

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY NETWORK
THE THIRD GULF WAR
(2003–20??)



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Kenneth W. Estes



As extraordinary as it would have seemed three years ago, nobody could have predicted that the drama of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington would have been upstaged by any other event in the presidency of George W. Bush. However, this apparently remains the case with the unilateral US invasion of Iraq, which produced vigorous debate in an already polarized diplomatic and US political landscape. Although the military defeat of Iraq was a foregone conclusion, the drawn-out political and diplomatic deliberations running up to the war defy most simplified analyses.

Despite the evident popularity of comparisons to the US intervention in Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s, it may prove more edifying to consider the example of the Spanish-American War for a military victory so easily won, followed by a confounding insurrection of the apparently “liberated” peoples. The Iraq campaign of 2003 (inaugurating the Third Gulf War) nevertheless met the timely needs of the US political leadership.

During 2002, indicators continued to build signaling US military action against Iraq. The Bush administration had already demonstrated its desire to settle direct and latent threats to US national security in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks. Thus, even before the campaign against Afghanistan reached its culminating point in the establishment of a friendly interim government there, planning continued for removing the onerous government of Iraq and any future threat it presented to the region and to US interests.

Early on, the administration of President George W. Bush indicated its wish to take new initiatives against Iraq in 2000. Maintaining the US-led aerial over-watch of “no-fly” zones in Iraq from Turkish and Saudi bases, a product of the Second Gulf War (1990–1991), cost too much in funds, equipment, and increasingly scarce military manpower. Moreover, the former coalition arrayed against Iraq had tired of the UN sanctions and embargos that followed the conclusion of the conflict. Several of these nations openly anticipated the resumption of trade relations. Moreover, Iraq’s dictator, President Saddam Hussein, had defiantly resisted and obstructed the efforts of UN weapons inspectors monitoring the disarmament clauses of the 1991 armistice Iraq had agreed to. In a manner still unexplained to this day, Iraq withheld the remaining details of the creation and scrapping of its ballistic missiles, chemical and biological weapons programs, and its research in nuclear weapons.

Iraqi military forces had approached the Kuwaiti border several times in the 1990s, and expensive military deployments by the US had been ordered to demonstrate both its resolve and its military superiority in the Gulf region.

Early deliberations by Bush’s advisors on how best to put an end to the seemingly endless defense drain posed by Saddam Hussein’s regime quickly gelled with the destruction of the World Trade Center and the resulting need to provide a strong response to reassert US power in the region and to destroy the amorphous band that could be held responsible for the attacks. Even as the quick reprisal campaign against Afghanistan to destroy terrorist bases of operations took shape, US deployments and war planning efforts against Iraq could be discerned. The US Army V Corps headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany, received its assignment to begin planning operations in “Southwest Asia” during the first week of November 2001.

If the United States intended to wage a “global war on terrorism,” then states sponsoring terrorism or known to sympathize with terrorist acts could be added to the list of likely targets. This scarcely implicated Iraq and Saddam Hussein’s regime, but Paul Wolfowitz, the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, publicly revealed that Iraq’s possession of “weapons of mass destruction” was vigorously emphasized so that the US public would more readily appreciate the threat posed by Iraq and the justification for war.

While the US Army planned, war gamed and revised concepts of operations against Iraq, President Bush announced Saddam Hussein’s regime as a member of the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address. By doing so, he identified Iraq as a nation of interest and set the tone for a political and military campaign against the country. The immediate objective aimed at overthrowing Hussein and installing a more friendly government that would ease tensions, isolate other opponents (such as Iran, also included in the Axis of Evil), and permit greater US influence in the region, including military basing rights.

As laudable as these objectives remained with the public, the concept of unilateral military action, even with British forces participating, did not prove compelling in the United States or among the usual allies. The US nevertheless carried out the extensive deployment of forces and supplies through the summer of 2002. In retrospect, it appears that

Bush overestimated war fervor and deployed forces to the region far faster than allies or the UN Security Council were willing to act. Arab allies that had supported the 1990–1991 Gulf War also proved less interested in a showdown with Iraq. Although many viewed Hussein as at least a latent threat to their security, the notion of a US-sponsored invasion to accomplish regime change found little favor in the traditional autocracies of the Arab world.



Map of Iraq. Source: CIA World Factbook

By late summer of 2002, therefore, the United States had stationed several brigades of ground troops in Kuwait, moved at least five sets of prepositioned equipment sets (each sufficient to outfit a mechanized or armored brigade) from other sites to Kuwait, and had more ships entering the Persian Gulf each week with cargos of general supplies and equipment. It seems entirely possible that President Bush had cued the US forces to be ready to act against Iraq by November, but ongoing international diplomacy, particularly British prodding to take the case to the United Nations in September, imposed delays. In the end, for Bush to accede to allied requests for more weapons inspections and more pressure upon Hussein to seek non-military solutions would have required him to cancel the expensive buildup of the summer, return the troops to garrison, and await the next campaign season in the fall of 2003.

By this time, Army V Corps planning considered using both the 3rd Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division as the leading elements of the attack, supported by the 101st Airborne Division. Other major units, such as the 4th Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division, and 82nd Airborne Division would reinforce or perform supporting missions for

V Corps. However, by February 2003, the V Corps' force lists had been stripped of many units and revised plans called for a starkly reduced attack force, with reinforcements to be "rolled" into the theater after combat began.

Eyes on Saddam

The capabilities of satellite systems have evolved dramatically over the last four decades – from satellites that returned film days or weeks after the images were obtained to satellites that return their imagery almost instantaneously. In addition, the detail that could be extracted from those images has also risen sharply over the years.

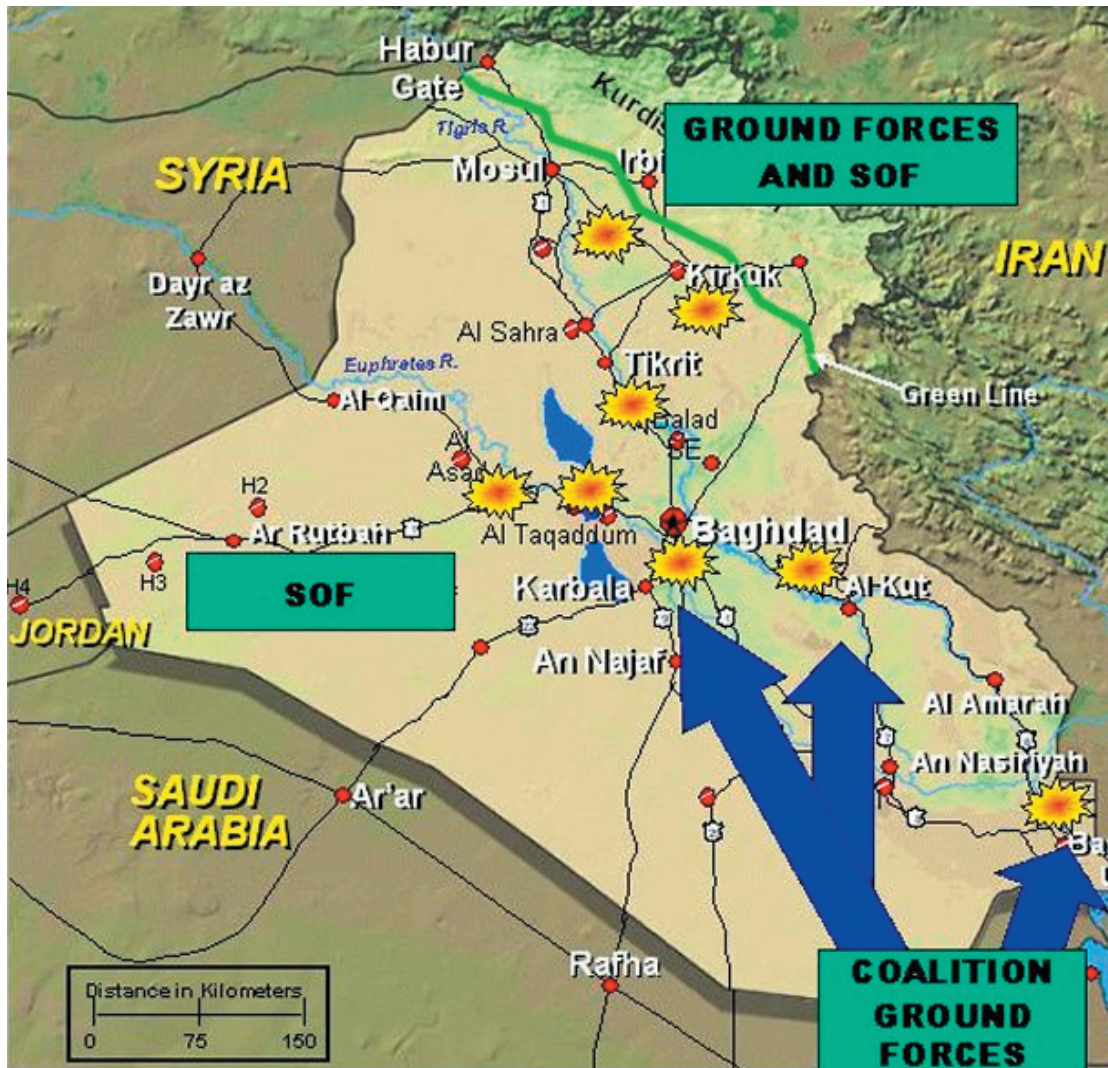
From the fall of 2002 through April 2003, the White House, Defense Department, and State Department released over 70 images, most obtained by satellite, of portions of Iraq. The objective was to provide evidence to support US claims about the nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, as well as claims about Iraq's failure to comply with UN resolutions concerning its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Once military operations began, Defense Department and Central Command briefings made extensive use of satellite imagery to provide pre- and post-attack views of targets attacked by coalition air forces.

In the fall of 2002, at the same time that the US brought its concerns to the UN Security Council and argued that action needed to be taken to completely eliminate Iraq's holdings of, and its ability to produce, WMD, the CIA released an unclassified version of its new National Intelligence Estimate on Iraqi WMD, which contained several satellite images of Iraqi facilities of concern. Images were also released at the time President Bush gave a 7 October 2003 speech on the Iraqi issue and the following day as part of a Defense Department briefing on Iraqi denial and deception.

On 5 February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council on the issue of Iraq and disarmament. He presented a combination of imagery and signals intelligence intended to persuade council members and others that Iraq had not disarmed and was seeking to deceive the UN and its inspectors. Powell argued that the imagery presented provided evidence of Iraq's failure with UN resolutions.

Imagery of civilian areas was used to illustrate three arguments made by the Bush administration – Iraqi deception with regard to matters other than WMD, its attempts to use civilians and civilian areas as shields to prevent attacks on military equipment, and its willingness to extinguish groups considered a threat to the regime.

Excerpt from "US Overhead Imagery of Iraq". National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 88. Edited by Jeffrey T. Richelson. 30 April 2003.



Coalition Ground and Special Forces operations in Iraq. Source: GlobalSecurity.org

Convinced of a cheap and rapid victory, the Bush administration approved an air attack against an alleged hideaway of Hussein's late on 19 March and launched the ground offensive on 20 March 2003.



Coalition plan of attack in southern Iraq. Source: UK Ministry of Defence

The evident weakness of Iraq – defeated in 1991 and embargoed since then – suggested that no long air campaign or overwhelming buildup of forces would be needed. Fewer than 50,000 US and UK troops initially crossed into Iraq from staging bases in Kuwait with another 100,000 en route to the assembly areas in Kuwait. Dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom” by US forces, the campaign was called “Operation Telic” by British forces and “Operation Falconer” by the Australian units involved. While British and US Marine Corps troops isolated the major southern Iraqi city of Basra and the nearby Faw Peninsula, the remainder of the US forces thrust along the Euphrates River as far as Al Nasiriyah, before splitting into two axes of advance.

The Army V Corps and the companion I Marine Expeditionary Force thus began the fastest offensive in US military history, covering the distance

from the Kuwaiti border to their penetration of downtown Baghdad – a straight-line distance of 540 kilometers – in a mere 16 days. Combat involved not only the leading assault elements of the two corps but many combat support and service support units, as they followed along the lengthening lines of communications. The soldiers and marines responded to changing situations and enemy tactics, adapting their own tactics, techniques, and procedures to defeat the enemy wherever found. The surprising speed with which they approached and penetrated into the capital city with armored forces brought a quick end to organized resistance. Despite the lack of the 1st Armored, 1st Cavalry, and 4th Infantry Divisions, the US Central Command achieved a stunningly rapid success of US arms.

As the Iraqi government fled the city, military resistance melted from all but die-hard factions, some of which required neutralization by additional US divisions following those leading. The US 4th Mechanized Infantry Division remained out of action, with its equipment onboard ships in the eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey had denied both access to unload and passage to invade northern Iraq. Instead, allied special forces, used in record numbers in this operation, secured airfields at the Iraqi city of Kirkuk for the 173rd Airborne Brigade to land and occupy the Kurdish northern provinces of Iraq.

Between 7 April and 20 April, a mopping up of isolated pockets of “noncompliant” Iraqi units continued to the south of Baghdad while the occupation of the area to the north of the city and south of Kirkuk completed the combat phase of the campaign. After defeating the Iraqi armed forces and toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein, the focus of the effort now shifted to the Iraqi population and the need to provide a safe and secure environment for reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, and the inevitable nation building that now faced the US and its coalition partners in Iraq.

Although the planning for the invasion of Iraq had exceeded a year in gestation, precious little thought and effort had been given to planning for Phase IV-B (post-hostilities) of the campaign ordered by the commander of USCENTCOM. At least in part, this condition stemmed from the political leadership’s direction of the war and its preparation of the US public. Iraq was depicted as an easy campaign, in which the US forces and coalition troops would be welcomed as liberators. A certain wishful thinking prevailed in that little preparation ensued for establishing an occupation

force, military government, or other civil-military actions. Instead, most authorities insisted that the Iraqis would replace the cupola of its government with new leaders, and an intact government, police, and services bureaucracy would return to work and assist immediately in the recovery effort. Likewise, the general lack of informed sources on Iraq caused the US leadership to underestimate the deteriorated state of Iraq as a polity, and its physical state in terms of infrastructure. Without direction from the national command authority, the forces in theater essentially remained focused upon the rolling attack scenarios and changing force lists as they devised and then conducted the invasion. Few voices raised the question of military government and reconstruction efforts, and the staffs already engaged in combat operations often assumed that other organizations would be tasked for this effort once combat had concluded. The harsh reality presented to the occupiers of Iraq in April 2003 approached none of this cascade of wishful thinking

Despite efforts by US forces to restrict bombardment and fire support and thus minimize collateral damage, nearly all available services in Iraq collapsed as a result of combat operations: civil servants and other public workers fled, and buildings and infrastructure were looted of materiel (even items of little apparent value were carried off by the mobs). There was no rapid restoration of services on the part of the Iraqis, and US military forces had not been prepared to provide for, or assist with, the reconstruction of Iraqi infrastructure. The “rolling start” method of the 2003 campaign minimized the employment of forces of all kinds. An eventual buildup of forces was planned in the event that Iraqi resistance continued or setbacks to the offensive required new operations to be launched. But the rapid movement of initial assault forces brought about the “decapitation” of the Hussein regime in a mere 16 days, leaving the same assault forces in charge of a large and unplanned recovery and stabilization operation. In fact, a nation-building program far larger than that conducted by NATO in the Balkans during the 1990s now beckoned for the US and its coalition partners. But the assault forces stood alone, recovering from their own exertions, and the follow-on forces scheduled to conduct the remainder of the fighting expected in Iraq, such as 1st Armored and 4th Infantry Divisions, were still arriving and assembling. Even if the US had planned for an occupation and nation-building effort, none of the requisite forces had been sent, nor would any arrive for the foreseeable future.

A great improvisation now took place; a “rolling occupation” plan was devised to match the “rolling start” campaign, but no time remained. The opportunities for an early restoration of order had already vanished.

By all accounts, the US invasion of Iraq, undertaken in conjunction with British and Australian combat forces, had succeeded in its mission. Although the term “coalition of the willing” had been frequently cited by US spokespersons, only five of the 30 nations initially named had sent combat troops, and the small Polish and Romanian contingents took no part in the fighting.

President Bush proclaimed major combat operations at an end on 1 May 2003. But in the months that followed, the war became a struggle of resistance and insurrection by varied groups against the US-led occupation of the country. Again, US military planners had not taken serious account of the possibility of a resistance movement, and even with the creation of a “sovereign” Iraqi provisional government in July 2004, there seemed no end in sight for the Anglo-American campaign to pacify Iraq. Two major uprisings in the Shi’ia dominated southern provinces, led by the Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, challenged US efforts to establish a provisional government, and open combat flared from April to September 2004. Successive elections, constitutions, and governments later, the insurrection movements have demonstrated no loss of energy. And yet the coalition partners have shown real fatigue in continuing the security and economic reconstruction of Iraq (2006).

The US invasion of Iraq stemmed from an overly enthusiastic and ambitious concept that had been reinforced (in unintended fashion), by the ease of victory in the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Back then, the deployment of overwhelming US and coalition forces over a period of six months led to an aerial campaign of roughly 30 days and a 100-hour ground war that eliminated the threat posed by Iraq to the region and settled the United States into a commanding presence there. The apparent ease of that victory influenced the more ambitious schemes of invading and occupying Iraq in 2003.

Unfortunately, the fortunes of war and the intrinsic play of chance against even the best-laid plans make the simplest things in war difficult. A typical example of such oversimplification came when US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called upon Iraq to surrender on the first day of ground

operations, as if the “game” were up and there would be no need for the armed forces of a sovereign nation to attempt to do its duty and defend itself, no matter how hopeless the odds.

As a result of such wishful thinking and the harsh realities left unanticipated or miscalculated, the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq brought numerous problems for which few solutions remained at hand: national resistance, the misconduct of troops, the use of torture, prisons and prisoner handling, and the rules of engagement to name but a few of the items on a seemingly endless list of concerns. The shortage in the United States of Arabic speakers and other knowledgeable experts formed a poor basis for establishing hegemony in a part of the world unfamiliar at best to American eyes. If nothing else, the US experience with the Iraq War of 2003 has served as a warning to those who consider war a facile tool to be exploited in the hands of designated craftsmen.

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 most 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.

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<http://jccc.afis.osd.mil/images/images.pl?Lbox=defenselink.Operation_IRAQI_FREEDOM>

UK Ministry of Defense: Operation Telic
<http://www.operations.mod.uk/telic/photo_gallery.htm>

Additional Materials

"Eyes on Saddam" excerpted from "US Overhead Imagery of Iraq."
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Images

Cover image courtesy of the US Department of Defence
Map of Iraq courtesy of the CIA World Factbook
Coalition invasion diagrams courtesy of GlobalSecurity.org and the UK Ministry of Defence