

The Moral Failures of Operation Desert Storm

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THE SUCCESSES OF Operation Desert Storm hardly need to be mentioned. The media have joined forces with politicians to praise the superior fighting ability of the United States military, the diverse international coalition that was maintained throughout the conflict, and, of course, the liberation of Kuwait. We are occasionally reminded of the disappointments of the war—Saddam Hussein's continuing stranglehold of power, Kuwait's and our other Arab allies' persistent human rights abuses and anti-democratic systems, the failure of attempts to convene a Middle East peace conference, and the suffering of the Kurdish and Shiite refugees, whom the world seemed to forget until it was too late.

These disappointments are seen as unfortunate elements of geopolitical reality, however, and have done little to dampen the national euphoria that has accompanied the Gulf war. This essay will not directly address the military, strategic, or geopolitical aspects of the war. Instead, it will examine the war experience in terms of moral and ethical standards. Unfortunately, the military and political successes came at the price of a compromise in moral integrity. The nation allowed itself to be cajoled and manipulated, through the rhetoric of jingoism and commercialized patriotism, into developing an unexamined conviction of our total moral correctness and forsaking the Christian mandate of compassion for one's neighbor.

A number of dangerous moral failures accompanied the violence that was waged against Iraq through Operation Desert Storm. First,

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the United States and its allies failed to abide by requirements of a "just war." Second, the nation has allowed itself to feel a savage pride over what was essentially an unnecessary slaughter of hapless, Third World conscripts sent into battle by a brutal tyrant and a disproportionate campaign of bomb attacks designed to destroy Iraq's infrastructure and return it to a "pre-industrial state." Finally, the nation has allowed itself to be dissuaded, or at least numbed, against a critical evaluation of the entire experience in terms of ethics, morality, and gospel principles. This final failure has occurred for several reasons, all of which are dangerous and morally wrong.

Two important requirements of a just war are widely accepted by religious and secular philosophers and explicitly set forth in Mormon scriptures (see D&C 98:33-34, Alma 43:47, Mormon 4:4): (1) violence must be a last resort after all peaceful methods have been exhausted, and (2) necessary violence must be carried out in such a way that it is proportional to the permissible goal of defending oneself or another nation.

Economic sanctions and diplomacy were the obvious means for persuading Iraq to leave Kuwait peacefully. The scale of the sanctions imposed against Iraq was unprecedented. They were initiated soon after the invasion, with the entire world participating. There were leaks, of course, but they were insignificant. There was no doubt that the embargo was seriously crippling Iraq's economy. In addition, many experts believed that sanctions would quickly erode the Iraqi military's ability to maintain combat readiness. We will never know whether sanctions could have successfully evicted Iraq from Kuwait, however, because they were not given enough time. Supporters of a violent response argued that we could not wait for sanctions to work, because Kuwait would be completely destroyed by the time sanctions worked (Wines 1990; Hufbauer and Elliott 1991).

The real time pressures were not imposed by this concern, however. After the congressional elections in November 1990, President Bush abruptly doubled the number of troops in Saudi Arabia and considerably increased their offensive capacity. It became clear that we could not maintain such a huge fighting force in the Gulf while waiting for sanctions to work, without incurring damaging losses in public support and troop morale. President Bush's action ensured that time would press the coalition more than it pressed the occupying Iraqis and that abandoning the sanctions was both strategically and politically expedient (Posen 1990).

It is also clear that the United States did not sincerely pursue a diplomatic solution. Iraq made several offers to withdraw from Kuwait. The first usually included a condition that there be some kind of Mid-

dle East peace conference to resolve the Palestinian issue. While it was prudent to view these offers skeptically, State Department officials and Middle East experts recognized that Iraq was taking a serious pre-negotiation position (Chomsky 1991; Radin 1991). The administration, however, rejected any possibility of discussing the offers, adopting an unprecedented opposition to what it called "linkage" (Friedman 1991). Both before and after the war, the administration has advocated "linkage" as a peaceful way to resolve crises involving aggression and occupation, particularly in the case of Israel's brutal occupation of territories previously belonging to its neighbors (Dickey 1991). What was cynically called "linkage" in this situation is typically referred to as "diplomacy" in other situations.

After bombing had begun and while the impending ground assault was approaching, Iraq offered to withdraw unconditionally, in accordance with a plan formulated by the Soviet Union. When President Bush voiced some concerns over the plan, the Soviets persuaded Iraq to modify its offer to make it even more favorable to the United States. Instead of seizing upon these offers as a possible means of resolving the crisis without unilaterally imposing more death and destruction than it had already imposed, the United States responded with inflexible ultimatums that were certain to be rejected by Saddam Hussein and thus ensured a ground war (Friedman and Tyler 1991; Watson 1991). The United States pursued a policy whose ultimate goal was clearly the violent removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the total humiliation of Saddam Hussein (Bennet 1991). Diplomacy, a requirement of a just war, was not genuinely pursued as an alternative to violence.

Both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants agree with long-accepted wisdom that only the need to defend oneself justifies violence. A permissible motive may extend to defending a fellow nation that has requested help. President Bush assured the nation on the day we attacked Iraq that our only goal was the liberation of Kuwait. It soon became clear, however, that this assurance was false (Bush 1991). The subsequent bombing was aimed not only at troops in occupied Kuwait, but also at targets in Iraq, many of which were as far away from Kuwait as northern Iraq and had no relation whatsoever to the goal of removing Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Military planners later conceded that a major goal of Operation Desert Storm was "to create postwar leverage over Iraq, not to influence the course of the conflict itself" (in Gellman 1991). By deliberately destroying essential facilities which allowed Iraq to support itself as an industrial society and which could not be repaired without foreign assistance, the administration hoped that the West would be able to assert influence in Iraq when

those facilities needed to be rebuilt or repaired after the war. The administration also expected that the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure would impel Iraqi citizens to overthrow Saddam Hussein. These goals violate the requirement that the violence waged during a war be proportional to a defensive motivation. While the liberation of Kuwait was a just motive, the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure clearly was not.

The war experience also led the nation to glorify with pride the high-tech warfare that we unilaterally waged against an effectively helpless Third World country and to ignore the destruction, death, and human misery wrought by our actions. The nation cheered at videos of bombs destroying buildings, bridges, factories, and power stations. The bombing of a shelter, which killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians, caused only a momentary and inconvenient lull in our lust for televised images of these glorious, computerized machines that purportedly delivered their bombs with cleanliness and precision.

It did not occur to most Americans that, in relentlessly bombing an entire country "back to the preindustrial age" (J. Mathews 1991) we were creating a situation which would necessarily lead to decades of suffering for the Iraqi people.

The effects of the bombing are already being felt. The international Committee of the Red Cross has recently warned of the beginnings of a "public health catastrophe of immense proportions" in Iraq (J. Mathews 1991). They were referring to the situation of fourteen million Iraqis, and not that of the 1.5 million Kurdish refugees. With electricity and sanitation systems virtually destroyed by the bombing, infectious and deadly diseases such as cholera and typhoid inevitably follow, bringing widespread suffering and death. Our collective conscience was mollified by the combined efforts of the media and our leaders, who, by presenting the war as a bloodless, large-scale video game and refusing to show images of injury or death, were able to suppress any awareness of the awesome destruction and instill only pride over the quality of our weapons and the skill of our soldiers. The public accepted this manipulation enthusiastically.

In reality, this war was one of the most one-sided military conflicts of recent memory. While fewer than two hundred American soldiers perished in the actual fighting, well over one hundred thousand Iraqis, many of them civilians, were killed. As military experts had correctly argued before the war, Iraq was no match for superior American military might (Posen 1990). The massacre reached immense proportions at the end of the ground war as allied bombers wiped out the Iraqi soldiers retreating from Kuwait City on the road to Al-Matlaa ridge. The retreating soldiers, unable to defend themselves as they fled, were bombed and shelled mercilessly. One pilot described the Iraqi soldiers

as “basically just sitting ducks” (Coll and Branigin 1991, 12). Nothing remains on that road but burned out vehicles and charred human remains, which some American soldiers described as “crispy critters” (Kelly 1991, 14). Where is the glory in this? The bombs, rockets, missiles, and artillery shells fired upon Iraq made this war the most firepower-intensive conflict since World War II. Operation Desert Storm was also unprecedented in its use of new, and often experimental, munitions whose effects were designed to be similar to those of tactical nuclear weapons. In addition to the relatively precise laser-guided bombs, we used fuel-air explosives, penetration bombs, and wide-area cluster bombs whose effects are cruel, brutal, and massively destructive (Klare 1991, 721).

It is one thing to wage a true war where the enemy is actually capable of fighting back. We would perhaps be rightly praised for our courage and skill in such a situation. However, where the enemy is totally outclassed and outgunned, and we are essentially engaged in a unilateral and unnecessary slaughter, it is difficult to find an explanation, other than bloodlust or abstract fascination with televised violence, for the astonishing pride and glorification that accompanied the use of our new, high-tech weapons. Months after Operation Desert Storm, boasting and self-congratulation continue over the performance of our soldiers and our weapons of destruction.

The situation is reminiscent of the attitude of King Noah’s people after they had won a decisive victory over the Lamanites:

And now, because of this great victory they were lifted up in the pride of their hearts; they did boast in their strength, saying that their fifty could stand against thousands of the Lamanites; and thus they did boast, and did delight in blood, and the shedding of the blood of their brethren, and this because of the wickedness of their king and priests. (Mosiah 11:19)

Conventional wisdom tells us that the war was a positive thing for the United States, if only because it has allowed us to feel patriotic again. The value of such “patriotism,” however, is questionable at best.

One newspaper recently had a front-page, full-color photograph of a soldier standing next to a Patriot missile launcher, with the headline, “A Patriot with a Patriot Launcher.” The photograph brought to mind the words of Spencer W. Kimball over ten years ago:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching:

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

“That you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44-45). (Kimball 1976, 6)

If the nation’s patriotic sentiment depends upon its ability to bomb a Third World country back to the Stone Age, then it is a patriotism that is not only pathetic but also built on a foundation contrary to gospel principles.

While it is understandable for the nation to feel pride over the fact that we helped to liberate Kuwait and joy over the safe return of our soldiers, the boastful self-congratulation and glorification associated with the destruction that we imposed are shameful. In addition, there are few signs of compassion for the people of Iraq whose lives were ruined by the war. At General Conference following the war, President Ezra Taft Benson instructed us, “The collective prayers of the nation and the world should focus not only on a lasting peace but also on the needs of the many on both sides who lost loved ones and endured suffering in the conflict” (in Monson 1991, 4).

There has been no end to the sympathy, honor, and prayers for American families whose lives were affected by the war. In the rush of homecoming celebrations, tickertape parades, and television specials, however, how many prayers were said for the families of Iraqi soldiers killed during the war? How many prayers were said for the families of Iraqis killed while taking refuge in a civilian bunker that American bombers mistook for a military command post? How many prayers for the families of Iraqis killed through “collateral damage”?

The outpouring of support for the Kurdish refugees was impressive and commendable. However, that support is based entirely on the fact that the Kurds are not our enemies, but the enemies of our enemy. President Benson’s injunction to pray for those suffering *on both sides* embodies the gospel teaching that we are all brothers and sisters, that we are to love even those who our leaders tell us are our enemies. It would be a profound loss if the experience of the war, in the name of “patriotism” or for whatever other reasons, caused the nation to forget these important teachings.

A final moral failure of the Gulf War is the way in which we, as a nation, allowed ourselves to overlook the obvious difficulties associated with the war and proclaim the total moral correctness of our actions. Prior to the war, all discussions of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait alluded to morality. Advocates of a quick, violent resolution to the crisis stressed the importance of stopping, as soon as possible, a brutal dictator who was raping and pillaging his small, defenseless neighbor and who threatened to become another Adolf Hitler. Such overt, illegal aggression

had to be stopped immediately, they argued with astonishing moral certainty. Two weeks before Operation Desert Storm began, when President Bush had already decided to launch an attack against Iraq, he said to his advisors, "For me it boils down to a very moral case of good versus evil, black versus white. . . . If it's right, it's gotta be done" (in Mathews 1991, 65).

Advocates of a peaceful, diplomatic resolution pointed to convincing evidence that economic sanctions were seriously hurting Iraq's economy. They argued that sanctions must be given more time to work, that it was morally unjustified to launch a violent attack against Iraq until all possible means of peaceful resolution had been exhausted. Those taking this position were not only peace activists and prominent religious leaders, but also ordinary citizens and almost half of the members of Congress (Stanley 1991; Clymer 1991a).

As 15 January 1991 approached, the nation continued to be sharply divided between these two positions, and the moral elements of the debate grew more urgent (Steinfels 1991). President Bush sought the approval of several religious leaders. His Episcopalian bishop, Edmond L. Browning, vocally opposed a violent solution to the crisis and refused to give his approval. Needing some kind of sanction from religious authorities, President Bush flew the Reverend Billy Graham, who supported military action, to the White House, where Graham predictably endorsed President Bush's plans (Robb 1991). In the meantime, during the weeks before Operation Desert Storm was launched, the Catholic Church and many other churches announced their official opposition to immediate military action, and people in all of the major cities organized public protests opposing a violent resolution of the crisis (Hinds 1991).

Once President Bush gave the order to begin bombing, however, most of the opposition seemed to dissipate, and the moral elements of public discussion shifted from critical examination to unquestioning support for what seemed already to be a *fait accompli*. As the war progressed, the intensity of the bombing was matched only by the intensity of the zeal and certitude with which the nation proclaimed its total justification.

The moral absolutism attained proportions that were both tyrannical and repressive. Lack of support for the bombing was not tolerated. A college basketball player from Italy who declined to wear an American flag on his uniform was repeatedly booed off of the court, received threatening phone calls, and finally returned to his country. Any attempt to deviate from the policy of censorship imposed by the Pentagon and the media itself was viewed as treachery. One news reporter was accused of being a "sympathizer" for the enemy when he

covered stories that other networks had refused to cover (Prochnau 1991). Furthermore, it was not sufficient for public figures to support the removal of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait; they had to support a *violent* solution or be labeled “unpatriotic.” Members of Congress who voted for a peaceful resolution to the crisis are now threatened with political reprisal, as their loyalty to the absolute moral correctness of the violence is questioned (Clymer 1991b).

There are several explanations for the shift to moral absolutism. Perhaps the most dominant is that after the bombing began, fellow Americans were putting their lives on the line in the desert sands of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait. Nobody wanted to say anything that might hurt or demoralize them. Supporting our troops and atoning for the mistakes of Vietnam became the rallying cries that made any questions about the morality of Operation Desert Storm seem like cruel attacks on the soldiers themselves. The obvious point that it is possible to support our troops while disagreeing with the policies of their commander-in-chief was lost as the nation was bound with yellow ribbons and inundated by carefully censored media coverage of the war.

Equating support for our troops with a refusal to entertain any questions as to the wisdom or morality of our nation’s policies is not only childishly simplistic, but also dangerous. Under such an attitude, the president could compel support for his actions, no matter how immoral and unjust, merely by sending troops into battle. This attitude requires people to forsake moral convictions unnecessarily. The only way to support our friends, neighbors, and relatives who were stationed in the Persian Gulf was not, as promoters of the war tried to persuade us, to rally behind President Bush and support his decisions completely. It was equally, if not more, valid to show our support by advocating a peaceful resolution, so that the troops could come home earlier, preferably alive and uninjured.

Moral objections to Operation Desert Storm also dissipated because our actions were, in many respects, honorable and just. After all, we were defending a small nation which could not defend itself. And we were stopping a brutal tyrant who fit the role of villain perfectly and did everything possible to make the rest of the world hate him. In addition, most of our actions were authorized by United Nations resolutions. People may have made the mistake of believing that because many of our actions were morally correct, it was appropriate to disregard the elements that were morally questionable. Our cause is just. Therefore, we can do no wrong.

The danger of this attitude is obvious. It has led many nations, as well as many individuals, to commit crimes and atrocities in the name of what they believed was a greater good. It is likely that President

Bush, partly because of this attitude, felt justified in proceeding in a way that violated many of the accepted requirements for a just war. It is also likely that this attitude led the nation to overlook the brutal destruction and the one-sidedness that characterized our actions during the war.

These moral difficulties did not disappear merely because we were doing a good thing by cooperating with the international community to defend Kuwait. Selective morality is dangerous not only because it permits immorality, but also because those who practice it compromise their integrity. It fosters a utilitarian cynicism in which morality becomes not an end in itself, but a tool whose persuasive rhetoric may be used manipulatively to accomplish other goals.

One final explanation for the rejection of moral uncertainty, as Operation Desert Storm progressed, is that the crisis was over so quickly and Iraq's defeat was so overwhelming. Although any explicit suggestion that "might makes right" is clearly repugnant to moral principles and must be quickly rejected by all but the most cynical of amoral realists, there is a natural tendency to equate success in warfare with moral correctness. Vietnam was unrighteous because we lost; Operation Desert Storm was righteous because we won. This attitude is another version of selective morality and is equally, if not more, pernicious. It justifies the belief that a strong and powerful nation can do whatever it pleases to other nations merely because it is stronger.

Our easy victory in the Persian Gulf did not prove that opponents of the war were morally incorrect. On the contrary, while it did prove wrong predictions that thousands of American men and women would be killed in the fighting, the victory provided support for assertions that the violence, destruction, and death were eminently avoidable. The Iraqi army was not even close to being the formidable fighting force that Saddam Hussein, as well as promoters of the war, had led us to believe they were. Indeed, the army turned out to be shockingly ineffectual, hardly able to shoot back, and staffed by unwilling conscripts who were more than happy to turn over their guns to allied forces. Their lack of will to fight for Saddam Hussein's cause is evidence that the liberation of Kuwait could ultimately have been achieved with less violence and destruction, and perhaps through sanctions and diplomacy (Achenbach 1991).

The final moral failure of Operation Desert Storm, thus, was a compromise in the nation's integrity as we allowed ourselves to ignore ethical difficulties surrounding the war and proclaimed the absolute moral correctness of the violence. The normative reasoning through which we did this was especially troubling. The nation reasoned either (1) that we had to show unquestioning moral approval of the war in

order to support our troops, (2) that because we were fighting for a good cause everything we did was justified, or (3) that our clear military superiority also gave us clear moral superiority. These reasons are dangerous and wrong and are perversions of the genuine and serious moral examination that any nation should engage in as it decides to launch a war and evaluates its own conduct.

The nation has suffered grave moral damage from Operation Desert Storm. No war is ever completely justified or ethical. There will always be, as there were here, violations of the requirements for a just war, as well as elements of merciless and unnecessary brutality. In addition, there will always be attempts to justify wars by invoking ethical principles. Most wars, however, inflict heavy losses on the winning side as well as the losing side, thus spurring the winning side to scrutinize seriously the morality of its actions.

The Gulf war, by contrast, was remarkably quick and painless for the United States. Furthermore, the manipulation of the public, persuading them to ignore the moral difficulties of the war and support the violence without question, was thorough and complete. Any genuine post-war evaluation of the morality of our actions in the Gulf is unlikely to be considered seriously, as the nation continues to be assured by its new warrior-heros that Operation Desert Storm was a complete success, ethically as well as militarily. Witness the huge tickertape parades in New York City and Washington, D.C.

In an age when image and appearance are more important than substance, and "sound bites" take the place of serious moral reflection, the Gulf war has set a dangerous precedent. The nation has shown itself capable of delegating moral responsibility not only in matters of ordinary politics, but also in decisions of war and peace. This war, like all wars, necessarily involved the imposition of death, destruction, and suffering by some of God's children upon others of his children. The failure sincerely to evaluate our actions, both during and after the war, caused serious damage to the nation's character and integrity and set a frightening precedent for the resolution of future conflicts.

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