



The Gulf Wars: Winning the War, Losing the Peace

The two American wars against Iraq, separated by little more than a decade, began for very different reasons and produced very different results. The first Gulf War—Operation Desert Storm—was short, decisive, and enormously popular at home. The second—Operation Iraqi Freedom—also produced a remarkably rapid military victory, but what followed became a long, costly struggle to create a stable Iraq.

Together, the two wars demonstrated both the extraordinary power of the modern American military and the limits of military power. The United States could defeat Saddam Hussein's armies. It proved much more difficult to determine what should replace them.

Saddam Hussein Invades Kuwait

The first Gulf War began on August 2, 1990, when Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait. Iraq had emerged from its long war with Iran heavily in debt, and Saddam accused Kuwait of depressing oil prices and taking oil from fields along their disputed border. Whatever his grievances, his solution was simple: he sent in his army and seized the country.

The invasion immediately threatened the political and economic balance of the Persian Gulf. Kuwait possessed enormous oil reserves, and just beyond it lay Saudi Arabia. President George H. W. Bush responded by organizing an international coalition backed by the United Nations. American forces poured into Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield to prevent any further Iraqi advance while economic sanctions and diplomacy attempted to force Saddam out of Kuwait.

He refused.

Desert Storm: A Stunning Military Victory

On January 17, 1991, the coalition began Operation Desert Storm with an enormous air campaign against Iraqi military forces, command centers, communications networks, air defenses, and other strategic targets. For more than a month, coalition aircraft dominated the skies.

The ground war began on February 24. American and coalition forces swept around and through Iraqi defenses with overwhelming speed. The famous “left hook” through the desert outflanked much of Saddam’s army, while coalition forces attacked directly into Kuwait. Within about 100 hours of the beginning of the ground offensive, President Bush declared Kuwait liberated and suspended offensive operations.

For Americans still carrying memories of Vietnam, Desert Storm seemed almost cathartic. The war had a clear objective, overwhelming public support, broad international backing, and a quick victory with comparatively light American casualties. Television viewers watched precision-guided weapons strike targets and saw American armored columns race across the desert. The United States appeared to have rediscovered the ability to fight and win a war decisively.

But there was a catch.

Saddam Remains in Power

The coalition had been created to liberate Kuwait, not conquer Iraq or overthrow Saddam Hussein. President Bush and his advisers feared that marching on Baghdad might fracture the international coalition and leave the United States responsible for occupying and governing Iraq.

Consequently, Saddam remained in power.

In retrospect, that decision has often been criticized, particularly because Saddam brutally suppressed uprisings by Kurds in northern Iraq and Shiites in the south after the war. Yet the decision also avoided precisely the problem the United States would confront twelve years later: removing Saddam was much easier than deciding what kind of Iraq would replace him.

Throughout the 1990s, Saddam remained a troublesome adversary. Iraq lived under international sanctions and weapons inspections, while American and British aircraft enforced no-fly zones over portions of the country. The Gulf War had ended, but the confrontation had not.

September 11 Changes the Equation

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 transformed American foreign policy. President George W. Bush's administration became increasingly concerned about hostile governments possessing weapons of mass destruction and potentially providing such weapons to terrorists.

Attention soon turned again to Iraq. The Bush administration argued that Saddam had failed to comply fully with United Nations weapons requirements and maintained that Iraq possessed, or

was continuing to pursue, chemical and biological weapons and possibly a nuclear weapons program.

The administration also suggested connections between Saddam's regime and international terrorism. However, Iraq was not responsible for the September 11 attacks, and subsequent investigations did not establish an operational relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda in carrying them out.

The most important public argument for war became Iraq's suspected weapons of mass destruction. That claim would prove enormously consequential.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

On March 20, 2003, American and coalition forces invaded Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Once again, the conventional military campaign demonstrated overwhelming American superiority. Coalition forces advanced rapidly toward Baghdad. Saddam's military resistance collapsed, and Baghdad fell in April. Television viewers saw one of the war's defining images when a statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down in the Iraqi capital.

President Bush announced on May 1 that major combat operations had ended, speaking aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* beneath a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” The organized Iraqi military had indeed been defeated. But the mission was far from accomplished.

The Vacuum After Saddam

The United States had won the war against Saddam Hussein. It had not yet figured out how to win the peace. Saddam's government had been a brutal dictatorship, but it had also been the central authority holding together a country divided among Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Kurds, and other groups. Once that government disappeared, Iraq's political structure began to unravel.

Two early occupation decisions made the situation worse. The American-led Coalition Provisional Authority pursued “de-Ba’athification,” removing many members of Saddam's Ba’ath Party from government positions. It also dissolved the Iraqi Army and other security organizations. Hundreds of thousands of armed men suddenly found themselves unemployed, while experienced administrators and government officials were removed from positions needed to keep the country functioning.

Looting spread. Government services deteriorated. Sectarian rivalries intensified. Insurgent groups emerged, some composed of former regime supporters and others motivated by religious extremism or opposition to the American occupation. The United States had destroyed the old Iraqi state faster than it could build a new one.

Saddam Captured and Executed

Saddam Hussein disappeared after the invasion but was captured by American troops in December 2003, hiding near his hometown of Tikrit. He was eventually turned over to the new Iraqi government, tried for crimes committed during his dictatorship, convicted, and executed by hanging on December 30, 2006. His death symbolized the final destruction of the old regime, but it did not end Iraq's violence.

By then, Sunni and Shiite militias were fighting one another, terrorist attacks had become commonplace, and al-Qaeda in Iraq had emerged as a major force. What had begun as a rapid invasion had turned into a grinding occupation and counterinsurgency campaign.

The Surge and American Withdrawal

By 2006, Iraq appeared dangerously close to full-scale civil war. In 2007, President Bush ordered additional American troops into Iraq in what became known as “the surge.” Combined with changes in American counterinsurgency tactics and cooperation from Sunni tribes that turned against al-Qaeda, the additional forces helped reduce violence substantially.

The improvement provided breathing room for Iraq's government, but it did not eliminate the country's underlying political and sectarian divisions.

American combat forces gradually withdrew, and the last U.S. troops under the existing agreement left Iraq in December 2011 during the presidency of Barack Obama. But Iraq's instability continued. The Islamic State—ISIS—later exploited political divisions, the Syrian civil war, and weaknesses in Iraqi security forces to seize large areas of Iraq and Syria. American forces eventually returned in a more limited role as part of an international campaign against ISIS.

The consequences of the 2003 invasion therefore continued long after the invasion itself had ended.

Two Wars, Two Lessons

The contrast between the two Gulf Wars is striking. Desert Storm had a limited and clearly defined objective: **drive the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait.** Once that objective was accomplished, the war ended. Saddam remained in power, an outcome that was frustrating but avoided an American occupation of Iraq.

Operation Iraqi Freedom pursued the much larger objective of removing Saddam's regime. Militarily, that objective was accomplished with astonishing speed. Politically, however, overthrowing the government created a problem for which the United States was poorly prepared.

The first Gulf War was remembered by many Americans as the almost perfect modern military campaign: overwhelming force, international cooperation, a clearly defined mission, and a quick exit. The second demonstrated that defeating an enemy's army and successfully rebuilding his country are entirely different undertakings.

America won the battles in both Gulf Wars. In Desert Storm, it also achieved the political objective it had established before the fighting began. In Iraqi Freedom, it toppled Saddam Hussein but discovered that removing a dictator could create a vacuum more dangerous and complicated than the regime it replaced.

It was another lesson Americans had encountered before: **winning a war does not necessarily mean winning the peace.**