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## An Analysis of U.S. Coercion behind UN Resolutions Authorizing the Gulf War

### *Introduction*

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. That night the UN Security Council convened in an emergency meeting, with delegates racing “back and forth between the consultation room and the bank of phones in the corridor, struggling to contact their foreign ministers even as they negotiated the text of the resolution.”<sup>1</sup> After eight hours the Security Council drafted Resolution 660, which condemned the Iraqi invasion, demanded an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi troops, and called on Iraq and Kuwait to begin “intensive negotiations for the resolution of their differences.”<sup>2</sup> In the four months that followed, the Security Council drafted and approved eleven other resolutions to address to the unfolding Iraqi occupation and annexation of Kuwait. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Council passed Resolution 661, placing Iraq under the toughest trade embargo “the world organization had ever imposed on any country.”<sup>3</sup> On August 25<sup>th</sup>, Resolution 665 gave member states authority to use limited force “commensurate to the specific circumstances... to halt all inward and outward maritime shipping.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, on November 29<sup>th</sup>, the Security Council gave up diplomatic efforts and approved all out war.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bosco. *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155.

<sup>2</sup> “Resolution 660.” *United Nations Security Council*. (August 2, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <<http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1990/scres90.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Nasir Khan. “US Abuse of UN in Gulf War.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29. (1994), 2277-2282. Accessed May 3, 2010 on JSTOR.

<sup>4</sup> “Resolution 665.” *United Nations Security Council*. (August 25, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <<http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1990/scres90.htm>>.

Resolution 678 authorized coalition forces to “use all necessary means” to assure the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait, unless Iraq evacuated by January 15<sup>th</sup> of 1991.<sup>5</sup> Of the fifteen states on the Council, twelve voted in favor, China abstained, and Cuba and Yemen voted against.<sup>6</sup> On January 16<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. led military force began a deadly air campaign that “wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society.”<sup>7</sup> With schools, hospitals, sanitation facilities, electrical plants, water distribution systems and all other forms of modern infrastructure completely decimated, Iraq was “relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology.”<sup>8</sup>

The Security Council’s directive to use military force against Iraq has been hailed by many as the first successful exercise of UN decision-making procedures in collectively responding to an interstate conflict. The Security Council’s activity in the summer and fall of 1990 was “what the World War II allies had in mind during the final days when they began drafting the charter of an organization that would be able, in the new atomic age, to prevent regional conflicts from growing to global proportions.”<sup>9</sup> Bush claimed that with the triumphant cessation of hostilities in the Gulf, a new world order was coming into view, “a world where the United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders.”<sup>10</sup> However, the process by which the Security Council was led to support military action was not by any means

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<sup>5</sup> “Resolution 678.” *United Nations Security Council*. (November 29, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <<http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1990/scres90.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Cameron Hume. *The United Nations, Iran, and Iraq: How Peacemaking Changed*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 213.

<sup>7</sup> *Joint WHO / UNICEF Team Report: A Visit to Iraq*. (New York, NY: United Nations, 1991). A report to the Secretary General, dated March 20, 1991 by representatives of the U.N. Secretariat, UNICEF, UNDP, UNDRD, UNHCR, FAO and WHO.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> John Goshko. “End of Cold War Strengthens U.N.; Gulf Acts Signal Harmony Not Seen Since Founding.” *Washington Post*. (August 26, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010 on LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>10</sup> George Bush and Jim McGrath. *Heartbeat: George Bush in His Own Words*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2001), 134.

collective. Rather, “the UN authorized a resort to war as a result of pressure exerted by the U.S. government.”<sup>11</sup> Using economic handouts, political concessions, and blatant threats to secure Council votes, the United States government and its allies turned the UN into an instrument for legitimizing a war that they had already decided to fight.

This essay will attempt to map the process by which the U.S. manipulated the UN and its member states to support and spread U.S. national interests. I start by reviewing the global political context from which the Council response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait emerged. I then provide evidence proving that the U.S. government consciously considered military engagement a priority to peaceful resolution and acted upon this belief. I also examine the reasons why the U.S. decided to act through the UN instead of building an external coalition or engaging unilaterally with Iraq. After discussing the different concessions, bribes and threats that the U.S. made to influence Council decision-making, I end with an evaluation of the effects this had on the UN as a legitimate institution capable of sponsoring collective state action.

### *Global Political Context*

Iraq invaded Kuwait during a time of major shifts in the world’s political balance. As Alexander Thompson explains:

With the conclusion of the Cold War, a new set of opportunities presented themselves to U.S. foreign policymakers. The Soviet counterbalance had disappeared, and the world’s lone superpower possessed a newfound ability to wield influence in virtually every corner of the globe [...] At the same time, the UN Security Council (UNSC) was at least potentially liberated from its Cold War straight jacket.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ed. Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael. *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations of the Middle East*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Thompson. *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 46.

Within the UN Security Council, “The USA had no peer competitor in the drafting and construction of the normative architecture of the multilateral machinery for the maintenance of peace and security.”<sup>13</sup> Without the Soviet veto to counterbalance the United States, Iraq had no protection from the US’s interests. As Foreign Minister of Iraq Tariq Aziz argued to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, “If we still had the Soviets as our patron, none of this would have happened. They would have vetoed every U.N. resolution.”<sup>14</sup> After emerging from the Cold War, the United States carried unique power to “write the agenda and time table to this conflict.”<sup>15</sup> U.S. policy makers knew this. In a testimony to Congress in the autumn of 1990, Baker argued: “We remain the one nation that has the necessary political, military, and economic instruments at our disposal to catalyze a successful response by the international community”<sup>16</sup>

At the same time as the U.S. began to realize the power afforded to it by the UN Security Council, it was also growing increasingly tied to Saudi Arabia as a seller of weapons and a buyer of Saudi oil. According to the Federation of American Scientists:

Since 1990, the U.S. government, through the Pentagon’s arms export program, [had] arranged for the delivery of more than \$39.6 billion in foreign military sales to Saudi Arabia, and an additional \$394 million worth of arms were delivered to the Saudi regime through the State Department’s direct commercial sales program during that same period.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to arms sales, Saudi Arabia also held critical importance to the U.S. as supplier of oil.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ramesh Thakur. *The United Nations, Peace and Security*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Friedman and Patrick Tyler. “From the First, U.S. Resolve to Fight.” *New York Times*. (March 3, 1991). Accessed May 3, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/03/world/after-war-reconstruction-path-war-bush-s-crucial-decisions-special-report-first.html?pagewanted=1>>.

<sup>15</sup> Khan.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Bennet, Joseph Leggold, and Danny Unger. “Burden-Sharing in the Persian Gulf War,” *International Organization* 48. (1994), 39-75. Accessed May 3, 2010. <<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=1583516>>.

<sup>17</sup> Federation of American Scientists. “Saudi Arabia: Country Profile.” (2002). Accessed April 29, 2010. <[http://www.fas.org/asmp/profiles/saudi\\_arabia.htm](http://www.fas.org/asmp/profiles/saudi_arabia.htm)>.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, 49.

As George Bush declared in White House press release on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1990: “Our country now imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic independence.”

<sup>19</sup> After August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the U.S. government felt the need take decisive action to protect its economic interests in Saudi Arabia. In the same press release, Bush argued “Iraq has massed an enormous war machine on the Saudi border capable of initiating hostilities with little or no additional preparations.”<sup>20</sup> The U.S. government was clearly concerned about protecting its economic interests in the Middle East.

Iraqi control of Kuwait also posed a major threat to the stability of the global oil economy. Iraq, “with the world’s fourth largest military, now had control over 25 percent of OPEC’s proven oil reserves. Thus, not only did Saddam’s move alter the regional balance of power, but it concerned states around the globe that relied on Persian Gulf oil.”<sup>21</sup> U.S. policy leaders recognized that the future of U.S. as a global superpower was directly tied to capital control in the Persian Gulf, and pushed for immediate military action when it fell into jeopardy.

### *Prioritizing Military Action*

In reacting to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. government consciously prioritized military intervention over attempts for peaceful resolution. On Saturday, August 4<sup>th</sup>, two days after the invasion and only one resolution into the UN decision-making process,

General Schwarzkopf took the President and his aides through a series of charts depicting the full plan to move troops to the gulf. “This is what it will take to defend Saudi Arabia,” the general said. Then, flipping to a final chart depicting an even larger use of troops, he added, “And if you want to liberate Kuwait, this is what it will take. Although the group

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<sup>19</sup> George Bush. Press Release. “Confrontation in the Gulf; Excerpts From Bush's Statement on U.S. Defense of Saudis.” *New York Times*. (August 9, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/09/world/confrontation-in-the-gulf-excerpts-from-bush-s-statement-on-us-defense-of-saudis.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, 49.

was focused on the immediate problem of defense, General Schwarzkopf had introduced the concept of offense from the very beginning.<sup>22</sup>

On August 8<sup>th</sup>, only two days after the Security Council passed the resolution to place Iraq under strict embargo, Bush delivered a public speech “deciding to send forces to Saudi Arabia as a launching pad for war against Iraq.”<sup>23</sup> The U.S. government made no obvious attempt to use soft power generated through economic sanctions, even when its own CIA Director William Webster clearly understood their effectiveness. In his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, he explained how “more than 90 per cent of [Iraqi] imports and 97 per cent of [Iraqi] exports have been shut off,” depriving “Baghdad of roughly 1.5 billion dollars of foreign exchange earnings monthly... At current rate of depletion, (of foreign exchange reserves), we estimate Iraq will have nearly depleted its available foreign exchange reserves by next spring.”<sup>24</sup> While the U.S. could have waited for the embargo to non-violently drain Iraq of its war resources and end the conflict, it instead impatiently pushed Resolution 678 through the Security Council, authorizing aggressive military action.

Resolution 678 was passed on November 29, 1990. Forced through by U.S. during the last days of U.S. control of the UNSC president’s seat.

*Why did the U.S. turn to the UN?*

Before August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1990, Cold War bipolarity had virtually nullified the UN Security Council as a multilateral decision-making body. As David Bosco writes, “Years of disuse, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s had pushed the institution to the periphery of international politics.”<sup>25</sup> It’s also clear that the U.S. did not need the UN for military support – the U.S. “supplied

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<sup>22</sup> Friedman and Tyler.

<sup>23</sup> Khan.

<sup>24</sup> “The Middle East Congressional Quarterly.” (Washington DC: 1991), 380-81. Cited in Khan.

<sup>25</sup> Bosco, 156.

more than twice as many troops as the rest of the coalition states combined.”<sup>26</sup> Considering the United States’ position as the only global superpower, if it wanted to engage militarily with Iraq, why didn’t it just bypass the UNSC process like it did in the Vietnam War?<sup>27</sup> As a UN Ambassador from 1971-1972, George Bush may have felt the need to altruistically revitalize the UNSC as a central force in world politics. More likely, however, U.S. interaction with the UN was “driven by an instrumental desire to reduce the international political costs of coercion, not from a preference for acting appropriately by adhering to multilateralist norms.”<sup>28</sup>

In planning for war, the Bush administration understood that the costs of unilateral action outweighed the benefits. As President Bush wrote in *A World Transformed*, “There might be serious political problems if we were perceived as launching an attack on Iraq without explicit UN endorsement.”<sup>29</sup> Relations with the Soviet Union and smaller, less-developed countries that rejected U.S. interventionism were at stake.<sup>30</sup> Many of these countries chose to wait for UNSC approval before explicitly backing the war coalition, using UNSC authority “to get as many constraints as possible on U.S. military action in the Gulf.”<sup>31</sup> By the time Resolution 678 was on the table, “with the exception of the U.K., every European and Arab Member of the emerging coalition, as well as Canada and the Soviet Union, had made UNSC approval a condition of their support for offensive action.”<sup>32</sup>

The U.S. Government was also aware of the benefits in public image that came with labeling

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<sup>26</sup> Bennet, Lepgold, Unger.

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Peter Cosgrove. Edited Extract of 2009 ABC Boyer Lecture Series. “How Australia could have won the Vietnam War.” *The Australian*. November 6, 2009. Accessed May 1, 2010. <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/how-australia-could-have-won-the-vietnam-war/story-e6frg6z6-1225795166348>>.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Bush, 356.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Doyle. “Crisis in the Gulf: Americans hail decision on blockade as historic.” *The Independent*. (August 27, 1990.) Accessed May 2, 2010 on LexisNexis.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, 55.

the war as a UN decision. In framing their public statements, “U.S. leaders initially focused... on the Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia and the global oil supply.” As Bush remarked to the Department of Defense employees, “Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom, and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would suffer if control of the world’s great oil reserves fell into the hands of that one man, Saddam Hussein.”<sup>33</sup> However, when the war-for-oil argument failed to rouse domestic and international support, Bush argued that “this fight isn’t about oil; it’s about naked aggression,”<sup>34</sup> and proceeded to “construct Iraq as a major threat to international peace (as distinct from US material interests).”<sup>35</sup> The day after the UNSC approved Resolution 678 to authorize direct military action against Iraq, George Bush said in a news conference, “As the votes of the United Nations show, this is not a matter between Iraq and the United States of America. It is between Iraq and the entire world community.”<sup>36</sup> By engaging in the UNSC decision-making process, the Bush administration was able to sell Operation Desert Storm as a war founded on international consensus.

### *Money for Votes*

While Operation Desert Storm was technically UNSC approved, the methods that the U.S. used to get the votes for Resolution 678 were more coercive than consensus-building. The Bush administration significantly influenced other members to support the Resolution by offering economic handouts and political concessions. As Burns Weston writes, “To ensure the votes of the Latin American and African delegations (Colombia, the Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Zaire), the United States... promised long-sought financial help and attention.”<sup>37</sup> In return for Soviet Union support, the U.S. pledged to pressure Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to give Moscow more than \$1 billion to pay

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<sup>33</sup> George Bush. “Remarks to Department of Defense Employees.” (Washington, DC, August 15, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <[http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public\\_papers.php?id=2165&year=1990&month=8](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2165&year=1990&month=8)>.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, Leggold, Unger.

<sup>35</sup> Thakur, 61.

<sup>36</sup> George Bush. “The President’s News Conference.” (Washington, DC, November 30, 1990). Accessed April 20, 2010. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19119>>.

<sup>37</sup> Burns Weston. “Security Council Resolution 678 and Persian Gulf Decision Making: Precarious Legitimacy.” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 85. (July, 1991). Accessed May 2, 2010 on JSTOR.



off overdue commercial loans,<sup>38</sup> and “agreed to help keep Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania out of the November 1990 Paris summit conference.”<sup>39</sup> To prevent China from vetoing the resolutions, the Bush administration pardoned the government’s violent suppression of pro-democracy student demonstrators in the Tiananmen Square massacre that occurred a year before, lifting trade sanctions and unblocking a \$140 million loan from the World Bank.<sup>40</sup> For those countries who refused to pledge their support, Washington made clear that it would cost them:

Minutes after the Yemeni delegate joined the Cubans in voting against the resolution... a senior American diplomat was instructed to tell him: “that was the most expensive vote you ever cast” -- meaning it would result in an end to America’s more than \$70 million in foreign aid to Yemen.<sup>41</sup>

Using economic and political incentives, the U.S. coerced countries into providing the votes needed to pass Resolution 678 and punished those who didn’t climb aboard the war train.

The U.S. also bought support from countries outside the Council, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Syria, and Turkey, to name a few.<sup>42</sup> Washington forgave a \$7 billion loan to Egypt for arms,<sup>43</sup> and “immediately following the war, Egypt received an IMF loan of \$372 million at the urging of the United States (and despite a history of flouting IMF-imposed conditions).”<sup>44</sup> The Bush administration also promised Saudi Arabia \$12 billion in arms sales<sup>45</sup> and forgave “70 percent of Poland’s \$3.8 billion in debt.”<sup>46</sup> The amount of U.S. coercion within and surrounding the UNSC

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Friedman. “Mideast Tensions; How U.S. Won Support to Use Mideast Forces.” *The New York Times*. (December 2, 1990). Accessed May 2, 2010 on LexisNexis.

<sup>39</sup> Weston.

<sup>40</sup> Ramsay Clark. *War Crimes: A Report on United States War Crimes against Iraq*. (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1992), 42. See also: Thompson, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Friedman.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, 61.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, 61.

decision-making process supports the argument that UNSC authorization was simply a label the U.S. paid to have stamped on its war in an effort to generate the semblance of international consensus and reduce the costs of unilateral action. As former U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark so aptly concludes:

The U.S. paid multi-billion dollar bribes, offered arms for regional wars, threatened and carried out economic retaliation, forgave multi-billion dollar loans... [and] offered diplomatic relations despite human rights violations, [to create] the appearance of near universal international approval of U.S. policies toward Iraq.<sup>47</sup>

*The Effects of U.S. Coercion*

In conclusion, U.S. interaction with the UN in the months preceding the First Gulf War can be seen as a double-edged sword. On one hand, the Bush administration reversed the “thinly disguised contempt for the UN” that made up the Reagan Doctrine,<sup>48</sup> and “faced the choice of how energetically to pull it back to the center” of international politics.<sup>49</sup> For example, Resolution 661, adopted on August 6<sup>th</sup>, “imposed a comprehensive sanctions regime on Iraq and established a special committee to monitor compliance. The creation of that committee was a small but notable step for toward an active governance role for the Council.”<sup>50</sup> While the Bush administration may have had good intentions for revitalizing the UN’s multilateral decision-making potential after it was liberated from its Cold War “straight jacket,”<sup>51</sup> the methods through which the U.S. participated turned the UN into a tool that simply served to legitimize U.S. war interests. The Bush administration’s blatant economic and political coercion that underwrote the formal resolution

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<sup>47</sup> Clark, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Tucker. “Origins of the new world order.” Ed. Gad Barzilai, Aharon Klieman and Gil Shidlo. *The Gulf Crisis and Its Global Aftermath*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 164.

<sup>49</sup> Bosco, 156.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson, 46.

process had significant consequences on the UNSC's legal and moral legitimacy as a multilateral institution capable of directing state action. Resolution 678, pushed through two days before the UNSC president's seat rotated from the United States to Iraq's ally Yemen,<sup>52</sup> "ignored the procedures of the UN Charter. The Security Council did not wait to see the results of the implementation of Resolution 661," which offered a viable and peaceful route to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.<sup>53</sup> The costs of such impatience arguably threw the legitimacy of the entire UN system into doubt. As Harald Munthe-Kaas so elegantly explained, "You cannot allow selective usage of international laws and regulations to suit specific purposes at different times by different nations and still retain the authority of the Charter as the 'magna carta of peace and security for mankind.'"<sup>54</sup> Past policies also set a precedent for more recent U.S. coercion and de-legitimization of the UN. On March 20, 2003, the U.S. completely disregarded the UN resolution process and returned to the Gulf to invade Iraq. The months leading up to the First Gulf War set the stage for U.S. interaction with the UN today, and as we can see, history repeats itself.

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<sup>52</sup> Bosco, 159.

<sup>53</sup> Khan.

<sup>54</sup> Harald Munthe-Kaas. "The United Nations: Instrument for Peace or War?" *Life and Peace Review*, 5. (1991). Cited in Khan.

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