

# Chemical Maggie? Thatcher's handling of the crisis caused by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and lessons for Boris Johnson



**Nigel Ashton** discusses Margaret Thatcher's handling of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and draws lessons for future prime ministers.

How far can an international crisis protect an embattled Prime Minister from political peril at home? Amid Russia's war on Ukraine, the question remains relevant in 10 Downing Street. Precisely the same question faced Margaret Thatcher during her final months in office. Thatcher's resignation is almost universally remembered as having resulted from her loss of Cabinet support due to differences over Europe and the poll tax. But look closer and her erratic handling of the crisis caused by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was also a significant factor.

Thatcher's earlier, successful handling of the Falklands War in 1982 is widely regarded as the watershed moment in her premiership. Her determination that Argentine aggression in the South Atlantic would not stand was vindicated as Britain emerged victorious. So, when the Kuwaiti crisis broke in August 1990, the prime minister found herself once more apparently in her element. Demonstrating her credentials as a war leader would surely help see off discontent over Europe and the poll tax. There was much in common between the Falklands and Kuwaiti crises, both of which involved clear breaches of international law by invading powers.

But there were also crucial differences. Whereas over the Falklands Thatcher had gritted her teeth and accepted the initial US attempt to seek a diplomatic resolution, over the Gulf she was much less restrained in highlighting what she saw as US weakness. So, in May 1982, her private rebuke to President Reagan, in which she reproached him that 'our principles are no longer what we believe, nor those we were elected to serve, but what the dictator will accept', was never sent. In 1990, by contrast, her reproach to President Bush 'this is no time to go wobbly, George' was leaked as a public lesson. And it was not appreciated by the decorated former World War Two naval pilot. In his first message to John Major after he had succeeded Thatcher in Number 10 Bush pointedly observed that 'the United States was not – to use Mrs Thatcher's phrase – going wobbly. It was just a question of being seen to be going the extra mile for peace.'

In fact, as the crisis unfolded Thatcher showed herself to be fundamentally out of sympathy with Bush's approach of building multilateral support for action through the United Nations. The UN she believed was a diplomatic swamp and venturing into it would only sap the West's resolve to act in defence of its own interests. Senior officials were astonished that she thought she could 'tell the Americans how to do this'. More significantly, her Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd wrote privately that 'the PM, increasingly Boadicean, is now definitely of the war party.'

When US Secretary of State James Baker told Thatcher of the US's intention to seek a UN resolution authorising the use of force, Thatcher told him: 'You don't need it politically'. Baker's reply was even more withering for the courtesy with which it was delivered: 'With all due respect ma'am, I think you need to let us be the judge of what we need politically'.

But perhaps the two most damaging features of Thatcher's handling of the Gulf crisis which directly undermined her position with senior colleagues were her obsessive secrecy and her extraordinary advocacy of the use of chemical weapons against Iraqi forces.

During the crisis Thatcher evidently saw communication at the highest level with the United States as simply too important to be shared with the responsible ministers. So, when her Private Secretary Charles Powell asked her whether a discussion with the US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft about war plans should be shared with Foreign Secretary Hurd and Defence Secretary Tom King, Thatcher's response was telling: 'no need to say anything to others'. It was an extraordinary state of affairs for the PM to instruct her Private Secretary not to brief the two key responsible ministers about preparations for war.

On the possible use of chemical weapons, her position was even more startling. Thatcher pressed the US repeatedly to be ready to retaliate with Chemical Weapons in response to any Iraqi use. The normally hawkish US Defence Secretary Dick Cheney must have been astonished to find himself significantly out-hawked on this issue by Thatcher who berated him that 'if we wished to deter a CW [chemical warfare] attack... we must have CW weapons available'. Once again, the put-down from the Americans was direct: 'the President had a particular aversion to chemical weapons' Cheney shot back. But she remained undeterred: 'it would be justified for the United States to use CW against Iraqi armoured formations in Kuwait if the Iraqis used it first', she insisted. The Iron Lady had morphed into Chemical Maggie.

Throughout the crisis Thatcher kept senior colleagues at arms' length. When her Chancellor John Major stepped into Number Ten at the end of November 1990, he had to start from scratch in building up a picture of Britain's preparations for war. Normal decision-making processes were bypassed to such an extent that one senior official later confided: 'If things had gone wrong, we might have had difficulty in convincing a Franks-type inquiry that all the big decisions to commit UK forces were properly taken.' This imperial style at a time of crisis was a significant factor in her demise.

So, what can Boris Johnson learn from the circumstances surrounding Thatcher's fall? Not only does managing a major international crisis not insulate you from domestic threats, mishandling such a crisis can undermine a precarious position still further. Crisis management is about the careful calibration of response and the precise choice of words for maximum effect. Losing the confidence of allies, straying from the script for rhetorical effect, and bypassing proper processes can all prove politically fatal.

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Note: the above draws on the author's latest book [False Prophets: British Leaders' Fateful Fascination with the Middle East from Suez to Syria](#) (Atlantic Books, 2022).

### About the Author



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