

OPERATION MIRAGE

American troops on Saudi soil: how one of the most consequential decisions in history was based on the blatant misuse of intelligence, leading directly to the chaos in Afghanistan. **by** STEPHEN DAVIS



Dick Cheney and Norman Schwarzkopf looked at the Saudi king and waited for him to say no. They had just made the outlandish suggestion that the king allow US troops on sacred Saudi Arabian soil.

Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait after a dispute over oil revenues and Cheney, the United States secretary of defense, and General Schwarzkopf, head of Central Command, had flown to Riyadh to tell King Fahd his country was under threat and propose that the US come to the rescue.

It was the longest of long shots. The king turned to his brothers and solicited their reaction. They were unanimously opposed to an American intervention – to US forces being on the soil of the land of the two holiest mosques in Islam.

Fahd thought about it for a moment, then said, simply, “Yes.”

The US delegation was stunned; they had the go-ahead to set up bases with troops and weapons in one of the world’s most devout Muslim nations. Schwarzkopf said later he almost fell off his chair.

It was August 1990. This was truly a moment when history changed gears. But the assembly of President George HW Bush’s coalition, preparations for Operation Desert Storm – the operation to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait – and the air and ground wars that followed meant there was very little examination then or since of that decision, and the “evidence” that persuaded the Saudis.

It is time there was. Had there been a negotiation rather than a war over the dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, and no US troops on Saudi soil, it is almost certain there would have been no 9/11 and no invasion of Afghanistan, with the 20 years of bloodshed and enormous expenditure that followed – ending in the tragic scenes in Kabul last month.

Richard A Clarke, who sat in on the meeting as a member of the US State Department (he was later US head of counterterrorism from 1998-2003), has said: “The rise of al-Qaeda in the 1990s, the US invasion of Afghanistan, the second US war with Iraq, the rise of Isis, all followed that August 1990 decision to deploy large US forces to the Gulf. There were many social and political pressures that contributed to the upheaval in the Arab and Islamic world, but the continued US military presence in the region and the way those US forces were used were major contributors. This chain of events also contributed to the Arab Spring and the creation of failed states in Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Taken together,

these events caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands, turned millions of people into refugees, and cost trillions of dollars.”

But as revealed in my new book, *Operation Trojan Horse*, the decision was made as Washington and London had clear on-the-ground intelligence

that the Iraqis were taking up defensive positions in Kuwait, not getting ready to invade Saudi Arabia. This was a misuse of intelligence with consequences that have lasted decades.

I would argue that it was a worse intelligence scandal than the weapons of mass destruction fiasco used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In fact, one led to the other. There is actually no evidence, in the lead-up to the now famous (or infamous) meeting in Riyadh, that Hussein ever intended to invade Saudi Arabia.

THE HUMAN SHIELDS

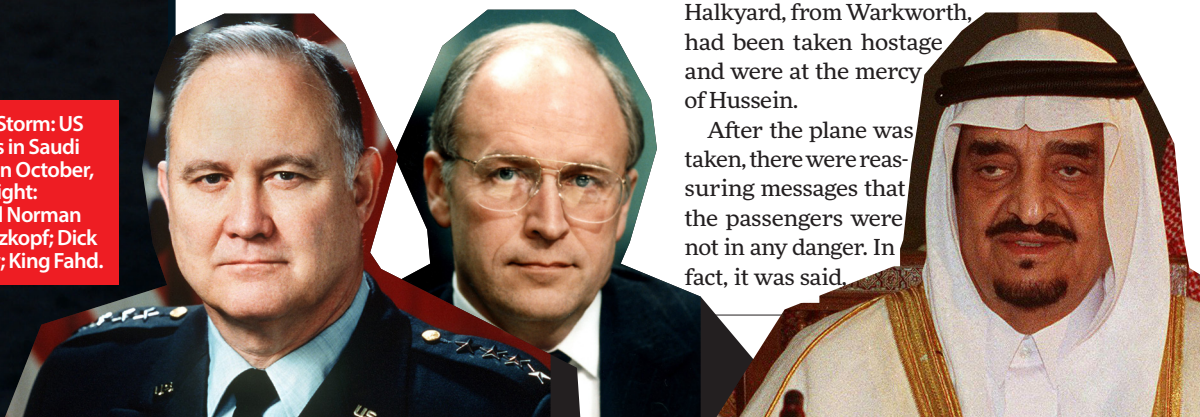
In August 1990, I had become interested in persistent rumours about a passenger flight, BA 149, that had landed in Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion.

All the passengers and crew, including two New Zealanders, Henry and Daphne Halkyard, from Warkworth, had been taken hostage and were at the mercy of Hussein.

After the plane was taken, there were reassuring messages that the passengers were not in any danger. In fact, it was said,

All the passengers and crew, including New Zealanders Henry and Daphne Halkyard, had been taken hostage.

Desert Storm: US Marines in Saudi Arabia in October, 1990. Right: General Norman Schwarzkopf; Dick Cheney; King Fahd.



they were on a sort of unexpected holiday, drinking cocktails in the sunshine by the pool at luxury hotels. One of my contacts begged to differ. There is something not right about all this, he said; you should investigate. So began a long search for the real story.

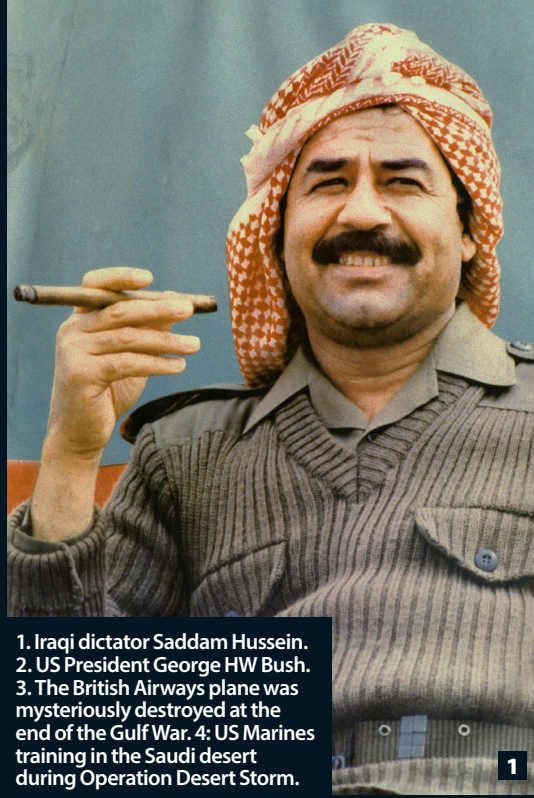
Ironically, the CIA, so often accused of getting it wrong, had successfully predicted the invasion, declassified documents show. The agency was not above boasting of this success. In a letter to the *New York Times*, the agency's Richard Kerr took issue with an October editorial claiming that the CIA had "at least to public perception, flunked". Kerr wrote: "You suggest the agency failed to anticipate the fall of the Berlin Wall, Saddam Hussein's aggression and the implosion of the Soviet Union. This portrayal ... is inaccurate, and does a disservice by furthering a perception that is flat out wrong.

"... Concerning Saddam Hussein, the CIA clearly warned of his potential for aggression. Longer-range estimates judged that the apparent restraint in Iraqi foreign policy following the war with Iran reflected the realities facing postwar Iraq rather than a fundamental shift in Saddam Hussein's policies or regional ambitions. During the spring of 1990, we tracked Saddam Hussein's increasingly threatening tone and behaviour; in the days leading up to the invasion of Kuwait, we reported the buildup of Iraqi forces on the border, and we gave explicit warning of the possibility of attack more than a week before it occurred."

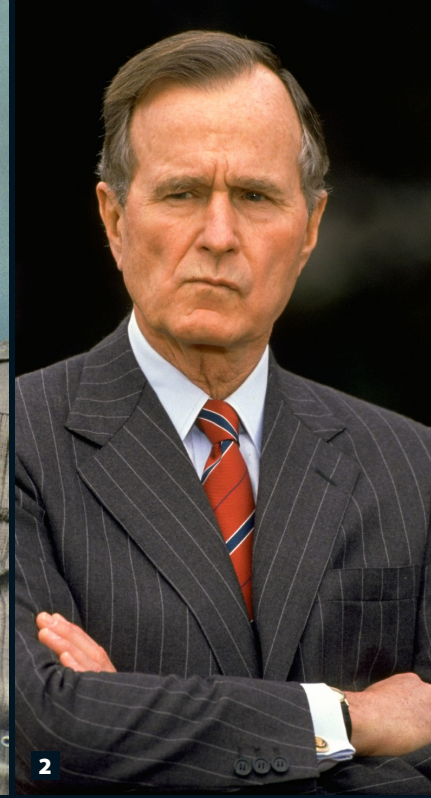
SPOOKS ON A PLANE

This early warning enabled the dispatch of a secret intelligence and special forces team that landed in Kuwait on BA 149 and got away from the airport – leaving the passengers and crew to be taken hostage along with hundreds of other Westerners trapped on the ground who were soon to become known as the human shields.

The team were sending back real-time,



1. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.
2. US President George HW Bush.
3. The British Airways plane was mysteriously destroyed at the end of the Gulf War. 4: US Marines training in the Saudi desert during Operation Desert Storm.



The Saudis themselves did not believe they were about to be invaded. Their scouts reported there were no Iraqi troops in sight.

actionable data. There was clear evidence that the Iraqi forces were adopting a defensive rather than an aggressive posture. At the front line, they were digging huge tank berms – sand traps designed to repel a tank attack. The observers quickly passed messages back to London and Washington, to say that it did not look as though Hussein was preparing to attack Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis themselves did not believe they were about to be invaded. They had sent scout teams across the border the day after the invasion and these reported that there were no Iraqi troops in sight.

Soon afterwards, the Saudis received another, more unusual offer of help. A member of a wealthy family met with King Fahd's brother, Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, the defence secretary, to propose a jihad against the Iraqis. The man, who had fought with the mujahideen in Afghanistan, told Prince Sultan he could raise an army of 100,000 holy warriors to drive the Iraqis out. He said they had to do the job themselves and that American troops must be prevented from being stationed on Saudi soil at all costs.

Prince Sultan promised to pass on the offer but said it was likely to be declined. The wealthy Saudi and potential jihad leader – a man named Osama and one of 20 heirs to the bin Laden fortune – stormed out of the meeting. Osama bin Laden warned that US troops on sacred Saudi soil would be an insult to all of his faith.

THE RIYADH LINE

Cheney and Schwarzkopf arrived in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, for a meeting with King Fahd. They came with the words of President Bush: both publicly and privately, he was saying the invasion "will not stand". He was supported – some say pushed – into taking a tougher line by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher

Despite the eye-witness intelligence from inside Kuwait, Cheney and Schwarzkopf told the king that Iraq might move against Saudi Arabia. They showed him satellite photographs of the Iraqi positions and outlined their plans to bring in 200,000 allied troops. Clarke later described the meeting. "Cheney asked General Schwarzkopf to brief the king on what the Iraqis *could* do with the large military force they had just inserted into Kuwait. With large maps and photos, the general showed that the Iraqi tanks *could* be in Dhahran, the Saudi oil city, in a matter of hours. The US forces would leave when the Iraqi crisis passed or at any time the king wanted them to go; we sought no permanent military presence, Cheney assured Fahd.

"Fahd talked at length about how hard he and his family had worked to build a

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Osama bin Laden: offer rejected.



Osama bin Laden offered to raise a “holy” army to drive the Iraqis out. He warned that US troops on Saudi soil would be an insult.

modern country from a backwards, desert collection of tribes. I wondered where he was going with the monologue when he finally stopped, took a breath, and then said: ‘Tell President Bush to send the forces. Send them all. Send them quickly. I accept his word that the forces will leave when this is over.’ The decision and its clarity surprised us. King Fahd thought about it for a moment, then said simply, ‘yes.’”

When bin Laden discovered that the US offer had been accepted in preference to his “holy warriors”, and US troops were going to arrive on holy soil, he vowed revenge. He proved to be a man of his word.

THE EVIDENCE GULF

Jean Heller, a journalist with the *St Petersburg Times* in Florida, soon obtained satellite photos of Kuwait that did not support Bush’s claim of an imminent Iraqi invasion. In fact, the photos showed no sign of a massive Iraqi troop buildup in Kuwait. “The troops that were said to be massing on the Saudi border, and that constituted the possible threat to Saudi Arabia that justified the US sending of troops, do not show

up in these photographs,” he wrote. “And when the Department of Defense was asked to provide evidence that would contradict our satellite evidence, it refused to do it.”

The pictures, taken by a Soviet satellite on September 11 and 13, 1990, were analysed by two satellite-image specialists: Peter Zimmerman, a nuclear physicist and arms control expert, and a former image specialist for the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) who wished to remain anonymous.

As the newspaper reported, the specialists saw few Iraqi troops or weapons in Kuwait. They said the roads showed no evidence of a massive tank invasion, there were no tent cities or troop concentrations, and the main Kuwaiti air base appeared deserted.

Both analysts agreed there were several possible explanations for their inability to spot Iraqi forces: the troops could have been well camouflaged, or they could have been widely dispersed, or the Soviets had deliberately or accidentally produced a photo taken before the Iraqi invasion. But the latter explanation was not considered likely and, given the reported massive deployment, the specialists found it “really hard to believe” they could miss them even if they were well camouflaged and/or widely dispersed.

The images backed up the on-the-ground reporting that there was no intent to invade, but the story was ignored by most of the media.

The largely unexamined history of August 1990 extends to the human shields, whose ordeal in a mass hostage-taking has not had the attention it deserved. There were rapes and other sexual assaults, mock executions, near starvation conditions. Many of

The ordeal of the human shields has not had the attention it deserved. They have been victims of a cover-up.

them have suffered lifelong trauma.

Those who were landed in a war zone on flight 149 have been victims of a cover-up that also prevented a public examination of the use of intelligence from that mission.

That Hussein (previously a US ally, it is worth noting) was going to invade Saudi Arabia and that the threat justified putting American troops on Saudi soil is, perhaps, the biggest lie of all.

One can easily imagine a different, more peaceful world if the intelligence had been used in a different way. ■

New Zealander Stephen Davis is the author of Operation Trojan Horse, the story of a secret intelligence mission, a mass hostage-taking and the horrific consequences for these civilians trapped in a war zone. Davis has been a newspaper editor, foreign editor and award-winning TV current-affairs producer. He developed a course at the University of Otago in combating misinformation and disinformation, and his recent investigation into intelligence links in the sinking of the ferry Estonia for a Discovery channel documentary series made headlines around the world.



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