Threat-Based Strategies
of Conflict Management:
Why Did They Fail in the Gulf?

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EARLY ON THE morning of August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops poured across the border into Kuwait. Within a few hours, Kuwait’s limited resistance had collapsed, the emir had fled, and Iraq’s forces occupied and controlled all of Kuwait. The invasion and occupation of Kuwait was preceded by a confused and half-hearted attempt by the United States to deter Iraq from using force against Kuwait and to reassure Iraq of its benign intentions; it is not surprising that both deterrence and reassurance failed.1 The intriguing question is whether, had the United States tried seriously to deter Iraq before it invaded Kuwait, deterrence would have succeeded in preventing the attack.

After Iraq’s invasion, occupation, and annexation of Kuwait, the United States assembled a broad international coalition that signaled its determination to go to war in order to compel Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait, if Iraq failed to remove its forces voluntarily. The coalition had unquestioned military supremacy and deployed sufficient military forces in Saudi Arabia to signal its resolve. Yet the deadline set for Iraq’s withdrawal passed, and on January 16, 1991, the international coalition led by the United States began a large-scale military campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The second puzzle is why compellence failed.2 The two failures are interconnected.

Three different explanations can be advanced for the twin failures. All rest on counterfactual reasoning. First and most obvious is the failure of the United States to mount an effective strategy of deterrence in the period preceding the invasion of Kuwait. This explanation assumes that had deterrence been implemented properly, Saddam Hussein might have been deterred. A second related argument suggests that Saddam Hussein systematically miscalculated the capabilities and resolve of the United States, even after large numbers of American forces were deployed in Saudi Arabia. The fault here lies not so much with the strategy as with Saddam’s tactical miscalculations. If he had correctly calculated the power balance, the war might have been avoided.
The third explanation argues that Saddam Hussein could not have been deterred. He was unstoppable because of the strategic judgment he had made, late in 1989, that the United States was determined to undermine his regime through economic sabotage and covert action. Once he had developed a strong image of an enemy bent on his destruction, he was almost immune to any evidence that challenged that image. Under these conditions, neither deterrence, nor reassurance before the invasion, nor competence after the invasion stood much of a chance. This explanation challenges the argument that deterrence might have succeeded had it been practiced more effectively. It is not wholly inconsistent, however, with the proposition that deterrence and competence failed because Saddam misperceived relative capabilities. The two are interconnected.

To establish the relative weight of these two explanations, we compare American and Iraqi estimates of military and political capabilities made before the war began. On most dimensions, there are surprising similarities between the two sets of estimates. This similarity in estimates across most dimensions of political and military capability suggests that Saddam’s estimates of the relative military and political balance were not prima facie unreasonable. The critical difference was the broad strategic judgment President Hussein made early in the process.

One important caveat is in order. This argument rests not only on a counterfactual argument but also on the limited evidence we have of Saddam Hussein’s calculations. With the exception of Tariq Aziz, who was foreign minister at the time, and a senior Iraqi diplomat with access to the Iraqi president, no one of the inner circle around Saddam has spoken publicly about the thinking that governed the decisions of President Hussein and the Revolutionary Command Council. Tariq Aziz gave several interviews after the war that are revealing of Saddam’s thinking. However, they may well be tainted both by his fear of the consequences of public statements and by the impact of the war, which may have colored his reconstruction of earlier decisions. The speeches Saddam gave from October 1989 until January 1991 therefore provide the principal source of evidence for the reconstruction of his images. Even though his image of the enemy is remarkably consistent throughout the period, any conclusions must remain tentative until more varied and better quality evidence is available.

The Failure to Deter

Evidence that a confrontation was brewing in the Gulf first became available at the end of May 1990. During an Arab summit meeting convened in Baghdad to condemn the increased flow of Soviet immigrants to Israel, Saddam Hussein privately denounced the Arabs of the Gulf who, he claimed, were keeping the price of oil artificially low, thereby engaging in economic sabotage of Iraq (1990b). On July 10, the oil ministers of Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates met in Jidda and agreed to limit production in order to get the price back up to $18 a barrel. In announcing the agreement the next day, however, Kuwait added the stipulation that it would review and possibly reverse its commitment in the fall. At an OPEC meeting a few days later, Kuwait repeated its intention to observe the limitation on production only until the autumn.

As the impasse deepened, Iraq escalated its demands. On July 16, at Saddam’s request, Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz sent a memorandum to Kuwait demanding $2.4 billion in compensation for oil that he claimed Kuwait had pumped from the disputed Rumaila oil field; $12 billion in compensation for the depressed oil prices brought about by Kuwait’s overproduction; forgiveness of Iraq’s war debt of $10 billion; and a lease on the strategic island of Bubiyan that controlled access to Iraq’s only port, Umm Qasr. In a speech on Iraq’s Revolution Day on July 17, Saddam again attacked those who were stabbing Iraq in the back with “a poison dagger” by overproducing oil as part of a plan “inspired by America to undermine Arab interests and security.” Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates were part of a “Zionist plot aided by imperialists against the Arab nation,” and Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad, the foreign minister of Kuwait, was “an American agent.” Iraq, he said, had become the Arabs’ one reliable defender: because of Iraq’s advanced weaponry, the imperialists no longer dared to attack but were resorting to economic warfare through their agents, the Gulf rulers (1990c).

As Iraq began to mass troops along its border with Kuwait, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and King Hussein of Jordan attempted to mediate a solution. President Mubarak arranged a meeting on July 31 in Jidda between Izzat Ibrahim, the vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council in Iraq, and Crown Prince Saad al-Sabah of Kuwait, with a second session scheduled for Baghdad. The meeting ended the next day with no progress. Early on the morning of August 2, two Iraqi armored divisions spearheaded the attack against Kuwait.

While the crisis was intensifying, Washington’s signals to Iraq were ambiguous and contradictory. On July 19, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney affirmed that an American commitment made during the Iran-Iraq War to come to Kuwait’s defense was still valid: “Those commitments haven’t changed” (Sciolino with Gordon 1990). Later that day, Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams qualified the statement by noting that the secretary had been quoted by the press “with some degree of liberty” (Sciolino with Gordon 1990).
On July 21, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported the first Iraqi troop movements near the border with Kuwait. Two days later, the United States sent two KC-135 aerial tankers and a C-141 cargo transport to the Gulf for joint exercises with the United Arab Emirates and moved six warships in the area closer to Kuwait and the Emirates in order, in the words of a Pentagon official, to “lay down a marker for Saddam Hussein” (Gordon 1990a). However, when Navy Secretary H. Laurence Garnett told the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower, “Our ships in the Persian Gulf were put on alert status,” an aide later told the press that the secretary had misspoken (ibid.).

On July 24, as Saddam escalated his threats against the Gulf states, Pentagon spokesperson Pete Williams said, “We remain strongly committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defense of our friends in the Gulf with whom we have deep and long-standing ties.” When asked whether the United States would provide help if Kuwait were attacked, he declined to answer (ibid.). That same day, the State Department asked Ambassador April Glaspie in Baghdad to stress the friendship of the United States toward Iraq but also to warn that the United States had made a commitment “to ensure the free flow of oil from the Gulf and to support the sovereignty and integrity of the Gulf states. We will continue to defend our vital interests in the Gulf. We are strongly committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defense of our friends in the Gulf” (Glb 1991). This was the strongest and least ambiguous warning sent by the United States in the weeks preceding the invasion. It would be followed by less clear and less forceful statements.

The senior State Department spokesperson added to the confusion. On July 24, the same day that the CIA reported the movement of two Iraqi divisions to the frontier, she was asked whether the United States had any commitment to defend Kuwait. Margaret Tutwiler replied, “We do not have any defense treaties with Kuwait, and there are no special defense or security commitments to Kuwait.” Asked explicitly whether the United States would come to the assistance of Kuwait if it were attacked, she added, “We also remain strongly committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defense of our friends in the Gulf with whom we have deep and long-standing ties” (Gordon 1990a).

On July 25, Saddam Hussein asked to meet with Ambassador Glaspie within the hour. The request was extraordinary. In her two years as ambassador, she had never met with President Hussein privately. Glaspie had been seeking a meeting with high-level Iraqi officials since July 17, when she met with the deputy foreign minister, Nizar Hamdoon, and asked for clarification of Iraq’s intent following its explicit threats against Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Angered by the announcement on July 24 that the United States was conducting joint military exercises with the United Arab Emirates, Saddam suddenly requested the meeting.

President Hussein complained that U.S. maneuvers with the United Arab Emirates were encouraging the Emirates and Kuwait to disregard Iraq’s rights (Iraqi transcript 1990). In response, Ambassador Glaspie assured the president: “I know you need funds. But we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American Embassy in Kuwait during the late ‘sixties. The instructions we had during this period were that we should express no opinion on this issue and that the issue is not associated with America. James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasize this instruction” (ibid.).

Glaspie then asked, in light of Iraq’s troop movements to the border with Kuwait yet “in a spirit of friendship,” “What are your intentions?” Saddam Hussein informed Ambassador Glaspie that he had just told President Mubarak “to assure the Kuwaitis . . . that we are not going to do anything until we meet with them. When we meet and we see that there is hope, then nothing will happen. But if we are unable to find a solution, then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death, even though wisdom is above everything else” (ibid.).

Despite the conditional quality of Saddam’s statement, the ambassador herself was reassured of Iraq’s intentions. “His emphasis that he wants peaceful settlement is surely sincere,” she concluded. “Iraqis are sick of war.” In a cable to Washington, Glaspie recommended that “we ease off on public criticism of Iraq until we see how the negotiations develop” (Hoffman and Dewar 1991). Consistent with Glaspie’s advice, on July 28 President Bush cabled Saddam, “We believe that differences are best resolved by peaceful means and not by threats involving military force or conflict. My administration continues to desire better relations with Iraq” (ibid.). No reference to the deployment of 100,000 Iraqi troops on Kuwait’s border was made in the president’s message to Saddam Hussein.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ambassador Glaspie claimed that she delivered strong oral warnings to President Hussein against the use of force. “I told him orally we would defend our vital interests, we would support our friends in the Gulf, we would defend their sovereignty and integrity,” the ambassador insisted. Although she acknowledged that she had indeed told Iraq’s president that the United States had no opinion on its conflict with Kuwait, she claimed that she preceded that comment with the repeated warning that “we would insist on settlements being made in a nonviolent manner, not by threats, not by intimidation, and certainly not by aggression” (Friedman 1991).
No such warnings appear in either the Iraqi transcript or Ambassador Glaspie's summary of the meeting cabled to the State Department. It is possible that in conformity with standard practice, her cabled summary concentrates on what Saddam Hussein said, rather than on any warnings she was instructed to deliver. Tariq Aziz, then foreign minister of Iraq, who was present at Glaspie's meeting with Saddam, affirmed, however, that no strong warnings against military action were delivered:

Having been a Foreign Minister, I understand the work of an ambassador and I believe Miss Glaspie's behavior was correct. She was summoned suddenly. The President wanted to tell her that the situation was worsening and that our government would not waive its options. . . . We knew she was acting on available instructions. She spoke in vague diplomatic language and we knew the position she was in. Her behavior was a classic diplomatic response and we were not influenced by it. (Viorst 1991b, 66–67, emphasis added)

In the forty-eight hours preceding the invasion, as intelligence agents in Washington received evidence of heightened Iraqi military preparations, the United States made no additional attempt at deterrence.44 Not until August 1, when the CIA warned that Iraq would attack within twenty-four hours, did Assistant Secretary of State John Kelly summon Iraq's ambassador in Washington to warn that the situation was "extremely serious."15 The previous day, Iraq and Kuwait had met in Jidda for the abortive negotiating session. Tariq Aziz insists that Saddam decided to invade on August 1, after the collapse of the negotiations (ibid., 67). Saddam could not have received Kelly's warning before he made his decision. Early on the morning of August 2, Iraqi tanks rolled across the border into Kuwait.

Ambassador Glaspie argued in her testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that deterrence failed because President Hussein "was stupid—he did not believe our clear and repeated warnings that we would support our vital interests. Like every other government, we did not understand that he would be impervious to logic and diplomacy" (Friedman 1991). But her allegation does not bear the weight of the evidence. The diplomacy of deterrence in the critical two weeks preceding the invasion was inconsistent, incoherent, and unfocused. Given the confusing signals from Washington, had Saddam been deterterable, it is unlikely that he would have been stopped.

That deterrence did not receive a fair test is clearly established by the evidence. Insofar as it was not seriously attempted, two intriguing questions remain. If deterrence had been practiced seriously and well, could the invasion of Kuwait have been prevented? Second, could the United States have mounted an effective strategy of deterrence? The answer to the first question hinges on the assessment of Saddam's motives and intentions. Was Saddam Hussein an opportunity-driven aggressor or a vulnerable leader motivated by need? This judgment is critical because it determines the appropriate mix of deterrence and reassurance.

The Motives and Intentions of Saddam Hussein

The motives and intentions of Saddam Hussein were then and are now the subject of intense controversy. Iraq had unquestioned military capability to engage in expansionism in the Gulf; it was by far the preeminent military power in the region.16 Iran was recovering from its eight-year war with Iraq, and no coalition of Arab states in the Gulf could conceivably match the battle-tested and battle-hardened Iraqi army. During its war with Iran, Baghdad had also received substantial amounts of financial aid from the Gulf states and sophisticated military technology and equipment from the Soviet Union and the Western world, who all felt threatened, albeit in different ways, by the revolution wrought by the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Especially for the Sunni governments in the Gulf, Iraq was the first line of defense against the export of the Shia revolution from Iran. The Gulf states, as well as Egypt, were willing to pay in loans and military assistance to reinforce Iraq's military capability against Iran. Overwhelming local military superiority does not, however, necessarily lead to crisis and war unless the motive and the intention to use force are also present.

Saddam's repeated threats against the Gulf states from mid-May 1990 are consistent with the argument that he saw an opportunity to assert Iraq's longstanding claim to Kuwait and to control oil pricing. The strongest version of the proposition that Saddam Hussein was an opportunity-driven aggressor suggests that the invasion of Kuwait was not primarily provoked by the specific issues in dispute between the two countries. Rather, Saddam was determined to assert Iraq's historic claim to Kuwait, to establish control over the oil-producing Gulf, and to secure for Iraq a commanding voice in the determination of oil pricing and production for the rest of the decade. Although intentions cannot be inferred directly from capabilities, Iraq's heavy investment in the development of nuclear capabilities is also used to substantiate charges of Iraq's aggressive intent.17 The logic of these arguments suggests that the invasion could have been avoided only if the United States had deterred forcefully or if Kuwait had appeased Iraq.

The United States did not deter effectively, and Kuwait did not concede. On the contrary, the al-Sabah family was unwilling to accommodate Iraq and make major concessions on the issues in dispute.
Immediately after the OPEC meeting in July, Kuwait’s statement that it would reconsider its willingness to observe OPEC quotas in the autumn signaled major buyers to wait for October, when the price would drop again; in the opinion of Iraqi officials, “Kuwait killed the agreement” (Viorst 1991b, 66). Tariq Aziz, then the foreign minister of Iraq, observed that at the meeting in Jidda on August 31, “the Kuwaitis were very strange, very pompous, very obstinate” (ibid.). Mohammed Al-Mashat, Iraq’s ambassador to the United States, subsequently maintained that “[the Kuwaitis] were arrogant. They were conducting themselves like small-time grocery store owners. The gap was irreconcilable, so the meeting collapsed” (Miller and Myloge 1990, 20).18

The Iraqi reconstruction of Kuwaiti behavior at the meeting is largely consistent with evidence from American and Kuwaiti officials. Sheikh Salim al-Sabah, the minister of interior in Kuwait before the war, observed: “By the time the crisis with Iraq began last year, we knew we could rely on the Americans. There was an exchange of talks on the ambassadorial level just before the invasion. No explicit commitments were ever made, but it was like a marriage. Sometimes you don’t say to your wife ‘I love you’ but you know the relationship will lead to certain things” (Viorst 1991a, 72).19 The United States indeed did not encourage the al-Sabah family to be forthcoming in the negotiations. In late June, Ambassador Nathan Howard called Washington for instructions. He proposed that Kuwait be encouraged to make concessions but was advised by the State Department to reiterate the American commitment to defend Kuwait.20 If Saddam was “another Hitler,” driven largely by the opportunity he saw to control oil pricing, then the absence of effective deterrence or meaningful concessions made the invasion of Kuwait very likely.

A somewhat different construction of the motives and intentions of Saddam Husseins, one that emphasizes need, is also plausible. For eight years, Iraq had been the frontline participant in a bitter and protracted war against Iran. Although Iraq had initiated the war, it did so because of the threat posed by the revolutionary Shiite government of Ayatollah Khomeini to Sunni governments throughout the Gulf. The war had cost Iraq over $500 billion, and throughout most of the conflict Iraq had spent about 40 percent of its gross domestic product on military procurement.

After the war ended, Iraq owed Western governments some $40 billion and Arab governments the equivalent.21 Before the war with Iran, Iraq had had a net surplus of $30 billion, but by early summer 1990 inflation raged in Iraq and the dinar had fallen to one-twelfth its official value. The Iraqi economy was severely strained by the cost of financing its large debt and by the sharply lower price of oil, its principal export and source of hard currency. Between January and June 1990, the average price of a barrel of oil dropped from $20.50 to $13.00. A one-dollar drop in the price of oil cost Iraq $1 billion annually in lost revenue. The loss of revenue was a severe strain on Iraq’s economy and its capacity to finance imports of essential foodstuffs.

After the invasion, Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz drew a direct link between Iraq’s deteriorating economy and the invasion of Kuwait:

The economic question was a major factor in triggering the current situation. In addition to the forty billion dollars in Arab debts, we owe at least as much to the West. This year’s state budget required seven billion dollars for debt service, which was a huge amount, leaving us with only enough for basic services for our country. Our budget is based on a price of eighteen dollars a barrel for oil, but since the Kuwaitis began flooding the world with oil, the price has gone down by a third.

When we met again—in Jidda, at the end of the July—Kuwait said it was not interested in any change. We were now desperate, and could not pay our bills for food imports. It was a starvation war. When do you use your military power to preserve yourself? (Viorst 1990, 90)

The foreign minister is explicit that Iraq had no long-term intention to invade and that the deployment of troops along the border was designed to compel concessions from Kuwait at the bargaining table:

President Saddam had no intention of invading—he didn’t even think of it before the end of June. It was never discussed at any level of government. . . . The issue of the Rumaila oil field and our border demands became a part of our talks with the Kuwaitis only in late June, by which time we had concluded that they had joined some sort of conspiracy to destroy our regime. Finally, in mid-July, we decided to dispatch troops to the Kuwaiti border, hoping it would make the Kuwaitis change their minds. (Viorst 1990, 66)

Aziz contends that on July 17, President Hussein warned Kuwait that he would use force if Kuwait violated its production quotas. One week later, when President Mubarak of Egypt visited Baghdad, Saddam pledged to take no military action as long as negotiations were ongoing but warned Mubarak: “Don’t comfort the Kuwaitis.” Aziz alleges that Mubarak informed Kuwait that there would be no invasion, thereby encouraging their inflexibility during the negotiating session (ibid.).22 Saddam decided to invade only at the last minute, Aziz maintains, after the negotiations in Jidda broke down (ibid., 67). The foreign minister insists that a frustrated and desperate Iraq first tried compellence and resorted to force only when coercive diplomacy failed and it saw no other way to meet its fundamental needs.

The two interpretations of Saddam Hussein’s motivations and intentions are not wholly incompatible. It is likely that Saddam, angered by
Kuwait's unwillingness to guarantee higher oil prices and frustrated by the reluctance of the al-Sabah family to compensate Iraq for its huge expenditures incurred during the war with Iran, was initially driven by the acute economic weakness of Iraq and its inability to finance basic imports. In this context, he saw an opportunity to reassert Iraq's longstanding claim to Kuwait. Under these conditions, a vigorous attempt at deterrence combined with some attempt to address the remaining of Iraq's debt might have prevented the invasion.

Was an Effective Strategy of Deterrence Possible?

Could the invasion of Kuwait, as distinct from a limited attack against the disputed oil field and strategic islands, have been deterred? To answer this question, we must first determine whether the United States could have mounted an effective strategy of deterrence. The answer must of necessity be the product of limited evidence and counterfactual reasoning.

The limited evidence that is available suggests that it would have been very difficult for the United States to deter forcefully in the period preceding the invasion. A few days before the attack, members of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department were uncertain of and divided about the likely American response to an Iraqi attack. As late as the afternoon of August 1, the general expectation in Washington was that Saddam was engaging in coercive diplomacy and that, at most, he would occupy the disputed oil fields and the strategic islands. At a meeting of the interagency Deputies Committee at the State Department to consider the Iraqi military buildup, CIA Deputy Director Richard Kerr estimated that Iraqi troops would cross Kuwait's border, but he would not predict whether Iraq's forces would go farther than the disputed oil field and Bubiyan island (Oberdorfer 1991, 40). Senior American officials were uncertain until the invasion began about Iraq's intentions. "We were reluctant to draw a line in the sand. I can't see the American public supporting the deployment of troops over a dispute over 20 miles of territory and it is not clear that local countries would have supported that kind of commitment. There would have been a lot of fluttering if there had been a partial invasion. The crucial factor in determining the American response was not the reality but the extent of the invasion" (Sciolino with Gordon 1990).

The logic of the United States is difficult to understand: a deterrent commitment could not be defined before it was massively violated. The United States could not "draw a line in the sand" because unless the line was crossed in a large-scale invasion, officials doubted Arab as well as domestic support for military action against a limited incursion. American officials felt constrained by both Arab and domestic opinion. These political judgments made an effective strategy of deterrence virtually impossible.

Even if an effective strategy of deterrence had been politically possible, it is questionable whether it would have succeeded. Saddam's motives and intentions developed within the larger context of his strategic image of the United States as an unrelenting enemy determined to destroy his regime through economic warfare and covert action. This image made both deterrence and reassurance immeasurably more difficult, if not impossible.

Saddam's Image of the United States as Enemy

As early as October 6, 1989, when he met with Secretary of State Baker in Washington, Foreign Minister Aziz accused the United States of being hostile to Iraq and of "mounting a campaign" to punish Iraq (Oberdorfer 1991, 21). His accusation followed charges by investigators from the Department of Agriculture that Iraq had systematically misused funds generated for the purchase of food to acquire "sensitive nuclear technologies." Aziz subsequently revealed that his government was also informed early in 1989 that the CIA was telling Iraqis inside and outside the country that Saddam's regime had to be overthrown (Viorst 1991b, 64).

A few months later, Saddam was infuriated by an editorial aired by the Voice of America. The February 15, 1990, editorial explicitly criticized Iraq's repressive record as well as that of other "police" states and called for the overthrow of dictatorial governments. Ambassador Glaspie cabled Washington that Saddam "read the editorial as USG [United States Government] sanctioned muddling with the intent to incite revolution" (Oberdorfer 1991, 22). She wrote immediately to Tariq Aziz that the VOA editorial had been incorrectly interpreted in Baghdad: "It is absolutely not United States policy to question the legitimacy of the government of Iraq nor interfere in any way with the domestic concerns of the Iraqi people and government" (ibid.).

This reassurance was not credible to Saddam. He did not accept the disclaimer that the Voice of America, which explicitly claimed to represent the views of the U.S. government, did not in fact reflect administration policy. At his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie on July 25 in Baghdad, he told her: "Then the media campaign against Saddam Hussein was started by the official American media. The United States thought that the situation in Iraq was like Poland, Rumania, or
Czechoslovakia. We were disturbed by this campaign. . . . The media campaign continues. And it is full of stories” (Iraqi transcript, 1990).

In a speech later that month to the Arab Cooperation Council in Amman, Iraq’s president made explicit his image of the United States as an imperialist power bent on economic warfare against the Arab world through its agents in the Gulf states. He predicted that because of the decline of Soviet power, the United States would exercise hegemonic power in the Middle East unless challenged by Arab governments:

The [United States] . . . will have the greatest influence in the region, through the Arab Gulf and its oil, [and] will maintain its superiority as a superpower without an equal to compete with it. This means that if the Gulf people, along with all Arabs, are not careful, the Arab Gulf region will be governed by the wishes of the United States. . . . [Oil] prices will be fixed in line with a special perspective benefiting American interests and ignoring the interests of others. (Hussein 1990a)

In the post-cold war world, the United States was no longer constrained and contained by the Soviet Union. The only answer, Saddam argued, was the assertion of Arab power. If Arab states did not assert their power, the United States would dictate the economic and political shape of the region through its agents in the Arab world for five years to come. President Mubarak of Egypt was so angered by Saddam’s explicit attack on the United States and the implicit charges against Egypt that he walked out of the meeting. 30

In March 1990, Gerald Bull, the inventor of the supergun, who had been advising Iraq on artillery, was assassinated in Brussels. Iraq blamed agents of the Mossad (Israel’s intelligence agency), alleging that they were engaged in a conspiracy with the United States against Iraq. Shortly thereafter, a shipment to Baghdad of devices suitable for triggering nuclear weapons was intercepted in London. Saddam’s image of a growing American-led conspiracy was reinforced. On April 1, he announced that Iraqi scientists had developed binary chemical weapons and threatened that “we will make the fire eat up half of Israel, if it tries to do anything against Iraq” (Cowell 1990). Washington finally took notice: the State Department called the threat “inflammatory, irresponsible, and outrageous,” and the White House termed Saddam’s speech “deplorable and irresponsible” (ibid.)

On April 12, directly following Saddam’s threat against Israel, five senators, headed by Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole, met with Iraq’s president in Baghdad. Saddam again voiced his complaint that the United States was conspiring against Iraq. Senator Dole reassured him of President Bush’s benign intentions (Woodward 1991, 199–204). On April 16, the interagency Deputies’ Committee met at the White House for the first time to reconsider U.S. policy toward Iraq, and after heated discussion some $500 million in agricultural loan credits to Iraq were suspended. As Tariq Aziz observed, “[Baker] got half the deal [on soft-loan guarantees] through, but in April of 1990, it was suspended, just when we critically needed barley.” From that moment, Aziz continued, “as Foreign Minister, I was convinced that in April the Americans had stopped listening to us and had made up their minds to hit us” (Viorst 1991b, 64–65, 67). Policy was uncoordinated, and the mixed signals only confirmed Saddam’s suspicions of American intent.

The image of the United States bent on conspiratorial action against Iraq remained constant right up to the invasion of Kuwait. In his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie, Saddam reviewed the history of U.S.-Iraq relations and returned again to the attempt by the United States to undermine his regime: “I don’t say the President himself—but certain parties who had links with the intelligence community and with the State Department . . . . Some circles are gathering information on who might be Saddam Hussein’s successor.” Glaspie reported that he complained as well that such circles “worked to insure no help would go to Iraq” from the Export-Import Bank and Commodity Credit Corporation. He recalled the “U.S.I.A. campaign against himself and the general media assault on Iraq and its President” (U.S. transcript 1991).

Despite the dramatic improvement in relations between the United States and Iraq during the war with Iran, Saddam still recalled with anger the secret sales of equipment to Iran in 1986 and remained acutely suspicious of American intentions. He told Ambassador Glaspie on July 25:

The worst of these [rifts] was in 1986, only two years after establishing relations, with what was known as Iran gate . . . . But when interests are limited and relations are not that old, then there isn’t a deep understanding and mistakes could leave a negative effect. Sometimes the effect of an error can be larger than the error itself . . . . And we shouldn’t unlearn the past except when new events remind us that old mistakes were not just a matter of coincidence (Iraqi transcript 1990).

In addition to the image of the United States as enemy, Saddam gave voice in his two-hour conversation with Ambassador Glaspie to the powerful impact of pride and honor on his calculations: “You can come to Iraq with aircraft and missiles, but do not push us to the point where we cease to care. And when we feel that you want to injure our pride and take away the Iraqis’ chance of a high standard of living, then we will cease to care and death will be the choice for us. Then we would not care if you fired 100 missiles for each missile we fired. Because without pride, life would have no value” (ibid.). Saddam asked that the United
States not force Iraq to the point of humiliation at which logic must be disregarded (U.S. transcript). Pride and the avoidance of humiliation, shame, and dishonor loom far larger in Arab culture and calculations than they do in Western culture.

Saddam was also infused with a sense of the legitimacy of Iraq’s claims and anger at Kuwait. An estimate of legitimacy and entitlement generally increase the propensity of leaders to commit themselves to a risky strategy and to ignore information that suggests that their preferred option is dangerous. A deeply embedded image of a powerful enemy, a strong sense of pride, acute frustration, and a keenly felt sense of legitimacy and entitlement all contributed to Saddam’s decision to invade Kuwait.

American attempts at reassurance were uneven, unpersuasive, and ineffective in addressing Hussein’s growing suspicion that the United States was masterminding a plot against his regime. Nor did they address the economic issues that Saddam voiced with growing urgency in the late spring of 1990. Although President Mubarak, King Hussein of Jordan, and Yasser Arafat all warned Kuwait to negotiate seriously with Iraq, the United States, as we have seen, did not urge the al-Sabah family to be more forthcoming in its negotiations with Iraq on debt forgiveness. Rather, the United States strengthened Kuwait’s resolve to resist.

Was it reasonable or justified for Iraq’s leadership to conclude, judging by American actions, that the United States was determined to sabotage their regime? Washington had no intention, before the invasion of Kuwait, to destabilize the regime of Saddam Hussein; on the contrary, the Bush administration intervened repeatedly to block congressional attempts to end loan guarantees and suppressed investigations of irregularities in Iraq’s use of American aid. Its flawed strategy was in large part a function of the expectation that it could “reform” and “resocialize” Saddam, encourage moderate behavior by him, and build Iraq as a regional counterweight to Iran.

On a superficial level, Iraq’s Revolutionary Command Council did not distinguish carefully between public comment and private commentary in the United States and had difficulty decoding the cacophony of signals that emanated from multiple American sources. More fundamentally, the United States had been portrayed for so long as an imperialist power, conspiring against the Arab people and populist Arab leaders, that it was all too easy for Saddam to interpret information as consistent with this deeply rooted and easily available stereotype.

Given the strength of the stereotype, it was extraordinarily difficult to reassure Iraq of the benign intentions of the United States in the period preceding the decision to invade Kuwait. The cultural and political divide across which the two sides communicated was simply too great for each to assess the other’s intentions accurately. Whether or not it was reasonable for Saddam to draw this conclusion about American intentions is beside the point. Once Saddam concluded that the United States was determined to undermine his regime, reassurance and deterrence became virtually impossible, even had the United States clearly defined its commitments and consistently communicated its benign intentions.

Could Saddam Hussein Have Been Deterred?

Had an effective strategy of deterrence been possible, would it have been successful in preventing the full-scale invasion? Again, the answer to this question must be based on counterfactual reasoning. To the extent that Hussein was motivated principally by the opportunity to establish a commanding regional presence, claim Kuwait, and control oil pricing, only a clear and unequivocal commitment combined with an explicit threat of the consequences of the use of force against Kuwait stood any chance of preventing the invasion. Deterrence had to be forcefully executed. If Saddam was driven primarily by Iraq’s economic vulnerability, then a strategy of reassurance had to address the issues, both directly and indirectly through Kuwait, that were central to easing its acute economic crisis. If the United States was uncertain of Iraq’s motives and intentions, as its senior leaders and seasoned diplomats were, then a mixed strategy of a strong and unequivocal commitment to come to Kuwait’s defense and reassurance of its determination to address Iraq’s pressing economic concerns was appropriate. As we have seen, the United States could not deter.

Nor could the United States reassure Saddam, given his image of Washington as bent on his destruction through economic sabotage and covert action. Tariq Aziz reported that from April on, not only Saddam but the rest of the senior leadership of Iraq was convinced that the United States was trying to destabilize the regime through economic warfare waged by its agents in the Gulf. He put it bluntly:

The decision [to occupy all of Kuwait] was predicated on Saddam’s belief that it would make no difference whether Iraq chose to take part or all of Kuwait. The Americans had decided long before August 2nd to crush Iraq, and there was nothing our government could do to stop them. ... We expected an American military retaliation from the very beginning. Within the leadership we had no dispute—we agreed that we had to go all the way.

(Viorst 1991b, 67)

Aziz suggested that the overarching judgment of an American-inspired conspiracy against Iraq made the choice between a limited attack along the border and a full-scale invasion largely inconsequential.
Several intriguing inferences can be drawn from the limited evidence that is available. Evidence uncovered after the war suggests that Iraq was within a few years of developing a primitive nuclear capability; in such a position, an opportunistic aggressor would have waited to invade Kuwait until its capability was operational. This anomaly in Iraq's behavior is understandable only if Saddam and members of the Revolutionary Command Council were firmly convinced that the United States was trying to destabilize their regime. Under these circumstances, they had little to lose by precipitating a confrontation that they expected would eventually come in any case. They were clearly aware of superior American military capability, but in their view they faced a choice between overt and covert conflict. Deterrence was unlikely to have succeeded, given the way Iraqi leaders had framed the problem.\textsuperscript{25}

The proposition that the invasion could have been prevented by stronger warnings may well be overly optimistic. Given the premise of Saddam's decisional calculus, he may well have been unstoppable. His judgment of American intentions was deeply rooted in the political and cultural context that reinforced the long-standing image of the United States as an imperialist power working through its wealthy agents in the Gulf against the interests of Arab states like Iraq.\textsuperscript{26} During the height of the cold war in 1961 and 1962, similar but reciprocal images of the United States and the Soviet Union led to serious mutual miscalculation of intent and precipitated intense crises in their relationship.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, in the summer of 1990 it was extraordinarily difficult for deterrence or reassurance to cross the cultural and political divide.

Saddam's strategic image of an adversary bent on his destruction through economic and covert action is not inconsistent with his estimate that the United States, given its distaste for large numbers of casualties, might not retaliate for the invasion of Kuwait with large-scale military force. A senior Iraqi official explained that the decision to invade all of Kuwait rather than only the disputed areas was in part an attempt to deny the United States the opportunity to deploy large numbers of ground forces in the area.\textsuperscript{38} Saddam chose to occupy all of Kuwait, rather than only the disputed oil field and the strategic islands, after information reached him that, should Iraq attack, Kuwait intended to invite a U.S. expeditionary force to land and establish bases in the unoccupied part of the country.\textsuperscript{39} Convinced that the Saudi royal family could not survive the political consequences of a deployment of Western forces on its territory and that, therefore, it would neither invite nor permit the deployment of U.S. forces, Saddam chose at the last moment to occupy all of Kuwait and deprive the United States of the opportunity to establish landing facilities there for its ground forces (Viorst 1991b, 67).\textsuperscript{40} If this reconstruction of Saddam's calculations is correct, it suggests that he hoped to avoid a massive American military response and contradicts Aziz's statement that the Revolutionary Command Council expected military retaliation by the United States.\textsuperscript{34}

Saddam's reasoning was, however, fraught with tactical miscalculations. The only major airport in Kuwait capable of providing landing facilities for the huge American transports is on the outskirts of Kuwait City. If Iraqi troops had advanced no farther than Kuwait City, large numbers of American troops could have arrived only by sea, a process that would have taken months. Kuwait, moreover, has only one good harbor; if Iraq had occupied the port of Kuwait City, it would have been extraordinarily difficult for the United States to deploy forces to Kuwait, even by sea. Had they attempted to do so, they would have been within range of Iraqi missiles and artillery.\textsuperscript{42}

By moving large numbers of troops to the border with Saudi Arabia and by briefly deploying these forces in offensive configuration to discourage King Fahd from shutting down the pipeline that carried Iraqi oil, Saddam created the very condition he wanted to avoid: a frightened Saudi leadership and a sense of alarm and urgency in Washington, which culminated in Saudi acquiescence to the deployment of American troops. Moreover, during the critical days immediately after the invasion, Saddam made little effort to reassure King Fahd of his benign intentions. This was Hussein's most serious tactical miscalculation.

However, even with Iraqi troops deployed in offensive formation along the Saudi border, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney experienced considerable difficulty in persuading King Fahd to agree to the deployment of large numbers of American forces on Saudi soil.\textsuperscript{43} Saddam's initial judgment that the Saudi royal family would fear the consequences of a large deployment of Western forces was correct. Only the offensive deployment along the Saudi border persuaded King Fahd to agree to the deployment that neither he nor Saddam—for quite different reasons—wanted. Without access to Saudi bases and logistics, U.S. military action to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait would have been infinitely more complicated. Saddam also badly misjudged the likely American reaction to a limited invasion, as distinct from a full-scale occupation of Kuwait. Ironically, as we have seen, American and Iraqi judgments of the domestic political consequences in the United States of the use of force against Iraq differed only on the issue of the magnitude of the provocation.

King Hussein of Jordan has provided an alternative explanation of Saddam's decision to invade and occupy all of Kuwait. He reports that Saddam told him that he did not intend to stay but "that he believed he would be in a stronger position . . . if he eventually withdrew to a point that left Iraq with the disputed territories only" (Miller 1990). If indeed Saddam intended to use most of occupied Kuwait as a bargaining chip,
it was imperative that he begin a withdrawal before serious military opposition began to coalesce. Saddam did the reverse: in a speech on August 12, he attached political conditions to the withdrawal that would have taken months to meet.\textsuperscript{44} In so doing, he persuaded many Arab leaders that he intended to occupy Kuwait permanently.\textsuperscript{45}

My analysis of the failure to prevent a full-scale attack against Kuwait and the ensuing crisis points to three distinct but not mutually exclusive explanations: a poorly designed strategy by the United States that would have confused a fully rational adversary bent on expansion; an adversary motivated by a mixture of opportunity and need who made serious tactical miscalculations about the scope of military action; and an adversary who framed the problem in such a way that the choice was between open confrontation and long-term sabotage. Any one of these conditions could have defeated deterrence and reassurance. Together, they made deterrence of the attack against Kuwait hopeless. Only two of these conditions were present, however, when compellence failed.

The Failure of Compellence

Unlike the practice of deterrence, the orchestration of coercive diplomacy by the United States after the invasion of Kuwait met textbook requirements. President Bush, working through the United Nations, imposed a stringent embargo and economic sanctions against Iraq, marshaled an impressive international coalition, deployed hundreds of thousands of troops as well as the latest generation of aircraft equipped with precision-guided munitions in Saudi Arabia, set a deadline for withdrawal, and threatened to use force to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait if it did not do so voluntarily. Unlike the period preceding the invasion, presidential attention was now focused overwhelmingly on the Gulf. The Soviet Union and France, although not the United States, offered Iraq considerable inducements to withdraw from Kuwait.

Yet the attempt to manage the crisis short of war failed. Saddam Hussein ignored the international ultimatum, and the coalition went to war on January 16. The failure of a carefully crafted strategy of coercive diplomacy serves as a useful comparison in explaining the earlier failure of deterrence. Unlike the period preceding the invasion, the failure of coercive diplomacy to compel Iraq to withdraw cannot be traced to flawed strategy, ineptly executed. We must look elsewhere for the explanation.

One argument holds that the United States did not want coercive diplomacy to succeed and planned to trap Saddam into war. Seeking to destroy his regime, it sought international legitimacy to wage war and did not provide the inducements necessary to persuade Saddam to concede and ease the withdrawal. Successful coercive diplomacy depends not only on credible threat but on inducement as well. Tariq Aziz lamented that his government had tried repeatedly to find a diplomatic exit but had invariably found itself trapped by the determination of the United States to wage war (Viorst 1991b, 67).

The evidence does not support this proposition. Some powerful members of the administration certainly welcomed the opportunity to go to war to curtail the power of Saddam in the Gulf. Senior military officials, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, and Secretary of Defense Cheney grew increasingly confident by November that they could eject Iraq from Kuwait with a tolerable number of American casualties.\textsuperscript{46} Such a policy was constrained, however, by the terms of the resolutions and by the vigorous attempts of a large number of mediators to provide Saddam Hussein with an honorable exit. In September and October, French, Arab, and Soviet mediators put forward a series of proposals that went some distance toward meeting the terms outlined by Saddam in his speech of August 12.\textsuperscript{47} Saddam rejected all these offers.

It can be argued, however, that compellence did not really begin until November 8, when President Bush announced the deployment of an additional 150,000 troops. Until that time, the military forces assembled in the Gulf were there primarily to deter and defend against an attack on Saudi Arabia. Only with the large increase in the number of forces, and the decision announced two days later by Secretary of Defense Cheney to rotate American forces stationed in the Gulf, did the American commitment to compel an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait become clear (Gordon 1990b). After that point, some U.S. officials described negotiations and a partial Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait as a “nightmare scenario” (Apple 1990). Nevertheless, as the risk of war grew, others outside the United States redoubled their efforts to resolve the crisis.

In mid-November, President Hassan of Morocco (1990) proposed a special summit to find an Arab solution to the crisis. President Gorbachev, before he agreed to UN Resolution 678, which authorized the “use of all necessary means” to eject Iraq from Kuwait, invited Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz to Moscow on November 28 for a final attempt to mediate the conflict; no progress was made. On December 4, King Hussein of Jordan, Yassir Arafat, and Ali Salim al-Bid, the vice-chairman of the Presidential Council of Yemen, met with Saddam in Baghdad. In mid-December, President Chadli Benjedid (1990) announced his intention to work with Iraq to find a negotiated solution.\textsuperscript{48} Saddam took none of these opportunities to begin a negotiating process. If he had, the willingness of the international coalition to use force would have fractured.
and there likely would have been no war. Irrespective of the wishes of some members of the Administration, Saddam was not trapped into war.49

There remains only one plausible explanation for the failure of coercive diplomacy. It is clear in retrospect that Saddam Hussein preferred to retain Kuwait without war but preferred war to unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. The puzzle is why Saddam ranked his preferences that way. His preference ordering can be explained by a series of tactical calculations that were generally plausible and surprisingly similar to those made by American officials at the time.

Saddam’s Calculations

Saddam made a series of tactical judgments that led him to question first the likelihood, but more important the duration and the outcome, of war, should it occur. His most important judgments were political rather than military: he was not certain that the United States would use force, but more to the point he was persuaded that, if it did, Iraq would win a political victory in military defeat. Many of these political judgments were shared by senior officials in Washington. It is difficult to conclude, as April Glaspie did, that Saddam was stupid or irrational; if he was either, so were many others.

Yevgenii Primakov (1991b) reports that Saddam was surprised by the Soviet reaction to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Saddam believed that the Soviet Union would not endorse American coercion nor agree to resolutions at the United Nations authorizing the use of force. Saddam’s estimate was not completely unrealistic: Gorbachev did press vigorously for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, to the evident discomfort of senior members of the Bush administration. It is not easy, however, to reconcile Saddam’s expectation of Soviet behavior with his analysis in February 1990 of the decline of the Soviet Union and the emergence of unchallenged American hegemony (1990a). His strategic analysis was not fully consistent with his tactical expectation that the declining Soviet Union would stand apart from the hegemonic United States in the international effort to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. Moreover, even after he saw the pattern of Soviet-U.S. cooperation, he took none of the opportunities for exit provided by Gorbachev.

Saddam also behaved at times as though he were not certain that the United States would attack. His decision to release the hostages, for example, is difficult to reconcile with an expectation of a large-scale American attack.50 Saddam subsequently acknowledged that Western diplomats who had come to Baghdad had convinced him that a release of the hostages would prevent war (Hussein 1991b). The judgment that

the United States might not respond with massive force was also not inherently implausible. After the fact, action often appears predetermined; but there was an intense domestic debate within the United States, almost until the last moment, about the appropriateness of the use of force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

More important, Saddam calculated that Iraq could survive the military consequences of the war and win a political victory. Saddam was warned repeatedly by Primakov of the vastly superior American military capabilities, but he remained confident that Iraq would survive the air and missile attacks and prevail through superior staying power in the ground fighting to follow (1991b). In a speech to the Islamic Conference in Baghdad in January 1991, Saddam argued,

Under all circumstances, one who wants to evict a fighter from the land will eventually depend on a soldier who walks on the ground and comes with a hand grenade, rifle, and bayonet to fight the soldier in the battle trench. All this technological superiority, which is on paper, will eventually be tested in the theater of operations. We are not people who speak on the basis of books; we are people with experience in fighting. (Hussein 1991a)

Saddam significantly underestimated the impact of air power. It is not surprising that he did so, because air power had figured so little in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, even American analysts, who were convinced of the decisive impact of air power, were also persuaded that, regardless of how successful the air campaign might be, a ground war would be necessary.51

Saddam also doubted the resolve of the United States to sustain the large numbers of casualties expected in ground fighting. As he told Ambassador Glaspie even before the invasion of Kuwait, “Yours is a society which cannot accept ten thousand dead in one battle” (Iraqi transcript 1990). This judgment was not inherently unreasonable: division ran deep within the United States, and American military analysts were estimating a considerable number of casualties should the war go to a ground battle.52 Saddam was persuaded that the United States would not have staying power, as it had demonstrated when it withdrew its marines from Beirut after an attack on the marine compound in October 1983.

Far more important than his military calculations was the weight Saddam gave to political factors in the Arab world. He expected that Arab governments aligned with the United States would not survive the political consequences if they went to war and that the coalition arrayed against him would fracture. Indeed, he worked actively to engineer the downfall of the coalition in the period preceding the outbreak of war. Saddam again and again enjoined the Arab people to launch a “jihad” against the “imperialist aggressors” and their “agents” in the Arab
world and explicitly called for the overthrow of Fahd and Mubarak (1990e, 1990f, 1990h). Saddam described the American decision in November to enlarge the deployment of its forces as evidence that it was losing the battle among the Arab masses (1990g). Again, Saddam’s estimate was not wholly unrealistic: senior American officials worried as well that friendly Arab governments could be destabilized by images of Western forces killing Iraqis.35

Planning to attack Israel as soon as war began, Saddam hoped that Arab governments would be unable to survive the political consequences of a tacit alliance with the “Zionist enemy” (1990b). In late December, after the United Nations had imposed a deadline for withdrawal, Saddam argued that escalation to war would ignite a Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic reaction that would eradicate the evil imperialist and Zionist conspiracies along with their illegitimate Arab agents (1990l). He was persuaded that soon after war began, if he could draw Israel into the battle, he would triumph in the “street” and force negotiation on his terms. This too was a concern shared by senior American officials who worked hard to prevent a retaliation by Israel, should Iraq attack.34

Saddam calculated relative capability not only in traditional military categories but also in larger political terms measured on longer time horizons. His political calculations weighed heavily in his decision to stand firm in Kuwait despite his obvious vulnerability to American power in the air. Saddam misjudged his fellow Arabs badly, but so did many analysts of the Middle East in Washington and elsewhere. Although there were widespread demonstrations in North Africa, in Yemen, and in Jordan during the war, no Arab government was overthrown, and the Arab coalition did not fracture, even when it appeared that Israel might retaliate for the missile attacks against its cities.

These political as well as military judgments governed Saddam’s decision to stand firm. Almost all of these judgments were not inherently implausible; other than the underestimation of the impact of air power, many were widely shared by Western analysts before the war. They proved, however, to be wrong, and cumulatively they doomed the prospects of coercive diplomacy.

Could War Have Been Avoided?

The difference in the way the two strategies of deterrence and compellence were crafted and implemented is striking. The attempt at deterrence was flawed, inept, and incredible, while the attempt at coercive diplomacy drew on carefully assembled political and military forces to signal unequivocally to Baghdad that the coalition would go to war if Iraqi forces were not withdrawn voluntarily from Kuwait. Despite the differences in the execution of the two strategies, they led to similar outcomes—failure. An effectively designed strategy is a necessary but insufficient component of successful crisis prevention and management.

It can be argued that deterrence is generally easier than compellence, given the costs of retreat once Saddam had occupied and annexed Kuwait.30 The argument is not convincing: the multiple opportunities provided by French, Soviet, and Arab mediators for a face-saving exit, which would have given Saddam almost all of what he wanted, should have compensated for the additional costs of withdrawal. Nor is Saddam’s “stupidity” a satisfying explanation for the failure of compellence. Many of his military and political calculations were widely shared by sophisticated leaders and analysts in the Western world. The explanation for the failure to avoid war lies largely in the strategic judgment of Saddam Hussein.

Foremost was Saddam’s conviction that the United States and its agents were determined to destroy his regime. Convinced that if he retreated the conspiracy against Iraq would be strengthened, he saw no alternative but political resistance, even in military defeat.35 Saddam’s isolation and inexperience with the West facilitated his easy acceptance of the conspiracy theory, prevalent in Arab political culture, that placed the United States at the center of both power and evil in the Middle East.

Saddam’s serious error was not the narrow, technical miscalculation of the impact of air power but the initial, fundamental misjudgment of the intentions of the United States. American leaders could not imagine that Saddam believed that the United States was determined to destroy him. When Aziz first met Baker in October 1989, he accused the United States of hostility toward Iraq and of “mounting a campaign” to punish Baghdad; Baker was surprised and puzzled.37 It was extraordinarily difficult for the United States to design a strategy of reassurance to deal with a contingency they found incredible and knew to be false. From Saddam’s central belief in an American conspiracy, it appears that most if not all else followed. His expectation that the United States sought to destroy him became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

His strategic conviction was reinforced by anger and frustration toward Kuwait, given the costs Iraq had borne during the war with Iran, a war Iraq fought for the Gulf states as well as on its own behalf. King Hussein of Jordan asserts that Saddam was embittered because leaders in the Gulf seemed indifferent to the fact that Iraq had protected them and their people with “the blood of Iraqis” during the war with Iran (Miller 1990). The bitterness was increasingly dominant from May 1990 through to January 1991.38
Reinforcing his bitterness and anger was Saddam's strong sense of entitlement. Again and again during his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie, he spoke in the language of "rights": "I say to you clearly that Iraq's rights, which are mentioned in the memorandum [delivered to Kuwait], we will take one by one. . . . We are not the kind of people who will relinquish their rights. There is no historic right, or legitimacy, or need, for the U.A.E. or Kuwait to deprive us of our rights" (Irani transcript 1990). Within the context of Saddam's conviction that the United States sought his destruction, this sense of entitlement, magnified by the judgment of inequity at Kuwait's behavior, fueled the anger and frustration that contributed heavily to the decision to invade and then to stand firm.

The failure of compellence is explained by a complex and interacting set of political, cultural, and emotional factors that led Saddam to prefer war to retreat in the face of conspiracy. Although he preferred to retain Kuwait without war, he believed that, should war come, it would be the catalyst for the fundamental change he expected and wanted in the political landscape of the Middle East. My analysis suggests further that, within the framework of his judgment of American hegemony and conspiracy, Saddam was inflamed by anger and frustration and that he was driven by his sense of Iraq's legitimate rights, however these may have appeared to others. Within this context, he saw both the need to address Iraq's looming economic crisis and the opportunity to assert Iraq's long-standing claim to Kuwait. Given these multiple incentives, even finely crafted and optimally designed strategies of deterrence and compellence stood little chance of success. The conclusion is sobering. My analysis suggests that the invasion of Kuwait was probably unstoppable, short of major concessions by Kuwait not only on oil prices but on the other issues in dispute, and irreversible, short of the use of force to compel withdrawal.99

NOTES

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1. Deterrence threatens punishment or denial in order to prevent an adversary from taking unwanted action. It is most effective against an adversary that is opportunistic and seeking to make gains. Reassurance seeks to reduce the incentives for adversaries to use force by reducing the fear and insecurity that are so often responsible for escalation to war. It is most effective against a vulnerable adversary that fears loss. For detailed analysis of the factors that contribute to the failure of deterrence as a strategy of crisis prevention, see George and Smoke (1974), Jervis, Lebow, and Stein (1985), and Lebow and Stein (1990b). For an analysis of strategies of reassurance, see Stein (1991, 8–12).

2. For a detailed analysis of the requirements of successful compellence, see Schelling (1960), George, Hall, and Simons (1971), George (1991), and George (forthcoming).

3. There are good historical and biographical studies of Saddam Hussein, but they do not treat the period under investigation. See, for example, al-Khalil (1989) and Matar (1981).

4. The interviews with Tariq Aziz may also be contaminated by the bias of hindsight, which leads people after the fact to consider as certain events they had earlier seen as contingent.

5. Boushany and Tyler (1990) and Theodoulou (1990) report the comments of the private memorandum.

6. At the meeting, Iraq demanded $10 billion in new loans from Kuwait. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia agreed to grant the loans, but Kuwait insisted that the boundary question must first be addressed. Iraq refused. See Cooley (1991, 128), citing private interviews with King Hussein and Foreign Minister Malway at-Kassem of Jordan.

7. These documents were released to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for its investigations in spring 1991.

8. Author's interview with a senior member of the Policy Planning staff, State Department, Washington, D.C., April 1991.


12. No one in authority remembers who approved the cable or indeed if President Bush saw it before it was sent (Gerb 1991).

13. Author's interview with a member of the Policy Planning staff, State Department, Washington, D.C., August 1991.

14. On the contrary: on July 31, Assistant Secretary of State John Kelly went to testify before the Middle East Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee against the cutoff of loan guarantees to Iraq. When asked what the U.S. position would be with respect to the use of force should Iraqi forces cross the border into Kuwait, Kelly replied: "That, Mr. Chairman, is a hypothetical or contingency question. Suffice it to say that we would be extremely concerned." Pressing further, the subcommittee chair, Congressman Lee Hamilton, asked explicitly whether, under those circumstances, it would be correct to say that the United States did not have a treaty commitment that would obligate Washington to engage U.S. forces. Kelly replied: "That is correct." Testimony of
Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs John Kelly to the Middle East Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, July 31 1990, reported in Cockburn (1990).

During this period, King Hussein of Jordan telephoned President Bush and assured him that Saddam would not resort to military force. President Mubarak of Egypt and King Fahd also told the president that the problem was being handled in an Arab way and asked Bush to do nothing to upset the process. See Oberdorfer (1991, 40). These requests from Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia may explain the quiescence of the United States in the forty-eight hours before Iraq's invasion.

15. Kelly told Ambassador al-Mashat: “Mr. Ambassador, we know you have at least 100,000 troops on your border. This is extremely serious. It looks as though you are preparing aggressive action against Kuwait.” He reiterated that any differences must be solved peacefully and asked Iraq to pull its forces back from the border. Al-Mashat denied any aggressive intentions whatsoever. See Oberdorfer (1991, 40).

16. Iraq had some 700 combat aircraft, 6,000 tanks, 5,000 artillery pieces, and approximately 1 million men under arms. The figures are misleading in that only 165 of the aircraft were advanced fighters and bombers, and the Republican Guards, the crack fighting units, constituted less than a third of the total armed forces. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (1990).

17. UN investigators after the war concluded that Iraq could have produced an atomic bomb within one to three years. See Broad (1991) and Lewis (1992).

18. Egyptian Ambassador-at-large Tahseen Bashir reported that Kuwait was very “difficult” in the negotiations. Author's interview with Tahseen Bashir, Los Angeles, August 15, 1990.

19. When he made these comments, Sheik Salim al-Sabah was the foreign minister and second in the line of succession.

20. Author's interview with a senior member of the Policy Planning Staff, State Department, Washington, D.C. April 1991.

21. Saddam Hussein claimed a debt of $40 billion to Western governments during his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie (Iraqi transcript 1990).

22. In his interview with Viorst, Aziz charges, “Mubarak was the Americans’ man. After the invasion, Mubarak accused Saddam of having lied about his intentions. It was actually Mubarak who was the liar and whose lie speeded up the race to disaster.” Aziz's reconstruction of what Saddam told Mubarak is consistent with the U.S. transcript of his meeting with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, where he used the same phraseology. It is unlikely, however, that Mubarak would have deliberately sought to fuel the crisis, since he was vigorously attempting to mediate a peaceful solution. Egyptian officials subsequently expressed frustration with the negotiating position of Kuwait's representative at the talks.

23. Iraq's leaders have long held that the border between the two countries was imposed by Britain in 1922 and thus lacked legitimacy. They considered Kuwait part of the Ottoman vilayet of Basra, which was severed by Britain to deny Iraq easy access to the Gulf. The claim of entitlement is counterbalanced by Kuwait's autonomous status within the Ottoman empire, by the continuous al-Sabah rule there since the middle of the eighteenth century, and by its status as a British protectorate since 1899. Iraq accepted the official status of the border in 1932, when it became independent, and again in 1963, when the Baath came to power. However, it challenged the legitimacy of the border whenever it saw an opportunity to do so: in 1961, when Kuwait became independent from Britain; in 1969, when Iraq deployed forces in Kuwait to defend Umm Qasr from an alleged Iranian attack; and again in March 1973, when Iraqi troops occupied a border outpost close to Bubiyan.

24. Author's interview with a senior member of the Policy Planning Staff, State Department, Washington, D.C., August 1990.

25. Author's interview with a senior member of the National Security Council Staff, Washington, D.C., August 1990.

26. Charles B. Allen testified at the confirmation hearings for Robert M. Gates, later to be Secretary of Defense, in 1991. Gates disclosed that as early as January 1990 he and other officials at the CIA were aware that Iraq might engage in an all-out attack against Kuwait. Allen noted that “there were economic indicators that developed prior to the military mobilization” (CIA's Ofﬁcial’s Testimony 1991). These early warnings did not reach senior ofﬁcials in the administration.

27. Minutes of meeting in Department of Agriculture (Baguet, 1992a). On August 4, 1989, officials of the FBI and the Federal Reserve Bank seized documents from the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro in Atlanta. Investigators from the Department of Agriculture charged that Iraq was using the bank to divert funds granted by the Commodity Credit Corporation to third parties in exchange for military hardware and sensitive military technology. Officials confronted high-ranking members of Iraq's governments with the accusations in October 1989. Georgia's Attorney General Robert L. Barr, Jr., proposed returning an immediate indictment, but the Justice Department intervened to delay charges. Minutes of the meeting in the Department of Agriculture that listed the charges were released by the House Committee on Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs (Baguet 1992a, 1992b; Gelb 1992).

28. The editorial broadcast by the Voice of America was entitled “No More Secret Police.” It began with the comment: “Next, an editorial reflecting the views of the U.S. government: A successful tyranny requires a strong, ruthless secret police force. A successful democracy requires the abolition of such a force.” The editorial then celebrated the defeat of tyranny in Eastern Europe and concluded: “Secret police are also entrenched in other countries, such as China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba, and Albania. The rulers of these countries hold power by force and fear, not by the consent of the governed. But as East Europeans demonstrated so dramatically in 1989, the tide of history is against such rulers. The 1990s should belong not to the dictators and secret police, but to the people” (Voice of America 1990).


30. Author's interview with Egyptian Ambassador-at-large Tahseen Bashir, Los Angeles, August 15, 1990.

31. On April 5, Saddam asked Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia to assure Britain and the United States that he did not intend to attack Israel but that he wanted assurances that Israel would not attack. He explained to Bandar that, since Israel and the West were planning against him, he had made his statement
to mobilize Iraqi opinion against the threat from the "imperialist Zionist" plan to destroy Iraq. See Seib (1990a, A10) and Oberdorfer (1991, 23, 36).

32. In October 1989, after the charges by the Department of Agriculture, President Bush issued National Security Directive 26 mandating the United States to "improve and expand our relationship with Iraq" (Gelb 1992).

33. Deterrence and reassurance address different dimensions of an adversary's incentives to use force. Although both may be necessary, each can undermine the effect of the other.

34. The concept of the United States as an imperialist oppressor, conspiring against the Arab people, had figured prominently in the thinking of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt; it is an image widely held by Arab leaders who appeal to populist sentiments against established governments.

35. For an analysis of the importance of "framing effects" on strategic choices, see Stein and Paully (forthcoming).

36. See al-Khalil (1989) for an analysis of the obsessive fabrication of enemies that characterized Saddam's perpetual war against the adversaries of Arabism.

37. For a detailed examination of these dynamics, see Lebow and Stein (forthcoming).


39. During a visit by King Hussein of Jordan to the emir in Kuwait City, the Kuwaiti foreign minister told his Jordanian counterpart, "If the Iraqis attack us, we would call the Americans" Miller (1990).

40. Yevgenii Primakov, the Soviet official who visited Baghdad twice in October to mediate a peaceful resolution to the crisis, reported that Saddam was surprised by the Saudi reaction to the invasion. Saddam did not believe that King Fahd would allow American troops into the kingdom (1991b).

41. It is only Tariq Aziz who argues that it made no difference whether Iraq occupied all or part of Kuwait because, as he said, "We expected an American military retaliation from the very beginning." Other Iraqi officials claim that Saddam was persuaded that Washington wanted to undermine his regime through economic warfare and covert action but was uncertain in August about the likely scope of American retaliation. Author's interview with a senior Iraqi official, Geneva, April 1991.

42. The Joint Chiefs of Staff would have vigorously opposed such a deployment. Author's interview with a senior Pentagon official, Washington, D.C., September 1991.

43. In a tense meeting with King Fahd, Secretary Cheney warned: "We will defend you, but we will not liberate you. You have a very short time to make your choice." Author's interview with a member of the National Security Council staff, Washington, D.C., August 1991. Saudi Arabia earlier had refused to join the joint exercises of the United States and United Arab Emirates. See Oberdorfer (1991, 38).

44. Saddam linked Baghdad's withdrawal from Kuwait to the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel from the occupied Arab territories in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon; Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon; and a mutual withdrawal by Iraq and Iran from each other's territory captured during the war. Saddam also demanded that U.S. forces leave Saudi Arabia and be replaced by Arab forces under UN authority. Finally, he insisted that all sanctions against Iraq be lifted upon its withdrawal from Kuwait (1990d).

45. Author's interview with Tahees Bashir, August 15, 1990.

46. Author's interview with a senior member of the National Security Council staff, Washington, D.C., May 1991. See also Woodward (1991, 290–96) for a discussion of "preventive war" scenarios.

47. In September 1990, King Hussein of Jordan, King Hassan of Morocco, and President Benjedid of Algeria proposed a compromise: Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait, but the two would have a special relationship similar to that of Syria and Lebanon; Kuwait would cede the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah and the Rumaila oil fields, and a free vote would be held in Kuwait for a successor government; the Iraqi withdrawal would be tightly coupled to a fixed date for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Saudi Arabia and to a discussion of the Palestinian problem ("Arab Initiative" 1990, 1–2). On September 24 President Mitterrand of France proposed to the United Nations a four-stage process of settlement. Iraq would declare its intention to withdraw from Kuwait, and the Kuwaiti people would exercise their "democratic will." An international conference would then address the Arab-Israel conflict and the future of Lebanon. Finally, the states in the Middle East would consider arms control agreements and arrangements (Lewis 1990). Yevgenii Primakov, President Gorbachev's personal envoy, traveled to Baghdad twice in October and proposed connecting Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait to Israel's agreement to attend an international conference to resolve the Palestinian problem (Primakov 1991a).

48. Saddam insisted that talks could not occur while U.S. forces threatened Iraq and that the Arab-Israel conflict had to be on the agenda; in response, Presidents Mubarak and Asad rejected the proposal. The three Arab mediators accepted most of the terms laid out by Saddam in his speech on August 12 but insisted that Iraq must abide by UN Resolution 660 that called on Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait; again, Saddam offered no concessions on Kuwait (Benjedid 1990).

49. Herrmann (forthcoming) makes a compelling case for the proposition that Saddam was given several honorable exits and that he was not trapped into war. For a competing interpretation, cogently argued, see Smith (1992).

50. Herrmann (forthcoming) argues persuasively that this decision is comprehensible only if Saddam expected to forestall an attack.

51. See, for example, Pape (1990, 1a), who concludes: "Air power alone cannot compel Saddam Hussein to retreat from Kuwait. If the embargo fails and the US remains determined to force him out, we must be prepared to commit immense ground forces as well as air forces for a protracted campaign, and be ready to pay a high price in blood and treasure."

52. In December 1990, General Norman Schwarzkopf was given the order "to accept losses no greater than the equivalent of three companies per coalition brigade." The order translated into casualties of approximately 30 percent among allied ground forces, or 10,000 allied soldiers. It is unusual that President Bush, Secretary of Defense Cheney, and General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would impose an upper limit on casualties as the date of military operations drew closer. The order is included in U.S. Department of Defense (1991), submitted to the Congress on April 10. See Cushman (1992).
53. Former head of the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Nicholas Veilleux expressed concern that through war "you could set in train a series of actions to destabilize current governments" Seib (1990b, 10).

54. Author's interview with a senior member of the National Security Council staff, Washington, D.C., May 1991. See also Welch (forthcoming).

55. The proposition that deterrence is easier than compellence is widely accepted. See Schelling (1986). For an analysis of cases of "immediate" deterrence and compellence that challenges this proposition, see Lebow and Stein (1990a).

56. Yevgenii Primakov describes Saddam's thinking as consistent with a "Masada complex" (Primakov 1991a). Masada refers to the embattled stand made by Jewish defenders against Roman legionnaires for three years after the decisive military battle in 70 A.D., with full knowledge that they were doomed. The defenders at Masada ultimately committed suicide rather than surrender to Roman forces. Primakov either misunderstands the analogy of Masada or misapplies it to Saddam, who expected to survive and win a political victory in the face of military defeat. The better analogy would have been to Egypt's Nasser in 1956: although Nasser's forces were defeated by Israel, Britain, and France, he won an enormous political victory by resisting.

57. Iraq's Ambassador to Washington Mohammed al-Mashat subsequently explained that "we had information that some authorities in the United States were working to destabilize Iraq" by setting emissaries to the Gulf states and "planting fear of Iraq in the heads of the sheikhs." Oberdorfer (1991, 21). Al-Mashat may have been referring to the periodic briefings given by the U.S. Central Command that identified Iraq as a potential threat in the region.

58. The intense emotional reaction to Kuwait's unwillingness to make concessions was part of a personality profile described as "defiant, grandiose, resting on the well-fortified foundation of a siege mentality." The impact of Saddam's personality on his behavior is analyzed in Post (1991a, 1991b).

59. This analysis does not suggest that Saddam Hussein was unstoppable under all conditions. In complying with UN resolutions after the war, Iraq acknowledged that it had thirty untested chemical warheads for its al-Husayn missile that it used against Israel's cities. Despite Saddam's overwhelming interest in provoking an Israeli retaliation, he did not arm the missiles with chemical warheads, even at the end of the ground war, when his army faced catastrophic defeat. That he did not use the chemical warheads may have been the result of successful Israeli deterrence. Alternatively, the untested warheads may not have been operational. See Welch (forthcoming) and Steinberg (1991).

REFERENCES


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