

# Empire of the Son

*How George Bush rewrote the book on the imperial presidency*

by James David Barber

*T*ime magazine asked the question with a cover story marking the anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait: WAS IT WORTH IT? By any meaningful standard, the answer is no. There was no true liberation of Kuwait, no restoration of human rights in the region, no toppling of Saddam Hussein, no peacemaking, no strengthened nuclear security. The United States, which George Bush famously promised would become “a kinder, gentler nation,” killed tens of thousands of people, sent forth disease and starvation, and triggered and then permitted massive murder and torture by the enemy.

But this debate over the outcome of Operation Desert Storm, though welcome at long last, has obscured one of the most important long-term costs of the war, incurred even before the first bombs hit the ground on the night of January 16: the damage to democracy, which is supposed to govern American war-making and all other policy. Bush has established a precedent for future American presidents, acting alone, to enter major wars.

To be sure, other presidents stepped beyond their constitutional authority to launch adventures abroad. But none ever approached the scale achieved by Bush, who, by drawing on his predecessors’ examples, has created a model for an American monarchy—the rule by one—in the conduct of foreign policy.

That Bush has done so, given his character and beliefs, should come as no major surprise. Bush was thought of early on as a wimp, a latter-day Warren G. Harding who would swing along with the people around him. Not so. Considered in light of his life’s important turning points, Bush’s Iraqi adventure was predictable. As he declared in accepting the

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Republican presidential nomination, "I am a man who sees life in terms of missions"—missions that have tended to be driven less by specific goals than by a vague quest for adventure and self-reliance. Bush embarked on his first mission, he says, when he left on his eighteenth birthday to serve as the youngest Navy pilot in World War II. In so doing, Bush ignored the objections of both his parents—and not incidentally escaped his longstanding fear of his father and the interference of his mother. He once explained his decision to go like this: "I had a very powerful father. . . . Very much of a leader and admired by everybody, and I didn't want to do something on his, I had a kind of a, not a competitive thing with him, but I wanted to go out and do something on my own."

The second mission came after Bush graduated from Yale. Dismissing his father's efforts to land him a Wall Street sinecure, he struck out in 1948 for West Texas (albeit with his family's financial backing): "I had a soft job on Wall Street all set, but I wanted to do something"—that phrase again—"on my own." The third revealing assertion of will came in 1975, when Gerald Ford offered Bush, at the time chairman of the Republican National Committee, the ambassadorship to either France or England. Bush asked for China. Again, his reasons seemed personal but vague. According to him, "The best future we could imagine was one that took us as far as possible from the immediate past. . . . We'd come to a decision much like the one we made in 1948."

Studying this background against a model I had used to examine previous presidents, I described Bush in *The New York Times*, before he was inaugurated, this way:

His character is active-positive, a pattern that means he is ready to learn, to change, to develop in office, as distinct from the fixated types, such as Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson. . . . The pattern strongly suggests that Bush sees himself as enlivened and inspired by a mission into a new, different, distant, unknown land. Could he move out into the real world and take on the challenge of forging peace and justice, not in the failed Reagan manner but in a new and different way? Given Bush's past, that is conceivable. He is not stuck with consistency.

On the other hand, Bush's hunger for mission could carry us all over the brink of disaster. . . . The ultimate danger is war. That was Bush's first big mission. The inevitable frustration Reagan's left-over debt imposes on any domestic programs could make him angry. So could the natural desire of the press to avoid being spun as it was before and thus to criticize him as weak.

Congressional Democrats may well stand tall against his administration's recommendations . . . . Turning to a military cause, even beyond the dimension of the Grenada invasion that Bush helped orchestrate, is always going to be a temptation for this president.

In the fall of 1990, the Bush budget was getting creamed in Congress. The president's popularity ratings were sagging amid headlines like "Bush Wavers" that recalled the wimp image. And so, thanks to Bush's long-suppressed autocratic tendencies, a weak-kneed response from Congress, and cheerleading from the press, war came.

## Madisonian hypocrisy

Although it may be tricky to divine the Founders' intent regarding an issue like the regulation of cable television, no such confusion exists when it comes to the question of war—a public policy dilemma with which they were richly familiar. They were unequivocal about where warmaking power should reside. At the Constitutional Convention, one delegate put forth a proposal "for vesting the power in the president" to make war. No other member backed him up. James Madison stated that "executive powers . . . do not include the rights of war and peace." George Mason was clearly opposed to "giving power of war to the executive because [he is] not to be trusted with it." James Wilson, a leading figure, said of the Constitution, "This system will not hurry us into war; it is calculated to guard us against it. It will not be in the power of a single man, or a single body of men, to involve us in such distress." The Americans had explicitly rejected the British system, under which the sovereign had free reign in foreign policy, including military matters. In contrast, George Washington followed the direction of Congress throughout the Revolutionary War and on into his presidency. Yes, over the years, complexities did grow in the law, but the basic principle remains clear. When it comes to war, the policy of the United States is to be decided by debate and decree by congressmen, representing the people. Only then is the policy to be executed by the president.

Many presidents have abused that principle—and benefitted politically from doing so. The exceptions to this rule are those presidents who failed to win quick battles. Lyndon Johnson entered the Vietnam war by means of a fairy tale that the U.S. had been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congress hastily wrote him a blank check, resolving that "the Congress approves and supports the determination of the president, as commander in chief, to take all nec-

essary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Eventually Johnson decided not to run again, in part because of the stain of the drawn-out conflict. Similarly, while Jimmy Carter's expedition to Iran may have been brief, it was an unmistakable disaster, and he too paid dearly. But where the military action was over swiftly and the president could establish at least the appearance of success—as Reagan did in Libya and Grenada, and even Ford did with the *Mayaguez*—the ends, in the public's mind, justified the extralegal means. Thus a president gained by breaking his oath of office, in which he promised to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." Bush's innovation was to massively escalate the size of his unconstitutional deployments, to take no chances that the conflict wouldn't be short and sweet.

Bush applied this new formula first in Panama and then in Iraq. As reported by Bob Woodward in *The Commanders*, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney expressed the cynicism underlying the strategy most baldly: "He felt strongly that if the use of force turned out to be successful, if the objectives were achieved at the lowest possible cost and casualty levels, it wouldn't matter what kind of debate or vote there had been in Congress."

## The warrior king

Rather than merely propose a policy and try to rally the country to it, Bush determined what that policy would be, then convinced—by means that included deceit and bribery—the public and our allies to go along. He sent an enormous military force overseas, committed the U.S. to military alliances with other nations, and set a deadline for the biggest American assault since World War II—all before there was any policy determination by Congress.

On August 3, 1990, Bush said "We are not discussing intervention," though he phoned the king of Saudi Arabia to say that he would stand by the Saudis militarily. Congress adjourned for its usual month-long vacation, but it left behind a committee to con-

fer with the president and to call a special session should the need arise. Although Secretary of State James Baker declared his conviction that the president could make the decision to attack without consultation at all, at the time no one really thought a

massive deployment, much less an American assault, was remotely possible. As the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized, "Hundreds of thousands of American fighting men are not going to be put into the ferociously hostile environment of Saudi Arabia. That won't happen because Congress would never approve such a commitment." But by August 19, some observers were beginning to perceive the staggering outlines of Bush's policy. "In only 15 days," wrote Michael Wines in *The New York Times*, "while

Congress was scattered on summer recess and much of official Washington was on vacation, senior Bush administration officials have committed the United States to its broadest and most hazardous overseas military venture since the Vietnam war." Senator Joe Biden was shocked. "This is a big, big deal. . . . I never contemplated talk of 250,000 troops," he said, calling for "not only some consultation, but some extensive debate."

Bush, however, continued to reassure the public about his intentions. He went on TV to tell the American people:

I want to be clear about what we are doing and why. America does not seek conflict, nor do we seek to chart the destiny of other nations. But America will stand by her friends. *The mission of our troops is wholly defensive.* Hopefully, they will not be needed long. *They will not initiate hostilities, but they will defend themselves, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and other friends in the Persian Gulf.*

That line was echoed by the small group of men that served as Bush's war council. On August 29, on "Nightline," Cheney declared: "Well, again we'll come back to the proposition that our dispositions in the region are defensive. We're there to deter and to defend. . . . [B]ut we're not there in an offensive capacity, we're not there threatening Iraq."

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contemplating his colonies,  
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emotions as though the  
country's actions turned upon  
him alone:**

**I want peace.  
I will continue to be patient.  
Consider me provoked.  
I've had it.**

Both men came on clear as a bell. And both men lied. They had been planning for the possibility of an American attack from the very first meeting called at Camp David to discuss the Iraqi invasion. But Bush kept his cards close to his vest. As November approached and plans for what would become Operation Desert Storm began to jell, Bush ordered that

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they be kept secret, deliberately seeking to prevent the war from becoming an issue of debate in the coming elections. Heaven forbid the American people should have the opportunity to vote up or down on sending their troops into battle.

Two days after the elections, Bush ordered 200,000 more men to Saudi Arabia and dispatched Baker to the UN to secure support for an American attack. Without any consultation with Congress, Baker proceeded to line up backing for the president's objectives by any means necessary.

The United Nations

was paid \$187 million and China \$140 million; the Soviet Union got a promise of \$7 billion, and millions more went to Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and Egypt. In other words, the notion that the UN Security Council fell in behind the U.S. simply because of the overpowering righteousness of our cause just isn't true. It did so because of a series of international commitments made not by the U.S., but by one unelected official, the secretary of state, reporting only to the president.

While he was dispensing favors to foreign dignitaries, Bush showed no such solicitude toward the representatives of the American people. Sam Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, learned of the new deployment only one hour before the plans became public. Bush continued to try to downplay the possibility of an American attack—a difficult balancing act, since he was attempting to calm the American people and scare Saddam Hussein at the same time. He reassured congressional leaders on November 14 that “I have not crossed any Rubicon,” urging them not to call a special session unless

they planned to vote to support him. Such a blank check did not appear to be forthcoming. Robert Dole, the Senate minority leader, declared that restoring the emir of Kuwait to power was not “worth one American life, as far as I’m concerned.” But, although Nunn held hearings at which retired general after former secretary of defense after retired general argued for economic sanctions, not war, Congress, perhaps snowed by Bush, perhaps too chicken to assert its authority, failed to meet and decide. Many congressmen began to object by letters and speeches as they saw thousands of Americans protesting the war. But no plain and simple meeting of the people’s representatives took up the question until the final hours.

Which left the field entirely to the president. Day after day, the question of whether we would have war or peace focused increasingly on the thoughts and feelings of George Bush. The result was a bewildering series of reversals that seemed to correspond more to the president’s mood swings than to any coherent policy. On December 16, Bush announced on television that U.S. action so far had left Saddam Hussein “still unconvinced.” Two days later, he noted that “my gut says he will get out of there.” At the beginning of the new year, he declared that he alone would decide for or against war, no matter what the Congress or the public had to say. Like King George III contemplating his colonies, Bush increasingly described his emotions as though the country’s actions turned upon him alone:

I want peace.

I will continue to be patient.

I will not say exactly what I will do.

Consider me provoked.

I’m not all that hopeful.

I want Congress on board.

I want ’em all home, as soon as possible.

I don’t feel we are close to a peaceful solution.

I do not have that much of a feel.

I’ve had it.

In the past, Bush held back from imperial pronouncements. His habit was to delete the first person pronoun, giving rise to those choppy, subjectless sentences so beloved by comedians. When, as a boy, he occasionally bragged about himself, his mother would scold him, just as she did during his run for the presidency: “You’re talking about yourself too much, George.” By the time of the Iraqi campaign, however, President George Bush was no longer his mother’s little boy. He was a man on a mission, doing something on his own—even if he still wasn’t sure what the long-term goal was.

And at long last, the UN-specified deadline was bearing down. On January 6, Bush discussed with

Cheney the possibility of finally bringing Congress into the game. Cheney opposed the idea since he felt there was a good chance Congress would reject Bush's policy. But the point was moot: The next day, Speaker Tom Foley announced that the House of Representatives would debate a resolution on the use of force in the Persian Gulf. Unfortunately, the debate itself was moot. By the time Congress convened, the talks in Geneva had failed, and the president and his advisers had decided on war. The notion that war was inevitable hung over the entire so-called debate—really a series of speeches before television cameras and empty galleries. Even Sam Nunn, the leader of the forces opposed to war, limply conceded during his otherwise brilliant speech, "I expect I will not be on the prevailing side." By then, opposing the president could seem only unpatriotic and cowardly. As historian Garry Wills observed, "The personalizing of this matter as support for the president, as if that were support for the nation, is indicative of the loss we have undergone of our original ideals. We are being asked to do the king's will."

As Bush prepared to dispatch bombers over Iraq and Kuwait, he came before the American people and made a strong, false claim: "As a democracy, we've debated this issue openly and in good faith, and as president I have held extensive consultation with Congress." There followed more than a month of bombing before American tanks started rolling north. One hundred hours after the ground war started, Bush suddenly ordered a cease-fire—a decision that caught even his own field commanders off guard. The Gulf war was over, as it had begun, by official proclamation of George Bush.

## Spoils of war

Back in 1788, Patrick Henry thought he could see it all coming:

Your president could easily become king. . . . If your American chief be a man of ambition and abilities, how easy is it for him to render himself absolute! The army is in his hands, and if he be a man of address, it will be attached to him. . . . Away with your president! We shall have a king: The army will salute him monarch . . . and what have you to oppose this force? What will then become of you and your rights? Will not absolute despotism ensue?

War can kill democracy. This could happen in the United States. The danger is real when a president takes over national policy, trashing government by consent of the governed instead of turning to

Congress to decide policy in advance of action. That is the perilous example Bush has set: Use swift, decisive force, even in violation of the Constitution, and you will profit politically. Thanks to Bush's precedent, his successors will inherit both a strategy for political mastery and the power to enact it, power far beyond what this democracy ever intended, power for the president to move worldwide with death-dealing force on his own initiative. If there is a single lesson that the historical experience of monarchy teaches, it is that, even in the best case, a good king with good luck sets the stage for the opposite. As domestic irritations like bank failures and urban crime continue to mount and as trouble flares in faraway lands like Georgia, India, and Mozambique, a future president will feel free to dispatch hundreds of thousands of fighting men to pacify the natives and to boost his own popularity ratings at home.

Of all the bitter lessons we've harvested from the war in the Gulf, that one may prove the most tragic. But despair won't help. To revive democracy, we must exert a strong political effort to stop monarchy, and to commit this nation to the form of government we honor when we salute the flag: to the *republic* for which it stands. □

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# MEMO OF THE MONTH

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### Steps in the Revision Process:

- One    Responsible Office identifies need for change in Manual Section and contacts Planning and Policy Analysis (PPA).
- Two    PPA works with Responsible Office to create Briefing Paper describing proposed revisions.
- Three    PPA sends announcement of Policy Revision Review Meeting and Briefing Paper to Affected Offices.
- Four    Affected Offices present prepared comments on proposed revisions at Policy Revision Review Meeting.
- Five    PPA prepares Summary of Comments from the Policy Revision Review Meeting.
- Six    PPA sends Summary of Comments, Briefing Paper and Decision Memo to ADs, COS and General Counsel.
- Seven    PPA sends Decision Memo for approval of Briefing Paper to Director with Summary of Comments and Senior Staff's Decision Memos.
- Eight    PPA revises Manual Section for approval by Responsible Office.
- Nine    PPA sends Clearance Memo with revised Manual Section to ADs, COS and General Counsel.
- Ten    PPA sends Transmittal Letter for final approval of revised Manual Section to Director with Senior Staff's Clearance Memos.
- Eleven    PPA manages reproduction and distribution of revised Manual Section.