

MY PERSIAN GULF WAR DIARY

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Just when the world was taking off its helmet and emerging with a sigh of relief from its Cold War bunker a nation attacked another in the savage old way. In response dozens of other nations rushed their armed forces to the battlezone in fear of losing their heartlines of oil which the invasion threatened and justified their warlike reaction with pieties of maintaining peace. It all seemed to imply that humankind simply cannot resist folly at the threshold of sanity.

"One can feel the almost palpable sense of relief among world leaders who mobilize their militaries for war in the old familiar way," I wrote at the time, "uncertain as they must be with the political geography of the brave new world of peace unexpectedly presented by the collapse of communist power."

In the five years since then have been the horrors of Bosnia and Rwanda, and more recently Chechnya.

"The poets might be right after all," I wrote. "The prospect of peace is more irrational than the dark brooding desire for murder each of us hosts like a malevolent gene. Humanity's penchant for sinister error, folly, mass psychosis and loathsome horror, gives us our sense of humor, our appreciation of the comedy of inescapable personal death."

I kept a diary of the Persian Gulf War on the homefront. By the time it begins huge armies from several nations, led by the U.S., had been deployed in the Saudi Arabian desert for almost six months, waiting to be unleashed against the Iraqi occupiers of Kuwait.

Saturday, 1/12/91

Peace marches and demonstrations protesting the possibility of war in the Persian Gulf were held all over Europe and the United States today, including a rather bedraggled and rained on march of about 300 in Astoria. I saw them walk on Marine Drive, strung out for a couple of blocks. I thought as they passed that they should have disguised themselves as oil barrels, which might have got more attention than the usual signs and chants.

Today both houses of Congress voted to give the President the war powers he has been demanding for use in the Gulf. Congress should have pressed the matter months ago instead of at the 11th hour before the U.N. deadline for Iraq to remove its armies from Kuwait.

ABC News earlier said that President Bush claims to be relying on his "gut instincts" that Saddam Hussein will withdraw from Kuwait before the January 15 deadline, this from an interview in Time magazine. Also the top American military boss says U.S. ground forces won't be ready to fight until mid-February, which, as some cynics say, gives Bush a reprieve from making the big decision.

So the world watches a game of machismo between two males who can determine whether millions live or die. In the United States, women are against a war in the Persian Gulf in recent polls 2 to 1 over men, who themselves show a not especially vigorous majority. Of course increasing dissension might force Bush to move quicker to war; and a political miscalculation by him or Hussein will probably lead to the great tragedy of war.

Sunday, 1/13/91

The Iraqi dictator who sent his heavily mortgaged army to seize a neighboring country the size of an average city parking lot but rich enough to bankroll the invading force is compared to the century's worst citizen, Hitler. The American President meanwhile assumes the mantle of the first Roosevelt and dispatches a very big stick of military might to the Middle East, in particular Saudi Arabia which acts as nervous host to the hordes of Western crusaders who are determined to protect the indispensable Saudi oilfields and wrest back the rich Kuwaiti fields. The Iraqi leader howls for a holy war against the satans poised at his borders and makes temporary peace with his enemy Iran with whom he fought a war for almost a decade at a mutual cost of a million lives. This frees at least half his army for use against the massive buildup of American and European forces which are assisted by a few wary Arab contingents.

Prejudice, always waiting with its intolerant leer, leaps into the dialogue. Whatever people in the Middle East might be calling the massive influx of Westerners, some words current in the United States to describe the diverse types of humanity in the Arab lands are *ragheads* and *desert niggers*. Sidewalk philosophers assure listeners that rabid religious beliefs and hotheaded passions are only Middle Eastern traits. Propaganda machines rapidly respond to the crisis, erasing the ambiguities of everyday civilization to present immediate contrasts devoid of shades; extremes overpower dialogue. It is us against them, good versus evil, black and white the only acceptable tones of public conversation.

One element in all the handshaking and swordrattling is seldom expressed. The probable cost in human lives. Barrels of blood are offered in exchange of barrels of oil. The world has a glut of human blood. Oil is plentiful at the moment but will likely dry up sometime in the next century.

It is apparent that although the oil age is nearing its end old habits resist change and conservation. We send forces to protect oil interests yet we have had much time to develop alternative sources. Our leaders and the powerful oil companies are hostile to change and continue to squander fuel supplies in the old reckless way, demanding that we go with them, and in a sense we are helpless not to because they control the resources and means to develop new sources of energy. The irony is that our nations seem determined to fight over what is left of fossil fuels and dump immense quantities of what can hardly be spared into huge war machines geared to replenish themselves on the spoils. And of course the present crisis puts intense pressure on opening up new oil reserves such as those in the Alaska wilderness and offshore areas of Oregon, Washington and California.

An American military nurse interviewed in Saudi Arabia said that she was homesick and nervous about the prospect of combat. "I don't want to die for an oil well," she said.



GARY VISKUPIK (1990)

Monday, 1/14/91

Twenty-five years ago today I boarded a Navy troopship for the Vietnam War. (I was in the USMC.) Today I took part in an hour-long radio discussion on KMUN about war and its reality and how such experiences might relate to the possible advent of combat and its consequences in the Persian Gulf.

My point is that the country is already at war, that the sanctions against Iraq are a blockade, a siege as in olden times when cities and castles were pinched off and starved into submission, in the present case a nation; nothing in, nothing out. Hundreds of ships have been boarded by the multinational Navy in the Persian Gulf; armed forces of a dozen nations virtually surround Iraq. Patience is required. George Bush is worried that the fragile coalition of armies might collapse if combat is not initiated soon. Saddam Hussein of Iraq maintains a similar hope. Yet combat might actually rip it apart, particularly among the Arab nations whose cautious support might evaporate if Iraq is attacked; their wavering support goes only so far as liberating Kuwait. And the bill for maintaining 400,000 American troops in Saudi Arabia is more than the U.S. is able to pay. Bush thinks a quick, highly destructive war is possible and what the nation will support. American society is deeply divided about the wisdom of sending its troops into combat, which was reflected by the close vote in Congress Saturday, a thin margin of support for giving the President the war powers he was seeking.

Antiwar demonstrations continue all over the world as the United Nations deadline for Iraq's evacuation of Kuwait becomes only a matter of hours. My main concern is with the people who might soon begin slaughtering each other. Though a quarter of a century separates my own experience of war from the anxiously waiting soldiers on all sides, the dread and horror remain with me as if it were only moments ago I waited for a bullet or an incoming rocket or mortar round.

A friend and veteran of Vietnam asked if I would rather fight a war in the jungle or desert. Jungle, I immediately answered, and he agreed. At least in the bush we had cover and the Viet Cong were as hampered by limited visibility as we were.



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though they used it to much better advantage with their surprising costly ambushes. The desert provides little cover or concealment and virtually demands clashes of large forces on open ground. During the long desert campaign in North Africa in World War 2 night provided the cover that foliage gave in the jungle, but technology has rendered nighttime as bright as day with special scopes and radar detectors.

"The best way to win a war is without firing a shot," I said on today's radio program.

Tuesday, 1/15/91

Today I wait for war. It seems ludicrous to sit in my small house in a forest grove on a hill above the Columbia River, alone in a small old city (Astoria) with a radio my only link to the high suspense and drama being played out all over the world in capital cities, in the UN, on the deserts of Arabia.

Today is Martin Luther King's 62nd birthday, a man of peace, a follower of Gandhi, both assassinated (the Mahatma fifteen days from now in 1948; MLK twenty years later in April 1968). I wonder if either MLK or Gandhi are being thought of today.

The French try a last minute attempt at peace by proposing to Saddam Hussein that if he remove his troops from Kuwait an international conference will be held to resolve conflict in the region, including the festering Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Hussein refuses and the French foreign minister says it is time to send in the war machine. On this side, Presidential aides say Bush is calm and composed, ready to make hard decisions. Bush is quoted as saying he will use the war machine "sooner than later" after the deadline ends at Midnight.

I think if the war machine goes into action the clash of opponents will be gigantic — more than a million human beings are poised against each other, armed with tens of thousands of tanks, aircraft and missiles; not to mention biological and chemical weapons Hussein threatens to use and the U.S. assuredly has positioned on the ground and on the hundreds of ships in the Persian Gulf. Hundreds of thousands of civilians will also be probable victims of a savage air operation.

The great dangers of war that have been aroused are principally the result of weapons sold to every Middle Eastern faction with a buck by the very nations that have mobilized to preserve their oil supplies. The U.S. and the Soviet Union, along with France and other Western arms traders, armed the Iraqi dictator and made possible his now threatening power.

In the afternoon, about six hours from the Midnight deadline which is apparently Washington, D.C. time (it will be 9 tomorrow morning in Kuwait) peace marches clogged traffic in Seattle while a state legislator in Olympia (Wash.) called for an amendment to allow sanctions against Iraq be continued for a year before military action is started. "It's never too late to work for peace," he told a National Public Radio newswoman.

In Baghdad, except for a demonstration against the U.S. the streets are quiet. A reporter on a phone from the city said people were staying away from military installations that would most likely be bombed if war breaks out. Many were leaving for remote villages. The reporter, from the BBC, told NPR that most Baghdad residents were not afraid of indiscriminate bombing, believing that only military installations would be targeted, and they seem to have a faith in modern weapons that the reporter did not share. American citizens and reporters have been urged by the State Department to leave Baghdad.

Ironically, President Richard Nixon ordered suspension of all U.S. offensive action in Vietnam today in 1973. Veterans' centers throughout the country are getting phone calls and visits from Vietnam veterans who are stressed out at the threat of war: some are complaining of resurgence of post combat syndrome, some who have never suffered it are claiming it has hit them; many say nightmares of combat have been recurring as a result of the possibility and tension of a war. Mine have returned; at some point every night I am once more caught in the hideous terror of being back in war, unable to escape.

After dark I walked down the hill from my house to the waterfront. On the eve of possible war I saw a man through a window solitarily play a video game on an office computer; I heard a young woman laugh underneath a pier I walked upon. Otherwise Astoria downtown was empty, which it usually is at even such an early hour, yet I felt people were hiding in their burrows on this importunate, fearful night watching almost compulsively their televisions for voices and scenes they did not want to view or hear about. Some churches were open for prayers that war not begin or that loved ones not die if there is war.

I set out for my favorite altar, the bar of the Ship Inn. I left my house because I decided to not be alone when Midnight struck on the final deadline. I was earlier confused whether the deadline was set for local time in the desert, which would have made Midnight at Noon here in the Pacific Northwest; or at Greenwich time, six hours from here — but of course I should have realized the Midnight deadline was set for Washington, D.C., the capital city of George Bush's "New World Order."

I sat at the bar with a glass of red wine in front of me, friends sitting on stools or at tables all around the room. A few Scots from a cablelaying ship were down the bar. At 9 o'clock it was Midnight in Washington. The deadline for Iraq to leave Kuwait was upon us. Nothing happened. Television reporters in various Middle Eastern countries and in D.C. noted the time. No armies were unleashed; no fleets of bombers rose from airfields. The barroom of the Ship Inn continued on as noisily and unconcernedly as if a momentous shift in history had not occurred.



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