prevent severe oppression and humanitarian catastrophes arose as Yugoslavia began its painful disintegration, with first Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina pleading for help. The Bush Administration was clearly unenthusiastic about these cases as well, and left the Europeans to do what they could. So the US was a reluctant intervener, and there is no reason to suppose that Bush was at all interested in turning the US into a campaigner for a more just world. Nonetheless, the issue of how to respond to violent instability was now firmly on the agenda with a clear precedent. Safe havens for the Kurds began the series of humanitarian interventions that continued for the rest of the decade.

Up to this point the overall European contribution, other than from Britain and France, had been minimal. A unified Germany had looked like becoming the power broker of the 1990s, but its constitutional and political inhibitions against acting in any mode other than its own self-defense meant that its shows of solidarity took the form of subventions to help pay the costs of those who could use armed force. In the post-Cold War euphoria the talk was of new forms of political association, coming together after decades of separation, managing conflicts without violence. The events in the Gulf could be presented as a throw-back to an earlier, more brutish period in international affairs, while Europe prepared itself for a progressive process of economic and political union. Unfortunately Europeans were more dependent on oil from the Gulf than the Americans, and their nationals were as likely to be taken as hostage by the Iraqis, at least during the first weeks of the conflict. In addition the Americans had adopted a meticulously multilateral approach, successfully invoking Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, so it was impossible to stand aside.

Japan demonstrated a similar ambivalence to the international effort, initially largely concerned about protecting trade. Europe was, however, in a different place, and so was caught out in the middle of optimistic thoughts about how its new circumstances could facilitate an exemplary and mature approach to crisis management. The humanitarian issues associated with the Safe Havens initiative were picked up first by Europeans but the initiative could not succeed until the Americans signed up. In both sets of conflicts, the British and French tended to act more in their roles as Permanent Members of the Security Council than members of the European Community (soon to be Union). The prospective pooling of the power of a whole continent had created an expectation that an incisive and capable European Union could be one of the more striking features of the New World Order. The Gulf War might have been dismissed as the wrong sort of test, coming too soon, inadequate for a proper evaluation of European claims. Unfortunately, the limits of the EU in terms of collective decision-making and capacity were subsequently confirmed in the floundering over the break-up of Yugoslavia, a crisis in the neighborhood and one that European leaders claimed to be uniquely suited to the Community’s capabilities and responsibilities.

The paradox in the war’s outcome lay in the gap between what might have been achieved

if the coalition had employed its superior power to the full and what was actually achieved. The determination to show restraint, to fight conspicuously to the letter of the UN resolutions, avoiding mission creep, meant that the outcome was something of a letdown. The fact that Saddam survived and was able to proclaim his survival as an Iraqi victory was irritating at the time, and became even more so as he was able to ride out the March insurrection and later the various plots to overthrow his regime. It did not feel like a victory.¹⁴ It was not decisive in the traditional sense, in that the Iraqi army was not eliminated and the Iraqi state was not left defenseless. If the war had turned out to be the stiff fight anticipated by many commentators then this restraint would have seemed prudent, a matching of ambition to capability. In the event, however, the abrupt conclusion of the war suggested faint-heartedness. There were good reasons not to march on Baghdad. The administration – prudently- did not want to take responsibility for running the country. It also wanted to discourage provoking Iraq's partition and intervention by its neighbors. But when Bush agreed to a cease-fire before the Iraqi troops had been cut off in their retreat from Kuwait, Saddam's mood turned in a second from desperation to joy.¹⁵ The result, however, was to leave residual uncertainty about the meaning of American power and the ruthlessness of its deployment.

The uncertainty continued. The Administration put a lot of effort into trying to move forward on an Arab-Israeli peace process, taking advantage of Palestinian discomfiture at having become so closely tied to Saddam during the crisis, while challenging the Israeli government on its settlements policy. The Madrid Conference suggested that this was bearing fruit but there was no real opportunity to follow up. In the run up to the 1992 Presidential election George Bush was clearly vulnerable to the charge that he was too engrossed in foreign policy and insufficiently focused on the economy, and when James Baker was pulled out of the State Department to manage the re-election campaign the energy went of American diplomacy. With Bush defeated, President Clinton focused as promised on domestic and economic issues, and at least in his first two years, appeared as cautious and if anything more confused by unfolding international events as his predecessor.

The US undoubtedly emerged from the Persian Gulf War in a leading position, but with attention turning to domestic issues, it appeared disinclined to lead. In the Middle East, the Palestinians and the Israelis managed to take their own initiative rather than wait for Clinton to come up with one of his own. He sought to contain Iran as well as Iraq, without seeking a decisive resolution of the conflict with either. The rise of al Qaeda was observed but its seriousness was not fully appreciated. Retreats in Somalia and caution in Rwanda, Bosnia and Haiti indicated a risk-averse Administration. Washington appeared semi-detached as Europe struggled to cope with the traumas resulting from communism's collapse, although American interventions when they came, as with the decision to open up NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact countries and the operation in both Bosnia and Kosovo, were often decisive. In the Middle East it never quite used its full power to make the most of the opportunities for an Arab-Israeli peace or to deal with radical Islamism. If the American position overall

¹⁴ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

¹⁵ Samarrai interview, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/samarrai/8.html>.

strengthened during the 1990s it was largely because of the renewed dynamism of the economy.

Meanwhile within the Security Council tensions grew. Russia, as the successor to the USSR, showed increasing signs of insecurity and irritation with NATO's expansion. By the start of the 2000s the good relations of a decade earlier had frayed. Russia and China had broken with the west over Kosovo, which in the end was handled outside of the UN system, while France had joined them over Iraq. When the new George W. Bush administration entered office it apparently, or at least publicly, aspired to an even more limited international role. This was the point at which the events set in motion by the various upheavals of 1989-1991 – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iran as well as Iraq and Israel – began to come together in ways with which the “New World Order” could barely cope.

In principle, the makings of a New World Order were in place, if not necessarily in the grand and elevated form implied in some American rhetoric. It had two critical features: the pre-eminent position of the US and its allies within the international system; and, second, a series of precedents created during the Gulf crisis for collective international action against flagrant violations of international law. Of these the most clear-cut was the decisive response to aggression and the most uncertain was the response to the distress of the Kurds. The unequivocal nature of Iraqi aggression meant that in this respect the precedent was celebrated but the case was unlikely to be repeated. By contrast, the humanitarian issues exemplified by the Kurdish case meant that in this case the precedent was played down but it was in fact much more pertinent and soon new examples were soon coming thick and fast.

The description of a New World Order reflected an aspiration to manage a period of major upheaval with the institutional structures and power configurations developed over the previous 45 years. In the event international affairs were overwhelmed and reshaped by the unruly economic and political forces that were already well in motion as a result of decolonization and which were aggravated by the end of the Cold War and also, eventually, the Gulf War.