

## Iraqi aggression, oil, and power

The **Gulf War** started on August 2, 1990 when the forces of Iraqi dictator **Saddam Hussein** invaded oil-rich Kuwait. Hussein hoped that Kuwait's oil reserves would help to pay off the massive debt Iraq had accrued in its recent war with Iran, as well as give Iraq significant bargaining power as the gatekeeper to Middle Eastern oil.



Map of the Persian Gulf region. [Map](#) adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

Map showing Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

US officials worried that the invasion of Kuwait might be Iraq's first step in a larger effort to consolidate its power over other nations in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. With about one million soldiers in its armed forces, the Iraq Army was the world's fourth largest military force—in part, ironically, because the United States had furnished weapons to Iraq to aid in its fight against Iran. (The United States and Iran had been on bad terms since 1979, when Islamic fundamentalists had ousted the pro-American government in Iran and [taken American embassy workers hostage](#).)

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait posed a geopolitical oil crisis. If Saddam Hussein gained control of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he would have control over twenty percent of world oil reserves and become the world's dominant oil power. As President George H.W. Bush explained, "Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein.

The United States and United Nations Security Council immediately condemned the invasion. The Security Council passed resolutions placing economic sanctions on Iraq and set a deadline of January 15, 1991 for Iraq to withdraw forces from Kuwait.

## **The Gulf War**

The response to the invasion of Kuwait took place in two stages:

### **Operation Desert Shield (August 1990 - January 17, 1991)**

Five days after Iraq invaded Kuwait, President Bush commenced Operation Desert Shield. Building a 34-nation coalition in the United Nations and enhancing US troop strength in the region to more than 500,000, the president explained Operation Desert Shield as "a line in the sand"—both to protect Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait.

### **Operation Desert Storm (January 17 - February 28, 1991)**

Operation Desert Storm was the combat phase of the conflict. It began with a five-week bombing campaign of some 2,000 sorties a day that employed "smart bombs"—bombs able to find their target with pinpoint

accuracy—against a broad range of strategic Iraqi targets. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, and General Norman Schwarzkopf orchestrated the US-led attack.



US Air Force war planes flying over burning oil wells during Operation Desert Storm, 1991. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Iraq, in turn, launched largely-ineffective short-range "Scud" missiles at civilian and military targets in Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Gulf War was the first American conflict shown on live television (though footage from the Vietnam War was shown on TV, video coverage of events lagged by several days). CNN aired live images of bombs exploding and other events of the war onto people's home television sets.

## The end of the Gulf War

After the four-day ground campaign, by February 28, Iraqi forces fled Kuwait (having set fire to hundreds of oil wells). President Bush declared a ceasefire, and the Gulf War was over. Kuwait had been liberated.

Saddam Hussein was allowed to remain in power in Iraq, though Iraq was subsequently required to submit to searches for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). President Bush had built the UN coalition around removing Iraq from Kuwait, not around the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and the decision to allow Hussein to remain in power proved controversial.

The Gulf War was hardly the end of United States involvement in the Middle East. Rather, it signaled that at the end of the twentieth century, the foreign policy of the United States was becoming ever-more enmeshed in the politics of the Middle East.

Following the terrorist attacks of [September 11, 2001](#), a second war in Iraq began in 2003 after US intelligence agencies and spy agencies around the world asserted that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Was the United States led effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait a prudent one?

What did the United States hope to accomplish in the Gulf War?

What might the consequences have been if Iraq had been allowed to annex Kuwait?

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