

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome

From the Archive: With Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf's death on Thursday and the declining health of ex-President George H.W. Bush an era of war and intrigue is coming to an end, a time of resurgent U.S. imperialism that saw this warrior seeking peace and the politician wanting war, as Robert Parry wrote in 2011.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Feb. 28, 2011, and slightly updated)

Two decades ago, with a resounding victory in a 100-hour ground war against Iraqi troops in Kuwait, the first Bush administration completed the restoration of a powerful public consensus, a renewed national commitment that the United States should act as the world's imperial policeman.

That consensus, which took shape after World War II, had been shattered by the Vietnam War and rebuilding public support for foreign adventures had become a key (though secret) goal of the Persian Gulf ground war, which President George H.W. Bush ordered on Feb. 23, 1991, and called off on Feb. 28.

Bush knew that the extra killing of Iraqi and American troops wasn't needed to achieve the military objective of getting Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, because Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had long signaled his readiness to withdraw.

But Bush and his top political advisers, including Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, insisted on the ground war as a dramatic climax to a story line designed to thrill the American people and get them to embrace warfare again as an exciting part of the national character.

Bush, Cheney and other senior officials judged that the slaughter of tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, mostly poorly trained conscripts, and the combat deaths of some 147 American soldiers was a small price to pay.

On Feb. 28, 1991, just hours after the fighting stopped, Bush gave the public a fleeting glimpse of his secret agenda when he celebrated the ground war victory by blurting out the seemingly incongruous declaration, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all."

What Americans didn't know at the time and still don't understand today is that this first U.S. war with Iraq had become less about liberating Kuwait and more about consolidating domestic public support behind a new phase of the American Empire, one that continues to this day.

After the bitter experience of the Vietnam War, which left some 57,000 U.S. soldiers dead and the country deeply divided, the American people were having

second thoughts about the wisdom of maintaining an expensive worldwide empire.

That ambivalence toward foreign military adventures was called the Vietnam Syndrome and it became the target of a long-running propaganda campaign mounted by old Cold Warriors and a younger generation of hawkish intellectuals known as the neoconservatives.

As internal documents from the Reagan administration have made clear, the Vietnam Syndrome was regarded as a major obstacle to future military operations deemed necessary to protect U.S. economic and strategic interests around the globe.

It also was an article of faith among Ronald Reagan's foreign policy team that the defeat in Vietnam had been engineered by a combination of communist propaganda that had deceived the American people, a disloyal U.S. press corps that had undermined the war effort, and traitorous American leftists. [See Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

Scaring Americans

To counter these supposed "enemies," the early Reagan administration invested much time and energy in devising what amounted to a massive psychological operation to convince Americans that they faced dangerous adversaries abroad and domestic enemies at home.

This propaganda campaign fell under the rubric of "public diplomacy" though some of its practitioners called their work "perception management," i.e. influencing how Americans saw the world around them.

J. Michael Kelly, a senior Pentagon official, summed up the task thusly: "The most critical special operations mission we have today is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us."

The Reagan administration's chief technique for reprogramming the American people was to scare them about foreign threats like pretending the Soviet Union was on the rise and on the march toward world conquest when CIA analysts were actually detecting signs of Moscow's rapid decline.

The Reagan administration's solution to the problem of those pesky CIA analysts was to politicize the intelligence product, push aside the professionals and put in place opportunists who would go along with the ideological agenda of hyping the Soviet threat.

The key players in that gambit were CIA Director William Casey, a Cold War hardliner, and an ambitious careerist who was put in charge of the analytical

division, Robert Gates, who later became Defense Secretary for both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Reagan's 'Tear Down This Wall' Myth](#)" or Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

Meanwhile, Americans who favored more peaceful approaches to world problems had to be roughed up and put on the defensive. For that, the Reagan administration adopted the tried-and-true tactic of challenging the patriotism of politicians, journalists and citizens who wouldn't get onboard or who insisted on criticizing human rights crimes by U.S. allies.

As Reagan's U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick explained the problem to the 1984 Republican convention, these were Americans who would "blame America first."

Still, Reagan moved cautiously as he guided the country away from its painful memories of the Vietnam debacle. In conflicts overseas, he operated mostly through proxies, such as the right-wing security forces of Guatemala and El Salvador or the Nicaraguan Contra rebels. When he chose to invade another country, it was a slam-dunk victory against the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983.

Still, under Reagan in the 1980s, the United States was getting its swagger back. It was a decade of flag-waving chants, like "USA, USA" and "we're number one."

By the end of the decade, the people and the political establishment were primed to give Reagan's policies credit for "winning the Cold War," although they actually had very little to do with the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The CIA analysts had been seeing the decay there for years mostly due to the internal failings of the communist system and its failure to keep pace with the technological advances in the West but those analysts had been silenced by Reagan's political team. The new generation of politicized analysts was so conditioned to not seeing signs of Moscow's weakness that Gates and his cohorts essentially missed the collapse of the Soviet empire.

When the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989 and Soviet-backed regimes began to collapse across Eastern Europe it was thus easy for the influential neocons and their allies to spin the events as a victory for throwing America's weight around.

The First Bush Wars

In December 1989, Reagan's Vice President and his successor as President, George H.W. Bush, also stepped up the escalation of U.S. military interventions by dispatching U.S. forces to throttle the Panamanian army of Gen. Manuel Noriega,

another fairly easy American win. War was starting to appear both exciting and simple.

The next chapter in the Vietnam Syndrome's demise began in August 1990 when Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein grew exasperated with the Kuwaiti royal family, the al-Sabahs. Kuwait had loaned Iraq money to fight Iran from 1980-88, fending off Iran's revolutionary Shiite government which was seen as a threat to the corrupt Sunni-controlled oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. Hussein was demanding that the loans be renegotiated and that the Kuwaitis stop slant-drilling into Iraq's oil fields.

Since Hussein had long considered himself something of an American ally having received covert assistance from Washington during his war with Iran he consulted U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, who gave him an ambiguous response about Washington's attitude toward Arab border disputes.

Seeing no bright red lines, Hussein sent his military into Kuwait and all the way to Kuwait City. The al-Sabahs fled to Saudi Arabia in their luxury Mercedes. Yet, almost from the moment that the conquest was complete, Hussein began sending out peace feelers, indicating that he had made his point and was willing to withdraw from Kuwait.

"We had to go in," Saddam Hussein told Jordan's King Hussein on the same day as the invasion, according to *Secret Dossier*, a 1991 book by President John F. Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger and French journalist Eric Laurent. "I am committed to withdrawal from Kuwait. It will start within days and will last several weeks."

Saddam Hussein asked King Hussein to help fend off outside threats because that might cause Iraq to dig in its heels, Salinger and Laurent reported.

However, President George H.W. Bush, who himself had invaded Panama just months earlier, decided that in this case the principles of international law must be defended. Bush said he told King Hussein "that it had gone beyond simply a regional dispute because of the naked aggression."

Bolstered by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Bush returned to the White House on Aug. 4, 1990, and declared, "this will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." He ordered plans to begin for a military response.

As Washington began to line up its Arab allies starting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak King Hussein grew worried, later stating that "this destroys everything. And it gives all chances of broadening the conflict."

Peace Feelers

Obviously, a tyrant as ruthless as Saddam Hussein would not hesitate to mislead friend and foe alike when it suited his purposes. But it will never be known whether an Arab solution to the crisis was possible in those early days had Egypt not given in to pressure from Washington.

For his part, President Bush was sensing another opportunity from the crisis, to enhance American influence in the Middle East under the guise of freeing Kuwait. Saddam Hussein, too, appears to have sensed the trap that he had sprung for himself. He began sending his own peace feelers to Washington.

Salinger and Laurent reported that Iraqi deputy foreign minister Nizar Hamdoon used PLO chief Yasir Arafat to deliver a message on Aug. 7 in Vienna to a Palestinian businessman with close ties to the White House. He conveyed Iraq's desire to pull-out to White House chief of staff John Sununu, but the White House made no reply.

Another Iraqi peace feeler was dispatched through a back channel of two Arab-American businessmen, Michael Saba and Samir Vincent, who received oral instructions from Hamdoon.

The proposal called for a complete Iraqi military pullout from Kuwait in exchange for guaranteed Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf through some arrangement regarding Kuwait's Bubiyan and Warbah islands, complete control of the Rumailah oil field which dips slightly into Kuwait territory, and negotiations on oil prices with the United States.

The initiative was conveyed to former CIA director and Middle East expert Richard Helms, who feared the long-term consequences of the crisis and agreed to raise the Iraqi peace plan in a lunch with Bush's national security adviser Brent Scowcroft on Aug. 21. However, Scowcroft brushed off the initiative, saying the White House wanted to assess the impact of economic sanctions first.

By then, the confrontation was spinning out of control, as Hussein began taking American hostages and Bush began ratcheting up the propaganda. The President soon elevated Saddam Hussein to above Adolf Hitler on history's list of most-evil villains.

"I am more determined than ever to see that this invading dictator gets out of Kuwait with no compromise of any kind whatsoever," Bush declared. For his part, Hussein was ranting about making American soldiers "swim in their own blood."

On Oct. 16, Secretary of State James Baker formally rejected the idea of trading any Kuwaiti concessions for an Iraqi withdrawal. In the weeks that followed, the Bush administration delivered only a series of threats and ultimatums that assured that the head-strong Hussein would not back down.

Later, I discovered a January 1991 congressional summary, prepared by a Democratic aide with intelligence-oversight responsibilities. It explained Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as something of a dramatic opening bid in negotiations to resolve the border dispute, not as a permanent conquest.

"The Iraqis apparently believed that having invaded Kuwait, they would get everyone's attention, negotiate improvements to their economic situation and pull out," the summary said, adding that if the White House had been interested, "a diplomatic solution satisfactory to the interests of the United States may well have been possible since the earliest days of the invasion."

Instead, the summary said, Bush's National Security Council "apparently concluded on the basis of a psychological profile of Saddam Hussein, and to avoid seeming to in any way reward the invasion, to refuse any negotiations with him, concluding that they would be fruitless until the U.S. had backed Saddam Hussein into a corner from which he could not escape."

In an interview with me, former CIA chief Helms put it more succinctly: "The U.S. government didn't want to make a deal."

Bush's Thinking

Less apparent at the time were two other key factors of President George H.W. Bush's thinking that a U.S. military victory over an outmatched Iraq would consolidate the transformation of American public attitudes toward war and would cement U.S. leadership in what Bush called "the new world order."

Those strategic aspects of Bush's grand plan began to emerge after the U.S.-led coalition started pummeling Iraq with air strikes in mid-January 1991.

Those bombings inflicted severe damage on Iraq's military and civilian infrastructure and slaughtered a large number of non-combatants, including the incineration of some 400 women and children in a Baghdad bomb shelter on Feb. 13. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Recalling the Slaughter of Innocents](#)."]]

The air war's damage was so severe that some world leaders looked for a way to end the carnage and arrange Iraq's departure from Kuwait. Even senior U.S. military field commanders, such as Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, looked favorably on proposals for sparing lives.

Schwarzkopf, who was in command of the half-million troops dispatched to the Persian Gulf, was receptive when he learned that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was proposing a cease-fire and a withdrawal of Iraqi forces. But the proposal was running into trouble with President Bush and his political

subordinates who wanted a ground war to crown the U.S. victory.

Schwarzkopf reached out to Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to make the case for peace with the President. On Feb. 21, 1991, the two generals hammered out a cease-fire proposal for presentation to the NSC.

The peace deal would give Iraqi forces one week to march out of Kuwait while leaving their armor and heavy equipment behind. Schwarzkopf thought he had Powell's commitment to pitch the plan at the White House.

But Bush was fixated on a ground war. Though secret from the American people at that time, Bush had long determined that a peaceful Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait would not be allowed. Indeed, Bush was privately fearful that the Iraqis might capitulate before the United States could attack on the ground.

At the time, conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak were among the few outsiders who described Bush's obsession with exorcising the Vietnam Syndrome. On Feb. 25, 1991, they wrote that the Gorbachev initiative brokering Iraq's surrender of Kuwait "stirred fears" among Bush's advisers that the Vietnam Syndrome might survive the Gulf War.

"There was considerable relief, therefore, when the President ... made clear he was having nothing to do with the deal that would enable Saddam Hussein to bring his troops out of Kuwait with flags flying," Evans and Novak wrote.

"Fear of a peace deal at the Bush White House had less to do with oil, Israel or Iraqi expansionism than with the bitter legacy of a lost war. 'This is the chance to get rid of the Vietnam Syndrome,' one senior aide told us."

In the 1999 book, *Shadow*, author Bob Woodward confirmed that Bush was adamant about fighting a war, even as the White House pretended it would be satisfied with an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal.

"We have to have a war," Bush told his inner circle of Secretary of State Baker, National Security Adviser Scowcroft and Gen. Powell, according to Woodward.

"Scowcroft was aware that this understanding could never be stated publicly or be permitted to leak out. An American president who declared the necessity of war would probably be thrown out of office. Americans were peacemakers, not warmongers," Woodward wrote.

On Jan. 9, 1991, when Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz rebuffed an ultimatum from Baker in Geneva, "Bush was jubilant because it was the best news possible, although he would have to conceal it publicly," Woodward wrote.

Gorbachev's Plan

However, the "fear of a peace deal" resurfaced in the wake of the U.S.-led bombing campaign. Soviet diplomats met with Iraqi leaders who let it be known that they were prepared to withdraw their troops from Kuwait unconditionally.

Learning of Gorbachev's proposed settlement, Schwarzkopf also saw little reason for U.S. soldiers to die if the Iraqis were prepared to withdraw and leave their heavy weapons behind. There was also the prospect of chemical warfare that the Iraqis might use against advancing American troops. Schwarzkopf saw the possibility of heavy U.S. casualties.

Powell found himself in the middle. He wanted to please Bush while still representing the concerns of the field commanders.

Stationed at the front in Saudi Arabia, Schwarzkopf thought Powell was his key ally back in Washington. "Neither Powell nor I wanted a ground war," Schwarzkopf wrote in his memoirs, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*.

At key moments in White House meetings, however, Powell sided with Bush and his hunger for outright victory. "I cannot believe the lift that this crisis and our response to it have given to our country," Powell told Schwarzkopf as American air sorties pummeled Iraq.

In mid-February 1991, Powell bristled when Schwarzkopf acceded to a Marine commander's request for a three-day delay to reposition his troops.

"I hate to wait that long," Powell fumed. "The President wants to get on with this." Powell said Bush was worried about the pending Soviet peace plan.

"President Bush was in a bind," Powell wrote in his memoir *My American Journey*. "After the expenditure of \$60 billion and transporting half a million troops 8,000 miles, Bush wanted to deliver a knock-out punch to the Iraqi invaders in Kuwait. He did not want to win by a TKO that would allow Saddam to withdraw with his army unpunished and intact."

On Feb. 18, Powell relayed a demand to Schwarzkopf from Bush's NSC for an immediate attack date. Powell "spoke in the terse tone that signaled he was under pressure from the hawks," Schwarzkopf wrote. But one field commander still protested that a rushed attack could mean "a whole lot more casualties," a risk that Schwarzkopf considered unacceptable.

"The increasing pressure to launch the ground war early was making me crazy," Schwarzkopf wrote. "I could guess what was going on. ... There had to be a contingent of hawks in Washington who did not want to stop until we'd punished Saddam.

"We'd been bombing Iraq for more than a month, but that wasn't good enough. There were guys who had seen John Wayne in 'The Green Berets,' they'd seen 'Rambo,' they'd seen 'Patton,' and it was very easy for them to pound their desks and say, 'By God, we've got to go in there and kick ass! Got to punish that son of a bitch!'"

"Of course, none of them was going to get shot at. None of them would have to answer to the mothers and fathers of dead soldiers and Marines."

On Feb. 20, Schwarzkopf sought a two-day delay because of bad weather. Powell exploded. "I've got a President and a Secretary of Defense on my back," Powell shouted. "They've got a bad Russian peace proposal they're trying to dodge. ... I don't think you understand the pressure I'm under."

Schwarzkopf yelled back that Powell appeared to have "political reasons" for favoring a timetable that was "militarily unsound." Powell snapped back, "Don't patronize me with talk about human lives."

A Last-Minute Appeal

By the evening of Feb. 21, however, Schwarzkopf thought he and Powell were again on the same page, looking for ways to avert the ground war. Powell had faxed Schwarzkopf a copy of the Russian cease-fire plan in which Gorbachev had proposed a six-week period for Iraqi withdrawal.

Recognizing that six weeks would give Saddam time to salvage his military hardware, Schwarzkopf and Powell devised a counter-proposal. It would give Iraq only a one-week cease-fire, time to flee from Kuwait but without any heavy weapons.

"The National Security Council was about to meet," Schwarzkopf wrote, "and Powell and I hammered out a recommendation. We suggested the United States offer a cease-fire of one week: enough time for Saddam to withdraw his soldiers but not his supplies or the bulk of his equipment. ..."

"As the Iraqis withdrew, we proposed, our forces would pull right into Kuwait behind them. ... At bottom, neither Powell nor I wanted a ground war. We agreed that if the United States could get a rapid withdrawal we would urge our leaders to take it."

But when Powell arrived at the White House late that evening, he found Bush angry about the Soviet peace initiative. Still, according to Woodward's *Shadow*, Powell reiterated that he and Schwarzkopf "would rather see the Iraqis walk out than be driven out."

Powell said the ground war carried serious risks of significant U.S. casualties and “a high probability of a chemical attack.” But Bush was set: “If they crack under force, it is better than withdrawal,” the President said.

In *My American Journey*, Powell expressed sympathy for Bush’s predicament. “The President’s problem was how to say no to Gorbachev without appearing to throw away a chance for peace,” Powell wrote.

“I could hear the President’s growing distress in his voice. ‘I don’t want to take this deal,’ he said. ‘But I don’t want to stiff Gorbachev, not after he’s come this far with us. We’ve got to find a way out’.”

Powell sought Bush’s attention. “I raised a finger,” Powell wrote. “The President turned to me. ‘Got something, Colin?’,” Bush asked.

But Powell did not outline Schwarzkopf’s one-week cease-fire plan. Instead, Powell offered a different idea intended to make the ground offensive inevitable.

“We don’t stiff Gorbachev,” Powell explained. “Let’s put a deadline on Gorby’s proposal. We say, great idea, as long as they’re completely on their way out by, say, noon Saturday,” Feb. 23, less than two days away.

Powell understood that the two-day deadline would not give the Iraqis enough time to act, especially with their command-and-control systems severely damaged by the air war. The plan was a public-relations strategy to guarantee that the White House got its ground war.

“If, as I suspect, they don’t move, then the flogging begins,” Powell told a gratified President Bush.

The next day, at 10:30 a.m., a Friday, Bush announced his ultimatum. There would be a Saturday noon deadline for the Iraqi withdrawal, as Powell had recommended. Schwarzkopf and his field commanders in Saudi Arabia watched Bush on television and immediately grasped its meaning.

“We all knew by then which it would be,” Schwarzkopf wrote. “We were marching toward a Sunday morning attack.”

The Ground War

When the Iraqis predictably missed the deadline, American and allied forces launched the ground offensive at 0400 on Feb. 24, Persian Gulf time.

Though Iraqi forces were soon in full retreat, the allies pursued and slaughtered tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers in the 100-hour war. U.S.

casualties were light, 147 killed in combat and another 236 killed in accidents or from other causes.

“Small losses as military statistics go,” wrote Powell, “but a tragedy for each family.”

On Feb. 28, the day the war ended, Bush celebrated the victory. “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all,” the President exulted, speaking to a group at the White House.

So as not to put a damper on the post-war happy feelings, the U.S. news media decided not to show many of the grisliest photos, such as charred Iraqi soldiers ghoulishly still seated in their burned-out trucks where they had been incinerated while trying to flee. By that point, U.S. journalists knew it wasn’t smart for their careers to be accused of “blaming America first.”

Returning U.S. troops were honored with ticker-tape parades; tanks were placed in the National Mall so children could play on them; an extravagant fireworks display filled the Washington sky. It was a time when Americans clearly had learned to love war again, just as Bush had hoped.

The war, however, had other consequences. The continued stationing of U.S. troops near Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia further radicalized Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, whose al-Qaeda organization began rallying other extremists to the cause of driving out the U.S. infidels. The plan was to attack U.S. embassies, military facilities and finally the American mainland.

In 2001, just months after Bush’s oldest son had taken over as the new President of the United States, al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four American passenger jets and crashed three of them into the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

Americans were shocked and confused by the attacks, wondering “why do they hate us?” President George W. Bush answered the question by telling the nation, “they hate our freedoms,” a response that made no sense but seemed to please his many followers.

Bush quickly prescribed a military reaction to the 9/11 attacks, with an invasion of Afghanistan followed by a quick pivot back to Iraq to tie up some loose ends of the Bush Family’s unfinished business, the final ouster and destruction of Saddam Hussein.

The political/media patterns that had been set in 1991 were repeated a decade later. Most Democrats and the mainstream U.S. news media fell smartly into line behind the President’s war justifications. Almost no one risked having their

patriotism questioned. Many average Americans reveled again in the thrill of watching the U.S. military swing back into action.

Even now, more than a decade after the second Bush wars began after more than 6,000 U.S. soldiers have died and hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis have perished the momentum from those exciting early days of conflict continues to hold at least the Washington insider community in thrall.

Politicians, journalists and military analysts still shy away from any suggestion that they might be defeatists who would “blame America first.”

Across the country, however, polls show that many Americans have lost their enthusiasm as they realize how the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have siphoned off hundreds of billions of dollars, as millions of Americans remain unemployed.

Still, many die-hard Bush supporters and other rank-and-file right-wingers refuse to see how they have been manipulated for decades, used either as fodder for war or as the suckers who pay for it. They don't appreciate that the Vietnam Syndrome might have been the last hope for saving the American Republic.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
