

Operation Desert Storm

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A U.S. Navy F-14A Tomcat flies over burning Kuwaiti oil wells during Operation Desert Storm on February 1, 1991. Photo by: U.S. Department of Defense

In 1990, Iraq was ruled by Saddam Hussein. He was a cruel and all-powerful leader. That August, he ordered his army across the border into Kuwait, a tiny country next to Iraq.

Kuwait had no way to defend itself. Iraq was much bigger, and its army was well equipped. The United States and other countries had given large amounts of weapons to Iraq during its eight-year war with Iran. In 1990, Iraq had the fourth-largest army in the world.

The United States did not want to see Saddam take over Kuwait. If he did, he might keep going and take over neighboring Saudi Arabia. Both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia sold a lot of oil to the United States at the time. If Saudi Arabia fell to Saddam, Iraq would control one-fifth of the world's oil supply.

All eyes were on the White House, waiting for a response. President Bush stated simply: "This will not stand."

The U.S. carries out military action

In the last months of 1990, the United States carried out a military action known as Operation Desert Shield. Over 500,000 American troops were placed in Saudi Arabia in case of an Iraqi attack.

At the same time, the U.S. went to the United Nations Security Council. The United Nations Security Council had the power to put together an international force so the U.S. wouldn't have to fight Iraq alone. The international community was united and the U.N. helped form a force to fight Saddam.

Bush, meanwhile, remembered the lessons of Vietnam, a war which became very unpopular at home in the U.S. So he tried to get public support for the mission in Iraq. In this respect, he was successful. The vast majority of Americans and a narrow majority of the Congress supported the president's actions. When all the forces were in place, the United States issued a final offer to Saddam Hussein: leave Kuwait by January 15, 1991, or face a full attack by the multinational force.



Operation Desert Storm goes into effect

January 15 came and went with no response. The next night Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm. The U.S. bombed Iraq's military targets for the next several weeks.

Iraq responded by launching missiles at American military bases in Saudi Arabia and Israel. By attacking Israel, Saddam hoped to persuade neighboring Arab nations to join him. Israel was seen as a common enemy by many of them. The Arab nations never joined Saddam's side, however.

On February 24, the ground war began. It was brief. American ground troops freed Kuwait in just 100 hours. They then moved through Kuwait and entered southern Iraq.

At that point, the U.S. faced a decision. The main goal of the operation was to free Kuwait. That had been done. But Saddam was still in power. Should the U.S. keep going in Iraq? Should they chase Saddam all the way to Baghdad, the capital city?

An environmental disaster for Kuwait

President Bush feared that the allies would not support such a move. If Saddam was removed from power, the entire nation could fall into a civil war.

Soon Iraq agreed to terms for a cease-fire. The conflict ended.

Iraq did not leave Kuwait untouched, though. Millions of dollars of valuables were stolen by the occupying troops. As Iraq retreated, they set off explosives at many of Kuwait's oil wells. The disaster to the environment grew as Iraq dumped oil into the Persian Gulf. The costs were enormous, and many were killed or injured.

In the war itself, tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed, but just 148 Americans died. This was mostly because of the technological advantages of the United States. U.S. troops had better

equipment and weapons.

U.S. military operation was a big success

The Persian Gulf War was a television event. CNN showed round-the-clock coverage of the events. Americans saw footage from cameras placed on smart bombs as they struck Iraqi targets. American generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell became famous.

Overall, Operation Desert Storm, the largest American military operation since Vietnam, was completed with smashing success. Most Americans felt confident in their military and technological edge once more. President Bush declared that the "new world order had begun."