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Research Essay

**Strategic Leadership in The Gulf War:
Lessons from President Bush's Critical
Decisions to Begin the Gulf War**

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The US-led coalition won a decisive victory in the Gulf War when it conducted Operation Desert Storm. Without question the coalition was successful in achieving its overall objective of ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty. Controversy swirls though around the fact that some feel the war was unnecessary. They argue that the war could have been avoided completely if President Bush would have warned Saddam Hussein prior to the invasion of Kuwait that, if he invaded, the United States was going to come get him.¹ Even after Iraq invaded Kuwait, others argue that the Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait could have been secured through peaceful means. Predominant among these peaceful means was allowing time for the United Nations imposed sanctions to work.

Although the war ended successfully for the coalition, we need to examine the decisions made by President George Bush not to intervene during the Iraqi buildup on the Kuwait border and the decision to launch the attack into Kuwait against the Iraqis. Specifically in this paper, we will look at the conditions under which President Bush made strategic choices at the beginning of the Gulf War, why he decided what he did, and what we can learn from it. Heeding the lessons from these decisions will enable future strategic-level leaders to be as or more successful than this US-led coalition in achieving their objectives.

PURPOSE AND METHOD

What happened in the Presidential decisions to begin the Gulf War? Was the war necessary? Why did controversy and questions arise over these decisions? What lessons can be learned to improve strategic leadership in future conflicts?

The principal leadership lesson from President Bush's decisions to begin the Gulf War is that strategic level leadership must make correct information decisions on which to base strategic decisions to intervene politically or militarily in a hostile situation with an aggressor nation. To prove this thesis, this paper will begin by defining strategic leadership and strategic decision-making. The three types of decisions inherent to strategic decision-making will be introduced and explained. The influences on strategic level decisions will then be discussed in the context of the three decision types. Next, the critical aspects of these decision types will be explained through the historical example of the Cold War decision to launch nuclear weapons. Then President Bush's two most critical decisions to begin the Persian Gulf War will be analyzed in terms of these decision types. First, his decision not to confront Saddam Hussein prior to his attack into Kuwait will be examined. Then President Bush's decision for coalition forces to launch an offensive to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait will be analyzed. The conclusion will then summarize the lessons that can be learned about the nature of strategic leadership from these two critical strategic decisions of the Persian Gulf War.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING

While there has been quite a bit of leadership research concerning supervisors and middle managers, there has been little research accomplished on strategic leadership.² As a result, there is no universally accepted definition of strategic leadership in either government or private industry. The United States Army defines senior leadership and command as

the art of direct and indirect influence and the skill of creating the conditions for sustained organizational success to achieve the desired result . . . In the final analysis, leadership and command at senior levels is the art of reconciling competing demands according to priorities activated by a clearly formed vision, implemented by clearly communicated intent, and enforced by the toughness to see matters through.³

In terms of long-range planning time frames, senior leaders handle midrange planning and mission accomplishment from one to five years or more.⁴ The United States Army goes on to differentiate strategic leadership from senior leadership when it defines strategic leaders as those who:

Tailor resources to organizations and programs and set command climate . . . establish structure, allocate resources, and articulate strategic vision . . . Strategic leaders focus on the long-range visions for their organization ranging from 5 to 20 years or more.⁵

These definitions, however, describe timelines which are peacetime in nature. Since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a crisis situation, we need to transition these definitions to crisis, wartime situations.

According to the US Army Battle Command Laboratory, leadership is the means to “make it happen” as visualized.⁶ Therefore, for a crisis situation, we will adopt a definition of strategic leadership as the art of making the strategic vision happen as visualized to resolve the crisis or war in favor of the critical stakeholders for whom the strategic leader serves. A stakeholder is defined as one who commits resources to the effort and hence holds a stake in the outcome. Support by stakeholders ensures resources continue to flow to the strategic leader to accomplish his vision. If the stakeholders become disenchanted with the strategic leader and/or his vision, stakeholder resources and support will be withdrawn. Assuming stakeholders do not replace the strategic leader, the strategic leader will be forced to change his strategic vision to win back support of the stakeholders.

To be effective in resolving crisis or war in favor of critical stakeholders the strategic leader must be able to make critical strategic decisions. Decisions made to commence or terminate employment of military forces in a crisis or war are strategic and made at the highest level.⁷ At the highest level the contribution of the strategic decision-maker is more a matter of correctly introducing order into the complexity of the crisis, thereby allowing a feasible course of action to emerge, than of selecting a preferred solution from among several alternative courses of action through a tradeoff analysis.⁸ Hence, for a crisis situation we will adopt a definition of strategic decision-making as the ability to acquire,

understand, and organize the complexity of information about the crisis to allow a feasible course of action to emerge and be selected to resolve the crisis in favor of critical stakeholders. In the Gulf War crisis President Bush's critical strategic stakeholders were the American people, who provided the American political will and support for the US-led effort, and the nations of the US-led coalition, who contributed UN political support, forces, and legitimacy to the coalition effort.

As a strategic leader in a wartime situation, the President of the United States, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, exercises strategic command and control of US-led forces. To inherently understand and gain insights into President Bush's strategic leadership during the Gulf War, one must define the strategic command and control process as it existed during the Gulf War. The strategic command and control process is examined primarily from the perspective of decision-making, where the Commander-in-Chief – the decision maker – is distinct both from persons reporting the phenomena on which decisions are based, and from the people required to execute the President's decisions.⁹

According to generally accepted command and control theory, commanders make decisions of three types: operational, organizational, and informational.¹⁰ We usually think of commanders making operational decisions about employment of their forces. These decisions are the ones that are highly publicized and receive the most attention from the media, the public, and historians. Such

decisions are made though, only in light of prior organizational and information decisions.

Prior organizational decisions are made on the composition of the armed forces in terms of personnel, equipment, force structure, organization, and capabilities. Once organizations are manned, equipped, and trained, approved Operations Plans (OPLANs) or Operations Orders (OPORDs) establish a task organization, a strategic movement plan, and a chain of command to carry out wartime missions. This prior planning enables a timely military response to the most likely wartime missions.

Information decisions are made by commanders to establish what they believe the situation to be, and how that situation relates to the mission they are seeking to accomplish. While information decisions are not always stated outright, a commander's operational decisions, what actions subordinate commanders are to take, are always preceded by information decisions about what is actually happening.¹¹ The term "operational decision" is not only limited to decisions made at the "operational" level but is used for decisions taken at any level that are intended to result in military action. Most operational decisions in combat to apply force are tactical, are made by commanders close to the scene of action. Operational decisions made at the commencement or termination of hostilities are strategic and made at the highest level.¹² President George Bush's decision to launch an offensive against Iraqi troops in Kuwait and his decision to end the war

as Iraqi troops were pulling out of Kuwait are examples of wartime strategic decision-making.

We will now discuss the significant influences on strategic decision-making.

INFLUENCES ON STRATEGIC LEVEL DECISIONS – ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY AND THE “CNN EFFECT”

The nature of strategic leadership responding to a crisis, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, has undergone change due to advances in technology since the 1960's. Prior to the 1960's the President of the United States, in a wartime or conflict situation, issued strategic direction in terms of general objectives to provide latitude for field commanders to determine the level of force and tactical methods.

Today's Commander-in-Chief is able to influence battlefield decisions more directly and monitor progress on an almost real-time basis. In addition, the President often has current intelligence available to him not necessarily available to the field commander.¹³ Also affecting strategic level decision making is the so-called “Cable News Network (CNN) effect.” The “CNN effect” raises the possibility that widely available open-source information might influence the strategic commander's decision making.¹⁴ Reactions to events on nearly real-time television news by foreign governments, the domestic public, and the international community might influence Presidential decision-making that is not

in the best interests of achieving the strategic vision to resolve the crisis. For example, the scene of an American soldier being dragged through the streets of Somalia in 1993, caused the American president to change his strategic direction virtually overnight, ordering the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Somalia after the American public viewed this horrific scene on CNN.

INFLUENCES ON STRATEGIC LEVEL DECISIONS – SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND BUY-IN

In his book, Command in War, Martin van Creveld states that the history of command is an endless quest for certainty, resulting in a race between the demand for information and the ability of command systems to meet that demand.¹⁵ What's critical for the strategic level leader is to have at his disposal a command and control system that reduces his uncertainty enough to enable quality decisions. Quality decisions about what the situation is (information decision) so he can formulate a strategic vision of what he wants to accomplish. This is followed by organizational and operational decisions to bring that strategic vision to fruition.

The command and control process can be characterized as a web of human relationships and shared understandings.¹⁶ Hence the President must communicate the strategic vision with his informational, organizational, and operational decisions to subordinate force commanders, so that they achieve a

shared understanding of the vision and how that vision will be attained. They are then able to buy-in to the vision and accomplish it within the framework of the President's intent and understanding. The strategic command and control process relies on that shared understanding, an understanding that can be enhanced by common doctrine, a spirit of teamwork, and a continuous exchange of information.

This shared understanding must also be achieved between the strategic leader and all of his stakeholders, so the strategic leader and his stakeholders buy-in and commit to the vision. This shared

We will now examine strategic decision-making through the historical example of the Cold War decision to launch nuclear weapons to further illustrate the three decision types.

STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING HISTORICAL EXAMPLE – THE NUCLEAR WAR PERSPECTIVE

In the 1950's strategic command and control, and within it, strategic decision-making, centered on how to fight a nuclear war. Since no one had actually fought a nuclear war, the difficulties and complexities with commanding and controlling nuclear forces, while the nation itself was under nuclear attack, had to be imagined. Strategic command and control for nuclear forces, then and even today, demonstrate the three decision types made by strategic commanders. The strategic organizational decision was to man and equip nuclear forces to have a triad response capability. This triad included land-based Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), sea-based ICBMs, and nuclear bombers to achieve mutually assured destruction of any enemy that attacked the United States and Canada. This organization set the stage for nuclear war information and operational decisions. For information decisions, the variety of sensors and warning systems established and monitored by North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) collected information about the airspace in and around North America. The information collected from the sensors continuously fed into

the situation assessment. If this situation assessment indicated that North America might be under nuclear attack, the information and assessment reached the President. Once the President makes an information decision about what is happening, his focus shifts to making an operational decision about what action to take. Because only a very short time was expected to be available between the information decision and the strategic operational decision, detailed courses of action were developed for each foreseeable situation. These courses of action were like football plays: planned in advance and with great detail. This enabled operational decisions to be viewed as having been made over a very long period of time, awaiting only the making of an information decision in real time to trigger the final decision as to which option to execute.¹⁷ This achieved as much shared understanding and buy-in, as was possible in advance, between the NORAD stakeholders, the United States and Canada.

The transition of the focus of strategic command and control from responding to a nuclear war to one of managing conventional war or peace operations in a “CNN effect” environment has more similarities than readily meets the eye. Exhaustive detailed planning to develop “football plays” for the numerous conventional operations is virtually impossible to accomplish. When information becomes known to everyone at the same time through the “CNN effect,” and that information calls into question critical strategic stakeholder support for a strategic vision, the strategic leader may not have a plan to respond with quickly. The

decision-maker can be caught totally off-guard as the US President was when he was forced to make the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Somalia in 1993. Hence the President can no longer just issue strategic direction in terms of general objectives so field commanders can accomplish strategic objectives. He, his cabinet, and entire administration have to be vigilant so a “CNN factor” or other event does not derail his strategic vision in the eyes of his critical stakeholders before his vision can be achieved.

President Bush’s strategic decision not to confront Saddam Hussein prior to his attack into Kuwait will now be examined within the context of strategic leadership and strategic decision-making with the three decision types.

THE FAILURE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP TO PREVENT THE GULF WAR

On August 2, 1990 Iraq’s army attacked Kuwait. Within hours Kuwait capitulated and the Emir of Kuwait with most of his family fled to Saudi Arabia, where he sat out the war. Iraq’s action sent shockwaves throughout the world as neighboring countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, felt immediately threatened. Had Iraq also attacked these and other nearby countries successfully, Saddam Hussein would have controlled almost 50% of the world’s oil reserves.

The United States and the rest of the western world were clearly caught off guard by these events. Initially, the United States moved warships to the Gulf. On the morning of the invasion President George Bush said that, “We’re not discussing intervention.” Reporters replied, “You’re not contemplating any intervention or sending troops?” Bush stated, “I am not contemplating such action.”¹⁸

These words portrayed a President who was in crisis. The crisis occurred because his previous strategic vision with respect to Iraq had been shattered with this invasion of Kuwait. In his first year as President on October 2, 1989, Bush had issued the secret National Security Directive 26, which held that the United States wanted to develop normal relations with Iraq and bring Iraq into the family of nations.¹⁹ Specifically, the strategy was to use “economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior, and to increase our influence with Iraq.” This was implemented in November 1989 with a one billion-dollar aid package for Iraq. In 1990 Bush authorized an additional one billion dollars in credit guarantees for Iraq. However, the Bush administration provided this support with virtually no strings attached. The administration continued the Reagan era policy of silence on Saddam Hussein’s human rights violations; the most horrific of which was gassing the Kurds in 1988, despite congressional calls for sanctions.²⁰ Political scientists Edward Drachman and Alan Shank say it best when they state:

When Saddam began threatening Kuwait in early 1990, U.S. policy continued despite recognition that it had some problems. Bush gambled that continuing aid to Iraq, reiterating U.S. friendship with the Iraqi people, and denying that the U.S. military presence in the Gulf threatened Iraq, together would restrain Saddam's potentially aggressive behavior in the Gulf. . . . After Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2 1990, the Bush administration still tried to justify its support for Saddam. Though clearly a failure, the official line is that it had laudable intentions.²¹

Alan Friedman, an investigative journalist for the Financial Times of London, states Bush was not honest with the American people. According to Friedman, Bush engaged in a "systematic cover-up to avoid being politically embarrassed."²² He did not want to have to explain his earlier support for Saddam. This support used American tax dollars to help Saddam develop some of his most advanced weapons used during the Gulf War.²³

Other critics of Bush's policy, such as Senator Al Gore (Democrat, Tennessee), charged during the 1992 presidential election campaign that Bush ignored numerous warnings of a possible Iraqi attack that he should have anticipated. Worse, he had armed Saddam and provided him with the military arsenal with which to attack Kuwait.²⁴ According to then vice presidential

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The week of July 16, 1990, the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA's) intelligence officer for the Middle East and South Asia, Walter P. (Pat) Lang, Jr. saw Iraqi T-72 tanks begin to arrive by rail in the empty desert in southeastern Iraq, north of Kuwait, on morning satellite photos.²⁶ Lang was a 50-year-old retired Army colonel who was a Middle East expert, fluent in Arabic. He began to question, why had the tanks been moved hundreds of miles from the interior of Iraq? He identified the tanks from the Hammurabi Division of Iraq's Republican Guard Forces (RGFC), Iraq's most elite unit. In addition to various Iraq-Kuwait border disputes, Iraq had been complaining bitterly that Kuwait was exceeding oil production quotas set by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). This was driving oil prices down, costing Iraq substantial oil income. Within three days, by July 19, 1990, three RGFC armored divisions of 35,000 men and almost 1000 tanks were within 10 to 30 miles of the Kuwait border. Lang and other defense intelligence analysts concluded that Saddam Hussein was using the deployment as a threatening lever in the ongoing negotiation over oil.²⁷ This constituted ambiguous warning that Iraq would invade Kuwait.

Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chief's of Staff (CJCS) and President Bush's principal military advisor, read the intelligence summaries of the 35,000 troops on the Kuwait border and concluded the information was troubling, but not alarming.²⁸ However, over the next eight days five more divisions arrived, such that by July 25th eight Iraqi divisions of 100,000 men were on the Kuwait border.

Since Kuwait only had an army of 20,000 very marginally trained soldiers, many experts would argue this constitutes unambiguous warning that Saddam intends to invade Kuwait. However, Colin Powell denied this. As Bob Woodward writes in his book, The Commanders:

As he monitored the flow of information, Powell remained cool about the prospects for trouble. He knew what a field army had to do to prepare for combat, and the Iraqi Army was not acting like it was going to attack. Four things were missing: (1) communications networks were not in place – intercepts showed the traffic levels were too low for an invasion; (2) artillery stocks were not in place for offensive action; (3) other needed munitions were not there; and (4) there was an insufficient logistics “tail” – supply lines – capable of supporting attacks by armored tank forces.²⁹

However one has to wonder what General Powell was thinking. If Saddam was able to move approximately 100,000 men and 5,000 vehicles 300 to 400 miles in eleven days, how difficult would it be to move the necessary logistics to overrun a small country like Kuwait.

On that same day, July 25, 1990, the US Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, met with Saddam Hussein in his office. Instead of confronting Saddam about his massive troop build-up on the Kuwait border, she coddled up to him. According to the translated tapes of the meeting the conversation went like this:

“What can it mean when America says it will now protect its friends?” Saddam asked, in an apparent reference to (US Secretary of Defense) Cheney’s statement that the United States would stick by its friends in the Gulf. “It can only mean prejudice against Iraq. This stance plus maneuvers and statements which have been made has encouraged the UAE and Kuwait. . .

“The United States must have a better understanding of the situation and declare who it wants to have relations with and who its enemies are.”

Glaspie said, “I have direct instruction from the President to seek better relations with Iraq.”

“But how?” Saddam asked.

Glaspie said that more talks and meetings would help. She remarked that she had seen an ABC News profile of Saddam and his interview with Diane Sawyer. “The program was cheap and unjust,” Glaspie said. “And this is the real picture of what happens when the American media – even to American politicians themselves. These are the methods the Western media employs. I am pleased that you add your voice to the diplomats who stand up to the media. Because your appearance in the media, even for five minutes, would help us to make the American people understand Iraq.

This would increase mutual understanding. If the American President had control of the media, his job would be much easier.”

Later in the meeting Glaspie told Saddam, “But we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait.” She went on to say that the United States would insist on a nonviolent settlement. “I received an instruction to ask you, in the spirit of friendship – not in the spirit of confrontation – regarding your intentions.”

Saddam said that through the intervention of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak he had agreed to talks with the Kuwaitis.

“This is good news,” Glaspie said. “Congratulations.” She added that she had planned to postpone a trip to the United States the following week, but with this good news, she would leave Baghdad on Monday.³⁰

With an Iran-Iraq war-experienced field army of 100,000 men on the border of Kuwait enjoying a 5:1 overwhelming ratio of combat superiority over the inexperienced 20,000 man Kuwaiti Army, is this all the US Ambassador has to say to Saddam Hussein at this critical moment in history? Where was US Secretary of State James Baker to give his Iraqi Ambassador instructions on what to say to

Saddam Hussein? One begins to conclude that the entire Bush administration was in total denial about what they were seeing on those satellite photos. The Bush administration was certainly behaving like they did not want to admit what the imagery was telling them about Saddam's intentions.

Needless to say, Colin Powell was relieved when he read the cable from Glaspie on her meeting with Saddam. It appeared to suggest there was negotiating room between Iraq and Kuwait. As Bob Woodward writes, in Powell's mind

all the Iraqi troops on the border certainly indicated something strange was going on. But his days seemed to be filled with people and documents reporting strange, inconclusive goings-on. It was in some respects a world filled with fuzzy, blurred pictures, and his approach was to let time fine-tune them.³¹

For Pat Lang, the Middle East DIA intelligence officer, the show of force theory to explain Saddam's buildup on the Kuwait border did not pass the common sense test. Kuwait did not possess the intelligence capability to detect this buildup of troops. Unless the United States was passing this intelligence to Kuwait the show of force was being lost on the audience it was intended to influence, the Kuwaitis.³²

In early July, 1990, Pat Lang had attended a Rand Corporation seminar in which the participants analyzed an Iraqi threat against Kuwait. The seminar participants had concluded that the only way to forestall an Iraqi invasion against Kuwait was for the President of the United States to warn Saddam if he stepped over the border, the United States would come get him.³³

On Monday, 30 July, 1990, Pat Lang forwarded an assessment through the Director, CIA to Colin Powell that Iraq was getting ready to invade. Powell saw Lang's assessment but dismissed it because he did not see Iraqi communications, sufficient levels of munitions, and Iraqi airpower in place to support a ground attack. The CIA Deputy Director also told Powell that day that the Iraqis could launch an invasion. Powell dismissed both assessments as personal opinions.³⁴

By the 30th of July, the US Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, had arrived in Washington. Pat Lang gave her a briefing on the buildup that day as well. After describing the situation to her, he asked her, "Well, are you going to do anything?" She replied, "What can we do?"³⁵

Two days later, on 1 August, 1990, Lang observed on morning satellite photos that the Iraqi tanks had uncoiled and were lined up within three miles of the border, all facing Kuwait. When he provided this assessment to Colin Powell, the light came on. He told Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Cheney still thought it was a ploy. Hence Cheney did not sound the alarm at the White House.³⁶

At about 8:20 in the evening the President finally got word from his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, that Iraq may be about to invade Kuwait. It was then that National Security Council's (NSC's) Middle East expert, Richard Haass, suggested to President Bush that he call Saddam Hussein to convince him not to attack. However, moments later, a call came in reporting there was shooting in

downtown Kuwait City. Iraq had already invaded. President Bush then stated, “So much for calling Saddam.”³⁷

FAILURE TO PREVENT THE PERSIAN GULF WAR – STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

In his book Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics, Robert Jervis writes that the assumption, that decision-makers usually perceive the world quite accurately and that the misperceptions that do occur are random accidents, is inaccurate.³⁸ Psychology applied to international politics has shown throughout history that there are patterns to misperceptions concerning world situations between countries. The definition of cognitive dissonance helps us to explain the strategic leadership failure to prevent the invasion of Kuwait. Simply defined the definition of cognitive dissonance states:

two elements are in a dissonant relationship if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element would follow from another. . . . The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance. . . . When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information, which would likely increase the dissonance.³⁹

President Bush’s strategic vision for US relations with Iran had sought to develop “normal relations” with Iraq and saw Iraq replacing Iran as one of the “twin pillars” to secure US interests in the Gulf.⁴⁰ Of course, this strategic vision

was flawed because the information decision upon which it was based proved to be incorrect. The information decision that was flawed was that Iraq's behavior could be moderated through economic and political incentives. Hence the large US taxpayer-financed one billion-dollar aid package in 1989 and the one billion-dollars in loan guarantees in 1990 were provided to Iraq in the hope that Iraq could be brought into the "family of nations." Also implicit in these beliefs was that the United States could somehow trust Saddam Hussein.

With these beliefs underlying the United States strategic vision for Iraq in the Middle East, one can conclude that Colin Powell suffered from cognitive dissonance. Powell reduced his dissonance of the conflicting information that Iraq was a friend of the US and at the same time was assembling a 100,000 man Kuwait invasion force by dismissing the buildup as a show-of-force for dispute negotiations. Of course, as DIA analyst Pat Lang pointed out, Kuwait would have no way of knowing the invasion force was there unless the US told them. Powell should have questioned his cognitive dissonance after Iraqi forces had built up to a 5:1 overwhelming offensive posture five days prior to the invasion. Then, as principal military advisor to the President, he could have given the President sound military advice to phone Saddam and warn him that if he invades Kuwait, the United States will come after him. This would have even been too important of a warning for even Saddam Hussein to ignore. Besides the conventional option the US would have, Saddam would also have to wonder

about the nuclear option. This would be too much for Saddam Hussein to worry about. Instead, what happened is that the US Ambassador to Iraq soft-peddled Saddam in his office five days before the invasion.

To be fair, the whole administration is guilty of cognitive dissonance, not just Colin Powell. Organizational behavior theorists call this groupthink. Groupthink occurs when group members strive for solidarity and cohesiveness to such an extent that any questions or topics, which could lead to disputes, are avoided.⁴¹ Whereas cognitive dissonance applies to each individual, groupthink applies to the entire group. President Bush, Secretary of State James Baker (who gave Ambassador Glaspie no instructions), National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney were all suffering from groupthink when no one in the group sounded the alarm bells to a President who was suffering from cognitive dissonance himself. Even Norman Schwarzkopf, the Commander-in-Chief of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), who briefed the situation in the Pentagon on August 1st did not predict a ground invasion by Iraq.⁴² However, Powell, as principal military advisor to the President, had the responsibility to not just tell Secretary of Defense Cheney, but to warn the president himself of the impending invasion from a military viewpoint.

Later, George Bush wrote his thoughts right after he learned of the invasion.

I found it hard to believe that Saddam would invade. For a moment I thought, or hoped, that his move was intended to bring greater pressure on Kuwait and to force settlement of their

disputes, and that he might withdraw having made his point. I worried about the invasion's effect on other countries in the area, especially our vulnerable friend Saudi Arabia.⁴³

The final lesson to be learned is that, although a shared understanding and buy-in of a strategic vision is required by stakeholders for the vision to work, it will not work if that vision is flawed because it is based on faulty information decisions. In addition, if stakeholders such as the members of President Bush's cabinet and key advisors all fall into the groupthink trap and ignore information that call that vision into question, then the entire organization may fail or have to pay dearly for that mistake. In the case of the failure to prevent the Persian Gulf War, the US-led coalition would be forced to wage a war that cost billions of dollars to force Iraq out of Kuwait to restore the legitimate Kuwaiti government.

We will now turn to President Bush's strategic decision for the US-led Coalition Forces to attack Iraqi forces to eject them from Kuwait. We will see what strategic leadership lessons can be learned from that strategic decision.

THE STRATEGIC DECISION TO ATTACK IRAQI FORCES IN KUWAIT

For whatever strategic leadership shortcomings President Bush exhibited in failing to prevent the Persian Gulf War, he definitely applied his international experience and leadership to form a broad-based coalition of Western and Arab

countries to liberate Kuwait. The day after the Iraqi invasion he began to call other world leaders to build support for a coalition to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

He began by polling foreign leaders to form a political information decision on where these leaders stood. Margaret Thatcher stated:

If Iraq wins, no small state is safe. They won't stop here. They see a chance to take a major share of oil. It's got to be stopped. We must do everything possible. . . The Saudis are critical, we can't do anything without them. . . King Hussein was not helpful. He told me the Kuwaitis had it coming – they are not well liked. But he grudgingly agreed to weigh in with Saddam.⁴⁴

Next President Bush talked with King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. The King stated:

He (Saddam) doesn't realize that the implications of his actions are upsetting the world order. He seems to think only of himself. He is following Hitler in creating world problems – with a difference: one was conceited and one who is both conceited and crazy. I believe nothing will work with Saddam but the use of force. . . My conversation with him today was strict and strong, and I asked him to withdraw from Kuwait now, and that we would not consider any (imposed) regime representative of Kuwaiti public opinion or Arab public opinion. I told him I hold him responsible for the safety of all of the people in Kuwait – Kuwaiti or not. . . Mr. President, this is a matter that is extremely serious and grave. It involves a principle that cannot be approved or condoned by any reasonable principle or moral. . . I hope these matters can be resolved peacefully. If not, Saddam must be taught a lesson he will not forget the rest of his life – if he remains alive.⁴⁵

Next Bush spoke with President Ozal of Turkey. Bush summarized:

Early in the afternoon of August 3, I spoke with President Turgut Ozal of Turkey, who angrily said Saddam should “get his lesson.” He had been on the phone with King Fahd an hour earlier, “I told him that if the solution is that Iraq pulls back and Kuwait pays, that

is not a solution but another Munich. . . We should not repeat the mistakes made at the beginning of World War II.”⁴⁶

On August 5th Bush reported a conversation he had with Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

On August 5, Brian Mulroney told me of a discussion he had with Turgut Ozal. Ozal was prepared to blockade all oil coming out of Iraq, but warned there was another source through the Jordanian port at Aqaba on the Red Sea. He added that Baghdad had sent an emissary to try to wean Turkey away from the West. The Iraqi had brazenly told Ozal that Baghdad had no intention of pulling out and planned to annex Kuwait. “The West is bluffing,” he had said. Ozal believed that without Western action Iraq would probably invade the UAE and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

Bush also reported another conversation he had with Ozal the same day.

Ozal urged that we get started with sanctions as soon as possible, after which he would close the pipeline. He warned that we would have to consider military action. “Saddam is more dangerous than Qaddafi. He must go. He killed a hundred and twenty officials who refused to fight. If the blockade is very effective, his people may overthrow him.” The Iraqi emissary had boasted that they could live with a blockade, saying, “We are twenty million, we will fight to the end. . .”⁴⁸

On August 6 Bush had another conversation with Brian Mulroney.

When I spoke with Brian Mulroney, he filled me in on a conversation he had with Mubarak, who by then had already received the Iraqi emissary. The account was incredible and showed how cynical Saddam was about grabbing Kuwait.

“He said (the Iraqi) came in and announced that Kuwait has five hundred billion dollars they can put their hands on,” said Brian. “The first thing they would do with that money would be to help Egypt if Egypt supported Iraq. Mubarak said, ‘We won’t sell our principles.’” The Iraqi said his countrymen were prepared to die. “They are most unreasonable,” said Brian. “Mubarak has heard all sorts of rumors. He told the Iraqi he thought they would be driven

out of Kuwait. The Iraqi response is that they would never accept that.” Mubarak had said the UN resolution should be strictly executed, and that the Soviets agreed. Brian believed that Mubarak’s views would provide “cover” for the other Arab states that wanted to join our coalition. “What clearly happened is that the Iraqis have just robbed the bank and will split it up with whoever will support them,” he added.⁴⁹

Stories of Iraqi brutality in Kuwait began to surface. Bush recounted his conversation with the Kuwaiti Ambassador on 8 August.

That day I met with the Kuwaiti ambassador, who described to me his family’s experience and how they had been threatened. His wife had decided to stay in Kuwait, and he was very nervous about her safety. He told us how the vaults had been looted of billions of dollars’ worth of gold; how women had been raped; and there was pillaging and plundering. (I also learned from Margaret Thatcher the next day that a stewardess from a British plane had been raped by Iraqi soldiers. The British protested and the Iraqis said one of the men had been shot.) I thought we should get the word about Iraq’s brutality, but despite these reports, the world did not seem to be really aware of what was happening in Kuwait.⁵⁰

Bush continually worked troop contributions to the coalition force. On August 9th he talked to the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada to obtain force commitments to the coalition.

We were also gathering commitments from Western allies. Britain had been quick to send naval and air forces to the Gulf, announcing the deployment the day after we had. Margaret called me on August 9, to inform me of her decision. Members of the Commonwealth intended to contribute, but wanted others alongside them. Late in the afternoon I called Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who without equivocation said he was solidly behind us and offered to send warships, but he wanted Canada to commit as well. I immediately phoned Brian Mulrooney, who told me this helped him enormously in Canada. He indicated he would send aircraft and a small naval force – “but

don't hold me to it," he added hastily. Just as I had to do in the United States, he still had a job to do selling it.⁵¹

On August 10th a major victory was won, when at the Arab League Summit in Cairo, the Arab league voted to send a Pan-Arab force to defend Saudi Arabia. With this vote the coalition became a Western-Arab force. This gave the coalition great credibility. Saddam Hussein had suffered a severe Arab political defeat. President Mubarak of Egypt had been the leader in getting this vote through the summit.⁵²

The above excerpts from President Bush's memoirs are representative of conversations with numerous strategic leaders about information decisions he was making on political (Western-Arab support), social (Iraqi brutality in Kuwait), economic (sanctions against Iraq), and military (forming the Western-Arab coalition force) matters affecting the coalition's effort to remove Iraq from Kuwait. By August 23rd, President Bush began to reach conclusions.

The more I thought about it at this juncture, I could not see how we were going to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait without using force. There was no specific event that put doubts in my mind; instead it was the cumulative effect of my worries about the ability of Iraq to withstand political and economic pressure to withdraw from Kuwait, and whether waiting for the sanctions to work (if they did) risked too much.⁵³

Two and one-half months later President Bush made the announcement on November 8, 1990 that the United States would continue to deploy to buildup forces to sufficient size to launch an offensive action against Iraq in Kuwait. The

President would still have to work to win passage of the UN resolution giving Iraq until January 15, 1991 to withdraw from Kuwait or face attack. In addition, the administration would need to acquire congressional support. However, the key decision to go to an offensive force was the critical organizational decision prior to the operational decision to begin the attack on January 16, 1990.

THE DECISION TO ATTACK IRAQI FORCES IN KUWAIT – STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

For whatever strategic leadership failings President Bush appeared to make in not intervening to prevent Saddam from taking Kuwait, he definitely applied his international experience and leadership to form a broad-based coalition of Western and Arab countries to liberate Kuwait. The experience of misreading Saddam during the buildup of Iraqi forces on the Kuwait border, taught President Bush to take personal charge of his information decisions on which to base his strategic decisions to form the coalition force and launch an offensive attack against Iraqi forces in Kuwait.

President Bush entered into an international chess match with Saddam Hussein to see who could win the most support for their causes. George Bush's domestic and international experiences at high levels of government proved decisive in winning this chess match with Saddam. As a former United States Ambassador to United Nations (UN), he understood how to direct Secretary of State James Baker

and US Ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, to pass a series of UN Security Council resolutions. These resolutions first condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and ultimately authorized the use of force to eject Iraq from Kuwait to restore the legitimate Kuwaiti government.

President Bush's former experience as US Ambassador to China enabled him to direct Baker and Pickering to secure the support of the Soviet Union and China for these key resolutions on the Security Council. Since both of these countries have a veto on the Security Council, their support was absolutely crucial for securing UN legitimacy for the offensive against Iraq in Kuwait.

Probably the most critical of George Bush's attributes was his ability to network with other foreign leaders to build support for the campaign against Iraq. It was through this networking that George Bush was.

able to achieve his strategic vision for the operation as articulated in his strategic objectives:

First, the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Second, the restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government. Third, security and stability for the Gulf. Fourth, the protection of American citizens abroad.⁵⁴

By achieving these strategic objectives, President Bush was able to resolve the Persian Gulf Crisis in favor of his critical strategic stakeholders, the American people and the nations of the coalition.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the principal leadership lesson from President Bush's decisions to begin the Gulf War is that strategic level leadership must make correct information decisions on which to base strategic decisions to intervene politically or militarily in a hostile situation with an aggressor nation. The paper began by defining strategic leadership as the art of making the strategic vision happen as visualized to resolve the crisis or war in favor of the critical stakeholders for whom the strategic leader serves. Strategic decision-making in a crisis was defined as the ability to acquire, understand, and organize the complexity of information about the crisis to allow a feasible course of action to emerge and be selected to resolve the crisis in favor of critical stakeholders. Informational, organizational, and operational decisions, which are inherent to

strategic decision-making, were introduced and explained. The influences on strategic level decisions: technology, the “CNN effect,” and shared understanding and buy-in were discussed in the context of these decision types. The Cold War decision model to launch nuclear weapons was used to illuminate the critical aspects of the three decision types. Then President Bush’s two most critical decisions to begin the Persian Gulf War were analyzed in terms of these decision types.

First, President Bush’s decision not to confront Saddam Hussein prior to his attack into Kuwait was examined. It was found that the cognitive dissonance of President Bush, his cabinet, and military advisors caused them to ignore the unambiguous information that Saddam would invade Kuwait. This occurred because it ran counter to the administration’s strategic vision of Iraq as a country coming into “the family of nations.” This caused President Bush and his advisors to fall into the groupthink trap. Not considering seriously the possibility Saddam may actually invade Kuwait, President Bush and his military advisors failed to make the decision to warn Saddam not to invade Kuwait because the US would retaliate. President Bush failed to make this decision because he had made a faulty information decision concerning his strategic vision about Iraq in the first place. Had President Bush made this decision, it is likely that he could have prevented the Persian Gulf War.

Next President Bush's decision for coalition forces to launch an offensive to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait to restore the legitimate Kuwaiti government was analyzed. Here President Bush's previous international and domestic experiences, coupled with an uncanny ability to network with Western and Arab leaders, enabled him to make correct information decisions about other nation's support for the coalition and Saddam's intentions after he invaded Kuwait. He was then able to make correct organizational decisions about the coalition force, particularly its composition and the US contribution. With these decisions set in place, he was able to make the operational decision to launch the offensive against Iraq to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait on January 16, 1990.

These decisions comprised President Bush's strategic vision to resolve the Gulf Crisis in favor of his critical stakeholders, the American people and the coalition nations. He achieved shared understanding and buy-in of this vision as expressed by: the UN resolutions, the US congressional vote supporting the use of force, and the commitment of forces by the coalition nations for the attack into Kuwait. This vision, and its associated organizational and operational decisions, was made possible because President Bush was able to make the correct information decisions about other nation's support for the coalition and Saddam's intentions after he invaded Kuwait. This contrasts with President Bush's inability to make correct information decisions regarding Saddam's intentions to invade Kuwait. If President Bush had warned Saddam, a great likelihood exists the war

could have been avoided. Therefore, in dealing with an aggressor nation like Iraq in a hostile situation, one can conclude that strategic level leadership must make correct information decisions on which to base strategic decisions to intervene politically or militarily in a hostile situation with an aggressor nation.

With correct information decisions about other nation's support for the coalition and Saddam's intentions after he invaded Kuwait, President Bush was able to accomplish his strategic vision for the end of the Persian Gulf War as it achieved the four strategic objectives he had laid out from the beginning. President Bush, in so achieving, was able to satisfy the interests of his critical strategic stakeholders, the American people and the nations of the US-led coalition.

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- ⁹ Snyder, 11.
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- ¹⁵ Martin van Creveld, Command in War (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985) 264, 265.
- ¹⁶ Snyder, 152.
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- ¹⁸ Woodward, 225.
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- ²⁸ Woodward, 207.
- ²⁹ Woodward, 212.
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- ³¹ Woodward, 212.
- ³² Woodward, 217.
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- ³⁵ Woodward, 218.
- ³⁶ Woodward, 221, 222.
- ³⁷ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) 302.
- ³⁸ Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 3.
- ³⁹ Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957) 13, 31.
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- ⁴¹ D. R. Forsyth, Group Dynamics, 3rd ed. (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999) 335.
- ⁴² Woodward, 220.
- ⁴³ Bush and Scowcroft, 303.
- ⁴⁴ Bush and Scowcroft, 320.
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- ⁴⁶ Bush and Scowcroft, 326.
- ⁴⁷ Bush and Scowcroft, 331, 332.
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