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The Persian Gulf War

Terms & People to Know

Cold War

President George H.W. Bush

economic blockade

economic sanctions

coalition forces

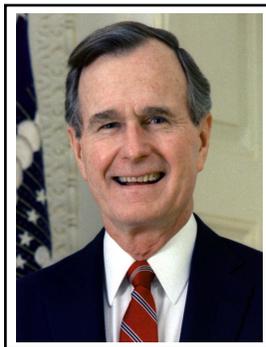
Osama bin Laden

☀ On July 25, 1990, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, met with Saddam Hussein at the presidential palace in Baghdad. Their conversation focused on Saddam's complaint that Kuwait was pumping oil that rightfully belonged to Iraq from deposits along the Iraq-Kuwaiti border. The Iraqi dictator also complained that Kuwait was holding down oil prices to slow his country's economic recovery from the Iran-Iraq War.

☀ When Glaspie left the meeting, she believed that she had clearly warned Saddam of the dangers of using force to resolve his dispute with Kuwait. The conversation didn't make the same impression on Saddam Hussein. Eight days later, 100,000 Iraqi troops poured across the desert border into Kuwait.

☀ In the late 1980s the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War had given way to a spirit of cooperation. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union had sought to build bridges to the West. Moreover, the Soviet Union was beginning to fall apart under the weight of an ailing economy.

☀ Iraq had been a close ally of the Soviets during the Cold War. But within hours of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Gorbachev stopped arms shipments to Saddam and joined the United States in supporting a UN Security Council resolution demanding Iraq's immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. With the Soviets on his side, President George H.W. Bush had an opportunity to steer the international system in a new direction.



☀ Bush spoke of building a "new world order" in which the world's leading powers would work together to prevent aggression and enforce the rule of law internationally. He intended to make Saddam Hussein's grab for Kuwait a test case. At the same time, America's traditional interest in oil and Israel continued to figure into Bush's considerations. Decisions made during the Persian Gulf crisis would have a lasting effect on U.S. policy in the Middle East.



☀ In the days immediately following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush's top priority was to prevent Saddam Hussein's military from seizing the oil fields of northeastern Saudi Arabia.



☀ Iraq's occupation of Kuwait had given him control of 1/4 of the world's oil reserves. If Saddam was able to occupy Saudi Arabia, he would have nearly half of the world's oil under his control. Bush rushed American troops to the region to block the Iraqi army's path.

☀ Once Saudi Arabia was protected, the president carefully built domestic and international support for stronger measures against Iraq. First he pushed for an economic blockade against Iraq. (A blockade is an effort to isolate a particular area, by force. An economic blockade is a block or isolation of a country so they couldn't trade with other countries). In November 1990, Bush won UN approval to use "all necessary means" to force Iraq out of Kuwait. A deadline was set - January 15, 1991 - for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

☀ As the deadline approached, the United States positioned 540,000 troops in Saudi Arabia. American's European allies, as well as several Arab states, contributed forces as well. Bush favored attacking Iraq quickly. He doubted that economic sanctions, or bans on trade, alone would pressure Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait.



☀ President Bush also felt that the coalition of thirty-nine nations he had assembled would not hold together long. He was worried about Saddam's appeal in the Arab world and how this popularity would deepen hostility towards the United States throughout the Middle East.

☀ Within the United States, Americans were split about how the country should respond to Iraq's aggression. U.S. leadership was also divided. Opposition to using force was especially strong from some U.S. military leaders concerned about possible casualties (dead or wounded soldiers). Many warned that Iraq would use chemical weapons if attacked. There were worries that Iraq might even possess nuclear bombs. Others argued that economic sanctions should be given more time to take effect. When Bush asked the Senate to approve military action, his request passed by only five votes.

☀ In making his case, President Bush said, "Our jobs, our way of life and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein."



☀ After the assault against Iraq began in mid-January 1991, Americans quickly rallied behind the war effort. Despite Saddam's prediction of "the mother of all battles," his army proved no match for the United States and its allies. For over a month, coalition warplanes pounded Iraqi targets. By the time allied ground troops moved forward in late February 1991, communication links within Iraq's army had been shattered. Coalition forces retook Kuwait's capital, Kuwait City, with little resistance.

☀ After 100 hours, President Bush brought the ground war to a halt. He decided not to destroy Iraq's retreating army, believing that a weakened and contained Saddam was better than an Islamic government in Iraq like the one in Iran.

☀ The Persian Gulf War was one of the most lopsided conflicts in history. While Iraq did launch Scud missiles into Israel and Saudi Arabia, they did not cause a lot of damage.

☀ Saddam inflicted his heaviest blows against the environment by ordering Iraqi troops to set 700 Kuwaiti oil wells on fire and to spill millions of gallons of oil into the Persian Gulf creating the world's largest environmental disaster.



☀ In all, 146 American troops were killed during the war. (Coalition forces suffered a total of 260 deaths.) Iraq lost as many as 100,000 people, both soldiers and civilians, in the war.

☀ Through a combination of power and persuasion, the United States had won greater influence in the Middle East. At the same time, there were fresh responsibilities. Once the fighting in the Persian Gulf ended, leaders in the region looked to the United States to maintain the new American-made order.

☀ The war against Iraq elevated the region's importance from the American perspective. It also convinced Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the smaller states of the Persian Gulf that an American military presence was needed in the region to safeguard their own security.



☀ Yet the presence of more than fifteen thousand American troops in the Persian Gulf created tensions of its own. Unlike the people of Western Europe, the Americans and the Arabs of the Persian Gulf do not share common values and culture. For the United States, increased involvement in the Middle East has not been without cost.

☀ From the Arab standpoint, the U.S. military presence represents



a painful reminder of the Arab world's weaknesses and divisions. It also angered many people, including extremists like Osama bin Laden and his followers, who believe that foreigners do not belong in Islamic countries. Bin Laden was especially upset over the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the country where the prophet Muhammad (the founder of Islam) was born.

☀ In addition, the wealth that oil has brought to the kingdoms of the Persian Gulf has brought resentment from their Arab neighbors. For example, Kuwaitis did not receive much sympathy from most of the Arab world after their country was overrun by Iraq. At the time, more than 500,000 foreigners performed most of the work in Kuwait. Since Iraq's defeat, Kuwaitis have rebuilt their country with labor from outside the Arab world, while counting on the United States for protection.

☀ In addition to the physical presence of U.S. soldiers, the Middle East is also bristling with American weapons. The region is the world's largest market for arms exports, accounting for over half of the overseas sales of American weapons manufacturers. The Persian Gulf states buy billions of dollars worth of weapons every year.

Questions for Understanding:

1. Why did Saddam Hussein order his army to invade Kuwait?
2. How did Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev react when Iraq invaded Kuwait?
3. What was George H. W. Bush's "new world order?"
4. Why did President George H. W. Bush immediately send troops to Saudi Arabia after Iraq invaded Kuwait?
5. Why were some U.S. military leaders opposed to using force?

6. Why did President Bush decide to allow Saddam to stay in power?

7. What did the Iraqi troops do as they retreated from Kuwait?

8. Why does the presence of American troops in the Persian Gulf create tensions?

9. How do Arab nations regard the U.S. military presence?

10. Why was Osama bin Laden upset over the presence of U.S. troops?