Fred Halliday

The Gulf War 1990-1991 and the study of international relations

Article (Published version)
(Refereed)

The Gulf War 1990–1991 and the study of international relations*

FRED HALLIDAY

Introduction: IR and the contemporary era

The Gulf crisis of 1990–1991 was, by any standards, one of the more significant international crises of the post-1945 epoch.[1] It involved the mobilization of around one million armed men, the diplomatic involvement of much of the international community, and a war that, for all its limited character, was a significant case of inter-state conflict. In what follows I do not want to dwell on the actual course of this war or to examine in detail specific aspects of the history, not least because the broad outline of what happened is already well known.[2] I do, however, want to look at this conflict in broader perspective, and from two vantage points in particular, each pertinent to the study of international relations (IR).

First I would like, with the benefit of at least a little hindsight, to ask some questions about the significance of this war, and how, in retrospect, our evaluation of it may already have shifted. The other, more extended vantage point from which I would like to examine the war is that of the question of its implications for the study of international relations as an academic discipline. Here we often encounter two problems, two forms of reserve. On the one hand, many people, including practitioners and general readers of the press, doubt whether there is any need for an academic discipline of IR at all, or assume that it is just commentary, with a bit

---

[1] The analysis presented here draws on a wide range of discussions held during and after the Gulf War, in the United Kingdom, in the United States and the Middle East. I am particularly grateful to the participants in the one-day seminar 'The Gulf War and International Relations' held at the International Relations Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science on 16 June 1992: Falih Abd al-Jabir, Michael Donelan, Lawrence Freedman, Christopher Hill, Efraim Karsh, Ken Matthews, Michael Rustin, Steven Smith, and Paul Taylor. Several publications by them are referred to in subsequent notes.

[2] Of the multitude of books on the crisis, the following are amongst the most informative and judicious: Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990–1991, Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (London, 1993); Ken Matthews *The Gulf Conflict and International Relations* (London 1993); John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Origins of the Kuwait Conflict and the International Response* (London, 1991). Freedman and Karsh are especially good on Western decision-making, Matthews is exemplary on the analytic implications for IR.

of historical and moral depth, on current affairs. Those of us who work in the field of IR theory are forever being hectored by philistines who tell us that there is no need for concepts in such a field. But, one may ask, where were the men of reality on the night of 2 August 1990, when Saddam was occupying Kuwait? Asleep in Surrey, or about to go to sleep in Arlington, Virginia, or Bethesda, Maryland, is the answer. Our justification must be not that we can predict but that, beyond any insights we can cast on events contemporary or historical, we can bring out some of the underlying issues, analytic and moral, that are posed by international politics.

On the other hand, and in part because of this public depreciation, and the perils of commentary on current affairs, there is always the temptation to argue that IR as a discipline has no need to respond to the immediate. But like all other social sciences, it is related, and should recognize itself as such, to contemporary events and concerns, if not immediately, then mediately, in an engaged but independent, and critical, way. The whole history of social science is indeed one of intellectual activity, whether taught in a university or not, proceeding by some response, be it critical, outraged, or collusive, to events in the real world; IR is not, and should not be, any different. Economics began as a reflection on problems of trade and the industrial revolution; sociology as a response to urbanization; political science in reaction to democratization and problems of governance; geography as a reflection on the rise of a world market and of empire; psychology in response to a new awareness of mental illnesses. In our case the academic origins lie, in Aberystwyth above all where the first department of international relations in Britain (and probably the first department in the world) was established, in the response to World War I and as a reflection, mediate but engaged, on why the efforts of diplomats, lawyers, peace campaigners, industrialists, feminists, working-class leaders and the rest, had not been able to stop the slaughter of 1914–1918. The challenge facing us, as much as for any social scientists, is to decide on what, in the established tradition, is pertinent, and where new problems are posed: there is much in Machiavelli, Kant, Marx, even Woodrow Wilson that is relevant to-day; there are also developments that prompt a modicum of rethinking.

Retrospection

Many claims were made at the time as to the implications of this crisis for the international system as a whole, and for the Middle East in particular: some of these at least would seem to require retrospective qualification. Here I would like to address four of the broad issues that were so raised.

In the first place, this war had little or nothing to do with something called 'a New International Order'. This was a phrase used by US President George Bush at the time, but he stopped using it soon afterwards; indeed, the only people to go on using it were critics of US and Western policy looking for a convenient object to attack. Bush's 'order' was supposed to refer in part to relations between states, and the prevention of aggression, and in part to the situation within states, and the promotion of democracy. The former was a major component of the war effort, the latter only secondarily so: in this sense, the Western response was not 'new' at all,

but a relatively consistent part of the post-1945 international system. Much was made of the issue of 'double standards' in regard to the Western defence of Kuwait, but the defence of an established sovereign state against full annexation by another state was a relatively rare event.[3] Insofar as the 'new' order meant anything, it referred to the situation that prevailed from 1988, and for most of 1989, in which the two superpowers, formerly at odds with each other in the Cold War, sought to solve a range of Third World conflicts in which they had previously been on opposing sides. These included the Arab-Israeli dispute, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Namibia, Nicaragua, El Salvador and the Horn of Africa. If one can say about these efforts that they had some success, they were not characteristic of a 'new', let alone more orderly, international system, for three reasons: first, because some of the problems were not liable to solution at this time and continued;[4] secondly, because the collapse of the Soviet Union as a global power in 1990–1 meant that one pillar of the new order was gone; and thirdly, because, with the collapse of communism and of the control, unwelcome as it may have been, which the Cold War brought to international relations, a whole range of new regional problems emerged which no amount of great power involvements seemed able to resolve— most notably the Balkans, and Transcaucasia.

A second general judgement on the Gulf War came from critics of the war who, rightly suspicious of the hegemonic import in the term 'New World Order' and aware that the US was now acting largely unchallenged, saw the Gulf crisis as presaging more unrestrained US aggression and intervention and the re-establishment of US hegemony over its allies.[5] Here, whatever the justice of their particular judgements on the US role in the Kuwait crisis, the critics mistook the broader direction of international relations. US public opinion, and Congress in particular, while in the end generally supportive of the Gulf policy, did not favour a greater international military role for the United States and, as demonstrated in the 1992 presidential elections, wanted to turn away from international involvements and related expenditures towards a concentration to US domestic politics. For many involved in other crises, most notably the Balkans, the problem became not *too much* but *too little* US involvement, whether diplomatic, military or financial. Further US military interventions in the Third World could not be ruled out, but the removal of the Cold War context, and the rising alarm at domestic issues, made the United States less, not more, interventionist. As for strengthening the US

---

[3] Post-1945 history has several instances of states being annexed by more powerful neighbours, but *at the moment at which they became independent*: Palestine, partitioned by Israel and Jordan in 1948–9, Western Sahara and East Timor in 1975, Bosnia in 1992. Tibet in 1949–50 was a possible further candidate in that one can assume it would have organized itself to acquire international diplomatic recognition, following the British departure from India in 1947, if a little more time had elapsed.

[4] Thus the conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, Cyprus all defied such international resolution.

[5] For representative views, see Michah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (eds.), *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York, 1991); John Gittings (ed.), *Beyond the Gulf War, The Middle East and the New World Order* (London, 1991); Victoria Brittain (ed.), *The Gulf Between Us: Gulf War and Beyond* (London, 1991); Haim Bresheeth and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.), *The Gulf War and the New World Order* (London, 1991). Among the most persuasive critics of the war were Noam Chomsky, whose analysis is in both the Sifry and Cerf and the Bresheet and Yuval-Davis volumes, and Regis Debray, 'La Guerre en proces', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 1371, 14–20 Feb. 1991, pp. 41–51.

position *vis à vis* its commercial competitors, there is little evidence that Washington gained anything, beyond the $55 billions of cash to pay for the war itself, from its efforts over Kuwait. There may have been a small combat charge, a contemporary form of seigniorage rake-off, but in the broader pattern of things it was not much.

A third broad conclusion drawn at the time was that this war represented in some sense the start of a new, or in other ways revived, global conflict between the 'West' and a new enemy, 'Islam', i.e. a new version of the Crusades. Saddam Hussein certainly sought to mobilize Islamic sentiment behind him, calling for *jihad* and placing the Islamic credo *la Allah ila Allah* ('there is no God but God') on the Iraqi flag;[6] many who warned against taking military action prior to January 1991 did so on the grounds that it could irrevocably exacerbate relations between the West and the Arab and Islamic peoples. Here too closer examination reveals a less neat picture. First of all, Saddam's regime was hardly in the forefront of Islamic radicalism, having fought revolutionary Islamic Iran for eight years and having persecuted the opposition clergy at home.[7] The two main rivals for leadership of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia and Iran, both distanced themselves from Iraq, and even Iran, while unwilling formally to back the US intervention, denounced Baghdad and ensured that its followers took a neutral stance during the war. There was a considerable amount of pro-Iraqi sentiment in the Arab world and elsewhere, but this had as much if not more to do with nationalistic opposition to a Western military intervention in a Third World area as it had to do with religion: pro-Iraq sentiment was probably as high in predominantly Hindu and increasingly anti-Islamic India as it was in, say, Egypt or Algeria. On the Western side, there has been a lot of loose talk about a new war with 'Islam', but this is largely nonsense, if not the self-interested exaggeration of arms salesmen and defence experts. The 'West', i.e. the group of developed democracies, as such does not need an enemy, in communism, Islam or anything else, and its historic dynamic, if there is one, has been to make the whole world homogeneous. Marxists who argue for the West's need of a foe would do well to re-read the *Communist Manifesto*; capitalism's destructive dynamic lies in its knocking down Chinese walls, in making the whole world like itself. If there is a Third World threat to-day it is much more from rising industrial powers in the Far East and Latin America than in the Islamic world. It is often forgotten too that for much of the 1980s when the United States, and more specifically the CIA, was involved in its largest ever covert operation, this was in support of Islamist forces in Afghanistan.

Finally, the war was seen at the time as a turning point in the history of the modern Middle East. Subsequently, it has been claimed that the war was the most important event since the collapse of the Ottoman empire.[8] The particular ways in

---

[6] On the Islamic dimension, see Gilles Kepel, 'La carte islamique de Saddam Hussein', *Le Monde*, 11 January 1991; Jean-Michel Dumay, 'La "guerre sainte" comme arme idéologique', *Le Monde*, 20–21 January 1991; Fred Halliday 'The Fractured umma: Islamist Movements, Social Upheaval and the Gulf War', *The Oxford International Review*, 2, no. 3 (1991), pp. 28–32; George Joffe, 'Middle Eastern Views of the Gulf Conflict and its Aftermath', *Review of International Studies*, 19 (1993), pp. 177–99. For a position opposed to Saddam Hussein from within an Islamic perspective, see Ghazi Algosaibi, *The Gulf Crisis: An Attempt to Understand* (London, 1993).

[7] On the Islamic opposition to Saddam, see Hanna Batatu, 'Shiʿi Organisation in Iraq: al-Daʿwah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin', in Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie (eds.), *Shiʿism and social Protest* (New Haven, 1986).

[8] Bassam Tibi, *Conflict and War in the Middle East, 1967–91* (London, 1993), p. 165.

which it was new, or marked a new era for the region, were, however, not at first clear. It certainly was new in the coalition it produced: for the first time the armies of Arab states seriously fought another Arab state, and, although masked by decades of rhetoric about the US role, this was the first time US forces had in any significant way actually engaged in combat in the region. It also marked a further step in the decline of an effective, political, pan-Arab nationalism. If it gave an impulsion to a general sense of Islamic grievance the latter had many other, ongoing causes, notably socio-economic conditions within states. Some of the expectations raised at the time were not, however, borne out: the Iraqi regime, although weakened, did not fall; the Palestinians, although apparently alienated from both Gulf Arabs and the West by their sympathy for Iraq, were soon and most unexpectedly involved in the Madrid peace negotiations. As far as the Arab states of the Gulf themselves are concerned, there was some political change, evident in the elections in Kuwait and in a somewhat more overt opposition in Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain.[9] Yet in these states, the margin of political freedom remained small and was still shrouded in evasive invocations by the ruling families of supposedly different 'Islamic', 'Arab' or 'tribal' political traditions. Yet here, as in assessing the impact on Iraq, too little time has elapsed. It would be premature to regard the political changes in these countries as merely face-saving since the political effects of wars take many years to work themselves out. It is worth remembering that the introduction of universal adult franchise, promised in World War I, was only achieved in Britain in 1928.

More serious, because more explosive, was the failure of the victors to create a new system of economic or military security in the Gulf: Iran was isolated, and soon turned antagonistic; oil prices fell, creating greater popular rancour; the regimes and their no wiser Western allies resorted to the oldest and most short-sighted of security policies, namely the flooding of the region with weaponry that threatened to destabilize the fragile balance and provoke greater anxiety;[10] most importantly of all, the fact that the regime of Saddam Hussein remained in power meant that there was all the likelihood of a major confrontation in and with Iraq in the future. We should not erect unreasonable criteria or expectations here: wars do not, as Michael Howard has reminded us, tend to solve problems, they only prevent things from getting worse. The Gulf War would seem, in regional terms, to have been of this kind, with one further, major and most unexpected consequence, namely that it gave the impulsion to both Washington and Israel, and also, through a desire to end their isolation, to the Palestinians, to engage in meaningful negotiations. One can no more say on this—than one can on democratization of the Gulf states—that it would lead anywhere, but at least something had been initiated. On the regional security and oil fronts, however, the worst lessons seemed to have learnt, and unnecessarily so.

---

[9] Roger Hardy, *Arabia after the Storm: Internal Stability of the Gulf Arab States* (London, 1992); Mary Ann Tetrault, 'Kuwait: The Morning After', *Current History*, no. 91 (January 1992). pp. 6–10; Fred Halliday, 'The Arabian Peninsula in the Aftermath of the Gulf War', *Vierteljahresberichte* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Bonn) no. 133, September 1993, pp. 297–302.

[10] On post-war arms flows to the area, see Saferworld Foundation, *The Middle East Peace Process and the Arms Trade: A Fatal Contradiction?* (Bristol, 1992); and Yahya Sadowski, 'Scuds vs. Butter: The Political Economy of Arms Control in the Arab world', *Middle East Report*, no. 177 (July/August 1992), pp. 2–13.

Analysing the war

Concerning the war itself, there are a number of issues on which, in retrospect, some more accurate assessment may now be possible. Here I would mention four issues, which I shall discuss briefly, if only to show how our thinking can change in retrospect. These are: the causes of the Iraqi intervention, the issue of diplomatic alternatives to war during the five-month interlude, the character of the combat period, and the post-war policy of the allies towards Baghdad.

Assessment of why Iraq invaded Kuwait was central to public debate at the time because it was intertwined with the discussion of the rights and wrongs, to which I shall come later. It was, for example, argued that since the West had in the past armed Saddam Hussein, this implied complicity and so it was inadmissible now to oppose him. Alternatively, it was claimed that the failure to give him clear warning, in particular through the US ambassador in Baghdad meeting with him on 25 July, meant that the West had in some way or another led him into a trap. Neither of these is a very substantial argument: prior support does not invalidate later opposition; there is a world of difference between a guarded diplomatic exchange, with the ambassador acting under instructions, and a conspiracy or green light.[11] Yet it is important to look at what the motives were. Saddam gave, at various times, four reasons: that there had been a popular uprising in Kuwaiti requesting help from 'brotherly' Iraq; that Kuwait had damaged Iraq's economic interests by taking oil from the Iraqi part of the Rumaila oilfield and exceeding its OPEC quota, thus lowering the price of oil; that the border between the two states was wrongly drawn; that Kuwait itself had no legal status and was historically on Iraqi territory, its nineteenth province. That these arguments were contradictory did not stop Baghdad from making them. Yet other reasons were almost certainly present: Iraq's need to offset its rising internal debt of up to $80 billions by seizing the assets of Kuwait; the impasse in which Iraqi politics had found itself as a result of Iran's failure to make concessions after the August 1988 ceasefire; Saddam's fear that the United States and the Soviet Union were conspiring to remove him, as they had Ceaucescu in Rumania some months before; the opportunity for Arab leadership and domination of the Gulf which the disarray over Palestine and Iran's prostrate military condition provided. There is no reason to think any one of these was decisive, and the decision to occupy Kuwait, based on a long-standing claim and with contingency plans for occupation well in place, could have been taken at the last moment, as could equally his decision to invade Iran in September 1980.[12]

Whatever calculations were involved, this was not the decision of a madman, and it draws attention to something almost wholly ignored in the discussion of the war, namely the political background within Iraq. Indeed, throughout the crisis there was virtually no discussion in the media, including the serious press, of what kind of country Iraq was, what its long-run political strategies were and, not least, what

[11] Transcript of the April Glaspie interview in Sifry and Cerf (eds.), *The Gulf War Reader*, pp. 122–33. The mixed signals contained in this interview lie at the heart of several critiques of US policy, notably Pierre Salinger and Eric Laurent, *Secret Dossier, The Hidden Agenda Behind the Gulf War* (London, 1991).

[12] We have no first-hand evidence, written or oral, on Saddam's decision-making and a final judgement would have to wait until any such material is made available, an unlikely eventuality. For a perceptive surmise about Saddam's impulsiveness in invading Iran, see Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear* (London, 1988), pp. 271–2.

was involved in the history and ideology of its ruling body, the Arab Baᶜth
Socialist Party.[13] Failure to discuss this was like not discussing the ideology of
communism when assessing Soviet foreign policy, for Baᶜthism tells us as much as
anything about this war and its outcome. Relevant features include its dramatic
idea of the Arab nation, its cult of war as the purgative fire, its glorification of
sharaf or honour, its obsession with the strong man—the knight or *faris* on
horseback—who will deliver the Arab nation, and its explicit valorization of
al-qiswa, harshness, as a tool of government control. In assessing the broader
motives, most commentators have inclined towards emphasis on the internal,
economic, causes of Saddam's gamble; this may need to be balanced with an equal
emphasis on the international dimension, and particularly that of relations with
Iran. Indeed, if there is a moment when the Kuwait crisis began it may not be in
the bungled negotiations of June and July 1990, or in Saddam's address to the
Arab Cooperation Council in February 1990, but the death of Khomeini in June
1989. After the August 1988 ceasefire, Iraq blocked negotiations with Iran in the
apparent hope that pressure would force Iran to concede. The mass outpouring of
grief, and the swift establishment of a new, effective, government team in Tehran
after the Ayatollah's death demonstrated as nothing else could have done that the
Iranian regime was solid and would not submit to Saddam's blandishments. The
great gamble on Iran, that Iraqi pressure could force it to submit, had failed; the
new gamble, on Kuwait, was to take its place.[14]

The second historical question is in many ways the most controversial of the
whole conflict, namely whether alternative outcomes were possible. An alternative
was possible before 2 August 1990: Saddam thought he could get away with it, and
so, in a different way, did the Kuwaiti leaders;[15] both could with clearer signalling
have been told otherwise. In particular, Western inattention and wishful thinking,
abetted by the credulousness of Egyptian president Mubarak, who was told by
Saddam that no military action was intended, must bear great responsibility for
what happened; a timely set of diplomatic messages, backed by a show of force,
would probably have deterred Saddam. The wrong signals were sent, as much here
as in the Korean or Falklands cases. On the other hand, and in contrast to the
views of many critics of the war, it would seem that no alternative was possible
thereafter, other than simple acceptance of Saddam's occupation of Kuwait and, as
a consequence, of his military predominance in the Gulf. Those who argue against
the launching of the allied offensive can certainly put this case: lives would have
been saved, and the appearance of a new imperialism would have been precluded.
But other consequences would certainly have followed: Saddam would have
exploited his victory, half or more of the world's oil supplies would have been
under his control, Kuwait would have been destroyed, and the demonstration effect
elsewhere in the world considerable, as no small country would have felt secure; in

---

[13] On Baᶜthist ideology and the role of the Syrian nationalist Sati Al-Husri in transmitting European
   fascist and nationalist ideas to the Arab world, see al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear,* and Efraim Karsh
   and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (London, 1991).
[14] One indication of this shift in Iraqi thinking after June 1989 comes from the information on arms
   purchases revealed by the Matrix-Churchill affair: a year of relatively slack demand after the 1988
   ceasefire gave way to a much more determined pace of arms procurement in the last part of 1989
   and early 1990.
[15] On the calculations and miscalculations of the Kuwaiti royal family, see my interview with
   opposition leader Ahmad al-Khatib, *The Guardian,* 19 January 1991.

such states as Taiwan, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Israel, Belize, to name but some, the lesson would have been drawn.

However, the main plank of the anti-war argument rests not on the argument for accepting the *fait accompli*, although a few were quick to do so by comparing Saddam favourably with the al-Sabah, but on the belief that diplomatic pressure, plus sanctions, could have resolved the crisis: peace should have been 'given a chance'. Many attempts at a negotiated settlement were made, most notably in the speech of President Mitterrand to the UN General Assembly in September. Dozens of mediators—Arab and non-Arab, ending up with the Secretary General of the UN—went to see Saddam. On their side, the allies more than once said they would accept a peaceful withdrawal. Others hoped that over a year or two sanctions would do the trick; they claim the coalition went to war too quickly. Both judgements can be contested, though such an argument must necessarily be counter-factual. A decent time was given for negotiations, and Saddam simply refused the way out. His treatment of the last-minute mission of the UN Secretary General, made to wait for several hours while Saddam conversed with the leader of the Japanese Socialist Party, and then treated to a historical discourse, and the similar treatment of many other mediators, demonstrates this. His behaviour can be explained by one simple reason: Saddam did not believe the Americans would actually attack. He raised some other objections: that his army would not allow it, that the allies would attack after he withdrew, or that at least Israel would do so. These were not trivial concerns, but the main reason was his refusal, born of miscalculation, that no retreat was necessary. The diplomatic option was tried, and it failed. Peace *was* given a chance.

As for sanctions, they presuppose a government willing enough, or vulnerable enough, to bend. The general implications of this will be discussed later. In this case Saddam was not willing to bend and did not bend even with the sanctions imposed after the war, when he was in a much weaker position. He knew, and knows, that his regime can survive sanctions, through belt-tightening, a massive boost of domestic agricultural potential, and smuggling along the long frontiers with Turkey, Iran and Syria.[16] Sanctions could not have been expected to work in five months, but that was not the point: the point was that he did not accept the message sent by sanctions and, given the kind of political and strategic response which Saddam made in those five months, sanctions would never have worked. The alternative was, therefore, either to leave Saddam in Kuwait, or go to war. There was no third way. There are those who argue that the allies, and particularly the United States, were hoping they would be able to have a go at Saddam, and it would have been odd if this consideration had not been around: the phrase used was that there would be 'no golden bridge', no easy way out, for Iraq. But had Saddam taken the bridge that was there, had he even effected a partial withdrawal, abandoning the populated

[16] It was calculated that within a year of the end of the war Iraq had been able to organize a quite effective smuggling trade with its neighbours, including the export, in road tankers, of up to 200,000 barrels of oil a day, and of considerable quantities of fertilizers and cement, especially to Iran. Total income from these exports was in the region of $2 billions, compared to export earnings of $15–20 billions before the war. While greatly reduced, these earnings none the less provided the regime with a basic revenue.

parts of Kuwait, the allies could probably not, in the face of their own public opinion and of the international community, have gone to war.[17]

With regard to the third of the analytic issues, the nature of the combat period, it can certainly be said that the Gulf combat itself was, as a war, a curious one: the air campaign was almost wholly one-sided and unseen by the outside world, and the land fighting lasted for a very short time—100 hours. In one sense, this was a war of a historically familiar kind: a colonial war, with an enormous imbalance of technology and casualties, more reminiscent of, say, the British occupation of Tibet in 1904, when in one engagement hundreds of Tibetans died with four British wounded, than of any post-World War II Third World war. In some respects it was novel. In military terms, it was the first in which cruise missiles were used, and the first in which tanks on the battlefield could communicate directly with headquarters in their home country, via satellite. In human terms, it was the first in which Western armies deployed women soldiers at the front line, and also the first in which Western troops in the host country were forced to observe temperance— trucks loaded with cool beer only appearing, as if miraculously, when the forces crossed into Iraqi territory. On casualties some perceptions at the time were, in retrospect, mistaken: Iraqi casualties, which were estimated at the time to be up to 200,000, were it later appeared a tenth or even twentieth of that.[18] The level of technology used was far less advanced than allied propaganda suggested, almost all of it being conventional hardware of at least twenty-year vintage. Similarly the military impact of Scud attacks was overstated. The most vaunted elements in the US arsenal, the Patriot missile and the Stealth bomber, were far less effective than initially claimed.[19] Similarly the Scud missile attacks, while politically unnerving, were of little military significance, and on a much lower level than comparable Iraqi attacks on Iran in the 1980–8 war.[20] At the same time, allied intelligence about Iraq, although gathered in almost ideal conditions, was faulty, not least in its gross underestimation of the number of Scuds possessed by Iraq.[21]

So far, some historical issues have been raised on which an element of retrospection and hence proportion may be possible, and where the general tenor

---

[17] A further argument against the war was that of those Americans who said it was not in the United States' 'national interest' to go to war. Whatever its domestic merits this paid scant attention to the international issues involved. For one example, a remarkably silly one, see Stephen Graubard, *Mr Bush's War* (London, 1992).

[18] On revised figures for Iraq casualties see *The Independent* 5 February 1992, and John Heidenrich, 'The Gulf War: How Many Iraqis Died?', *Foreign Policy*, 90 (Spring 1993), pp. 108–25. At the time of the war both US and Iraqi officials lent credence to the idea of higher casualties, for opposed political reasons—the former to intimidate Iraq, the latter to emphasize the perfidy of US action.

[19] 'The Gulf War Revisited: Armchair Generalship', *The Economist*, 2 May 1992. On the broader assessment of US military capabilities and the dated character of the 'hi-tech' war, I am particularly grateful to Kevin Michaels, MSc student at LSE 1990–1. As Michaels pointed out, the balance of civilian to military technology had shifted dramatically over the past decades: the latest technology was not now that of the military, but that in the civilian field—available in any high street personal computer shop.

[20] 308 Scuds hit Iran in that conflict, as against 72 used in the Kuwait war, the former causing the deaths of over 2,000 people. See Farhang Rajaee (ed.), *The Iran–Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression* (Gainsville, 1993).

[21] Part of the problem was the confusion between launchers and the larger number of missiles. *The Military Balance 1989–1990*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, gave the number of *launchers* as 36 Scud B with a presumably smaller number of the Abbas and Husayn variety. It later transpired that Iraq had 890 Scud *missiles* (*International Herald Tribune*, 26 March 1993).

accords with the earlier judgement that the Gulf war was not as original as was thought at the time. There is, however, another, fourth, dimension on which claims of originality and precedent may more accurately be made, and that concerns not the war, but its aftermath. Saddam's regime survived but was faced after the war with two forms of external pressure of a novel kind. One was the regime of intrusive arms control and inspection instituted by the UN. The other, following on the uprising within Iraq that followed the war, was the introduction of the safe haven for the Kurds in the north which, in effect, put about a third of Iraq under a Western protectorate and allowed the Kurds to exercise self-rule for the first time. Both of these, although drawing on earlier practices and norms, were major new developments in international relations, and constituted precedents in modern international history. The normative implications of these policies will be returned to later. Here I would only underline that perhaps the most important feature of this war was not anything that happened prior to or in the course of the war itself, but the forms of intervention, military and political, imposed on Iraq in its aftermath.[22]

Issues in IR analysis

So far I have looked at the actual record of the war, and have tried to isolate certain empirical issues, of assessment and fact, that were prominent at the time. I would now like to look at some of the underlying and more and theoretical issues, beginning first with the analytic, and then moving on to the normative.

The analytic issues raised by the Gulf crisis read like a roll call of a course in IR theory: the causes of war, the functions of war in the international system, the relation between domestic and international policies, and between military and economic considerations, the roles of diplomacy, signalling, misperception, the patterns of decision-making, the construction of inter-state alliances and domestic coalitions, the functions of sanctions, the roles of the great powers, and of international institutions, the role of ideology, and of the media.[23]

For students of decision-making and foreign policy analysis, there was much in this war that was familiar and stimulating. Both sides had their share of mis-perception, based on the historical experiences of past wars and on the workings of groups that did not question their own assumptions. Saddam seems to have thought the Americans would not fight because they had run away from Vietnam in 1973 and from Beirut in 1983, the latter after 250 men killed. He also seems to have imagined that the 'masses' of Kuwait, whoever they were, would welcome his occupation. From all that we know of the milieu around Saddam, contradicting the boss is not a low-risk strategy, and the diplomats and others with whom foreign envoys were in touch, and who had some foreign experience—Tariq Aziz, Saadun Hamadi, Nizar Hamdun and others—apparently were not part of the inner circle.[24]

---

[22] On the arms control regime, see Rod Barton, 'Eliminating Strategic Weapons: The Case of Iraq' *Pacific Review*, 6 (1993), pp. 11–13.

[23] See Ken Matthews, *The Gulf Conflict and International Relations*, for further discussion.

[24] Communication from the foreign minister of an Arab state who visited Iraq on several occasions during the crisis.

But there was misperception on the allied side as well: the allies were mistaken in thinking Saddam would not invade, and, later, in expecting him to withdraw under pressure. They also, as it turned out, had greatly underestimated some of his military potential, including the number of Scuds Iraq possessed and its progress on a nuclear bomb. Perhaps their greatest mistake was in expecting the regime to fall after the defeat in Kuwait. Here Saddam outfoxed them all, for prior to the war he led the Americans into a trap which they closed on themselves. By brandishing chemical weapons, and then at the Baker-Aziz meeting in Geneva extracting a threat by the United States to destroy him if they were used, he lowered the risks of war enormously: he could be driven from Kuwait or even, as he chose, withdraw most of his forces anyway, knowing the United States and its allies would not pursue him. This was perhaps the fatal error which the allies committed, and forces us to ask how far, in the end, Saddam really fought to defend Kuwait at all.[25]

The issue of sanctions was also much debated, both before and after the war, and, as we have seen forms an important part of the 'give peace a chance' argument. The academic literature on sanctions makes abundantly clear that sanctions rarely work to achieve their stated goal, namely to force a government to reverse a particular policy: they did not get Ian Smith to back down on UDI, or Brezhnev to leave Afghanistan. They serve to fulfil other goals, notably that of sending a signal to the international community that a particular course of action is reprehensible. This certainly occurred in the Kuwait case, though whether sanctions alone would have done much to reassure Singapore or Belize one can doubt. But what the academic literature perhaps underplays is that in some cases sanctions can work not to change a policy, but to produce a change by undermining the regime as a whole, where such a government is vulnerable to popular challenge. Examples of this include the sanctions against Iran in 1953 and against the Popular Unity government in Chile in 1973;[26] in both cases, Western sanctions contributed to economic crises, which in turn led to military coups in which more 'acceptable' regimes came to power. But the point here is that these were democratically elected and responsive governments; in other words, sanctions worked against nice people, such as Muhammad Mosadiq and Salvador Allende. Against Saddam, who had killed many thousands of his people, and who was about to do so again in the face of the March uprising, such sanctions, even if economically effective—which, as I have argued above, they could not have been—would not have worked. Saddam was, and remained, very much not a nice person.

The issue of the causes of the war was one of the subjects of greatest controversy at the time. It is worth restating at the outset that there was no one single cause, and no simple explanation, in terms of an individual or an accident, that occasioned this war. All of the theoretical approaches or paradigms that have been

---

[25] The issue of whether the allies did none the less try to kill Saddam by hitting a bunker in which he was present is unclear, but intuition would suggest they did. For one version of such attempts, using a specially designed new 5000 lb bomb, see US News, *Triumph without Victory* (New York, 1992), pp. 3–6.

[26] Or, in an extreme case, that of South African sanctions against land-locked Lesotho in 1986: a week after the sanctions were imposed, a coup removed the offending government in Maseru. Similarly, in 1993 Russia cut off energy to Lithuania, Estonia and Ukraine and obtained policy concessions.

debated within IR over the past two decades could claim with some justification to be able to explain this war, but each also looks somewhat strained in the process. The realists would see it as an example, if in the end not a very important one, of inter-state conflict and of the continued importance of security issues in inter-national affairs. They would stress the importance of the great powers, without whom there is no international security and without whom nothing would have been done in the Gulf case. At least they could argue that the Gulf War put an end to the transnationalist claim about great powers not being able to use force in the modern world, a claim based largely on the oft-repeated cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan. The transnationalists would stress the importance of economic factors on both sides—in impelling Saddam to invade, and in eliciting a Western response, in defence of vital economic interests, namely oil. Equally they would point to the importance of transnational ideologies—Arab nationalism, Islam, Third World assertiveness—in the conflict, and of the growing communality of interest of the developed countries who acted to defend what they saw as an international asset. For many Marxists and structuralists, the war would present no problems: it was a war between the dominant and subordinated in world politics, one motivated by the crudest of material interests—oil—and justified on the West's side by a spurious invocation of an international law and international interest defined to suit the needs of the hegmonic powers. Martin Wight's application of this revolutionary view of international law by Nazi Germany to the British and French, 'successful burglars now trying to settle down as country gentlemen, making intermittent appearances on the bench', was well exemplified in this crisis: the very arguments used by Saddam to justify his action had been used by the Western states in colonial times.[27]

This would bear out Thomas Kuhn's observation that any decent paradigm, any 'historically significant' theory, can come up with an explanation, 'more or less'. Yet there are also what Kuhn has called anomalies here, which suggest that none of the three paradigms can have it all its own way. If the realists presuppose rationality and calculation of state interest, then they will find it very hard to explain Iraq's actions, which must count, along with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the Anglo-French action at Suez, as among the major miscalculations of the twentieth century. Equally, the role of pan-Arab and Islamic ties, and that of economic factors, will strain their framework. The liberal and transnationalist approach will in its turn have to revise some of its claims about the declining salience of military power in international relations, and will also have to recognize, rather more than it might like, that the UN acted as it did not out of some common interest or universal commitment, but because one member, the United States, cajoled, led and twisted the arms of the other members, those on the Security Council in particular, to act as they did. China, for one, refrained from exercising its veto not because it upheld the principle of Kuwaiti sovereignty but because it got a payoff in the form of remission for the Tien An Men massacre of the previous year. Equally, the assumption, implicit in much liberal and trans-nationalist writing, that the end of hegemony and of great power domination is a good thing, and that those who challenge it are more virtuous, would seem rather

---

[27] Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions,* ed. Gabrielle Wight and Brian Porter (London, 1991), p. xv.

dented in the case of Iraq. Terrorism, the Mafia, racist movements and ethnic cleansing are as much part of transnationalism as the more benign processes commonly alluded to.[28]

The Marxist and structuralist approach might appear to have more to say on this question, but it too has its drawbacks: if it was an 'imperialist' war, then the implication must be that Saddam somehow reflected a more positive, and progressive, trend in international politics. Underlying this judgement is not only a general conception of north—south relations, but also a view of historical development, with states such as Iraq, brutal as they may be, somehow representing a more 'progressive' level of development, at least in their anti-imperialism. This teleological view of history, present in much liberal and revolutionary thought of the past two centuries, has been challenged in recent years, and rightly so.[29] The whole idea of a historical progression, through appropriate states of liberation, had taken rather a knock in Eastern Europe in 1989; it was hardly in good shape to vindicate events of 1990 in the northern Gulf.[30] But even if this teleology were accepted in theory, Iraq was an uneasy candidate for such an emancipatory role: at home it was brutal, far more so, than its monarchical neighbours: in inter-Arab relations it used its oil money not to develop other states but to exploit their migrant workers, particularly those from Egypt; the ideology of the Baᶜth party invoked socialism but was at least as much derived from another strand of radical European thought, namely fascism.

Equally present, and open to debate, within much of the structuralist discussion of the war was the question of 'imperialism' itself: since the United States was an imperialist country, and Iraq was opposed to it, it followed that the war was an imperialist one, and hence illegitimate. But, apart from the question of whether Iraq had not also in some sense been acting in an imperialist manner, this presupposed the argument that everything imperialist countries do is historically regressive and, by extension, morally bad. This had become the mainstay of much left-wing and nationalist writing over the past two decades, but it is, as the late Bill Warren so well pointed out, at variance with the view of Marx himself, who took up a more two-sided and contingent attitude to the role of imperialism in world economics and politics.[31] The question, which Marx rightly posed, was what imperialism was directed against. In terms of values, some of the norms of developed (*and* imperialist) countries were preferable to those of the traditional societies they conquered: the subaltern has no ethical primacy. In more general terms, the briefest of surveys of twentieth-century history would suggest that, whatever the motives, even the United States had done some good things, at least by the criteria of most of those who criticized it in this war: Woodrow Wilson's

---

[28] For further discussion, see my forthcoming *Rethinking International Relations* (London, 1994), chs 1–4.

[29] See on this my 'An Encounter with Fukuyama', *New Left Review*, 193 (May–June 1992), pp. 89–107, and *Rethinking International Relations*, chs 3 and 10.

[30] Occasionally framed in terms of the popular, anti-imperialist, character of Baᶜthism, and the social 'gains' it had achieved, this progressivist or stagist argument was more commonly found in an alternative from in references to the 'feudal', 'semi-feudal', 'backward' or 'tribal' regimes of Kuwait and its associates. What these latter terms meant, however, was that on some, unspoken scale of historical advance and moral probity, Iraq was somehow more 'advanced'. A variant was contained in the phrase 'oil-rich Kuwaitis', as if having a per capita income of say, $12,000, forefeited one's right to self-determination.

[31] Bill Warren, *Imperialism Pioneer of Capitalism* (London, 1981).

support for national self-determination, the participation in the anti-Axis coalition, to name but two. Again, whatever the motives, such more recent US initiatives as diplomatic intervention to prevent a Pakistani—Indian nuclear war, support for independence in Namibia, and the Madrid peace negotiations could count in this way. What too often occurred was that an initially historical and materialist critique of US foreign policy was replaced by an ahistorical and idealist one, whereby the United States became the incarnation of a timeless world-wide evil. Some of this was fuelled by European cultural anti-Americanism, some by the courageous but rather static critique produced by opponents within the United States.[32] None of the three major paradigms of IR theory can, therefore, be said to have emerged unscathed from this episode. What of post-modernism, regarded by some as the 'fourth' paradigm? Its pretensions to explaining events, and providing an alternative, non-ethnocentric, moral compass were rather strained.[33] Rather more substantial was the response of another theoretical contender, feminism: several new insights on this war, and war in general, were provided, with regard to the gendered dimensions of the war itself, the issue of women's combat role, and the images or symbols involved. Yet with feminism, as with the three more established paradigms, the war posed questions for concepts and values, as much as it vindicated by example.[34]

Ethical issues

We can now turn to the other kind of issue raised by the war, and much discussed at the time, namely the normative or ethical questions. Here I would like to discuss three issues raised in the war and its aftermath about which the war highlighted some difficulties for established thinking on the subject: sovereignty, intervention, just war.[35] It can also be suggested that even where the criteria were reasonably applied, public discussion in the West suffered from a strong degree of historical amnesia and self-righteousness. On the other hand, and despite many assertions about the relative 'ethno-' or 'euro-centric' character of criteria invoked in Western discussion, Iraq did not argue for an alternative set of standards. Its justifications,

---

[32] It is here that the analyses of Noam Chomsky, relevant in some other respects, are questionable.

[33] On the liaison between discussion of the war and post-modernism, see Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London, 1992). For an example of German 'critical theory' turned to anti-war usage, in the idiom of the Frankfurt School at is worst, see Helmut Thielen (ed.), *Der Krieg der Kopfe: Vom Golfrieg zur neuen Weltordnung* (Bad Honnef, 1991).

[34] Cynthia Enloe 'The Gulf Crisis: Making Feminist Sense of It', *Pacific Research*, vol. 3, no. 4 (November 1990), pp. 3–5. On alternative invocations of women's role, 'Saddam Husayn Awards Medals to Women: Says Their role More Important than Men's', *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, Part 4, 7 March 1992.

[35] Among the more nuanced examinations of the ethical issues involved, see Michael Walzer, preface to the second edition of *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York, 1992) and Matthews, *The Gulf Conflict and International Relations*, chs 5–7, who are broadly in support of the war; Michael Rustin, 'Justice and the Gulf War', and Gregory Elliott, 'A Just War? The Left and the Gulf War', *Radical Philosophy*, 61 (Summer 1992) pp. 3–13, who elaborate cases against it. For a more one-sided defence of the war in traditional Catholic terms, see James Turner Johnson and George Weigel, *Just War and the Gulf War* (Washington, 1991). For comparable critiques, see materials in the volumes edited by Sifri and Serf, Gittings, Brittain, and Bresheeth and Yuval-Davis, cited in fn. 5 above.

like those of Western critics of the war, were framed in the same terms as those of the anti-Saddam coalition.

The issue of sovereignty lay at the heart of the debate on the war. Iraq questioned the validity both of Kuwait's frontiers, which it claimed were artificial and colonial, and of its legitimacy as a state; equally, in both Iraqi and some Western critical discussion, the illegitimacy of the al-Sabah rulers of Kuwait was given as a reason for denying Kuwait's sovereignty. Others, from pan-Arab and Islamic but also from Western universalist positions, questioned whether sovereignty should indeed be the primary or sole normative criterion for debating international relations and hence whether even the most disinterested defence of Kuwaiti sovereignty legitimated war.[36] It is also worth noting that, in the bizarre final twist to the crisis, Iraqi sovereignty was itself greatly infringed by the twin policies of arms control and safe haven.

The two most common arguments against accepting the sovereignty of Kuwait in particular would seem to me to be of little seriousness when looked at in general terms. Kuwait's frontiers may well have been created artificially or by colonialism or by force, but that goes for most of those in contemporary world. If Kuwait was, on these criteria, an artificial and therefore illegitimate state, then so too was Iraq, the product of an Anglo-French carve-up in 1918. Moreover Iraq's historic title to Kuwait as a whole was, at best, debatable,[37] and even if it had been a strong one it would not have justified resort to arms. The question of the legitimacy of the al-Sabah rulers is equally beside the point, since the legitimacy of a government or some rulers *vis à vis* their own people is separate from the legitimacy of a state or country *vis à vis* other states: the case of Poland in 1939, presided over by an unsavoury albeit not very murderous military dictatorship, is an obvious analogy. The only qualification is the humanitarian one, which is applicable where a state exercises extreme tyranny, commits acts 'that shock the moral conscience of mankind', and its people clearly want intervention. In such circumstances an external state may intervene to restore the self-determination of that people, but this was clearly not the case for the Iraqi intervention in Kuwait. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the whole episode, and one that must inflect any assessment of its legitimacy, is that none of the indigenous Kuwaiti population welcomed the invasion, and few of the immigrant population did either. Even the leaders of the Kuwait Ba'thi Party, summoned to Baghdad to bless the invasion, refused to do so; some have not been heard of since.[38]

Sovereignty has, however, been challenged in another way by this war, namely in

---

[36] Peter Gowan, 'The Gulf War, Iraq and Western Liberalism', *New Left Review*, 197 (May–June 1991), pp. 29–70, contains a powerful argument against the primacy of sovereignty and the application of this to the Kuwait crisis. For a defense of the 'legalist paradigm' on state sovereignty, but one that permits opposition to this particular war, see Michael Rustin, 'Justice and the Gulf War'.

[37] See the excellent study by Richard Schofield, *The Kuwait–Iraq Boundary Dispute* (London, 1992).

[38] It was argued by some critics of the war that any assessment of the popular response to the Iraqi invasion should include the non-Kuwait population as well. That the Kuwaiti regime discriminated against non-Kuwaitis is indisputable, but this is not the same as asserting a general political equivalence of all those within a country at a particular moment: no society in the world would accept that. Certainly Iraq did not, with its brutal treatment of tens of thousands of its own citizens accused of Persian connections and expelled in the early 1980s, and of Egyptian migrant labourers. Iraq's claim to be liberating the non-Kuwaitis may have won support amongst a minority of Palestinians, but its treatment of non-Arab immigrants was swift and brutal, resulting in the expulsion, soon after the invasion, of hundreds of thousands of Asian workers.

the intervention, or safe haven policy, introduced after the war, which is an infringement of Iraq's sovereignty and one that sets precedents for other countries in the world. One can only imagine what a world would look like were this generalized. Soon afterwards, in fact, related crises occurred in Bosnia and in Somalia. Here, there is a dilemma in terms of established practice. On the one hand, international law and not least the UN Charter place supreme value on the principle of non-interference, of sovereignty in this sense. On the other hand, the supremacy of sovereignty has been questioned in recent years, not only on grounds of reality, as in the consequences of the growth of the EC or of the global economy, but also on legal and moral grounds, and in particular with regard to human rights questions. The UN itself has set up machinery, as has the EC, that in some ways overrides the primacy of states, and public opinion in the developed world has also moved in that direction. There is, moreover, historical precedent for this, both in the ideas of Grotius or Kant about the validity of individuals as against states, and in the justification of humanitarian intervention, i.e. intervention against inhumanity, where extreme brutality has occurred.[39] Beyond calculations of the cost and international consequences, at least two ethical criteria are suggested here: 1) the assent of the people on whose behalf the intervention is said to occur; 2) an extreme degree of oppression. Neither criterion is, of course, without its ambiguities and problems.[40]

There can be little doubt that in the case of the safe haven the Kurds welcomed this move: indeed, they subsequently held free elections where all candidates supported the policy. Saddam's regime was certainly oppressive, by any standards, and what we have learnt since about the 1988 genocide of the Kurds—operation *anfal*—only confirms this.[41] It is at least arguable that the majority of the Iraqi people would also have welcomed a complete US occupation, i.e. the 'Japanese solution'. Three other issues remain unresolved here. First, how does one ascertain that 'extreme' brutality has occurred, i.e. what degree, for what percentage of the population, in what areas? Second, even if one can agree, how often can such a moral right or obligation be implemented? It will, of necessity, be selective. Third, there is the issue, present in much earlier discussion, of how far intervention is legitimate when carried out by an interested power. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979 and that of the United States in Grenada in 1983 were both welcomed by the peoples of those countries and would appear to meet Mill's criteria on the oppressiveness of the regimes concerned, but they were condemned by one bloc or the other because of charges of self-interest in a Cold War context. The Cold War is over, but the issues of self-interest will not go away, as debates on Bosnia and Somalia have shown.

The problem of motivation and interest prevails throughout discussion of the war and intervention and is raised most clearly in the third of the moral issues I want to discuss, namely that of just war. For some the very concept of 'just war' is an abomination, in that it permits discussion of war itself; but unless one adopts a

[39] Waltzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, ch. 6.
[40] For general discussion of this issue, see Rosalyn Higgins, 'Intervention and International Law', in Hedley Bull (ed.), *Intervention in World Politics* (Oxford, 1984); Adam Roberts, 'Humanitarian War: Military Intervention and Human Rights', *International Affairs*, 69 (1993), pp. 429–49.
[41] Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence* (London, 1993) and Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Iraq* (New Haven, 1990).

consistent pacifist position, itself a position on the legitimacy of war, one has to engage with this category. For too many, 'justice' is defined to suit political convenience. Many of those on the Left most opposed to the war and to any measured discussion of its justice would, in other contexts, have defended the right of, for example, oppressed peoples to use force in wars of national liberation and revolutions; conversely many of those who favoured the war would have denied the right of revolutionary and nationalist movements to take up arms in revolt. Indeed, much of the public argument on the war mixed up analytic questions, of fact and probability, with moral discussion. Such discussions also blurred the distinction between *jus ad bellum*, the right to go to war, and *jus in bello*, the right conduct of the war itself. The argument against the Gulf War was, in broad terms, *both* that the allies had no right to wage it and that they conducted it in an illegal or criminal way. In other words, there was neither *jus ad bellum* nor *jus in bello*.

The argument on justice in going to war usually focuses on three questions: just cause, competent authority, and right intention. Saddam himself claimed just cause in several respects: that Kuwait was *de jure* part of Iraq anyway, that he had been invited in, and that Kuwait had harmed his interests. If the first two are simply spurious, the last is more interesting because it was, of course, regarded as a quite legitimate reason for going to war until this century. Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 and its threats against Venezuela in 1902, for example, were because of debt defaults. If Saddam was not justified, it is in part because there has been a change of international norm or regime. Yet the regime has not changed that much, since if war is not acceptable as a recourse in such cases, it is certainly still regarded as legitimate to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on countries which have harmed another state's economic interests, or nationalized without compensation, or failed to repay their debts, or on those which adopt unfair trading policies. Saddam was in this respect not so out of line with international norms, although it could certainly be said that his response to the economic harm caused was disproportionate.

While the question of just cause on the anti-Iraqi side hinges mainly on the issue of sovereignty, that of competent authority turns on the legitimacy of the Kuwaiti government's appeal for help and on the role of the UN, the latter clearly raising the issue of great power involvement. Many said the UN action was illegitimate because the Security Council acted at the behest of the United States, but it would seem that an ideal criterion is being invoked here.[42] The UN charter itself recognizes the prominent role of the five permanent members, who are under Article 24 given prime responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Indeed in the light of what has happened since, for example in ex-Yugoslavia, one might well criticize them for failing to meet this obligation and thereby forfeiting their right to their permanent seats. In the case of the Gulf, there is no doubt that the United States led and cajoled the vote through the UN, but all politics, domestic and international, probably involves an element of this. The issue which is most difficult, and raises the greatest questions, is right intention.

All sorts of justifications of high-minded kind were given by the United States for the war: protecting the sovereignty of Kuwait, restoring the al-Sabah to power, ensuring the supply of oil, protecting other countries in the Middle East. In reply,

---

[42] Paul Taylor and A.J.R. Groom, *The United Nations and the Gulf War 1990–91: Back to the Future?* (London, 1992).

the critics suggested other motives: the defence of monopolistic Western oil interests, the protection of tribal oligarchies, the desire of the United States to subordinate its commercial rivals in Europe and Japan, the equal desire of the United States to intimidate the Third World by an exemplary action, the wish to overcome the 'Vietnam syndrome' and offset the peace dividend, the need for President Bush to distract attention from domestic problems, his desire for re-election. One can accept that *all* of these seem plausible motives, and we would need to know more than any archives or retrospective interviews and memoirs can tell us to exclude any one of them. However, this does not settle the argument, which is in the end not mainly about facts; rather we may need a more elaborated conception of right intention to discuss the matter.

An exploration of the differences between the morality of states and that of individuals was, of course, one of the central concerns of E.H. Carr in his *Twenty Years' Crisis*, and it is worth bearing in mind here. Firstly, it is probably always misguided to try and pin down *one* motive for any major act of foreign policy: discussion of such classic cases as the US decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, or of Khruschev's stationing of missiles in Cuba in 1962, is bedevilled by this false starting point. States, like individuals, act for a mixture of motives and one has to come to some plausible judgement not of the one, 'key', motive, but of what the balance of motives was.[43] The considerations identified by critics of the US role were not the only motives of such a commitment and do not automatically discredit the war the Allies fought.[44]

Secondly, in states, as opposed to individuals, self-interest does not necessarily disqualify the morality of an action, even if it looms large as a motive: defending US security, indeed defending the stability of the international oil market, may not be such a nefarious consideration, given the political and economic consequences of this not being done. In the late twentieth century, secure and reasonably priced oil is as important a component of stable democratic politics as cheap wheat was in the late nineteenth century; this does not justify oil company profits, but it does suggest a general interest in oil.

Thirdly, while we need not assess morality solely in consequentialist terms, some of the evaluation of right intention has to be based on consequences, for states and for individuals; the restoration of Kuwaiti sovereignty was, if an acceptable aim, such a result, as was the containment and domestic weakening of Saddam. Yet even if one argues that states do things solely for reprehensible motives, their actions may be defensible. The Second World War provides an obvious example: Churchill fought it to preserve the British Empire; Stalin to protect the Soviet dictatorship; Roosevelt, somewhat less basely, to prosecute US hegemonic competition in the Far East with the Japanese.[45]

---

[43] See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. xix: 'But mixed motives are normal also in international politics, and they are normally troubling in wartime only if they make for the expansion or prolongation of the fighting beyond its justifiable limits or if they distort the conduct of the war'. If anything, the less savoury motives of George Bush led him to curtail the war and unwarrantedly narrow its aims.

[44] It is on this issue that my disagreement with Michael Rustin turns: of course, the motives of Bush included many unsavoury ones, but this fact alone does not preclude a *jus ad bellum*.

[45] In all discussion of consequences, the issue of time is important: if, ten years from now, Saddam and his regime have been ousted, and a democratic and peaceful regime established in Iraq, then the war will look rather more acceptable: but these are not judgements we can make now, so we have to base our assessment on what has already happened.

Finally, and equally in the realm of consequences, it has to be said that whether or not some of the baser or more self-interest motives were present in President Bush's mind, they proved to be ill-founded: the United States did not become more interventionist in the Third World, no significant advantages accrued *vis à vis* Western Europe and Japan, and, of course, Bush failed to get re-elected. In these respects, at least, the consequences were soon shown to be rather less pernicious than originally feared.

We now turn to the even more contentious question of *jus in bello* where Western arguments, though often valid in substance, tend to be unduly complacent. Both sides stand accused of violating this aspect of just war theory. On the Iraqi side the allegation pertains to its treatment of civilian populations and POWs and to deliberate ecological destruction in the final days of the war.[46] The Iraqis certainly did treat the population in Kuwait badly, and looted and spoliated Kuwait, though not by any means as badly as many others in modern times have done: there was no genocide, mass execution or 'scorched earth'. Allied POWs were beaten up and ill-treated but none were tortured or killed; Iraqi treatment of them compares well with that of the United States in Vietnam, where torture, shooting, even ejection from helicopters, as well as the mutilation of corpses, were widespread.[47] Some of the ecological damage the Iraqis were accused of, such as flooding the Gulf with oil, was greatly and possibly deliberately exaggerated at the time.[48] But what is indisputable is that the Iraqis blew up over 600 oil fields in Kuwait before leaving, with great, though again limited, damage to the atmosphere and to the territory of Kuwait itself. What was, however, most striking in this regard was the lack of historical perspective with which this question was treated: what the Iraqis did was in a strict sense new, but ecological crimes in war were far from new, e.g. the destruction of forests and land in World War I, the usage of Agent Orange by the United States for defoliation in Vietnam, not to mention the detonation of atom bombs in Japan and in subsequent nuclear testing.[49] Here the claim of novelty in Saddam's criminality masked a moral amnesia that was rather too convenient for the Western states involved.

The charge of illegitimate practice in the war itself levelled against the West—one that would pertain also to the issue of right intention—rests upon a series of incidents in which, it is claimed, excess force was used: the B-52 'carpet bombing' of Iraqi troops prior to the ground offensive, the missile attack on the Amariya

---

[46] Adam Roberts, 'The Gulf War and the Environment' *The Oxford International Review*, 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 13–18.

[47] On the mutilation of enemy dead by US forces in Vietnam, see Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London, 1979) p. 161. On the starving to death of German POWs after World War II, see James Bacque, *Other Losses* (Toronto, 1990).

[48] There are two uncertaintities surrounding the spillage of oil from tankers and pumping stations. First, it is not clear that all of this was a result of deliberate Iraqi action as some may have been the result of allied bombing and/or artillery attacks. Secondly, media coverage was designed to play up the consequences of the slick, implying, wrongly as it turned out, that it would go beyond Bahrain and permanently destroy the Gulf's fish stock. See Joni Seager, 'Operation Desert Disaster: Environmental Costs of the War', in Bresheeth and Yuval-Davids (eds.), *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, pp. 235–6.

[49] During the Indochina war, an estimated 11 million gallons of the defoliant Agent Orange were dumped on South Vietnam, affecting 2 million hectares of forest; 170,000 hectares were also turned into craters. See Peter Korn, 'Agent Orange in Vietnam: The Persisting Poison', *The Nation*, 8 April 1991, pp. 440–6.

shelter in Baghdad, the destruction of electricity generating plants and water pumping stations in Iraq which caused protracted suffering to the civilian population, and the strafing of Iraqi forces retreating from Kuwait to Basra. Here some of what was claimed in criticism of the war would seem to be unfounded: in contrast to Vietnam, there was no massive bombing campaign to push Iraq 'back to the stone age' or to cause mass civilian casualties, and in the main allied targeting was selective and accurate. The Amariya shelter was clearly a mistake, and a reprehensible one, but not part of a broader pattern: it was not unreasonable to have thought it was a dual use (civilian and military) installation. The destruction of the civilian electricity generating plants had a legitimate military purpose, to disrupt Iraqi military communications, but it was in retrospect excessive and unnecessary. In any case, from all we know, it failed to meet its objectives, since the Iraqis had a well-developed system of landlines powered by their own small generators. The shootings on the road to Basra fell clearly within the legitimate use of force against combatants as defined in international law: soldiers who are in retreat but have not surrendered are not exempt from attack and never have been so considered.[50] Equally to the point is the fact that those soldiers were returning to be used by Saddam against his own people, who were then in a state of imminent insurrection.[51] The logic of those who support that insurrection, let alone who criticize Bush for not having gone further into Iraq and ousted Saddam, is that the US President should have killed more, not fewer, Iraqi troops when they were still inside Kuwait. As we have seen, the key moment in the whole crisis was probably the realization by Saddam just prior to the start of Desert Storm that the Americans would not go after him, thus enabling him to pull his forces back from Kuwait with what were, despite the shootings on the Basra road, rather low casualties. Mistakes were made by the coalition in targeting and execution, but it is hard, given what we now know, to make a strong case that on grounds of *jus in bello* the war was unjust.

While analytically separate from the issue of *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello* is pertinent to it in that in some general way violation of the one prejudices the case for the other. Much discussion of the war, on both sides, tried to use violations real or alleged of the *jus in bello* to argue against a *jus ad bellum* case for the war, but this is a less simple matter than such arguments imply. Here again we come up against the lack of adequate criteria: how much violation of *jus in bello* cancels out what would, *a priori*, be a just war on *jus ad bellum* grounds? Did Hiroshima and Dresden invalidate the justice of the Allied cause? Did acts of assassination and terror undermine the rights of national liberation movements? Almost always what we see is that violations of *jus in bello* are used for polemical reasons to bolster an argument that begins with *jus ad bellum*, just as conversely acts of atrocity are justified on the grounds that the overall cause is just. The conclusion would seem to be that there needs to be a much more careful separation of the two: crimes *in*

---

[50] On this see Matthews, *The Gulf Conflict and International Relations*, p. 166, and Robert Jackson 'Dialectical Justice in the Gulf War', *Review of International Studies*, 18 (1992), pp. 335–54, p. 349.

[51] On the insurrection, see Falih Abd al-Jabir, 'Why the Uprising Failed', Issam al-Khafaji, 'State Terror and the Degradation of Politics in Iraq', *Middle East Report*, 176 (May–June 1992), pp. 2–21, and Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence*.

bello do not easily cancel a case *ad bellum*, just as a right *ad bellum* does not easily legitimate acts *in bello*.[52]

Ironically, one of the strongest moral arguments against the allied conduct of the war was not that it used excessive force, but that it did not use enough. It is one of the curiosities of the public debate on this whole conflict that many of those who are strongest in making this charge, that Bush should have gone further, are the same people who argued that he should not have gone to war in the first place.

Conclusions

In retrospect, this war, historically unique in several respects, can also be seen to have put considerable strain on some conceptions of International Relations, and to have involved a set of paradoxes. It was an explosion of the oldest style of inter-state military conflict, at the moment when the world was breathing a sigh of relief after the end of the Cold War and hoping such crises were a thing of the past. It raised the question of sovereignty and intervention in a two-headed way, first in the context of Iraq's claims to Kuwait and to leadership of the Islamic and Arab worlds, then in the historic whiplash of UN and Western intervention in northern Iraq. It provoked widespread opposition that at times seemed to argue both that war against Iraq should not have been started and that the war that was fought was invalid because it did not go far enough.

Where does this analysis leave the study of international relations? We can draw two conclusions about the relation of the academic study to the broader process of international politics. In the first place, the crises and changes of international relations challenge us to apply, revise, and on occasion overthrow our established concepts. Beyond the intrinsic intellectual discipline involved, the two great criteria for the relevance of what we teach are the extent to which our concepts can 1) explain events in the world and 2) enable us to refine the moral judgements that we make about it. The Gulf War presents challenges of exactly that kind: it did not provoke the need for a 'scientific revolution' in the teaching of IR, but it did test parts of the intellectual system. As we have seen, there are elements of discomfort or anomalies, for all three major paradigms in what occurred, as for feminism and even more so for postmodernism. On a whole range of analytic and normative questions, the war raised issues central to our subject, and nowhere more so than on the ethical ones we have identified, particularly the importance of sovereignty, the new precedent for intervention, and the need to refine our conception of right intention.

---

[52] Public discussion of the war often appeared to invoke a third dimension of morality, what may be termed *jus in nuntio*, i.e. the obligation to present facts fully, fairly and accurately and to avoid derogatory, racist, or misleading images of the enemy. A barrage of criticism during and after the war rested upon the charge that allied governments, and the media, had engaged in various forms of propaganda and news control. See for example Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Oxford, 1992) and John Fialka, *Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War* (Washington, 1992). Postmodernism extended this to identification of hegemonist and other obnoxious discourses *vis à vis* Iraq. All this may have been true, but it was beside the point: first, because such distortion is an inevitable accompaniment of war and can hardly be adduced as a factor in evaluating its legitimacy; second, because if the allies violated *jus in nuntio* the Iraqis certainly did so as well.

This crisis also highlighted a second kind of relationship between the academic study of IR on the one hand and the events of the world and the formulation of judgements and policy on the other. This is the pertinence of what we teach to the handling of such crises themselves and to public debate. Such a relationship has at times been corrupt, often trivial, and sometimes naive. Yet there can be a relationship of independent and critical assessment, one separate from the dictates of power but not innocent or careless about them, which the academic teaching of IR can properly have; such a relationship was certainly not foreign to E.H. Carr. If anything comes out of the Gulf crisis and of much of the public discussion of it, it is how confused, short-sighted, and lacking in historical, comparative, or conceptual depth much of this public debate is. We should recall the superficiality of much of the discussion of sovereignty, legitimacy, and intervention, and the confusion between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, that marked the public debate. All social sciences have, as part of their job the clarification and the improvement of public debate on the issues they study; in our field the degree of irrationality, rhetoric and sheer muddle-headedness is probably greater than any other. Whatever its other failings, few can say that the area of international relations and the crises it has provoked, and will continue to provoke, are not important for the public and the world as a whole. If nothing else, the Gulf crisis showed those of us who teach and research in the field of IR that we have a job, indeed several jobs, to do.