

# POST-WAR MYTHS AND POLITICAL ILLUSIONS

*What is remarkable, a year after Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, is how much the Middle East after the war looks like the Middle East before.*

BY JANICE GROSS STEIN

**E**VEN THOUGH IT IS STILL VERY EARLY, THE EUPHORIA OF VICTORY surrounding the Persian Gulf war has already created several myths, and elicited some preliminary lessons about the management of international conflict in the post-Cold War era. The lessons are cautionary and disheartening, and the myths misleading.

Two lessons in particular stand out in importance. The first is that "smart" weapons are smart not only because they hit their targets with precision, but because, although they were relatively expensive to make, they reduced the political and human costs of war to the coalition far beyond expectation. Smart bombs, missiles and aircraft brought swift victory with a minimum of military casualties to those who used them. But by reducing the costs of battle, smart weapons also make it easier for great powers to fight conventional wars against middle and smaller powers in the Third World. Accordingly, the easy availability of smart weapons over the next decade may significantly depress the likelihood of the peaceful settlement of a myriad of disputes in the Third World and make some kinds of north-south wars more likely.

Second, the domestic political constraints operating on President Bush during the war, as distinct from the pre-war period, were over-estimated. Although the war was electronic, its coverage in the media was not. Largely as a result of what leaders thought they had learned from the Vietnam experience, management of the media and control of information was carefully planned by the Pentagon before the fighting began.

The result was the first radio war in two generations, one where television was largely restricted to "talking heads." This lesson has been well assimilated by military leaders in Washington as well as other Western capitals. In part because the public saw very few images of death and damage in the fighting, Bush conducted the war virtually free of political constraints. Electronic wars with radio coverage make war more rather than less likely as a future instrument of managing conflict.

IN THE VERY EARLY POST-WAR PERIOD, SEVERAL DANGEROUS MYTHS HAVE already achieved wide acceptance. The first and most important is that the orchestration of the war confirms "American hegemony," or the emergence of a "unipolar system" dominated by the United States. Some critics allege that the US, working under the guise of collective security to preserve a hegemonic order, went to war to secure strategic resources in the Persian Gulf and to protect its client regimes. Others insist that the most striking feature of the post-Cold War world is its unipolarity, with the US unchallenged at the centre of world power.\* The first group sees continuity, the second fundamental change in the system, but both agree on the pre-eminence of the United States in the post-Cold War world.

However, such views mistake the shell for the substance. The war occurred under very specific conditions which are not likely to be

replicated in the future. Saddam Hussein was widely feared and hated in his own country and beyond his borders in the Middle East, and although his political agenda received wide support in the Arab world, he had almost no personal constituency. In addition, Iraq sat close to the largest proven reserves of the world's oil, upon which the industrialized economies generally depend. This created a shared perception of threat and common interest among the major powers at the United Nations that was unique. It is inconceivable, for example, that a Syrian invasion of Lebanon, or an attack by Libya against Chad, would evoke the same response.

SOVIET INTEREST IN COOPERATING WITH THE UNITED STATES WAS ALSO extraordinarily high, and in view of its long-standing political and military relationship with Iraq, nothing short of remarkable. Soviet cooperation can be explained in large part by the expectation of its leaders of Western economic and technical assistance critical to the reorganization of the Soviet economy. If a politically weakened President Gorbachev cannot resist the renewed political importance of the military, the KGB, and traditionalist foreign ministry officials, the Soviet "moment" that created the myth of "unipolarity" may well have passed.

Last, the United States from the outset did not expect to pay for the war. Even before the fighting began, Washington exacted financial pledges from the Gulf states for more than half the anticipated cost of the war. Interestingly, the contributions of the strong industrialized economies – Germany and Japan – were small in proportion to the total bill. Without the money provided largely by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the impact on the American budgetary process would have been severe, with real domestic political costs for the Bush administration. But just as it has been able to do with its debt, the United States was able to export most of the costs to those most directly threatened.

These are not the actions of a pre-eminent power. In a unipolar system the single great power is supposed to bear a disproportionate share of the burden in order to persuade would-be free-riders to join; it does not export costs unless it is a power in decline. In short, a historically specific and unique set of conditions permitted the US to engineer a series of steps which were all necessary to move down the path to war. Insofar as all were essential, it is dangerous and misleading to generalize from this single case. The United States did not so much "control" the international agenda as it carefully, and at considerable political risk, crafted a coalition to shape that agenda. The evidence suggests, then, that the role of the US in conflict management in the decade ahead will be conditioned more by its diplomatic and political skills than by its economic and military power.

A SECOND MYTH IS THAT WARS CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN THEIR aftermath, and that imaginative leadership can restructure once-frozen political forces and resolve long-festered conflicts. What is remarkable, a year after Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, is how much the Middle East after the war looks like the Middle East before. Though the consequences of war are almost always unpredictable, this war changed little in the polit-

\*Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, 1 (Winter 1990-91).