The Gulf War Debate

Sally Student

Colorado Technical University

**Introduction**

In the summer of 1990, Iraqi forces invaded neighboring Kuwait. This was the first major international crisis since the end of the Cold War. Seeing the United States as a global leader and the continued necessity to spread freedom around the globe, George H.W. Bush forged a coalition of nations to stop the Iraqi invasion. While he saw the US military intervention in the Middle East as necessary to global peace and stability, some Americans disagreed with using the American military to intervene in conflicts in the Middle East.

**Summary**

On October 1, 1990, President George H.W. Bush went before the United Nations General Assembly to argue that Iraqi aggression towards their neighbors posed a threat to a world that was embracing democracy as communism began to crumble across eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. Bush talks of the role of the UN in creating a “new world order” based on “consultation, cooperation and collective action” (Bush, 1990). Bush wanted free trade and democracy to the be the main principles of this new world. And he sees the Iraqi government’s actions in Kuwait as a threat to this.

Thus, Bush was calling on the UN to take action. The United States supported the use of sanctions to force Iraq to withdraw. He also noted that he was not against the Iraqi people, but rather against the dictator, Saddam Hussein. The United States also supported sending humanitarian aid to help the people of both Iraq and Kuwait. Overall, Bush wanted the United Nations to take the lead, with US support, in stopping Iraqi aggression against its neighbors in the name of continuing to promote democracy.

Only a few months later, the United States was involved in military action in Iraq. In January of 1991, an antiwar rally was held in Washington, D.C. *The* *New York Times* covered the protest. According to *The New York Times* (1991)*,* there had been an active antiwar movement prior to American military action. People involved questions both the reasoning and morality of American involvement. Some argued that the war offered nothing for working-class people and was motivated by oil interests. Their ideas of what the war was about, protecting oil interests, did not coincide with the fight for freedom that Bush articulated at the UN.

Since the fighting broke out, people like David Pierce had begun to rally around the troops. “When bombs are falling, there’s a natural inclination of people to rally round the flag and not seem unpatriotic” (Applebome, 1991). Polls showed that there had been a surge in approval for the president and the war since fighting began. This was hindering the antiwar movement. The movement was also being hindered by divisions within over whether an immediate withdrawal or a cease-fire was the best course of action. *The* *New York Times* concluded that the antiwar movement was weakened by the beginning of military action. Similar to what Bush said about being against the dictator but for the Iraqi people, so too did those opposed to the war talk about being for the troops but against the war.

**Context:**

Bush’s foreign policy has been described as reactionary. According to the Department of State Office of the Historian, “the team faced such radical and rapid global changes that the Department of State seemed capable only of reacting” (Bush Foriegn Policy, 2017). The late 1980s and early 1990s saw dramatic changes on the world stage. The ending of communist control in Eastern Europe led to the fall of Berlin Wall, the Chinese were cracking down of pro-democracy demonstrations, most infamously in Tiananmen Square, and South Africa was ending its long apartheid system. A wave of prodemocracy sentiment seemed to be sweeping the world at a rapid pace. And the Bush administration saw the United States as the natural leader of this movement.

The Gulf War was an extension of Bush’s effort to continue to promote democracy and freedom. The dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and his aggressive moves towards annexing his neighbor Kuwait, were in direct opposition to Bush’s vision of a “new world order” (Bush, 1990). Bush’s speech and the eventual American military involvement in Kuwait and Iraq demonstrates that America saw itself as the dominate power in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and that it was the United States mission to continue to help the spread of freedom and democracy.

**The Issue Today**

Today, President Donald Trump speaks about an “America First” policy. According to the White House, a better future for America will be built on the assertion of “American sovereignty and the right of all nations to determine their own futures” (Foreign Policy, 2017). This means that America should stand on its own as should other nations. All nations should be free to make their own decisions about their government and path forward without interference from other nations.

This is a departure from the interventionalist policies of George H. W. Bush. Whereas Bush wanted the United States to work in conjunction with other nations, primary through the UN, to stop the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President Trump would argue that the United States should look out for its own interests first. Trump does not want the United States to get entangled with the affairs of other nations. If put in the same situation as George H. W. Bush, I do not think that Trump would make the same decision. I do not think he would have gotten involved unless it began to impact American safety and sovereignty.

**Conclusion**

George H.W. Bush saw American and UN involvement in Kuwait as a necessity to spread freedom in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Many Americans disagreed with military action in the Middle East and saw the war as a move to protect American oil interest. The US continues to be entangled in Middle East affairs today. However, our current administration is much less likely to take such interventionalist action.

**References**

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