

War of PRINCIPLES

The debate over the Gulf has been presented on all sides as a cut-and-dried affair: Left pacifism vs the pro-American Right. In the process, the debate over principle has been lost. Here, as a contribution to the debate-that-wasn't, ALR publishes the very different views of a variety of voices from the wider Left.



Smart Bomb, Dumb Aimer

The war is wrong, says Mike McKinley. But even if it weren't, you wouldn't want to get too close to the Americans while they were fighting it.

On every basis I can think of I am opposed to the allied strategy of war in the Gulf. In any case, I would have the greatest difficulty in reconciling a view

that was a justified response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait with the knowledge I have of the US record in war. This knowledge, by the way, is not some arcane possession of the strategic analyst,

but an accessible and published body of data and commentary freely available to those who can read. I therefore begin with two open questions about Australia's policy advisers, and policy-makers: how do they get away with it?; how have they got away with it for so long?

My point is this: notwithstanding the need I feel to resist this war at the level of principle, there is the question of US military competence to consider. Or, to be more precise, the demonstrated military incompetence of our major alliance partner and leading power of the anti-Iraq coalition. In other words, I am advancing the prudential argument that even if Australia's Gulf policies could ever be regarded as unproblematic, their standing is compromised by the company they keep.

This pessimistic conclusion is informed by an analysis—indeed the realist analysis so beloved by the policy-making community—of US involvement across the whole spectrum of conventional conflict over the last 41 years. 1950 is significant here since it located what one typical, recent study by US scholars recalls as “the last major victory for American arms”. In the subsequent four decades we find that US military efforts have been, and are, no model of competence. From the record, which includes the overall debacle in Indo-China and also the more than 120 specially designated rescue and other operations in that conflict, through still more rescue missions such as those in support of the Mayaguez, and in interventions, such as those in Grenada and Panama, the US armed forces performed in a manner which allows neither confidence in themselves nor on the part of allies co-operating with them.

The basic data and an analytical literature attesting to this have been available, cumulatively, since 1950 and are, moreover, marked by four characteristics: 1) the data-base is broadly agreed on; 2) the analyses are provided by specialists from a wide range of the political spectrum; 3) there is broad agreement among their findings; 4) their judgments are reached on criteria established by the US military itself and on which there is a consensus among similar analysts outside the US.

Since space precludes a detailed excursion into any of the events in question I will mention only that the Middle East has provided some of the richest and most embarrassing examples of incompetence. Among these we must include operation Desert One—the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran—and the interventions in Beirut, including the criminal negligence which led to the loss of over 250 marines in a single one-man attack on their accommodation and the equally criminal, indiscriminate use of US naval firepower against the non-combatants of the Shouf mountains and other locales. Probably the most dramatic example, however, was the April 1986 bombing of Libya where 15 F-111 fighter-bombers equipped with a laser guidance bombing system, and carrying a combination of cluster bombs and 2000-pound bombs could not accomplish their mission of assassinating Colonel Muammar

Al-Ghaddafi. This example is particularly poignant in the context of cost per outcome as well. It was attempted by two aircraft carriers costing \$5 billion each which were turned, defended by escort ships worth around \$12 billion as well as their aircraft complement, each aeroplane costing \$30-50 million—all in order to support a failed mission which was reducible to the equivalent of hitting a tent on a football field inhabited by one man, who was, even then, an irritating but hardly substantial enemy.

The Gulf, nevertheless, is the true pons asinorum (bridge of fools, site of all its embarrassment) for the US military. We have witnessed the May 1987 Iraqi attack on the USS Stark after which the US punished Iran and placed American flags on tankers belonging to Iraq's ally, Kuwait in the patently absurd Gulf convoy operation which saw the US Navy have the 400,000-ton supertanker *Bridgeton* deployed in front of three American warships that were supposed to be protecting it; the April 1988 aborted attack by the USS *Merrill* using Harpoon anti-ship missiles against a Soviet Sovremenny class guided missile destroyer in the mistaken belief that it was an Iranian Saam class guided missile frigate; and the July 1988 shooting down of Iran Air flight 655 by the USS *Vincennes*.

Even in the period of the build-up for Desert Storm so many US service personnel were needlessly killed—nearly 100 in my estimation—that by early October 1990 all USAF Gulf training flights were cancelled so that a ‘safety-awareness’ study could be conducted instead. I hardly need add that this comes only one year after the US Navy was stood down for similar reasons for a period of 48 hours.

And although I could continue to catalogue other incompetencies in the field of weapons and material, doctrine and morale, to name just four, I will resist the temptation to do so in favour of citing Richard Gabriel's quite typical conclusion to his study of the overall phenomenon: “The American military is in serious trouble. Its recent historical performance...has been marked far more often by failure than success. Its military plans have been unrealistic and unsuccessful. The officer corps, by any historical standard, is lacking in the spirit and expertise that have characterised the more successful officer corps in history. Worse, it is infected by habits and values which are characteristic of many of the worst officer corps in history. The record is clear that the [American] officer corps has failed the single test of a successful army, the ability to perform well on the field of battle.”

I write this as the war nears the close of its fourth week, with the US lost for a strategy other than bombing, and its ground force commanders uncertain whether 70,000 sorties is sufficient to allow them success. And of all the Americans confirmed dead in Desert Storm to date, 90% have died in non-combatant incidents or from “friendly fire”.

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