

Operation DESERT FOX: Effectiveness With Unintended Effects

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As the United States and its allies work to stabilize post-Baathist Iraq, the world has come to know that, despite an international consensus to the contrary, deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein did not possess large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Only after the US-led coalition removed Saddam from power and gained truly unfettered access to the entire country of Iraq did the international community learn that Hussein apparently had mothballed his WMD-related programs in the mid- to late 1990's, though he maintained both the intent and latent capability to resume production of various types of WMD following a lifting of international sanctions and scrutiny.

In many ways, assessments of the status of Iraq's WMD programs were frozen in time, partly as the result of the end of United Nations (UN) weapons inspections in December 1998. Following months of Iraqi obstruction and defiance, chief UN inspector Richard Butler removed his inspectors while Washington and London determined to punish Saddam for his intransigence. The military response to Iraq's continued refusal to fulfill its obligations under numerous UN resolutions, Operation DESERT FOX, consisted of a four-day "air war" and was the last major armed confrontation between Iraq and the United States and Great Britain prior to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). Through an examination of DESERT FOX, this article seeks to underscore the difficulty of using limited airstrikes alone to deal with states suspected of developing and proliferating weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, this article is not about a "failure" of airpower and will also show that airpower is only as effective in setting the conditions to attain meaningful political objectives as the broader strategy under which it is employed.

Reflecting on the central role airpower played in the American victory in the Persian Gulf War of 1991, Eliot Cohen wrote that American airpower had attained a "mystique" of strategic value, a mystique that both intimidated our foes and enthralled our politicians. According to Cohen, "[a]irpower is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment." Haunted by the enduring specter of casualties suffered in Vietnam as well as the more recent ghosts of Mogadishu, the United States, in the last decade of the Twentieth Century, came to lean on airpower as its preferred means of maintaining order in a chaotic post-Cold War world without running the risk of suffering significant combat losses.¹

Though most Arab governments in the region wanted Saddam punished for his obstruction of UN inspections, they did not necessarily support a large-scale military operation. Likewise, the UN Security Council remained split over how to handle this latest confrontation with Baghdad. In short, the divisions among the major powers and America's regional allies served as a brake on Washington's use of force against Iraq. Thus, lacking the will, the time and the international backing to mount a large-scale combined arms operation against Iraq, the US and UK turned to airpower as a means of holding Saddam accountable for his continued belligerence.

The United States and Great Britain had relied largely on airpower as the military element of a strategy aimed at containing Saddam, and forcing his compliance with the terms of various UN resolutions. A critical component of this containment strategy consisted of the southern and northern "no-fly zones" that together covered more than 62% of Iraqi territory.² As the crisis grew with Iraq over UN weapons inspections throughout 1997 and into 1998, the long-standing Anglo-American air presence in the Persian Gulf region thus provided the US and Britain with a military force already largely in place and ready to respond to any provocation.

The many twists and turns of the UN inspections regime in Iraq are beyond the scope of this article. In short, the trigger for DESERT FOX came on December 15, 1998, when chief UN inspector Butler filed a report to the UN Security Council charging that Iraq had failed to provide the promised "full cooperation" to UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspectors and had further initiated "new forms of restrictions upon the commission's work." Butler withdrew his remaining inspectors from Iraq.³ As they departed, Butler's team could not account for nearly 32,000 chemical munitions, 550 mustard gas-filled bombs, and 4,000 tons of chemical precursors. In addition, American intelligence sources suspected that Iraq was concealing as many as 12 SCUD-type missiles and producing propellants for missiles capable of hitting targets beyond the ranges allowed by UN resolutions.⁴

In response to Saddam's intransigent behavior President Bill Clinton declared on December 16 that Hussein had "abused his last chance" and that he had directed US forces to strike military and regime security targets in Iraq. In a brief televised address to the American people, President Clinton laid out both his rationale for and the objectives of the operation. Referring to airstrikes he called off at the last moment during a tense period in November 1998, the President declared, "I gave Saddam a chance—not a license. If we turn our backs on his defiance, the credibility of U.S. power as a check against Saddam will be destroyed." The mission of the US and British operation was "to attack Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and its military capacity to threaten its neighbors." More importantly, Clinton declared that Saddam "must not be allowed to threaten his neighbors or the world with nuclear arms, poison gas or biological weapons." This time, Clinton vowed, the allies' response would be "strong" and "sustained."⁵ Yet the President only hinted at a broader political goal, one beyond the immediate aims of crippling Iraq's WMD programs. The best way to eliminate the threat Saddam posed to the security of the Middle East and the world, the President claimed, was "with a new Iraqi government."⁶

President Clinton's reference to a "new Iraqi government" could certainly be seen as an implied objective of DESERT FOX. Less than two months earlier, on October 31, 1998, Clinton signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act (ILA). The passage of this legislation was widely interpreted as

evidence of congressional support for the concept of promoting “regime change” in Iraq by backing an insurgency supported by US airpower protecting opposition-controlled enclaves. The following month, in November 1998, Clinton publicly stated that regime change was an official component of U.S. policy toward Iraq. These developments came at a time of rapidly rising tensions with Iraq. Thus, many in the media connected the president’s address on December 16 announcing the start of DESERT FOX and the policy intent of the ILA as parts of a broader strategy aimed at toppling Saddam.⁷

In a separate briefing to reporters, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen also put forward the administration’s objectives for DESERT FOX. Calling them “clear military goals,” Cohen informed reporters that the US and UK aimed to “degrade Saddam Hussein’s ability to make and use [WMD]. We want to diminish his ability to wage war against his neighbors. And we want to demonstrate the consequences of flouting international obligations.”⁸ These goals left the administration a fair amount of room to maneuver politically. As defense analyst William Arkin noted, a goal of “degrading” and “diminishing” Saddam’s WMD capabilities could be met with the successful impact of the first weapon.⁹

Secretary Cohen also summed up the Administration’s position on the use of these strikes to force Iraq into compliance with the inspections and the numerous UN resolutions upon which those inspections were based. In an answer to a reporter’s question on the matter, Cohen responded that Iraq could, at this point, do nothing to halt the attacks. “We will continue the operation until that [the aforementioned ‘degradation’ of WMD and military capability] is complete, to our satisfaction at least.”¹⁰

American and British airmen nevertheless had a daunting task before them. The United States mustered just over 200 combat aircraft in the region, both land- and carrier-based, for DESERT FOX. These were joined by approximately a dozen British warplanes.¹¹ The potential number of targets for an air campaign ostensibly focused on Iraq’s WMD was quite large. Coalition sources listed some 100 chemical-related facilities and another 90 biological-related facilities across the country. These did not include most of a large number of dual-use facilities, many of them having been inspected and monitored by UNSCOM.¹² Secretary Cohen made a virtue out of necessity when he noted that attacking Iraq’s missile research and development and production program was the surest way to “degrade” and “diminish” Saddam’s ability to use WMD and otherwise threaten his neighbors. Still, even here, the number of potential targets was extensive; UNSCOM had been monitoring 63 missile-related sites and some 2,000 missiles that were permitted by the UN.¹³ Indeed, from the large list of WMD-related targets, US and British aircraft would eventually strike only eleven during DESERT FOX and these were nearly all missile-related.¹⁴ More importantly, UNSCOM inspectors had catalogued the locations within these facilities of several pieces of equipment that would be most difficult to replace under the sanctions then in place. The destruction of this equipment would thus help achieve the objective of “degrading” Iraq’s ability to use WMD.¹⁵

The final DESERT FOX target list contained roughly 100 sites or facilities, including the eleven noted above, and reflected the narrow focus of the operation. American and British planners benefited from the wealth of information on Iraq’s WMD and security apparatus gathered over several years by UNSCOM as well as an in-depth knowledge of Iraq’s air defenses gained from

years of no-fly zone enforcement. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Anthony Zinni, USMC, insisted that strikes take place against only targets identified with a high degree of certainty.¹⁶ He and his planners were well aware that completed WMD, in the form of warheads or other stockpiles, were easy to hide. Zinni and his planners would focus on delivery systems instead. Likewise, to achieve the greatest effect, Zinni placed a premium on achieving surprise and would thus forego a visible and time-consuming build-up of forces that would give the Iraqis an opportunity to disperse personnel, equipment and other WMD-related equipment. He also directed the preparation of two options, a “heavy” and a “light.” The former would hit more targets over a period of several days, the latter a smaller number of targets more rapidly. Zinni favored the “heavy” option.¹⁷

Planners created seven broad target categories: Integrated Air Defense System (IADS); Command and Control; WMD Security (generally Special Republican Guards units); WMD Industry and Production; Republican Guards; Airfields; and one simply listed as “Economic.”¹⁸ CENTCOM planners purposely avoided “dual-use” facilities in order to minimize the attack’s impact on Iraqi civilians. Likewise, CENTCOM and Administration spokesmen stated publicly that airstrikes would not target known WMD stockpiles or storage sites in order to avoid widespread collateral damage.

The opening blows came in the middle of the night on December 16, and in the form of nearly 250 ship or submarine-launched Tomahawk land-attack missiles (TLAM) and 40 sorties launched from the aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise*. The speed with which the US struck apparently caught Baghdad off guard. Subsequent post-strike analyses would indicate that General Zinni’s plan had achieved the desired degree of surprise and that the Iraqis did not have the time to disperse either their forces or equipment as they routinely did when threatened. Over the course of approximately four and a half hours, US forces struck at more than 50 of the 100 targets on the DESERT FOX target list, many of them part of Iraq’s air defense network.¹⁹

Secretary of Defense Cohen told reporters on December 17 that, following the raids of the first night, the US was “advancing our goal of containing Saddam Hussein” and that “[w]e’re diminishing his ability to attack his neighbors. . . .” Cohen noted that there had been no American casualties and that the attacks were focused on military targets—“Iraq’s air defense system, its command and control system, airfields and other military infrastructure and facilities.” By the end of the first day, DESERT FOX had already unleashed heaviest attacks on Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War.²⁰

Considering the high priority the American and British governments attached to keeping Iraq diplomatically isolated, international response to DESERT FOX was of vital importance. Unfortunately, not every government shared the allies’ opinion regarding Iraq’s defiance of UN resolutions. Russian President Boris Yeltsin denounced the Anglo-American strikes as “unprovoked” and a “flagrant violation of the United Nations charter.” The Russian parliament, or Duma, overwhelmingly approved a non-binding resolution calling the airstrikes “international terrorism.” The following day, Moscow recalled its ambassadors to Washington and London for “consultations.”²¹ China’s government likewise expressed “shock” over the coalition attacks and demanded an end to military action.²²

Nevertheless, the scope and scale of the operation expanded on the second night. Eight-engine B-52s based on the island of Diego Garcia and employing air-launched cruise missiles (ALCM) joined in the fray. The B-1 bomber also made its combat debut on the night of December 17, striking at Republican Guard and other military targets. US aircraft based in Kuwait now took part, as did Britain's 12 Kuwait-based Tornado aircraft. British combat aircraft logged 32 sorties between 17 and 19 December, striking 11 sites, including two command and control facilities, two Republican Guard bases, six air defense sites and one airfield. British efforts eventually represented 15 per cent of the total number of missions flown in DESERT FOX.²³

While ruling out any concessions to the US or the UN, Iraq had done little to actively resist the attacks. Whether Iraqi leaders considered the impending start of Ramadan and Russian and Chinese reactions to DESERT FOX when they determined the level of their resistance to coalition airstrikes is still unknown.²⁴ During a Baghdad news conference, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz gave reporters some clue as to Iraq's seeming indifference to DESERT FOX. "The reality is that the resources they could assemble for this aggression are limited," Aziz correctly told reporters. "They are not the same resources that they assembled in the aggression of 1991. They cannot throw missiles every day for a whole month." Reflecting Baghdad's apparent calculation that the regime could ride out the attacks, Aziz concluded that the operation would not—could not—last more than a few days. "It might be extended one, two, three, four days, but they cannot go on with these resources for a very long period," he claimed.²⁵

By December 19, US and British aircraft and missiles had struck 97 facilities. This total included the following targets and facilities: 32 SAM or IADS; 20 command and control; 18 "security" facilities, including SRG units; 11 WMD industry and production; nine Republican Guard headquarters and barracks, including those of three heavy divisions and 1 infantry division in the Baghdad region; six airfields; and an oil refinery at Basra, the sole "economic" target on the list. The Department of Defense would not speculate on the number of Iraqi military casualties the raids had caused to this point. Baghdad claimed dozens of civilians had been killed, and admitted to only a very small number of military casualties.²⁶

At the end of the third day of strikes, Secretary Cohen was ready to make some definitive claims about the success of DESERT FOX. Cohen reminded the journalists gathered for a Saturday press conference that the Pentagon sought from the beginning of the operation to set realistic goals and not overstate results. Noting as well that DESERT FOX was launched to "diminish" Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbors and the region, Cohen declared that "Saddam's missile program has been set back by at least a year." He stated that international sanctions would slow, if not preclude, Iraqi attempts to rebuild the missile-related infrastructure destroyed thus far. He also pointed out the high degree of success obtained against Iraq's command and control network and the forces of the SRG and Republican Guard. He cautioned reporters that while Saddam might rebuild and replace his military infrastructure, the US and Great Britain had "diminished his ability to threaten his neighbors with both conventional and non-conventional weapons."²⁷

The defense secretary conceded the limits air attacks alone faced in a counter-WMD campaign. He noted, for example, the difficulty of finding and attacking biological weapons production sites, pointing out that the manufacturing process "could take place in a room the size of this one [the Pentagon briefing room] right here What we have tried to focus upon are the means to

deliver them” Attacks against airfields during DESERT FOX were also not part of a typical campaign to gain air superiority but aimed at destroying unmanned vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical and biological agents. These airfields also held Iraqi attack helicopter units as well. The Iraqi regime employed these against pockets of resistance within the country and were thus an element of Saddam’s internal security apparatus.²⁸

According to General Zinni, DESERT FOX was so successful that he saw no need to extend the operation into Ramadan, due to begin on December 19. It would be, in Zinni’s words, “bombing for bombing’s sake.”²⁹ With the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also declaring themselves “satisfied” with the progress of DESERT FOX, President Clinton appeared on television the evening of December 19 and declared “victory.” The President restated the operation’s main goals, and concluded that “[I]t will take some time to make a detailed assessment of our operation, but based on the briefing I’ve just received, I am confident we have achieved our mission.” Notably, he repeated his belief that only a new regime in Baghdad could bring a lasting resolution of the threat Iraq posed to the Persian Gulf region and the world. He pledged to support Iraqi resistance movements and work toward removing Saddam Hussein from power.³⁰

Battle damage assessment supported the President’s claims of success, insofar as the stated goals of the operation were concerned. The Pentagon determined that over the course of a 70-hour air campaign, US and British warplanes hit 85% of 100 targets. Analysts determined further that 74% of all strikes were “highly effective.” General Zinni summarized the effort during a press conference on December 21. DESERT FOX involved 30,000 personnel, with another 10,000 in support outside the CENTCOM area of responsibility. The operation included more than 600 sorties, including 300 night strike sorties, flown by more than 300 combat and support aircraft. Aircraft employed 600 pieces of air-dropped ordnance, 90 air-launched cruise missiles, and 325 TLAMs. Forty naval vessels supported DESERT FOX in one fashion or another and thousands of ground troops deployed to protect Kuwait against a possible Iraqi counterattack.³¹

Several weeks after the conclusion of DESERT FOX, General Zinni “upped” the estimate on the time it would take Iraq to repair the damage wrought on Iraq’s missile program from one to two years. He based that assessment in part on the determination that many of the structures hit were not empty, as previously thought. Unique facilities and pieces of test equipment related to missile development had been destroyed. Likewise, additional analysis of damage indicated that weapon penetration of many buildings was deeper, causing structural damage beyond repair. Still hesitant to either discuss or confirm the number of Iraqi casualties, Zinni estimated anywhere from 600 to 2000 Republican Guard troops were killed. Subsequent reports settled on 600 killed from the Special Republican Guard and 800 from the Republican Guard.³²

Apart from apparently degrading Iraq’s missile programs, the air attacks did little to affect Baghdad’s other WMD programs. For example, General Zinni remarked after the operation concluded that the ease with which chemical and biological agents could be manufactured, particularly for use by terrorists, made bombing dual-use facilities a waste of time. Degrading such a capability was virtually impossible, according to General Zinni, if “they’re that easy to . . . establish.”³³

Nevertheless, DESERT FOX inflicted serious damage on Iraq's missile development program. The 2004 report of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG), the team tasked with determining the fate of Iraq's WMD following the toppling of Saddam's regime in OIF, noted that several key facilities were badly damaged during the course of the campaign. American claims to have set back Iraqi missile development by 1-2 years were based in part on the assumption that destroyed equipment and materials could not be easily replaced because of existing UN sanctions. Still, the ISG determined that following DESERT FOX and the withdrawal of UN inspectors, "the pace of ongoing [Iraqi] missile programs accelerated" and the regime took advantage of the decreasing effectiveness of sanctions to begin work on longer-range missiles. Baghdad invested increasingly large sums of money in delivery system-related procurement, including the hiring of foreign expertise. "Money was pouring into Iraq's delivery system programs," the ISG report noted, and the Iraqis also undertook negotiations to buy missile engines as well as entire missile systems from countries such as North Korea and Russia. The report does not draw any conclusions on the amount of time DESERT FOX set back Iraq's missile development program; it's clear the attacks were effective, but equally clear that, with the inspectors gone, Iraq pulled out the stops to get the development of ballistic missiles moving forward at as rapid a pace as possible and the ISG catalogued significant activity taking place in this area by 1999-2000.³⁴

President Clinton's December 16 reference to regime change in Baghdad, however, was another matter altogether. The operation's emphasis on targets that were only tangentially related to Iraq's WMD kept alive in the media throughout the operation and beyond the notion that the "real" goal of DESERT FOX was the decapitation or fatal weakening of the Iraqi regime. Members of the administration and the military often found themselves fielding questions surrounding the possibility that DESERT FOX was actually aimed at toppling Saddam from power. More often than not, their responses to these questions reinforced the notion that regime change was the intended effect of Operation DESERT FOX. On December 17, Secretary Cohen, for example, acknowledged that attacks on the SRG and Republican Guard were intended to reduce the threat Iraq posed to its neighbors and eliminate the "capability" of the SRG to conceal and maintain WMD. Responding to a reporter's question if such attacks also degraded the regime's stability, the defense secretary replied, "[t]hat could be the consequence." At the same press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton was more circumspect about overthrowing Saddam, stating only that his fall from power would be, in Shelton's words, "value-added."³⁵

Attacks against television and radio broadcasting facilities led many reporters and other observers that DESERT FOX was aimed at weakening Saddam Hussein's grip on power. Secretary Cohen as well as other Pentagon and CENTCOM leaders included these facilities as part of the broader attack on "command and control" targets. "Radio and television facilities are indeed part of the command and control operations of Saddam Hussein and how he communicates to the Iraqi people as far as his propaganda is concerned," Cohen told reporters on December 18, "so those were indeed part of our target base." One reporter noted that these kinds of broadcast facilities were not used exclusively to communicate with the military. "He could use that [radio and television facilities] to communicate with his own people. Doesn't that, in fact, isolate Saddam Hussein and stabilize [sic] his regime—whether that's your goal or not?" "If Tariq Aziz is on television communicating to his people," Cohen responded, "they're still able to communicate."³⁶

Indeed, Pentagon and CENTCOM briefers presented some targets to the press as “WMD security,” and those, together with command and control and Republican Guard targets, comprised nearly half the target list. Attacking these, according to William Arkin, would “accommodate the new intelligence reports [on WMD] and cover an effort to shake the Iraqi regime to its core.”³⁷ Arkin was well aware that, during Operation DESERT STORM, CENTCOM planners targeted the same kind of leadership and command and control facilities with the aim of isolating and incapacitating the regime’s leaders as part of an effort to create civil unrest or even collapse.³⁸

Strikes against several target sets in particular furthered debate in the media that the aim of the operation was broader than the stated mission of degrading Iraq’s WMD capabilities. US warplanes struck a distribution manifold at an oil refinery near Basra. The refinery, according to US officials, was a source of oil smuggled out by the regime, in defiance of UN sanctions. The strike was part of a larger effort to punish Saddam’s inner circle by interfering with what US authorities claimed was an illicit cash cow for the regime. Likewise, a raid on a food warehouse in Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit was part of an effort to inflict harm on the privileged inner circle that supported the Iraqi dictator.³⁹ Ironically, by hitting these two targets, the US provided “evidence” for Baghdad’s charges that the airstrikes were indeed aimed at “the whole people of Iraq.”⁴⁰

Some members of the British government were more forthright in their views of the ultimate effects they desired from of DESERT FOX. During a press conference on December 19, the UK’s Secretary of State for Defense, Mr. George Robertson, stated that the SRG and Republican Guard units under attack were the “lynchpin of Saddam’s regime. The Republican Guard are Saddam’s force for internal repression, they keep him in power.” While noting the Republican Guard’s role in concealing and controlling Iraq’s WMD, Robertson also claimed that “[i]f the Republican Guard ceases to support Saddam, his brutal regime is under immediate threat.” “We want the Republican Guard,” Robertson continued, “to know that the cosy [*sic*] life they have led under Saddam is under attack and we think they have got that message very clearly.”⁴¹

Senior Clinton Administration officials continued to speak of Saddam’s possible fall from power after DESERT FOX concluded. For example, in the course of two press conferences held in January 1999, General Zinni called attention to reports of an Iraqi command shake-up, executions of officers of the regular Iraqi army and the round-up of dissidents, particularly in the Shia-dominated south. The general considered this evidence that Saddam was “desperate”, “isolated” and “shaken.” During a press conference on January 25, 1999, General Zinni declared further that Saddam was “much more isolated. A question could be made as to whether these are becoming acts of desperation. What’s the cure for all of this? A post-Saddam regime, in my view.”⁴²

Recalling the events of DESERT FOX several years later, General Zinni considered the attack as “perfectly executed” and one that achieved “total” surprise. He went even further than his January 1999 assessments, describing the Iraqi regime as “so dazed and rattled they were virtually headless.” He noted that sources informed him that “if the bombing had lasted a little while longer,” Saddam might have fallen victim to a coup. Indeed, Zinni claimed that the potential political result of DESERT FOX “totally surprised” him. The general also determined

that, in his words, “nobody” was preparing for the contingency of a coup or regime collapse, nor was official Washington much interested in planning for it, despite all the rhetoric about regime change.⁴³ This was, of course, purely speculative; Saddam’s regime did not fall and there is little evidence of a serious uprising threatening his rule.

In fact, from 1996 to the passage of the ILA in the fall of 1998, the Clinton Administration had allowed its contacts with the Iraqi opposition to atrophy. Only in January 1999 did the State Department name career diplomat Frank Ricciardone as “Coordinator for the Transition in Iraq.” He would serve as the chief liaison to Iraq’s various opposition groups. Millions of dollars in aid authorized by the ILA began to flow to groups like the Iraqi National Congress and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. All of this heightened coordination and activity with Iraqi resistance groups took place only after the completion of DESERT FOX. As noted above, General Zinni realized that if DESERT FOX had precipitated the collapse of Saddam’s regime, the US was in no position to prevent the country from spinning apart or to avert civil war and complete chaos.⁴⁴

As executed, DESERT FOX was a face-saving punitive strike imbued with the *hope* that the regime would collapse. The US and UK employed brute force to destroy elements of Saddam’s power, without seeking a change in his behavior and therefore, seemed to pursue no concrete political objectives. According to defense analyst Anthony Cordesman, the physical damage the operation could achieve would not be the true measure of its success. The true test of DESERT FOX, Cordesman wrote, would be “what it did or did not do to reshape Iraqi behavior” and its impact on America’s position in the Middle East and the world.⁴⁵

Yet what did DESERT FOX truly accomplish? If the strikes were “effective,” what was the “effect” of the operation? It “degraded” and “diminished” Iraq’s WMD programs and its ability to threaten its neighbors. These “effects” were easy to produce and one could say they were accomplished after one night’s worth of attacks. A cynic might note that the destruction of a single facility had “degraded” a target set and thus, failure was impossible given this rather elastic goal.⁴⁶

The absence of Iraqi WMD use during OIF and the failure of the United States and its allies to find significant WMD stockpiles afterward has led to some speculation that we “got it all” during DESERT FOX. This line of reasoning is not supported by the available evidence. The US and UK did not target stockpiles during the 1998 operation and neither at the time nor since has anything come to light to suggest that such stockpiles were hit, if they even existed. At the same time, the ISG determined that Iraq did not retain SCUD-type missiles beyond 1991, though other missiles were both used by the Iraqis and captured by the coalition during OIF. The fate of Iraqi WMD and related materials left accounted for in December 1998 remains unknown to this day.

Beyond the physical damage noted earlier, the operation failed to “reshape Iraqi behavior,” in Cordesman’s words. Iraq refused to accept the return of UN inspectors. Tariq Aziz declared that Iraq would not permit the resumption of inspections until the UN Security Council lifted sanctions, a move the US and Britain would clearly oppose. Indeed, UN inspectors would not return to Iraq for another four years. Despite reports of unrest and regime reprisals within Iraq, Saddam Hussein remained in control of the country.⁴⁷

Iraq remained a threat to its neighbors and the interests of the United States and its allies—one need only to recall Clinton’s assertion that Saddam’s very presence in power, and not his WMD alone, constituted that threat.

In the aftermath of DESERT FOX, Iraq adopted an even more belligerent tone than before. Saddam also declared “victory” in a taped address aired over al-Jazeera television. On January 3, 1999, Iraqi media reported that the Iraqi dictator had offered a bounty of \$14,000 to any unit that shot down a coalition airplane, plus another \$2,800 reward for the capture of an allied pilot. Iraqi air defenses actively targeted US and British aircraft that continued to patrol the no-fly zones over the country. Iraqi aircraft made brief forays into the zones as well. The number of Iraqi “provocations” in the no-fly zones rose over the next several years.⁴⁸

Diplomatically, DESERT FOX splintered once and for all the 1991 Gulf War coalition. France announced that it would no longer take part in enforcement of the no-fly zones. Paris, together with Moscow and Beijing, called for a comprehensive review of sanctions. The governments of Saudi Arabia and Turkey grew visibly nervous as the crisis escalated and refused to allow combat sorties from bases on their soil. The Saudi action in particular sidelined a large number of American warplanes throughout the operation. The dismay and outrage displayed by the Russians and Chinese over DESERT FOX would linger for years. While most of Washington’s traditional allies had stayed on board during DESERT FOX, the diplomatic outcome amongst the major powers—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—foreshadowed the splits that would arise in the run-up to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003.

Military leaders grappled with the question of what to do next. The US would continue to contain Iraq militarily and diplomatically. The trigger for future military actions, however, would no longer be tied to Iraqi compliance with UN weapons inspections. The US and Britain would reserve the right to strike Iraq in the future, with or without the approval of the UN Security Council, based on their assessment of Iraqi behavior. This open-ended commitment would include striking Iraq again if, as Secretary Cohen pointed out, “he [Saddam] tries to reconstitute that capability” the Pentagon claimed had just been “degraded” through 70 hours of bombing. Neither US nor British officials identified what constituted other “trigger” events, other than the aforementioned “reconstitution” or an overt act of Iraqi aggression against one of its neighbors.⁴⁹

In the end, DESERT FOX was a militarily effective use of airpower. Terminating the already very brief operation short of a change in either Iraqi behavior or leadership, and limiting targets to a relative handful, however, was a political decision. Yet the lure of achieving a bloodless yet devastating military victory while making a rapid exit possible, if necessary—what Eliot Cohen called “gratification without commitment”—ultimately, perhaps inevitably, led to the misapplication and abuse of airpower. Many airpower theorists had long cautioned against using airpower in penny-packets or in hyper-constrained political environments. “When presidents use it,” Cohen wrote, “they should either hurl it with devastating lethality against a few targets (say, a full-scale meeting of an enemy war cabinet or senior-level military staff) or extensively enough to cause sharp and lasting pain to a military and a society.” The 70-hour operation became what Cohen cautioned against: an attack on Saddam with a “sprinkling” of air strikes that would merely “harden him without hurting him and deprive the United States of an intangible strategic asset”, an asset that Cohen called the post-Gulf War “mystique of American airpower.”⁵⁰

Perhaps a longer, more punishing air campaign would have upended the regime. It is unclear, however, why anyone could imagine that such a brief air campaign had the slightest potential of driving from power a ruthless tyrant—and notorious “survivor”—like Saddam Hussein. In fact, post-OIF interviews conducted by the ISG with high-ranking members of Saddam’s fallen regime revealed that the Iraqis were “satisfied” with the results of DESERT FOX. “They said, given a choice of sanctions with inspections or sanctions without inspections, they would prefer without.”⁵¹ Likewise, the 2004 ISG report stated that in 2003 Saddam discounted the threat of an American-led invasion and considered the air attacks associated with DESERT FOX as the “worst he could expect from Western military pressure.”⁵² This is hardly the attitude of a leader who was confronting the possible collapse of his regime in December 1998 in the wake of those air attacks. It seems clear that both American and British leaders considered the regime’s fall a possible result of this air campaign, though they apparently did not intend to sustain the attack in a manner sufficient to bring about that collapse. That they also were not prepared to either exploit or contain the results of a potential airpower-induced regime implosion revealed political short-sightedness.

Yet when DESERT FOX ended a mere 70 hours after it began, Saddam remained firmly in power—minus some of his infrastructure—and the Iraqi dictator could claim to his people and to the world that once again, he had withstood an onslaught from the most powerful form of America’s and the West’s armed might—airpower. The status of Iraq’s WMD programs would remain a mystery and these programs were now beyond the scrutiny of the UN. Moreover, DESERT FOX lacked clear *political* goals, an omission for which no amount of firepower could compensate. Despite the militarily effective, if brief, application of airpower, Saddam Hussein not only survived, he succeeded in ending UN inspections and retained both the intent and capability to restart his WMD programs once sanctions either collapsed or were lifted. Only the fall of Baghdad in 2003 to coalition forces ended once and for all the threat from Saddam’s murderous regime and his quest for weapons of mass destruction.

Notes

1. See Eliot Cohen, “The Mystique of U.S. Air Power,” *Foreign Affairs*: 73:1, pp. 109-124. For the important linkage between the preference for airpower and casualty aversion, see Jeffrey Record, “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War.” *Parameters*, Summer 2002, pp. 4-23.
2. Alfred B. Prados, *Iraq: Former and Recent Military Confrontations with the United States*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, Updated October 16, 2002, p. CRS-2; “Operation Southern Watch,” available at Federation of Atomic Scientists, www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/southern_watch.htm. Until this point, France also helped patrol the no-fly zones but would not partake in DESERT FOX.
3. Prados, p. CRS-4.

4. Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Weapons Threat, Compliance, Sanctions and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, Updated December 24, 2002, pp. CRS-5-7.
5. "Clinton: Iraq has abused its last chance," posted December 16, 1998 and available at CNN.com, www.cnn.com/US/9812/16/clinton.iraq.speech/. In a telling example of how at least some in the US media viewed contemporary air warfare, the CNN website featured a link titled "Watch as anti-aircraft fire erupts over Baghdad." See also Barton Gellman, "U.S. Strikes at Iraqi Targets," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1998, p. A-1.
6. "Clinton: Iraq has abused its last chance," December 16, 1998. For the position of the British government, see Tim Youngs and Mark Oakes, *Iraq: "Desert Fox and Policy Developments,"* Research Paper 99/13, (London: International Affairs and Defence Section, House of Commons Library, 10 February 1999), pp. 34-35.
7. Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime*, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Updated December 10, 2002, p. CRS-5.
8. Transcript of DoD News Briefing, William S. Cohen, Secretary of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), December 16, 1998, p. 1. Available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1998/t12161998_t216gulf.html. Secretary of State Madeline Albright did cite Iraqi compliance with the UN inspections regime as a "medium-term" goal of the operation. On December 17, Albright told reporters that the US sought to achieve Iraq's compliance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions. But appearing on television the night before, Secretary Albright suggested that Iraq was not expected to do anything—now that the attack was underway: ". . .this attack is going to go through to its completion, and what Saddam Hussein can do *after* it is to comply." [emphasis added]. See Jane A. Morse, "Secretary of State Albright Defines US Goals in Iraq," *USIS Washington File*, 17 December 1998, p. 1, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/17/98121707_tlt.html; Barton Gellman, "Modest War Shifts Dynamics of Struggle With Iraq," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 1998, p. A-1; available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/stories/war122098.htm.
9. See William M. Arkin, "The Difference Was in the Details," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1999, p. B-1. Also available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/analysis.htm. "Desert Fox Special Report."
10. Ibid.
11. Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey: Summary Report*. (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1993), p. 7. For a comparison of force sizes between DESERT STORM and DESERT FOX, see Anthony

Cordesman, *The Military Effectiveness of Desert Fox: A Warning About the Limits of the Revolution in Military Affairs and Joint Vision 2010*, (Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003), p. 8, available at www.csis.org. For more details on the size and composition of the coalition air force in 1991, see Chapter 7 of this report. Typical of press coverage at the time was Rick Atkinson and Vernon Loeb, "Limited Campaign Could Limit Success," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1998, p. A-1.

12. Anthony H. Cordesman, *Key Targets in Iraq*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1998), p. 3. Available at www.csis.org.

13. Katzman, *Iraq: Weapons Threat*, p. CRS-6.

14. Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, pp. 8-9.

15. Arkin, "Difference Was in the Details."

16. As part of its rationale for refusing to comply with UN inspections, Iraq cited "espionage" on the part of UNSCOM inspectors. Arkin, "The Difference Was in the Details."

17. Tom Clancy with General Tony Zinni (Ret) and Tony Koltz, *Battle Ready* (New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 2004), pp. 9-12.

18. "BDA Assessment Summary," 19 December 1998, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/19/bda2/slide08.htm. See also Steven Lee Myers, "Pentagon Says Jets Avoided Poison Gas Centers in Iraq," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1998, p. A-2; available at www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/12198iraq-military.html; Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, p. 8. Cordesman provides a slightly different breakdown of target categories than that used by CENTCOM.

19. Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, p. 11; Transcript, DoD News Briefing, December 17, 1998, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1998/t12171998_t217dfox.html; Barton Gellman, "US Strikes at Iraqi Targets," *Washington Post*, December 17, 1998, p. 1, available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/stories/attack121798.htm.

20. DoD News Briefing, December 17, 1998.

21. Peter Heinlein, Transcript, Voice of America broadcast, December 17, 1998.

22. Youngs and Oakes, p. 32.

23. Transcript, DoD News Briefing, December 18, 1998, Subject: Operation DESERT FOX, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1998/t12181998_t1218sd.html. For details on Britain's views and participation, see Young and Oakes, pp. 27-28.
24. See Julian Nundy, Transcript, Voice of America broadcast, December 17, 1998. The operation also generated tension among America's allies. France straddled the fence, disassociating itself from the strikes altogether and calling for a review of international sanctions. The French government also confirmed that it would no longer participate in the enforcement of the no-fly zones. At the same time, French officials placed the blame for the military action on Iraq's failure to cooperate fully with the United Nations. Young and Oakes, p. 33. At home, the President's decision to launch the attacks met with generally high approval from the public. A Gallup poll reflected a 74-percent approval rating for the President's actions. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll likewise found 73 percent approval, though only 41 percent thought the attacks would accomplish the goals of limiting Iraq's ability to produce WMD. Almost two-thirds of respondents to a CBS News/*New York Times* poll, 63 percent, wanted the strikes to continue until Saddam was driven from power; only 27 percent favored halting the strikes if Saddam cooperated with the UN. See United States Information Agency, "Polls Show Majority of Americans Support Strikes Against Iraq," December 18, 1998, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/18/poll1218.htm.
25. See also Eugene Robinson, "Overall Bombs Success Reported Mixed," *The Washington Post*, p. A-1, December 19, 1998.
26. Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, p. 14.
27. Transcript of DoD News Briefing, December 19, 1998, Subject: Operation DESERT FOX, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1998/t12191998_t1219fox.html.
28. Transcript of DoD News Briefing, December 19, 1998.
29. Clancy and Zinni, p. 18.
30. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Transcript, "Clinton Remarks on Iraq," December 19, 1998, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/19/98121913_tlt.html
31. Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, pp. 19-20; see also Table Four in Cordesman's study, p. 28.

32. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), Transcript, DoD News Briefing, "General Zinni on Operation DESERT FOX and Iraq," January 8, 1999, available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1999/t01081999_t0108znn.html; Alfred B. Prados, *Iraq: Former and Recent Military Confrontations With the United States*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, October 16, 2002, p. CRS-5.
33. Arkin, "Difference Was in the Details," p. 3.
34. See *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, 30 September 2004, Vol II. Findings related to DESERT FOX are noted throughout this volume that focuses on delivery systems and Iraq's nuclear program. See p. 5 for a brief summary of Iraq's efforts to expand its missile programs following DESERT FOX and the departure of UN inspectors. The entire report of the ISG comprises three volumes.
35. Jacquelyn S. Porth, "Cohen, Shelton Emphasize Strikes Aimed at Military Targets," USIS Washington File, 17 December 1998, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/17/98121702_plt.html.
36. Transcript of DoD News Briefing, December 18, 1998.
37. Arkin, "Difference Was in the Details," p. 2.
38. William M. Arkin, "Baghdad: The Urban Sanctuary in Desert Storm?", *Aerospace Power Journal*, Spring 1997, available at www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/spr97.arkin.html.
39. Arkin, "Difference Was in the Details," p. 5; Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, p. 15. See also Robinson, "Overall Bombs Success Reported Mixed," p. 2.
40. Howard Schneider, "Despite Air Raid Toll, Iraqis Are Defiant," *The Washington Post*, p. A-1, December 19, 1998, available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/stories/baghdad121998.htm. Iraqi officials sounded defiant while simultaneously playing up every incident of collateral damage. Government officials escorted credulous foreign reporters to damaged buildings and hospital wards filled with supposed victims of the Anglo-American raids. After two nights of raids, Iraqi officials placed the civilian death toll in Baghdad at 30; the Red Cross estimated 30 to 40 dead in the capital, with another 80 injured. Top Iraqi officials conceded that the attacks had inflicted heavy damage on industrial sites, as well as presidential palaces and sites that had been subjected to monitoring by the UN weapons inspectors. See Robinson, "Overall Bombs Success Reported Mixed."

41. MOD Report on the Third Night of Operation “Desert Fox,” Opening Statement by the Secretary of State for Defence [*sic*], Mr. George Robertson, MOD Press Conference, London, Saturday, 19 December 1998, available at www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/12/19/981219-uk-mod.htm.
42. Transcript of January 8, 1999, briefing; Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), Transcript, DoD News Briefing, “Operation SOUTHERN WATCH Update,” January 25, 1999, available at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/1999/t01251999_t0125znn.html.
43. Clancy and Zinni, p. 18.
44. For a complete yet concise examination of US efforts to jump start Iraq’s opposition following DESERT FOX, see Katzman, *Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime*, pp. CRS-5-6. See also Clancy and Zinni, p. 19-20.
45. Cordesman, *Desert Fox*, p.
46. Bill Arkin, ever the cynic, made exactly that point. See Arkin, “Difference Was in the Details.”
47. Schneider, “Despite Air Raid Toll, Iraqis Are Defiant.”
48. Prados, “Iraq: Former and Recent Military Confrontations,” pp. CRS 5-6; Howard Schneider, “A Durable Saddam Declares ‘Victory’,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1998, p. A-1.
49. Bradley Graham, “The Big Military Question: What’s Next?,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1998, p. A-25; Thomas W. Lippman, “U.S. Warns Iraq of More Raids,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1998, p. A-1.
50. Cohen, pp. 110; 124.
51. *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor*, Vol. I, pp. 12. The report also noted that former regime figures stated that the Iraqi dictator did not take seriously talk of a U.S.-led invasion believed instead that any American attack in 2003 “would resemble DESERT FOX.” In fact, Saddam used DESERT FOX as part of a “legal foundation” for Iraq’s abrogation of its compliance under UN resolutions. See pp. 32; 56-57.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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