

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 142: Arabian Nightmares: Washington's Persian Gulf Entanglement

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Executive Summary

For any society, the key question of statecraft is what are the nation's vital interests--that is, those for which it will go to war. Although the United States and Iraq are on course for an all-out war, it is far from clear that America's vital interests are at stake in the Persian Gulf crisis. It is time to ask--before it is too late--whether Washington's aims in the gulf, which go far beyond the defense of Saudi Arabia, justify going to war with Iraq.

Animated by understandable revulsion at Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's brutal subjugation of Kuwait, the United States reacted in a frenzy of war hysteria. Across the political spectrum, politicians called for Saddam's head, and the massive deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia quickly followed. Passion is never a good reason to go to war, however. We need only remember how enthusiastically Europe rushed into war in 1914. Four years of carnage in the trenches erased that enthusiasm. America's crusade in the Persian Gulf may not turn out as badly, but now that sober second thoughts are beginning to set in,(1) it is increasingly apparent that America has plunged headlong into a commitment that has a high probability of ending in a setback (diplomatic or military) and little chance of achieving Washington's objectives--especially its long-term ones.

At least 200,000--and ultimately perhaps 300,000--U.S. troops are gathering in Saudi Arabia. Does Saddam pose enough of a threat to U.S. vital interests to merit such a massive military response? Clearly, Iraq cannot jeopardize the most vital of American interests: the physical security and territorial integrity of the United States. Iraq is a powerful country by Third World standards, but in no sense is it a world power. (If Iraq had intercontinental nuclear weapons, the threat to U.S. security might be assessed differently. But it does not, and the United States--or other nations--can prevent Iraq from becoming a nuclear power without risking a major Middle Eastern land war.) Because the United States is not directly threatened, the Bush administration has scrambled to find reasons that will persuade Americans that their sons should be put in harm's way in the Persian Gulf. Those reasons fall into two categories: the need to maintain access to Persian Gulf oil and the need to defend the international system against aggressor nations.

The Administration's Faulty Oil Rationale

President Bush asserts, "Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world will suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves falls into the hands of Saddam Hussein."(2) That statement is the sheerest hyperbole. The United States might suffer some economic dislocation over the medium term, but only if Iraq gained a dominant position in the Persian Gulf and then used petroleum blackmail. Both possibilities, however, are extremely unlikely.

The Limits of Iraqi Power

Aside from the fact that Iraq has powerful rivals in the Middle East who would have every incentive to thwart an Iraqi bid for domination, it would be difficult for Baghdad to gain effective control of world oil supplies. The Bush administration has stressed that if Iraq conquered Saudi Arabia, it would control nearly half of the planet's proven oil reserves. But the concept of proven reserves is not terribly meaningful, especially in the short term. "Proven reserves" is simply a term used to describe oil deposits that it would be economically worthwhile to pump under current conditions. Such reserves are not a static quantity; changes in various factors (the discovery of new deposits, the emergence of new extraction technologies, even changes in oil prices) can cause major changes in the amount of proven reserves. Proven reserves have soared from 700 billion barrels to nearly 1 trillion barrels over the past five years.(3) Moreover, oil reserves include a great deal of oil that no one would contemplate pumping for 40 or 50 years--long after Saddam will have become nothing but a bad memory.

The pertinent question is how much control Iraq could gain over current world oil production. Even a worst-case scenario does not support the Bush administration's panic mongering. Iraq's conquest of Kuwait gave Baghdad control of 7 percent of global production; if Saddam were to take over Saudi Arabia, that figure would increase to only 15.7 percent. That degree of control might modestly boost oil prices--perhaps to \$30 per barrel--but it hardly would give Iraq a stranglehold on the U.S. or other Western economies. And even a modest increase in prices would have to be predicated on Baghdad's willingness to withdraw a substantial quantity of its oil supplies from the market.(4) Since oil is Iraq's only significant source of revenue, such a step has always been unlikely.

By raising oil prices to extortionate levels, Iraq or any other oil producer would hurt itself as much as it would harm consumers. Not only do producing nations have a tangible stake in the West's economic health, the last thing they want to do is to give the industrialized nations incentives to cut back on oil consumption and to develop alternative energy sources. By leading the effort to impose an international embargo on Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil, and by creating pervasive fears of a major war in the Middle East, the Bush administration's policies have already driven oil prices above \$40 per barrel--substantially greater than any probable price rise that would have resulted from Iraq's expansionism alone.

It is true that political considerations can sometimes overwhelm economic logic--as the Arab oil embargo of 1973 demonstrated. A ruthless and unpredictable ruler such as Saddam might use oil as a political weapon to further his diplomatic objectives, even at the cost of great suffering to his own people and the short-term loss of revenues to his regime. That possibility may be why Washington blanched at the prospect that Iraq--already a considerable political and military power in the region--might absorb Saudi Arabia as well as Kuwait and thus gain additional wealth and power. To be sure, over the long term the requirements of supply/demand equilibrium would force even a rogue oil-producing nation such as Iraq to return to an economically rational oil-pricing policy. In the intervening period, however, the U.S. (and world) economy might experience unpleasant dislocations.

The Real Cost of Persian Gulf Oil

Those concerns underscore a larger problem. Because political turbulence in the Persian Gulf is endemic, access to that region's oil is inescapably precarious and will remain so even if Iraq capitulates in the current crisis. Precisely for that reason, gulf oil has never been the bargain it has been advertised to be. The hidden--but real--cost is the need to maintain and, if necessary, use military forces to keep oil flowing from that perennially volatile region. That cost is enormous. Just maintaining the forces earmarked for Persian Gulf missions runs nearly \$40 billion per year in peacetime.(5) The current troop deployments cost an additional \$1.2 billion to \$1.5 billion per month. Thus the actual cost of the 2 million barrels of Persian Gulf oil the United States uses each day is between \$60 and \$80 per barrel higher than the nominal price.(6) But that total is nothing compared with the expense that will ensue if the current crisis explodes into war. Some defense experts estimate that the cost of combat operations could approach \$1 billion a day,(7) bringing the total potential cost of "cheap" Persian Gulf oil to more than \$600 per barrel. And there may be the additional cost of thousands of American soldiers' coming back to the United States in body bags.

A Quixotic "World Order" Crusade

After initially emphasizing the need to protect oil supplies, the Bush administration has increasingly denied that the

Persian Gulf crisis is solely, or even primarily, over oil. Responding to hecklers at an Iowa campaign rally in mid-October, the president stated: "You know, some people never get the word. The fight isn't about oil. The fight is about naked aggression that will not stand." (8) Earlier Bush had contended that Iraq's invasion was "more than a military attack on tiny Kuwait, it was a ruthless assault on the very essence of international order." (9) On another occasion, he held out the vision of "a new world that is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we have known," a world characterized by "international stability" and respect for the sovereignty and freedom of nations. (10) In his view it was clear that a successful international (i.e., U.S.-led) response to Baghdad's aggression was a prerequisite for the creation of his utopian vision of global harmony.

Three so-called world order objectives underlie the U.S. build-up in the gulf: (1) defending Saudi Arabia, (2) forcing Iraq to disgorge Kuwait, and (3) punishing aggression and deterring other ruthless leaders like Saddam. (Implicitly, the last objective requires the overthrow of the Iraqi dictator for the object lesson to be fully effective.) The Bush administration insisted that the initial deployment of an 82nd Airborne Division brigade--supported by U.S. air and naval power-- was to deter an impending Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia and to buy time for other nations threatened by Iraqi aggression to organize effective collective resistance. Yet from the beginning, Washington's purposes were more ambitious, and the U.S. deployments are now far in excess of what is needed to dissuade Baghdad from invading Saudi Arabia.

U.S. leaders have reiterated that the only acceptable resolution is an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and the restoration to power of that country's ruling family. (11) Theoretically, Washington could achieve that result through diplomacy, economic pressure, or military force. The United States has all but foreclosed the option of negotiating with Baghdad, however. President Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III have stated repeatedly that a complete and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal must precede any negotiations (which raises the obvious question of what there would be left to negotiate). The uncompromising U.S. position, especially when combined with the portrayal of Saddam as a modern-day Hitler, leaves virtually no room for diplomatic maneuvering--although Jordan's King Hussein, French president François Mitterrand, and the Soviet government have not abandoned the effort. The Bush administration has not only boxed Saddam into a corner, it has boxed itself into one as well.

Will the Embargo Work?

President Bush has placed great hope in the international economic sanctions imposed on Iraq. It is possible that strategy may work, but history suggests that failure is more likely. (12) Even if the embargo works, it will take a long time, for even the strictest blockades are notoriously slow acting. A good example was the effective Allied quarantine of the Central Powers in World War I, which did not really begin to bite until the war's last year. Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that the longer the current blockade goes on, the less constricting it will become. For some nations the incentives to circumvent the sanctions will rise with the passage of time. Others will simply resign themselves to the new status quo in Kuwait and lose interest in the exercise.

Even if the embargo remains effective, it is still unlikely to achieve the objectives sought by Washington. Indeed, an effective embargo may create problems of its own. Since Saddam can control who will be the earliest victims of shortages, it is a safe bet that the initial suffering will be borne by the people of occupied Kuwait and Westerners being held in Kuwait and Iraq. Members of the Iraqi military and their families will be the last to feel the pain. How tenacious will be support in the United States and other Western countries for continuing the embargo when images of starving women and children begin to appear on television screens? (13) By exempting "humanitarian" food shipments (precisely to avoid the specter of starving Iraqi women and children), the United Nations has created a major loophole in the blockade that compromises its effectiveness as a coercive diplomatic weapon. Finally, if the embargo somehow remains intact despite such obstacles, Saddam may still opt for war--especially if the only alternative is a humiliating surrender and his political (and perhaps physical) demise.

Pressures for a Military Solution

Although the Iraqi dictator may have misjudged world reaction to his seizure of Kuwait, U.S. leaders have fundamentally miscalculated too. Time is our enemy, not our ally, and the longer this affair drags on, the more difficult Washington's position will become. The odds that there will be terrorist actions against Americans or military

confrontation (accidental or otherwise) will rise appreciably. As the Persian Gulf stalemate deepens, cracks in the anti-Iraq coalition will widen, U.S. policy will be at the mercy of events beyond Washington's control (such as the Israeli killing of Palestinians on Jerusalem's Temple Mount), and Baghdad's absorption policy will erase the last traces of Kuwaiti nationhood.

The eroding cohesiveness of the fragile international coalition President Bush has assembled will become especially troublesome as crucial policy differences become increasingly evident. Worrisome fissures are already visible. For example, the commanders of the Egyptian and Syrian units stationed in Saudi Arabia have stated that their forces will not be available for any offensive operations against Iraq.(14) Even the Saudi government has begun to hint at a willingness to compromise with Iraq on Baghdad's claims on Kuwaiti territory, much to the consternation of U.S. officials.(15)

There is also the problem of wear and tear on U.S. military equipment and personnel if the stalemate continues. The desert sands of the Arabian peninsula are likely to take a high toll on the sensitive, high-tech hardware in the American arsenal. American troops may not fare much better in that inhospitable environment. In addition to the environmental difficulties, military leaders have to be concerned about the erosion of morale. The rigidly conservative Saudi culture prevents the usual forms of rest and relaxation that American troops had available in previous conflicts. For that reason, the morale problem may become even worse than it was in Vietnam. There will be no weekends in Saigon or occasional trips to Bangkok to alleviate the tension or boredom. A trip to Riyadh, even in the unlikely event that the Saudi government consented to such a contaminating American presence, would prove to be an acute disappointment to most GIs. Signs of war weariness and declining morale among U.S. troops are already evident.(16)

Another factor that increases the likelihood of an early resort to the military option is Iraq's plundering of Kuwait. If a major goal of the Bush administration is to restore the status quo ante in the Persian Gulf region, it cannot wait much longer to act. The Iraqis are rapidly stripping Kuwait of virtually everything of value. Kuwaiti youths are being conscripted into the Iraqi military, Iraqi officials are governing the new "province," and Iraqi currency is now the only legal medium of exchange. Baghdad is fast erasing Kuwait's claim to nationhood. If the U.S.-led multinational force does not act soon to "save" Kuwait, there may be very little left to save.

Finally, the American people are not likely to support an open-ended stalemate in the Persian Gulf. A pronounced erosion of support for the Bush administration's policies is already apparent and is likely to accelerate. The probable lack of staying power reflects a simple fact: in a prolonged showdown, Saddam and Iraq are likely to display more "resolve" than is the United States because they have much more riding on the outcome. All of the above factors are converging to make a major war in the Persian Gulf highly probable in the near future.

More Subtle Difficulties for U.S. Policy

A protracted standoff would hurt U.S. interests in many ways. A long-term, large-scale U.S. military presence would weaken the position of the "moderate" Arab states as anti-Western sentiments gripped their restless populations. The proSaddam demonstrations that have erupted repeatedly in Jordan underscore the potential for a political explosion. Even if those governments managed to avoid being caught in the backlash and hung on to power, they would very likely call in the markers they have given to the United States.

In fact, that is already occurring. The Bush administration's willingness to forgive Egypt's \$7 billion debt and to greatly increase the transfer of sophisticated military hardware to the Saudis is not a manifestation of U.S. altruism; it is payment for services rendered. And it is likely to be only a down payment. In return for supporting America in the Persian Gulf crisis, the Arab governments may eventually demand that Washington apply severe pressure to Israel on the Palestinian question. One of the unanticipated consequences of the administration's Persian Gulf policy is that world opinion has linked resolution of the Iraq-Kuwait conflict to settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. U.S. leaders may soon face a Hobson's choice: abandon Israel or resign themselves to the further radicalization of Middle Eastern politics. That aspect of the new alliance between Washington and the various Arab regimes is already causing uneasiness in Israel and among its supporters in Congress.(17)

Long-Term Problems

Washington may hope for a deus ex machina in the form of Saddam's timely demise. But his successors--who would almost certainly be young hotheads from the Iraqi army officer corps-- might be even more dangerous and intractable than he is. In any case, Iraq's national interest in attaining regional preeminence will not change regardless of who holds power in Baghdad. Iraq's territorial claims on Kuwait long predate Saddam's regime and, if thwarted, will persist long after his departure.

Any hope of maintaining the status quo in the Middle East would require a long-term, sizable U.S. military presence. Administration leaders are already contemplating that step. Both Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and the chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell, have stated that such a presence will be needed.(18) Baker has gone further, suggesting the formation of a Middle Eastern version of NATO--a proposal that provoked incredulity among experts who are familiar with the endemic political instability in the region.(19) Although Baker subsequently backed off from advocating such a grandiose security arrangement, the administration's intent to put the United States permanently on the front line of conflicts in the volatile Middle East is increasingly evident.

Searching for a Gulf of Tonkin Pretext?

America has put itself in a geopolitical cul-de-sac in the Persian Gulf. Barring a stroke of very good luck, the stark alternatives seem to be a diplomatic retreat or a major shooting war. We must ask whether the administration has a hidden agenda in foreclosing other options. In 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt tried to goad Nazi Germany into war with still-neutral America by allowing U.S. naval vessels to escort British convoys across the Atlantic. President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to provoke North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin. The very scale of the American build-up in Saudi Arabia and the gulf raises the possibility that the United States is trying to maneuver Iraq into the position of firing the first shot. Bush's uncompromising demands for an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal, as well as his more recent dark hints that Iraq should be required to pay reparations for the occupation of Kuwait and that there should be a Nuremberg-style war crimes trial of Saddam and his associates (all of which eliminate any incentive for Baghdad to seek a face-saving exit from the crisis), reinforce that suspicion.

Washington's Flawed Foreign Policy

How did we get into this mess? A combination of super-power hubris and Washington's obstinate insistence on clinging to the outmoded assumptions inherited from the cold war is the culprit. Once again, U.S. leaders are trotting out the panoply of clichés that accompany the so-called Munich analogy: peace is indivisible, aggression must be resisted everywhere, and dictators are insatiably expansionist.(20) That view of the world was always false and contributed mightily to the Vietnam debacle and America's imperial overstretch. Yet those assumptions had at least a shred of plausibility in the cold-war era. After all, it could be argued that a bipolar world had no geopolitical peripheries and every gain for the Soviet Union was a loss for the United States. In such a world, it could be argued that all of America's strategic commitments were interdependent and that U.S. credibility itself was a "vital interest" worth fighting for. Throughout the cold-war era, U.S. foreign policy was driven by two other crucial axioms as well: that America could be secure only when the international environment was totally "safe" and that only the United States had the power to impose order on a recalcitrant world.(21)

Obsolete Cold-War Rationales

Communism has collapsed in East Central Europe; the Soviet Union has all but withdrawn from the cold-war superpower rivalry to attend to pressing internal troubles; and international bipolarity is giving way to multipolarity. But one would never know the cold war was over from listening to U.S. policymakers discuss America's role in the new era. They have merely modified their rhetoric in an attempt to remain credible in a postcold-war setting.

Deprived of the Soviet adversary to justify maintaining a bloated military establishment and a global interventionist foreign policy, Washington's geostrategic mavens have worked overtime to find new reasons to justify old policies. Stopping dictators (remember, Saddam was being demonized as another Hitler well before Kuwait was even a gleam in his eye), supporting and spreading democracy, smashing drug lords, and protecting the world from the fuzzily defined threat of "instability" are now declared "vital" American interests. In reality, those are merely excuses to meddle in other countries' affairs and keep the current structure of the U.S. armed forces intact with only marginal downsizing.(22)

America's Unique Advantages

It is time to move past clichés and see the world as it really is. The first step is to stop using the concept of vital interests promiscuously. Because of its geographic position, its large nuclear arsenal, and its strength in all indicia of great power status, the United States has few truly vital interests to defend in the world. In that respect America stands conspicuously apart from other great powers throughout history. The geographic proximity of threatening neighbors often defined the vital interests of other great powers. The United States, however, is virtually immune to external conventional military threats, which means that America has considerable latitude in defining its vital interests.

The United States cannot be indifferent to events abroad, but it can afford to react deliberately to them, precisely because it is a superpower and because it is insulated from most global trouble spots. When U.S. officials start talking about "vital interests," Americans should be wary. Globalism's proponents always elevate lesser concerns to the "vital" category when they seek to rally public support for dubious overseas adventures. Another danger related to using extravagant rhetoric to justify interventionist initiatives is that policymakers may come to believe their own propaganda.

Like their cold-war-era predecessors, America's post-cold-war decisionmakers seem incapable of distinguishing vital from peripheral interests. They rely on simplistic historical analogies to justify flawed policies. Even if Saddam is another Hitler, Iraq is not another Nazi Germany. Hitler was dangerous not merely because he was ruthless but also because he controlled a powerful nation of nearly 70 million people with a world-class economy and military. Under his dominance, Germany was capable of disrupting the global balance of power and ultimately, perhaps, threatening the United States. Iraq has no such capability.

Global Entanglements or Strategic Independence?

Because of their habitual confusion of peripheral with vital interests, America's warhawks do not realize that evolving geopolitical trends mean that the United States can follow a policy of strategic independence rather than rush in everywhere to defend world order.

Western Europe and Japan are far more dependent on Middle Eastern oil than is the United States, and the Europeans have more significant geopolitical stakes. While Saddam poses no threat to American security, other nations (e.g., Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt) are directly threatened by his bid for regional predominance. Those regional powers also have more than sufficient military capabilities collectively to contain Iraqi expansionism. Just the nations bordering Iraq have military forces that substantially outnumber those of Iraq. They have 1.8 million troops to Baghdad's 1 million, 9,900 battle tanks to 5,500, and nearly 1,300 combat aircraft to 513.(23)

President Bush insists that Saddam threatens the world and that our allies are behind us. The facts suggest otherwise. Despite much propaganda about the "international" response to Iraqi aggression, the multinational force is an overwhelmingly American enterprise. As it did repeatedly during the cold war, Washington is pursuing a largely U.S. military initiative behind a multilateral facade.(24) Even the U.S. effort to get its principal allies to share the financial burden of the "multinational" military effort against Iraq has elicited a mixed response. Although Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich gulf sheikdoms have agreed to provide significant sums, Japan and the members of the European Community have groused and made grudging, minimal contributions. (That U.S. troops should be latter-day Hessians in the service of Europe and Japan is itself a highly dubious proposition.)

Given their reluctance to share the financial burden, it is not surprising that Washington's allies have been even less cooperative on the more crucial matter of risk sharing.(25) Some West European nations have sent a few ships and aircraft to the gulf, and Britain and France have sent small contingents of ground troops to Saudi Arabia, but the massive U.S. build-up utterly dwarfs those deployments. Washington has sent more than 200,000 troops; the largest European contingent (France's) is barely 13,000, including a mere 5,000 ground troops(26)-- a token effort. Japan and Germany have conveniently hidden behind constitutional provisions that supposedly prevent them from making any military effort in the region, despite the contentions of some constitutional experts in both nations that the alleged restraints are less than clear. Even the Arab nations that have the most to lose if Saddam prevails (e.g., Egypt and Syria) have sent only modest numbers of combat forces to Saudi Arabia.

Already there is an undercurrent of anger in the United States about "burden sharing" inequalities and allied free-riding. Those complaints are somewhat incongruous when uttered by the same people who urged the United States to plunge into the gulf militarily. Other governments are not stupid. If they know Washington is going to assume the costs and dangers of defending their interests, they have every incentive to sit back, relax, and let it do so.

The United States need not tamely accept such an unpalatable situation. As history has shown repeatedly, the balance of power usually works. Threatened states typically form coalitions to check an aggressor--unless someone else graciously offers to assume the costs and risks of protecting their security for them.(27) Washington should reverse its misguided massive military build-up while there is still time to choose a more prudent course. It should halt the deployment of troops to Saudi Arabia and tell the European, Japanese, and Middle Eastern governments the following: "Defending Saudi Arabia, defeating Saddam Hussein, and driving Iraq out of Kuwait are your problems--not ours. We will honor international sanctions against Iraq, and the withdrawal of our forces will be gradual enough to give you time to formulate a substitute strategy. But we are not going to fight a war in the Middle East for you. If you don't value your interests enough to protect them, instead of merely providing token support for a U.S. military expedition, the consequences will be far worse for you than for us. The Persian Gulf is a peripheral, not a vital, U.S. interest."

An Impending Tragedy

Saddam Hussein is a nasty piece of work. But there are many evil leaders and evil political systems in the world. Indeed, we now find some of them on our side. Syrian president Hafez el Assad is not going to win an award from Amnesty International for respecting individual liberties, and feudal, fundamentalist Saudi Arabia is not a Middle Eastern version of Jeffersonian democracy. Washington has been understandably reticent about the sins of its newfound allies. It has even failed to mention Syria's continuing occupation of Lebanon, which would seem to meet President Bush's definition of "naked aggression."

War and aggression are distasteful, but they are also long-standing facts of international life. As the prevalence of civil war, insurrection, and armed rebellion around the world reminds us, strife and conflict are an inescapable component of both domestic and international political systems. The world is, as it has always been, an unstable place.

No doubt it would be nice to remake the world by eradicating aggression and injustice. But taking on that mission is a blueprint for endless interventionist crusades and perpetual war. Journalist Tom Bethell's indictment of such "incurable activism" is particularly appropriate. "The perennial U.S. search for 'stability' abroad resembles nothing so much as an out-of-control 18-wheeler roaring down the highway, slamming into motorists and careening off first one guard rail and then the other."(28)

Instead of dismissing the lessons of Vietnam, Americans must remember them. Superpowers are not omnipotent. The United States lacks the material, psychological, and spiritual resources to reshape, or impose order on, a fractious and unruly world. Moreover, the Middle East is probably the least congenial venue for the practice of America's version of world order politics. Nations in that region move from alliance to enmity and back again faster than the sands shift in the Saudi desert. Arab grievances over Western colonialism are an open wound, and Islamic fundamentalism is superimposed upon Arab nationalism, creating an explosive political mixture. A longterm U.S. presence in the Middle East will simply fan the flames of Pan Arabism and weaken the American and Western position. It will make the United States a lightning rod for all the rage and frustration of that troubled region.(29)

Washington--by a hasty commitment in pursuit of questionable objectives--has put itself in a bad spot. Now it faces the choice between a difficult withdrawal or a war that could cost thousands of American lives. It would have been far better to have avoided such a foolhardy overcommitment in the first place. The Bush administration and its warhawk supporters are in danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. They now insist that U.S. credibility and prestige are at stake and that we cannot accept a "humiliating" retreat. But U.S. prestige and credibility were not involved until the administration foolishly volunteered to make the United States the military point man in the Persian Gulf.

Even if Washington's ambitious goals can be attained--and it is doubtful that they can be--the cost is likely to be high, in terms of both money and lives. The Middle Eastern impasse in which we now find ourselves is not, however, the fault of a single administration. It is the responsibility of an entire foreign policy establishment and national leadership

that for decades have refused to come to grips with the evolving realities of world politics and redefine America's foreign policy and vital interests accordingly.

Finding an Exit

It is not too late to avoid war in the Persian Gulf, but an immediate and fundamental change in U.S. strategy is imperative. As a first step, President Bush and his advisers should tone down the shrill rhetoric about Saddam's being another Hitler, an emotional and historically unfounded exaggeration that converts a limited regional quarrel over mundane issues of territory and power into a Manichean struggle between good and evil. Such rhetoric makes a political settlement almost impossible, for moral societies cannot legitimately compromise with a Hitlerian evil.(30)

Administration leaders must also abandon their rigid insistence on an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. Such demands are the functional equivalent of an unconditional surrender doctrine, and they increase the likelihood that Saddam and his associates will ultimately choose to fight rather than be humiliated. Suggestions that Iraqi leaders should be placed on trial before a war crimes tribunal further enhance the prospect of tenacious resistance. Washington's demands also greatly complicate the efforts being made by President Mitterrand, the Soviet government, King Hussein, and the Arab League to find a political solution to the crisis.

Disagreeable as it may be to the Bush administration and its allies in the foreign policy community, a political settlement will probably have to be a compromise. It is easy to reflexively dismiss all such proposals as, in Secretary Baker's words, "the siren song of appeasement," but those who do so must consider the probable consequences. Embracing a strategy based on a stiff-necked moralism reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson at his worst may appeal to those who long for an internationalist utopia, but the outcome is likely to be a war that will cost thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of lives. If the Bush administration cannot bring itself to facilitate a peaceful solution to the crisis, it should at least not make itself an obstacle to such a solution.

Most important, Washington should begin to withdraw its forces from the region as soon as possible. That will unquestionably be a delicate operation that will have to be carried out in a gradual, orderly manner. Because the United States pressured the moderate Arab governments into confronting Iraq and supporting a U.S. military presence, a precipitous U.S. disengagement might create understandable feelings of betrayal and could poison U.S. relations with those countries for years. The difficulty of extricating the United States from the Persian Gulf crisis without creating even more turmoil in the region, and perhaps triggering a war between Iraq and its adversarial neighbors, underscores the wisdom of not making such ill-advised commitments in the first place. History has shown that finding the entrance to Third World military quagmires is invariably easier than finding the exit.

The best course of action now would be to adopt a time-table for the withdrawal of U.S. forces over the next 6 to 12 months, combined with a concerted effort to have Egypt, Syria, and other members of the Arab League replace at least a portion of those units if the Saudis desire such protection.(31) Washington should pledge to honor the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq, although U.S. air and naval units should not be involved in enforcing the embargo. If it is really a case of "the world versus Saddam Hussein," as President Bush is so fond of saying, that level of continuing support would provide the rest of the international community with an opportunity to demonstrate that it is serious about containing Iraqi expansionism.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should use this occasion to formulate an entirely new strategy for the post-cold-war era. The decline of the Soviet threat offers the United States an opportunity to shed numerous, obsolete cold-war security burdens and to chart an independent course. Such a strategy, based on a less expansive definition of America's vital security interests, would greatly reduce the costs and risks to the American people. The Persian Gulf crisis offers a sobering lesson on the probable consequences to the United States if it persists in waging dangerous and unprofitable "world order" crusades.

Notes

(1) Public approval of President Bush's handling of the Persian Gulf crisis, as measured in New York Times/CBS News polls, shrank from 74 percent in early August to 57 percent in early October. Michael Oreskes, "Economy and Mideast Standoff Bring a Drop in Bush's Standing," New York Times, October 14, 1990, p. 1. Thirty-two percent even

concluded that the original decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia was a mistake.

(2) Quoted in David Hoffman and Patrick E. Tyler, "Bush Denounces Saddam as Threat to Arabs, West," *Washington Post*, August 15, 1990, p. A31. Democratic party leaders have been equally alarmist on the oil issue. House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin (D-Wis.), for example, stated, "Simply put, if we allow Saddam to control half the world's oil supply, he will control our economy--determining our rate of inflation, our interest rates, our rate of growth." Les Aspin, "Define Our Goals in the Gulf," *Washington Post*, August 10, 1990, p. A15.

(3) Doug Bandow, "The Myth of Iraq's Oil Stranglehold," *New York Times*, September 17, 1990.

(4) For an analysis of the probable effects on oil prices, see David R. Henderson, "Do We Need to Go to War Over Oil?" *Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing*, no. 4, October 24, 1990.

(5) For a discussion of those costs, see Ted Galen Carpenter and Rosemary Fiscarelli, "Defending America in the 1990s: A Budget for Strategic Independence," in *America's Peace Dividend: Income Tax Reductions from the New Strategic Realities*, *Cato Institute White Paper*, August 7, 1990, pp. 25-27.

(6) For other discussions of the current costs of defending the Persian Gulf oil supply, see Alan Tonelson and Andrew K. Hurd, "The Real Cost of Persian Gulf Oil," *New York Times*, September 4, 1990; Earl C. Ravenal, "Designing Defense for a World of Diffuse Power," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, forth coming. An important earlier discussion of those costs is Earl C. Ravenal, "Defending Persian Gulf Oil," *Intervention* (Winter 1985): 12-15.

(7) Rick Atkinson, "Costs of Confrontation: Who Pays? How Much?" *Washington Post*, August 18, 1990, p. A1.

(8) Quoted in James Gerstenzang, "Protests Echo Vietnam War Opposition," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1990, p. A6.

(9) Text of President Bush's address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, August 20, 1990, *Washington Post*, August 21, 1990, p. A16.

(10) Quoted in Tom Bethell, "A New World Struggling to Be Born," *American Spectator*, November 1990, pp. 11-13.

(11) Bush himself has stressed those demands on numerous occasions. See text of his speech to the nation on August 8, 1990, *Washington Post*, August 9, 1990, p. A36; text of his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars on August 20, 1990; text of his speech to Congress on August 28, 1990, *Washington Post*, August 29, 1990, p. A18; text of his speech to a joint session of Congress on September 11, 1990, *Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, p. A34.

(12) See Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1985), an exhaustive historical study that concludes that sanctions fail more often than they succeed in changing the policies of the target regime. The authors have subsequently expressed skepticism about the likelihood that the Persian Gulf sanctions will be sufficient to dislodge Iraq from Kuwait. See Hobart Rowen, "Why Sanctions May Not Be Enough," *Washington Post*, September 13, 1990, p. A23. Other experts contend that the Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott study actually overstates the effectiveness of sanctions. See Joseph G. Gavin III, "Economic Sanctions: Foreign Policy Levers or Signals?" *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* no. 124, November 7, 1989.

(13) Even some supporters of the administration's gulf policy acknowledge that such problems constitute a fatal flaw in the embargo strategy. See Richard Cohen, "Embargo: Heads They Win, Tails We Lose," *Washington Post*, September 7, 1990, p. A15; Charles Krauthammer, "The Road to War," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1990, p. A23.

(14) Edward Cody, "Arabs Affirm Limited Role," *Washington Post*, October 9, 1990, p. A12.

(15) Carlye Murphy, "Saudi Hints at Options on Kuwait," *Washington Post*, October 23, 1990, p. A1.

(16) Douglas Jehl, "For GIs, It's a Diet of Boredom," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1990, p. A1; James LeMoynes,

"GIs in the Saudi Desert Are Harder Now, But Still Have Lessons to Learn," New York Times, October 18, 1990, p. A9.

(17) E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Israel's Backers Alarmed by U.S. Policy," Washington Post, September 6, 1990, p. A36; Jackson Diehl, "Cold War's End, Gulf Crisis Shake Israel's Security Strategy," Washington Post, September 16, 1990. Senior U.S. officials conceded privately that "a major factor" in the administration's decision to support a UN resolution condemning Israel for the Temple Mount killings of 21 Palestinians was "the need to preserve Arab support for the multinational force lined up against Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf. The officials said a U.S. veto of a resolution condemning Israel could have threatened the coalition." David Hoffman, "U.S. Backs Move to Condemn Israel," Washington Post, October 10, 1990, p. A1.

(18) Patrick E. Tyler and Dan Balz, "Cheney Sees Multi-Year Commitment," Washington Post, August 18, 1990, p. A1; Robert Mauthner and David White, "U.S. Ready to Stay in Gulf 'for Years,'" Financial Times, October 16, 1990, p.9.

(19) David Hoffman, "Baker Proposes New Alliance to Contain Iraqi Aggression," Washington Post, September 5, 1990, p. A1. Even most Persian Gulf hawks acknowledged the impracticality of Baker's scheme. Henry Kissinger stated that the belief that the region could be protected by such a multilateral security agreement was "a fantasy." The experience of the defunct Baghdad pact and SEATO