

2001

“A Nation Blessed”

George Bush

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Recommended Citation

Bush, George (2001) "A Nation Blessed," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 54 : No. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss4/9>

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The Honorable George Bush, born in 1924, became in June 1943 the U.S. Navy's youngest commissioned pilot. Assigned to the aircraft carrier USS San Jacinto (CVL 30) in the Pacific, he flew fifty-eight combat missions and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for "heroism and extraordinary achievement."

Graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Yale University in 1948, he entered the oil business. In 1963 he was elected chairman of the Harris County (Texas) Republican Party and in 1966 to the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas's Seventh District, serving two terms. Thereafter Mr. Bush was appointed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (1971), chairman of the Republican National Committee (1973), chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in China (1974), and Director of Central Intelligence (1976).

*In 1980 he became vice president of the United States, and in 1988 the forty-first president of the United States. Since leaving office, President Bush has coauthored (with General Brent Scowcroft) *A World Transformed* and has published his correspondence, in *All the Best*. President Bush serves on the Board of Visitors of M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, and is honorary chairman of the Points of Light Foundation.*

These remarks are adapted from a commencement address delivered on 15 June 2001 to the Naval War College graduating class of 2001.

Naval War College Review, Autumn 2001, Vol. LIV, No. 4

“A NATION BLESSED”

The Honorable George Bush

A little over a decade ago, a true revolution in world affairs took place. The Soviet Union imploded; the Baltic States and the captive nations of Eastern Europe were freed. Then, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the world made a very important statement in coming together to see that that aggression would not stand. Such a revolution required a fundamental rethinking of the role of the United States in world affairs and of the nature of warfare in a radically transformed military environment. The Gulf War forced us to face up to this revolution, this transformation, almost before we knew it was upon us.

We did not know it at the time, but the Gulf War was in many respects a preview of things to come. It's hard to remember how surprising it was in 1990 when the Soviet Union stood with us in condemning Iraqi aggression and actually voted with the United States in the United Nations to condemn Iraq. This remarkable development was absolutely crucial to our strategy in dealing with that situation. It also raised the possibility of a new world order, and I think it stemmed from the way we managed the winding-down of the Cold War.

You may recall that when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, one of the leading television commentators asked me, “Why, Mr. President, do you not show the emotion the American people feel and go to the Wall and dance with those students, as the leaders in Congress are urging you to do?” That might have been the stupidest thing an American president could have done—to tweak Mikhail Gorbachev's nose when things were moving peacefully toward the reunification of Germany. So we didn't do that kind of thing.

Consequently, a year later, in the matter of Iraq, the Soviet Union voted with us in the Security Council. (China abstained—and we had to work very hard to induce the Chinese to do that.) The Soviet Union's vote in the Security Council

was indispensable; it implied a world in which the great powers would stand together against international aggression—a world in which the United Nations could undertake to protect world peace as its founders had envisioned in 1945, a world that was more democratic, and a world that had more market economies.

This vision was not fully achieved while I was president—though we went a long way toward it—but the world order today is in fact completely new. The “new world order” we strove for does not mean putting everything under the United Nations or surrendering an ounce of sovereignty; it means working cooperatively with other countries so there would be more democracy, more market economies, more freedom.

The Gulf War taught us several lessons about the use and limits of American military power in the post-Cold War world. It might be instructive to recount some of the features of our strategy for that war and some of the lessons we learned then—lessons that perhaps are taught today in our war colleges.

To begin with, we knew immediately, almost instinctively, that our response to Saddam Hussein could not and should not be unilateral. We felt—I was blessed with a wonderful team of people to help me make these decisions—from the very beginning that we could not do it alone. We had the military force to do it alone, but we needed other countries with us.

So we went forward. We asked Kuwait to take the issue to the United Nations Security Council. We ourselves went to Nato to explain what we would have to do. Richard Cheney, the secretary of defense, and General Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went to Saudi Arabia. They asked the Saudis to do something that was almost impossible, culturally, for them to do, but that they knew was in their own interest—to accept the deployment of U.S. forces into the kingdom itself. We urged others to join us in a military coalition. Eventually thirty-one nations did, and many other nations agreed to support us in nonmilitary ways.

Our first step was to isolate Iraq, isolate Saddam Hussein, by blockade and sanctions. The United States, Britain, and France did most of the “heavy lifting” in the actual interception of ships. I will never forget the day in the Oval Office the White House staff told me that the maritime interception force intended, because of persuasive intelligence we had, to permit a ship then in the Gulf of Oman to return to Aden without being inspected. Someone asked, “Well, who’s going to tell Margaret Thatcher [the British prime minister] that we’re not going to inspect every ship? We told her we would inspect every ship.” I looked around for volunteers; no hands went up. So I called Margaret Thatcher myself. I told her that we were going to let this particular ship turn around—to violate the fundamental rule of inspecting all of them—and I told her the intelligence information that led us to do that. I will never forget Margaret’s words: “George,

that's fine with me. But this is no time to go wobbly." (There was never any question that Margaret Thatcher might "go wobbly" herself, I might add.)

Our strategy was to build a grand coalition—although doing so would complicate our own military operations—and (this was absolutely critical) not let Saddam link the Gulf crisis to the Israeli/Palestinian issue. To do that, we had to

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build a network of United Nations resolutions to solidify the world community in support, and to give legitimacy to what I knew early on we were going to have to do. We evaluated each action in

terms of its suitability as a model for the future. Further, we had to keep the Soviets on board—although the Soviets' major client in the Mideast was Iraq, and there were many Soviet citizens there, including military advisers.

One of our biggest tasks was to get to the region military strength adequate for any contingency. There was a huge movement of forces. I remember a meeting at Camp David, Maryland, in October—Congress was fortunately out of session then. General Powell and General Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander in chief of Central Command, told me, in effect, "Mr. President, if you want to do this right, if you want to use sufficient military strength, if you want to guarantee to yourself and more importantly to the nation that we will reduce the risk to every single soldier, sailor, Marine, and airman, you have got to double the force." We had 250,000 at the time; that meant five hundred thousand. I said, "You've got it." One of the nice things about being president is that you can make decisions like that without having to go to Congress. It might clobber you when its members come back to town, but we did it, we doubled the force. We sent half a million Americans to serve their country halfway around the world.

We had to keep the coalition together in the United Nations, and that was not easy. It got even harder later, when the Iraqis fired Scud missiles into Israel; it was absolutely essential for us to go the extra mile diplomatically to make sure that Israel would not get involved. That was asking a great deal of the Israelis—missiles were falling on them—but if they had entered the war, it would have been impossible to hold the coalition together. On the other hand, Israel at one point asked for the "identification friend or foe" codes that would allow its aircraft to fly over Jordan and Saudi Arabia. We said no; our Air Force aircrews and naval aviators would do the job. Again, it was a hard sell, but to their credit as friends and allies, they stood down.

We sought and received from the UN Security Council a resolution—Resolution 678 of 29 November 1990—authorizing "all necessary means" to enforce previous council resolutions condemning the invasion if peaceful means failed

and Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait by 15 January 1991. We also had to go to the Congress for legislation giving the president authority to use whatever means were necessary to end the aggression. That was not easy, and the final vote—fifty-three to forty-seven—was more or less on party lines.

In our buildup of forces, we were fortunate to have strength in Europe, ready for combat. Some of those forces could now be spared from Europe, because the threat from the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact had sharply diminished. This was a fortunate set of circumstances that I frankly do not think that anyone who commands large operations in the future will be able to depend on.

It is worth emphasizing, given our success and what time does to memory, that the victory we achieved was not assured from the beginning. I'm sure that many remember Saddam Hussein's promises of trenches of fire and the "mother of all battles," and how the horrors of war were brought to the minds of the American people by a vigorously anti-action press. We had to convince the American people that we might have to fight. Also, the coalition was in constant need of tending. Saddam might stir up radicals in the Arab world; time was not on our side. It took many presidential telephone calls and much hand-holding. I ran up a huge phone bill, but the time, effort, and diplomacy we invested overseas paid off, especially in the United Nations, which proved remarkably supportive on resolutions.

I confess, however, that there were difficulties with Congress. I can understand why they did not want to authorize the use of force in the beginning—why, with the memories of Vietnam, they did not want to make the kind of military commitment that eventually we had to make. Congress supported the early defensive measures, but it parted company with me on using offensive means to end this aggression. It wanted to let sanctions work. We tried that for a long time—but sanctions did not do the job. In the background were constitutional questions that concerned us: should we ask for a declaration of war, or simply commit our forces to battle, as had happened many times in the past? When Congress passed its resolution, that ceased to be a major problem.

The war itself was a triumph of "smart" technology. The minute they turned to the intelligence channel—that would be CNN—everyone in America knew that this time the "smart bombs" really were smart, that the motivation of our Navy and Air Force pilots was unlike anything seen in recent years, that the military "had it together."

My approach to dealing with the military was that the White House would take care of the politics, diplomacy, and the United Nations, and if we had to fight, it would define the mission—and then get out of the way and let the military fight and win the war. That is exactly what happened. So the war was also a triumph of military training, coupled with leadership—in a sense, the product

of schools like the Naval War College. The result was a hundred-hour ground war, with few casualties—although like any president I was concerned about the loss of every single life. Only the commander in chief, the president, can commit people to battle, send somebody else's son or daughter into harm's way. In DESERT STORM the military made it look effortless—though, of course, it was not.

Military operations moved so fast that we did not completely devastate Iraq's Republican Guard divisions. The question is understandably asked, did we stop too soon? My answer is and will always be, no. We had defined the mission: it was

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not to kill Saddam Hussein; it was certainly not to occupy an Arab nation; it was to end the aggression against Kuwait. We had tried to do it peacefully; when that failed, we ended it militarily, with

the cooperation of many countries. If I had told General Schwarzkopf to send the 82d Airborne Division rolling into Baghdad, we would have become an occupying power in an Arab land. The coalition would have shattered instantly; only a handful of nations would have stayed. We would have made a hero out of a brutal dictator. The Madrid Conference, in which Arabs and Israelis sat down with each other for the first time, would never have started.

Some argue that if we had kept going only twenty-four hours more, we could have wiped out another, say, fifty thousand Iraqis fleeing on the "highway of death." The American military and the president of the United States do not measure success by how many people are killed, but by whether the mission has been completed. In this war—unlike Vietnam—we had a defined mission, and we carried it out.

Looking back, in what sense was the Gulf War a "preview of coming attractions"? What lessons did we learn? First, and most obviously, the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of threats to American interests or to international peace and security. If we take our security for granted, we do so at our own peril.

Second, American leadership remains absolutely indispensable. I say this with respect to all from abroad, but it is true—we are a nation blessed. If we do not act and lead, no one can or will take our place.

However, and third, though we are the world's only remaining superpower, we should not act unilaterally; in most cases we could not, even if we were so inclined. We have to make friends and allies whenever we can, and bring them along with us; if we have to fight, we will have people at our side. But we must *persuade* others to follow; we cannot command their participation—the national and presidential leadership studied in war colleges is hard and unrelenting work.

Fourth, the United Nations can be an invaluable foreign policy tool, but only if we invest the time and effort to make it so. We must not expect the United Nations to do things that it is not prepared to do, and we must resist the temptation to use it as a whipping-boy or a dumping ground for messy problems.

Fifth, we have the best-trained, best-equipped, and best-led forces, with the most technologically advanced weapon systems, in the entire world—yet that does not change the fact that war is a deadly business. If we pursue a “zero-casualty doctrine,” a policy of “immaculate coercion,” we will find ourselves unable to employ military force wisely or effectively in the service of American interests.

These are some of the lessons that I learned during that historic time. I am very proud to have been your commander in chief—the only thing I miss about being president is dealing with our superb military. Thank you all very much, and God bless you.