

Captain May – August 12, 1992 – published essay:

“Success of Desert Storm being judged unfairly”

Houston Chronicle Outlook, by Captain Eric May

One of history’s most evil men, Adolph Hitler, had contempt for the verdict of history. His belief was that history is written by the victors. Ironically, his belief was true in his own case – the victorious allies consigned him to his rightful place in the sewers of history – but it may not apply to the latest of our century’s monsters, Saddam Hussein.

Today Saddam, a megalomaniac dwarf on the postwar stage, is once again being portrayed in some quarters as the lion of the Middle East, more dangerous with all his wounds than he was before they were inflicted. President Bush, a scant 18 months ago our “St. George,” as he slew the Iraqi dragon, is now being decried as an inept Don Quixote who let the awful lizard slither away.

The muse of history must be blushing. Desert Storm is now being judged unfairly as an incomplete military operation, as often as not by the same pundits who decried the initiation of *any* military operation.

In the words of Karl von Clausewitz: “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” Desert Storm achieved the political end that unified the nations supporting it: the liberation of Kuwait. If the United States had pushed its forces forward to Baghdad, thus changing the political objective in mid-stride to the invasion of Iraq with the aim of removing Saddam, the alliance would likely have crumbled and whatever credibility we had gained in the Arab world would have been tainted by dark suspicion.

Even supposing that the alliance had been willing to march on Baghdad, would we have been prepared to accept the human consequences? The death toll from the battle of Berlin was over 100,000. With Saddam nestled deep underground, surrounded by Baath Party loyalists and sizable Republican Guard forces, the citizens of Baghdad could hardly have deposed him; it would have been our task to root him out. The misery of cities under attack is awful, as we’ve seen in Sarajevo recently and Beirut in past years. An assault on Baghdad would have increased previously light battle casualties to ghastly levels.

Some might argue that we could have held our maneuver forces back, merely allowing artillery and aerial bombardment to destroy Saddam’s troops. But ordnance, though sent with the best intentions, is really addressed “to whom it may concern.” Would we have been willing to face untold thousands of women and children casualties? Finally, even if we had kept a reluctant alliance intact, and

swallowed the gall of reducing Baghdad, what then? Would we have attempted an occupation, as with defeated Germany, until we could establish a secure democratic government? Given the history of the region, that would have been a long and much-begrudged occupation.

If we had opted not to occupy the nation, whom would we have chosen as the new strongman? For which new dictator would we have given American lives? How would our choice of leader have been received by the other regional powers?

We were wise in not expanding Desert Storm, in the opinion of this student of the operational art. The American military proved itself more capable than any force in history of fulfilling the proper military function: the controlled use of violence to destroy the enemy and seize terrain.

The enlargement of Desert Storm's object would have taken us back to what we transcended in Desert Storm – the Vietnam quagmire, with its high death tolls, inconclusive results, and political divisiveness at home and abroad.

I agree with the critics who once exclaimed “No more Vietnams!” Creating one more in Iraq wouldn't have helped our country.

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