

## How Saddam Won the War

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After a year of tense confrontation, President Bush suddenly announced the withdrawal of American troops from the Gulf. The next day, Baghdad shook with the sounds of celebration, with one million Iraqis chanting "Saddam, Saladin" and calling for a new Caliphate from Riyadh to Rabat. It was summer 1991.

Those with long memories recalled a moment of fear in the Baghdad bunker—after the Kuwait grab, when the U.S. switched from coddling to containment. America had deftly built a global coalition against Saddam Hussein and poured forces into the region.

But as the blockade took hold, Saddam remembered Napoleon's dictum: "If fight I must, let it be against a coalition." What use was a league that encompassed enemies like Israel and Syria, rivals like the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., a stalwart like Mrs. Thatcher and lukewarm tag-alongs like Greece and Spain? That posse bestowed the badge of legitimacy on the U.S. But it also obeyed the iron law of the lowest common denominator. And low it was.

There, for example, was Moscow, subtly playing both sides of the street. There was Syria, slipping into Lebanon for a ruthless killing spree to establish hegemony at last.

Then there was France, Iraq's old armorer, which early on hinted that "everything was possible" if Baghdad merely promised to evacuate Kuwait. But nobody could have buoyed Saddam's spirits more than Mr. Bush. On Oct. 1, the president meekly held out wondrous rewards in exchange for "unconditional departure." Decoded, the signal read: "You can get what you want peacefully," and "we will put the squeeze on Israel"—as if Saddam had invaded Kuwait to liberate Palestine.

The brittleness of the coalition was

dramatized when the Palestinians opened a second front in Jerusalem. After the Temple Mount clash, Washington unleashed its fury on Israel, signaling Saddam: "Our posse is so fragile that we would rather condemn our reliable ally than punish you." Mr. Bush took a beating in opinion polls. Marchers proclaimed "remember Vietnam."

Napoleon was right. Saddam realized that he had little to fear as long as he did not provoke the U.S. His adviser on the U.S. kept quoting Tocqueville to him—that "democracies naturally desire peace." The fellow also listed the reassuring exceptions to that law: Grenada and Panama, actions that were swift, almost bloodless, and close to home. But in a faraway place like Lebanon, 241 dead Marines had been enough to terminate the American intervention in 1984.

There was still the blockade. But no blockade has ever dislodged a determined aggressor. When starving Kuwaitis showed up on Western television, the food embargo was lifted. The arms embargo simply did not bite as long as there was no war.

The cooler months passed. The window of opportunity that had opened in November closed in March 1991. By then, the world had forgotten the aggression, just as it had forgotten Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal by the time Britain and France attacked Egypt four months later, in November 1956. Nations began ordering their forces home.

Kuwait, in the meantime, had been populated by Iraqis and Palestinians who, after a "referendum," had proclaimed an "Islamic Socialist Republic" and appealed to their Baathist brethren for military protection. The Saudis were now torn between keeping Western "infidels" on their soil and appeasing Saddam. In the end, they opted for a deal, asking the U.S. to withdraw in favor of an "over-the-horizon" na-

val presence. President Bush, battling recession and smarting from a Republican midterm defeat, was glad to oblige.

U.S. soldiers were now out of harm's way, but then the bills started piling up. Immediately, Saddam called a meeting of Arab oil producers. None argued against his plan for maximizing long-term oil profits. Pegged to Western inflation, prices would keep rising but remain just below the point of triggering large-scale conversion to substitute energy sources. OPEC had tried this tactic before and failed, but now there was a brutal enforcer—Iraq—whose offer nobody dared refuse.

Awash in petrodollars (rich Arabs had swiftly canceled the Iraqi debt), Saddam had little trouble acquiring missing parts for his nuclear-weapons project. With it came missiles that could reach Tel Aviv, Tehran and Rome—with nuclear, chemical and bacteriological warheads. Unable to lick Saddam, Damascus and Cairo set off on their own nuclear programs.

As Western Europe and Japan forged their separate links with Baghdad, the U.S. found it had traded tactical respite for strategic defeat of the first order. Arabs, having lost faith in the U.S., now looked to Baghdad. Cairo tore up the Camp David peace with Israel, America's proudest achievement in the Middle East.

Just a year after the Soviet Union had declared its surrender in the Cold War, America was exposed as a phony giant. It had committed its prestige for a worthy purpose—decent world order—but did not have the will to uphold it. The message was simple: The ruthless shall inherit the earth. A stable post-war future was lost because America had gone to the brink and blinked.

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