"The Art of Ruling the Minds of Men": George H. W. Bush and the Justifications for Intervention in the Gulf War

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Anthony M. Crews

November 2010

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This thesis titled
"The Art of Ruling the Minds of Men": George H. W. Bush and the Justifications for Intervention in the Gulf War

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CREWS, ANTHONY M., M.A., November 2010, History

"The Art of Ruling the Minds of Men": George H. W. Bush and the Justifications for Intervention in the Gulf War (177 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Chester J. Pach

Selling the Gulf War required the George H. W. Bush administration to depart from its ineffective approach to public communications. The American people initially supported the President’s response to the invasion of Kuwait, but over time the administration’s inconsistent arguments caused the case for intervention to be increasingly called into question. By late November the administration perceived a looming crisis in support and moved to solidify domestic approval. Public opinion research informed them that the memory of the Vietnam War was the greatest threat to public support of an American war in the Persian Gulf. Consequently the administration simplified the justifications for war and argued that challenging Saddam Hussein was a moral imperative. After an initial swell of support in the aftermath of victory, the administration became less able to publically justify the war and unable to use it for political ends. The cultural and political consequences of the administration’s decisions contributed to Bush’s defeat in the 1992 presidential election.

Approved: __________________________________________________________

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several people deserve thanks for making this project possible, and none more than my thesis advisor Dr. Chester Pach. Though he was always willing to discuss my ideas, Dr. Pach wisely insisted that I find my own path. He sacrificed some of his personal time to read drafts of my work. The other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Paul Milazzo and Dr. Peter John Brobst, were both generous with their time and offered helpful comments. Dr. Ingo Trauschweizer was out of the country during my major writing period but he read some of my early proposals. I would also like to thank the rest of the faculty at Ohio University, many of whom broadened my thinking about history in a variety of ways.

Living in the graduate community in Athens has been an enriching experience. Special thanks to Patrick Campbell, who read a draft of one of my chapters, and also to Sebastian Hurtado-Torres, Meredith Hohe, and Michael Cook, all of whom suffered my thinking-out-loud with grace. My undergraduate advisor Dr. Jonathan Winkler first sparked my interest in graduate study. His enthusiastic mentoring encouraged me to pursue a new career path.

The Ohio University History Department and the Contemporary History Institute provided travel funds to conduct research in Texas. The archivists at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library were helpful in many ways and kind to a novice. My family’s willingness to babysit provided me the time I needed to read and write. I would also like to thank Olivia, for whom it must have seemed like I stared at computers much too often.
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INTRODUCTION

After a quick victory over Iraq in the Gulf War George H. W. Bush informed the nation on March 1, 1991 that “we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all!” Immediately after the war many Americans seemed to agree with Bush’s apparent jubilation as a postwar euphoria swept through the country. Thousands gathered to celebrate in victory parades across the country. One such parade in Washington drew a crowd of between 200,000-800,000 celebrators and only a single protester; sometimes when dissenters showed up they were beaten or arrested. Americans were not in the mood to tolerate antiwar agitators in part because protesters reminded many of the negative aspects of the Vietnam War, which the President had assured everyone no longer mattered. Public approval of the President reached nearly 90 percent in the immediate postwar period.

Though the Vietnam Syndrome is difficult to define and some questioned its existence, there did seem to be something to the concept. Many decision-makers worried about the effects of the war on U.S. foreign policy and public opinion. When Ronald Reagan pulled American troops out of Lebanon in 1984 after 241 Marines were killed by a suicide bomber he followed the recommendations of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who based his advice on the military’s collective memory of Vietnam. Weinberger had opposed the deployment in the first place and used the opportunity of

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1 From here on I will refer to George H. W. Bush as Bush. If I am talking about his son I will make that clear.
Reagan’s decision to withdrawal to announce the Weinberger Doctrine, which was to determine when and when not to commit American forces abroad.\(^5\) Foreign policy practitioners drew different lessons from the Vietnam War, but most agreed that they did not want to repeat the mistakes that resulted in the most divisive event in American history since the Civil War. Some academics wondered how to implement the perceived lessons of Vietnam. In 1990 James F. Pontuso, a scholar of political philosophy, wrote that television news cameras should be restricted by the federal government from reporting from war zones. Pontuso argued that such a plan was perfectly compatible with the First Amendment and necessary to secure the public will in any future conflict. If the United States didn’t take these steps, Pontuso warned that it “will be progressively at the mercy of those regimes which have no qualms about denying their people full freedom of the press.”\(^6\) Pontuso and Weinberger were both reacting to the Vietnam Syndrome in their own ways by offering solutions that they thought would mitigate the most debilitating consequences of the experience of the Vietnam War. The President’s claim that the country had kicked the Vietnam Syndrome was partially rooted in real concerns of policymakers and analysts.

The media had mixed reactions to the President’s claim. While railing against Congressional Democrats who had voted against the Gulf War and continued to refer to the Vietnam Syndrome as if it existed after the U.S. victory, the Wall Street Journal editorialized that for Democrats, “somehow, nothing was learned [from the Vietnam War] and the entire scenario repeated itself on a grand scale with Operation Desert

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Storm.” Others argued that Bush’s concept of the Vietnam Syndrome was narrow and his dismissal hasty. Los Angeles Times reporter Robert Scheer admitted to being a “downer” when he asked several lingering questions about the postwar order. He thought any cure of any syndrome was at best bittersweet. The Boston Globe argued that Bush’s statement was a “dubious claim” that was based on a “narrow and tendentious” interpretation of the original mistakes of the Vietnam War. The New York Times seemed ready to move on to other matters when it led a story on Bush’s post-war popularity by asking “where is President Bush’s domestic agenda?” The Washington Post suggested that Bush had been preoccupied from the beginning with curing some syndrome and in the process had lowered the threshold for acceptable reasons to go to war.

Some of these arguments in the media reactions to Bush’s statement hinted at an important dynamic at work in the Bush administration’s strategy for selling the Gulf War that has been generally understudied by historians. The administration was often preoccupied with the memory of the Vietnam War while it sold the idea of the Gulf War to the American people. It worked to discourage comparisons between the two wars and win over constituencies it considered important to making the Gulf War seem better and unlike Vietnam. Selling the Gulf War took on a special urgency in late November, 1990, when public approval of the White House’s policies in the Middle East began declining. When it seemed as analogies between the Gulf War and Vietnam War were among the

largest obstacles in the way of gaining public support for the war the Bush administration created a new communications strategy to discourage such comparisons and bolster support. This strategy was successful insofar as the goal was public support for the war effort in the short-term.

Ultimately the administration’s success in selling the Gulf War was both temporary and an aberration in an administration that had serious problems selling its ideas to the American public. Though not without controversy, President Bush and his administration managed the momentous changes of the era with great skill. But in another sense they failed utterly. Despite realizing several important foreign policy goals during the first eighteen months of his presidency, the administration did not become identified with its achievements. Bush retained relatively high approval ratings through most of his presidency, but approval tended to be rooted in vague, unreliable voter instincts. This dynamic was especially frustrating for a president who hoped to establish his legacy in foreign affairs. The administration’s problems were partially a result of a series of decisions rejecting the communications model of the Reagan administration but also Bush’s personal struggle with rhetoric. The tensions surrounding the troubling trends in public opinion came to a head in the summer of 1990, when the Bush administration seized the opportunity to try a new approach to public communication after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Ultimately the administration’s inability to sell its policies to the American people was one of the most important reasons for Bush’s failure to win reelection in 1992.
Bush’s struggles with public communication provided abundant material for satirists. The most famous impersonation of George H. W. Bush performed by Dana Carvey on Saturday Night Live often had a serious critical undertone. As members of the SNL cast explained in a 2010 interview with CNN talk-show host Larry King, impersonations are not always designed as exaggerations of the political views or physical mannerisms of a person. Occasionally characters are wholly fictional creations of writers and actors. In SNL’s interpretation of Hillary Clinton, for example, Clinton is imagined by SNL writers to be a politician of prodigious competence who struggles to contain her frustration with the flaws of those around her.11 Not so with Carvey’s George Bush, who acted and sounded much like the real man and engaged directly with the issues that permeated the Bush administration.

In 1991 Carvey’s character gave a fictional address to the nation during which he discussed the looming American invasion of Iraq. Carvey depicted Bush as awkward but earnest, unserious and seemingly incompetent; he spoke with a nasal drawl, grinned inappropriately, and dressed in a suit that was much too big for him. The character referred to the Middle East by gesturing vaguely into the distance as if he did not know where it was. He claimed to have learned the simple lesson of the Vietnam War: “stay out of Vietnam.” The viewer assumes that Bush had not in fact learned any lesson. The character told the audience that he probably would not invade Iraq…”but then again, I might,” he added. At best Carvey’s Bush was dangerously unpredictable, at worst a knave, knowingly leading the country into an ill-considered war despite the lessons of

history that he facetiously dismissed. In earlier Carvey impersonations on *SNL*, his Bush character refused to answer debate questions and in other cases seemed incapable of speaking in full sentences. Carvey’s Bush was inept in many ways and eerily willing to “unleash a full-scale orgy of death there in the desert sand.”

A few years after Bush left office, his depictions in popular culture became more sympathetic. In a 1996 appearance on *The Simpsons*, an animated version of Bush moved in across the street from the eponymous family in Springfield (“the town with the lowest voter turnout in America”) to finish his memoirs in peace. His popularity among the characters in town angered Homer Simpson. When Homer’s son Bart irritated Bush so much that Bush gave Bart a light spanking, Homer escalated the situation by calling Bush a “wimp,” recalling for Bush the same accusation made during the 1988 presidential campaign. The situation spiraled into a prank war that ended when the Bush family left town.

On balance, Bush fared much better in this cultural representation. He was still worthy of spoofing – in one scene Bush types this last line in his fictional memoir:

“since I achieved all of my goals as president in one term, there was no need for a second.” He was aloof, naïve, and out of touch with regular Americans. By comparison, when he moved out former president Gerald Ford moved in and immediately developed a friendship with Homer based on mutual love of football and beer. Despite his shortfalls, Bush was admired by everyone in town except Homer. He was smart, capable in many ways, and potentially lethal – in a climactic sewer fight he pulled a disguised weapon from his wrist watch and dove at Homer, yelling “here’s a little something I learned in...

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the CIA.” In the end, Bush left town defeated, but the viewer feels like the situation was unjust. Though humbled, Bush departed Springfield and the series with the respect of the characters on the show.  

By 2000 Bush was increasingly portrayed favorably. He was often used as a foil for depictions of his son. Dana Carvey reprised his role as George H. W. Bush in an SNL skit on the eve of the 2000 presidential election. In the skit the senior Bush took his son George W. Bush on a hunting trip. Taking a break, the father tried to impress upon his son the gravity of what was about to take place, and the duty and honor inherent in the office of the president. The younger Bush, played by Will Ferrel as a fun-loving man-child with serious mental deficiencies, responded “It’s gonna be cool dad. I’m pretty psyched.” George W. was distracted by clanging together antlers like an infant and possessed by a single-minded focus to kill one particular deer. When the father told him “it looks like you have a shot” at winning the election, the son replied “I wish I [had] shot that deer.” In a moment of reflection, the father considered mercy-killing the son for the good of the nation, but decided against it. “Probably just four years,” he said, and “Babs wouldn’t like it.” In this portrayal, though apparently prone to violent thoughts, George H. W. Bush was depicted as a wise and rational elder statesman. As a responsible family man he tried to pass on some wisdom to his son but in the end allowed him to learn on his own, and made the happiness of his marriage a central concern. Of course he is also portrayed as infinitely more intelligent than his son.  

A somewhat similar portrait emerged in Oliver Stone’s 2008 film W. Again the younger Bush appeared to be fun-loving with underwhelming intelligence. His father made occasional appearances in the film, usually to leverage his political power for his son’s advantage. When the son was arrested, Representative Bush spoke with the local authorities to have him released, and when the son was struggling to find a professional path, the father arranged for his admission to Harvard business school. In W. there was a constant tension between the father and son, and Oliver Stone explains much of the younger Bush’s actions as the result of his inability to achieve the success of his father. Though in one instance Bush senior is depicted as out of touch and affected by old age, for the most part he appears to be a serious and principled public servant, unwilling to pretend to be overly zealous in front of black Christian church leaders (“unauthentic,” he said) and careful not to overstep the ability of the American military in the aftermath of Gulf War victory. Again, his 1992 election loss seemed unjust.15

Academics and foreign policy observers have fed into this cultural trend. The Gulf War, for all its flaws and postwar complications, was a quick and overwhelming American victory. The Iraq War by contrast has been long and bloody, and the official pretext for war was largely proven false. As many criticized the justifications for the Iraq War and the ideology undergirding it, some foreign policy intellectuals began calling for a return to realism in foreign affairs, and some looked back at the George H. W. Bush administration as a model.16 Around the same time some historians began reevaluating the Bush administration. Bartholomew Sparrow examines realism specifically, especially

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15 W., directed by Oliver Stone (2008; Shreveport, LA: Lionsgate/QED International/Omnilab Media).
how National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft embraced that ideological approach. Sparrow judged Scowcroft “highly effective” in a recent article.\textsuperscript{17} David Rothkopf argues that “in the recent history of U.S. foreign policy, there has been no president, nor any president’s team, who, when confronted with profound international change and challenges, responded with such a thoughtful and well-managed foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{18} This trend towards more positive assessments of the realistic foreign policies of the first Bush administration have likely been amplified by more negative assessments of the idealistic and interventionist policies of the George W. Bush administration. Because of natural comparisons between father and son and their respective wars in Iraq, George H. W. Bush seems to be a more frequent topic for historians, who also seem to be assessing the Bush administration more favorably than they once did.\textsuperscript{19}

Historians emphasize different motivations for the Bush administration’s intervention in the Gulf crisis. Robert Divine argues that “the American way of life as it had evolved in the course of the twentieth century – the reliance on the automobile, the sprawling suburbs, the vast interstate system, the vibrant Sun Belt dependent on air conditioning – was at stake in the Persian Gulf crisis.” In other words the possibility that Iraq’s invasion might threaten the American way of life compelled the administration to act. The principled ideals which Bush occasionally appealed to, Divine argues, were largely manufactured to persuade the American public to go to war, since unfortunately

\textsuperscript{17} Bartholomew Sparrow, “Realism’s Practitioner: Brent Scowcroft and the Making of the New World Order, 1989-1993,” \textit{Diplomatic History} 34, 1 (January 2010), 144; see also a short historiography of the Bush national security team on 142-43.\textsuperscript{18} David Rothkopf, \textit{Running the World}, 261.\textsuperscript{19} Of course historians are also drawn to the growing amount of declassified archival materials from the Bush era. According to one estimate 18% of the documents produced by the Bush administration have been declassified. See Jeffrey Engel, “A Better World…but Don’t Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George H. W. Bush Twenty Years On,” \textit{Diplomatic History} 34, 1 (January 2010), 25, footnote 1.
for the administration, Saddam Hussein “refused to cooperate” by not invading Saudi Arabia and providing a clearer reason for an American intervention.\textsuperscript{20}

Daniel Yergin also largely dismisses the administration’s public justifications. He is more open to multiple motivations and accepts that in selling the war to the public the administration did not have the “luxury of a single explanation.” Yergin essentially argues that the Gulf War was a preventative war. In his view it was foreseeable that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, if allowed to absorb Kuwait, would become the dominant world oil power. With that power Saddam would have been able to develop the martial strength he had been seeking for at least a decade. He would have had the strength to influence his neighbors, and he would have been too important to much of the industrialized world to challenge directly. In short, Iraq would have become a regional power and “perhaps…a global superpower.”\textsuperscript{21} Divine, Yergin, and others tend to reject the administration’s stated justifications and analyze the buildup to war on their own terms. This is likely a consequence of the administration’s frequently inconsistent rhetoric during the buildup to war.

In this thesis I do not attempt to directly answer the question of why the administration intervened in the Persian Gulf. I do try to establish that the justifications for war were fluid, that Bush changed his mind over why he thought going to war was a good idea, and that the administration never really developed a clear rationale. Like Yergin and Divine, I am suspicious of the administration’s moral arguments for war and

\textsuperscript{20} Robert Divine, \textit{Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace} (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), 34-35.

\textsuperscript{21} Daniel Yergin, \textit{The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (New York: Free Press, 2008), 755.
suspect that, like most foreign policy decisions during the Bush era, the administration reached a decision based on a calculation of national interests rather than a crusade. I take issue with Divine and Yergin to the extent that they argue there was a single justification for war. Yergin is more accurate when he argues that there were multiple motivations, but that argument presumes clarity of thinking. It is important for my argument that the justifications for war were at least flexible, and I work to undermine any notion of consistency. But ultimately I do not go beyond this goal to offer a more correct set of real motives to intervene in the Gulf. At heart this thesis is concerned with how the various justifications for war were constructed to persuade a domestic audience, not necessarily with the actual reasons for intervening.

Much of my understanding of the Bush administration and the buildup to the Gulf War has been aided by the secondary literature on the Gulf War, President Bush and his administration, public opinion, and the memory of the Vietnam War. The best book-length studies on the Gulf War were published between 1991 and 1995. Bob Woodward gained unparalleled access to top officials to write *The Commanders*, a highly readable account of the decision-making of the Bush administration during the Gulf War. Woodward writes without footnotes, and he has been criticized for letting interviewees manipulate his account and for embellishing events – his portrayal of Colin Powell is an example – but this early history is necessary reading. The most thorough military history of the Gulf War is probably Robert Scales’ *Certain Victory*, written while Scales was an Army brigadier general. It suffers at times from its emphasis on Army operations at the expense of other services, and as the official Army history tends to be somewhat biased.
Rick Atkinson’s *Crusade* puts the conflict in better context and is generally more critical of the administration. Those two books are useful as companions to understand the military aspects of the war. *The General’s War*, written by *New York Times* military correspondent Michael Gordon and General Bernard Trainor, covers similar territory. They argue that President Bush largely allowed the military to conduct the Gulf War in a way that Presidents Johnson and Nixon did not during the Vietnam War, and that Powell took the opportunity to orchestrate a U.S. victory.

While there is no definitive account of the Bush presidency, there are several biographies and specialized approaches to aspects of his administration. The best biography is Herbert Parmet’s *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, which is balanced and well-documented. The journal *Diplomatic History* devoted its January 2010 issue to the Bush administration, and several articles provide useful insights into aspects of the Bush presidency. For Bush-era foreign policy, Ryan Barilleaux and Mark Rozell’s *Power and Prudence* and especially Christopher Maynard’s *Out of the Shadow* are good recent examinations. Barilleaux and Rozell offer a sympathetic reinterpretation of the Bush presidency and argue that Bush was limited in what he could accomplish and took an incrementalist approach to foreign affairs. Doomed to a difficult reelection because of matters out of his control – the difficult task of matching the rhetorical ability of Ronald Reagan and a cyclical economic recession – they argue that Bush’s political fate was tragic. Maynard offers a more focused account of Bush’s role in the end of the Cold War and argues that Bush-era foreign policy may have seemed extraordinary given the events but Bush’s strategy was really the culmination of half a century of strategic
thinking that he ably completed. Lloyd Gardner wrote a provocative account of the attempts to sell war in the Persian Gulf in a recent book chapter. Many scholars of Bush and his presidency have commented in passing on Bush’s rhetorical struggles. In related fields like presidential rhetoric and communication studies the Bush presidency seems to be a popular subject of inquiry. Martin Medhurst collected some of the better work on this topic in his essay collection, *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H. W. Bush*. These essays vary in topic but all lead to the conclusion that Bush rejected the public aspects of the presidency as below the dignity of the office and that his failures as an orator were a substantial part in any failures he had as a president. These insights were instrumental in my thinking.

There is a vast literature on the memory of the Vietnam War. Though it is not a book about historical memory per se, in *Explaining the Vietnam War* Gary Hess reviews some of the major scholarly disagreements about the war over the last three decades. These debates are a crucial component in understanding the conflict over the memory of Vietnam. Several historians have traced the war’s impact on popular culture, and Philip Beidler is one of the best. A veteran of the Vietnam War, Beidler wrote a series of books that are part cultural history and part personal essay which examine the cultural legacies of the war in film, literature, music, and other aspects of American culture.

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22 Lloyd Gardner, “‘The Ministry of Fear: Selling the Gulf Wars,’” in *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*, eds Andrew Frank and Kenneth Osgood (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010), 224-249.


Jeffords writes about the consequences of the war for American concepts of masculinity.\textsuperscript{25} Patrick Hagopian writes about the social memory of the Vietnam War and the competing memories of Vietnam and the Munich conference in national security discourse.\textsuperscript{26} Several authors have argued that the military – especially the Army – had to deal with the legacies of the Vietnam War in a more immediate way than the public at large. Some authors research how the perceived lessons of the war have impacted military doctrine. George Herring offers the best introduction to the military’s memory of Vietnam in his essay in Charles Neu’s collection, \textit{After Vietnam}. John Nagl makes a much narrower argument in \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife} about the Army’s approach to counterinsurgency warfare. Some of the top historians of the Vietnam War, such as Robert Schulzinger, Robert McMahon, and Marilyn Young, have written on its legacies and how the war is remembered.\textsuperscript{27}

This field of inquiry is vast, but in general I find that few explain well the role of the Bush administration and the Gulf War in the history of the memory of the Vietnam War. Many historians acknowledge, for example, the influence of the Powell Doctrine on the military preparation for the war. Many others argue that victory in the Gulf War

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helped heal some of the psychological wounds of Vietnam, and that George Bush’s claim that the country had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome” was an outgrowth of the postwar euphoria. These arguments overlook the administration’s preoccupation with the memory of Vietnam. Bush was not simply reflecting national elation when he proclaimed the syndrome cured. He was also providing a capstone to what had been months of planning to avoid the subject of Vietnam. I argue that the memory of Vietnam was central to the administration’s communications plan, especially beginning in November 1990. George Herring has argued that the Gulf War was “more about Vietnam than oil, Kuwait, or Iraq,” but even that bold statement refers only to the military. I argue that the memory of Vietnam – and the fears that such memories might have precluded public support of the Gulf War – drove the administration’s communications policy to a significant degree.

To write this thesis I conducted archival research at the George Bush Presidential Library, spending most of my time reading documents that had to do with the Gulf War, public relations, and communications generally. I also draw from the memoirs of administration officials. Bush’s memoir and edited diary collection were both useful. The recollections of cabinet-level figures Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, Marlin Fitzwater and Colin Powell all feature prominently. In some cases I also refer to memoirs written by lower-level officials such as John Podhoretz, Peggy Noonan, and

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Charles Kolb. Where I rely on memoirs, I try to corroborate information from multiple sources.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters. The first begins with the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980 and ends in the summer of 1990. It is especially focused on the 1988 presidential campaign and the first eighteen months of the Bush presidency. The second and third chapters concentrate on a much shorter period from the beginning of August, 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, through mid-January on the eve of the Gulf War. The second and third chapters divide chronologically at November, 1990, when the Bush administration formulated a new communications strategy.

Chapter one begins in 1980 with the start of the official relationship between George Bush and Ronald Reagan. It examines in particular public perceptions of Bush and how he engaged those perceptions, not always to his advantage and not always in good faith. Reagan’s shadow hangs over much of the narrative of this chapter. Often, his and Bush’s public views were hard to distinguish during the Reagan administration. Yet there were many differences. Throughout his career Bush had been a moderate Republican, and conservatives often questioned his ideological purity. More than most presidents, Bush sought to distance himself from his predecessor in order to establish his own legacy and, in this case, his own identity. Despite these motivations, Bush’s most important selling point during the 1988 presidential election was his similarity to Reagan. Upon winning the election Bush distanced himself from Reagan with mixed results. I pay special attention to public relations and how it connected to foreign affairs.
some significant accomplishments the administration was unable to gain public goodwill as a result. Though Bush’s approval ratings remained relatively high, they were based on factors that the administration knew were not reliable for reelection. By the summer of 1990, the White House was searching for a way to overhaul its approach to public communication and redefine the president’s image. The invasion of Kuwait provided that opportunity.

The second chapter begins with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the immediate consequences. I provide some background on what drove Iraq to invade Kuwait and how the international community reacted. Three days after the invasion, President Bush gave an uncharacteristic impromptu press conference on the South Lawn. With the phrase “this shall not stand,” the President effectively threw down the gauntlet and committed the country to war. This chapter traces the evolving arguments justifying intervention in the Gulf crisis and how those arguments affected and were affected by public opinion. I argue that the stated justifications for war changed over time. Though Americans generally approved of the president’s response to the Gulf crisis, their reasons for doing so varied widely, and by late fall many grew increasingly skeptical towards the argument for intervention. The administration perceived these developments as critical. Public approval reached its nadir in mid-November. At that point the administration had secured a large international coalition against Iraq and a United Nations resolution authorizing the use of force but had yet to persuade the American public or Congress to support its policies in the Gulf. The erosion of domestic approval was alarming to the
administration, and in late November it created a new communications strategy to ensure the country went to war with the public’s approval.

My third chapter explores that strategy and assesses its implications. Beginning with the recommendations of White House Communications Director David Demarest in November and continuing through the eve of war in mid-January, this chapter explores the internal debate over how to make the argument for war to the public and describes the administration’s attempts to measure what the public would accept as a reason to go to war. The administration was concerned that the intervention in the Gulf would be perceived by the American public as similar to the Vietnam War in a variety of negative ways, and its approach to public communication was often designed to discourage comparisons between the two wars. The White House thought that the American public applied a special wisdom to Vietnam veterans on matters of war and peace, and so it was at times preoccupied with gaining their support. After taking into consideration the views of important constituencies and commissioning months of public relations research, the administration concluded that it needed to adjust and simplify its argument. The final result of this effort was a public argument for war that in many ways reflected the concerns of the Americans who participated in the discussions and polls that the White House conducted.\(^{30}\)

Ultimately the questions I hope to answer are relatively limited. How did the Bush administration sell the Gulf War to its domestic audience? What led to the decisions to present the argument for war in the way that it did? Why stress some reasons to a domestic audience instead of others? How did the administration’s arguments affect or reflect public opinion? In the end, I will also discuss some of the consequences of the Bush administration’s policies for Iraq, the United States, and George Bush.
CHAPTER 1: SEARCHING FOR TEFLON: GEORGE H. W. BUSH AND THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION

“I’m not good at expressing the concerns of a nation – I’m just not very good at it.”

-- George H. W. Bush, interview with David Frost, September 6, 1989

George H. W. Bush’s political experiences before 1990 shaped the way he governed and helped create the conditions for American entry into the Gulf War. Especially important were Bush’s experiences beginning with the campaign for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination, when Bush became a national political figure and defined his political identity chiefly in relation to Ronald Reagan for a decade. Though Bush disagreed with Reagan and some of the conservatives who supported him, he nonetheless echoed Reagan administration policies during his time as Vice President. After he was elected to the presidency, President Bush distanced himself from his predecessor but could not avoid the comparison. Through his first eighteen months in office Bush struggled to define himself and his presidency. In part his difficulties were caused by the administration’s deficiencies in public communication, an area in which the distinction from the previous administration was especially sharp. From the mounting difficulties in public communication and his struggle with identity, President Bush learned the need to improve his approach to public relations and to appear decisive. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990, the Bush administration used the opportunity to apply a new approach to communication and try a new public persona for
the president. The administration’s strong reaction to the invasion of Kuwait is best understood in the context of an evolving approach to public communication and the administration’s ongoing search for political identity.

When George H. W. Bush became chief executive, he did so with what two historians recently called “the most impressive background of any man entering the presidency in the modern era.” He began his public career in the Navy during World War II, at the time the youngest pilot in the service. After the war, he left the traditional home of his family in New England to make his fortune in the oil industry. He began his political life in 1964 when he became chair of the Republican Party in Harris County, Texas. He became a standout congressional representative. His colleagues elected him president of the freshmen class and Bush was appointed to the prominent House Ways and Means Committee, unusual for a first-term representative. President Richard Nixon asked Bush to sacrifice his safe seat to run for the Senate, but he lost. Out of a job but in Nixon’s good graces, Bush was rewarded with an appointment as Ambassador to the United Nations from 1971-1973 then Chair of the Republican National Committee through 1974. President Gerald Ford appointed Bush Chief of the U.S. Liaison Office to the People’s Republic of China – the de facto ambassador to mainland China. He subsequently served as the Director of Central Intelligence from 1976-77 and became the President of the Council on Foreign Relations before eyeing the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, when his campaign motto described him as “A President We Won’t

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Have to Train.” Bush won some early victories as a primary candidate and fared better than expected before losing to front-runner and conservative icon Ronald Reagan.

To everyone’s surprise, including Bush and his campaign team, Reagan selected Bush as his running mate. “It seems to me,” Reagan explained on the phone, “that the fellow who came the closest and got the next most votes for president ought to be the logical choice for vice president.” There were moments during the 1980 campaign when Bush and Reagan had competed at personal levels that might have precluded Bush’s vice presidential nomination. After a complicated series of events led to Reagan embarrassing Bush in Nashua during the New Hampshire primary, Bush changed his campaign tactics and began directly attacking Reagan’s policies. He criticized Reagan’s promise to blockade Cuba, calling it a “macho thing” and a “phony promise,” while questioning Reagan’s record and the logic of his economic plans, which he later described as “voodoo economics.” Once Reagan emerged as the Republican nominee, he offered the vice presidency to Bush only after negotiations with Gerald Ford fell through, but Bush was nonetheless honored and accepted. After Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in the November election, Bush wrote a letter to the President-elect pledging his

34 The Nashua Telegraph offered to fund a two-man debate between GOP front-runners Reagan and Bush. Both agreed, but the FCC ruled that this privately-funded debate constituted an illegal campaign contribution. Reagan picked up the tab and changed the rules of the debate by inviting the remaining four candidates. Bush insisted on sticking to the original rules, and during some confusion angrily walked onto the stage, which was still set up for two people. Reagan said into his microphone that he would accept the new rules. When the Telegraph moderator told the technicians to turn off Reagan’s microphone, Reagan responded theatrically “I’m paying for this microphone, Mr. Green.” The crowd cheered. They supported the four underdog candidates and Reagan, but Bush was left looking like a failed bully. Bush thought Reagan had tricked him into the situation. See Parmet, 227-229.
loyalty and promising to follow the administration line on policy. “I have strong views on issues and people,” Bush began, “but once you decide a matter that’s it for me and you’ll see no leaks…[and no] bitching about life—at least you’ll see none out of me.”

In general, Bush kept his promise and contributed his voice to the chorus of the Reagan administration.

Bush’s capitulation was a major personal concession. Naturally, Bush and Reagan had stressed their differences on policy during the 1980 primary campaign. Though Bush employed a flexible “on the other hand” approach making his views somewhat unclear, his opinions were as lucid as they could have been when he was forced to articulate them during the campaign. When Bush was selected as the vice presidential nominee, practically overnight he reversed position on many policies to echo the Reagan administration’s stance. As a result, when Bush tried a second time for the Republican nomination in 1988, the American people were unsure what to expect from him as an executive despite his long record of public service. One journalist called him a “burbling presidential cheerleader….Often he seems politically frightened, a finicky, pandering man with no mind of his own.”

After eight years serving one president, he had to define for the American public what kind of politician he would be on his own. As might be expected, during the 1988 presidential campaign George Bush stressed his experience as Vice President. This tactic came at a price. With voters uncertain about Bush’s political identity, Bush defined his candidacy by his association with Reagan to help get elected. Choosing to begin his presidency in this way

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36 George H. W. Bush, All the Best: My Life in Letters and Other Writings (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 303.
exacerbated an existing problem. It was logical to compare Bush to Reagan, since Bush had served for eight years in the Reagan administration. Unfortunately for Bush the comparison was often made unfavorably, especially in terms of rhetorical ability. Bush’s deficiencies as an orator were personal. He was apparently not born a great speaker, nor did he hone what skills he had through years in acting like Ronald Reagan. But Bush also created a White House communications apparatus that was designed to be different from the infrastructure of the Reagan White House, and it ultimately proved to be less effective. Both personal and institutional factors contributed to the Bush administration’s communications failures. Bush’s struggle to define himself was often related to his struggle against his predecessor’s legacy, but that legacy was so pervasive in part because candidate Bush had framed the Bush presidency in terms carefully chosen to associate himself with Reagan. When the Bush administration changed its communications strategy in the summer of 1990 it did so with the mistakes of the previous eighteen months in mind, mistakes that were rooted in appealing to conservative groups in the 1988 presidential campaign.

Despite what appeared to be the erstwhile moderation of Bush, Republican Congressman Robert Dornan called Bush a “pit-bull” rightist in 1987. During his presidential campaign Bush promoted this image and often sounded like a Reagan conservative. He frequently chose to attack his opponent rather than discuss issues, which might have revealed his more fundamental political views. Bush’s attempt to package his candidacy as a right-wing conservative was especially visible during his acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican Convention, a speech in which, according to

rhetorical scholar Catherine Langford, Bush “cloak[ed] himself in Reagan’s image,” and which was intended to “attach Bush’s philosophy to that of Reagan.” Bush imagined his presidency as a kind of third term for the Bush/Reagan team and compared their combined legacy to Franklin Roosevelt’s three terms. “We shouldn’t changes horses in midstream…” Bush said, “but when you have to…doesn’t it make sense to switch to the one who’s going the same way?” He told the sympathetic audience that “the most important work of my life is to complete the mission we started in 1980,” thereby framing his candidacy as a continuation of the so-called Reagan Revolution. Bush reminded everyone of his role in the previous administration by listing his accomplishments during the last eight years, always using the plural pronoun: “Inflation was 12 percent when we came in. We got it down to four….We cut [unemployment] in half….We came in and gave [the economy] emergency treatment….We’ve created 17 million jobs….They talk – we deliver. They promise – we perform…[italics mine].” The frequent use of the pronoun “we” was a way for Bush to link himself in the public imagination to Reagan and the conservative policies of the previous eight years. The use of “we” also encouraged the idea there was a larger movement that Bush now represented, which opposed some unmentioned but disreputable “they.”

Peggy Noonan recalls that before writing this speech she often had to remove pronouns from Bush’s speeches entirely because he did not like them and he might cut a phrase or idea if it contained a pronoun. Bush’s disinclination towards pronoun use

changed during a series of handwritten notes leading up to the nomination speech.\textsuperscript{41} The systematic use of the plural pronoun was an aberration in Bush’s rhetoric, and he included them for the specific purpose of selling his candidacy as a continuation of the Reagan Revolution. Noonan explains that the nomination acceptance speech was written in collaboration with a number of leading GOP figures who collectively produced a text that constituted a “restating of the conservative credo.”\textsuperscript{42} The result was a speech that was more explicitly conservative than other Bush speeches and designed to highlight Bush’s similarities to Reagan.\textsuperscript{43} Some of Bush’s imagery mirrored Reagan’s romanticism. Bush called America a “rising nation” and a “unique nation with a special role in the world.”\textsuperscript{44} Picking up where Reagan’s Morning in America theme left off, Bush stepped outside the proverbial front door to speak from what he called “democracy’s front porch.”\textsuperscript{45}

Bush also courted conservative groups who had previously voted for Reagan but were not traditionally amenable to Bush’s policies or style. According to Cambridge historian Andrew Preston, Bush was “unloved and still not fully trusted” by evangelicals during the 1980’s.\textsuperscript{46} For his part Bush took “violent exception” to religious figures who insisted he fall into line with their views. When asked about groups like the Moral

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 311.
\textsuperscript{43} Noonan devotes a chapter to writing the speech in \textit{What I Saw at the Revolution}, 298-317.
\textsuperscript{44} George H. W. Bush, Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention, August 18, 1988, Miller Center for Public Affairs, \url{http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/5526}.
\textsuperscript{45} George H. W. Bush, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989, Miller Center for Public Affairs, \url{http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3419}.
Majority, he responded “to Hell with them.” Faced with a primary challenge from
teleevangelist Pat Robertson in 1988 and falling behind Democratic presidential candidate
Michael Dukakis by substantial margins in polls, Bush moved to the right on many social
issues and tried to capture the grassroots energy that Reagan had commanded in the early
1980’s. In a letter to his hometown “spiritual advisor,” Bush betrayed his concern when
he cited an unnamed poll that indicated “two-thirds of the respondents that favored
Dukakis think he is more conservative than I am.”

As the summer wore on his popularity continued to decline, and with the
Republican nomination looming, Bush worried about how he would recover politically.
“We’ve got to make people understand how far left Dukakis is…” he brainstormed as he
dictated a diary entry. In Bush’s mind, the problem was public perception – there were
conservative voters to whom he was not appealing. One way to make Dukakis appear
further left was to increase the distance between the two on the political spectrum by
moving to the right. Though Bush considered religion a private matter, he began making
public pronouncements which made him sound like a born-again Christian, efforts which
seemed hollow to many believers. To outside observers Bush’s efforts seemed like
transparent politics; George Will called Bush a “lapdog” of the religious right – but
ultimately evangelicals campaigned and voted for Bush in 1988. Appealing to the
religious right was an overt political maneuver. Bush was a Christian but a private one

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49 Ibid., 393.
and his tactics in this case were intended to secure some of the votes that Reagan had in 1980.

Bush used Southern racial tensions to his advantage through his campaign manager Lee Atwater in another attempt to attract a right-wing constituency. Some southerners were suspicious of Bush, who despite his time in Texas and occasional public appearance wearing cowboy boots seemed to be a blue-blooded Yankee at heart. Atwater learned how to run campaigns when he made an opposing candidate’s Jewish heritage an issue in a South Carolina senatorial election, provoking voters to grill the candidate on whether or not the candidate knew Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Atwater developed a reputation not only for dirty campaign tactics, but also for winning. During Bush’s 1988 campaign, Atwater was the architect of the infamous Willie Horton advertisement, which criticized Michael Dukakis for a prisoner furlough program that Dukakis had overseen as Governor of Massachusetts.

Willie Horton was sentenced to life in prison on a murder charge in 1974. On a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison in 1986 he stabbed a man and raped his fiancée. During the Democratic primary Al Gore criticized Dukakis for the furlough program. When the Bush campaign picked up on the concept, it handpicked Horton to represent the potential consequences of a Dukakis victory. Horton actually went by William; the corruption to “Willie” was a choice by the ad’s creators to make Horton conform to African-American stereotypes. The ad included a menacing photo of Horton with his untamed Afro haircut. A Dukakis victory, the ad suggested, would undermine law and order and, in the words of one of the ads’ creators, unleash the “big black rapist”
on America. Because it was nominally produced by an independent policy advocacy group, Atwater could plausibly deflect criticism of the ad, which was widely perceived as racist. The Bush campaign certainly never mentioned that the furlough program was modeled after a similar program in California that was presided over by Governor Ronald Reagan. Dukakis became connected in the public imagination to Willie Horton, agitating racial tensions and inflaming concerns about law and order. The ad was especially well-received in the South, which voted for Bush despite his image as a Yankee aristocrat. Just as Bush courted the votes of the religious right, his campaign tactics during the Willy Horton controversy exploited Southern racial tensions and helped ensure an electoral victory in November. In both cases, Bush moved to the political right in order to get elected. Though hardly a rare political tactic, in this case Bush was already battling unfavorable comparisons with his more conservative predecessor. Resorting to these sorts of maneuvers made Bush more eager to move away from Reagan in whatever ways he could, once elected.

Despite the differences between Bush and Reagan, some historians have stressed their similarities. Stephen Skowronek sees little difference between the approach to governance and leadership styles of the two presidents, so much so that he called them “gross caricatures of the classic leadership models” of American presidents. Susan Jeffords interprets their relationship as familial and compares the Bush-Reagan dynamic

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52 For an excellent treatment of Lee Atwater and the Willie Horton affair, see the documentary *Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story*, produced by Stefan Forbes, Noland Walker, Tia Wou, directed by Stefan Forbes, New York: InterPositive Media 2009.
to similar bonds that were explored in films in the 1980’s. “These [generational] transition films,” Jeffords argues, “in which the son learns to operate independently of the father and in which he in turn protects the father, externalized the deep-seated anxieties for those in the conservative movement…about the passage from Reagan to Bush.”\textsuperscript{54}

One of Bush’s biographers explains Bush’s relationship with Reagan in part as a continuation of Bush’s tendency to connect with and placate strong paternal figures, as he also did to various degrees with Presidents Nixon and Ford and others.\textsuperscript{55} In his memoirs Bush credits first Reagan and then his father as the two most important influences on his presidency.\textsuperscript{56} This narrative emphasizing Bush’s dependence on Reagan depicts Bush as a political neophyte who knew little about governing, other than what he learned from his elders. Jeffords’s argument may be partially accurate in that some conservatives hoped Bush’s presidency would be a continuation of Reagan-era policies and were concerned that Bush might not be sufficiently conservative. Even so, conservatives were worried about Bush’s credentials despite his closeness to Reagan not because of it. If their relationship were familial, perhaps Bush could have turned out different from his father figure, as rebellious sons occasionally do.

The Bush presidency has been described by some historians as the “guardianship presidency” or the “status quo presidency.”\textsuperscript{57} These generally negative assessments were written mostly in the few years after Bush lost re-election and were encouraged by insider

\textsuperscript{55} Parmet, \textit{Lone Star Yankee}, especially 30-41.
exposés which exposed the alleged dysfunction of the administration. Some interpreted Bush’s presidency as a mere stewardship of Reagan-era policies, and some loyal to Reagan balked at such an attempt. Such interpretations de-emphasize the momentous foreign policy events of the Bush administration, like the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and do not give enough credit to Bush’s role in these and other events. Even historians more sympathetic to Bush’s accomplishments admit that “he did not come to office seeking to transform the world.” At the beginning of his administration, it seemed Bush agreed. He rejected the “high drama” of his office and comforted the nation, telling them “we know what works…we know what’s right.”

Bush may not have sought to remake the world, but he did attempt to distance himself from his predecessor, and he shrewdly managed the country’s foreign policy through a historic period. His presidency hardly maintained the status-quo.

The perceived similarities between Bush and Reagan are in part a result of Bush’s choices to define himself in relation to Reagan in 1988. After all, Bush entered office having served under Reagan for eight years and echoing the administration’s policy views. Bush cloaked himself in Reagan’s legacy during the campaign, appealed to the same constituencies for votes, and promised a smooth transition with similar policies. Eugene McCarthy, then a former senator from Minnesota, said at the time that Bush was obligated to govern as a “stand-in for Ronald Reagan” lest he appear ungrateful.

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During his inauguration Bush said that he saw “history as a book with many pages.” His policies would not only extend the Reagan Revolution, as he described at the Republican Convention, but they were governed by ethereal forces. A “breeze blows, a page turns, the story unfolds. And so, today a chapter begins,” he said. In January 1989, Bush asked the public to imagine that his presidency was driven by nothing less than nature itself. He promised Americans that his administration would be an extension of the previous eight years and that it would continue the policies that they had liked about the Reagan presidency. According to one poll, 70 percent of voters who voted for Bush did so because they thought he would continue Reagan’s policies.

Immediately upon winning the election, Bush reversed his attitude towards several conservative groups. As a reward for his service, Lee Atwater was appointed Chairman of the Republican National Committee, but he was excluded from Bush’s inner circle. Once Atwater became a national figure he was widely reviled, so much so that he wrote a deathbed letter lamenting his life’s work. Though Bush tried to sound like a born-again evangelical Christian for a time, he really wasn’t. According to Andrew Preston “the religious intensity of the campaign did not carry through to the administration…. [Bush] relegated Christian conservatives to the margins.” Perhaps, as historian Andrew Bacevich argues, the “Reagan Revolution offered Christian

conservatives access without influence,” but at the ascension of Bush the façade of empowerment was torn down.65

Other groups who had been devoted acolytes during the Reagan administration lost a considerable amount of influence during the Bush administration. Prominent neoconservative John Podhoretz worked in the Bush Administration but found that he lacked influence in the White House. Immediately after Bush lost the 1992 election, Podhoretz published a diatribe about his time in the White House. Each chapter of the book allegedly represents the voice of a real person who worked in Washington during the administration, though sometimes they aren’t real, and sometimes they are amalgams, and in no case are names revealed. Podhoretz tries very hard to be funny, and sometimes he is, but for the most part he is tiring. The book is obviously biased, but his raw anger reveals the frustrations of neoconservatives generally with their reduced role in the administration.66 Though Bush had promised a smooth transition, he cut out of power those who had recently gained it in 1980.

Describing the 1988-89 transfer of power in the White House to his subordinates, Secretary of State James Baker made clear that “this is not a friendly takeover.”67 Bush’s first action as president-elect was to purge his administration of Reagan appointees.68

Although never comfortable with the more zealous Reagan supporters, Bush’s hostility

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67 Quoted in Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), 26.
68 There were four cabinet-level exceptions: Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, Secretary of the Treasury Nicolas Brady, Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater. Fitzwater had worked for George Bush when he was Vice President, and thus was originally loyal.
had deeper roots. Bush began his political career in Houston, Texas, a hotbed of conservative radicalism and power center for the John Birch Society. Though he was occasionally compelled to court their votes, Bush opposed the Birchers philosophically and distrusted their conspiracy-mindedness. “I took some far right positions to get elected,” Bush said. “I hope I never have to do it again.”

Conservatives in turn often derided Bush as a “closet liberal.” The Right’s distrust of Bush was occasionally absurd, as when one conservative group noted suspiciously that Bush’s father-in-law published *Redbook*, which to them sounded like a Communist Party publication.

Under Reagan, Bush defended the supporters of the administration. As Vice President-elect, he insisted to journalists that Reagan was “not an extremist” as some critics claimed and argued that “conservative religious groups” who supported Reagan were being unfairly characterized as radical. In the same breath he took “violent exception” to religious groups who demanded purity on social issues.

His private opinions on Reagan and the far right directly contradicted his public statements. During a visit by Mikhail Gorbachev, Bush called Reagan “extreme” and his supporters “blockheads and dummies.” There was precedent for Bush’s tendency to have contradictory private and public personas. During a 1964 senatorial race against Ralph Yarborough, Bush “told crowds anything that would attract them.”

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69 Quoted in Parmet, *Lone Star Yankee*, 114.
70 Ibid., 110.
campaign to a successful congressional race in 1966, “a model of sorts for Bush’s career.” The division between Bush’s public and private political beliefs created tension during the 1980’s. In the context of Bush’s ambivalent relationship with the political right and the imperatives of the 1988 campaign, Bush took an opportunistic approach to articulating his views. These choices of expedience help explain Bush’s problems of establishing an identity and his subsequent approach to public communication.

The 1964 model was applied to the 1988 election, when Bush said what he had to say in order to get elected and then attempted to dismantle much of what the previous administration had bequeathed him. Bush ordered a comprehensive security review in February, 1989. The security review came to be known as “the pause” after Gorbachev and Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze, perplexed by the shift in policy, called Bush’s review pauza. The origins of “the pause” are unclear, but on some level they were rooted in genuine differences of opinion on national security. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft had more influence on Bush’s foreign policy than anyone else, and he was deeply suspicious of Soviet intentions. Unlike the Reagan administration, Scowcroft thought Gorbachev was trying to “kill us with kindness,” and “believed that Gorbachev’s goal was to restore dynamism to a socialist political and economic system and revitalize the Soviet Union domestically and internationally to compete with the West.” Scowcroft doubted the more optimistic hopes of observers of

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74 Ibid., 119.
76 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 13.
international affairs, and couldn’t believe that the Politburo purposely elected a leader who would reform their regime out of existence. He and others asked why, if Soviet intentions were peaceful, ground troops remained so long in Eastern Europe.

Bush seemed to echo Scowcroft’s reservations when he argued that a “prudent skepticism was in order” when dealing with the prospect of Soviet reform. To a significant degree, the administration found that it was hemmed in by strategic imperatives and the resistance of a bureaucracy with entrenched views. After using official mechanisms failed to produce the desired results, Scowcroft explains that “we just fashioned policies ourselves within the NSC and then debated them in the NSC.” Some of the documents that grew out of this approach hinted at dramatic strategic change. National Security Directive 23 stated that the new rhetoric coming from the Kremlin was welcome but lacked the substance to back it up. If reform was to come to the Soviet Union at all, the authors of the document speculated that it might take decades.

At a time when some were calling for a reduction in American conventional forces in Europe in response to the reduced Soviet threat, NSD-23 vowed “we will not react to reforms in the Soviet Union that have not yet taken place,” since despite Gorbachev’s rhetoric Soviet conventional forces remained in Europe. Instead of slashing troop levels “the United States will challenge the Soviet Union step by step, issue by issue and institution by institution.” In short, this document suggests a reheating of Cold War tensions, a reversal of the trend that began in Reagan’s second term. Not even the most

78 Chris Maynard interview with Brent Scowcroft, quoted in Maynard, Out of the Shadow, 16.
prescient observers predicted the speed of change that soon came in Eastern Europe, which precluded any lasting policy implications of a more muscular Cold War strategy.\(^{80}\)

James Baker explains that the pause was intended to begin establishing Bush’s legacy and serve as a signal to the American people that “it was time for a reassessment of old assumptions.”\(^{81}\) If Bush wanted to establish his legacy in any specific field, foreign affairs were a logical choice. He entered office with a great deal of experience, and the public tended to perceive him as more competent than his predecessor in this arena.\(^{82}\) Some went further and criticized Bush for neglecting the domestic sphere. One political cartoon depicted Bush sitting in a classroom where the teacher writes “U.S. Education” on the blackboard. Bush is missing the lesson as he stares out the classroom window, distracted by buildings labeled “Soviet Union,” “Mideast,” and “Iraq.”\(^{83}\)

Considering this perceived strength (or distraction) in his diary, Bush wrote “one of the [news]papers [is] saying that I am more comfortable with foreign affairs, and that is absolutely true.”\(^{84}\) Jack Matlock, the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, argues that the pause served domestic political purposes by placating the right wing of the party, rather than reflecting a preoccupation with international affairs. Some conservative

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\(^{80}\) NSD-23 was not a direct outgrowth of the security review. The actual re-evaluation of US-Soviet relations was National Security Review document 3 (NSR-3). This policy paper recommended following essentially the same course in US-Soviet relations. Dissatisfied with these results, Scowcroft ordered NSC staffer Condoleezza Rice to draft an alternative approach. Her memo became the foundation of NSD-23. See Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 39-44; Maynard, *Out of the Shadow*, 14-17; Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 68-70.


\(^{82}\) An example shows Bush leading Reagan by nine points in the foreign policy category. *Presentations on Current Political Opinion*, December 1991, page 1, compiled from Republican National Committee and public polls, ID# 297070, WHORM: Public Relations, BPR, GBPL.


\(^{84}\) Bush, *All the Best*, 480.
Republicans thought Reagan had gone soft in his later years, and they rejected the nuclear abolitionism that was at the heart of his foreign policy. If true, this would not be the only time that Bush formulated foreign policy for crass political purposes. Matlock’s argument is at odds with Bush’s behavior once in office in that Bush for the most part did not cater to conservative groups and in many ways cut them out of influence.

Whether the pause was driven by a reasoned strategic vision, kowtowing to party hawks, or something else, it was at any rate poorly received by the public. Bush’s desire to establish an independent political identity impeded his ability to communicate his policies to the American people. The pause was the first in a series of public relations miscalculations by the administration, and it represented the beginning of eighteen months of dysfunctional public relations that was temporarily halted during the buildup to the Gulf War. The mishandling of the pause was the beginning of a trend that partially explains the administration’s response to the invasion of Kuwait. Bush had promised continuity in the conduct of foreign policy, but he pursued reform. Effective change might have been welcomed, but the government stood still for three months and produced few substantive recommendations. The administration did not account for the bureaucracy’s traditional resistance to any new initiatives. One former bureaucrat said with frustration “If we had any better ideas than the ones we had, we would have used them!” Jack Matlock exploded to his aides: “Our marching orders are clear: Don’t just do something, stand there!”

Public opinion polls showed a drop in presidential approval ratings and rise in disapproval ratings beginning in February 1989 and lasting

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86 Ibid., 15.
the length of the security review, eliminating the so-called “honeymoon” period at the beginning of a new administration.\textsuperscript{87} Other polls showed that the public remained mostly oblivious to the plodding review, but many intellectuals disagreed with Bush’s approach.\textsuperscript{88} They helped shape public opinion, and their initial impressions of the new administration were not encouraging.

Many prominent politicians and journalists were perplexed by the president’s behavior, and Bush became increasingly aware that his policy was having a deleterious effect on public opinion. \textit{New York Times} columnist Tom Wicker wondered about Bush’s ponderous updates on the review, which were full of clichés, half-finished thoughts, and occasional contradictions. Bush seemed to be saying in one sentence that he both would not rule out and would never consider a “premature deployment” of nuclear weapons. Wicker went further and mocked Bush’s style of speaking: “could he not express himself in, like, maybe, you know, sixth- or seventh-grade English…”\textsuperscript{89} According to Press Secretary Fitzwater, the pack mentality of the White House press corps was especially pronounced during this period.\textsuperscript{90} Bush was also criticized by such prominent figures as Margaret Thatcher, George Kennan, and perhaps Ronald Reagan. Bush took issue with a column written by George Will which quoted Reagan as being openly critical of the strategic review. Bush sent a note to Reagan regarding the article,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{87} The American Enterprise Institute Public Opinion Report, “The Bush Barometer,” 114, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\bibitem{88} “Report to the President on the U.S. National Survey of Public Opinion, conducted May 15-17, 1989,” Republican National Committee, “U.S. Policy Response to Gorbachev’s Changes in Soviet Society,” 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\bibitem{90} Fitzwater’s example here concerns John Sununu and his accumulation of enemies in the press: Marlin Fitzwater, \textit{Call the Briefing! : Bush and Reagan, Sam and Helen: A Decade with Presidents and the Press} (New York: Random House, 1995), 176.
\end{thebibliography}
calling it “mischief” and calling George Will a “little ____” for not printing a retraction (there are no printed curse words in Bush’s edited diary). As the security review dragged on, Bush grew increasingly concerned about public opinion. In a letter to United Nations official Sadruddin Aga Khan, Bush looked forward to completing the security review and said, “I’ll be darned if Mr. Gorbachev should dominate world public opinion forever.” In his diary ten days later he listed the tasks he needed to complete before he might be able to begin countering Gorbachev’s influence on global public opinion. “I just want to get progress on…the re-evaluation [i.e. security review] so we can move out in front of Gorbachev.”

Unfortunately for Bush, he was personally and institutionally ill-equipped to wage a rhetorical battle. His difficulties articulating his thoughts were widely acknowledged. He often admitted this deficiency in public, and at times questioned the relevance of eloquence to the office. But he also constrained the administration institutionally by first gutting the public relations office in the White House and then reducing the importance of its role. Consequently the administration struggled with public communication especially in foreign affairs, which was particularly frustrating for a president who wanted to leave his legacy in that arena. In the words of Martin Medhurst, Bush’s struggle with rhetoric “infect[ed] the whole White House operation with an antirhetorical virus.” Press Secretary Fitzwater recalls a story Bush told to his incoming staff:

91 Bush, All the Best, 426.
92 Ibid., 416, 418.
During his first full day in office, President Bush met with his speech writers to discuss his style, his words, his themes, and the events ahead. He told the story of riding with President Reagan in his limousine to a last minute speech at a Washington hotel. As the president and vice-president were getting into the car, someone handed President Reagan a text of the speech, saying he was sorry it was so late. “No problem,” President Reagan said, and he proceeded to read through it, marking the paragraphs for pauses and punctuations. “Is this the first time you’ve seen this speech?” Vice-President Bush said to the President. “Yes,” President Reagan said, “but it will be OK, don’t worry about it.” President Bush told his speech writers he thought it would be a disaster, but the delivery was perfect, the speech was magnificent. “And the lesson,” the new President Bush said, “is I can’t do that.”

Bush dealt with this deficiency by neglecting the rhetorical aspects of the presidency. He first employed this tactic when he decided not to retain Reagan-era speechwriters in his administration, who he thought had become too visible and had wielded undue influence. He appointed David Demarest, who became Director of Communications at the White House, to find new speechwriters, and they “intentionally set about hiring writers of lesser stature.” Demarest agreed with Bush on the proper role of speechwriters and thought that “during the Reagan administration the speechwriters had gotten out of control….speechwriters were trying to make policy.” The possibility of finding new talent was reduced when the administration placed a low cap on speechwriters’ salaries.

Whatever these new discount speechwriters wrote was subject to further last-minute editing because Bush often “resisted using any word that someone else gave him” and had a “general disregard for written speeches, texts, or any documents that could be interpreted as putting words in his mouth.” In other words, Bush personally wrote

94 Marlin Fitzwater, *Real Time Communications and Diplomacy* (College Station, TX: Program in Presidential Rhetoric, 1994), 6-7.
96 Fitzwater, *Call the Briefing*, 112.
much of what he said in public, a problematic approach from a man “so impatient with words that he seldom used verbs.”

This regrettable approach to public communication was in part a result of Bush’s philosophy of government. For Bush, the imperatives of the campaign were fundamentally different from the imperatives of governing. In 1968, after voting for a controversial minority housing bill in Congress, Bush returned to Houston to explain his vote to an angry crowd of right-wing voters, to whom he had promised much in his campaign. As a way of explaining his choice to go against the views of his constituency, he quoted Edmund Burke: “Your representative owes you not only his industry; but his judgment, and he betrays instead of serves you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.” Bush regularly did not govern in the way that he campaigned. He dropped some of his convictions in 1980 to serve loyally as Vice President and promised a kind of continuity in 1988 only to push reform immediately. As president, he famously broke the promise he made during the Republican National Convention not to raise taxes. By March 30, 1989, he was already reconsidering his one clear pledge, writing “I’m not going to be held up by campaign rhetoric.”

Charles Kolb served as Bush’s Deputy Assistant for Domestic Policy, and he too saw Bush as a man who distinguished “governing mode [from] campaign mode.” As Kolb argues, “that modal mentality explains how Bush could so cavalierly jettison his ‘read my lips’ pledge not to raise taxes and then mock his own vow by telling the media to ‘read my hips’ when he was out jogging one day. That

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97 Ibid, 259.
98 This is the central argument of the essay collection in Martin J. Medhurst, ed., The Rhetorical Presidency of George H. W. Bush (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006).
99 Quoted in Parmet, Lone Star Yankee, 132.
100 Bush, All the Best, 421.
was then, this is now.”\textsuperscript{101} According to one of Bush’s speechwriters, Bush considered all the aspects of the public presidency “phony baloney, inauthentic, unpresidential.”\textsuperscript{102} Bush’s Deputy Chief of Staff Andy Card observed that “President Bush clearly relished the role of governing and disdained the role of campaigning.”\textsuperscript{103}

Bush’s relationship with the press was complex. He began meeting many major media figures as Vice President when then-Reagan Press Secretary Fitzwater anticipated a Bush presidential run and often arranged for interviews in order to prepare Bush. “Unfortunately,” Fitzwater adds, “almost every one of them was bad.”\textsuperscript{104} Upon his election as chief executive Bush made himself available generously to the press, and by Fitzwater’s measure “had been generally more accessible than any president in modern history.”\textsuperscript{105} Fitzwater recalls that he “regularly preached to President Bush about mixing journalism and friendship,” but to no avail. Bush often invited journalists to his home in the same fashion that he invited world leaders to Kennebunkport. But unlike his skill for personal diplomacy, he was not able to induce journalists to support him through his affability. When media figures were critical of him Bush judged them harshly.

Bush’s measure of the quality of journalists was whether or not he liked them.\textsuperscript{106} He tended to take personal offense when a negative story was printed about him, as with George Will. When Peggy Noonan was writing the 1988 nomination acceptance speech, Bush wrote her a letter describing his deepest beliefs and a list of words that he liked and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{102}{Quoted in Medhurst, “Why Rhetoric Matters,” 3.}
\footnote{103}{Interview with Card quoted in Wynton C. Hall, “Economically Speaking: George Bush and the Price of Perception,” in \textit{The Rhetorical Presidency}, 178.}
\footnote{104}{Fitzwater, \textit{Call the Briefing!}, 75.}
\footnote{105}{Ibid., 12.}
\footnote{106}{Ibid., 11-12.}
\end{footnotes}
hoped could be incorporated. As an afterword, he wrote “now Peggy—I have done to myself, as I fly to Wyoming’s serenity, that which Gail Sheehy (that _____) tried to do…” With a whitewashed curse, Bush defamed Vanity Fair reporter Sheehy, who had recently written a psychoanalytical article about him; as a footnote, as if it were not clear in the letter, Bush added “I hated it [the article].” After a critical and allegedly inaccurate article was printed in the Washington Post about the administration’s energy policies, the White House sent a detailed letter of rebuttal to the editor, accusing the editorial staff of professional laxity. On September 6, 1988, Bush responded to a letter from Newsweek editor Thomas DeFrank, who had written to complain about unfair treatment of his reporters and to ask for special access for a future book on the campaign. Bush promised that DeFrank’s reporters would be treated fairly but he was still incensed at the Newsweek editors, who had allowed an article in their pages to call him a “wimp,” a term that stuck and stung. Bush wrote in strong language, accusing DeFrank and his fellow editors of making a “calculating decision” and twisting the story to suit their ends. Bush’s emotional approach to media relations constrained the administration’s ability to effectively disseminate its message.

In the context of Bush’s troubled relationship with the press several major foreign policy events that were handled (arguably) with strategic competence by the administration drew media criticism and failed to translate into increased support from

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107 Bush, All the Best, 392.
108 Ibid., 392.
110 Ibid., 398.
the American people. After failing to make gains in approval as a result of his policies, Bush lost a substantial amount of support in 1990 when he reneged on his promise not to raise taxes. Presidential approval ratings dropped from 80 percent in January to 60 percent in July.\textsuperscript{111} Approval ratings among Republicans dropped by ten points in one poll from the spring to the summer.\textsuperscript{112} Bush eventually admitted that he “lost a lot of credibility” once he advocated raising taxes.\textsuperscript{113} Those who did approve of the president did so for vague reasons, which were unreliable as a basis for reelection.\textsuperscript{114} Anticipating the 1990-91 recession, in their view a direct consequence of the high-spending 1980’s, officials understood that the President would have to answer for an economic downturn on his watch. After losing some public support and failing to establish a basis of goodwill, the administration worried that it would be difficult to make a case for reelection.\textsuperscript{115} Though Bush had tried to avoid the manipulative tactics of the Reagan administration’s communications strategy, by the summer of 1990 Bush found himself in a politically precarious situation in which his alternative strategy seemed to have failed. From these experiences the administration learned that it needed to effectively communicate its message to the public. Three foreign policy events contributed to the formulation of this lesson.

\textsuperscript{112} “Summary of Findings: U.S. National Survey,” June 29-July 1, Republican National Committee, “U.S. National #7,” 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{114} “Summary of Findings: Report on American Public Opinion,” page 2, “Reasons for Bush Job Approval and Disapproval,” 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{115} David Demarest: “I talked with the president a lot about that quite frequently!” Interview with Demarest in Hall, “Economically Speaking,” 171.
The first of those events occurred in China from April to June, 1989. Student protests began after the death of Hu Yaobang, a former party official and hero to many progressive-minded Chinese because of his open criticism of Maoist excesses. Hu was forced to resign by party leaders in 1987 and died of a heart attack two years later. Thousands gathered at his funeral and subsequently began protesting the repressive policies of the Chinese leadership. The Communist party labeled the protesters “counterrevolutionaries.” For many Chinese who had lived through the Cultural Revolution, the subversive rhetoric of the protesters sounded ominously like the Red Guard. Many Americans perceived the social upheaval in China as part of the larger phenomena of global political change and Western populations called on their governments to support the activists.\(^\text{116}\)

According to one inside account President Bush was the de facto “China desk officer” during his presidency given the extent of his personal control over U.S. policy towards China. Jeffrey Engel argues that Bush was not qualified to dominate U.S.-Chinese relations to the degree that he did; Bush, for example, was not a student of Chinese politics or culture and did not speak Mandarin.\(^\text{117}\) But Bush had served as the unofficial ambassador to China from 1974-75 (Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping called him “old friend”) and was better equipped than most to understand the dynamics of U.S.-Chinese relations.\(^\text{118}\) President Bush perceived the protests as indicative of the

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\(^\text{116}\) See Randolph Kluver, “Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square,” *Diplomatic History* 34, 1 (January 2010).


\(^\text{118}\) Engel, “A Better World…”, 38.
“inexorable” progress towards democracy, but he also thought that democratic transformation required economic incentive and thus the maintenance of trade relations. He was well aware of Chinese aversion to foreign intrusion into internal affairs. Bush later recalled that he was “old enough to remember Hungary” and did not want to encourage violence by promising support to the protesters that he would never be able to provide.\footnote{Quoted in Kluver, “Tiananmen Square,” 89.}

After six weeks of protests the Chinese government cracked down in what became known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Randolph Kluver, a scholar who specializes in communication in modern Asia, argues that “by approximately mid-May, compromise [with the protesters] was more or less impossible.”\footnote{Ibid., 90.} Bush’s response was to secretly send Brent Scowcroft to China to try to preserve good relations. Scowcroft agreed with this choice, arguing that “we had too much invested in the China situation to throw it away with one stroke” by condemning their actions.\footnote{Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 99.} Ultimately “the clash of cultures had created a wide divide” that precluded any sort of settlement; negotiations, though, had not been the goal but rather the maintenance of “personal relationships [which] had cultivated a degree of trust by each side.”\footnote{Ibid., 110-11.} Historian Andrew Bacevich criticizes the Bush administration’s choices in this matter, calling their behavior “morally obtuse.”\footnote{Andrew Bacevich, American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 57.} Asked about such criticism in 2007, Bush insisted that “one of the most
important actions of his administration was keeping the lines of communication open
with the Chinese.”

The American public perceived things differently. Kluver argues that American
policy towards China “has always been largely dependent on perceptions of China shaped
largely by the media.” His thesis may be overstated, since the Bush administration did
not act based on perceptions shaped by the media, nor did Richard Nixon when he
opened relations with China, but Kluver is correct to point out the power of the media in
shaping American perceptions of China. After Bush vetoed a bill extending Chinese
student visas that had passed the House 403-0 and the Senate by voice vote, the
Washington Post fumed at the “affront” of an “American president hastening to
accommodate…people with blood on their hands up to their armpits.” The article further
called the administration “weak and confused.” Post columnist Mary McGrory argued
“murderous and unrepentant China is the Willie Horton of nations, and George Bush has
just given it a furlough.” David Gergen of the U.S. News & World Report wrote that
the president was “almost embarrassed by eloquence and cannot easily give voice to the
country’s deepest emotions.”

Not all media figures were critical of Bush’s response to the Tiananmen Square
Massacre, but many were, and Secretary Fitzwater recalls that the President was “furious
with the press, but he didn’t want to do anything publically to change it. He had a

124 Quoted in Kluver, “Rhetorical Trajectories,” 71.
125 Ibid., 94.
curious code of media discipline that said: ‘If I am doing the right thing, I can take any punishment.’”¹²⁹ One popular political cartoon at the time showed Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle dressed in unimpressive Batman and Robin costumes. Quayle, holding a golf club in one hand, looks to Bush and says “Holy massacre Bushman…Deng Joker and Li Penguin are executing citizens!” Bush responds “Golly, Boy Wonder…we’d better voice our regret!”¹³⁰ The cartoonish image and campy language are a caricature of Bush and his public response to Tiananmen Square as weak and out of touch. While the approach of the Bush administration was arguably prudent, “what the public really wanted was to see a little righteous indignation from their president” according to historian Chris Maynard.¹³¹

Bush’s media philosophy was tested again in November. On September 10 Austria opened its border with Hungary, prompting a mass exodus of Eastern Europeans through the sole legal exit out of the Eastern bloc. East Germans traveled to Hungary ostensibly for leisure and fled through the open border, many of them making their way into West Germany. The movement of population and subsequent mass protests throughout Eastern Europe put pressure on the East German government. When Gorbachev refused to intervene on behalf of Erich Honecker’s regime, he initiated a chain of events that led to a misstated lifting of travel restrictions in Berlin and the spontaneous dismantling of the Berlin Wall. It was an ecstatic moment for many Germans and others who looked forward to reversing the division of Europe and ending

¹²⁹ Fitzwater, Call the Briefing!, 264
¹³¹ Maynard, Out of the Shadow, 36.
the Cold War; Western policymakers faced the prospect of German unification, which had made a successful resolution of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union difficult since World War II.\textsuperscript{132}

Few events in the Cold War would have more appropriately called for a few historic words from the President of the United States, but Bush did not provide them. The comparison to Reagan’s rhetorical style was especially conspicuous in this case. In June 1987 Reagan implored Gorbachev to “tear down this wall,” a strong phrase that provoked an uproarious response by the crowd of Berliners in the audience. Reagan made his declaration against the advice of some of his advisors, who thought the language was too provocative. When the wall actually did come down, Bush gave a quiet press conference at Marlin Fitzwater’s insistence, though Bush told Fitzwater he refused to “dance on the Berlin Wall. The last thing I want to do is brag.”\textsuperscript{133} At the press conference on November 9, which Bush called “awkward and uncomfortable,” the following exchange took place between \textit{CBS News} correspondent Lesley Stahl and President Bush:

\begin{quote}
Stahl: This is a sort of great victory for our side in the big East-West battle, but you don’t seem elated. I’m wondering if you’re thinking of the problems.
Bush: I am not an emotional kind of guy.
Stahl: Well, how elated are you?
Bush: I’m very pleased.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

Fitzwater noted that Bush was “uninspired” and did the “one thing that made every Bush staffer start to sweat. He started sliding down in his chair.” Bush also began “talking in

\textsuperscript{132} For the problem of Germany during the Cold War, see Melvyn Leffler, \textit{For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

\textsuperscript{133} Fitzwater, \textit{Call the Briefing!}, 262.

\textsuperscript{134} Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 149.
monotone, his head bowed and his hands folded across his chest.” Fitzwater tried to end
the press conference early but nobody listened to him, so he chased down Stahl to try to
clarify the President’s motivations. He explained that Gorbachev would resent any
gloating and an emotional response from the President would have worked against
American interests and possibly provoked a backlash against the crowds. Everyone
would recognize the fall of the wall as a triumph of the West, he said. “Well, why didn’t
[the President] say that?” Stahl asked.

James Baker devotes a chapter of his memoirs to this question, and explains by
way of metaphor. “In politics, words are the coin of the realm. Used judiciously, they
can build political capital, coalesce public consensus, or enrich a nation. But when
frittered away or ineffectively employed, words in political life can bankrupt a candidate,
sell out a policy, or even dissolve a government.”135 The press was initially divided in
their views of Bush’s response, but many were critical. Mary McGrory thought Bush
should “study how to be giddy;” David Ignatius called the response “defeatism.”136
Alternatively, New York Times reporter Thomas Friedman thought Bush was “upbeat”
and sympathized with the administration’s concern about stability, while NBC News
reporter John Cochran approved of Bush’s cautious response.137 In the weeks following
the fall of the Berlin Wall, the press grew increasingly critical as Bush failed to articulate

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Ignatius, “While Washington Slept...: An Empire Is Crumbling, and the Germans Are Getting All the
Cochran thought Bush’s response was typically “prudent” and “cautious” and ultimately appropriate, NBC
News, Bush Conference-Analysis, November 9, 1989, Vanderbilt Television News Archive,
http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-
fulldisplay.pl?SID=20100613233367919&code=tvn&RC=891307&Row=3.
a satisfying response. Some called him “aloof” and a “follower.” Bush’s low-key approach to the changes in Eastern Europe must have been especially frustrating to those who heard his speech in Mainz, Germany six months earlier, which made strong appeals for a Europe “whole and free” and “self determination for all of Germany and all of Eastern Europe,” visions which Bush was not publically pursuing when he had the chance. The fruits of Bush’s policies towards Germany eventually ripened, but not for several months. In the meantime the focus of the American people shifted to the Middle East. Thus, the impact of the administration’s approach to the fall of the Berlin Wall on public opinion is difficult to measure, but to be sure Bush again took a substantial amount of criticism in the press for his initially subdued response and ignored an opportunity to speak about an important issue that might have persuaded some Americans to rally behind him.

Bush acted more decisively in December when he invaded Panama to depose Manuel Noriega. Noriega was a Panamanian general who became the de facto leader of the country during the 1980’s. He had been officially employed by the CIA since the 1960’s to oppose the activities of the Soviet-backed Sandinistas in neighboring Nicaragua, though he also worked undercover for Fidel Castro to oppose the American-backed Contras. In addition, Noriega worked with the Drug Enforcement Administration to help interrupt the international drug trade flowing from Latin America.

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to the United States. By the 1980’s, Noriega was also taking money from drug lords to help move their products. Increasingly his activities became an embarrassment to the Reagan and Bush administrations, especially after a grand jury in Florida indicted Noriega in early 1988 for smuggling cocaine into the United States. In May of 1989 Noriega nullified the results of a national election, which Guillermo Endara had won. Despite pleas from Bush to respect the democratic process, Noriega declared his preferred candidate the victor and had Endara publicly beaten with an iron bar. A subsequent coup attempt failed without American assistance, and some American media figures began to again call President Bush a “wimp” for not responding.141

Tensions escalated through 1988 and 1989 when the Bush administration instituted sanctions and a blockade on Panama. In response, Noriega and the Panamanian parliament declared a “state of war” between their country and the United States. Soon afterward, Bush claimed that “forces under his [Noriega’s] command shot and killed an unarmed American serviceman; wounded another; arrested and brutally beat a third American serviceman; and then brutally interrogated his wife, threatening her with sexual abuse.”142 The president feared for the safety of the approximately 35,000 Americans in Panama and justified the invasion in part on those grounds. Other official reasons justifying the invasion included preserving the democratic process, combating the drug trade, and protecting the neutrality of the Panama Canal, which the administration thought Noriega threatened. The invasion began on December 20, 1989. American force

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141 Ibid., 494.
was overwhelming and operations lasted only four days, though Noriega was not captured until January 9, 1990.

The Panama invasion continued the practice of “press pools.” Press pools were intended ostensibly to protect journalists from danger in war zones and to provide timely information to media outlets from official sources. “This, of course, was a lie,” argues John Macarthur in his scathing critique of the press pool system and censorship during the Panama invasion and the Gulf War, referring to the allegedly benevolent intentions of the government.143 In one political cartoon at the time, military men hand out cheerleader uniforms to four reporters, complete with skirts and a megaphone that says “go team.” The military men say to the news reporters: “Now we’ll give you the information and you put it on the air…We must have air superiority.”144 Macarthur sees a great deal of truth in this caricature. “What the Administration prevented during the first thirty-six hours of the Panama invasion were any eyewitness accounts or photographs of the shelling of El Chorrillo,” a poor neighborhood in the city where the dictator Manuel Noriega was thought to be hiding.145 Both Macarthur and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell acknowledge that the civilian death toll from the shelling was estimated at 300, which Powell called “tragic.”146

For his part, Powell took issue with the media coverage of the Panama invasion for different reasons. During one press conference after the invasion President Bush was

144 Dan Ziger, in The Media at War: The Press and the Persian Gulf Conflict, eds. Craig LaMay, Martha FitzSimon, and Jeanne Sahadi (New York: Gannett Foundation Media Center, Columbia University, 1991), 95.
145 Macarthur, Second Front, 160-161.
smiling and upbeat after a successful operation, but was depicted on a split screen with the other half showing a plane unloading American bodies. As Powell recalled it, the image unfairly implied Bush was callous. Powell called this event “cheap-shot journalism.”

He was also angry when the press began questioning his leadership and attempted to influence his decisions. In one case there was a radio tower left standing in Panama City that was broadcasting pre-recorded propaganda from Noriega. Several days after the invasion, Powell knew that the battle was already won, and that the new president would need that tower to run his country. Meanwhile, the press was in an uproar and demanded that the tower be taken down for strategic purposes. Under pressure from the media and, ultimately, his superiors in Washington, Powell reluctantly ordered the tower destroyed.

Whether Powell or Macarthur are more right about the nature of the press pools, the events in Panama accelerated any existing suspicion of the administration towards media coverage of war, and encouraged the administration to control its message during conflict. The institution of press pools exacerbated tensions between the press and the administration. Most Americans had little sympathy for Noriega, and many were pleased to see a quick American victory. But as Powell noted, reporting on the conflict was not always favorable for the administration. Positive memories of America victory did not seem to linger in the public imagination. For the

147 Powell, My American Journey, 418.
148 Ibid., 331-333.
149 There are several book-length studies of the media and the Gulf War. Several also examine the roots of the government-media relationship during the invasions of Grenada and Panama. See for example W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1994).
purposes of public relations, the invasion of Panama did little good for the Bush administration.

More than most incoming presidents, George Bush wanted to distance himself from his predecessor. This is true despite the similarities that some historians have assigned to Bush and Ronald Reagan. As part of the agreement to join the Reagan administration, Bush had decided to fall in line with administration policy despite some substantial disagreements over policy. As Vice President he was often in the national spotlight but he was never able to define himself politically for the American public. In his campaign for President, he leveraged his association with Reagan and the conservative movement to win the election. He thus entered office in 1989 with especially strong ties to Reagan. Comparisons between the two were frequent and typically unfavorable for Bush. Among the most important differences between the two were their approaches to public communication, and Bush’s approach was notably less effective. This deficiency led to occasionally tense relationships with the press. Despite some important successes in foreign policy, the administration often neglected the public aspects of the presidency and failed to enjoy the political fruits of their success. By the summer of 1990, these trends had so frustrated the administration that it began to reevaluate its approach to public communication.

In one of the final scenes from the 1996 episode of The Simpsons in which George Bush was featured, Barbara Bush forces her husband to apologize for his role in the prank war with Homer Simpson. Homer, victorious but still begrudging, celebrates: “Woohoo! In your face Bush! Now apologize for the tax hike.” Much of the drop in
presidential approval ratings beginning in 1990 can be attributed to the President’s reneging on his promise not to raise taxes. In one poll, when participants were asked if they remembered any of Bush’s campaign promises, 68 percent remembered the “read my lips” pledge, 5 percent remembered something else, and the rest remembered nothing.\(^\text{150}\) As the three foreign policy events above suggest, the administration had difficulty communicating its policies to the public. These problems were rooted in Bush’s distaste for governing as if he were campaigning, his desire to distance himself from the previous administration, the institutional reforms driven by these motivations, and Bush’s personal struggle to express his thoughts coherently. While it looked ahead to the fall midterm elections and tried to repair the perception of the President’s competence in foreign affairs – what was supposed to be an area of strength – the administration reevaluated its approach to public communication in the summer of 1990. In this context, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the Bush administration used the opportunity to employ a more active communications strategy. White Demarest recalls that he was suddenly “empowered” and the administration was “on the same page” when its communications strategy changed.\(^\text{151}\) With the weight of the previous eighteen months of public communications failures leading up to it, on August 5, 1990, to the shock of many media figures, Bush stepped to the podium on the South Lawn of the White House and committed the United States to war.

\(^{150}\) “Summary of Findings: Republican National Committee National Survey,” page 5, “U.S. National #7,” June 29, 1990, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.

CHAPTER 2: “A DIFFERENT GEORGE BUSH”

“I was searching for a formulation that drove home the magnitude of the threat to ordinary Americans, and thereby shored up domestic support for a policy that might end in combat in the desert of Kuwait. In the end, it came out badly.”


During the five-month buildup to war in the Persian Gulf, the Bush administration provided many different reasons to intervene in the region but its arguments often lacked a central theme or a consistent set of justifications. Nevertheless, the administration at times enjoyed substantial public support for its policies in the Middle East, especially immediately after the August announcement that the United States would defend Saudi Arabia and again once hostilities began in mid-January 1991. But in the period between these periods of high approval, public support of the administration’s policies fluctuated. Lacking serious opposition, the administration initially had little motivation to refine its message for the domestic audience. The argument for war changed often between August and November 1990. Those who endorsed the president’s policies did so for different reasons, and many who approved hesitated to back sacrificing American lives in pursuit of those policies. Largely as a result of the administration’s failure to articulate a clear justification for war, many Americans were unclear why exactly the United States was intervening, and public approval steadily eroded through the fall of 1990. For its part, the administration was preoccupied by domestic affairs and the demands of forming an international coalition against Iraq. President Bush changed his mind on why he thought the United States had to intervene in Iraq, though his new convictions were not
reflected in his rhetoric for months.\textsuperscript{152} By November, many Americans had become confused by the arguments for intervention and skeptical about the wisdom of the administration’s Middle East policies. Some objected to the invasion force ordered to the Gulf in November, especially because the president chose to delay his announcement until after midterm elections. In the international arena, the Soviet Union sought negotiations in the Gulf while Israel was condemned in the United Nations for murdering twenty one Palestinians. Both developments threatened to undermine the American-led coalition. By the end of November, the administration’s Gulf policy seemed to have reached a crisis point. After announcing the deployment of an invasion force on November 8, the administration’s policies seemed to be falling out of favor at home and abroad, support having been weakened over time by an inconsistent argument. In response, the administration formulated a new argument for war based in part on public opinion research.

Several factors influenced Saddam Hussein’s decision to invade Kuwait. His motivation was rooted in his perception of Iraq’s place in the region and history. Kuwait was once a tributary of the Ottoman Empire, administered from Basra. In the 1890s, however, Kuwait broke from the Ottomans. The sheikhdom became a British protectorate in 1899, and remained so until 1961. Nevertheless, successive governments in Baghdad had, ever since Iraq’s creation in the aftermath of World War I, asserted claims to Kuwait on the basis of its attachment to Basra in the nineteenth century. Iraq refused to recognize Kuwait’s legitimacy throughout much of the twentieth century, and

\footnote{In late September Bush claims that “I began to move from viewing Saddam’s aggression exclusively as a dangerous strategic threat and an injustice to its reversal as a moral crusade,” a conclusion he came to gradually. See Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 374.}
after the 1990 invasion some Iraqi officials referred to Kuwait as the 19th province of Iraq.\textsuperscript{153} When Iraq did not claim all of Kuwait, it disputed territory in the oil-rich border regions. Indeed oil was at the heart of the conflict, especially the possibility that oil revenues might spur an economic recovery in Iraq after a decade of war. The Iran-Iraq War had been enormously destructive for Iraq, though Saddam claimed a kind of Pyrrhic victory. Saddam perceived Iraq as a regional leader and the defender of the Arab Middle East against the radical, Persian, Shi’ite Iranians. The affront of Kuwait’s existence and Iraq’s perceived role as defender of the Middle East created a sense of grievance among Iraqi leaders.

Many Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, lent Iraq money to prosecute the Iran-Iraq War. After the war Saddam called on his neighbors to forgive his war debts, which he considered a crucial first step towards the recovery of the Iraqi economy. Iraq was not able to pay its existing loans, and without the Iranian threat as motivation foreign creditors were reluctant to invest or provide assistance. Saddam faced a growing liquidity crisis, and the deteriorating situation affected the nation as a whole. He was increasingly unable to provide the Iraqi people with tangible benefits of his governance, which was especially important in the aftermath of a destructive war. After several attempts were made on his life between 1988 and 1990 it was clear to Saddam that his regime was directly threatened.\textsuperscript{154} The vast majority of Iraq’s economy was tied

\textsuperscript{153} Frederick Anscombe, \textit{The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), chapters 5-6.

\textsuperscript{154} Steven Hurst, \textit{The United States and Iraq Since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 83-84.
to the sale of oil; 97 percent of export earnings came from oil.\textsuperscript{155} After the war, the only recourse that Saddam thought he had to rebuild his country and pay off his debts (if they would not be dismissed) was to increase oil revenue. Here, too, a crisis was growing. After fluctuations in the oil market in the mid-1980’s, oil prices in 1990 were half what they had been in 1985.\textsuperscript{156} Many OPEC countries were producing at much higher levels than had been agreed upon, thereby deflating global oil prices. Kuwait was especially guilty of ignoring OPEC quotas.

The Soviet Union had been the traditional patron of Iraq, especially after the 1958 coup in Iraq when their relationship officially became a “strategic partnership.”\textsuperscript{157} Iraq also often played the superpowers against each other during the Cold War. By 1990 Soviet power was in decline and Saddam was losing the opportunity to maneuver in the Cold War arena. He could not compete with a hegemonic United States, but American intentions were unclear to him. Before the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq served American interests by countering Iranian strength in the region. If Iraq collapsed – and Saddam thought it might if the situation stayed the same – it would cease to counterbalance Iran and the Americans must have known that, he thought. The Bush administration was not necessarily opposed to territorial change, as they had not been in Europe, and the United States was not necessarily friendly towards autocratic Kuwait. As if to confirm his analysis of the situation, Saddam asked the American Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie what the position of the United States was regarding territorial disputes between Iraq and

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{156} Daniel Yergin, \textit{The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008), 748-49.
\textsuperscript{157} Tareq Y. Ismael, “Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis,” \textit{Arab Studies Quarterly} 23, 4, (Fall 2001).
Kuwait. Glaspie answered by repeating the Department of State’s official policy, which said that the United States took no position on intra-Arab conflicts. Based on this statement Saddam reasoned that the Americans would not respond to an Iraqi invasion. If indeed the Americans acquiesced, then Iraq might solve its liquidity crisis and move towards a position of regional leadership by absorbing Kuwait. Saddam was confident that Arab leaders would insist on an Arab solution and that he had enough friends in the region to solidify his gains.158

By July 1990, 100,000 Iraqi troops were stationed at the Iraq-Kuwait border. Most observers thought the troops were meant to coerce Kuwait into observing OPEC quotas. Kuwait conceded and reduced its production, and by mid-summer Iraq was the only OPEC nation exceeding its quotas.159 Troops remained, however. Many analysts thought the troop presence might be used to threaten Kuwaiti leaders into giving away a disputed oil field or islands in the Persian Gulf. On August 2 Saddam commanded Lieutenant General Ayad Futayih al-Rawi, a decorated veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, to begin the invasion. Two of al-Rawi’s elite armored units quickly overran a single Kuwaiti brigade stationed at the border. Over 1,000 Iraqi T-72 tanks followed, an overwhelming offensive for a small Kuwaiti defense force. Iraqi ground forces moved south and captured most Kuwaiti troops in reserve before reaching Kuwait City. Elite Republican Guard units attacked the city from helicopters while seaborne commandos closed off the lines of retreat. Once the city was secured there was little resistance, and

158 Hurst, The United States and Iraq, 86.  
159 Yergin, The Prize, 771-72.
Iraq’s heavy armored divisions moved south to the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia border. Iraq conquered Kuwait in less than forty-eight hours.  

Saddam misread the political environment, and the international community widely condemned his actions. Within days the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to denounce the invasion and over the next few months passed several increasingly stern resolutions. Initially many countries worried about the consequences for the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf. Though gas prices spiked, they quickly stabilized. Nevertheless, the industrialized nations of the world that relied on cheap oil to fuel their economies were spooked and anxious to punish Iraq to deter future interruptions. Iraq’s invasion was alarming to some because of the perceived lessons of World War II and the Cold War. As the lesson went, the appeasement of Adolf Hitler had encouraged further aggression and ultimately brought a destructive war, while containment of the Soviet Union had led to apparent victory. Saddam’s attack resembled too closely the aggression of Germany and the Soviet Union, and aggression could not be allowed to proceed unchecked, especially with a more peaceful post-Cold War world foreseeable. Saddam hoped to frame the conflict as the Arab world against the United States, but the support of his neighbors was not forthcoming. While many Middle Eastern countries had been ready to support Iraq in order to prevent Iranian dominance in the region, they were unwilling to anoint Iraq to the same role by allowing it to absorb Kuwait. In response Saddam tried with some success to link the resolution of the Gulf crisis to the Israeli-

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Palestinian conflict, hoping to get the Arab masses behind him and compel the Arab states to consent to his will.

One of the first responses to Iraq’s invasion was the creation of economic sanctions in what one historian has called the “he can’t drink the oil” argument. Some argued that since Iraq had few resources other than oil, if he could be isolated within the international community Saddam might be coerced into leaving Kuwait, if only to prevent his people from starving. The economic sanctions of Iraq began with UNSC resolution 661, passed on August 6, 1990. The series of resolutions prohibited all trade between UN member states and entities in Iraq or Kuwait, all sales of arms to Iraq or Kuwait, all transactions with Iraq or Kuwait save humanitarian aid, and asked that member states prevent Iraq, Kuwait, and its citizens from accessing assets in their countries. The sanctions were intended to compel Iraq to bow to the demands of the United Nations. Some argued that it was only a matter of time before the sanctions either forced Saddam to acquiesce or pushed groups within Iraq to wrest control from his regime. In either scenario, an uncertain amount of time would have to pass.

Others argued that time was not on the side of the coalition against Iraq. Though Iraq had serious financial problems before the war, with access to Kuwaiti wealth Iraq might be able to endure sanctions for some time. Some worried that Saddam would work to restart Iraqi nuclear or biological weapons programs with his stolen wealth. In general, Saddam’s control of Kuwait grew stronger as time passed. The Bush administration worried that the international community would lose its zeal for the Gulf crisis and

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eventually allow Saddam to solidify his gains. The coalition was far from uniform in its views, and separate peace proposals threatened to undermine American policy and allow Saddam to withdraw with face-saving concessions. The administration worried that any settlement short of total surrender would embolden Saddam and other dictators, create admiration for Saddam among the Arab masses, undermine American credibility, and ultimately leave intact Saddam’s military. Within the administration, Chairman Powell was the most vocal proponent for allowing sanctions more time to work, while the President and others were generally skeptical. Until the United Nations gave Iraq an ultimatum demanding he leave Iraq by January 15, the possibility remained that sanctions would be given time to work.

The United States and President Bush in particular gave perhaps the strongest response of any country to the invasion of Kuwait. “I will not discuss with you what my options are or might be, but they're wide open, I can assure you of that,” the President said, promising the crowd on the South Lawn three days after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait that he would do “whatever was necessary” to protect American lives. He called Saddam Hussein and members of his regime liars, “outlaws and renegades.” He frequently cut off reporters’ questions. He ended the exchange with strong words which most interpreted as a promise to use force. “This will not stand. This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait.” As James Baker later recalled, “the only issue from then on was whether Iraq would go peacefully or would be forced out at gunpoint.”

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did not think of his words as a de facto declaration of war, but he knew that “force could be necessary” and was resolute that he “would do whatever it took to remove Iraq from Kuwait.”

That evening, the NBC Nightly News devoted much of its broadcast to an examination of the President’s surprising attitude. Anchor Garrick Utley said “we saw a different George Bush today, and heard him. A president with a fire in his belly, and tough words for Iraq....his strongest language yet.... A different George Bush.” Reporter John Cochran agreed: “Indeed it was. Not only was it a different George Bush, but an angry Bush.” Utley added “clearly something happened this weekend to the president and his administration,” something that made the president’s response to this particular international crisis seem different than his response to others. R. W. Apple of the New York Times thought that the crisis had the potential to “cripple” Bush’s presidency; Bush was suddenly compelled to “project an image of boldness.” The President’s response to the invasion was out of character, and the media recognized it. His South Lawn performance seemed peculiar when juxtaposed with a press conference the following day when Bush was much more casual as he stood with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to provide a joint statement on the Gulf crisis. While ostensibly a serious

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165 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 333.
occasion, Bush called the appearance “basically a chance to have a photo.” He dismissed the media event as a charade for the cameras.

The timing of the Iraq invasion was opportune for the Bush administration, which had recently accumulated reserves of political capital after a series of diplomatic victories, and for whom a distraction from domestic affairs was welcome. The successful unification of Germany created a reservoir of good will between the United States and the Soviet Union, strengthened by personally close relationships between Secretary Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. The administration convinced Soviet leaders to condemn the invasion of Kuwait in a joint statement. Also enjoying relatively good relations with China after its conciliatory response to the Tiananmen massacre, the administration had more influence than usual in the United Nations Security Council. When the UN debated a series of resolutions condemning Iraq, the United States persuaded Security Council members not to use their veto power and ultimately secured international sanction. The administration was preoccupied with partisan domestic politics at the time. Bush recalls that when he first heard about the invasion, “my mind that evening was on things other than Iraq. We were in the midst of a recession and an ugly, partisan budget battle.” The invasion provided a useful respite from domestic difficulties and a welcome boost in presidential approval. USA Today judged Bush

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169 During a segment called “A Day in the Life” of Bush in 1989, the President greeted Tom Brokaw and then went on to have a conversation with the camera crew, thus indicating little patience with the charade. See Medhurst, “Why Rhetoric Matters,” 9.
170 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 303.
171 From July 22 to August 9, Approval ratings jumped from 60 to 74 percent. See John Mueller, Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 180.
“off the hook domestically” after his August 5 remarks on the south lawn of the White House.\footnote{172}

While the timing of the invasion was convenient in the short-term, when considered in the context of the last decade of U.S.-Iraq relations, the American response to the crisis was hardly predictable. The place of Iraq in American strategic planning had been ambiguous during the 1980’s. The Reagan administration adopted the “tilt” policy towards Baghdad. By 1982 Iran seemed to be winning the Iran-Iraq war, and an Iraqi loss threatened the collapse of Saddam’s regime to the profit of the principal enemy of the United States in the region. The Reagan administration’s assistance was intended to ensure a favorable balance of power, but supporting Iraq required the United States to accept a brutal and aggressive regime. Hostilities ended in 1988 after perhaps 1.5 million total casualties, some resulting from Saddam’s use of chemical weapons. The Reagan and Bush administrations continued the policy of aiding Baghdad after the end of the war.\footnote{173}

President Bush ordered a review of U.S. policy towards Iraq in National Security Review 10, which was part of the larger strategic review that took place from February to May, 1989. Though NSR-10 remains classified, it was like most components of the security review in that the results differed little from the approach of the Reagan administration. Arguing that the bureaucrats who drafted the review were operating on entrenched assumptions, the Bush administration ignored the recommendations of the

\footnote{173}{Hurst, \textit{The United States and Iraq}, 77-78.}
review and centralized the power to transform foreign policy in the National Security Council. The President directed policy by issuing National Security Directives, which made the review effectively irrelevant. NSD-26 concerned foreign policy in the Persian Gulf. The most important strategic objectives in the region according to NSD-26 remained the same – i.e. maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil and challenging Soviet gains. On Iraq, specifically, NSD-26 advised normalizing U.S.-Iraqi relations and providing non-lethal military aid to Iraq. This portion of the policy towards Iraq was an implicit continuation of the tilt towards Baghdad. In a slight change from Reagan-era policy, NSD-26 called for creating incentives for “moderation” from Saddam and mentioned the possibility of sanctions as a consequence for any future use of chemical or biological weapons.

The Reagan and Bush administrations had tolerated Saddam’s viciousness towards domestic opposition and his general aggression in order to bolster his regime so that he could serve American interests in the region. Once the risk of Iraqi collapse seem to subside after the Iran-Iraq War, the Bush administration preferred Saddam alter his aggressive behavior in order to avoid its potentially destabilizing effects, though encouraging moderation was not a primary goal and U.S-Iraq relations remained largely the same as they had in the previous administration.

Bush later said that NSD-26 “generally confirmed the previous policy” and moreover that “the Persian Gulf had not been among our major concerns.”

James Baker added that “our administration’s review of the previous Iraq policy was not immune from domestic economic considerations….Had we attempted to isolate Iraq we

175 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 305-06.
would have also isolated American businesses” and provoked a reaction from influential Representatives. According to one unnamed senior Defense Department official who attended the meeting at which NSD-26 was written, nobody dissented from the proposed policy, but “no one was particularly optimistic that it would succeed or that Hussein would change his spots.” The aspect of the administration’s policy towards Iraq that encouraged moderation may have been doomed from the beginning. The March 1990 National Security Strategy Report also devoted some space to regional concerns in the Middle East and echoed the strategic importance of free flowing oil but said nothing specifically about Iraq, despite mentioning several other countries. By all accounts Iraq was not a primary national security concern for the United States before the invasion of Kuwait. Though the administration preferred that Iraq moderate its behavior, it was apparently less than confident that changes in U.S. policy would help realize this goal. Ultimately Iraq was not a priority for the Bush administration prior to the summer of 1990.

The low strategic priority of Iraq calls into question the necessity of Bush’s strong language on the South Lawn days after the invasion, though Saddam’s aggression had of course changed the strategic equation. President Bush had faced analogous scenarios in the past. Manuel Noriega was, if anything, more personally offensive to Bush. Noriega was a drug dealer whom Bush called a liar, both profound transgressions in Bush’s moral

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176 Baker, The Politics of Diplomacy, 263.
Though Bush ordered an invasion of Panama in 1989, the assault was done on a smaller scale than the invasion of Iraq and supported by softer public rhetoric. The Chinese government’s crackdown on protesters in Tienanmen Square was brutal and the evidence was undeniable, yet Bush did everything he could to maintain good relations with the Chinese. When reports of human rights atrocities by Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait came out soon after the invasion (false allegations, it turned out), Bush made human rights violations a fundamental tenet of the justification for war. Saddam’s treatment of the Kurds was used as evidence of his personal capacity for menace, another central justification for war. But when the Soviet Union suppressed nationalists in Lithuania (less violently than the suppression of the Kurds, to be sure), Bush respected Gorbachev’s requests for understanding.

Despite his struggle communicating to the public and regular criticism from the press, Bush retained relatively high approval ratings through the first eighteen months of his presidency. Many criticized his inaction during the “pause” period, but few Americans were engaged with the abstractions of national security strategy. However timid his response to the Tienanmen Square Massacre might have seemed to some, it was perceived by others as prudent, and events in China were at any rate far off and had little day-to-day effect on Americans. His response to the fall of the Berlin Wall was also perceived by many as weak, but images of ecstatic Germans may have overwhelmed negative perceptions of Bush in the public consciousness. At the end of the day, the fall of the wall was a resounding victory for the West. The institution of press pools in

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179 “Noriega is a murderer and drug dealer, and how can you believe him….” See Bush, All the Best, 387.
180 Approval ratings fluctuated in the range of 51 percent to 80 percent, according the compiled poll taken from Table 1 in Mueller, Policy and Opinion, 179-180.
Panama might have been dubious, but the American military won an overwhelming victory in that conflict. Though Bush was often criticized and had difficulty selling his image and policies in public, these deficiencies and perceived failures did not seem to hurt his approval ratings during the first eighteen months of his presidency.\footnote{181}

While tidy, approval ratings by themselves did not describe sufficiently the public’s perception. A deeper look at why the public approved of the Bush presidency reveals a tenuous endorsement of the administration. In early 1990, one representative poll asked why voters approved of the President. The results indicated that Bush’s approval was not tied to his performance in any specific area, with the slight exception of his drug policy, which 8 percent of people approved. Most of those polled indicated that they approved of Bush for general reasons – they thought he was “doing a good job,” or they “agreed with his stands in general,” or they liked that he was a “decisive/strong leader.”\footnote{182} Interestingly, eighteen months earlier, asked to choose between the words “leader” and “follower” to describe Bush, 52 percent chose “follower” and another 11 percent couldn’t decide.\footnote{183} Vague personality characteristics were the basis of the public’s approval of the President, but these opinions were fluid, and perceptions of personality were at any rate a less stable reason for approval than any policy or accomplishment would have been. By December 30, 1990, Bush’s approval ratings ceased to hinge on general perceptions. Bush retained an approval rating of 59 percent, but the vast majority said their future opinions of the President would be tied to the

\footnote{181 The public response to the Bush administration’s major foreign policies is discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.}
\footnote{182 “Summary of Findings: Report on American Public Opinion,” page 2, “Reasons for Bush Job Approval and Disapproval,” 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.}
\footnote{183 Taken from Table 2 in Mueller, Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War, 184.}
outcome of the Gulf War. In late August, Bush and Secretary Baker came to the conclusion that failure in the Persian Gulf “could see the Bush presidency destroyed.”

By the end of 1990, Bush was engaged in the issue that he thought would define his legacy.

The change in context compelled Bush to attempt to sell his Gulf War policy to the public in a way that he had avoided to that point in his presidency. Though most modern presidents have been obliged to convince the American people that the country should go to war, President Bush was particularly reluctant to sell his policies to the public. The decision to sell the Gulf War was supported by the president’s closest advisors in addition to the conclusions from public opinion polls. Secretary Baker, like Bush, thought that the executive had the constitutional authority to go to war, but argued that Bush needed to appeal to Congress and the public anyway. “I was convinced that while the President had the legal authority to act unilaterally, as a practical and political matter, we would be making a big mistake to undertake a war as big as this without first securing a resolution of support from Congress.” This strategy was even more important, he thought, because “there was [initially] little, if any, domestic support for using our military. We had to build that support painstakingly.”

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell insisted that the United States could only go to war with the public behind it as a matter of principle and sound strategy.

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185 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 354.
186 Baker, Politics and Diplomacy, 331.
187 Ibid., 273.
Securing public support was a tenet of the Powell Doctrine, itself an elaboration on the Weinberger Doctrine. Originally announced by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger on November 28, 1984, at a National Press Club Speech, the Weinberger Doctrine was a direct response to the deployment of Marines to Lebanon. The Powell/Weinberger Doctrines were also an outgrowth of the military’s memory of the Vietnam War. Among the perceived lessons of the Vietnam War was that in prosecuting the war as a limited war the American public was not asked to support the troops, so that when the war became increasingly difficult and fighting the war demanded more sacrifice there was no basis of support, leading Congress to eventually abandon South Vietnam.

Weinberger disagreed with other Reagan administration officials – especially Secretary of State George Schultz – over the appropriate response to the increasingly violent crisis in Lebanon. Despite Weinberger’s objections, in 1982 the United States deployed Marine units as part of a multinational force to establish order. In October 1983 a truck bomb struck Marine headquarters and killed 241 American troops. Weinberger’s response was to lay out a series of six questions that should be answered before committing ground troops to future conflicts. Powell summarized them by saying, “in short, is the national interest at stake? If the answer is yes, go in, and go in to win. Otherwise, stay out.”

When Powell embraced Weinberger’s guidelines he added that the United States should always consider the consequences of its actions and have an exit strategy. Both Powell and Weinberger agreed that national leaders should ensure that the American public supports a foreign policy before engaging in a conflict. During the buildup to the Gulf War, Powell embraced the role of “reluctant warrior” by questioning

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whether it was worth going to war to liberate Kuwait (at one point speaking out of turn and earning a reprimand from his boss, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney), and routinely insisting that the sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq by the UN should be given time to work.\textsuperscript{189} If there had to be a war, Powell was adamant that there be sufficient numbers of troops and that the administration secure public backing.

Despite the advice of Secretary Baker and the insistence of General Powell, Bush remained hostile to the idea of selling his policies. His talking points for an August meeting with Congressional leaders indicated that he would “welcome” Congressional support for administration policy and thought it was important to present a united front to the world, but ultimately he did not need Congressional sanction to go to war. To the degree that he would work with Congress at all, his talking point was “I cannot accept, for example, limits on size, scope, or duration of the Persian Gulf deployment, or on possible uses of U.S. forces.”\textsuperscript{190} Reacting to criticism that he was violating the War Powers Act and perhaps the Constitution, Bush asked White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray “is there a way for the President to fulfill all his responsibilities to Congress by saying, a few days before any fighting was to begin, ‘hostilities are imminent—period!!’….Is there something short of ‘declaring’ war that satisfies Congress?”\textsuperscript{191} Though Bush’s legal advisors provided him with the argument he sought his political advisors strongly suggested that he seek Congressional approval for war in the Gulf.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 464-66, 470-74.
\textsuperscript{190} Memo, C. Boyden Gray to George Bush, attachment: Contingency Talking Points, August 27, 1990, Counsels Office – C. Boyden Gray Files – Miscellaneous File, OA/ID 45046, Records on the Persian Gulf Conflict, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{191} Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 491-492.
The domestic economic impact of the invasion was the main concern of many legislators, and they were mostly preoccupied with oil. On August 6, the day after the South Lawn exchange, the President responded to a letter from Representative John Dingell (D-MI) which had expressed concern about any interruption in the flow of Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil and recommended a series of measures to mitigate the harmful effects of such an interruption. The letter implied that the administration should release stockpiled oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to offset supply shortages. On August 8, White House officials responded to Senators J. Bennett Johnston (D-LA) and James McClure (R-ID), who had wondered if the embargo of Iraq applied to oil already purchased or en route (the response was non-committal). Similar letters abounded. Perhaps the most prominent among them was a letter written by Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) and cosigned by seventeen others. Some letters offered little more than the addition of their voice to the collective concern over domestic gas prices. Though the President personally signed responses to the earliest letters, he soon delegated this responsibility to lower-level White House officials, suggesting a high volume of inquiries.

On August 8, the Justice Department granted broad freedom to any executive officials who might have financial interests in the Gulf region to participate in policy
deliberations. On the heels of this ruling, Texaco CEO James Kinnear sent a letter to the President, which was read at least by Chief of Staff John Sununu and forwarded to Deputy Chief of Staff James Cicconi. In the letter Kinnear urged the administration to use the Gulf War as an opportunity to gain public support for expanded domestic oil production. Representative Frank McCloskey (D-IN) proposed diverting frozen Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets into investments and collecting accumulated interest as profit, either to dump into the U.S. Treasury or to repay American energy consumers hurt by higher oil prices. The administration was compelled to grapple with the high gas prices that resulted from American opposition to the invasion of Kuwait. Though James Baker argued in November that saving American jobs justified intervention, in general the administration was hesitant to use domestic economic factors as a reason to go to war.

How exactly the war would be sold to the public by the administration was unclear from the beginning. On August 2, Bush told reporters that he was not contemplating an intervention, only to strongly imply the use of force on August 5.

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196 Letter, James Kinnear to George Bush, August 23, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.

197 Letter, Representative Frank McCloskey to President Bush, August 30, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 2, BPR, GBPL.

198 Scowcroft says that by the evening of August 2 “it became obvious to me that the President was prepared to use force to evict Saddam from Kuwait if it became necessary.” See Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 318. For the press conference, see: George Bush, “Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait,” August 2, 1990, Public Papers of the President, GBPL,

United States Information Agency Director Bruce Gelb sent a memo to Brent Scowcroft on August 16 listing the public diplomacy initiatives undertaken by the USIA, Department of State, and Department of Defense since the invasion. Despite a variety of actions undertaken by these departments, Gelb informed Scowcroft that “everyone is glued to CNN and the right messages are not getting through.”

The day of the invasion, the administration called a National Security Council meeting. The content of this meeting is classified but it is summarized in memoirs. During a meeting that was described as “chaotic,” the administration explored military contingencies while also deciding to put sanctions in place and declare Saudi Arabia a vital interest. Colin Powell said that “the only question is how do you [sic] lay it out to the public.” Scowcroft was “appalled at the undertone” of the main topic of discussion, the domestic economic impact of the invasion.

The second NSC meeting after the invasion moved away from domestic concerns and pondered the effects on the balance of power in the Middle East. Bush worried about the “historical Arab propensity to work out ‘deals’” and how that could lead them to acquiesce to Iraq. During this meeting, the concern over Iraq was at times rooted in realpolitik. NSC members worried that “Jordan and Yemen have tilted toward Iraq. Iran is militarily and economically weak, so it would not be an effective counter.” The Gulf crisis was characterized in various ways by administration officials. Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger described the

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199 Specific initiatives included transferring Arabic-speaking public diplomacy specialists to the region, increasing Voice of America broadcasting hours, and dispatching a USIA television crew to document the human suffering caused by Saddam. Memo, Bruce Gelb to Brent Scowcroft, “Public Diplomacy for the Middle East Crisis,” August 16, 1990, Bruce Gelb Files, 98-0001-F, Records on the United States Information Agency, BPR, GBPL.

conflict as the “first test of the postwar system,” while Defense Secretary Cheney hinted at the possibility of Saddam acquiring “new weapons” with stolen wealth. Bush later admitted that he thought of Saddam’s aggression “exclusively as a dangerous strategic threat” at that point. From the beginning of the Gulf crisis White House cabinet members perceived the conflict as important for different reasons.

On August 8, Bush announced the deployment of troops to the Middle East. He provided several reasons for his decision. He noted the dependence of the United States on foreign oil and alluded to the power Iraq might have over the United States if allowed to control so much oil. Bush claimed that the choices the United States had to make in the Gulf crisis were analogous to the Munich Conference of 1938, arguing that “if history has taught us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms. Appeasement does not work.” The speech is littered with loaded terms like “blitzkrieg” intended to evoke the memory of World War II. Bush went on to cite the various countries which had joined the United States in condemning Iraq. He called the invasion the “world’s problem” and said “all agree that Iraq cannot be allowed to benefit from its invasion of Kuwait.” The invasion thus also represented an affront to the international system. Such aggression had to be deterred, Bush argued, not only to avoid empowering a dictator whose crimes he argued were equal to Hitler’s, but also to discourage future land grabs. Finally, after publically declaring Saudi Arabia an area of “vital interest,”

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201 Ibid., 321-23.
202 Ibid., 374.
203 Some of these were apparently last-minute additions: “As I prepared my speech, I tightened up the language to strengthen the similarity I saw between the Persian Gulf and the situation in the Rhineland in the 1930’s, when Hitler simply defied the Treaty of Versailles and marched in. This time I wanted no appeasement.” See Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 340. See chapter 3 of this thesis for a discussion of Bush’s use of WWII analogies.
Bush promised that “America will stand by her friends,” thus making the conflict about the imperatives of alliance. Though the U.S.-Saudi relationship was not technically an alliance, Bush often spoke of the relationship in those terms, and to be sure the Saudis often worked for U.S. interests in the region. They also boasted the world’s largest oil reserves. These several justifications for intervening in the Gulf – stopping Saddam, setting a precedent for future aggressors, defending an “ally,” and securing the economic prosperity of the United States – were the basis of the public argument for intervention. The speech and Bush’s explanation were largely well-received in the press, and a Gallup poll indicated that 80 percent of Americans approved of the way Bush was handling the situation to this point.

Saddam Hussein provided another reason for White House officials and Americans to consider when he began taking foreign citizens hostage. On August 10 Saddam ordered all foreign embassies in Kuwait to close and send their staffs to their respective missions in Baghdad. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada all refused, insisting that Kuwait remained a sovereign country. On August 23 Saddam removed those embassy officials who remained in Kuwait and along with their families transported them to unknown locations in Iraq. Saddam initially refused to issue any exit visas and it was widely perceived that he was taking them prisoner – “blatant


205 For the Press, see Mark J. Rozell, The Press and the Bush Presidency (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 70-71; for the Gallup poll, see Mueller, Policy and Opinion, 193.
hostage taking” Bush wrote angrily in his diary. Saddam appeared on state television with several British families whom he had removed from Kuwait, images that were picked up by international media outlets. As he awkwardly patted a young British boy on the head and nervous British families looked on, Saddam explained that the Western media was deliberately misinterpreting his intentions and that he was merely trying to avoid bloodshed. Saddam told the young boy whom he was touching, seven-year-old Stuart Lockwood, that he would someday be proud that he had been used to bring about peace. Much of the world seemed not to accept his explanation. A State Department spokesperson called it “shameful theatrics,” while the British foreign office described it as “contemptible.” NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw echoed the skepticism of many when he introduced the story in a broadcast that evening: “Saddam Hussein, who started his political career as an assassin, and achieved infamy as a charismatic but ruthless military dictator, today tried to persuade the world that he is really a kindly statesman interested in peace.”

World opinion appeared to be overwhelmingly against Saddam on this matter. The Security Council responded by passing Resolution 664, which demanded Saddam allow detained foreigners to leave Iraq and Kuwait. Saddam then began moving the foreign prisoners to vulnerable targets in Iraq such as oil refineries and chemical plants where they were used as human shields. This tactic angered Bush so much that he drafted an ultimatum which promised an American invasion in a matter of hours if Saddam did not release all prisoners, “but it was too early for ultimatums,” Bush recalled.

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206 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 349.
He did not send the letter because he “did not want to invite comparison to Tehran,” referring to President Jimmy Carter’s botched Desert One rescue attempt of American hostages at the embassy in Iran in 1979. \(^{208}\) Though he did not send the provocative letter, he fumed over the issue, and hostage-taking became one of the main official reasons to intervene.

Many Americans shared Bush’s anger and thought intervention in the Gulf was justified to save American hostages, although most did not think that was the true motive behind the administration’s Gulf policy. One Gallup poll in late August indicated that 92 percent of Americans thought freeing hostages should be among U.S. goals in the Gulf, while another poll taken on August 22 indicated that 52 percent of Americans thought it should be the *main* objective; at the same time, an NBC/\emph{Wall Street Journal} poll showed that only 6 percent of Americans thought freeing hostages actually was the reason that U.S. troops were in the Gulf. \(^{209}\) Saddam agreed to release all hostages on December 6, which as a practical matter precluded the administration from justifying an invasion to free hostages. Nevertheless, American public opinion continued to factor in Saddam’s hostage-taking as a justifiable reason to go to war. Hostage-taking contributed to the overall portrait of Saddam’s menace as the kind of dictator who would take American hostages. For many Americans, Saddam had to be punished. \(^{210}\)

By the end of August, the argument for war shifted. The venue for the first evolution in the argument for war was a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a group that represented one of the constituencies that the administration targeted most frequently

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\(^{208}\) Bush and Scowcroft, \emph{A World Transformed}, 349.

\(^{209}\) Mueller, \emph{Policy and Opinion}, 244-246, tables 118, 122-23.

\(^{210}\) See Bush and Scowcroft, \emph{A World Transformed}, 423.
when trying to persuade the public of the case for intervention and war. During the speech, the President first echoed portions of what he had said previously, justifying the deployment as an effort to “stop aggression, help our friends, and protect our own interests and the peace and stability of countries around the globe.” He also assigned political meaning to the deployment by appealing to the veterans in the crowd to “help me convince the Congress… to adequately fund our defense budget.” But the central message of the speech was that defending Saudi Arabia and Kuwait was a moral imperative. Bush stressed abstract principles, saying that the United States had to intervene if it were to be “against aggression, against those who would use force to replace the rule of law,” and called the invasion a “ruthless assault on the very essence of international order and civilized ideals.” He rebuked Iraq for violating social prescriptions: “…you are violating the norms of your own religion. You are going against the age-old Arab tradition of showing kindness and hospitality to visitors…. [You must] Adhere to international law.” He also gave the crisis a cosmic meaning, telling the crowd “[we are] engaged in a cause larger than ourselves,” and insisted that the United States “must stand up to evil.”

This speech and other public statements made a different argument than previous administration statements. At a White House briefing of Congressional leaders on August 28 Bush added to the list of reasons to go to war Saddam’s refusal to allow

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foreign citizens to leave the country.\footnote{George Bush, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters in Kennebunkport, Maine, Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada,” August 27, 1990, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2184&year=1990&month=8, and “Remarks at a White House Briefing for Members of Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” August 28, 1990, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2185&year=1990&month=8, both in Public Papers of the President, GBPL.} Bush created some confusion about his stand on this issue when he subsequently minimized the magnitude of Saddam’s actions by saying “we cannot permit hostage-taking to shape the foreign policy of this country, and I won't permit it to do that,” but hostages featured prominently among the justifications for war in the five months that followed.\footnote{George Bush, “The President's News Conference on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” August 30, 1990, Public Papers of the President, GBPL, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2189&year=1990&month=8.} Bush also began insisting on the restoration of Kuwait’s sovereignty, a goal which many recognized might require a greater commitment than the defensive force en route to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Shield. The President’s arguments in late August did not amount to a full reversal of policy, but they did indicate uncertainty within the administration over what the public argument for war would be and a lengthening list of justifications and objectives. The VFW speech was unlike the President’s remarks weeks earlier. Some justifications for war were added, others emphasized more or less than they had been before. The President’s outrage was applied differently, and in different degrees. This speech was something of an experiment, as were many of the public statements about the Gulf crisis during the first four months after the invasion. In late August the administration had not yet decided how to structures its arguments to the American people; perhaps they had not yet decided why it was important to intervene in the Gulf. Questions of policy and of politics remained.
The president’s various arguments in support of intervention often overlapped, but there was little consistency in which justifications were included and no central theme. Bush’s several public discussions of the Gulf conflict in August defined the purpose of intervention in the Persian Gulf in a number of ways: to restore state sovereignty, to ensure stability in the Gulf region, to protect Americans abroad, to make a principled stand against aggression, to uphold international law, to fight for “what’s right,” to comply with the obligations of the special U.S.-Saudi relationship, to define America’s role in the post-Cold War world, to convince Congress to adequately fund defense, and to secure the supply of oil and indirectly America’s economic prosperity. At times the president appeared to have a clearer concept of the reasons to intervene, as when a portion of his prepared opening remarks during an August 30 press conference quoted directly from a radio address the day before, indicating some continuity of thinking, however brief. But the lists of reasons to intervene changed between public appearances and varied even more when reporters asked questions. None of the public justifications for war took on a central importance at this point, nor did a list of reasons become standard.

After being exposed to the public arguments for intervention for a month Americans disagreed over the reasons they thought the administration’s response to the invasion was justified. This trend continued throughout the buildup to the Gulf War. Market Opinion Reports published a booklet summarizing public attitudes on political issues from August to September which found that 58 percent of Americans thought the

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United States should do whatever was necessary to defend American hostages in Iraq, while 33 percent thought some other reason should determine the country’s actions in the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{215} These findings were echoed by a poll which found that 52 percent of Americans thought freeing hostages was the most important goal of the conflict, while 40 percent chose other reasons.\textsuperscript{216} Other polls came to completely different conclusions. In mid-August, a Gallup poll indicated that 49 percent of Americans thought the United States was responding to the Iraq invasion to “defend oil/interests,” while 17 percent thought “we should…have to defend other countries,” and 28 percent chose different reasons to get involved.\textsuperscript{217} A *Time/CNN* poll asked respondents on August 23 whether five individual reasons to get involved in the Middle East were good or bad reasons to do so: deterring aggression and protecting the oil supply were both 78 percent good, forcing Iraq out of Kuwait was 73 percent good, protecting Saudi Arabia was 67 percent good, and removing Saddam from power was 63 percent good.\textsuperscript{218} In other words, while some reasons were better than others, all were good enough to intervene. A similar poll taken on the following day found between 73 percent and 92 percent of Americans thought five different justifications should be U.S. objectives in the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{219}

Some polls were quite complex and asked participants about multiple potential reasons for war, degrees of support for those justifications, and triggers that would justify war. In one poll eleven different reasons were supported by a majority of Americans as

\textsuperscript{215} Market Opinion Reports, “August/September 1990, page 9, “Crisis in the Gulf,” 98-0004-F [1]. John Sununu Files Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{216} Mueller, *Policy and Opinion*, Black poll, Table 123, page 246.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., Gallup Poll Monthly, December 1990, p. 12, table 114, page 243.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., *Time/CNN* poll, table 121, pages 245-6.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., Gallup Poll, table 122, page 246.
justifiable reasons to go to war, but when asked which among those reasons were the most important, 22 percent selected “producing a lasting peace in the Middle East” and 20 percent chose “removing the President of Iraq.” Depending on the wording of the polling questions, Americans sometimes seemed directly opposed to the views expressed by members of Congress in letters to the President. Asked on August 29 whether the lives of American soldiers should be put at risk to keep gas prices low, 92 percent of Americans said no, while 71 percent on September 4-5 said the United States should not take action if gas prices went over $2.00/gallon (gas prices averaged $1.16 in 1990). The reasons that Americans thought the United States was becoming involved in the Persian Gulf varied, and the reasons they thought were justified also fluctuated. In expressing these diverse and occasionally contradictory opinions, the American public mirrored the nebulous rhetoric of the administration. Still, attitudes towards the administration’s policies were largely positive. Though Bush met with members of Congress to explain his position on the Gulf crisis twenty times, most of these meetings occurred after November and did not at any rate seem to clarify the administration’s position, since many Congressional leaders complained about the administration’s confusing position throughout the buildup to war and many ultimately voted against granting the President authority to use force in January. For the most part the Bush

222 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 357-58.
administration did not seriously attempt to clarify its objectives in the Persian Gulf until November.

From the beginning of September and through the November midterm elections a major budget debate distracted the administration from foreign affairs. During the 1989 presidential campaign, Bush said during his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination “read my lips: no new taxes.” His promise became the most remembered statement of his campaign and likely helped him get elected.\(^{223}\) By the time Bush took office, the American economy had ceased to grow at the rates it had in the 1980’s and was entering a recession. The terms of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget Act mandated that if a deficit continued into the next fiscal year automatic cuts would be made from federal spending of a kind that were politically untenable. Thus, the administration was compelled either to cut spending on its own terms or raise taxes. The President first announced the tax increases – which the administration attempted to disguise by renaming them “revenue enhancements” – on September 26 in a brief press statement which Press Secretary Fitzwater called the “biggest mistake of the administration.”\(^{224}\) From that point through most of October the administration negotiated with an uncooperative Democratic majority in Congress over the terms of the new budget. Bush often described the clash with congressional Democrats as emotionally taxing. He said in early October that the partisan wrangling made the budget debate the most frustrating period of his presidency.\(^{225}\) Ultimately he signed a tax increase into law, thus breaking his promise and contributing to his election loss in 1992.

\(^{223}\) See chapter 1 of this thesis.
\(^{224}\) Fitzwater, Call the Briefing, 214.
\(^{225}\) Bush, All the Best, 480.
In the short term, the administration’s focus on the budget debate distracted it from foreign affairs while the justifications for intervention came increasingly into question. As the administration neglected the argument for war, public support eroded. Bush was troubled over this development but he hoped his actions would speak louder than words. Against a hostile Congress and rising skepticism about the purpose of the American presence in the Gulf, Bush resigned himself, saying, “I would face criticism no matter what I did and I decided to rely on my conviction about what was just and right to guide me.”

His laissez-faire approach did not address the public’s confusion, but Bush recalls “I was convinced that the best way was to shape opinion not by rhetoric but by action.” The president’s tactics did not seem to work well – a confusing case for war grew no clearer while the administration ignored it. The importance of the budget debate forced the administration to focus its energies on domestic affairs. This neglect was one of the major causes of the decline in public approval that ultimately forced the administration to rethink the argument for war in November.

As the debate grew more vigorous, Bush hoped to leverage the goodwill that he enjoyed as a “wartime” president into support of his broader domestic agenda. Bush recalled that “foreign policy and budget politics mingled” in the administration’s political strategy during the fall. In a September 7 diary entry he wrote “I just hope Iraq and the country’s unity can now be parlayed into support for the budget agreement,” hoping that an American public which was inclined to support his wartime foreign policies would at

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226 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 357.
227 Ibid., 358.
228 Ibid., 357.
the same time support his broader domestic agenda.\textsuperscript{229} In a major speech before a joint session of Congress on September 11, he explicitly linked the Gulf Crisis to the budget debate:

   Our ability to function effectively as a great power abroad depends on how we conduct ourselves at home. …For America to lead, America must remain strong and vital. Our world leadership and domestic strength are mutual and reinforcing; a woven piece, strongly bound as Old Glory. To revitalize our leadership, our leadership capacity, we must address our budget deficit -- not after election day, or next year, but now.

   To my friends in Congress, together we must act this very month -- before the next fiscal year begins on October 1st -- to get America's economic house in order. The Gulf situation helps us realize we are more economically vulnerable than we ever should be. Americans must never again enter any crisis, economic or military, with an excessive dependence on foreign oil and an excessive burden of Federal debt.

In the course of the speech Bush said it was time to put “patriotism before party.” He went on to outline a specific four-part budget plan, part of which he had acknowledged in a previous exchange was “carved in stone.”\textsuperscript{230} He concluded that “in the final analysis, our ability to meet our responsibilities abroad depends upon political will and consensus at home,” and for Bush that meant Democrats bowing to his budget demands.\textsuperscript{231}

Democratic strategist Peter Hart described this tactic by saying "Operation Desert Shield will provide air cover for the…budget deficit."\textsuperscript{232} The Gulf crisis factored into the

\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 363.
\textsuperscript{232} Quoted in Dilip Hiro and Craig Tenney, Desert Shield to Desert Storm: The Second Gulf War, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc, 2003), 190.
administration’s political strategy in September and October largely to gain support for
the President’s domestic policies.

In addition to linking the Gulf deployment to the budget debate, Bush reiterated
many of his justifications for intervention during his address to Congress. The
organization of the speech suggested a hierarchy of objectives. Expressing over-arching
cconcerns, Bush told Congress “we must…defend civilized values around the world and
maintain our economic strength at home.” He subsequently listed a number of more
specific objectives: restoring legitimate sovereignty, ensuring stability in the Middle
East, and protecting American citizens were all described as “concerns of principle”
shared by much of the world. In a separate list of “common vital interests” and
principles, Bush insisted that the United States had to uphold international law, challenge
aggression, and disregard intimidation. More pragmatically, he explained how Saddam
Hussein would profit if allowed to absorb Kuwait. In a final reference to the incivility of
the crisis, Bush described Saddam’s behavior as a “mockery of human decency.”

This was also the speech which first included the phrase “new world order,”
which for a time became the central justification for war in the Gulf but was
dee emphasized once the administration realized that it was unpopular among most
Americans. Brent Scowcroft describes the conceptualization of the administration’s
vision: “The phrase, as we thought of it, applied only to a narrow aspect of conflict –
aggression between states. A limited aspect of conflict, yes, but one which had been a
chief ill of civilization since the beginning of recorded history. The term has
subsequently been broadened beyond recognition."  

Bush characterized the Gulf crisis as an opportunity to define the international order in the post-Cold War world, an order that would prominently feature the United Nations. “Clearly, no longer can a dictator count on East-West confrontation to stymie concerted United Nations action against aggression. A new partnership of nations has begun.” Replacing the old order would be “an historic period of cooperation… a new era -- freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony.”  

The new world order was the latest in the growing list of reasons to get involved in the Persian Gulf, but it was poorly received. Opponents on the left were skeptical about the motives of the government and called Bush’s plan a “rationalization of imperial ambitions.” Opponents on the right wanted to preserve American strength and the prerogative to act unilaterally and rejected any diminution of national sovereignty for dubious collective security arrangements.  

While the President expanded the list of reasons to go to war, the Secretary of State boiled everything down to a single explanation. Beginning in the late 1980’s, the United States economy experienced a series of setbacks. Under terms of the 1980 Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act (DIMCA), Savings and Loan institutions were allowed to make loans like other banks but were not bound by the same regulations as banks. Many S&L institutions engaged in high-risk loans which

subsequently defaulted, and many of these institutions failed as a result. The federal government bailed out the failed banks at great cost to American taxpayers. The S&L crisis, as it came to be called, exacerbated budget deficits and contributed to the need for tax increases. In addition, the delayed effects of a major stock market crash in 1987 began impacting the American economy in 1990, as did the Federal Reserve’s efforts to combat rising inflation. All of these factors contributed to rising unemployment and ultimately the recession of 1990-91.236

In this context Secretary Baker thought he would have a sympathetic audience when he preempted a November 13 exchange with reporters by saying in passing that the Gulf crisis was important because it would affect the “pocketbook” and “standard of living” of every American. Three days later he clarified his statement and told reporters why the United States had to intervene in the Gulf. “To bring it down to the level of the average American citizen, let me say that means jobs. If you want to sum it up in one word, its jobs. Because an economic recession worldwide…will result in the loss of jobs on the part of American citizens.”237 Reflecting on this moment, Baker recalled that he had “been frustrated by the administration’s collective inability to articulate a single coherent, consistent rationale for the President’s policy. Our public pronouncements had ranged from the principled to the esoteric. At times we talked of standing up to aggression and creating a new world order. At others we called Saddam the new Hitler and cited the threat to global stability from rising oil prices….We were beginning to pay a

political price at home as a result of our rhetorical confusion." Baker thought that the administration had done a poor job of explaining the potential economic consequences of Saddam’s actions, which were in Baker’s opinion the most important reasons to intervene. Though he admitted he “overreacted” to growing dissent and may have oversimplified a complex argument, ultimately he concluded “I still believe I was right.”

The collective rhetoric of the administration was not totally confused. Secretary Cheney stayed more-or-less on message when responding to similar inquiries at a press conference on September 17. He said that the United States was in the Gulf to enforce UN resolutions, restore sovereignty to Kuwait, secure stability in the region, and to protect American citizens abroad. These individual points were all taken from previous administration statements, though Cheney’s points did not constitute an exhaustive list nor contain anything like a central theme. Cheney for his part added that the Gulf War would be useful as a laboratory to test what kind of force structure would be necessary to respond to post-Cold War conflicts.

By November, deflated by reactions to Baker’s “jobs” comment, public approval of the administration’s Gulf policy had reached a nadir and opponents were growing more vocal. New York Times columnist William Safire argued that Baker was disingenuous in claiming that jobs were at risk as a consequence of Iraq’s invasion and

\[238\] Baker, Politics of Diplomacy, 336.
\[239\] Ibid., 337.
\[241\] Ibid.
that Baker was acting like a crass political campaigner by appealing to voters’
pocketbooks, which was in any case a poor reason to go to war. Safire further argued
that Americans were being “denied the articulation of a purpose worth fighting for.”
Baker’s statement prompted the *Los Angeles Times* to look back on the justifications for
war and argue “inept is not an unfair characterization of the Administration’s efforts to
date to explain and justify its military response to Iraq’s aggression.”

The White House took special note of the *Washington Post*’s analysis of public opinion in an article
entitled “Voters Confused about Policy Towards Iraq, Want Bush to Spell Out,” which
was among several major polls compiled by White House staffers.

Beginning in

November, 1990, public opinion polls appear more frequently in White House files.
Bush’s overall approval ratings fell from 76 percent in the aftermath of his August 8
announcement deploying troops to the Gulf to 54 percent at the end of October; approval
of his handling of the Gulf Crisis specifically fell from 80 percent to 61 percent during
the same period.

In mid-August, 34 percent of Americans thought Bush had not
sufficiently explained the reason for deployment, but by mid-November this number had
risen to 51 percent.

The President was typically dismissive of polls but he took note when he thought
they mattered. As public support for his foreign policy declined, he expressed concern in
a diary entry. “New polls are out: 57% support and 23% against—something like this.

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    17, 1990.
244 “Voters confused about policy towards Iraq, want Bush to spell out,” *Washington Post*, November 21,
    1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
245 Mueller, *Policy and Opinion*, Table 1, page, 180, and Table 8, page 193.
It used to be 7% opposed, and I worry, worry, worry about eroded support.”  

Bush’s general views on the administration’s ability to implement policy in the Gulf changed during this period. In a diary entry on September 7, Bush describes a “confident feeling” he had towards the Gulf crisis, and thinks “maybe it’s [because of] the support from the American people.” By October, he was experiencing the “most unpleasant, or tension filled [period] of the Presidency.” Perhaps his negative feelings were an immediate reaction to the budget dispute, but he hoped to overcome that obstacle so he could refocus on his more natural interest in foreign affairs. Increasing skepticism towards a foreign policy about which he felt strongly would hardly have improved his state of mind.

Bush grew increasingly sensitive to attacks on his personal leadership during the buildup to the war. Through much of August he had taken vacations so that he did not appear to be held hostage in Washington by events in the Middle East, but some observers criticized him for appearing insensitive. In one instance the president answered reporters’ questions casually from his golf cart. When this incident was reported on television news, Bush’s golf-cart press conference was followed by images of American soldiers in the desert. One man wrote to the president and advised him to “try to avoid being interviewed about [the] war on the golf course [because] it creates a negative impression of you.” Anti-war groups capitalized on this idea and began using pictures of Bush on a golf cart to suggest that he was unmoved by the suffering of deployed

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248 Bush, All the Best, 478, 480.  
250 Letter, Hall Wallis to George Bush, August 24, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
Americans and their families. Apparentl in response to these criticisms, Bush wrote a
friend to tell him “I’ve all but given up Golf….I just don’t want to risk sending the wrong
signal right now to the troops.”

Previously more concerned with substantive issues of policy like troop levels and
budget deficits, Bush became preoccupied with public perception. At one point Bush
asked Marlin Fitzwater to fix a picture of him that was used by CNN because the picture
made his hair look “weird.” On November 22 he wrote in his diary, “I’m worried that
the American people might think this will be another Vietnam and it isn’t and it won’t
be.” In a memo to Brent Scowcroft listing some questions about foreign policy, he
asked “when and how to assure people This Is No Viet Nam very important [sic],” and
also wondered how to develop “a better ‘public diplomacy’ program.”

International threats undermining the coalition also created a special urgency to
articulate a clear purpose for the war. As the politburo was in its last throes, conservative
Soviet reactionaries called for a return to traditional interests abroad. Among them
were Arabists who pressured President Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze
into floating separate peace initiatives in the fall which threatened to hand Saddam
victory of a kind and defy American policy. In November, Israel shot and killed twenty
one Palestinian protesters, prompting an outcry in the United Nations. Many called for a
comprehensive Middle East peace conference that would at once solve the crisis in

252 Bush, All the Best, 492.
253 Ibid., 477.
254 Ibid., 489.
255 Ibid., 490-91.
256 See Graham E. Fuller, “Moscow and the Gulf War,” Foreign Affairs 70, 3 (Summer 1991).
Kuwait and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With international actors threatening American policy in the Gulf and domestic political support eroding (and the President increasingly worried about his public image) the administration was approaching something of a crisis point in November.

In the context of declining support, many Americans remained unsure why the United States was involved in the Persian Gulf. In part because of the changing forms of questions and in part because of apparent uncertainty among the American public, it is difficult to determine consistent trends in why Americans thought the country should intervene in the Gulf at the end of 1990. One wide-ranging poll conducted from December 8-11 asked responders to pick which among six reasons was the most important reason why U.S. troops were in Saudi Arabia. Thirty three percent chose “to protect the world’s oil supply” and 18 percent chose “to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait,” while four other reasons were chosen by 9 percent or 10 percent of those polled. A detailed Los Angeles Times poll conducted on November 14 provided examples of nine different justifications for going to war in the Persian Gulf and asked responders to choose whether each reason justified a major war, limited war, or did not justify war at all. All reasons won the support of a minimum of 59 percent of Americans who found that at least a limited military involvement was justified. While only 59 percent of Americans approved of fighting some sort of war to restore Kuwait’s sovereignty, 90 percent approved of fighting a war to get Iraq out of Kuwait, and 90 percent approved of fighting a war to destroy Iraq’s chemical and nuclear weapons.

257 Mueller, Policy and Opinion, NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll, Table 118, page 244.
258 Ibid., Los Angeles Times poll, Tables 131-132, pages 251-53.
Taken together, public opinion polls indicated a general recognition that Saddam’s potential control of a greater proportion of Middle East oil reserves was a strategic threat, but opinions on how the country should react varied. Some saw the threat to oil reserves as the most justifiable reason to go to war, but an overwhelming majority thought that American lives should not be traded for oil (the fledgling anti-war movement’s slogan was “no blood for oil”\textsuperscript{259}). Americans tended to be offended by Saddam’s hostage-taking, but this was an acceptable justification for war only temporarily – asked if U.S. military forces should take action if hostages were harmed, 72 percent said yes on September 4-5, but only 49 percent said yes on December 8-11.\textsuperscript{260} John Mueller compiled a large amount of the public source opinion polls in the appendices of his book \textit{Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War}. He offers some cautious conclusions, arguing that “comparatively few people were moved by arguments concerning the protection of oil supplies or by the idea of restoring the Kuwait government,” though many who were unconvinced by these arguments supported the war anyway. More convincing motives to many Americans were the rescue of American hostages and the elimination of Saddam’s nuclear and chemical weapons capabilities. Even so, the public tended to differentiate between the reasons they thought the involvement was justified and the reasons they thought the United States actually got involved, thus complicating any analysis.\textsuperscript{261} By late November and early December, the reasons that people thought the intervention in the Gulf was justified were at least as varied as they had been in August; if anything, Bush’s new world order and Baker’s

\textsuperscript{259} See discussion in chapter three of this thesis.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., Table 136 section G, page 259.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., see brief conclusions on 37-48 and especially the brief conclusions on 42.
“jobs” explanation had confused matters more. At any rate, the public was both confused and increasingly disapproving. In this context, the Bush administration began a public relations offensive in late November in which it tried to refine the argument for war by measuring what the public would accept as a justification.
CHAPTER 3: WHY WE FIGHT: COMMUNICATING THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THE GULF WAR

“I am determined to expand the national consensus that is necessary for proper support for our nation's defense. I'll do this because the first bulwark of our national defense is our national will. And if our will is ruptured, our ship of state cannot sail…”


Bush administration officials showed little concern before November 1990 with persuading the American people of the wisdom of their response to the Persian Gulf crisis, though the President and other officials did make some important public statements through the late summer and fall. This rhetorical neglect was consistent with the President’s approach to public communication during the first eighteen months of his presidency, an approach that caused Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater to urge Bush in August to come up with some sort of consistent slogan to package his domestic policies. This problem was a sign of endemic deficiencies in the President’s public communication strategy as a whole. Occasionally, administration officials considered the political benefits of spectacle during the Gulf crisis, as they did when President Bush suggested to his national security team on August 10 that he visit American troops in Saudi Arabia as a way to rally public support. The President’s proposal sparked a debate among his advisors, and Secretary Baker, Chief of Staff Sununu, and National Security Advisor Scowcroft all argued that the trip was poorly conceived because it would have attracted the focus of Iraqi propaganda. Bush heeded their advice.

262 Quoted in Barilleaux and Rozell, Power and Prudence, 48.
263 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 361.
Though the President made an evolving argument for war from August to November, he rarely sought out opportunities to discuss the Gulf conflict and used few public relations tactics to sell his policy. In part this was a strategic maneuver to avoid a damaging discussion about war in an election year. But the administration was especially motivated to avoid the issue since its arguments for intervention were poorly defined, and in any case officials were inclined to let the issue rest on what had been high approval ratings of their policies. The administration tended to delay action and avoid drawing the public’s attention to the Middle East, as was the case when the President waited until after the November 2 midterm elections to announce that the United States would deploy more troops to the Gulf and create an offensive military option.\footnote{Ibid., 395-96.} As I argue in the previous chapter, domestic opinion towards Bush’s foreign policy in the Persian Gulf was largely supportive during the first three months after Iraq’s invasion, though many disagreed over why the country needed to be involved in the Gulf crisis.

By November increasing numbers of Americans wondered if the administration’s response to the Gulf crisis was prudent. The White House had little motivation to sell its policies domestically until public approval began declining. Though the administration also had to convince an international audience to support UN resolutions giving Saddam a deadline to leave Kuwait – effectively, a date that would commit the United States to war if Saddam refused – the UN had already passed several resolutions against Iraq and had generally been supportive from the beginning. Occasionally various states challenged aspects of U.S. policy, but most seemed to agree that Saddam had to be
challenged. Diplomacy was Bush’s strength, and international support in general seemed reliable.

The prospect of losing domestic support alarmed the administration, especially the risk that as approval declined Americans might perceive the deployment to the Gulf as similar to the Vietnam War in some ominous way. President Bush was personally convinced that armed conflict was inevitable, and he was hostile to the idea of asking Congress for permission to use force. In any case the United States was committed to act by the terms of UNSC resolution 678 if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait by January 15. It seemed war would come with or without the public’s approval, but the administration greatly desired to enter into the conflict with their support. The administration responded to the erosion of domestic support by researching public opinion, constructing an argument for war that reflected what they found, and engaging in a public relations offensive to win back public support before the invasion. Rather than the multi-faceted and inconsistent argument for intervention employed in August, the official motivation for war became a simplified moral argument that was linked to historical memories of previous wars. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the administration’s communications strategy as it evolved in late November helps explain the recovery of public support for the Gulf War.

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The public relations initiatives undertaken by the administration constituted a break from Bush’s established approach to public communication as manifested through the White House Office of Communication and the Office of Public Liaison. The
WHOC was created by President Nixon to help control the flow of information and put an official spin on events. The Reagan administration embraced the original purpose of the WHOC. It used the office “primarily to promote the White House spin on events;” and devoted a great deal of effort to coordinating a “line of the day,” according to one study.265 During the Bush administration, the President and White House Communications Director David Demarest rejected the Reagan administration’s approach, which they thought was too calculating. Beginning in 1989 the WHOC took on many more responsibilities. Unlike its role in previous administrations, the Bush WHOC provided more raw information to the public that was not manipulated to support the administration’s political agenda. For example, Demarest thought it was presumptuous to pick which single issue was the most important of any given day, so he provided four to six and let the media choose what to report. Though intended to be more transparent and less calculating, this strategy was criticized by many media figures for creating confusion. The administration’s strategy made it appear incompetent. In response to the White House’s approach to communication, David Ignatius opined in the Washington Post “Press Corps to Bush: Manipulate Us.”266

Bush also altered the way that his White House interacted with the public through the Office of Public Liaison. Traditionally the OPL was used by presidential administrations to link citizens or interest groups to the executive office, though the nature of their relations changed over time. The Reagan administration gave the OPL an overtly political character by using the office to create grassroots support and

265 Barilleaux and Rozell, Power and Prudence, 54.
communicate directly with loyal constituencies to pressure them to lobby for administration policy. Bush disagreed with his predecessor’s approach and placed the OPL underneath the WHOC administratively, a move that effectively meant the function of the OPL was to contribute to the articulation of the administration’s message. Private citizens who expressed their concerns with the OPL indirectly helped define the content of the White House’s communications. In other words, the flow of influence was reversed. During the Bush administration, OPL officials invited representatives from a wide variety of constituencies to Washington to voice their opinions, including those who opposed Bush’s policies. These meetings served dual functions: after hearing multiple viewpoints, compromises might be reached that would be more widely embraced than they might have been otherwise; at least, Bush thought, those groups who were given a platform to state their views would be less publically hostile. On the latter goal in particular Bush’s strategy was a failure, in part because of his naïve faith in a friendly code of conduct in Washington political circles.267 Changing the institutional function of the OPL and the WHOC in order to design what he thought would be a less crassly political public communications function in the White House hampered his ability to communicate throughout his presidency. When public approval of his response to the Gulf crisis began to fall, the communications infrastructure in the White House was incapable of selling the President’s message. The sense of urgency in the administration

267 See Marlin Fitzwater, Call the Briefing, 25.
led it to pursue a more effective communications strategy which resembled the approach of the previous administration.\textsuperscript{268}

As public approval declined in November, many administration officials began thinking about the reasons behind U.S. policy in the Gulf and how to more effectively articulate the underlying justifications for intervention. Undersecretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs Robert Zoellick and Director of Policy Planning Dennis Ross were among them. “One key problem we’ve had in communicating why we’re in the Gulf is that no one reason suffices,” they wrote on November 23. “It’s the combination that adds up to more than the sum of the parts.” Zoellick and Ross listed nine individual reasons justifying an American war. The reasons Zoellick and Ross listed mostly concerned Saddam’s individual capacity for menace and to a lesser degree the threat to the world economy by an interruption in oil trade and the threat of instability in the Middle East. Zoellick and Ross condensed some of these reasons into a single sentence which they hoped could be worked into some future statement by the President: “This crisis requires that we stop a dangerous dictator who has used chemical weapons, seeks nuclear weapons, and knows no limits; he’s seeking to dominate a vital area and is threatening peace at a defining moment in history.”\textsuperscript{269} The Office of the Chief of Staff offered less specific solutions but also worried about the perception that the justifications for war were insufficient. One document summarized the office’s conclusions: “Qualified endorsement may be the only support that Americans can muster given the

\textsuperscript{268} For the institutional differences in the Office of Communications and Office of Public Liaison during presidential administrations, see Barilleaux and Rozell, \textit{Power and Prudence}, 53-66.

\textsuperscript{269} Memo, James Cicconi to David Demarest, attached: note from Robert Zoellick to James Cicconi, re: “Remarks on Why We Need to Confront Iraq,” November 23, 1990, CO072: Iraq, 208915, BPR, GBPL.
fundamental skepticism that has become endemic in America. Without having an overriding sense of purpose, the ever-changing, conflicting, and often contradictory information, expert opinions, and pronouncements seriously undermine sustained conviction. People need a ‘beacon’ to clear the way.”270 The administration admitted serious reservations about the articulation of the argument for war to that point, at least in how the domestic audience digested that argument. While Zoelick and Ross summarized their justifications in a sentence, the Office of the Chief of Staff called vaguely for an abstract “beacon.” Officials were worried about the criticism that they had not provided an adequate justification to go to war.

On November 14, Demarest explained how the administration would make a coherent argument for war. To coincide with a trip by President Bush to Saudi Arabia, high-profile government figures and other respected foreign policy experts, he explained, would write opinion articles explaining why the United States was intervening in the Gulf crisis. Demarest mentioned several opportunities to keep the administration’s visibility at a maximum in the immediate future. The President’s cabinet could go on a “satellite media tour” to spread their message on television. Demarest also proposed a “White House on the road” campaign-style tour, during which senior officials could appear at American Legion and VFW halls, civic and business organizations, and conference and convention centers to explain administration policy in the Gulf. If confined to Washington, senior officials could give private briefings to regional reporters and separate briefings for “key constituent leaders.” Demarest assured the President that in

270 Communications Planning Document, “Fundamental Themes,” page 4, 98-0004-F [1]. John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
the near future “all speeches…are clearly cross-linked with the theme of the new world order.”

Demarest’s plan amounted to the first time that the Bush administration prepared a clear articulation of a central theme in the argument for war. In this case all officials were supposed to repeat that the United States was involved in the Gulf to help establish a new world order. Although the new world order did not remain the predominant justification for war, the expression of a central idea meant in principle that the President should in the future provide such a rationalization. Demarest’s plan also represented an effort to establish support for administration policy amongst broad segments of the population. Commissioning opinion columns in traditional print media was a way to influence elite opinion, but it also spread the administration’s message to a large audience. Appearances in local American Legion chapters were part of a grass roots effort to drum up support. The White House Office of Communications established a pattern for the remaining two months before the war. Later communication documents referred to the “original Demarest plan” as a kind of model.

The White House codified its new approach to selling foreign policy on November 29 in the Gulf Policy Communications Plan. The purpose of the plan was to “reassure the American people as to the objectives and purpose of our deployment and strengthen public support for Operation Desert Shield. Ultimately, our goal is broad, grass-roots support for the President’s initiatives.” In response to the criticism that the


administration’s arguments for war were unclear, the authors of this document explained the communications strategy was to “coordinate and focus” the administration’s message. The White House created a working group modeled on similar groups in corporate public relations firms. According to Representative James Hayes (D-LA) the Kuwaiti government hired an estimated twenty public relations, law, and lobby firms to persuade the American public to defend Kuwait.273 Together the Kuwaiti and American employment of public relations firms and use of their strategies made selling the Gulf War a notably professional endeavor. The purpose of the Bush administration’s Gulf working group was straightforward: to “tell people why we are there [in the Persian Gulf].” Their strategy was to “manage a sustained effort, aimed at delivering a consistent message and developing appropriate events.” Anticipating some popular dissent, the communications plan encouraged officials to stress the “historic lengths” the President had undertaken to avoid war. The strategy also sought “surrogates” to spread the administration’s message. Among them were Congressional leaders, policy intellectuals, media figures, business leaders, and veterans. The Gulf working group paid “special and appropriate attention” to opinion-makers, who were given “briefing materials and talking points” to convince them of the logic of the administration’s policy.274

The communications plan for Operation Desert Shield repeated verbatim what was written in the Gulf Policy communications strategy but also elaborated on specific tactics for refining and disseminating the administration’s message. Some activities

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coincided with the debate in the United Nations over Security Council Resolution 678, which provided Saddam Hussein a final opportunity to withdraw from Kuwait peacefully and authorized member states to use “all necessary means” to enforce the various UN resolutions if Iraq did not leave Kuwait by January 15, 1991. The administration’s communications strategy during the UN vote mostly entailed making important cabinet members and “big gun foreign policy experts” – in this context, former Presidents and their cabinets – available for interviews. The White House targeted *U.S. News & World Report*, *Time*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* to use as platforms to spread the administration’s message.

Communications activities during December were more elaborate. The December plan featured the ongoing search for surrogates to write opinion columns in support of administration policy, and the White House pledged to send out “favorable material and clippings” at least once a week for the following eight weeks to opinion leaders. The strategy stipulated that Gulf policy should be tied to existing public anniversaries. On Pearl Harbor Day (December 7), administration officials planned to appear on an ABC *Nightline* special to discuss the relevance of the Gulf crisis to the subject of the program. On Human Rights Day (December 10), the administration intended to release a statement condemning Iraqi human rights violations. The authors of the document suggested that the President spend Christmas Eve with deployed troops in Saudi Arabia. The plan recommended a number of publicized luncheons and official meetings that were to be held with media figures, foreign leaders, CEO’s, oil executives, and groups representing
the interests of minorities, veterans, labor, religion, educators, and “ethnic groups.” The plan made clear that White House officials were to “seek out opportunities to get the President’s message across.” The administration was attempting to offer a more consistent justification for war, but officials needed to actively spread the message to persuade the public. With this document the administration officially embraced the use of public relations tactics to sell the President’s response to the Gulf conflict.\(^{275}\) A final meeting of the Gulf working group in December revealed a well of creative ideas. Despite ongoing adjustments in the public argument for war, the communications strategy for the remainder of the buildup to the American invasion was effectively in place.\(^{276}\)

The search for surrogates to spread the administration’s message was the most common tactic in the White House’s communications strategy. A WHOC initiative chose columnists and media figures who could lend their rhetorical support to administration policy. With the exception of *Washington Post* contributor William Raspberry, all journalists on the administration’s list were conservatives. In an earlier draft of the WHOC list, several names were crossed out. They included Cal Thomas and Mona Charen, both of whom were particularly vocal supporters of Israel, and neoconservatives Irving Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and Jeane Kirkpatrick, all inclined ideologically to be sympathetic towards Israel.\(^{277}\) These exclusions may have

\(^{275}\) “Communications Plan – Operation Desert Shield,” November 28, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, GBPL.

\(^{276}\) Memo, David Demarest to Gulf Working Group, December 30, 1990, Office of Media Affairs-Paul McNeil Files, OA/ID 08055, Records on the Persian Gulf Conflict, BPR, GBPL.

\(^{277}\) Memo, Deb Amend to David Demarest, December 22, 1990, previous memo attached, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
had something to do with Bush’s personal aversion to neoconservative ideology, but were likely rooted in the concern that some conservative columnists would argue for a closer American-Israeli partnership during the Gulf conflict. Maintaining Arab support was a major concern of the administration. As late as December 20, participants at a meeting with the President and Congressional leaders worried that “military action [against Iraq] should be expected to [include] totally U.S., alone.” The Arab states had originally insisted that the Gulf conflict be handled exclusively within the region, and the administration continued to doubt that the armies of the Arab states would fight against Iraqi soldiers. Middle Eastern coalition-partners could not be counted upon to join the fight. Given their tenuous friendship, the administration understood that if Israel confronted Iraq, Arab states would abandon the coalition. Saddam knew this too, and he frequently threatened to attack Israel and sought to link the resolution of the Iraq-Kuwait conflict to a larger Middle East peace conference that would solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both actions were attempts to win wider Arab support. To avoid enflaming these sentiments, the White House chose not to include the most vocally pro-Israel pundits among their preferred surrogates. Though the administration was especially focused on persuading the American people by November, it continued to consider the reception of its actions among diverse international audiences.

In addition to spreading its message to the American public generally, the Bush administration targeted key groups that it thought was important to achieve its communication objectives. One of the most important of these groups was veterans.

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278 Handwritten Meeting Notes, Mitchell Delegation and President Bush, December 20, 1990, page 1, Office of Media Affairs-John Undeland Files, OA/ID 08890, Records of the Persian Gulf Conflict, BPR, GBPL.
Perhaps the White House was genuinely interested in ensuring the well-being of the troops and addressing problems caused by separating soldiers from their families, but the administration was also concerned with the political impact of their actions on veterans as a constituency. In a revealing letter, Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Public Affairs at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Edward Timperlake, wrote Demarest to summarize the general attitudes of veterans towards American policy in the Persian Gulf and how veterans might react to a war with Iraq depending on the war in which they had fought.

Timperlake differentiated between veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, but cautioned against the easy categorization of veterans groups by saying “27 million veterans will have 27 million opinions.” He called World War II veterans the “backbone of most veteran’s service organization[s].” Timperlake predicted that “these individuals will be very supportive of the President. They understand clearly his role as Commander-in-Chief and they see in the President and Mrs. Bush the personification of the best of their generation.” Though veterans of this war were aging (average age 68 in 1990) and concerned about the adequacy of VA health care, Timperlake thought they could be counted on to support American policy in the Gulf. He argued that Korean War veterans “tend to identify with World War II veterans.” He implied that fighting under a UN flag and responding to North Korean aggression were recalled as worthy causes by Korean War veterans and that they would likely support the
President’s policy if he framed the Gulf conflict in a way they recognized from their own experiences.\footnote{279 Letter, Edward Timperlake to David Demarest, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, GBPL.}

Timperlake thought gaining the support of Vietnam War veterans would be more complex. The administration needed to articulate two ideas if it wanted Vietnam veterans to accept the wisdom of American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf. The administration had to convince Vietnam veterans to take the administration at its word when it said “that once engaged, we will fight with the full force necessary to win.” Timperlake was confident that this first point was clear to most, but the second idea needed clarification. Vietnam veterans would not accept “committing fellow warriors to battle without the full on-record political support of the American people….they remember very painfully the abandonment by their fellow countrymen and politicians. The challenge is how to convey to the Vietnam veteran that the American people support the President’s actions. Until this is clarified, they will, with tremendous credibility and heartfelt emotion, stress the need for on-the-record national unity prior to combat.”

Although by Timperlake’s calculations there were almost twice as many WWII/Korean War veterans as Vietnam veterans, he suggested that the public at large gave Vietnam veterans special credibility.\footnote{280 Ibid.} Presumably Timperlake thought Vietnam veterans offered an important perspective for many Americans who worried that a major troop deployment would lead to another foreign policy failure like Vietnam, whatever that meant to them. The administration worried that Vietnam veterans might see themselves as voices of experience and warn against another poorly conceived foreign
war; alternatively, they might be persuaded that the situation in the Gulf was something different. Whatever the case, the administration thought that Americans valued the insight of veterans on how the looming conflict in the Gulf was or was not like the war in Vietnam. At least one Vietnam veterans group wrote the President to support his policies in the Gulf, but also made clear that they “do not [want to] have another Vietnam.” In exchange for backing the President’s policies, this group insisted “we want full support for our military units in the Middle East,” and if necessary, they said, “we would support the reinstatement of the Draft.”

For the administration to accomplish its communication objectives, “all veterans, but none more so than Vietnam veterans,” Timperlake argued, “will need to be positively influenced by a clear, concise and powerful statement of the nation’s goal [in the Persian Gulf].” If this could be accomplished, Timperlake predicted that “excluding a very small but vocal group of anti-establishment critics who can never be satisfied but nevertheless command media attention disproportionate to their numbers, the Vietnam veterans will in general see the wisdom of the President’s actions.”

Timperlake also mentioned that “senior members of the administration with Vietnam service can effectively speak out with conviction and credibility” to veterans as a whole. The only cabinet-level official in the Bush administration who had served in the Vietnam War was Colin Powell. Powell occasionally claimed the authority to speak

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282 Letter, Edward Timperlake to David Demarest, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
283 Ibid.
for all veterans of that war. His part in planning the Gulf War empowered him to affect policy in such a way that the military could avoid the pitfalls that might lead to a Vietnam-style debacle as he saw it. Reflecting on his function in the administration, Powell referred to himself as the “ghost of Vietnam” when he acted as a proxy for the views of Vietnam veterans. To be sure, veterans’ opinions of the Vietnam War were diverse. Some may have agreed with Ronald Reagan, who called the war a “noble cause” during his 1980 Presidential campaign. Others may have cheered along with movie-going audiences during Rambo: First Blood Part II when John Rambo, after being offered a chance to go back to fight in Vietnam, asked “do we get to win this time?” Whatever their views, Powell tended to act as their de facto representative in the Bush administration and his voice served as a constant reminder that veterans cared deeply for how the administration conducted the Gulf War.

Many veterans agreed that the country had failed its fighting men in Vietnam, and they looked for culprits. George Herring, one of the most prominent historians of the Vietnam War, argues that many veterans “felt betrayed by a civilian leadership that, they alleged, had forced them to fight with one hand tied behind their back. Some complained that the hostility of the media, the antiwar movement, and Congress had snatched defeat

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284 See Powell’s introduction of President Bill Clinton at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1993, discussed in Powell, My American Journey, 581-83.
286 For veterans’ memories of the war, see Schulzinger, A Time for Peace, especially 73-110; A detailed and sympathetic account of the military’s response to the legacy of the Vietnam War is in Frederick Kagan, Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy (New York: Encounter Books, 2006); a critical view of the military’s institutional response after the war is in John Nagl, Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).
from the jaws of victory.”

Though years after the war Powell said the military “failed to talk straight to its political superiors or to itself,” thus adding the military to the list of those blamed for mishandling the war, in general his opinions resembled the attitudes of many Vietnam veterans as summarized by Herring. Given Timperlake’s views on the role of veterans in selling the argument for war, Powell’s support was a crucial part of the administration’s case. In the context of developing a sound communications plan, in which Vietnam veterans were a crucial constituency and their sanction of the President’s policies would hinge on the degree of official support of their fellow warriors in the field, Timperlake proposed a single question to guide future communications tactics: “Will this action help or hurt the troops in the field?”

Veterans groups watched closely to see how this question was answered.

The tactics that the administration employed to court Vietnam veterans dovetailed with the broader effort to create grassroots support for the President’s policies, and the administration began highlighting the actions of private citizens who supported the armed forces. In addition to persuading veterans that their fellow warriors had the support of the public, the administration hoped to associate supporting the President’s Gulf policy with supporting American troops. To the extent that they were successful in linking these types of support, dissent from the President’s policies constituted a *de facto* abandonment of the troops. On December 11 one WHOC official proposed that government agencies

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288 For his criticism of the military’s role in the Vietnam War, see Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 149. For other criticisms see 102-03, 132-33, 144-49.

289 Letter, Edward Timperlake to David Demarest, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
“submit names of individuals or groups doing charity deeds for the soldiers to the Office of National Service for Presidential thank-yous.” By February, 1991, this short suggestion spawned several recognition programs. The Department of Defense set up a donations hotline through the Defense Logistics Agency and published the names of major contributors in February, mentioning recognizable benefactors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, who donated exercise equipment valued at $150,000. The White House proposed an event in mid-February to be held in the East Room in mid-March which planned to “showcase the ways Americans can do their part for the troops…without going through Washington or the White House.” Officials hoped the event would “include a few celebs.” One administration official thought the East Room gathering should be preempted by television public service announcements led by Barbara Bush, who would draw attention to families of deployed soldiers. Many of these plans featured the participation of celebrities or some other pop-culture display intended to draw in a popular audience, who the administration hoped would indirectly support its policy while actively supporting American soldiers.

The WHOC issued its own list of recommendations for how Americans might express their support during the Gulf War and suggested dozens of ways to assist troops and help their families, including information about aid agencies, memorial funds, and family liaison services. Some ideas were practical, such as donating blood to the Red Cross. Most were purely symbolic, such as flying the American flag or tying yellow

290 Memo, Deb Amend to David Demarest, December 11, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
292 Memo, Sara M. to Deb Amend, February 13, 1991, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
ribbons around trees.\textsuperscript{293} In other words these recommendations were not a purely utilitarian initiative by the White House, but a way of creating grass roots support for the President’s policies by associating the administration with the idea of supporting the troops. In some ways this goal was accomplished indirectly – flying a flag during war to support the troops constituted a tacit support of what soldiers were being ordered to do. The administration tried to create an environment in which those who opposed the Gulf War appeared unappreciative of the sacrifices made by soldiers.

The impact of the “support the troops” movement took on significantly more meaning in the context of the legacy of Vietnam. There was never a uniform collective memory of Vietnam, but certain narratives have gained or lost strength over time.\textsuperscript{294} Many remembered the war as a betrayal of troops in the field and blamed America’s defeat on domestic failures. During the 1980’s, the “stab in the back” theory for why the United States lost the Vietnam War became more popular. As the theory went, the United States was winning the war when civilian leaders cut the military off from the resources it needed. Other theories traced the U.S. defeat to the deterioration of public will and the resulting corrosion of military morale. Alleged incidents of protesters spitting on troops upon their return to the country were remembered with indignation by many, including by President Bush.\textsuperscript{295} New York University Sociologist Jerry Lembcke debunks the myth that anti-war protesters spit on returning veterans in \textit{The Spitting}.

\textsuperscript{293} Pamphlet, “What can I do to help U.S. military men and women and their families who are affected by the gulf war,” February 20, 1991, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.

\textsuperscript{294} The literature on this subject is vast, but see for example Patrick Hagopian, \textit{The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing} (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{295} See Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 486.
*Image*, in which he argues that protesters and some veterans were closely allied and finds that there are no documented cases of a protester spitting on veterans. Although he cannot ultimately prove a negative, Lembcke makes a compelling case for the spurious roots of the spitting narrative.296

Nevertheless, many Americans looking back at the Vietnam War in 1990-91 perceived protesters as chaotic forces who disgraced a proud military tradition and contributed to failure in Vietnam. One scholar notes that “over half of coverage involving protesters and troops between 1990 and 1991 made reference to protesters’ supposed antitroop behavior during Vietnam,” which suggests dissent during the Gulf crisis was understood in relation to protests a generation earlier.297 The fear of recreating an adversarial relationship between civilians and the military, and the opportunity that fears of such a scenario presented, encouraged the administration to advocate supporting the troops. Officials in the Office of the Chief of Staff argued that “perceptions of troop morale, conditions, and competence have a profound and disproportionate influence on attitudes and beliefs concerning advisable activities in the Gulf.”298 The administration’s tactics were a way of creating confidence – the Gulf War would not be like Vietnam, at least in the sense that there would not be a domestic abandonment of the American armed forces. In a questionnaire that asked respondents to write short messages to the President about the Gulf conflict, one such message, similar to many others, said “we may not

298 “Fundamental Themes,” page 7, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
support the policy, but we won’t abandon our boys this time.”

Because of the administration’s approach to wartime dissent and support of American troops, distinguishing between the two different kinds of support was difficult for many. Supporting soldiers who risk their lives for the nation is laudable, of course. But in making the encouragement of support a part of its public relations campaign, the Bush administration exploited the public memory of Vietnam War protests and politicized the idea of supporting American troops.

Despite the administration’s efforts an anti-war movement emerged during the buildup to the Gulf War, though it did not have a lasting effect on mainstream public opinion. The fledgling anti-war movement began in early August when the President suggested that military action in the Persian Gulf was possible, and protests continued through the beginning of the war. The arguments of anti-war activists were diverse. Some opposed the war because they assumed it would be expensive and might trigger an ecological disaster or encourage anti-Arab racism. Many thought American intervention in the Gulf would fail to solve long-standing problems in the Middle East. Most feared a violent confrontation and drew attention to the human cost of the conflict.

On two occasions at the height of protest participation in mid-January over 100,000 people marched in Washington D.C. and the New York Times carried a page one story on the anti-war movement’s burgeoning role in popular dissent. Yet these mass protests

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coincided with the highest approval ratings of Bush’s presidency – indeed among the highest modern approval ratings of any president.\textsuperscript{302} Despite some uncertainty among Americans, anti-war activists failed to substantially influence popular opinion, even at the height of their influence.

The anti-war movement was heterogeneous and included some Vietnam War veterans in its ranks. Many of the movement’s most prominent groups were already protesting the policies of the Bush administration and simply added opposition to a war in the Middle East to their lists of criticisms. The Rainbow Alliance and other gay and lesbian groups were among the largest contingents represented in the movement, which also included socialist organizations who opposed American imperialism, student groups who had been protesting U.S. foreign policies in Central America for a decade, and women’s groups who criticized the president for “playground-style” machismo.\textsuperscript{303} While some Vietnam War veterans likely shared the objections of these anti-war sympathizers, other veterans who recalled their unjust treatment during and after the Vietnam War opposed the Gulf War because they assumed a new generation of warriors would share their fate. In Madison, Wisconsin, the Vietnam Veterans Against the [Gulf] War created a poster that read “58,000 of our friends died in Vietnam in a rich man’s war. Now they want to sacrifice another generation….As veterans we say no!...No to V.A. hospitals filled with victims, forgotten by the media, the Congress, and the President.”\textsuperscript{304} Those Vietnam veterans who supported the Gulf War did so on the condition that American

\textsuperscript{302} Mueller, Policy and Opinion, page 180, table 1.
\textsuperscript{303} Elbaum, “The War at Home,” 143-147.
soldiers would be honored and cared for; many veterans who did not support the war lacked faith in American civilian leadership and doubted the American people would sustain their support of deployed soldiers.

Despite large numbers, the anti-war movement lacked mainstream influence for most of the five-month buildup to war. It was undermined in part by poorly conceived tactics and by the Bush administration’s claims to moral authority. Two national organizations were formed to organize opposition to the war – the National Campaign for Peace in the Middle East and the Coalition to Stop U.S. Intervention in the Middle East. Both organizations advocated supporting American soldiers, but thought the best way to do so was to pull them out of danger. The Bush administration also encouraged support of American troops, as discussed above. To many Americans the nuance of the anti-war position of support was difficult to distinguish from the administration’s stance. In the context of the post-Vietnam era when many Americans and veterans in particular remembered the poor treatment of Vietnam War veterans, the stance of pro- and anti-war camps on treatment of soldiers was especially important, and the Bush administration’s attitude towards support of soldiers was easier to understand and seemed more legitimate. Protesters insisted that it was possible to support soldiers while opposing the war they were ordered to fight. Many activists attempted to co-opt pro-war symbols such as yellow ribbons that were pushed by the administration. To prove their argument anti-war activists issued their own yellow ribbons, exactly the same as pro-war ribbons except for
the message they were supposed to convey. Most Americans did not grasp their point, since a different meaning had already been associated with yellow ribbons.\footnote{Ibid.}

Anti-war activists tried to claim the moral high-ground by opposing violence abroad and supporting the focus of American resources to domestic problems. But unlike the Vietnam War, which some argued was a localized conflict with few American interests at stake, Kuwait had been invaded by a vastly more powerful neighbor whose leader was by most accounts among the most brutal dictators in the world. The moral equation that the Bush administration utilized was simple – Saddam was unambiguously bad and the United States had to stop him. For many, the administration appeared to be acting justly. The administration’s argument was aided by sour memories of Vietnam War protests and the inept tactics of the Gulf War protesters.

College students and the young in general were often implicated in the erosion of public support and the alleged targeting of veterans during Vietnam War protests. Though anti-war activists ultimately failed to persuade the American public during the Gulf War, the administration recalled the allegedly corrosive role of Vietnam War protests on the war effort and worried about the potential impact that young protesters might have during the buildup to the Gulf War. Bush lamented that those who served were “ridicule[d]…while the draft-dodger and the protester were considered by many to be courageous, even heroic.”\footnote{Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 486.} One WHOC official proposed holding a “high-level briefing of college heads at [the] W[hite] H[ouse] and campaign for surrogate action on
campuses to highlight ‘not another Vietnam’ message.’³⁰⁷ The Office of the Chief of Staff argued in one document that “the Baby Boom generation has never seen the U.S. ‘win’ a war” and that this experience of failure was partially responsible for “shatter[ing] people’s confidence in American competence.”³⁰⁸ Further examining generational obstacles to gaining support for the war, the same officials argued that “at the root of people’s (‘Baby Boomers’) resistance to ‘war’ is a powerful, underlying aversion to and ambivalence about personal sacrifice.” There were three supposed causes of this attitude: the so-called “‘Me generation’ legacy”; young people had “grown accustomed to immediate gratification, indulgence, and quick fixes”; and moreover young people were “not used to trade-offs and compromises (‘want it all’).” The authors of this document hoped that “coming into a more mature phase in their lives is causing these ‘Baby Boomers’ to reconsider their values and priorities.”³⁰⁹ The children of Baby Boomers were perceived as threatening to the administration insofar as they inherited the values of their antiwar parents.

Yet the administration was also somewhat optimistic that a new generation would be different than the Baby Boomers. One of the polls included in the files of the Chief of Staff was a survey of the opinions of high school students on the Persian Gulf crisis. Though the oldest of those surveyed were toddlers during the fall of Saigon, 57 percent said that if the Gulf War was drawn out it would turn out to be “another Vietnam.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Memo, Deb Amend to David Demarest, “Pending Projects”, page 2, December 11, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
³⁰⁸ “Fundamental Themes,” page 3, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
³⁰⁹ Ibid., page 8.
³¹⁰ “National Student Survey on the Persian Gulf Crisis (Grades 9-12),” page 5, prepared for Citizens for a Free Kuwait, January 1991, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
The views of students resembled those of their parents in general, though students’ support of administration policy tended to be weaker. Students were inclined to be more concerned with domestic social problems and less concerned with foreign policy, compared to their parents. Students were also typically preoccupied with more superficial concerns; those surveyed were twice more worried about rising gas prices than the safety of American soldiers. Somewhat paradoxically, when asked which reason most justified going to war with Iraq, 69 percent said rescuing American hostages, more than any other single reason. The Bush administration worried that impressionable youth would oppose the Gulf War based on their memories of the Vietnam War – perhaps influenced by their parents – and a shared experience of national failure abroad. The administration apparently also hoped that a post-Baby Boom generation would be more amenable to a muscular foreign policy.

The administration’s concern about the potential influence of the young on public opinion led the President to write an open letter to college students on January 9, 1991. Sent to 460 college newspapers, the open letter repeated many of the justifications for war that the administration had used over the previous few months. It also commented on the virtues of duty and service. After framing the reasons behind the American intervention in the Gulf as “black and white” and an “unambiguous” moral imperative, the President promised college students that if he had his way there would be peace. “But while we search for that answer [how to peacefully resolve the crisis],” Bush wrote,
“in the Gulf young men and women are putting their own lives on hold in order to stand for peace in our world and for the essential value of human life itself. Many are younger than my own children. Your age, most of them – doing tough duty for something they believe in.” In other words, there are people your age who understand duty, said the President, but you, readers, may not be among them. Bush told the story of a soldier named Terry, who wrote a letter to the President expressing a willingness to stand for principle. “Terry understands…moral obligation,” Bush told college students, whose comprehension of that virtue seemed to be in question. Bush asked college students to reflect on the consequences of Saddam’s invasion. But even if they remained unpersuaded, the President asked college students to support those who were “willing to do their duty.”

The memory of the Vietnam War fundamentally affected the administration’s approach to youth and potential dissenters. Among the perceived lessons of the Vietnam War was that President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to fight a limited war was a major miscalculation that led to domestic unrest. President Bush acted on that lesson by attempting to mitigate conditions that might encourage dissent among the young.

The President’s communication strategy did more than create a public relations campaign that reflected the perceived lessons of the Vietnam War. The administration also continued to refine the official argument for war based on ongoing public opinion research. While on November 23 Zoellick and Ross argued that “no one reason suffices”

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to intervene in the Gulf, by December 5 the administration reconsidered the reasons to go to war with Iraq and apparently decided that “any one of these concerns is enough to justify our action.”\textsuperscript{317} Though a later draft of this document changed ideas again by saying “it is the combination of these factors…that makes reversing Iraq’s aggression so important,” clearly there was uncertainty within the administration over whether each idea individually or all ideas together were good enough reasons to justify war.\textsuperscript{318}

Consistent with Bush’s self-described image in his letter to college students, the administration encouraged the public to perceive the President as a peace seeker. This tactic undermined the argument made by some Democratic Senators and others that the administration should seek a solution short of war or allow sanctions more time to force Iraq to leave Kuwait. While outlining the major themes involved in the argument for war, White House officials stressed to the public that “the President has emphasized repeatedly that we want to achieve these goals [Iraq’s surrender and full compliance with UN Resolutions] peacefully” and the President “strongly prefer[s] a peaceful resolution…. [but] sanctions alone won’t get him [Saddam] out of Kuwait.” The cost of waiting for sanctions to work, officials argued, was high: “Saddam will continue to pillage Kuwait, increase the political and economic burdens on our coalition partners, get closer to developing nuclear weapons and create diversions.” The January 15 deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait was as late as the administration was willing to wait to take action. While officials were careful to exclude from the main themes of the conflict

\textsuperscript{317} For Ross and Zelikow, see: Memo, James Cicconi to David Demarest, attached: note from Robert Zoellick to James Cicconi, re: “Remarks on Why We Need to Confront Iraq,” November 23, 1990, CO072: Iraq, 208915, BPR, GBPL; for “any of these concerns is enough,” see: “Gulf Policy Themes (draft),” page 3, December 5, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.

\textsuperscript{318} “Gulf Policy Themes,” page 1, December 6, 1990, WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
any mention of war or the use of force, they reminded Americans that the United States would use “all necessary means” to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Ultimately “the hard truth,” they argued, was that Saddam had to face “disaster and defeat” before Iraq would leave Kuwait.319 Despite the President’s peaceful intentions, any action short of intervention was insufficient to achieve American foreign policy goals, the administration argued.

Having discredited the policy alternatives, the WHOC went about outlining the official argument for war that was employed by the Bush administration in January. Administration officials were instructed to use specific themes when talking about the Gulf conflict. Among the central themes was the personal menace of Saddam Hussein, a “ruthless despot” who had used the worst kinds of weapons in war (against Iran) and even on his own people. In addition, he sought nuclear weapons and wanted to significantly expand his country’s already substantial oil reserves in pursuit of larger regional ambitions. If allowed to stay in Kuwait, the administration argued that Saddam would dominate the Middle East and “the future of the region would be one of increasing violence from which none of us would be immune.” Ultimately the central theme was the moral imperative to intervene in order to uphold international law especially in the hope that the post-Cold War world would not be driven by state aggression.320 This new order would be American-led, “not because we seek it, but because no one else can do the job.” A draft of the document which outlined communications themes tentatively endorsed the idea that “there may be opportunities…for all states and peoples of the region to settle the conflicts that divide the Arabs from Israel,” an acknowledgement of

319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
the argument made by some that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the more critical problem in the Middle East. “But first Iraq’s aggression must be reversed,” the administration insisted.\textsuperscript{321} To summarize, the Gulf War had to be fought for several reasons: Saddam Hussein was personally dangerous and threatened to destabilize a strategically important and volatile region with his destructive weapons and control of oil, the latter potentially able to threaten much of the global economy. The United States was in a unique position to enforce the rule of law abroad and preserve the dream that a post-Cold War world would be governed by law and order. Most importantly, the United States was morally obliged to punish the heinous crimes of Saddam Hussein’s regime.\textsuperscript{322}

These justifications for war were reflected in public opinion. The administration’s emphasis on the President’s image as a lover of peace was rooted in what it perceived was the American public’s skepticism of an American invasion without provocation. One document argued that “there is strong evidence that if President Bush had to \textit{initiate} a major military offensive, he would not have the overwhelming support of the American people.”\textsuperscript{323} The same document alleged that there was a “prevailing self-consciousness about our ‘diminished position’ in the world” which compelled the administration to fight the war as a coalition, a way of bolstering the perception of America’s global position.\textsuperscript{324}

While many Americans seemed to have certain preconditions for initiating an invasion, the reasons that they thought the United States should go to war in the Gulf

\textsuperscript{321} “Gulf Policy Themes (Draft),” page 2, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{322} “Gulf Policy Themes.” BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{323} “Fundamental Themes,” page 2, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., page 3.
continued to vary significantly in December. One mid-December poll conducted by the Republican National Committee found that 78 percent of Americans thought preventing Iraq from acquiring nuclear weapons was a good reason to go to war, in this case the most popular justification.\footnote{“RNC National Survey,” page 18, “Middle East,” December 7-12, 1990, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.} A similar survey conducted by the polling firm, Greenberg-Lake, at the same time found that only 14 percent of Americans thought neutralizing Iraq’s nuclear capability was the reason the United States was in the Gulf.\footnote{Mueller, \textit{Policy and Opinion}, table 119, December 8-11, page 245.} Despite lingering uncertainty about the purpose of the war, the President’s approval ratings had recovered as a result of his communications strategy. Presidential approval ratings rose by ten points from mid-October, when the administration was distracted by domestic politics, to mid-December, when the President’s communications strategy was in place.\footnote{Approval jumped from 53 percent on October 18-21 to 63 percent on December 13-16, according to the compiled approval ratings polls in Ibid., Table 1, 180.} Results were less dramatic in polls that asked more specifically about the President’s performance in the Persian Gulf. In general President Bush began losing public approval on this issue in October but by mid-December polls had recovered slightly and stabilized until the invasion began. As an example, one Gallup poll indicated a fifteen-point drop in approval over the President’s handling of the “situation in the Middle East” from October 14 to November 15 and a three point recovery by December 9.\footnote{Ibid., table 8, page 193. See also tables 9, 11-13, 20.}

During December President Bush put his communications strategy into action and continued to make an argument for war, though in general he spoke less on the subject of
the Gulf during December than might be expected. He spent the beginning of December in South America while the White House sent out materials to opinion-makers to try to persuade some to act as surrogates. The President gave a speech on Human Rights Day that listed some of the successes and the difficulties of ensuring human rights across the world. In the context of this agenda he listed the importance of defending Kuwait, calling reports coming out of that country a “catalog of human misery.”

During an exchange with reporters on his way to meet with hostages who were released from Iraq, the President seemed animated and somewhat hostile. Asked if he planned to give anything to Saddam in return for releasing hostages, he replied “Hell no!” then cut off the next reporter’s question by saying, “If you have any doubt about it, it is no.” It is not clear from the transcript of the exchange what he meant, but there is no doubt that the President was taking an uncompromising position on Iraq. One reporter asked Bush if he expected Saddam to defuse the tension. The President responded “one way or another we will,” another vague response clearly meant as a threat, which also shifted the initiative at least rhetorically from Iraq to the United States. From a communications standpoint, Bush appeared to be uncompromising and seemed focused on the Gulf conflict even while traveling in another continent.

By mid-December the administration changed course by offering Iraq an opportunity for peace, but the offer was not made in good faith. The administration

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anticipated its effort in this case would fail and pursued it so that the United States seemed to be seeking peace. During a December 14 press conference Bush announced that he was opening a month-long window during which Secretary Baker would meet with Iraqi officials at any time to defuse the situation, though Bush made clear that Iraq would have to comply with all UN resolutions. The President’s approach to this meeting was consistent with his conviction that Saddam’s actions could not be rewarded in any way, since that would embolden future aggressors. Despite the seemingly benevolent intentions, the proposed meeting was a farce, if a necessary one. The United States left Iraq little space to negotiate, and it was extremely unlikely that Saddam would yield completely to U.S. demands without a face-saving option. The charade was the administration’s way of indicating to the American people and the world that it was going the extra mile to seek a peaceful solution.

Apparently no cabinet-level administration official thought the offer of negotiations would work, but most perceived it as politically necessary. Bush explained his motives by saying “I wanted to show that we were going the extra mile for peace and it would help quash some of the charges that I was contemplating war against someone we had not even tried to speak with.” James Baker thought the proposal was “intended to reinforce the message that the United States was the reasonable party,” and when Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze expressed some optimism towards the meeting, Baker thought Shevardnadze “was deluding himself.” Scowcroft was pleased that the announcement bolstered support for the administration and “blunted some of the damage

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cause by the Nunn hearings,” a congressional hearing in which Democrats had stated their anti-war views, positions that were more difficult to hold when the President sought peace.\textsuperscript{333} Much of the polling indicated that Americans wanted to see President Bush seeking peace, and opening a window of possible negotiations was a way to create the perception that Saddam rejected reasonable peace overtures.\textsuperscript{334}

As part of his ongoing effort to increase support for his Gulf policies, Bush invited regional reporters on December 18 to a news conference, one of the original proposals in the Gulf communications strategy. In addition to American efforts to find a peaceful resolution, he mentioned several others that came from the United Nations, the European Community, and Algeria. All of these offers were rebuffed by Iraq. The President stressed that Saddam was denying real opportunities for peace, and Bush by comparison seemed sincerely trying to avoid war. When the President was asked during one press conference how he would persuade the American people to accept war as the solution to the Gulf crisis, he avoided the question by saying he would rather not have war as an option. But if war was to come, whatever happened, he insisted, would not be like Vietnam – in this case he meant not a protracted war or a war that would be fought with “one hand tied behind our backs.” Asked if he would fight a war without Congressional approval, he answered “I’d rather not cross that bridge,” but implied that he would. As argued in the previous chapter, the President’s interpretation of the Constitution informed him that he could go to war without Congressional sanction, and

\textsuperscript{333} Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 421.  
he was annoyed by the apparent obligation to seek its approval.\textsuperscript{335} Most of what the President said during this particular press conference resembled what came before, but in this case the administration was reaching out to smaller print media markets to try to spread its message to a broader audience.

Before making its final arguments for war in January the administration sponsored a major study of public opinion in December. In what was called the “Pilot Study,” officials led eleven group discussions of two hours each with people from New York City, San Francisco, Dallas, and Kansas City. Organizers separated people by age and personality (i.e. “mainstreamers,” “succeeders,” “reformers”). Many discussion participants wrote a “telegram” of a few sentences to the President after their discussion. The study concluded that despite major differences in opinion, worldview, and knowledge of current events, there was “consistency across the groups of several key fundamental themes.”\textsuperscript{336} The first point of agreement was the need for a clear meaning to justify American intervention in the Gulf conflict. While many in the discussions seemed well informed they were also “confused by the tactics, maneuvers, and ever-changing events.” Participants could not identify a clear reason that had been given to go to war. Though they seemed willing in principle to support a war, they wanted to hear a plain explanation of goals, principles, and what was at stake. Ideally, the war would be both “pragmatic and ethical.”\textsuperscript{337}

\textsuperscript{336} “The Persian Gulf: A Pilot Study,” page 5, December 1990, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, BPR, GBPL.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., page 7.
Asked to provide the best reason for American involvement in the Gulf, many mentioned Saddam Hussein, who was variously called a “terrorist,” “madman,” or “real dictator.” Others said he was too clever to be left alive or too aggressive to be stopped by anyone except the United States. For the most part discussion participants supported a war to eliminate the individual threat of Saddam Hussein, some calling on the United States to assassinate him or, in one case, “go in there and blow him up.” 338 Participants were much more divided over fighting a war for oil. Some soberly argued that American economic interests were at stake and that sometimes, however unfortunately, war was necessary for such reasons. Others strongly disagreed and were unwilling to sacrifice human lives for oil. Some blamed Western dependence on oil for provoking Iraq’s invasion in the first place. 339 All participants rejected some of the secondary justifications for war, such as protecting Israel, restoring the Kuwaiti government, retribution for hostage-taking, and the United States’ responsibility as a “world policeman.” 340 A second shared theme across region, personality, and age group was the fear of Saddam’s army of Muslims. The summary in the study is illuminating:

Many of the people we talked with are terrified at the prospect of engaging in a war with Hussein and an “Islamic army.” The Iraqi population is perceived as so culturally different from ourselves that they would be capable of fighting with a ferocity and cruelty that most Americans find disturbingly alien. 341

The authors of the study argued that in the public consciousness Iraqi soldiers resembled North Vietnamese regulars in their allegedly alien fighting methods and supposed

338 Ibid., page 8. Italics mine.
339 Ibid., page 9.
340 Ibid., page 10.
341 Ibid., page 11.
ruthlessness. The authors advised the administration that “it is important for public confidence…to express belief in our ability to ‘master’ them [Iraqi soldiers].”

The legacy of Vietnam was apparently a frequent topic of conversation during these discussions. “No matter how different the conditions may be in the Middle East, and how different this political situation may be, these people’s perceptions of modern warfare seem to have been shaped by their memories and images of Vietnam,” the authors claimed. Many discussion participants worried that the Gulf War would be “like Vietnam” in some way. Though some used the analogy without clarification, others worried about a protracted war, a lack of support for American soldiers, or the formidable martial capabilities of yet another foreign enemy. Some suspected the U.S. government was lying. Others thought that the country had not yet recovered psychologically, or they did not want another “war we have] to watch – night after night” on television.342

Participants also discussed their perceptions of the American response to the Gulf crisis to that point. Many expressed what the pollsters called a “crisis of confidence” in leadership at various levels. Some questioned the “winnability” of the war and others worried about the state of America’s prestige in the world. Everyone seemed to agree that they “want this situation over fast.”343 On most subjects participants expressed uncertainty, much of it stemming from a poorly articulated or inconsistent message from the White House. On many subjects there was deep skepticism, especially if an analogy could be made with the Vietnam War. This study helped inform the Bush administration that in December the American public still was not sure why the country needed to go to

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342 Ibid., 12.
343 Ibid., 19.
war, and that some reasons to do so were more acceptable to the public than others. While many Americans seemed confused about the purpose of the war and had serious reservations about the risks of an intervention, participants perceived Saddam as a serious threat. For the Bush administration, the Pilot Study revealed uncertainty underneath promising poll numbers and pointed in the direction of a more acceptable argument for war centered on the danger of Saddam Hussein.

President Bush seemed to take the conclusions of the Pilot Study to heart, especially the American public’s apparent willingness to accept Saddam as a villain. During the buildup to war, Bush frequently characterized Saddam Hussein as another Adolf Hitler and described the Gulf conflict in terms chosen to make it sound like World War II. Historian Marilyn Young argues that in “every…particular, Gulf War I was self-consciously, carefully not Vietnam.” Instead “Gulf War I was scripted like a mini-World War II,” Young argues. “Saddam Hussein was Hitler; Kuwait stood for all of occupied Europe; it was a grand alliance; and appeasement was unacceptable.” Bush frequently compared the worst crimes of Nazi Germany with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. He recalled worrying on the day of the invasion that the United Nations would respond to Iraq as the League of Nations had responded to the Axis. “I knew what had happened in the 1930’s when a weak and leaderless League of Nations had failed to stand up to Japanese, Italian, and German aggression.” While trying to persuade Arab nations to support his policies, Bush told President Turgut Ozal of Turkey that anything short of the

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345 Ibid.
346 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 303.
unconditional surrender of Iraq was “not a solution but another Munich,” and told King Fahd of Saudi Arabia that “Saddam will not get away with all this infamy.” While debating Gorbachev on the proper approach to Iraq’s invasion, Bush asked “if we had offered Hitler some way out, would it have succeeded?” Before a speech on August 8, Bush recalled that “as I prepared my speech, I tightened up the language to strengthen the similarity I saw between the Persian Gulf and the situation in the Rhineland in the 1930’s….This time I wanted no appeasement.” Bush seemed to grasp the scale of Nazi atrocities and recognized that many critics thought the similarities between pre-World War II Germany and pre-Gulf War Iraq were exaggerated. Nonetheless, he insisted that the analogy was apt. “I caught hell on this comparison of Saddam to Hitler…but I still feel it was an appropriate one.”

President Bush learned about war when he fought in the Pacific theatre during World War II. The soundness of the lessons of Munich were reinforced for Bush by the apparent success of the containment of the Soviet Union during his long political career. The lessons of World War II were thus deeply personal for President Bush, and he was inclined to see international conflicts in similar terms. Bush was also a U.S. Representative during the Vietnam War and visited American forces there in the 1960’s. According to one of his biographers the most striking aspect of this period in Bush’s political career was his lack of commentary on the war, the dominant foreign policy issue

347 Ibid., 326, 330.
348 Ibid., 367.
349 Ibid., 340.
350 Ibid., 375.
The perceived lessons of the two wars tend to contradict each other. The apparent lessons from Munich say that if national aggression is allowed to go unchecked, then foreign enemies grow stronger with concessions and become emboldened by weakness. Eliminating a stronger threat later likely requires a more vigorous and costly confrontation than might have otherwise been true. Better to remove a threat in its early stages than after it has grown to full strength. The lessons of Munich seem to encourage an interventionist foreign policy. For many, the lessons of Vietnam warn that ill-conceived interventions against determined enemies can sap national strength and have a corrosive effect on society at home. In other words, the lessons of Vietnam seem to discourage foreign intervention while the lessons of Munich seem to encourage it. The lessons of Munich also reject appeasement. Of course, the concept of appeasement has a longer history. Historian Paul Kennedy argues that appeasement tactics have been denigrated by their association with the acquiescence of the Western democracies to Hitler at Munich, but appeasement had long been an honorable diplomatic solution to conflict. President Bush understood appeasement in the context of Munich, and he applied the perceived lessons from that historical memory to the Gulf conflict. Bush’s perceived historical lessons partially explain his frequent use of World War II and Hitler comparisons.

351 Bush’s primary concern during the Vietnam War was negative press coverage, but otherwise he wrote and said little of substance on the subject at the time. Parmet, Lone Star Yankee, 128-29.
Bush was also part of the larger culture of the early 1990’s and lived on the cusp of the so-called “memory boom.” This memory boom was a broad cultural phenomenon when various groups, motivated in part by the fiftieth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attacks, competed for the communal memory of the attacks and the second World War. Public historians argued over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum and the USS Arizona memorial’s background film. Lobbying groups competed in the so-called “history wars” over the relative responsibility of the commanders at Pearl Harbor, and some lobbied to restore the commanders’ ranks posthumously. Popular histories such as Tom Brokaw’s The Greatest Generation also proliferated during the 1990’s. In a genre that historian Emily Rosenberg calls “spectacular history,” many people read books that promised secret and “explosive” truths such as Henry Clausen and Bruce Lee’s Pearl Harbor: The Final Judgment or later Robert Stinnett’s Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor.

Popular histories were one of only several sources of dubious historical knowledge that emerged in the 1990’s, such as big-budget historical films and the internet, the latter of which provides a platform for anyone with access to spread false or questionable historical claims through blogs, chatrooms, websites, etc. Examples abound, but one example is this website which was found in .1 seconds through a Google search of “moon landing fake.” The site is dedicated to proving that no NASA mission ever landed on the moon. It provides the appearance of legitimacy first of all by existing on a website that is equally as accessible as the website for NASA, the White House, or

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Harvard University. The authors of the website make an extended argument complete with video evidence, interviews, timelines, alleged motivations, links to other sympathetic sites, and so on. The internet makes it easy to publish one’s view of history and to disseminate those views widely. The sheer amount of information available makes it difficult to determine legitimate claims from illegitimate ones. In some ways, the internet contributes to narrow or fringe beliefs about history, since those who use the internet as a source of knowledge have to seek out information and will likely be able to find something that confirms their beliefs.

President Bush governed at the beginning of these developments – indeed, his use of Hitler and World War II analogies likely contributed to a renewed interest in World War II and the history boom. Consciously or not, Bush was reacting to the cultural zeitgeist and used it to his advantage in selling the Gulf War. While his personal experiences and interpretation of the lessons of Munich may have genuinely led him to compare the Gulf conflict to World War II, public opinion research supported the idea that the American people would accept a comparison between Saddam and Hitler and that such a rationale would boost support for the administration’s Gulf policy. The administration used that information to its advantage in constructing an argument for war in the Persian Gulf.

The administration was sensitive to the accusation that it made policy based on polls. Roger Ailes worked for the Bush presidential campaign in 1988 and later as a media consultant during the buildup to the Gulf War. According to Deputy Chief of Staff James Cicconi, Ailes was one of the few people from whom Bush felt comfortable taking

communications advice, and Ailes was disproportionately influential relative to his position.\footnote{See interview with Cicconi in Hall, “Economically Speaking,” 177, footnote 26.} He wrote the President in January to update him on new focus group data. In the first point of the memo, Ailes promised the President that the marketing firm “understand[s] that public opinion research will not influence the President’s decisions. I strongly made that point again.” Presumably Ailes was asked by the administration to make this point, which would not have been raised unless the influence of polls on policy was in question. At any rate, after promising the President that all parties understood that polls would not make policy, Ailes advised the President on how the information from public opinion research should be used to guide policy.

According to Ailes the Y & R public relations firm, which had been contracted by the government, did not think the President had sufficient public support for his policies in the Gulf. Market research participants did not accept the argument that human rights were part of the administration’s calculation in going to war, but assumed instead that oil was the central motivation. Participants were unwilling to “trade blood for oil,” but Ailes wondered if the administration might circumvent this rhetorical problem by linking oil to freedom. He suggested the President convey to the American people that Iraq’s invasion “may be a step towards surrendering our political and economic freedom.” Ailes urged the President to emphasize that “Saddam started it” and “we are showing restraint” in response to Iraq’s aggression. Ailes argued that the American people were fundamentally unconvinced that the looming war was worthwhile and that the President should take the conclusions from market research and incorporate them into his rhetoric.

“The people don’t necessarily need more information,” Ailes said, “but a bit more
persuasion.”357 In the little time that remained for the administration to refine its communications tactics, Ailes’ recommendations seemed to influence the pro-war argument. In several mid- to late-January communications documents and in a final radio address to the American people, the administration employed a simplified argument for war that stressed some of the points Ailes had made and the Pilot Study had recommended.

In January the administration disseminated the final revision to its list of main themes that officials were to use when publically discussing the Gulf crisis. As officials were supposed to explain, the primary objectives of the American invasion were Iraq’s unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait and the restoration of Kuwait’s government, both of which reflected the U.S. commitment to security and stability in the region. The document listed the various attempts at reaching a peaceful resolution and the military preparations undertaken to enforce UN resolutions. The administration promised to do the job “massively and decisively,” and then “go home.” Though at this point Congress had not approved the use of force, officials claimed that the United States and the global community were united against Saddam’s actions. It had taken time to secure this unity, and the document insisted that after five months it was now time for action, since Saddam’s position grew stronger by the day as the global economy and the Kuwaiti people suffered. Officials promised they were “still prepared to ‘go the extra mile’” to achieve a peaceful resolution, but only if Iraq complied without exception to all UN

357 Emphasis his. Memo, Roger Ailes to George Bush, January 9, 1991, 98-0004-F [1], John Sununu Files, Box 1, GBPL.
resolutions. Without departing from all of the ideas that the administration had employed for months, the revisions in these thematic guidelines addressed some of the concerns expressed in the Ailes memo and December Pilot Study by articulating a few clear goals rather than the long list in President Bush’s September 11 address to Congress.

The recommendations of the Ailes memo and the Pilot Study were also reflected in the administration’s communication with Congress. As the White House prepared to justify its actions in the Gulf in anticipation of a January 12 congressional vote it drafted a talking points document written in exceedingly simple language. This document addressed anticipated Congressional inquiries specifically and it was intended to support the short letter to Congressional leaders that the President had sent out days before. The individual points covered similar issues as the January message document, but with a different tone. Written in the first person in the style of a script, one point read “I do not exaggerate when I say that this might prove to be the most important issue we confront in our public lives.” The administration argued that the future of the UN, the global economy, and the post-Cold War world was at stake. It urged Representatives to put aside legal and constitutional questions for the moment, which “we are not going to be able to solve in the next two days.” The administration reminded Representatives that it had sought peace repeatedly, even days before the looming vote, and had secured official international support for its actions at the UN. It also addressed the views of some

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Representatives who wanted to give sanctions more time to work, arguing that Saddam’s army would be well-equipped regardless of the results of economic warfare and that with the passing of time he grew more dangerous. Waiting past the UN deadline, it argued, threatened to unravel the coalition to the benefit of Iraq.360

The President also made his final case to the American people. In a January 5 radio address to the nation he reminded the country that he had “seen the hideous face of war” and wished to avoid it but promised that Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait even if it took war. He repeated again, in the first paragraph, “there will be no more Vietnams,” dismissing in a stroke all the concerns bundled in the public memory of that conflict. He described the forces arrayed against Iraq to make them seem overwhelming. The military advantages to the United States as the President explained them seemed certain to quickly overpower Iraqi forces. Nonetheless he expressed his wish not to use those forces and repeated his last-minute offer of peace.

Bush outlined the basic pragmatic and ethical justifications for war, to use the language of the Pilot Study. As part of these justifications he described Saddam as a regional danger who threatened American troops and every American ally in the area with chemical weapons. He had used such weapons before, after all. Someday soon, Bush warned, Saddam might terrorize his neighbors with biological or nuclear weapons. As time passed after the invasion of Kuwait he gained destructive capabilities and came closer to cornering the oil market, which not only gave him substantial control over the

360 “Talking Points for Cabinet Calls,” January 1991 10 or 11, Office of Media Affairs- John Undeland Files, OA/ID 08890, BPR, GBPL.
global economy but also promised to finance “further aggression, terror, and blackmail.” The combination of these threats destabilized the emerging democracies of the world.

The radio address succinctly summarized the administration’s case for war while addressing many of the concerns that emerged from public opinion research over the last few months. It contained some Bush-style colloquialisms—e.g. “go the extra mile”—while also giving the argument a sense of weighty importance. Sometimes this was implied—Bush “broke bread” with American soldiers, a biblical allusion. In more straightforward language, he told listeners “at stake is not simply some distant country called Kuwait. At stake is the kind of world we will inhabit.”

The administration demonstrated its perception of its place in history in one public diplomacy publication which placed Bush’s Middle East policies in the context of the policies of other Presidents beginning with Harry Truman. According to the narrative described in this document, every U.S. President had sought to stabilize the region and defend Saudi Arabia. Bush’s actions were the culmination of a half-century of consistent strategy. Many of the administration’s public statements in January conveyed a sense of weighty significance. In part this sense of significance was genuine—Iraq was perceived as a threat and the promise of a more peaceful post-Cold War world was at risk. Bush also believed that Saddam really was as dangerous as Hitler. But framing the conflict in historical terms also had the practical effect of defining the conflict as the finale in a decades-long struggle. In this way the administration could gloss over U.S.-Iraq relations

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362 “Past Policy Statements on the Persian Gulf,” WHORM: Public Relations, Box 3, BPR, GBPL.
during the previous decade, a necessary maneuver to persuade Americans who despite generally rallying to the President’s policies remained skeptical towards the underlying rationale for war.

On the eve of the Gulf War, President Bush’s overall approval ratings were a respectable 64 percent. Two days after the war began, his approval ratings rose to 82 percent, and they remained very high, typically in the mid- to high-80 percent range throughout the war. The jump in approval ratings can be explained intuitively by the tendency to support a commander in chief during war. The rally around the flag effect was at a maximum during the early stages of the war. The sustained high ratings might also be explained by the sweeping success of the American military. But those explanations, while useful, ignore the President’s efforts to sell the war to the American public and do not account for the change in opinion over time, which should be attributed to the evolving communications strategy of the administration. The administration’s preoccupation with defining the Gulf War as something unlike the Vietnam War seemed to drive much of that strategy, and the data which supported the public’s aversion to anything resembling Vietnam was apparently an important component in the administration’s decision-making. Thus public opinion research drove the administration’s argument for war. From the nadir of public approval in November 1990 until March 1991 (the last days before the administration wrote a new communications strategy until the immediate aftermath of the war), one poll indicated that the number of Americans who described President Bush’s ability to communicate his ideas as

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“excellent” tripled.\textsuperscript{364} Forming an international coalition had been easier for the Bush administration than gaining domestic support, but securing the coalition required the administration to construct a relatively complex and multi-faceted argument to accommodate the various interests involved. As the argument grew and changed over time, it seemed inconsistent to many Americans, and as some became confused they grew skeptical about the reasons behind the American intervention in the Gulf. Once domestic approval eroded to a critical point, the administration recovered through a focused public relations campaign. The evolving public communications strategy of the Bush administration should be considered partially responsible for the sustained public approval of the administration’s foreign policy throughout the Gulf War.

\textsuperscript{364} Ibid., table 3, section D, page 189.
CONCLUSION

During a January 9 meeting Secretary Baker gave Iraq Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz a letter from President Bush that made plain American intentions to take military action. Baker asked that this letter be delivered to Saddam Hussein, but after Aziz read the frank language he refused. With or without that letter, it is difficult to imagine any uncertainty in Saddam’s mind on the eve of war. Five hundred thousand American troops stationed alongside their coalition partners at the Saudi Arabian border were prepared to push into Iraq and Kuwait, and days before the January 15 United Nations deadline passed President Bush secured Congressional approval to use military force. Both the United States and Iraq guaranteed a war by creating conditions that were mutually unacceptable. Saddam would agree to withdraw from Kuwait only if the United States would withdraw completely from the Middle East and the United Nations would rescind every Security Council resolution after 660, which would have secured Iraq’s right to claim Kuwaiti territory. The United States demanded Iraq’s unconditional withdraw and full compliance with all UN resolutions, which would have solved none of the problems that drove Iraq to war in the first place. As he considered the U.S. ultimatum, Saddam told an Algerian official that he “had two options: to be killed by U.S. bombs or Iraqi officers…If I withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait, I will certainly have to face the second scenario.”365 For Iraq, the United States did not seem as formidable before the Gulf War – they too remembered the Vietnam War. Saddam hoped to force Israel into the conflict and split the coalition. If he lost the war, he hoped

365 Hurst, The United States and Iraq, 99.
it would be a glorious defeat that would preserve his regional ambitions by gaining the sympathy of the Arab masses who would see him standing up to the United States. With neither side willing to compromise, the United Nations deadline passed and the war began.

On January 16 Saddam proclaimed that the “mother of all battles had begun.” The American offensive began with an aerial bombardment that faced little resistance. Many Iraqi planes sat out the war in Iran to avoid destruction. American planes eliminated anti-aircraft defenses and quickly established air superiority. The Air Force designed bombing campaigns to cut off central communications lines, destroy key infrastructure, and eliminate sites associated with the development of weapons of mass destruction. After thirty-five days of uninterrupted bombing, American forces were running out of significant targets. Powell looked closer at day-to-day plans and wondered “how many times could you bomb the Baath Party headquarters, and for what purpose?”

The perceived lessons of the Vietnam War influenced the conduct of the war, as they did when President Bush refused to halt the bombing of Iraq because he did not want to repeat the mistakes of U.S. bombing pauses during in Vietnam.

Powell pressured Bush to begin the ground campaign in the third week of February. Aziz flew to Moscow on February 15 to discuss a cease-fire that would have effectively left Iraqi forces intact and in Kuwait. Worried about the possibility of a premature Iraqi surrender and with the U.S. Air Force running out of targets, the Bush administration moved quickly. On February 22 it gave Saddam an ultimatum that called

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367 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 454. See also Bush’s insistence that Saddam not be offered any face-saving alternative to total defeat on 482-83. Other examples abound; see 450-487.
for him to withdraw from Kuwait unconditionally or face a ground invasion. Though it seemed as if his forces would be destroyed, Saddam risked political suicide if he left Kuwait at this stage. The ground war began on February 23 and lasted only 100 hours. It was an overwhelming American victory. Though Iraq’s army was large, it was not especially well-equipped and the majority of its soldiers were not well-trained. U.S. ground forces operated without risk of aerial attack. Iraq used old Soviet tanks and other inferior hardware. Iraqi casualties were high, and many Iraqi troops in Kuwait City surrendered rather than fight. The war ended on February 28, and Iraq was forced to comply with all UN demands.

During the buildup to the Gulf War President Bush decided that the war would define his presidency. Before it began many Americans seemed to have the same opinion, at least for a while. According to public opinion polls, before Iraq’s invasion most Americans did not associate any single policy or issue with President Bush. Instead those who supported him did so for vague reasons of personality. Once Bush announced that he would expand the U.S. troop presence in November many Americans tied their opinions of the President to their views of his policies in the Gulf. Though Americans were increasingly skeptical about the argument for war at that point, many apparently thought that the relative success of the Gulf War would shape their opinions of the President, however murky the justifications for intervention may have seemed. In the short term this trend boded well for the Bush administration. Postwar presidential

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368 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 354
approval ratings ranged from 83 to 89 percent between February 28 and April 6. Most Americans considered the war a success and approved of Bush because of it.

After the Gulf War the U.S. Central Command issued an executive summary of the conflict, an official analysis of combat operations during the crisis. Though Central Command admitted a few mistakes, it argued that “the tremendous success of our operations cannot be overshadowed by these problem areas. The magnificent performance of the entire coalition and the totality of the victory clearly establishes the tenor of after action discussion as absolute success.” Measured on a larger scale, with the costs in American blood and treasure weighed against strategic goals accomplished, the operation was judged a resounding success. The satisfaction of Central Command extended into many individual aspects of operations. On intelligence: “no commander in the history of warfare has had a more comprehensive infusion of intelligence or a better picture of the enemy he faced.” On soldiers: “The quality of personnel deployed in theater set new standards of excellence.” On media pools: “Media pool operations proved an effective means to communicate the war effort to the American public despite criticism…[and] clearly demonstrated the need to continue pool operations for coverage of front line combat units.” The military, it seemed, could hardly have been more satisfied with its performance and its civilian leadership.

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370 Mueller, Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War, table 1, page 180.
372 Ibid., 18.
373 Ibid., 29.
374 Ibid., 28.
Optimism towards issues of war and peace seemed to be a feature of the early 1990’s in many ways, and the Gulf War was partially responsible. Americans celebrated victory in parades across the United States and President Bush claimed the country had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome.” Many in the military and elsewhere thought the military’s performance during the war absolved them of the earlier sins of Vietnam. Some Vietnam veterans marched with Gulf veterans in victory parades, the kind of welcome that Vietnam veterans never received upon returning from their war, as some remembered bitterly. Instead of the resentful and complicated memory of Vietnam, memories of the “Good War” – World War II – replaced Vietnam as the standard point of reference in the public consciousness. Francis Fukuyama called the victory of Western liberalism over Communism the “end of history” because it seemed as if no alternative ideology could challenge that of the dominate superpower.

But the euphoria of the immediate postwar period obscured remaining tensions in Iraq and glossed over questions that remained about the original motivations for war. Before long, victory in the Gulf War seemed like a mixed blessing. The war had been fought with limited objectives but the administration – President Bush in particular – placed few constraints on the rhetoric it was willing to employ to win support for its policies. Many of Bush’s top advisors counseled against his frequent comparison between Saddam and Hitler. As a consequence of selling the war based on the individual danger of Saddam, many Americans thought the Gulf War was justified on those

grounds: someone that dangerous had to be stopped. But none of the UN resolutions granted the coalition authority to depose Saddam, nor did the Bush administration wish to occupy Iraq, ever-worried about a Vietnam-style protracted war. Ultimately Saddam remained in power. Given Bush’s Saddam-Hitler analogy, one wonders if Bush also would have allowed Hitler to remain in power had he survived World War II, perhaps to secure the balance of power against a greater threat to the East.

The administration also worried about creating a power vacuum in the region that might lead to Iranian regional dominance. Balance-of-power calculations partially led the President to order a halt to American attacks against the retreating and vulnerable Iraqi military when it fled towards Baghdad on the so-called “highway of death.” While the administration considered how to end the war, U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Charles Freeman sent a cable to Powell which argued “it is not in our interest to destroy Iraq or weaken it to the point that Iran and/or Syria are not constrained by it.”

Scowcroft and Bush write in their joint memoir that “neither the United States nor the countries of the region wished to see the breakup of the Iraqi state. We were concerned that about the long-term balance of power [in the Middle East].” Colin Powell adds that “our practical intention was to leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to…Iran.”

Geopolitical concerns notwithstanding, the administration hoped Saddam would be overthrown by internal forces and encouraged ethnic Kurds in the north and Muslim Shi’ites in the south to revolt, which they did beginning on March 2. But Saddam

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retained the necessary forces to put down the uprisings, in part because the Bush administration had left a substantial number of Saddam’s elite Republican Guard units intact. Though the administration had promoted exactly these kinds of revolts, American interests in the region complicated any potential offer of assistance. Supporting the Shi’ite insurgency risked agitating religious tensions and would likely have increased the regional influence of predominantly Shi’ite Iran. Kurdistan made irredentist claims in several neighboring countries including substantial portions of Turkey, an important American ally. The Bush administration stood by as these groups were massacred, seemingly calling into question its professed commitment to human rights. In December, 1992, the United States, United Kingdom, and France declared the northern and southern portions of Iraq as no-fly zones, where US/UK/French planes tried to provide a shield for humanitarian efforts in those regions. Much damage had been done by that point, however. Though ultimately Saddam Hussein is responsible for the abhorrent violence in postwar Iraq, the Bush administration created the conditions for the postwar order, and it was either unable or unwilling to assist the forces mobilized against Saddam.

At the same time, the so-called “Iraqgate” controversy, which alleged that the United States had built up Iraq’s military power in the 1980’s, gained increasing public attention in 1992. Investigations dragged on in various congressional and executive offices. After being one of only ten Democratic Senators to vote for the resolution granting President Bush war powers, Senator Al Gore (D – TN) gave a speech in September in which he accused the Reagan and Bush administrations of building up Iraq’s military power. The charge by Nightline anchor Ted Koppel – who was once
accused by the watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting for being a voice box for government talking points – seemed to carry special weight. He reported that “George Bush, operating largely behind the scenes throughout the 1980s, initiated and supported much of the financing, intelligence, and military help that built Saddam's Iraq into the aggressive power that the United States ultimately had to destroy.” While American aid to Iraq had never been a secret, the emergence of the Iragate controversy made victory in the Gulf War seem less praiseworthy. With the media reporting damaging stories and political forces aligned against him, President Bush needed to make the case for his good stewardship. The political environment increasingly called for an explanation of the war and its larger purpose.

In 1993 major television networks began airing a British Telecom commercial that featured Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking. Hawking, who has severe muscular dystrophy and can only speak through a computer and synthesizer, advertised the company with the slogan “BT is helping to keep the world talking.” Speaking next to images from ancient Greek and Mayan ruins, Hawking explained that imagination and communication allowed early humans to cease living like animals and eventually accomplish great things. “Our greatest achievements,” he said, “stand as testimonials to the power of communication” as the camera showed the still-standing monuments from two of the great ancient civilizations. Then the camera shifted to a desert scene, where the wreckage of Iraqi tanks destroyed during the Gulf War littered the background. “Mankind’s greatest failures have come about through not talking,” Hawking

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concluded. Hawking was referring to the argument that the Bush administration had failed to pursue a peaceful solution to the Gulf crisis by talking to the parties involved, an increasingly popular sentiment as many of the motives for war came into question. That such a statement emerged out of a mainstream television commercial seems to suggest the deep penetration of this idea in American popular culture.

Others were turned against the Bush administration by the work of journalist and President of Harper’s magazine, John Macarthur, who won a Mencken award in 1993 for his New York Times article which exposed the daughter of a Kuwaiti diplomat for helping fake the story of Iraqi soldiers removing Kuwaiti babies from hospital incubators in an effort to drum up support for the war. In his book Second Front, Macarthur revealed that many of the claims of human rights abuses by Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait were exaggerated and that the Kuwaiti royal family had hired public relations firms in the United States to sell the idea of the war to Americans. Some Americans ceased to look back at the war fondly when according to one study 250,000 veterans returned to the United States with what came to be called the Gulf War Syndrome. Others looked beyond the motivations for the war and the human lives it affected to what they saw as a more fundamental tragedy. In 1991 Adena, a group affiliated with the World Wildlife Foundation, aired a television public service announcement that featured a seabird covered in oil. Apparently in an attempt to prevent a sea invasion by U.S. marines, Iraq

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381 British Telecom: Hawking, catalog ID AT:31564.004, The Paley Center for Media.
383 MacArthur, Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War
384 “Gulf War Service Linked to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Multisymptom Illness, Other Health Problems, But Causes Are Unclear,” Office of News and Public Information, National Institute of Medicine, April 9, 2010.
released hundreds of thousands of tons of oil into the Persian Gulf during the war in one of the largest oil spills in history. It was by all accounts an ecological disaster. Adena argued that “in spite of the political victories claimed by the opposing sides in the Gulf War, we all lost the environmental battle.” In short, for a number of reasons many Americans ceased to approve of the administration’s performance in the Gulf War by 1992. Between January 1 and mid-October 1992, according to a compilation of polls presidential approval ratings fluctuated between 32 percent and 47 percent; by the summer of 1992 a *Los Angeles Times* poll indicated that 50 percent of Americans thought the Gulf War was not a success, while a Gallup poll indicated that 69 percent thought the Gulf War was not a U.S. victory. The political goodwill among voters that Bush seemed to have accumulated from victory in the Gulf War in the spring of 1991 deteriorated substantially in 1992.

Unfortunately for George Bush, 1992 was an election year. President Bush lost the election in November, in part because what had been thought to be the single defining event of his presidency did not seem like such an accomplishment by November. Of course other important factors influenced his difficult reelection bid, notably the economic recession for which his administration was blamed. But perhaps more than these or other explanations, President Bush’s failure to win reelection in 1992 can be explained by the gap between the abilities of Bush and his Democratic opponent Bill Clinton to communicate. During a town hall-style debate during the 1992 presidential campaign, an audience member asked the candidates a poorly worded question about

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385 Adena Public Service Announcement, catalog ID AT:28986.044, The Paley Center for Media.
how they had been personally affected by the national debt. Bush was confused by the question and initially unable to answer, eventually explaining how the national debt affects interest rates, inflation, and ultimately personal spending power – an impersonal and somewhat rambling response. When Bill Clinton answered, he stood at a more intimate distance from the audience member and responded with seemingly heartfelt empathy while at the same time mentioning his major talking points. There are few better examples of the differences between the two candidates’ ability to communicate. Whatever their differences on policy, and whatever President Bush’s perceived failures and accomplishments, he could not hope to articulate his views to the American people as well as Bill Clinton.

To Bush this must have seemed a travesty of justice. As argued in this thesis, Bush differentiated between the imperatives of governing and campaigning. For a man who viewed the obligations of the campaign as fundamentally beneath his dignity, losing to a candidate who relished those public aspects of the presidency must have been humbling. The mismatched communications abilities that emerged during the Bush-Clinton competition were reminiscent of the comparisons that many made to Bush’s detriment between his communication skills and those of Reagan. But Bush’s difficulties went beyond personal skill. His experience in the Reagan administration taught him that the White House should not distort issues by running, effectively, a permanent campaign. Many might find Bush’s desire for a more honest approach to communications laudable. Unfortunately for his administration, those strategies were also ineffective.

The administration’s approach to selling the Gulf War was an aberration and seemingly an effective one. Public approval for the war effort was in large part predicated on the idea of Saddam’s personal menace, but after the war he stayed in power. The administration had a reasonable explanation – the UN had only approved of the use of force to expel Iraq from Kuwait, not to dethrone Saddam or occupy Iraq. Surely the international coalition would splinter if further action was taken, and following UN guidelines would sustain the hope of Bush’s New World Order, a hope that seemed achievable in the post-Cold War world. In any case the United States did not wish to occupy Iraq. Toppling Saddam would likely have lead to the collapse of Iraq and the increased influence of Iran in the region – who was, after all, the principal threat to the United States. A quick exit ensured that the Gulf War would not deteriorate into a situation that would remind Americans of the Vietnam War. This argument was multifaceted and difficult to parse. It was also a harder sell to the American people than the moral argument for challenging Saddam the dictator. Everyone seemed to agree that preventing Saddam from acquiring chemical and nuclear weapons was sound policy. But preserving a balance of power in the Middle East to check the power of Iran did not go down as easy. Bush claims that he stands by his Saddam-as-Hitler analogy, and it seems clear that this argument became the central one in the administration’s effort to sell the war.

Selling the Gulf War was successful, but it came at a cost. The postwar euphoria did not last long. Within a year, it became more difficult for the President to claim a victory and what was supposed to be the defining event of his presidency lost its appeal.
Instead, voters blamed the administration for a downturn in the economy and saw in Bush’s opponent, Governor Bill Clinton, a more effective communicator. Bush had the personal misfortune of being inarticulate and had institutionally hamstrung his administration by changing its communication strategy. During the Gulf War, he set aside his reluctance to sell his policies and constructed an argument for war that he thought the public would accept. For the most part, they did, but in catering to what he thought were popular impulses and making policy disconnected from rhetoric, he undercut the political value of victory in the Gulf War.

Though Bush would have preferred to separate the public aspects of the presidency – to him, the lower form – from day-to-day governing, he found out that he could not. Rhetoric creates the public perception of a president. Bush engaged in creating such perceptions during the buildup to the Gulf War, but in its aftermath the rhetoric he had employed seemed divorced from reality. Perhaps he could have continued to construct a favorable image of himself and the world for the American public, but he did not. Instead, he chose the more honest route by governing in the way he thought best. For his efforts, he was voted out of office.
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