

February 26, 1991

WINNING A REAL VICTORY OVER IRAQ

INTRODUCTION

Saddam Hussein is in retreat. The question is, will he be defeated decisively or will he survive and claim a propaganda victory? There is an enormous difference between a military retreat and a geopolitical defeat. Saddam can survive a military retreat since no one expected him to triumph over the United States-led 28-member coalition. What he seeks to avoid is a geopolitical collapse that would threaten his rule over Iraq and shatter his ambition of gaining leadership over the Arab world.

Saddam hopes that he can salvage a political victory from the ashes of military defeat by following in the footsteps of his idol, Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nasser suffered a crushing military defeat at the hands of British, French, and Israeli troops in November 1956, yet survived to score a diplomatic triumph when his enemies were forced out of Egypt by American pressure by the end of 1956. Saddam's only hope is that Washington will fail to translate the American military victory in Kuwait into a resounding political disaster for Saddam's brutal regime.

Discrediting Saddam. The challenge for George Bush is to turn Saddam's military retreat into a humiliating geopolitical defeat. Bush must make Saddam's "mother of all battles" become the "mother of all defeats." The U.S. must not allow Saddam to escape with a propaganda victory as Nasser did in 1956, but must defeat Saddam as decisively as the Israelis defeated Nasser in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Such a defeat would discredit Saddam, undercut his appeal and influence in the Arab world, and possibly end his domination of Iraq.

To defeat Saddam decisively, the U.S. must not only beat his army, but also his political strategy. From the outset of the crisis, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, Saddam has sought to transform the conflict from one between Iraq and the United Nations coalition into a conflict between the Arab world and the West, allied with Israel. Saddam, posing as the champion of the Arab world, hopes to bloody the U.S.-led coalition and force a pause in the fighting to gain better terms for withdrawal than those so far offered by the coalition: unconditional, total, and immediate withdrawal from Kuwait, as required by United Nations Security Council Resolution 660. Saddam's goal is to survive the war with the bulk of his army intact and to claim a propaganda victory by standing up to the West.

To defeat Saddam decisively the U.S. should:

◆ ◆ **Ignore Saddam's February 26 radio statement that claimed Iraqi troops were withdrawing from Kuwait.** This statement, which sought to present the rout of Iraqi forces as a victorious withdrawal, did not include an Iraqi pledge to comply with all U.N. Security Council resolutions on the Persian Gulf crisis.

◆ ◆ **Reject Saddam's repeated offers to withdraw from Kuwait under the terms of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's February 18 peace initiative, which already had been rejected by the U.S.** Saddam's offer is a sign of desperation and reveals that the Iraqi dictator may be seeking to avert a total military collapse and to survive to fight another day.

◆ ◆ **Try to oust Saddam at an acceptable cost by driving a wedge between Saddam's regime and the Iraqi army.** This can be done by making clear that the coalition is fighting a war against Saddam and his regime, not against the Iraqi people. For instance, Saddam's secret police and the Republican Guard, Saddam's loyal shock troops, should be targeted for heavy air attacks while Iraqi army units near Baghdad in a position to launch a coup should be spared attack as much as possible.

◆ ◆ **Maintain relentless military pressure on Saddam by rejecting a ceasefire or bombing halt until Iraqi troops have surrendered inside Kuwait or fled to Iraq without their weapons.** Now that Saddam has forced the allies to resort to a ground war which they are on the verge of winning, he should not be allowed to escape from his misadventure in Kuwait under the same terms that he could have obtained before the ground war started.

◆ ◆ **Maintain the U.N.-mandated economic embargo on Iraq until Baghdad agrees to comply with all U.N. Security Council resolutions concerning Kuwait.**

SADDAM'S STRATEGY

Saddam is not fighting a conventional war for traditional military objectives, such as the military destruction of his adversary. Rather, he is fighting a political and psychological war to strengthen his claim to leadership of the Arab world and to maintain his grip on Iraq. Saddam knows that he can win politically while losing militarily if he and his regime survive the war and if his propaganda convinces Iraqis and other Arabs that Iraq has defended Arab "honor" against what Baghdad Radio contends is a conspiracy of "the Satan in the White House," Western colonial powers, Israel, and Arab "lackey" regimes.

Saddam warned Bush repeatedly in the months before the war erupted on January 26 that the conflict would not be "another Panama," in which the U.S. triumphed quickly and at low cost, but closer to "another Vietnam." Saddam reportedly told visitors privately before the war that his strategy was to prolong the fighting into the summer, when he believed that the combination of heat and casualties would break American will.¹ A constant theme in the Iraqi dictator's statements is that Iraqi military prowess would enhance Arab honor. He told Cable News Network correspondent Peter Arnett on January 28: "Iraq will win the admiration of the world with its fighting prowess. Lots of blood will be shed...on every side."² A prolonged war would enable Iraq to wear down the allied coalition, raise the political costs to the allies in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and increase Saddam's chances of escaping the war with a settlement that he could proclaim to be a victory.

Hopes for a Settlement. Saddam's chief hope of gaining a settlement that he credibly could claim as a victory is to raise the costs of the war until the coalition balks at paying the price for total military victory and settles for a compromise solution that leaves Saddam in power. Another hope for a settlement that nets him a claim of victory is the possibility that the allies would permit his forces to withdraw from Kuwait without surrendering, after having fought "the mother of all battles."

Saddam so far has been unable to inflict heavy casualties on the allies in battle. But his coldly-calculated willingness to accept heavy Iraqi casualties also is an important source of bargaining leverage. Saddam has taken his own nation hostage, not just Kuwait. And he will continue to hold Iraqis hostage to his ambition to become the unchallenged leader of the Arab world. He contends that the goal of the allied war effort is to destroy Iraq, not to liberate Kuwait. To induce Saddam's hostages, the Iraqi people, to turn against him, the U.S. must convince them that the war is against Saddam, not them.

1 *The Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 1991, p. A12.

2 *The New York Times*, January 29, 1991, p. A12.

SADDAM'S DIPLOMATIC LANDMINES

The U.S. must put such military pressure on Saddam's retreating army that the allied forces, in effect, decisively defeat and capture the 42 divisions of 540,000 troops entrenched in the Kuwaiti theater of operations (which includes Southern Iraq) and destroy or capture their tanks, artillery, and heavy equipment. Iraqi troops should be allowed to retreat to Iraq without being attacked from the air only if they abandon their weapons. Until this military objective is achieved, Bush must continue to avoid jeopardizing an overwhelming allied victory through diplomatic missteps that would give Saddam an escape route to claim victory.

In addition to avoiding the more than 500,000 Iraqi landmines in Kuwait, the U.S. must avoid many diplomatic landmines. They are:

◆ ◆ **Agreeing to a cease-fire or bombing halt before the beginning of an unconditional, rapid, and total withdrawal of Iraqi forces in the Kuwaiti theater.** The U.S. should avoid one of the pitfalls of its Vietnam experience and refuse a bombing halt that would relieve the military pressure on Saddam to comply with U.N. resolutions on Kuwait. Saddam has a long history of violating agreements. The Iraqi dictator announced a unilateral withdrawal from Iranian territory in a bid to gain a cease-fire with Iran in 1982, but held onto parts of Iran anyway. After an exhausted Iran had accepted a U.N. cease-fire proposal in July 1988, Saddam launched a military offensive that pushed the Iranians back 40 miles. Clearly, Saddam cannot be given the benefit of the doubt.

◆ ◆ **Allowing the Iraqi army to withdraw without surrendering.** Now that Saddam has forced the allies to resort to a ground war which they are on the verge of winning, he should not be allowed to escape from his misadventure in Kuwait under the same terms that he could have obtained before the ground war started. The Iraqi army should be required to surrender before it is allowed to withdraw. The Egyptian army was allowed to withdraw without surrendering from territory it had seized in the Sinai peninsula during the first few days of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, despite the fact that the Israeli army had surrounded those Egyptian forces and was on the verge of decisively defeating them. This allowed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to claim a moral victory from the shambles of military defeat. Saddam is no Sadat. If he is allowed to escape with a "moral victory," he will use it not to make peace with Israel, as Sadat did in 1979, but to gain the stature he needs to lead the Arab world against Israel in another war.

◆ ◆ **Succumbing to Soviet-Iraqi diplomatic initiatives.** Bush correctly rejected Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's February 18 peace initiative because it attached a series of conditions to Iraq's "unconditional withdrawal," including assurances that Iraq would be rewarded with discussions on the Arab-Israeli issue and that Saddam would stay in power, free from punishment for his aggression and war crimes. The U.S. should avoid being entangled in Gorbachev's diplomatic agenda, which is to: 1) preserve

Saddam as a loyal client; 2) retain Iraq as a strategic ally; 3) retain Iraq as a major arms customer and important source of hard currency; 4) demonstrate that Moscow remains a key player in the Middle East; 5) strengthen the Soviet role in the postwar settlement; 6) enhance Soviet influence in the Arab world; and 7) restore Gorbachev's credentials as a statesman, which have been tarnished by his crackdown on democratic reformers in the Baltic states.

◆ ◆ **Accepting anything less than the demands set forth in the twelve U.N. resolutions.** Doing so would be in effect rewarding Saddam for fighting the war since the resolutions set forth the criteria for an acceptable peaceful settlement of the crisis.

WINNING THE PEACE

The U.S. must not only defeat Saddam Hussein's army but his political strategy. It must block Saddam's efforts to salvage political victory out of military defeat, as Nasser did in 1956. It must force Saddam to absorb a clear-cut political defeat that will explode his destabilizing claim to Arab leadership and discredit him, like Nasser after he provoked the disastrous 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Since Saddam's victory strategy is predicated on his personal survival, his removal from power would constitute a major victory for America. But such an outcome would be pyrrhic were it purchased at the price of occupying Baghdad and fighting a protracted guerrilla war inside Iraq that would inflame the Arab world and turn Saddam into a martyr. As the Iranians found when they pushed Iraqi troops across the border in 1982, the Iraqis fight much better on their own territory, motivated by national defense rather than conquest. Occupying forces would be easy targets for truckbombs; it is not difficult to imagine Iraq turning into a super-Lebanon. The military costs and ensuing political costs that such an occupation would impose on U.S. policy in the Arab world would offset the benefit of finishing off a mortally wounded Saddam.

Aiding Disgruntled Iraqis. The U.S. should seek to oust Saddam from power, but should do so by helping Iraqis who are increasingly disgruntled with his leadership. There are reports of anti-Saddam graffiti on the walls of Baghdad's buildings, a brave act given the fact that public criticism of Saddam is by law a capital offense in Iraq. A crowd of 5,000 Iraqis in the Iraqi town of Diwaniya, about 100 miles south of Baghdad, reportedly killed ten Baath Party officials who tried to stop their anti-Saddam demonstration on February 10.³ Saddam is unlikely to be swept away in a spontaneous popular uprising, given the strength of his omnipresent security forces. But the U.S.

3 *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1991, p. A12.

can reduce Saddam's ability to intimidate the Iraqi people by targeting for bombing Saddam's multiple secret police agencies, which have headquarters in every major Iraqi town and city.

Army Coup Attempts. The chief threat to Saddam's regime is posed by the Iraqi army, which bore the brunt of the cost of Saddam's miscalculations in invading Iran in 1980 and Kuwait last year. The army almost surely resents Saddam's constant purges of high-ranking officers and the heavy-handed surveillance of Baath Party commissars and spies sprinkled throughout its ranks. Tensions grew so high between Saddam and his army that there were four credible reports of coup attempts in 1990 before the August 2 invasion of Kuwait; and in July, Saddam closed army officers clubs, which he regards as potential sources of opposition.⁴

The U.S. should drive a wedge further into the growing fissure between Saddam and his army by making clear that this war is not against the Iraqi people. Washington constantly should reaffirm American support for Iraq's territorial integrity and rule out a postwar dismemberment of Iraq by Iran, Syria, and Turkey. This will reduce the willingness of the army to continue the war. The U.S. should continue to bomb heavily the loyalist Republican Guard, while Iraqi army units near Baghdad that are in a position to launch a coup should be spared attack as much as possible. This will reduce the odds against a successful coup.

The U.S. should continue to reject Saddam's offers to withdraw from Kuwait under the terms of Gorbachev's peace initiative. Washington already has rejected this initiative as an oxymoron — it promises an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal for which it then lists conditions. Moreover, the Gorbachev initiative is unacceptable because it gives Saddam better terms for withdrawal than he could have obtained before the war started on January 15, including assurances that he can remain in power and escape punishment for his aggression and war crimes.

Heavier Price. The U.S. is right to reject Saddam's offer of a conditional withdrawal and instead maintain relentless military pressure on Saddam until Iraq's forces in Kuwait, and any surrounded in southern Iraq, have surrendered unconditionally. Now that Saddam has forced the allies into a ground war that they are on the verge of winning, he should not be allowed to escape a total defeat on the ground. He should be required to pay a heavier price — surrender of his troops, not just withdrawal — because his obstinate refusal to withdraw forced the allies to bear the higher costs of the ground war option. By making it clear that it will accept nothing less, the U.S. puts the onus on Saddam for continuing the war, which will give the Iraqi army additional incentives for a coup.

4 Laurie Mylroie, "Saddam Was in Desperate Trouble," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 1990, p. A10.

Demanding the surrender of the troops inside Kuwait also will deprive Saddam of any basis for claiming victory. Such a humiliating defeat could accelerate his downfall. The U.S. also could encourage a coup by holding prisoners from the Republican Guard, diehard supporters of the regime, until the final stage of prisoners of war exchanges. Since roughly two-thirds of the 150,000-man Republican Guard was deployed in the Kuwait theater, this significantly will weaken Saddam's praetorian guard and make him more vulnerable to a coup.

Finally, the U.S. should veto any lifting of the U.N. economic sanctions against Iraq until Iraq agrees to comply with all U.N. Security Council resolutions on Kuwait. This will give the Iraqi people and the Iraqi army further incentive to rid themselves of Saddam. The U.S. also should organize an embargo on arms sales and the transfer of sensitive military technologies to Iraq to prevent Baghdad from rebuilding its offensive military capabilities, particularly its weapons of mass destruction, regardless of who rules Iraq.

CONCLUSION

Now that Iraqi forces appear to be trapped in a steadily tightening noose, they should not be allowed to escape a humiliating defeat. A face-saving settlement that prolongs Saddam's rule will perpetuate Iraq as a radical and destabilizing force in the Middle East and raise the long-term American and allied costs of containing the Iraqi threat. The U.S. should stay the course in Kuwait and inflict a crushing defeat on Saddam Hussein that will shake his hold on power and deter future Saddams from challenging vital U.S. interests. Given Saddam's determination to fight the "mother of all battles" against the allies, the U.S. now should impose the "mother of all defeats" on Saddam.

James A. Phillips
Deputy Director of Foreign Policy Studies

All Heritage Foundation papers are now available electronically to subscribers of the "NEXIS" on-line data retrieval service. The Heritage Foundation's Reports (HFRPTS) can be found in the OMNI, CURRNT, NWLTRS, and GVT group files of the NEXIS library and in the GOVT and OMNI group files of the GOVNWS library.

