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## *Imperialist in Chief: A Critical History of George H. W. Bush's War on Iraq*



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The U.S. media haven't been shy about lionizing the late President George H. W. Bush in their reflections on his life and legacy. This behavior is hardly surprising; we saw the same worship of the late Republican Senator John McCain via the erasure of any discussion of U.S. war crimes and genocidal violence in Vietnam, in favor of the predictable “war hero” narrative.

On CNN, Aaron David Miller of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars celebrates the “sheer humility” and “decency” of the elder President Bush, while the

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Washington Post emphasizes his “steady hand” at the Cold War’s end, at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse. The New York Times fawns over Bush as a “restrained and seasoned leader,” while celebrating the 1991 U.S. assault on Iraq. “If Mr. Bush’s term helped close out one era abroad [the Cold War], it opened another. In January 1991, he assembled a global coalition to eject Iraqi invaders from Kuwait, sending hundreds of thousands of troops in a triumphant military campaign that to many helped purge the ghosts of Vietnam.”

Portraits of late-heads of state and other prominent American leaders typically portray them as freedom-loving patriots who sacrificed for the good of their nation and in the fight for freedom, justice, and democracy abroad. For those with a critical awareness of Bush the elder’s time in office, little in this narrative is worth defending. Bush demonstrated a brazen commitment to realpolitik and enhancing American imperial power, particularly in U.S. policy in the Middle East. But this inconvenient truth simply “won’t do” in a sycophantic media system where journalists worship myths about the U.S. as global protector and savior.

What follows is a much-needed corrective of the hagiographies that follow the passing of U.S. heads of state. Bush’s administration, particularly via the 1991 Iraq war, pursued one of the most blatant and dishonest propaganda campaigns in modern history. To borrow from Chomsky and Herman, the success of this campaign speaks to the effectiveness of official and journalistic efforts to “manufacture consent” in the selling of U.S. imperial war.

### **The Invasion of Kuwait: The Onset of the U.S. Propaganda Campaign**

With the 1991 Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush utilized propaganda on multiple fronts to build support for war. After Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait in August 1990, the Bush administration quickly went to work portraying Hussein as a global threat and menace. Both Iraq and Kuwait are rich in oil, prompting American concerns with Hussein’s expansionist ambitions in a part of the world holding one-quarter of known oil reserves.

Hussein had a history of aggressive foreign policy. He invaded Iran and fought a war from 1980 to 1988 – with U.S. support – that ended in a bloody stalemate. Various estimates suggest the war caused from hundreds of thousands to a million deaths on both sides. Hussein’s motives for attacking Iran derived from a border dispute, in addition to concern that the Iranian revolution (1979) would motivate Iraq’s own citizens (its Shia majority) to rebel against Saddam’s dictatorship. After the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, Hussein

turned his attention to Kuwait, listing numerous grievances against its ruling royal family. Among them included: charges that Kuwait was slant-drilling into Iraq's southern Rumaila oil field, the claim that Kuwait was using the oil to flood the international market, thereby driving down global oil prices, anger that Kuwait was demanding repayment of an \$80 billion loan funding the Iran-Iraq war, and the claim that the borders between Iraq and Kuwait were artificially drawn by colonial powers, and that unification of Iraq and Kuwait under Hussein was necessary to Arab unity. None of these reasons were compelling to U.S. officials, who (correctly) viewed the attack on Kuwait as an assault on an oil-rich ally.

In selling the American people on war, Bush offered several reasons for why the U.S. should force Iraq from Kuwait. These included the following: Hussein violated international law by invading Kuwait; Hussein was a brutal dictator who killed his own people; Hussein committed human rights atrocities in Kuwait; and Iraq was a threat to American national security. Regarding international law, Bush condemned Hussein for an "outrageous and brutal act of aggression," deriding him for "threatening his neighbors." He warned that the invasion of Kuwait would empower Hussein to commit future acts of aggression:

"We must recognize that Iraq may not stop using force to advance its ambitions. Iraq has amassed an enormous war machine on the Saudi border capable of initiating hostilities with little or no additional preparation. Given the Iraqi government's history of aggression against its own citizens as well as its neighbors, to assume Iraq will not attack again would be unwise and unrealistic."

The president dismissed the "puppet regime imposed from the outside...Saddam Hussein's forces will leave Kuwait. The legitimate government of Kuwait will be restored to its rightful place, and Kuwait will once again be free."

Human rights were a prominent theme in Bush's rhetoric. Highlighting a history of executions and "routine torture" against dissenters, Bush referred to Hussein as "Hitler revisited," promising that "America will not stand aside. The world will not allow the strong to swallow up the weak." Central to human rights rhetoric was the claim that Iraqi troops brutalized premature babies in Kuwaiti hospitals. At the heart of this claim was testimony in Congress from a 15-year old Kuwaiti girl known simply as "Nayirah," in October 1990, who claimed that she personally witnessed Iraqi troops "come to the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators. They took the incubators and left the babies to die on the cold floor." This story was cited by President Bush as a

primary justification for war. As Bush recounted: “They had kids in incubators, and they were thrown out of the incubators, so that Kuwait could be systematically dismantled.” Bush cited the incubator story at least ten times in subsequent weeks, and was quick to emphasize human rights issues, rather than U.S. oil interests, as he stated that “it isn’t oil that we’re concerned about, it is aggression. And this aggression is not going to stand...What we are looking at is good and evil, right and wrong. And day after day, shocking new horrors reveal the true nature of terror in Kuwait.”

President Bush also referred to Hussein’s history of using chemical weapons, and his supposed development of nuclear weapons, as evidence that the U.S. needed to act. Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurds in the northern city of Halabja in 1988, resulting in 6,800 deaths (mostly civilians), and he had ordered the torture and mass killing of any Iraqis challenging his authority. Bush warned: “while the world waited, Saddam sought to add to the chemical weapons arsenal he now possesses, an infinitely more dangerous weapon of mass destruction – a nuclear weapon.” The president promised to “knock out Hussein’s nuclear bomb potential,” and his “chemical weapons facilities.”

Following the invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. introduced wide-ranging sanctions against Iraq, while mobilizing U.S. military forces for war. The U.S.-allied attack began on January 17, 1991 and culminated with the rapid military defeat of Iraq and its forced expulsion from Kuwait, in addition to the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians. Hundreds of thousands of civilians more died in the aftermath of war, as the U.S.-supported sanctions prevented Iraq from rebuilding vital infrastructure, including its electric grid and water purification facilities. President Bush briefly admitted in the pre-war period that “Iraq is already a rich and powerful country that possesses the world’s second largest reserves of oil” and that “our country now imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic independence. Much of the world is even more dependent upon imported oil and is even more vulnerable to Iraqi threats.” However, Bush insisted that oil was not a serious reason for the war, despite his admission. In his speeches throughout the fall of 1990, Bush focused almost entirely on issues of human rights, national security, and state sovereignty when making the case for war, not on oil concerns. President Bush’s pro-war rhetoric galvanized public support for war throughout the fall and winter of 1990. Gallup surveys found that, while feelings that the U.S. should “begin military action against Iraq” stood at just 21 percent in August, the number had risen to 41 percent by December, and 49 percent by January 1991 – a growth 28 percentage points. When asked if Americans believed it was “worth going to war,” 45 percent said yes in

August 1990, compared to 51 percent in November 1990, and 71 percent by late-January 1991 once fighting began. The twin factors of pro-war rhetoric from officials and the media, and the onset of military conflict, worked in tandem to aid the administration in cultivating and maintaining war support.

### **Rhetoric versus Reality in the Iraq War**

The lofty rhetoric employed by the president hardly matched the history of U.S.-Iraqi relations. Numerous distortions were presented as fact, and inconvenient truths were ignored by political elites and the media. One of the highest profile distortions was the claim that Iraqi troops threw Kuwaiti premature babies to the floor, while stealing their incubators. Reporting by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation found there was no evidence these events occurred. What of the testimony from the Kuwait girl, Nayirah? This 15-year old girl was not a neutral bystander, but the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. She was part of the Kuwaiti government's effort to get back into power, and was coached to deliver her lines in front of the Congressional committee by the U.S. public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, as part of the "Citizens for a Free Kuwait" astroturf "movement" funded by the Kuwaiti government, which allocated millions of dollars to a propaganda campaign aimed at cultivating public war support. In reaction to this deception, Amnesty International condemned President Bush for his "opportunistic manipulation of the international human rights movement." However, the details of this deception emerged too late to make a difference in deterring support for war.

What about the comparison between Saddam Hussein and Adolf Hitler, and the claim that Iraq threatened U.S. national security? Although Iraq did retain a nuclear program prior to the 1991 Gulf war, there was little evidence one way or another in the early 1990s regarding the state of the program. The lack of details meant the Bush administration had little direct insight into whether a nuclear threat existed, despite public claims otherwise. President Bush also warned that Iraq was amassing massive numbers of troops along the Iraq-Saudi border, and that potential aggression against Saudi Arabia merited war. Commercial satellite photos from 1990, however, revealed that there was no confirmable build-up of Iraqi troops on the Saudi border at the time.

Bush's comparison of Hussein to Hitler was also propagandistic. There's no doubt that Hussein was an aggressive, repressive dictator, as seen in his attacks on Iran, Kuwait, and his own people. But Hussein's criminality was minor league compared to the most criminal authoritarian regimes in history. Hussein was a regional aggressor, not a global

one. The Nazis were the largest existential threat the U.S. faced in its history. By contrast, although Iraq possessed the fourth largest military in the world in 1990, that military was technologically three-quarters of a century behind the U.S. military. The dominant tactic used by the Iraqis in the conflict with Iran was trench warfare, which had not been used by the U.S. and its allies since World War I. Iraqis hiding in trenches were no match for U.S. stealth bombers, fighter-jets, and tanks. U.S. tanks, fitted with plows, rode up to the trenches, burying Iraqi troops alive, and killing hundreds. Thousands more died on the “Highway of Death” between Iraq and Kuwait. Retreating Iraqi military convoys were savaged by U.S. fighter-jets, leading to mass incinerations and an image of devastation that became an enduring symbol of the war’s one-sided destructiveness, wrought almost entirely against Iraqis. U.S. fighter jets referred to their attack runs against Iraqi vehicles as a “Turkey shoot,” indicating the severity of the slaughter. While an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Iraqi troops were killed in the conflict, 147 U.S. deaths were recorded – translating into an imbalance of between 68-to-1 to 82-to-1. The 1991 Gulf War and the Second World War were also radically different in their duration. The U.S. defeated Iraq in just five weeks of fighting in 1991. In contrast, the Second World War spanned from 1939 to 1945, and the U.S. involvement extended for three-and-a-half years, from late 1941 through mid-1945. In short, Bush’s comparison of Hussein and Hitler was an incredible achievement of propaganda.

The Bush administration also deceived the public on Iraq’s chemical weapons. The U.S. provided billions in military and economic aid to Iraq during the 1980s, up until Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The U.S. was a supporter of Hussein’s regime during the worst of his atrocities, before, during, and after the gassing of Halabja in 1988. The issue barely appeared in the news in the run-up to the Gulf War, but it was more often reported following the invasion of Kuwait, since the gassing played into the United States’ own narrative that it was concerned with human rights in Kuwait. But the U.S. was anything but concerned with the victims of Hussein’s crimes when the deaths occurred – his victims were pawns in a geopolitical power game between the U.S. and Iraq.

Looking at past support for Hussein, one sees U.S. fingerprints all over the Iraqi chemical attacks on the Kurds and against Iranian troops during the Iran-Iraq war. President Bush, working with Senators such as Republican Bob Dole, fought against the instituting of sanctions against Iraq after the Halabja gassing. Furthermore, as reported by the New York Times in 2002, discussions with “senior military officers” revealed that the Reagan administration secretly provided “critical battle planning assistance [to Iraq against Iran] at

a time when American intelligence knew that Iraqi commanders would employ chemical weapons in waging the decisive battles of the Iran-Iraq war.” ABC’s Nightline reported in 1992 that the “Reagan/Bush administrations permitted – and frequently encouraged – the flow of money, agricultural credits, dual use technology (allowing Iraq to develop chemical weapons), chemicals, and weapons to Iraq.” In the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war, U.S. officials removed thousands of pages from U.N. reports that documented how the U.S. supplied the components for developing chemical weapons. As the German newspaper Die Tageszeitung reported:

“The missing pages [of the U.N. report] implicated twenty-four U.S. based corporations and the successive Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. administration in connection with the illegal supplying of Saddam Hussein government with myriad weapons of mass destruction and the training to use them.”

The Bush administration enabled the chemical weapons atrocities committed by Hussein. Widespread recognition of this harsh reality, however, did not materialize in the run-up to the 2003 invasion, as it threatened to undermine the narrative that the U.S. was concerned with human rights in Iraq.

Finally, what of President Bush’s insistence that oil was not a significant interest of the U.S.? Available evidence shows this claim was a lie, told to obscure U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. Now-declassified government documents reveal that oil interests were of central concern to the president. National Security Directive 26, signed by President Bush in 1989, stated that

“Access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area [of which Iraq was one in 1989] are vital to U.S. national security. The United States remains committed to defending its vital interests in the region, if necessary and appropriate through the use of U.S. military force, against the Soviet Union or any other power with interests inimical [contrary] to our own.”

At the time, Bush wrote that “normal relations between the U.S. and Iraq would serve our longer-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East.” National Security Directive 54, which Bush signed in January 1991, also declared that Middle East oil was vital to U.S. national security and that it remained committed to using force to defend “its” interest [Iraqi oil presumably belongs to the United States]. The Bush administration reversed course, however, declaring in the document that “Iraq, by virtue of its unprovoked invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and its subsequent brutal occupation, is clearly a power with interests inimical to our own.” The two NSD

documents reveal that the primary U.S. concern in Iraq was oil, and that Bush was willing to marginalize Iraqi human rights atrocities in pursuit of neocolonial interests. The documents also revealed that the U.S. was committed to the use of force in the name of dominating Iraqi oil, contrary to President Bush's public lies.

### **Getting Beyond the Grand Men of History**

Media eulogies of President Bush will focus on the "greatness" of the former president as a man of honor, determination, and resolve. But U.S. imperialism is not about one man, a personality, or about the power of the will. To strip away this mystique from the way we talk about U.S. presidents, however, would expose the naked neocolonial ambitions of U.S. foreign policy. There is nothing noble about the brutal motives that drive U.S. foreign policy, and few Americans will be willing to defend criminal foreign wars if they are made aware of the dirty details that define these conflicts. It's the job of the "stenographers to power" in the press, to borrow a phrase from David Barsamian, to echo the propaganda claims of U.S. officials. Considering this task, journalists much prefer romantic notions of American altruism to more sober assessments of the president as imperial manipulator. And by emphasizing the legacy of George H. W. Bush independent of presidential propaganda, the media marginalize the central issues of U.S. militarism and imperialism in the Middle East.

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