

## OPERATION EARNEST WILL

### The U.S. Foreign Policy behind U.S. Naval Operations in the Persian Gulf 1987–89; A Curious Case

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On 3 October 2015, the U.S. Navy met an odd milestone when it decommissioned USS *Simpson*—the last modern ship in its fleet to have sunk an enemy warship. *Simpson* had sunk the Iranian ship *Joshan* twenty-seven years earlier during an obscure deployment to the Persian Gulf from 1987 to 1989 to protect eleven Kuwaiti oil tankers and preserve freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

In 1987, when the episode began, the Cold War was hot. Despite ongoing negotiations over conventional and intermediate nuclear forces, U.S. and Soviet proxies faced off in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. The Iran-Contra hearings were about to begin, and the Iran-Iraq War was starting its seventh year. Iraqi and Iranian forces were sinking neutral oil tankers and other merchant ships moving cargo through the Strait of Hormuz at an alarming rate.

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It was in this environment that President Ronald W. Reagan authorized the Kuwaiti tankers to be reflagged as American ships and given a sizable naval escort, including *Simpson*. The deployment, code-named Operation EARNEST WILL, stood out as the U.S. Navy's largest and most complicated surface-warfare operation since World War II, and it was a rare example of the United States using force to protect access to crude oil. EARNEST WILL was a contentious deployment, and Congress demanded assurances that U.S. forces, if deployed, would be protected, to avoid friendly casualties.

Participants and historians judge the operation to have been a success, although there has been little counterfactual analysis to ascertain what would have happened had the United States done nothing.<sup>1</sup> We should seek to understand why we deploy forces abroad and evaluate each deployment on whether it succeeded in achieving its mission. Strategists use many criteria to determine whether deployments should occur, but minimally these missions should be moral efforts of last resort when diplomacy has failed (or used in conjunction with diplomacy) and tied to a nation's grand strategy.

This grand strategy can take many forms, but generally constitutes "a nation-state's theory on how to produce security for itself," or, as Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote, "how one uses whatever one has to get to wherever it is one wants to go."<sup>2</sup> A well-formed strategy must be feasible and have a decent probability of success. It must be suitable; that is, the strategy, if successful, actually will produce the desired policy goal. Finally, the strategy must be acceptable, meaning that the nation is willing to bear the cost of the strategy, as measured in lives, treasure, prestige, and leadership focus.

Given the stakes, one would think that grand strategies and the deployments that support them are well thought out. This does not seem to be so. Some research suggests that much American strategy has been improvised on the fly.<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Richard Neustadt, Ernest May, and Yuen Khong argue that individual policy decisions, such as particular deployments, are driven by a series of messy analytic models that include poor analogical thinking instead of structured analytic techniques.<sup>4</sup>

The EARNEST WILL deployment is an example of an ad hoc improvisation in the context of two developed U.S. strategies: the policy of containment and the Carter Doctrine. As a deployment, it was anomalous because of its size, the ferocity with which it was executed (the American joint task force [JTF] ultimately sank a large portion of the Iranian navy), and its adoption in the face of congressional opposition. An outlier such as this invites examination. We therefore should try to understand what strategic forces drove EARNEST WILL. Analysis of this case study can help us examine what practical realities drive states' foreign policies. When faced with multiple principles (such as containment and the Carter Doctrine), which are the more powerful influencers?

This article assesses two possible drivers. The first is that EARNEST WILL was executed as an extension of President Reagan's Cold War strategy. The Soviet Union had offered to solve the security issues in the Gulf. Keeping the Soviet Union out meant keeping U.S. forces in, and it also meant pulling Kuwait into an American-provided security convoy regime. In this explanation, EARNEST WILL was a shrewd, neorealist example of offshore balancing. A second option is that oil economics was the main driver behind the deployment. The U.S.

State Department's official policy rationale for EARNEST WILL stated that "the unimpeded flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz is a vital interest and critical to the economic health of the Western world."<sup>5</sup> The oil had to be protected, as it all went into the global spot and futures markets, which affected the price Americans paid at the gas pump. The Carter Doctrine was explicit that this was a national interest, and in the past, when oil supplies were disrupted, it sent the U.S. economy reeling. In this situation, the Persian Gulf was a critical piece of the economic global commons, and the United States was the protector of the global town green.

### THE ROAD TO WAR: THE SHAH, THE HOSTAGES, AND THE IRAQI INVASION

On 22 September 1980, Iraq commenced a mechanized invasion of Iran with twenty-two divisions equipped with modern Soviet weapons. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein thought his force could seize oil fields and the Shatt al Arab waterway quickly from an Iranian army still in disorder from the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Hussein also feared that Iran might export its revolutionary brand of Islam to Iraq's predominantly Shia population. The Iraqi invasion initially made good progress; Iran quickly rallied, however, drawing from a deep well of revolutionary fervor and a population three times the size of Iraq's. For years the ground war, while not exactly a stalemate, produced no decisive results.

America from the start tilted toward Iraq. Iran's status in America had shifted from key strategic partner to terrorist menace. In the 1970s, relations between the United States and Iran's monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (the shah), were warm. The United Kingdom had been the Persian Gulf's traditional protector and offshore balancer for much of the twentieth century, but in 1971 the United Kingdom withdrew from "east of the Suez," closing its naval base in Bahrain. With the United States overextended at the time and trying to disengage from Vietnam, Britain presented the move as a *fait accompli*.<sup>6</sup> Henry Kissinger recalled the dilemma: "[T]here was no possibility of assigning any American military forces to the Indian Ocean in the midst of the Vietnam war and its attendant trauma."<sup>7</sup> America filled the void with the Nixon Doctrine, a stratagem that called for the two pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia to provide security in the Gulf. Iran, well funded with petrodollars and well equipped with advanced American weapons, approached the task with zeal—until the shah's overthrow in 1979.

America tried to work with the subsequent Ayatollah Khomeini regime, with the Pentagon announcing shipments of spare parts to the Iranian military as late as October 1979.<sup>8</sup> But in November 1979, Iranian students seized fifty-four hostages in the U.S. embassy in Tehran in retaliation for the U.S. government allowing the shah into the United States for medical treatment. In April 1980,

President Jimmy Carter, perceived by many as overseeing a dovish foreign policy, launched U.S. special operations forces on an audacious rescue mission to recover the Americans. Aircraft malfunctions doomed the raid, and eight U.S. servicemembers died in a collision. The Iranians displayed their bodies and the destroyed aircraft for the world to see—a spectacle that added to the dual humiliations of deposed ally and captive diplomats. Tehran finally released the hostages on 20 January 1981, as part of a deal that netted the regime \$2.8 billion in assets previously frozen by the United States.<sup>9</sup> In a final affront to President Carter, the airplane bearing the hostages did not depart Iran until a few minutes after Ronald Reagan was sworn into office. They had been held captive for 444 days.

Although Saddam Hussein's decision to invade was unilateral, Iran saw the attack, which occurred during the American hostage crisis, as part of a wider effort to bring harm to the country and end the Khomeini revolution. Bruce Riedel, a former intelligence analyst specializing in the Iran-Iraq War, explains the thinking:

Iranians call the war the “Imposed War” because they believe the United States subjected them to the conflict and orchestrated the global “tilt” toward Iraq. They note that the United Nations [UN] did not condemn Iraq for starting the war. In fact, the UN did not even discuss the war for weeks after it started, and it ultimately considered Iraq to be the aggressor only years later, as part of a deal orchestrated by President George H. W. Bush to free the remaining U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon.<sup>10</sup>

## WAR FOOTING

The “Imposed War” soon required full mobilization of both combatants' citizenries and economies. One analyst has estimated the total cost of the war to both economies at \$1.097 trillion, and noted that the sum “exceeds by \$678.5 billion the entire oil revenue received by both countries, ever since they started to sell their oil on the world market.”<sup>11</sup>

Much of this money went to weapons purchases. In 1980, Iraq imported \$2.24 billion worth of weapons, a figure that increased to \$3.285 billion by 1982.<sup>12</sup> Iran's imports were anemic by comparison: \$278 million in 1980, when it was in a state of revolution but still on a peacetime footing, increasing to \$541 million by 1982. In 1983, the United States initiated Operation STAUNCH, an effort to stop the flow of arms, not to the aggressor but to Iran, on the grounds that the Iranian government would not negotiate a cease-fire. During a hearing to justify EARNEST WILL, the State Department's Under Secretary for Political Affairs described STAUNCH, then in its fourth year of existence, as “vigorous diplomatic efforts—through intelligence-sharing and strong demarches—to block or complicate Iranian arms resupply efforts on a worldwide basis.”<sup>13</sup>

Oil exports were critical to fuel the war machines of both sides. The war cut off Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf, leaving more than seventy merchant ships stuck in the ports of Umm Qasr, Shatt, and Khorramshahr. Shells and bullets impacted them and their egress to the Gulf slowly silted up. Insurers eventually wrote off the trapped ships as constructive total losses and paid out more than \$450 million to various policy holders.<sup>14</sup>

Baghdad adapted by exporting oil via pipeline and importing weapons and dry goods overland after off-loading at ports in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. Since its navy was small, Iraq used its air force to strike military and economic targets in the Iranian littorals. Kharg Island, Iran's major loading point for crude oil, was a frequent target, and Iran soon fortified the location with missiles, decoys, and anti-aircraft guns in a mode reminiscent of European cities during World War II. In October 1981, Iraq began using French helicopters equipped with French Exocet anti-ship missiles to attack neutral ships heading for Iran. Tankers loading crude at Kharg were a favorite target, and Iranian oil revenue suffered.

Iran declared its territorial waters a war zone shortly after the invasion and stated it would blockade Iraq (both legal moves under the laws of armed conflict), but initially the government did not try to interdict shipping heading to Iraq. By September 1982, after months of Iraqi attacks on Iranian shipping, Tehran's tone changed. That month, speaker of the Iranian parliament Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani told the Japanese ambassador, "We care a lot about the security of the Persian Gulf . . . but if others do not leave it safe and want to secure only their own interest and thereby use it against us, perhaps then we will not let it be safe for anyone."<sup>15</sup> Iranian rhetoric intensified, but it was not until 13 May 1984, after dozens of ships servicing Iran were hit, that the Iranian air force retaliated by putting an American-made Maverick missile into the side of *Umm Casbah*, a Kuwaiti oil tanker.<sup>16</sup>

Denied Iraqi targets, Iran felt justified in targeting third-party shipping, for two reasons. First, it deduced that Iraq was receiving commercial goods and war matériel via "neutral" ports, such as those in Kuwait and the UAE. Second, the Arab Gulf states had tilted openly against Persian (and Shiite-ruled) Iran. During the war, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states gave Iraq between twenty-five and fifty billion dollars in financial assistance.<sup>17</sup> Eight days after the *Umm Casbah* attack, the GCC asked the UN Security Council (UNSC) to address Iranian aggression. The UNSC condemned Iranian actions on 1 June 1984, in UNSC Resolution 552, a document that demanded that there "should be no interference with ships en route to and from States that are not parties to the hostilities." UNSC Resolution 552 made no mention of Iraqi maritime attacks, which were allowed under the laws of armed conflict, nor did it address Iranian

grievances about the thin neutrality that GCC members such as Kuwait displayed during the conflict.

Stymied on the battlefield and geographically isolated in the Gulf, with only a short list of arms suppliers, Iran must have felt increasingly isolated politically at this point as well. Additionally, the world's two superpowers had weighed in against Iran. The Soviet Union was, of course, Iraq's number one arms supplier. By 1984, the United States tilted against Iran in at least two ways. The first was Operation STAUNCH, its arms-restriction effort. The second was a small deployment of U.S. Air Force jets called ELF-1.

The Iran-Iraq War alarmed Saudi Arabia, which moved most of its oil through the Persian Gulf. Shiite Iran was a traditional foe of Sunni Saudi Arabia, which backed Iraq. Saudi Aramco's massive oil-processing facility and anchorage at Ras Tanura is 145 kilometers from an Iranian air force base at Bushehr—a mere fifteen-minute flight time for an Iranian F-4 Phantom. The Saudis requested and received deployment of American E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft and refueling tankers. E-3s flown by the ELF-1 mission stood sentinel over Ras Tanura and the western Gulf from October 1980 until the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The E-3s' mission was early warning, and the deployment was defensive, but it gave U.S. and Saudi air forces eyes over the battlefield over a four-hundred-kilometer radius from the aircraft's orbit.

## ESCALATION AND CONTINUED AMERICAN TILTING TOWARD IRAQ

Iran eventually retaliated by declaring large parts of the Gulf “free fire zones” and striking an increasing number of tankers and merchantmen with naval and air forces. In the 1980s, oil was cheap, and a glut of shipping meant crews volunteered to sail the Strait of Hormuz even as the tally of damaged and destroyed ships grew. Still, economic pressure built with the tempo of the attacks. Fifty ships were hit in 1985, ninety-seven in 1986.<sup>18</sup> During the summer of 1985, Iran started boarding ships transiting the Gulf as well. The Strait of Hormuz made an excellent choke point for these operations, as it narrowed to only twenty-three nautical miles, and most traffic used a much narrower set of shipping lanes. Iran also controlled the islands of Tunb and Abu Musa, located to the west of the strait, and observed or launched warships from bases there.

Boarding and inspection were legal under the laws of armed conflict for the purposes of seizing contraband, which third parties were funneling to Iraq. On 12 January 1986, a crew from an Iranian frigate boarded SS *President Taylor*, a U.S. ship in the Gulf of Oman, east of the Strait of Hormuz and outside the Persian Gulf proper. *Taylor* was heading to the UAE port of Fujairah to pick up packaged food aid bound for India. U.S. policy makers initially considered the

incident “a matter of serious concern,” but later conceded that the search was legal. Warships escorted subsequent U.S. merchantmen. In May 1986, an Iranian frigate tried to stop SS *President McKinley* during a Gulf passage but backed off when *McKinley*'s destroyer escort, USS *David R. Ray*, requested that it do so.<sup>19</sup> The United States, long a proponent of freedom of navigation, clearly felt its ships' rights to avoid inspection trumped that of Iran to interdict contraband cargo. Fujairah was known as a transshipment point for cargo heading to Iraq, so Iran's inspection efforts in the Gulf of Oman were logical. However, the United States in 1986, with hostages held by Iranian-backed Shiite militants in Lebanon and its memory still seared by the detention and torment of the fifty-four diplomats seized in 1979, naturally was reluctant to allow any detention, however brief, of its mariners by Iran.

During this time, hull insurance rates climbed fivefold for ships heading to Kuwait. It appeared that Iranian antishipping efforts, while threatening shipping heading to all GCC countries, were paying particular attention to Kuwait-bound traffic, including its supertankers. The U.S. defense intelligence establishment had concluded as much by the fall of 1986.<sup>20</sup> The GCC met to discuss the problem and develop protective schemes on 1 November 1986, but it did not reach a consensus.

Kuwait proved more interested than the others in pursuing alternative solutions to the Iranian antishipping attacks. Admiral William J. Crowe, USN, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1985–89, suggested that Saudi Arabia's hesitance to seek an armed solution came from a national culture that preferred quiet diplomacy to resolve disputes, as well as the sheer size of the Saudi oil trade, which could absorb the loss of the occasional oil tanker.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Crowe suggested that Kuwait's oil industry, while rich, was more sensitive to the threat posed to the Kuwait Oil Tanker Company (KOTC), which was owned by the Kuwaiti royal family.

David Crist, a historian who wrote an academic history of Operation EARNEST WILL, argues that Kuwait's precarious geostrategic position drove it to seek a military solution to the Iranian threat. Kuwait's existence as an independent nation-state was, in the words of a former U.S. ambassador to the country, “an accident of history.”<sup>22</sup> Iraq resented Kuwait's existence. The country had no national bureaucratic or technical class. Kuwait accepted thousands of Palestinian refugees after 1948. The Palestinians and their children ran much of the nation, while native-born Kuwaiti Bedouins reaped the benefits of the country's oil wealth. As a result, Kuwait felt constantly insecure—“a defenseless state surrounded by wolves.”<sup>23</sup> This encouraged diplomatic hedging. Kuwait was the only Gulf country with full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. It bought both Western and Soviet weapons. It refused to close its embassy in Tehran even after Iran bombed

the country and marked its merchant shipping for destruction. Of course, Kuwait—even while this was happening—also was assisting Iraq’s war by transferring weapons from its war stocks to Baghdad, accepting foreign military cargoes (contraband under the laws of armed conflict) and shipping them overland to Iraq, and extending loans and grants to the financially strapped regime. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the fall of 1986, the Kuwaiti government approached both the Soviet Union and the United States to see whether those nations were interested in providing security for Kuwaiti tankers.

### AMERICA’S ASSESSMENT AND POLICY FORMULATION

Soviet diplomats responded by saying that Kuwaiti tankers could be reflagged and would receive Soviet naval protection by doing little more than hoisting the hammer and sickle. The American request wended its way through the U.S. State Department slowly. After SS *President McKinley* avoided being boarded and searched, as *Taylor* had been in January 1986, the Department of Defense (DoD) must have felt that it had solved the Gulf’s freedom-of-navigation problem, at least for itself. The hull insurance market was reeling, but, with most premiums backed by Lloyd’s of London, this was primarily a British business problem. Operation STAUNCH continued, fitfully. AWACS radar planes of the ELF-1 mission continued their monotonous surveillance flights, and U.S. warships occasionally plied the Gulf and visited their tiny base in Bahrain. Certainly, the Iran-Iraq War was a tragedy, and the United States clearly had tilted (although not by official policy) toward Iraq, but there did not seem to be reason to intervene militarily over Gulf maritime traffic beyond escorting U.S.-flagged vessels.

In fact, the oil markets scarcely registered the uptick of shipping attacks in the Gulf. In one way, Iran helped depress the flight of oil. Most of its crude was exported through oil terminals on Kharg Island, a perennial favorite for Iraqi air strikes. Iran offered steep discounts for companies willing to fuel up at Kharg, and even self-insured tankers for the period that they were loading. Oil prices had plunged since the heady days of the 1970s, when the Gulf states posted record profits and the West, particularly America, feared the Arab “oil weapon” in the shape of an embargo. Market forces fueled investments in oil exploration and efficiency in the 1970s, and by the early 1980s prices dropped. By November 1986, the world was less than a year away from the introduction of the Brent spot market, a benchmark created on the basis of crude oil extracted from the North Sea that was to compete with the industry standard of West Texas Intermediate (WTI). Brent’s arrival indicated new abundance and a shift in the world oil market’s center of gravity. The futures market for WTI, a benchmark for crude oil, started 1986 at twenty-six dollars per barrel; by Monday, 3 November—the first



trading day after the GCC meeting and Kuwait's failed attempt to hammer out a deal on tanker security—WTI had fallen to \$14.71.<sup>24</sup>

After 3 November, the U.S. government had even fewer reasons to focus on the tanker war in the Gulf. On that day, *As Shiraa (The Sail)*, a Lebanese newspaper, published a story stating that the United States was shipping weapons to Iran despite having sanctions against that country.<sup>25</sup> Further revelations showed that the proceeds from these sales were used to fund freedom fighters battling Nicaragua's communist government, in circumvention of Congress's Boland Amendment. The Iran-Contra scandal had broken, and its revelation harmed America's standing worldwide, especially among Arab nations, who bridled at the superpower's duplicity.<sup>26</sup> Rear Admiral Harold J. Bernsen, USN, commander of Middle East naval forces, learned of the scandal during a meeting with a Lebanese defense official: "When I walked in the door, I realized I was in trouble," the admiral recalled. In the course of a severe dressing-down, the official told Bernsen, "[Y]ou can tell all of your buddies that they might as well not come around here anymore."<sup>27</sup> Handling international and domestic blowback absorbed the attention of Reagan's national security staff, ensuring that Kuwait's request remained second-page news for a while.

In contrast to the Soviets' quick and unequivocal response, the U.S. State Department, after consulting with the U.S. Coast Guard, relayed a litany of requirements to the Kuwaitis. These included that (1) reflagged vessels must be owned by a U.S. person, via a company incorporated in the United States; (2) vessels must be inspected by the U.S. Coast Guard for safety, to ensure, for instance, that they had the proper number of fire extinguishers on board; (3) vessels must have an American master during operation; and (4) vessels must have American names. While initially cool to the prospect of reflagging, U.S. administration officials, particularly Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, came to like the idea, as it would counter Soviet and Iranian objectives simultaneously while protecting U.S. oil supplies.

Weinberger, an avowed anticommunist, took Kuwaiti overtures to the Soviets seriously. Given the free world's dependence on the Gulf's oil, he considered an increased Soviet presence there threatening, later stating, "I was, and still am, convinced that it was not in our interest for Soviet forces to move into an area so vital to us. . . . We in the West need the Gulf's oil resources; the Soviets are more than self-sufficient in oil. Their position in the Gulf, should they achieve a vital presence there, could only be one of denial toward us. They would gain a tremendous strategic advantage I did not want them to have."<sup>28</sup> American defense planners did not want to open the Strait of Hormuz to the Soviet navy one inch. Weinberger dismissed claims that his enthusiasm for the reflagging constituted

the United States being “played” by the Soviets. Oil fueled the free world’s economy, and U.S. strategists loathed the thought of the Soviets being in a position to interdict its movement.

Admiral Crowe also concurred with the reflagging plan. While he agreed that Weinberger’s dual objectives were sound, the chairman thought that relationship building justified the action; “it seemed to me that reflagging would go a long way toward mending our fences in the region.”<sup>29</sup> Crowe had experience working in the Middle East and had participated in negotiating basing rights for the U.S. Navy in Bahrain in the 1970s. Additionally, Crowe hinted in his memoirs that ideational factors—a visceral antipathy for Iran—may have affected his support. The USN ships already in the Gulf witnessed many of Iran’s attacks on neutral shipping. These captains did not see a blockaded Iran striking back at Arabs smuggling war matériel into Iraq; they only heard calls for help on the radio as Iranian ships attacked merchantmen and observed the aftermath of damaged ships bearing the flags and crews of U.S. allies. Historian Harold Wise captured the sentiment of USN sailors prior to EARNEST WILL.

One Iranian ship . . . named *Sabalan*, gained a notorious reputation for these activities. The captain of *Sabalan*, known as Captain Nasty to Americans, would board tankers bound for Kuwait, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia, and pretend to carry out a friendly inspection . . . then, once the charade was over, Captain Nasty would order an attack on his defenseless prey. Often, Captain Nasty would send a parting message by radio to his victim and say “Have a nice day.” . . . Many times, American ships watched helplessly as both sides [Iran and Iraq] left merchants and tankers in flames.<sup>30</sup>

Stories such as that of Captain Nasty would have been related to the Navy ships’ local commander, Admiral Bernsen, and likely upward in the chain of command to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Crowe. Crowe may have had *Sabalan* in mind when he recalled his feelings toward Iranian conduct in the Gulf: “During my recent Gulf visit I had heard firsthand from the Middle East Force’s commanders and men about the unprovoked and murderous attacks they were witnessing. They were a frustrated group of sailors; they hated to have to restrain themselves while atrocities were carried out in front of their eyes.”<sup>31</sup> Neither Crowe’s nor Weinberger’s memoirs comment on Iraq’s also-murderous and equally illegal use of chemical weapons against civilians. While offshore balancing, oil supply, and loyalty to local allies were important, subconsciously he may have viewed the Iranians’ real crimes as threefold. First, they had held Americans hostage—American diplomats in Tehran and other American citizens held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Second, they gloated over America’s military failure during the hostage rescue mission. Third, by attacking neutral shipping with impunity, they made the Persian Gulf an area of lawlessness, and by extension made the American naval forces on hand look powerless.

As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Crowe was the highest-ranking military officer in the nation. He also was, by statute, the president's military adviser. However, he was outside the chain of command for military operations; those plans ran through Secretary Weinberger. So while Admiral Crowe's recommendation carried considerable weight, Secretary Weinberger spoke with the official DoD voice on reflagging.

The reflagging proposal was debated within the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) interagency process. DoD and the NSC were for reflagging, while the State Department was against it. President Reagan concurred with the DoD/NSC position. On 17 March 1987, Admiral Crowe delivered America's formal offer to Kuwait's emir, Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah, to escort KOTC's oil tankers, either under their Kuwaiti flags or as properly reflagged American ships.<sup>32</sup>

Around the same time, the administration alerted Congress to its intentions. The reflagging would not require extra appropriations. Although the actual exchange of flags would be done "by the book," according to U.S. Coast Guard regulations, DoD tried to expedite certain steps. Administration lawyers felt they did not need legislation to authorize the escort. The 1973 War Powers Resolution had set tough notification and approval requirements on a president regarding the use of military forces, but Weinberger thought these approval procedures did not apply to the reflagging; and Reagan, like all presidents since its passing, considered the War Powers Resolution unconstitutional. Admiral Crowe recalled congressional opposition during hearings on the reflagging as intense. Weinberger, a career politician and former legislator, considered it desultory posturing by opposition Democrats. The Iran-Contra scandal was a much bigger deal for Congress. Senator John G. Tower had released a report on the scandal on 25 February 1987, identifying administration errors. The Tower Commission had settled nothing, however. Another congressional entity with a wider scope and subpoena power was authorized in January 1987, and it was preparing for hearings during the reflagging debate.<sup>33</sup>

On 15 May 1987, KOTC lawyers finished the paperwork that created Chesapeake Shipping Inc., a corporation based in Dover, Delaware, that had "no employees, with 'offices' consisting of a mail drop at another company that specialized in dummy corporations, and controlling assets (the tankers) valued at approximately \$350 million."<sup>34</sup> At this point, Operation EARNEST WILL was ready to start.

However, two days later an Iraqi Mirage jet hit USS *Stark*, a frigate, with two missiles. *Stark* had been conducting routine patrolling activities in the central Persian Gulf when it was hit. Heroic crew efforts extinguished fires and saved the ship from sinking, but the impact and conflagration killed thirty-seven sailors. Congress was livid. On 22 May 1987, the Senate demanded more information on

EARNEST WILL, and by the next day a congressional delegation of investigators had arrived at the U.S. naval base in Bahrain to interview survivors. Iraq immediately apologized. The Navy investigation assessed the incident to have been an accident—the *Mirage* had been looking for shipping bound for Iran.

*Stark* had missile countermeasures, but had not defended itself, because it did not see the Iraqi aircraft as a threat. The problem was as much cognitive as technological. Naval tacticians long had feared combat in the congested Persian Gulf; American ships were designed for combat in open oceans. Admiral Crowe, among others, noted that encounters in the Gulf's confines left little time for humans to interpret data, identify a threat, and take countermeasures. Because of this, America's aircraft carriers remained in the open waters of the Indian Ocean for the duration of EARNEST WILL.

While the crew of USS *Stark* made mistakes, the Iraqi *Mirage* pilot was grossly negligent. He carried sophisticated radar and other sensors, yet did not identify that his target was a 4,100-ton *Perry*-class frigate instead of his desired prey: a two-hundred-thousand-ton very large crude carrier (i.e., a supertanker).

Despite this fact, America quickly blamed Iran for the tragedy. The day after the attack Reagan stated during a press conference that “the villain in this piece really is Iran.”<sup>35</sup> On 20 May 1987, Secretary of State George P. Shultz wrote to Congress, “Quite apart from the Iraqi attack on the USS *Stark*, Iran continues publicly and privately to threaten shipping in the Gulf. It is this basic Iranian threat to the free flow of oil and to the principle of freedom of navigation which is unacceptable.”<sup>36</sup> The anti-Iranian narrative continued.

Nothing had changed to tilt U.S. policy in the region away from supporting Iraq in strategy or narrative. On 16 June 1987, Michael Armacost, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, addressed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to justify EARNEST WILL. Regarding the Iran-Iraq War, he testified that “[w]e do not wish to see an Iranian victory in that terrible conflict.” Yet in the very next sentence he stressed, “Nevertheless, the United States remains formally neutral in the war.”<sup>37</sup>

Because of the *Stark* incident, America's “neutral intervention” now grew in scope. Congress insisted that the Navy establish robust rules of engagement. The rules would, for instance, have allowed *Stark* to order the *Mirage* to change course as it approached or to open fire on it if it refused. The Navy now planned to send more ships to the Gulf as well. Weinberger told General George B. Crist, USMC, commander of the EARNEST WILL JTF, to ask for any asset he felt he needed to conduct the operation.<sup>38</sup> In June, Weinberger convinced the Saudis to let the EARNEST WILL JTF connect the radar feeds from the ELF-1 surveillance aircraft to its naval ships, giving the United States better situational awareness.

The Reagan administration initiated a strategic communications campaign to address congressional opposition and political posturing. Under Secretary Armacost and Secretary Weinberger both delivered lengthy statements to congressional committees on U.S. policy. In justifying EARNEST WILL and *Stark's* sacrifice, the statements described strategic concerns of encroaching Soviet influence in the Gulf as well as economic ones regarding free flow of commerce.

Oil, of course, was the key element of this commerce. Armacost testified that “[t]he unimpeded flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz is a vital interest.”<sup>39</sup> Vital interests generally are understood to be those over which America is prepared to fight. A subsequent national security document defined them as “those directly connected to the survival, safety, and vitality of our nation.”<sup>40</sup> Armacost reiterated the Carter Doctrine’s affirmation that “[a]n attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>41</sup> EARNEST WILL was the Carter Doctrine’s first explicit test.

In addition to the Soviets’ geopolitical threat, America had a collective psychological fear of oil shortages. President Reagan addressed this concern during a 29 May 1987 radio address. In justifying EARNEST WILL, Reagan recalled the 1970s oil shocks and their deleterious effects on the U.S. economy. He argued that “[t]his could happen again if Iran and the Soviet Union were able to impose their will upon the friendly Arab States of the Persian Gulf, and Iran was allowed to block the free passage of neutral shipping.”<sup>42</sup>

#### AN UNDECLARED WAR WITH IRAN

Iran did not acquiesce to the convoys’ presence when the larger and more aggressive JTF started EARNEST WILL. The Iranians continued to strike neutral shipping with aircraft and ships. They directly challenged the United States by laying mines along convoy routes (while denying constantly that they were doing so). The Iranian navy acted aggressively toward U.S. forces supporting the convoy missions. Three distinct Iranian actions—the mining of SS *Bridgeton*, the attack on SS *Sea Isle City*, and the mining of USS *Samuel B. Roberts*—prompted the U.S. military to retaliate against Iran with military force.

The first EARNEST WILL convoy did not take place until 22 July 1987, when USS *Kidd* and USS *Fox* escorted SS *Bridgeton*, an ultralarge crude carrier that displaced four hundred thousand tons. *Bridgeton*, nominally homeported in Philadelphia, had until shortly before this convoy been the Kuwaiti ship *Al-Rekkah*. In a bit of irony, *Kidd*, a state-of-the-art destroyer designed for work in the tropics, originally had been ordered and bought by prerevolutionary Iran. After the shah’s ousting and the cessation of weapons transfers, the U.S. Navy took the ship.

The convoy started inauspiciously: *Bridgeton* hit a mine on 24 July 1987, while transiting the Gulf to pick up crude oil in Kuwait. The explosion punctured the tanker but did not stop it. As if it were not enough that its escorts could not protect it, *Kidd* and *Fox* escaped the minefield by having *Bridgeton* lead while the warships followed in its wake; sailors reckoned that a four-hundred-thousand-ton supertanker in ballast is nearly impossible to sink with mines, while a 7,900-ton destroyer loaded with fuel and ammunition was at considerable risk.

The Navy reacted to the *Bridgeton* mining by launching an offensive to find and destroy the Iranian minelayer. Washington reinforced the EARNEST WILL JTF with special operations forces (SOFs) and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets that could find and track the civilian Iranian ships suspected of laying mines surreptitiously. On 21 September 1987, they succeeded. SOF helicopters, working at night, caught the fishing ship *Iran Ajr* in the act. U.S. SOFs captured *Iran Ajr* in a daring raid and the Navy videotaped its deadly cargo for the world to see.

On 16 October 1987, an Iranian Silkworm missile hit SS *Sea Isle City*. The United States responded by destroying an oil platform.

When *Samuel B. Roberts* hit a mine on 14 April 1988, the United States ratcheted up its response. Unlike *Bridgeton*, which survived with a small hole, “*Sammy B*” burned, flooded, and almost sank. In retaliation, Admiral Crowe ordered the JTF to destroy two oil platforms and a frigate: “sink the *Sabalan*,” Crowe cabled the commander; “put it on the bottom.”<sup>43</sup> In a one-day offensive code-named Operation PRAYING MANTIS, the EARNEST WILL JTF destroyed the platforms, several speedboats, and damaged *Sabalan*. Unsatisfied with a partial victory, a surface task force located the frigate *Joshan*. USS *Wainwright* signaled the *Joshan* crew, “Stop and abandon ship, I intend to sink you.”<sup>44</sup> *Joshan* responded with a missile that missed its target; USS *Simpson* responded with four that did not. *Simpson*’s salvo, along with a flurry of gunfire from other ships in the task force, destroyed *Joshan* and earned *Simpson* its rare distinction as a ship killer.

Amazingly, Iranian provocations continued until the Iran Air Flight 655 tragedy. On 3 July 1988, USS *Vincennes*, while under attack by Iranian speedboats, mistook a civilian Airbus airliner for an attacking fighter aircraft and shot it down. The United States paid sixty-one million dollars in compensation while denying guilt for the incident. Vice President George H. W. Bush summed up America’s position regarding the downing of the Airbus during a speech at the UNSC. “The critical issue confronting this body is not the how and why of Iran Air 655. It is the continuing refusal of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to comply with Resolution 598, to negotiate an end to the war with Iraq, and to cease its acts of aggression against neutral shipping in the Persian Gulf.”<sup>45</sup>

Iran garnered little sympathy at the United Nations. America's unofficial war in the Persian Gulf was preceded by the United States blaming Iran for a mistaken attack launched by the Iraqis. The war then concluded, in a sense, with the United States blaming Iran for the mistaken attack against Iran Air 655. There were no more major engagements after *Vincennes's* incident with the speedboats and the downing of Iran Air Flight 655. By July 1988, Iran was defeated thoroughly on the battlefield. The *Vincennes* episode and PRAYING MANTIS both coincided with Iraqi victories. An exhausted Iran sued for peace later in July—which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei likened to “drinking hemlock for me.”<sup>46</sup> EARNEST WILL continued escorting tankers quietly until December 1989.<sup>47</sup>

## TWO FACTORS OF EXPLANATION

### *The Scourge of Communism and Reagan's Response: Ideological Drivers Spark a Great-Power Competition*

The threat of the Soviet Union involving itself in the Persian Gulf proved to be the most powerful driver of American foreign policy preceding EARNEST WILL. The fear that the Soviet Union would escort Kuwaiti oil tankers and thereby gain a foothold in the Persian Gulf—the fuel tank of the free world's oil-based economy—motivated the United States to counter the Soviets' offer. The Soviet threat mobilized Washington in a way that years of carnage, attacks on neutral shipping, including oil supplies, and deep-seated hatred of the Iranian government could not. Public statements from DoD and the State Department as well as President Reagan's own comments cited the centrality of the Soviet communist threat in justifying EARNEST WILL. There is little chance that this was posturing simply for public consumption; the fear of communism in the United States (and particularly in the Republican Party) was strong and long-standing, and anticommunism was a central tenet of the Reagan administration.

From the start, Marxist-Leninist Moscow and laissez-faire Washington had diametrically opposed worldviews. Lenin summed up the Manichean struggle as follows: “As long as capitalism and socialism exist, we cannot live in peace: in the end, one or the other will triumph—a funeral dirge will be sung either over the Soviet Republic or over world capitalism.”<sup>48</sup> Reagan was very much aware of and in agreement with Lenin's view on the dichotomy; in 1983, during a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, he likened the communist leadership to a demon depicted in the C. S. Lewis novel *The Screwtape Letters*, and called the USSR an “evil empire.”

After an alliance of convenience during World War II, this conflict morphed into great-power competition and solidified into the Cold War. The struggle's early phases were marked by the Truman Doctrine and the policy of containment,

both of which sought to box in the Soviet Union and respond to provocations in countries such as Greece, Turkey, and South Korea. A rebuilt Europe and, especially, a unified Germany were great sources of potential power. Superpowers contended over them, as they did countries on the periphery such as Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Kuwait.

The Persian Gulf was an active Cold War theater. America's first brush with oil shortage, the 1973 embargo, was driven by great-power politics. America's support for Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War that so inflamed Arab sentiments was part of a balancing act against the Soviet client states of Egypt and Syria. During EARNEST WILL, America was in Bahrain, as a tenant at a small naval base, because it had subsumed Britain's regional security responsibilities after British forces withdrew in 1971. Laissez-faire America could have relied on the free market to keep oil flowing, but it decided that it was important to prevent a hegemon from taking charge in the region. So it put in place its small naval presence and promoted the twin-pillar policies of supporting rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia to police the area.

Even the nation's core strategy for the Middle East, the Carter Doctrine, is at its heart about great-power politics. The shah fled Iran in January 1979; the Carter Doctrine was not promulgated until the January 1980 State of the Union address. Iranian destabilization was a critical foreign policy problem, but the precipitating event for the speech was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviets are mentioned thirty-two times in Carter's 1980 speech, Iran only six. America's pledge to prevent Soviet hegemony in the Persian Gulf was consonant with its grand strategy of containment and its regional strategy of keeping the Soviets away from critical resources. John Mearsheimer offers Reagan's execution of the Carter Doctrine / containment as a successful example of offshore balancing, as it relied primarily on proxies and, when needed, used expeditionary forces rather than those stationed at permanent forward bases.<sup>49</sup>

In this context, it should not be surprising that a threat of Soviet involvement in the Gulf, however slight, prompted an American response. Kuwait previously had been a British protectorate; although not a liberal nation, it previously had been in the American orbit. The Islamic Revolution shifted Iran to the neutral column, and this concerned the United States greatly. Also, while the United States faced (conventional) parity or (nuclear) mutually assured destruction on potential battlefields such as those in Korea or central Europe, it had the potential to exert hegemony in the Persian Gulf theater. Reagan greatly expanded the Navy, to nearly six hundred ships. It could support EARNEST WILL and more, without removing aircraft carrier battle groups from critical sea-lanes in the Atlantic and Pacific. In contrast, the Soviet navy's strength was its submarines. Its surface craft were few and could not operate for long in the Gulf, since they lacked forward



operating bases. While the Soviets lacked staying power, America could use its bases in Bahrain and Diego Garcia (the latter in the Indian Ocean) to support its military escort strategy and political objectives of boxing out the Soviets.

Secretary of Defense Weinberger unequivocally identified Soviet involvement as a threat the United States must avoid, even if it played into Kuwait's hands. The position of Secretary of State Shultz was less hard-line; he supported EARNEST WILL, but accepted the possibility of some minimal Soviet naval presence in the Gulf, to avoid giving the Kuwaitis what they wanted. Still, his position was clear. "The idea of the Soviets playing a key maritime role in the Gulf had no appeal to us."<sup>50</sup> He describes the reflagging as one of the few times he and Weinberger saw eye to eye on a military matter.

The Reagan administration's official rationale on reflagging, delivered to Congress by Under Secretary Armacost, listed protecting Kuwait from Iran first and prevention of Soviet influence second. Yet this ignores the fact that neither the United States nor the world oil markets cared one bit about Kuwait's predicament until the country approached the Soviets—and let the United States know about it—in the fall of 1987.

EARNEST WILL was classic offensive realist offshore balancing. The United States kept the Soviet Union and Iran out, and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in, while avoiding a permanent large garrison in the Gulf (its base in Bahrain was tiny). Reagan's desire to confront perceived Soviet expansion more aggressively does much to explain the foreign policy decision to engage in EARNEST WILL. Its explanatory power stands in contrast to the proximate reason for Kuwait's predicament. Protection of oil flows, as shown in the next section, played little strategic role in EARNEST WILL, despite the strategic proclamations of the Carter Doctrine and the administration's communication efforts to remind Congress of its importance to the U.S. economy.

#### *The Global Commons and Protecting Oil Flow— a Mediocre Explanation of Events*

In his memoir, Secretary of Defense Weinberger justified EARNEST WILL as an effort to keep Soviet influence out of the Gulf. However, while he mentioned the Soviet threat during his June 1987 testimony to Congress, in this public forum oil and economic arguments took center stage—he mentioned them at least six times. The Persian Gulf was a vital interest, he testified. "Our ability to continue to develop economically and to maintain the way of life we are accustomed to depends on our unimpeded access to this oil."<sup>51</sup>

President Reagan's messaging during a 29 May 1987 press briefing matched that of his Defense Secretary. Reagan's remarks occurred shortly after the Iraqi missile hit USS *Stark* and one week after the Senate formally requested more

information on Operation EARNEST WILL. Reagan hits the domestic implications of the Gulf crisis hard and early.

It may be easy for some, after a near record 54-month economic recovery, to forget just how critical the Persian Gulf is to our national security. But I think everyone in this room and everyone hearing my voice now can remember the woeful impact of the Middle East oil crisis of a few years ago: the endless, demoralizing gas lines; the shortages; the rationing; the escalating energy prices; the double-digit inflation; and the enormous dislocation that shook our economy to its foundations.<sup>52</sup>

Yet while the public messaging around EARNEST WILL focused on the resource narrative, neither politicians' memoirs nor military planning accounts show an immediate or quantifiable concern over oil access. Despite quotations of barrels exported, forecasts of America's future reliance on Gulf oil, and evocations (implicit and explicit) of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, oil was cheap in 1987, and concern—on the part of both policy makers and the public and congressmen they sought to influence—was ideational.

Domestic fears of oil shortages dated back to the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which Arab oil producers had imposed in retaliation for America's steadfast support of Israel during the Yom Kippur War. Although the actual supply disruption was neither complete nor lengthy, it shocked the country. The 1979 Iranian Revolution brought a new series of oil shocks and spectacular price hikes—from fourteen to thirty-five dollars per barrel by 1981.<sup>53</sup> But the shocks also encouraged exploration and technology. By the time of Operation EARNEST WILL, oil was cheap despite the blockade of Umm Qasr and the occasional sinking of tankers bearing Kuwaiti, Saudi, or Iranian crude destined for the world market. Yet American consumers remained psychologically vulnerable to the threat of oil price spikes.

The Iran-Iraq War had little long-term effect on global oil prices. Iraq's initial invasion did cause a price spike; a barrel of crude rose from fifty-three dollars in September 1980 to sixty-three dollars by February 1981, a 19 percent increase, as Iran and Iraq assiduously bombed and shelled each other's oil infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> But the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (i.e., OPEC) replaced all crude oil taken off the market by the war within a few months of the war's onset, and prices dropped to prewar levels by mid-1982. During this period, America's concerns were geopolitical more than economic. Iran was an Islamic republic seeking to export revolution, and the United States tilted against Iran as a result. Iraq escaped censure in the UNSC even though it was the aggressor, and the United States launched Operation STAUNCH against Iran.

The expansion of the conflict into the tanker war likewise did not move the markets. Iranian and Iraqi oil exports actually expanded slightly when the tanker war began.<sup>55</sup> The market situation was unchanged by 1986 the year Kuwait grew concerned about its fleet. Prices fluctuated quite a bit in 1986 (price fluctuations

on the futures market averaged forty cents per day, compared with a historical average of twenty cents per day from 1983 to 2015), but when Kuwait made its overtures to the superpowers in November, a futures contract for a barrel stood at \$14.71—far below the price at the beginning of the year (2 January) of \$25.56.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, insurance rates rose fivefold during this time. At one point, underwriters judged the Gulf to be more dangerous than sea-lanes during World War II.<sup>57</sup> At times it was impossible to insure a supertanker filling up at Iran's Kharg Island; Iran had to self-insure. Yet this was a problem for the sailors. And for the insurance market; Lloyd's of London controlled most of the premiums, but 10 Downing Street made no offer to Kuwait to protect its tankers, nor did it call for an international escorting scheme. Once EARNEST WILL started, Secretary Weinberger asked the British whether they would like to participate, but America's greatest ally demurred.<sup>58</sup>

Geography made Kuwait's risks political and unique. The country sought a political solution to the risk, and America's response, while tied to Kuwait's oil wealth, was underpinned by geopolitical competition first and market fundamentals second. EARNEST WILL would not have happened without the oil, but the oil market did not drive American policy makers. An analysis of oil market fundamentals during the tanker war, reinforced by the silence on the oil situation in key memoirs, makes it clear that arguments about oil in front of Congress addressed theoretical concerns and amounted to debating points aimed at getting congressional approval.

Oil was a factor in EARNEST WILL, but it was a nested factor. If Kuwait chose the Soviet Union to escort all eleven of its tankers, it might spark a permanent Soviet presence in the Gulf. This might embolden the Soviets to seize control of the Gulf one day, even though doing so would require incorporating several large countries (in terms of both population and geography) in an opposed campaign. If this were successful, the Soviets—a net oil exporter already—might decide to keep the extra oil off the market (although it had exported oil throughout its history, even during the 1920s—when it was a pariah state). This would have a serious effect on the U.S. economy, as had previous regional disruptions in 1973, 1978, and 1979. Still, it is critical to understand that this is a nested factor, as in a *matryoshka* doll. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Energy may have been paying close attention to the oil flow during the tanker war, but they did not raise an alarm. Oil security may have helped sell the deployment, but the rationale behind the deployment was power geopolitics.

Basil Liddell Hart wrote that the objective of war is to secure a better peace.<sup>59</sup> In that sense, EARNEST WILL succeeded in this episode of offshore balancing during

the long Cold War. America kept the Soviets out; the Kuwaitis in; and the Iranians down, to the extent that they sued for peace within a year of the operation's onset.

First, the JTF protected the KOTC's reflagged (and therefore American) super-tankers. While the Soviets did make a show of sending a few warships to the Gulf, they did not attempt to challenge U.S. regional hegemony.

Second, EARNEST WILL began to bring the mercurial Kuwaiti royal family into America's orbit. This process would be complete three years later when, following DESERT STORM, the world's most powerful democracy liberated the tiny country and reinstalled its royal family as rulers without a whisper about potential political reforms, such as moving toward a representative government. Additionally, the reflagging effort improved U.S. standing with GCC members, particularly Saudi Arabia. GCC members previously had been disappointed with America's inability to approve arms-transfer deals for sophisticated weapons its members demanded. Also, America's strategic approach in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Lebanon had given some nations the impression that the United States was a fickle ally, likely to cut and run. The fact that the United States stayed in the Gulf after the casualties of the USS *Stark* incident, and that its sailors obviously had no compunctions against closing with and destroying the Iranian navy, renewed the value of American military friendship in the region.

Third, EARNEST WILL contributed to defeating Iran. The second half of EARNEST WILL coincided with a spectacular series of Iraqi victories. Iran's navy, with its missile-armed frigates and covert minelayers, was one of the country's comparative advantages over Iraq. But EARNEST WILL neutralized it, along with any hope Tehran had that a maritime-interdiction campaign would isolate Iraq or convince GCC members to deny Baghdad vital financial support. The JTF's largest operation against the Iranian navy, Operation PRAYING MANTIS, was by coincidence launched simultaneously with Iraq's massive ground attack to retake the strategic al-Faw peninsula. This reinforced the existing attitude in Tehran that Washington and Baghdad were coordinating in their war against the Islamic republic. After *Vincennes's* tragic downing of an Iranian civilian Airbus, Iran quickly sued for peace. In his letter to UN secretary general Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, Supreme Leader Khamenei identified the aircraft's downing as an example of widening the war and a direct cause of his desire to offer peace terms.<sup>60</sup>

The EARNEST WILL episode suggests that the principles of strategy (such as containment) matter, but that specific foreign policy formulations will require improvisation within strategic confines. When the Kuwaitis approached the United States with the reflagging proposal, American policy makers did not respond from the Carter Doctrine playbook, and they did not approach the problem as rational actors strictly seeking the optimal response to the royal family's overture. They did, however, act within the framework of the decades-old

strategy of containment. America's desire to stymie the Soviet Union and keep it from obtaining hegemony in the Persian Gulf proved a powerful catalyst to get the United States involved. Still, while the specific strategy framework was preexisting, the details of the American response were ad hoc. Policy makers improvised actions that were specific to the tanker threat's time and place. Kuwait seized the initiative in the reflagging episode by making simultaneous overtures for assistance to both Washington and Moscow. When American leaders formed a policy to address this development, that policy was shaped by their notions of containment, their fear of Soviet influence, and their antipathy toward Iran. The United States responded forcefully to the threat of a few Soviet escorts in the Gulf even though it had done little regarding all the Iranian navy had done up to that point, including boarding a U.S. ship.

During any future inevitable policy improvisations, policy makers would do well to drill down into their key assumptions. For instance, oil is indeed critical to the world economy, but for all the success of EARNEST WILL there is no evidence the operation was necessary to secure the flow of crude oil through the Strait of Hormuz or a decent price for it on the world spot and futures markets; macro-economic factors far outweighed the JTF's efforts in this regard. EARNEST WILL was, in one sense, a subsidy for Kuwaiti crude—another point that policy makers should ponder when they determine future interventions in the Persian Gulf or other places rich in commodities.

However, in the greater context of containment, EARNEST WILL succeeded, and it did so without creating an open-ended military commitment. In an era of strained resources and multiple theaters vying for attention, policy makers should ensure that, given the uncertainty of any military action, capabilities are well matched to objective ends. As Richard Betts has observed, “strategy fails when means prove insufficient to the ends.”<sup>61</sup> EARNEST WILL paid off because of military overmatch and America's strong commitment to containing an existential threat—factors that are not always present.

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#### NOTES

1. Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger certainly called the operation a success in his memoir *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990). Historians David Brainard Crist, in “Operation Earnest Will: The United States in the Persian Gulf, 1986–1989” (PhD dissertation, Florida State Univ., 1998), and Harold Lee Wise, in *Inside the Danger Zone: The U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf, 1987–1988* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), also speak favorably of its outcome.
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- Studies colloquium, Durham, NC, February 2009).
3. Ionut Popescu, "Design and Emergence in the Making of American Grand Strategy" (PhD dissertation, Duke Univ., 2013).
  4. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992). *Thinking in Time* is the seminal work on the potential value of structured thinking in national security; *Analogies at War* contains powerful case studies on the consequences of poorly structured thinking—specifically, bad analogical reasoning.
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  7. Seyom Brown, *The Faces of Power: Constancy and Change in United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Johnson* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), p. 509.
  8. Steven A. Yetiv, *The Absence of Grand Strategy: The United States in the Persian Gulf, 1972–2005* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008), p. 44. This work explains the conciliatory efforts that the Carter administration employed after the departure of the shah and before the hostage crisis.
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  11. Kamran Mofid, *The Economic Consequences of the Gulf War* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.
  12. "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, www.sipri.org/.
  13. Armacost, "U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf and Kuwaiti Reflagging," p. 15.
  14. Martin Navias and E. R. Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping during the Iran-Iraq Crisis, 1980–1988* (New York: Tauris, 1996), p. 36.
  15. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
  17. Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," p. 43.
  18. Navias and Hooton, who had access to insurance records from Lloyd's of London, have multiple tables in *Tanker Wars* comprising the definitive list of commercial ships damaged during the tanker war.
  19. Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," p. 62.
  20. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 387.
  21. William J. Crowe [Adm., USN], with David Chanoff, *The Line of Fire: From Washington to the Gulf, the Politics and Battles of the New Military* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 176.
  22. Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," p. 62.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
  24. "West Texas Intermediate Future Price Database," *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, 16 April 2016, www.eia.gov/.
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  27. Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone*, p. 5.
  28. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 389.
  29. Crowe, *The Line of Fire*, p. 181.
  30. Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone*, p. 9.
  31. Crowe, *The Line of Fire*, p. 179.
  32. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, pp. 396–97.

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36. *Ibid.*
37. Armacost, "U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf and Kuwaiti Reflagging," p. 14.
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59. Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 353.
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