

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY NETWORK
IRAQ BETWEEN TWO OCCUPATIONS
THE SECOND GULF WAR (1990–1991)



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Kenneth W. Estes



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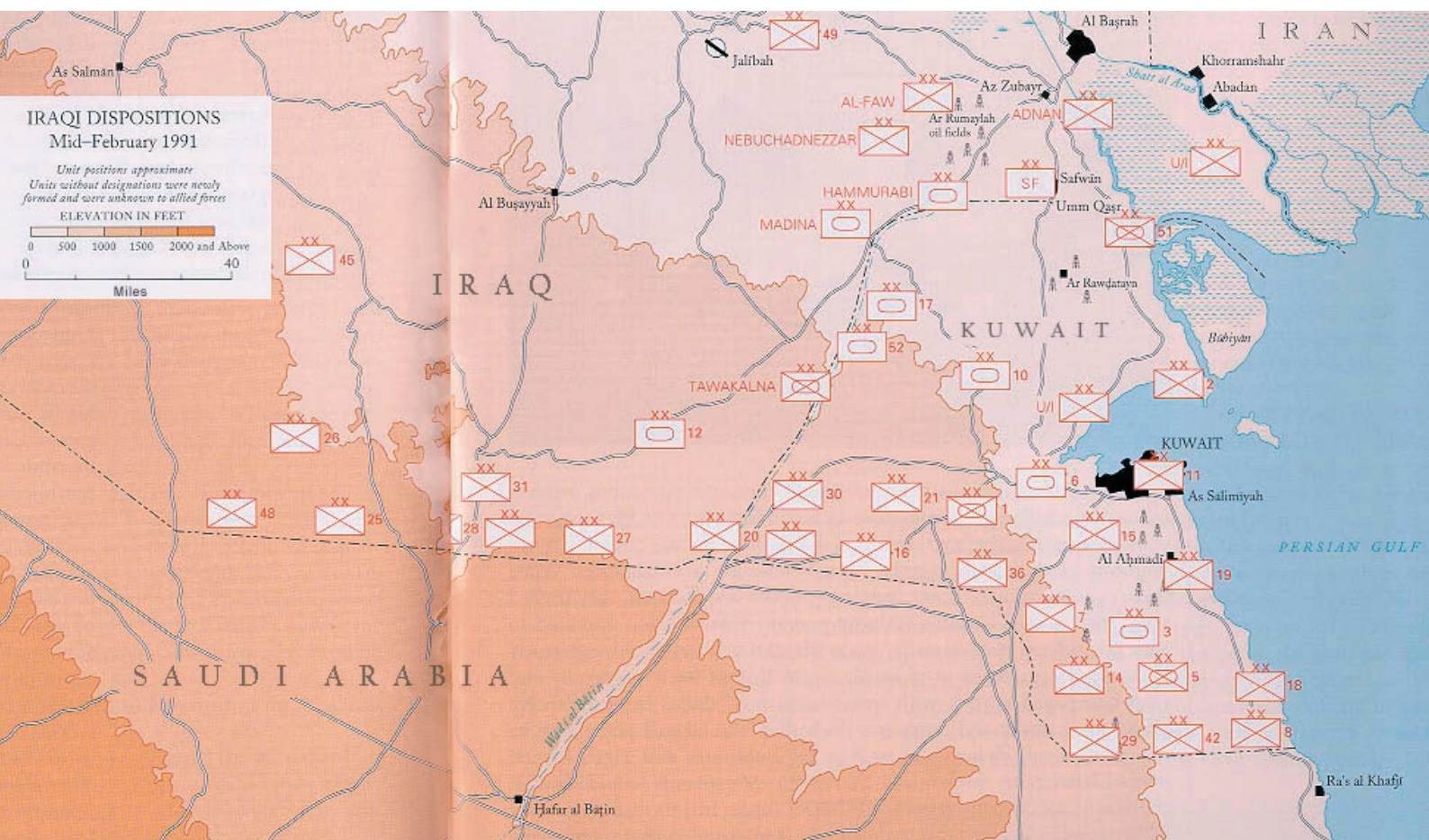
Curiously enshrouded with more even doubts because of its successor campaign of 2003, the Gulf War of 1990-1991 between Iraq and a US-led international coalition organized under UN auspices decisively settled the issue of Iraq's seizure of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. It inaugurated the permanent introduction of US ground and air forces into a region previously frequented only by its naval forces. In the process, US foreign policy became more entangled with the relations and problems of the Islamic states of this region than ever before.

Known in neighboring states as the Second Gulf War, the 1990-1991 Gulf War draws some origins from the Iraq-Iraq War of 1980-1988 (the First Gulf War), which began similarly with a surprise attack by Iraqi forces on the orders of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He seized the opportunity in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution for a quick military strike that would settle various border issues and prevent Iraq's large Shi'ia Muslim population from rallying behind Iranian fundamentalism. The war went badly and consumed much treasure and blood on both sides, each resorting to chemical weapons

to avert military collapse. In July 1988 both sides ceased hostilities.

Less than two years later, Iraq seized Kuwait, partly out of the need to recover financially from the ravages of the First Gulf War. Kuwait had loaned Saddam Hussein's government US\$14 billion in the interval and was loathe to remit any of it, despite government requests. Given incipient quarrels with Kuwait over borders and slant drilling into the Rumelia oil fields, Hussein determined to settle the issue by outright conquest.

Iraqi forces, in the strength of three divisions, crossed into Kuwait at 01:00 local time on August 2, 1990. Within a few days, US President George H. W. Bush ordered the US Central Command to reinforce and defend Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf emirates, at the same time fomenting a growing coalition determined to resist and ultimately expel Iraqi forces. In doing so, President Bush responded to the urging of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had taken a similar tough stance against the Argentine seizure of the Falklands (Malvinas) Islands in 1982.



Iraqi Dispositions Mid-February 1991. © US Army Center of Military History

With international support growing in the United Nations (UN), and with its material and military contributions to a coalition effort, the US fashioned and led a defensive effort to safeguard the remaining Arab states of the Gulf region from Iraq. The US, despite an announced defense cutback at the end of the Cold War, benefited immensely from previous war plans and major military infrastructure built in the region (particularly in Saudi Arabia), to defend the region against Soviet invasion. Air and naval bases, storage facilities, barracks, and operations centers had all been built by Gulf states and US contractors. US Central Command had been formed in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) and had since received the lion's share of planned reinforcements, equipment, and exercises in the US defense establishment. Thus, deployment plans made for the defense of the Gulf against the Soviet Union sufficed, with minimal changes, to set massive forces and support echelons in movement to the Gulf.

US aircraft reached Saudi Arabia on 8 August 1990 and were followed by US Army airborne and Marine Corps ground units, backed by naval aviation from offshore aircraft carriers and supporting land bases. Within a month, enough forces had been established in Saudi Arabia to block any Iraqi moves against Saudi Arabia. The US forces dubbed the defensive buildup "Operation Desert Shield," an operation aimed at confining Iraqi moves to the Kuwaiti territory already seized.

From Riyadh, the Saudi capital, the commander in chief of Central Command, army General Norman H. Schwarzkopf, and the largely titular Arab coalition commander, Saudi Lieutenant General Prince Khalid bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, began planning offensive moves in order to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait, supported by parallel diplomatic deliberations in the UN. On 31 October, President Bush authorized a doubling of US forces in preparation for the offensive.

US diplomacy ran into complex problems on various levels. Arab states sending forces to the coalition would fight only under Arab commanders, and some, such as Syria, disliked the new offensive mission. The Iraqi threat to fire missiles into Israel if attacked by the coalition introduced further anomalies to the Arab-Western coalition. The Russians, long military patrons and suppliers to Iraqi forces, saw their considerable investments at stake and urged a diplomatic solution, even offering its good offices apart from the UN for a last-minute settlement.

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Preparing for the Ground War, 17 January – 17 February 1991. © US Army Center of Military History

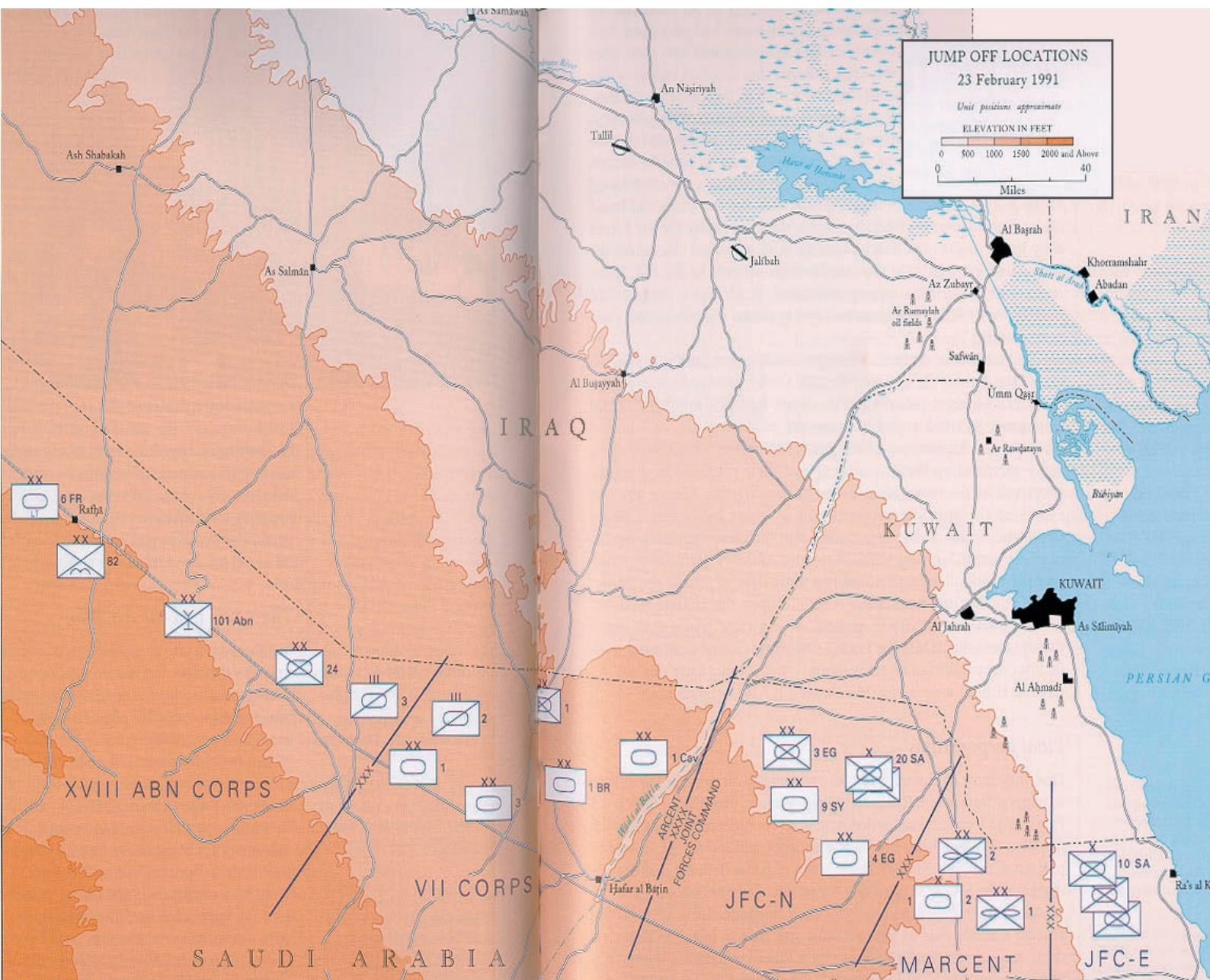
The Iraqis had little hope of resisting the coalition of US, British, French, Saudi, Egyptian, and Gulf contingents on the ground, let alone the overwhelming air and naval armadas that included even more national contingents. But Israel warned that it would not ignore Iraqi attacks, and Iraq clearly hoped to unhinge the Arab-Western alliance by bringing Israel into the conflict. US forces deployed defensive missile batteries to protect Israel while cueing coalition aviation and special forces to the Western Iraqi desert, from which any bombardment missiles would be launched against Israel.

US deployments to the Gulf region exceeded any similar undertaking since World War II. More than 500,000 troops, including a major mobilization of national guardsmen and reservists, deployed to the Gulf during a six-month period, and other major deployments from the US replaced units detailed to the Gulf region. Not only were multiple divisions of US ground forces sent to Saudi Arabia, but also bases in all the Gulf states from Bahrain to Oman received US naval and air forces and the growing logistic structure necessary to support them.

US logistical support units struggled with long supply lines and harsh desert conditions in order to maintain the forces already present and arriving, as well as to amass and store the 60 days of supplies required by the commanders. In the end, an entire logistic support base system for the ground combat force was planted in the Saudi desert a short distance from the Kuwaiti border, almost under the noses of the Iraqis, who lacked any effective reconnaissance in the face of coalition air power.

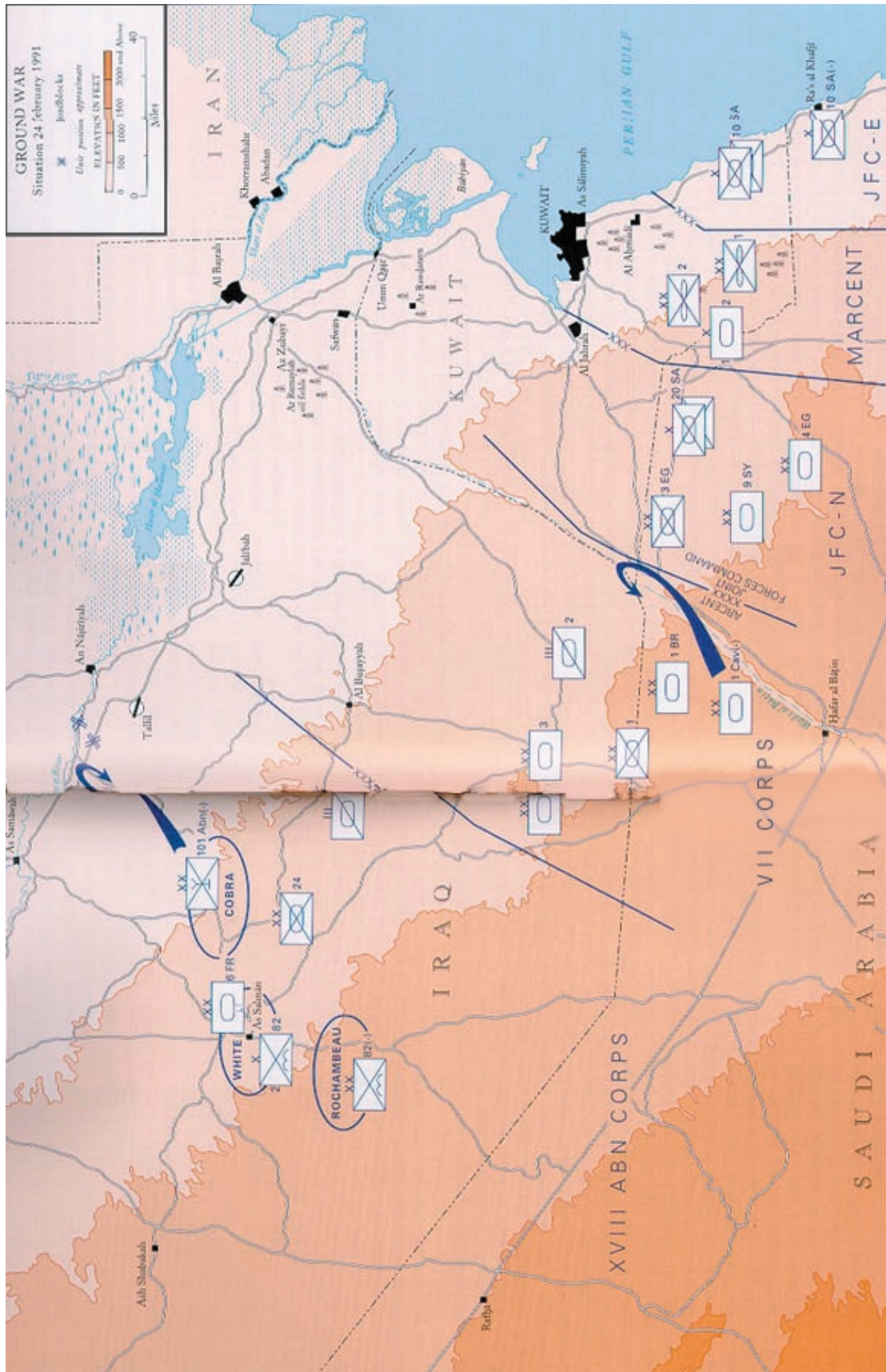
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After Hussein resisted UN and US calls to abandon Kuwait, the UN authorized the removal of his army "by all means necessary" on 29 November 1991. The US Congress followed by authorizing the president to use force against Iraq on 9 January 1991. The offensive, dubbed "Operation Desert Storm," by the US and "Operation Granby" by the UK, began with an air campaign on 17 January that struck strategic and tactical targets in Kuwait and Iraq on a continuous basis using aircraft and cruise missiles.



Jump Off Locations for Coalition Land Invasion, 23 February 1991. © US Army Center of Military History

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Ground War Battle Plan, 24 February 1991. © US Army Center of Military History

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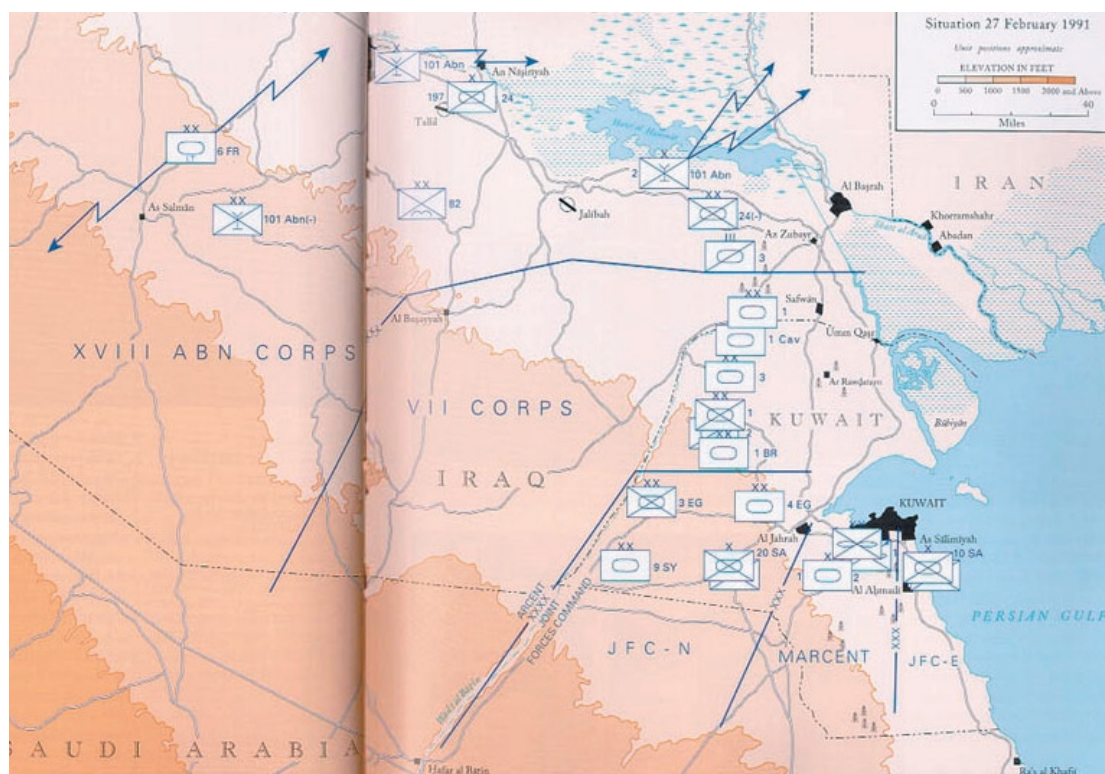
The ground war began on 24 February 1991, when the 1st and 2nd Marine Divisions of the I Marine Expeditionary Force attacked Kuwait, opening the coalition ground offensive by forcing their way through the Iraqi barriers and brushing aside frontline resistance. Flanked by a joint corps of Arab contingents, the attacking US forces destroyed or captured whole brigades of Iraqi troops and swept through the burning oil fields toward the capital of Kuwait City. Artillery barrages and repeated strikes by coalition fighter bombers and attack helicopters supported the advance of the troops, halting only at night in order to prevent accidental combat among the allied and Marine Corps units.

In the 24 hours that followed, a vast field army of mechanized, armored, and air assault divisions of the US, British, and French armies rolled across the Saudi-Iraqi border. Brushing aside weak defenses, these forces, under the US Army XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps, wheeled north and east to outmaneuver and destroy the main fighting forces of the Iraqi army and to move along the Euphrates River, completing a massive encirclement of Kuwait and southern Iraq. They maneuvered by day and night through sandstorms and other problems, despite the challenge of distinguishing friend from foe. A few Iraqi counterattacks were beaten off with

hardly any casualties. After 100 hours of combat, coalition forces dominated Kuwait and the Arab units cleared its capital of remaining Iraqi forces.

Iraqi forces either failed to fight or lacked the skills necessary to inflict damage when they did so. The Iraqi air force scattered, making only a few efforts to engage coalition air forces. Most aircraft were voluntarily interned in Iran, while Iraq's naval forces withered under overwhelming air attacks. Iraq's elite Republican Guard, held in reserve from the immediate battle area, suffered catastrophic losses while fighting the US Army-led encirclement, and the slight Iraqi resistance in Kuwait melted within the first 48 hours of the ground offensive.

The predicted Iraqi missile strikes against Israel came soon after the air campaign began, with the launch of ballistic missiles launched on 18 January. US anti-aircraft missile batteries seemed to counter most incoming missiles, but later analysis demonstrated that many Iraqi missiles broke up in flight. In any case, the missiles contained no chemical warheads, and the much-feared Iraqi arsenal of chemical weapons played no part in this war. Moreover, the coalition's air and special forces strikes against Iraqi launch sites made unnecessary any Israeli participation that might have threatened the coalition's political cohesion.



Ground War Situation on 27 February 1991. © US Army Center of Military History

As the nature of the Iraqi collapse became apparent, President Bush accepted the advice of his staff to cease-fire and halt what was becoming a slaughter of the now ineffective Iraqi forces. A hurriedly assembled armistice meeting on the Kuwaiti frontier allowed two Iraqi generals to meet with Prince Khalid and General Schwartzkopf on 3 March and pledge Iraqi adherence to the various UN demands, as well as to arrange for prisoner exchanges and other military requirements.

The decision to end the fighting led to endless second-guessing over possible outcomes had the coalition continued military operations to occupy Baghdad and depose the regime of Saddam Hussein. The unexpected resistance of Iraqis to the occupation in 2003 has apparently not quelled the notion that Iraq might have fallen easily into foreign domination in 1991.

As a result of the Second Gulf War, Kuwait was restored to its emir, Iraqi military power was crippled, UN inspection teams certified the destruction of newly prohibited munitions and weapons, and allied (later Anglo-American) air patrols were established over the northern and southern sectors of Iraq. A continuing US military presence settled in the Gulf region after the war.

US forces and equipment had performed well and the expenses of the 1990-1991 Gulf War were touted as "covered" by the US\$75 billion in contributions promised by coalition partners. However, only some US\$49 billion was actually donated, some of it in the form of goods and services, and none of the contributions covered the immense wear placed on US and coalition materiel. Despite this, many observers sensed a paradigm shift such that wars could be fought more economically by the United States to advance its national aims.

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Images

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lt. Col. Estes served in the US Marine Corps, retiring in 1993 after a 24-year career. A US Naval Academy graduate, Lt. Col. Estes completed a variety of command and staff assignments, including with the operations staff of the Marine Corps Headquarters in Washington DC and with the Office of Defense Cooperation in Madrid, Spain, where he performed various duties, culminating in that of chief of international affairs.

He received his PhD in Modern European History from the University of Maryland and his MA in History from Duke University. In 1974-1978, he taught at the US Naval Academy and in 1981-1984 at Duke University—all while serving as a Marine Corps officer. He also completed the Army Advanced Armor Officer Course and attended the Marine Corps Command and Staff College.

He is the editor of the *Marine Officer's Guide* and the *Handbook for Marine NCOs*, has contributed chapters in other works, and has written extensively in military journals. He recently published *Marines Under Armor: The Marine Corps and the Armored Fighting Vehicle, 1916-2000* (Naval Institute Press: 2000), *Tanks on the Beaches: A Marine Corps Tanker in the Great Pacific War, 1941-1946*, with Robert M. Neiman (Texas A & M University Press Consortium: 2003), *A European Anabasis: Western European Volunteers in the German Army and Waffen-SS, 1940-1945* (Columbia University Press: 2003), *The Spanish Civil War [History in Dispute, Volume 18]*, with Daniel Kowalsky (St. James Press: 2004), and *US Marine Corps Tank Crewman 1941-45: Pacific* (Osprey Publishing: 2005).

In 1984, he received a third-place Codd Award for best NROTC instructor in the US and has been twice awarded the US Meritorious Service Medal. In addition, he was awarded the Naval Cross of Merit, First Class, by the Kingdom of Spain, and in 1992, was made an Honorary Legionnaire in the Spanish

Legion. In 2002, he was awarded the American Historical Association's Gutenberg-e Prize.

Lt. Col. Estes continues to teach in the US and Spain, and also serves as a consultant in support of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, and the US 1st Armored Division.