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**THE STATECRAFT OF SADDAM HUSSEIN  
IN THE PERSIAN GULF WAR, 1990-91**

Core Course 1 Essay

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## THE STATECRAFT OF SADDAM HUSSEIN IN THE PERSIAN GULF WAR, 1990-91

This essay examines the statecraft of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the context of his invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and his subsequent confrontation by the U S -led coalition that culminated in the Desert Storm campaign the following year

**Saddam's Assessment of Iraq's National Interest.** Many observers assert that Saddam blurs the distinction between Iraq's national interest and his own personal interest -- or worse, that he subordinates the former to the latter. This phenomenon is not uncommon in dictators, especially those who come to power through violence, rely heavily on violence to retain power, and thus lack political legitimacy. This is certainly the case with Saddam, who began his career as a street gunman and whose rise to power and personal rule have been exceptionally ruthless and violent, revealing "a paranoid obsession with personal and political survival " (Freedman and Karsh, 19, 29) Saddam is not simply a brutal thug. Other regional leaders credit him with shrewdness and cunning. (Mylroie, 32-33) But his domestic and international conduct reveals a leader who puts his own personal interests above all else He acts as if he **owns** the state, and that it, and its people, are subordinate to his interests and ambitions Saddam may not literally say, "*L'etat, c'est moi*," but in an interview with Diane Sawyer shortly before his invasion of Kuwait, he declared, "I am in every glass of milk an Iraqi child drinks " This remarkable statement suggests that Saddam sees himself as "the father of modern Iraq, the man responsible for Iraq's development, the giver of life, and death, to its people " (Mylroie, 129)

**Saddam's Assessment of Domestic and International Conditions: Threats vs. Opportunities.** There are widely differing interpretations of how Saddam assessed domestic and international conditions leading to his invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (and Iran in 1980). According to Freedman and Karsh, Saddam's conduct of foreign affairs was relatively moderate and essentially defensive, driven by perceived threats to his domestic political, and perhaps physical, survival, and pursued "with the lowest risk and the greatest economy possible." (19) They portray Saddam's 1980 invasion of Iran as a "pre-emptive strike" to force Iran to stop trying to overthrow him, and that any expansive ambitions were "incidental." (20)

Similarly, they portray Saddam's invasion of Kuwait as an (over)reaction to economic problems that threatened his political survival. Heavily in debt and virtually bankrupt because of the war with Iran, other military projects, and declining oil revenues, Iraq faced huge costs to rebuild its ruined infrastructure.

"Yet it was upon this reconstruction that both Saddam's political survival and his long-term ambitions hinged... [A]n economic breakthrough [was] critical, for his domestic vulnerability would grow enormously if the state [was] declared bankrupt." (39-40)

According to Freedman and Karsh, Saddam's response to this "revenue problem" was to try to extort \$10 billion from Kuwait -- which was compounding his problem by greatly exceeding its OPEC oil production quota and driving down the world price of oil -- and when Kuwait's ruler foolishly defied his demands, to solve the revenue problem in a stroke by seizing the immensely rich sheikdom.

Mylroie rejects much of the Freedman and Karsh analysis,<sup>1</sup> arguing that Saddam's assessment of domestic and international conditions and of national/personal interests was based primarily on perceptions of great opportunities and aggressive ambitions

"Since becoming president of Iraq in 1979, Saddam seems to have had a grand but simple design, beginning with gaining control of the Persian Gulf's oil." (126) "[This] is not just a matter of money. It is above all a question of power. . . Saddam would have been among the most powerful individuals on earth." (127-8) "[Arab] governments would have had difficulty resisting calls for some form of unity under Saddam's leadership That unity would have provided the base from which to lead a charge against Israel. That . . . is the old Arab nationalist dream Saddam sought to carry it out " (126)

**Saddam's Assessment of Iraq's Power and the Balance of Power.** In 1990 Saddam, internationally confident but financially bankrupt, believed the regional balance of power had shifted decisively in his favor. Iraq's population had more than doubled (from 8 to 17 million) during 22 years of Baathist rule Iraq was armed to the teeth The Shah, America's ally and surrogate protector of Gulf oil, was gone, and no one had emerged to replace him. Iran was defeated and exhausted; Syria was bogged down in Lebanon; Egypt and Israel seemed distracted by internal problems; and the United States vied with other western powers to gain favor, and contracts, in Baghdad

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<sup>1</sup>The other reading on Saddam in Topic 20 (reading j), was written before Dessert Storm, says relatively little about Saddam as a leader, and, though 53 pages long, contains only a few paragraphs that specifically address Saddam's statecraft in ways germane to this essay Those paragraphs attribute a diverse laundry list of objectives to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait (Miller and Mylroie, p. 189-190) A 1993 article by Mylroie, entitled, "Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait," examines Saddam's statecraft in detail, providing ample ammunition for this essay. Moreover, this interpretation by Mylroie of Saddam's assessment and objectives seems, to this writer, to explain Saddam's actions more persuasively than does the work of Freedland and Karsh.

Assured by the Bush Administration that Washington had no security commitment to Kuwait, Saddam concluded that the way was clear for him to solve his financial problems and assume the mantle of regional superpower by asserting Iraq's historical claim to Kuwait. (Miller and Mylroie, 189-190)

The biggest negative international factor for Saddam seemed to be the collapse of Soviet power and Moscow's withdrawal from superpower competition in the Middle East. This trend, if unchecked, might embolden Israel and the United States. The abrupt fall of the East European communist regimes in late 1989 and the execution of Romanian dictator Ceaucescu, may have affected Saddam. These developments may have further spurred Saddam to act decisively on Kuwait while the regional balance was still favorable. (Freedman and Karsh, 30-31) In view of Washington's ambiguous signals through July 1990, Saddam's calculations may not have been unreasonable (Freedman and Karsh, 50-55)

**Saddam's Plan of Action, Tools of Policy, and Statecraft** When Saddam implemented his plan of action in the first half of 1990, he drew effectively upon a broad array of policy tools and demonstrated a high level of statecraft -- given his incorrect assessment of how the U.S. would respond -- achieving near total tactical and strategic surprise in his seizure of Kuwait.<sup>2</sup>

In early 1990, Saddam began raising tensions with Israel and the West in what now appears to be a calculated plan. In February, Saddam called for the Arabs to

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<sup>2</sup>These factors and their timing (beginning well before July 1990) lend credence to Mylroie's interpretation of Saddam's "grand design."

liberate Jerusalem (a subject on which he had been silent for years) and for U.S. armed forces to leave the Persian Gulf. In March, the British-based journalist Farzad Bazoft was suddenly tried for espionage in Baghdad and promptly hanged. In April, Saddam boasted of Iraq's chemical weapons capability and threatened to use them against Israel. These actions projected psychological power, boosted Saddam's prestige among the Arab masses, and made the Arab states in the Gulf more susceptible to Iraqi pressure. (Mylroie, 129-130)

At the same time, Saddam adroitly used negotiations to neutralize potential enemies. In January 1990, after 18 months of stalemated negotiations with Iran, Saddam publicly offered a peace plan to Teheran. He intervened again personally in April with an exchange of letters with Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani that culminated in a territorial settlement based on the 1975 Algiers Accord<sup>5</sup> -- Iran's central demand -- and the neutralization of the Iran-Iraq frontier for the duration of the Kuwait crisis. Following the international furor over his chemical weapons threat, Saddam sought Saudi and U.S. mediation that resulted in Iraq and Israel exchanging assurances that neither would launch a first strike against the other. Thus, through the Kuwait crisis, the "paranoic" Saddam did not find it necessary to deploy forces westward, facing Israel. (Mylroie, 130-131)

In the run up to the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam used deception and covert action masterfully, achieving tactical and strategic surprise. His demand for \$10 billion

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<sup>5</sup>This was a settlement of the disputed Shat'al Arab waterway that the militarily dominant Shah forced on Iraq in 1975.

from Kuwait "was so unreasonable that Saddam could well have meant it to serve as the pretext for invasion. After all, if Kuwait had paid, more demands for equally fantastic sums would have followed." (Myroie, 129) Nevertheless, by truculently insisting on a series of **economic** demands (the \$10 billion, Kuwaiti withdrawal from and compensation for the Rumaila oilfield, lowering OPEC production quotas, debt forgiveness), Saddam created the impression that it was money he was after, and that his military build up was merely a ploy to back his economic claims. By combining public threats of force with private assurances to Arab leaders such as Jordan's King Hussein that he had no intention to invade, he convinced the Governments of Kuwait and the United States, among many others, up to the last moment, that his deployments on the Kuwaiti frontier were there to threaten, but not attack.

**Outcomes.** Saddam's deception may have succeeded too well. Other Arab states, including Kuwait, convinced that Saddam was engaged in an elaborate negotiating strategy, persuaded Washington to take a low profile, to avoid "provoking" Saddam, and to let the Arabs settle it themselves. Thus, the Bush Administration did not give the strongest and clearest warnings to Iraq. This may have fatally misled Saddam. But it is not certain that even the most unambiguous U.S. warnings would have deterred Saddam in the end.

Saddam's miscalculations **after** seizing Kuwait appear to have been the most costly. Some six months elapsed before Desert Storm began. Saddam failed to take effective measures to thwart the formation of the anti-Iraq coalition and its ponderous military build up. He did not use diplomacy effectively to split the coalition or to

extract himself from impending military defeat. For example, he could have offered limited concessions such as partial withdrawal from Kuwait, or proposed negotiations to stall for time and split the coalition. Moscow tried desperately up to the last minute to avert a coalition assault, but Saddam did not use this card effectively. It is not clear whether these failures reflected Saddam's disbelief that the coalition would actually make war against him; a mistaken belief that he had more time to maneuver; a miscalculation of the actual military balance; or a belief that he could not survive politically if he backed down.

In the final analysis, Saddam was unprepared for battle when it came. He tried an imaginative piece of strategic statecraft during the battle by launching Scud missiles at Israel, evidently hoping to draw Israel into the battle, split the coalition and mobilize Arab support for Iraq. A good idea, but it did not work.

His army was routed and almost annihilated in a matter of days. Iraq suffered massive human and material battle damage, foreign military and political intervention in northern Iraq in connection with the Kurds; long-term international intervention bent on eliminating his weapons of mass destruction; crippling economic sanctions that remain in place four years after the end of hostilities, and diplomatic isolation. Although Saddam managed to retain power and claim "victory" by dint of survival against overwhelming force, by most objective measures his Kuwaiti venture was a costly failure.

**Lessons.** Three "lessons" will be highlighted here from among the many that can be drawn from these events. First, from Saddam's perspective, is the danger of war

by miscalculation. Many wars in this century were begun or disastrously expanded by blunder rather than design. In risking war, it is simply not enough to be "reasonably confident" of success, especially if there is a possibility of being confronted by superior force. While the Bush Administration has been faulted for not giving clear and unambiguous warning to Saddam before he invaded Kuwait, there **were some** warnings amidst the mixed signals. Saddam took a big risk in ignoring them. Saddam was clever, but insufficiently cautious.

Second, as noted above, the Bush Administration failed to warn Saddam adequately before he invaded Kuwait of the grave consequences of that action.<sup>4</sup> This calls attention to the importance of **unambiguous** communication of intent in time of crisis to deter action which could lead to armed conflict. The Kennedy Administration's warnings to Khrushchev during the Cuban Missiles Crisis are an example of clear communication of intent during a crisis.

Third, the fact that Saddam remains in power and continues to threaten U.S. interests in the Gulf underlines the importance of carefully formulating and implementing **political** objectives in wartime. The lack of a war-termination strategy and the failure to impose political conditions on Saddam commensurate with the decisive outcome of Desert Storm deprived the military victory of its political fruits. Perhaps the Administration believed that Saddam could not survive politically after the

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<sup>4</sup>The fault may actually have been failure to formulate a clear policy in the face of Saddam's military build up. For several days **after** the invasion, President Bush and other senior officials were saying that Kuwait was **not** a vital U.S. interest. Some analysts claim that British Prime Minister Thatcher's insistent lobbying persuaded President Bush that the situation was urgent, leading him to adopt the position that Iraq's aggression "will not stand."

enormity of his military defeat, and that they should not take responsibility for a successor regime. If so, this underestimated the staying power of a ruthless dictator.

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