

## NSD-54 Reveals the Shocking Truth about the first Gulf War by Mark R. Gery

Last week marked the 26th anniversary of the end of our illustrious campaign to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army.

Remember that war? Our very first engagement with Iraq? The one that *ushistory.org* calls a “smashing success”<sup>1</sup> and that *Wikipedia* still describes as a “decisive victory” for the American-led coalition?<sup>2</sup>

Never mind that we have been embroiled with Iraq in one way or another ever since.

The day the first Gulf War ended, February 28th 1991, leading American papers set the tone for understanding the six-week conflict: “Iraqis Crushed,” said the front page of the The New York Times.<sup>3</sup> A “military defeat” for Saddam, declared the Washington Post.<sup>4</sup> An “allied route,” observed the Los Angeles Times.<sup>5</sup>

Even The New York Times veteran military affairs writer Michael R. Gordon—co-author of perhaps the most critical book on the conflict—deemed the engagement with Saddam’s forces an American “victory” and a “defeat for the Iraqi military” only hours after the fighting ended.<sup>6</sup>

George H. W. Bush, our then Commander-in-Chief, was quick to confirm the victory claims: “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all,” the president declared the day after the war ended.<sup>7</sup>

Echoing Bush’s praise was Britain’s Prime Minister, John Major: “The war aims were met,” said our chief ally in the Gulf campaign, “and they were met comprehensively.”<sup>8</sup>

But was this truly the case? Did the US, Britain, and their coalition allies really accomplish all they set out to do 26 years ago?

The evening before the first Gulf War started—January 15th 1991—Bush’s National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft, came to see the President in his Oval Office to gain final authorization for the pending conflict. In his hand was NATIONAL SECURITY DIRECTIVE 54, the three-page, official document that approved the attack on Iraq and gave specific guidance to it.

Ever since the end of World War II, American presidents have utilized National Security Directives (also called Presidential Directives, National Security Council, National Security Decision Directives, and National Security Action Memorandums) to extend written instruction to their respective administrations and/or to the nations military.

Such directives are often classified and not to be confused with Executive Orders (such as President Trump’s recent travel ban on select countries), which, by law, must be published in the *Federal Register* and in the annual volumes of the *Code of Federal Regulations*.<sup>9</sup>

Harry S. Truman was the first to employ a presidential directive document, authorizing US covert action in Italy's national elections by way of NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL 1/1.<sup>10</sup> Truman's successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, made extensive use of directives, such as implementing a psychological warfare campaign against the communist block [NSC-127/1] and stating US political and military objectives in South Korea after the Korean War [NSC-157].

In 1961 President Kennedy issued NATIONAL SECURITY ACTION MEMORANDUM 38, or NSAM-38, calling for US guerrilla operations to begin in Vietnam, while his successor, President Johnson, utilized NSAM-314 to order an escalation in US involvement in the Gulf of Tonkin.

From Nixon's parameters for withdrawing troops from South Vietnam [NSDM-9] to Ronald Reagan's mandate to counter the Soviet Union's military deception program [NSDD-108], US Presidents and their national security staffs formulated, signed, and disseminated presidential directives (by whatever name) so that every member of the administration read from the same playbook and was absolutely clear on the president's intention. In almost all cases, such White House directives were carried out in full or altered by further official instruction, as circumstances dictated.

Which brings us to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990. Three weeks after that fateful event, President Bush signed NATIONAL SECURITY DIRECTIVE 45, the White House's official internal response to the crisis. Among NSD-45's mandates was the continuance of United Nations sanctions on Baghdad and the deployment of American military forces to the Persian Gulf.

But NSD-45 was just the warm-up for the Bush team's main event, NATIONAL SECURITY DIRECTIVE 54. Written up by Scowcroft and his chief Middle East aide, Richard Haass (currently president of the influential *Council on Foreign Relations*), NSD-54 condemned Saddam's brazen defiance of international norms and then spelled out America's response to it.

To "promote the security and the stability of the Persian Gulf," the directive read, "...U.S. and coalition forces should seek to:

- a. defend Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states against attack;
- b. preclude Iraqi launch of ballistic missiles against neighboring states and friendly forces;
- c. destroy Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities;
- d. destroy Iraq's command, control, and communications capabilities;
- e. eliminate the Republican Guard as an effective fighting force; and
- f. conduct operations designed to drive Iraq's forces from Kuwait, break the will of Iraqi forces, discourage Iraqi use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, encourage defection of Iraqi forces, and weaken Iraqi popular support for the current government."

(These explicit war aims can be viewed in the original document *here*: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd54.pdf>.)

Kept under wraps until June of 1997, NSD-54 was read and signed by President Bush that final night before the war, then copied and distributed to the entire Bush cabinet, including Vice President Quayle, head of CIA (William Webster), and the Secretary's of State (James Baker) and Defense (Dick Cheney) and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (Colin Powell), among others.

At that point, everyone in the top tier of the White House knew what the war was about and the overall war plan.

24 hours later, as US Stealth aircraft and missiles began unleashing their ordinance over Iraq's capital, Baghdad, President Bush addressed the nation live and reiterated his chief objectives: "We are determined to knock out Saddam's nuclear bomb potential. We will also destroy his chemical weapons facilities. Much of Saddam's artillery and tanks will be destroyed. Our operations are designed to best protect the lives of all the coalition forces by targeting Saddam's vast military arsenal," Bush stated before the cameras. (see video clip *here*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFrnQHaQWoA>, 2:10 mark)

For the next five-and-a-half weeks, as members of the White House nervously watched from half-a-world away, American and coalition air assets tried determinably to accomplish the goals set out in NSD-54. Guided Tomahawk cruise missiles smashed into all known Iraqi command and non-conventional weapons sites; American and British fighter aircraft crisscrossed Iraq in pursuit of Saddam's elusive SCUD missile launchers; and US B-52 crews dropped thousands of dumb-bombs on Republican Guard positions in southern Iraq.

Then came the ground war. Since most Iraqi troops had not visibly left Kuwait, over 250,000 highly trained US soldiers and marines, side-by-side with troops from Britain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, launched one of the most intricately planned ground attacks in modern history.

Four days later, it was all over. Apart from a few Iraqi stragglers, Kuwait was liberated from the enemy, its citizens were openly celebrating in their capital, and the hulks of burning and busted Iraqi tanks littered the landscape.

But what about the official war goals as expressly laid out in NSD-54? Had they been accomplished in the relatively brief battle?

Not by a long-shot.

While the US air force was working hard to knock out enemy assets in Iraq, Saddam's regular army in Kuwait was preparing to advance south across the border into Saudi Arabia. On the evening of January 29th, Iraqi armored units moved into the desert kingdom at several points, using knowledge of US spy satellites picked up during the Iran-Iraq War to avoid detection, as seen *here*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUMAyIOTPA>, 1:36:48 mark.

Due to negligence by the US air force—Gen. Buster Glosson later described it as "not the Air Force's best day"<sup>11</sup>—several hundred men and dozens of tanks and armored personnel carriers were able to egress a full ten miles into Saudi territory and occupy the coastal city of Khafji. King Fahd and the Saudi

leadership were outraged at the mishap, calling for the entire city to be leveled by B-52 strikes.

Despite coalition efforts to drive them out quickly, the Iraqis remained in Khafji almost three full days until Baghdad gave permission for a hasty withdrawal under fire. So much for defending Saudi Arabia against an Iraqi attack, the first of NSD-54's goals for war.

Contributing mightily to the failure at Khafji was the Air Force's counter-SCUD campaign that, according to some reports, occupied up to a third of the coalition's air assets. Many of the planes pursuing the SCUDS were scheduled to go after Iraqi forces in Kuwait, but the political priority of keeping Israel out of the war necessitated the redirecting of dozens of high-tech ground-attack aircraft, as well as US spy satellite's looking down from on high.

From the second day of the war on, Saddam launched surface-to-surface missiles on Israel and Saudi Arabia, sometimes five or more at a time. (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llV-jTDTXOc>, 1:09 mark) In Tel Aviv, the capital of Israel, dozens of homes and apartments were destroyed by SCUDS and hundreds of people injured, though the government claimed only one or two fatalities.

The worst SCUD attack occurred near the end of the war, and claimed 27 American lives, wounding 98. Thus, the second military objective of NSD-54, precluding Iraqi launch of ballistic missiles against neighboring states, went entirely unachieved.

Goal three of Bush's official war directives was also not attained. Though US, British and other coalition aircraft tried their best to bomb Saddam's chemical weapons stockpiles and his nuclear and biological program facilities, the Iraqis had placed a good number of their best air defense weapons at the most important sites. Iraqi AAA (anti-aircraft artillery) and surface-to-air missiles warded off most low-flying planes, dramatically reducing targets struck on the ground.

In addition, the Iraqis had dispersed their chemical arms far and wide, and the nuclear research sites were far more numerous than the coalition knew at the time. The failure to get to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was laid out by Barry D. Watts, then head of the Air Force's *Gulf War Air Power Survey's* work on operations and effectiveness:

...Coalition air forces were unable to target the Iraqi nuclear program effectively during Desert Storm, much less destroy it...the Iraqis displayed a surprising capacity to evacuate, further disperse, and hide program elements, including nuclear material, once the campaign began...while Iraqi work on nuclear weapons was halted by Desert Storm and many elements damaged or dispersed, the Coalition failed to achieve its operational objective of eliminating Iraq's nuclear program.<sup>12</sup>

In regard to Iraq's biological weapons facilities, coalition forces successfully bombed two of five known sites, but the Iraqis had withdrawn all important equipment from these locations beforehand. Often times, only the concrete structures were damaged. The three remaining facilities survived the war with almost no damage.

Destroying Iraq's command, control and communication capabilities—objective four in NSD-54—proved to be just as difficult for the coalition. Like his WMD facilities, Hussein had built many more command and control sites than US intelligence knew. Practically all were linked by fiber-optic cable networks and powered by remote batteries and generators, so that even if US planes got to their power sources and communication links, backup systems were available.

During the war, coalition officials denied going after Saddam Hussein personally, saying that the defiant Iraqi leader stood a good chance of being taken out, but only as “collateral damage.”

In truth, there was a concentrated effort to kill Saddam by way of two GBU-28 “bunker buster's,” but that quest was foiled when Hussein scooted away from the underground command target beforehand.

As is clear, not only did Iraq's top commander survive the Gulf War, but so did the bulk of Iraq's control and communication capabilities and the officers that manned them. Coalition air attacks “might have had more impact if the US had had the kind of intelligence to know what C4 facilities [command, control, communications, computers] were critical,” observed defense analyst and author Anthony H. Cordesman. “In practice, however, the attacks seem to have done little more than reduce connectivity and impose some disruptive effects.”<sup>13</sup>

The most crucial military mission listed in NSD-54 was the destruction of Iraq's elite Republican Guard, Saddam's most loyal troops. 110,000 strong, this was the force that had bested the Iranian army at the end of the Iran-Iraq War and that had taken over Kuwait in a matter of hours. Equipped with 1,000 T-72 tanks—many of them loaded with extra armor—the Guard stood as Baghdad's primary offensive asset as well as Saddam's chief bulwark against attack from within.

It was for these reasons that the Republican Guard force in southern Iraq was on the receiving end of the most concentrated bombing of the war. “I want you to destroy the Republican Guard,” Gen. Schwarzkopf commanded his top officers before the war. “When you're done with them, I don't want them to be an effective fighting force anymore. I don't want them to exist as a military organization...and if they draw back behind the border that's fine with us. That's bullshit! We are going to destroy the Republican Guard,”<sup>14</sup> the burly head of CENTCOM said.

But here, too, elaborate Iraqi counter-measures foiled the coalitions efforts again and again. Dug-in tanks and troops, searing air defense in many areas, thick smoke screens, dummy weapons and more dispersment techniques kept

air force leaders guessing about where the real targets were and about how many of them they had actually destroyed.

When the ground war was finally engaged, Colin Powell beckoned to Schwarzkopf: “Make sure the Republican Guard doesn’t escape.”<sup>15</sup>

But it was not to be. With the US army’s advance bogged down by Iraqi conscripts, unexploded ordinance and terrible weather, Schwarzkopf’s armored units were unable to get to most of the Guard as they trekked north toward the Euphrates River.

With thick cloud cover and smoke from burning oil wells grounding most coalition air assets, 80-100,000 enemy troops and their equipment were well out of harms way by the time of the cease-fire.

“The Gulf War was poorly conducted operationally,” observed Dr. Collin S. Gray, Professor of International Politics and Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, England, “with far too much of the regime’s Republican Guard being permitted to escape.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the first five military goals for Operation Desert Storm—as officially stated in NSD-54—were all unachieved.

Assessing success for the other goals of the war is a little more complicated. In strict military terms, Iraq’s troop pullback in the final four days of the conflict was not a panicked retreat under pressure—as specified in the directives to “break the will of Iraqi forces” and to “drive Iraq’s forces from Kuwait”—but an organized, if somewhat forced, withdrawal. What was left on the battlefield was largely a delaying force, consisting of smaller Guard units, some regular army infantry, and the untrained conscripts.

In regard to discouraging “Iraqi use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons,” there is really no way to tell for sure why Saddam opted not to use these deadly arms. It may just be that he stood by his prewar pledge to only use those weapons that were commensurate with those used against him, i.e., conventional arms, such as tanks, missiles and air power.

As for the 85,000 Iraqi conscripts that surrendered before and during the ground war, it is a big stretch to say they “defected,” since many had been given orders to fire one shot at the approaching enemy, and then surrender *en masse* to slow the coalition advance. What’s more, few Iraqi troops ever had a chance to actually defect, as almost the entire war was conducted from the air, with little face-to-face contact until the very end.

The last objective of NSD-54 was to “weaken Iraqi popular support for the current government.” Here the US-led coalition made significant progress. They wrecked havoc Iraq’s civilian infrastructure from the air, disabling the electrical grid, water treatment plants, and the telephone exchange. Dozens of bridges, transportation terminals and even food warehouses were targeted in the hope of turning the population against the government.

During the war itself, little unrest was observed, but a few days after the conflict, thousands of Iraqis in southern Iraq—bolstered by hundreds of anti-Saddam refugees from Iran and some defecting troops—went after regime officials wherever they could find them.

Hundreds of Iraqi administrative officials—both men and women—were apprehended and executed by the rebellious mobs, who were convinced that Saddam’s best troops had been vanquished. Schwarzkopf, Bush, and others had suggested as much before the press, motivating the regimes opponents to try and take power by force.

Tragically, it was not to be. A few days after leaving their positions in southern Iraq, the Guards regrouped and went after the rebels with a vengeance. Shiite and Kurdish fighters were driven back with blasts from modern rocket launchers, while lethal Soviet attack helicopters overwhelmed those trying to flee. Thousands of rebels were killed, including civilians caught in the cross-fire, and the central government’s authority was quickly restored.

These are the startling facts concerning the set goals for the Gulf War as outlined in NATIONAL SECURITY DIRECTIVE 54. All but one of the primary goals were left unachieved, and those Iraqis that answered NSD-54’s call to rise up were decisively cut to pieces by those same troops—the Republican Guards—slated to be destroyed.

While it is true that Kuwait was vacated by the Iraqis in February of 1991—a short-term gain for that country for sure—this was hardly the extent of what the US was trying to accomplish. Schwarzkopf himself was forthright about this, stating during the ground attack, “I would say that there is a lot more purpose to this war than just getting the Iraqis out of Kuwait.”<sup>17</sup>

Those military men, analysts, historians and others that would continue to maintain that the United States won the Gulf War simply because the Iraqis were out of Kuwait, must explain how Baghdad’s last-minute withdrawal maneuver somehow nullified the president’s greater war directives. Specifically, they must make clear how the US failure to vanquish Hussein, clip his WMD programs, and eliminate the Republican Guard—arguably the administration’s three most important war goals—could allow for a military victory in any sense of the word.

During the war, the core objectives listed in NSD-54 were never cancelled or altered, nor is there any evidence they decreased in priority as the fighting rolled toward its humbling climax.

On the contrary, the American 3rd Army’s pressured effort to catch and destroy the Republican Guard coupled with the Air Force’s concentrated attempt to drop a bomb on Saddam Hussein’s head demonstrates that Schwarzkopf and his CENTCOM staff had become, if anything, even *more* committed to the goals in NSD-54.

Though it was certainly true that the United States and its coalition partners destroyed more enemy equipment in the war, killed more enemy troops, won

most of the battles and skirmishes, and probably compelled the Iraqis to leave the war theatre by way of their impending ground advance, these were ancillary gains, since they were in no way accompanied by the completion of the main objectives as stated.

By any rational analysis, then, using the Commander-in-Chief's actual war directives as a guide, the United States suffered a strategic defeat in the Gulf War, both militarily and politically. Though never admitted by the White House, Pentagon officials, and practically every military analyst and journalist since, America's shocking *defeat* to Iraq in February of 1991 is a historic fact, prompting scores of vengeful strikes on Baghdad during the 90's, years of unwarranted sanctions on the Iraqi people, and an even greater military debacle in 2003, 12 years later.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ushistory.org/us/60a.asp>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_War)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, "BUSH HALTS OFFENSIVE COMBAT; KUWAIT FREED, IRAQIS CRUSHED" *The New York Times*, February 28, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> David Hoffman, "No Martyrdom for Saddam" *Washington Post* February 27, 1991; A01.

<sup>5</sup> "A Flawless Strategy for Victory," *Los Angeles Times*. A1. 2/27/91.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gordon, "Desert Missions By Commandos Aided in Victory" *The New York Times*, 3/1/91.

<sup>7</sup> Maureen Dowd, "White House Memo; War Introduces a Tougher Bush to Nation" *The New York Times*, March 2, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> C-SPAN video: "10th Anniversary of the Gulf War," 2/23/01, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?162751-1/10th-anniversary-gulf-war>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2013/02/eo\\_pd/](https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2013/02/eo_pd/).

<sup>10</sup> <http://digioll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=div&did=FRUS.FRUS1948v03.i0015&isize=text>

<sup>11</sup> PBS Frontline transcript, "The Gulf War."

<sup>12</sup> Clausewitzian Friction and Future War," rev. ed., McNair Paper 68 (Washington, D.C.; National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2004) p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Cordesman, Anthony and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons Of Modern War, Volume Iv: The Gulf War* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1999) 149.

<sup>14</sup> It Doesn't take a Hero, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Atkinson, Rick. *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War*, 406.

<sup>16</sup> Collin S. Gray, "Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory," <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub272.pdf>, April 2002, 31.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/28/world/war-gulf-commander-s-briefing-excerpts-schwarzkopf-conference-gulf-war.html?pagewanted=all>.