

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 131

Spencer D. Bakich, *The Gulf War: George H.W. Bush and American Grand Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era*. University Press of Kansas, 2024. ISBN: 9780700636877.

**Jeffrey A. Friedman, Dartmouth College**

3 July 2025 | PDF: <http://issforum.org/to/RE131> | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org) | X: @HDiplo

Editor: Diane Labrosse  
Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart

Production Editor: Christopher Ball  
Pre-Production Copy Editor: Katie A. Ryan

---

Spencer Bakich's *The Gulf War: George H.W. Bush and American Grand Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era* shows that President George H.W. Bush's handling of Operation Desert Storm should be understood and evaluated in the context of his broader grand strategy. Bakich explains that Bush viewed the Gulf War as crucial for establishing a "New World Order" in which "multilateral diplomacy and collective security would be facilitated by American power and leadership" (6). He argues that situating the Gulf War in the context of Bush's New World Order grand strategy explains many facets of his decisionmaking, while suggesting that the war did not ultimately prove to be as successful as the conventional wisdom holds.

University Press of Kansas published the *The Gulf War* in its "Landmark Presidential Decisions" series, which is primarily designed for course adoption.<sup>1</sup> The book serves this function beautifully. It is concise (116 pages excluding references), does a terrific job of synthesizing relevant scholarship, and is extremely well-written. The book's chapters introduce Bush and his key advisors, describe how Bush developed ideas about constructing a New World Order, detail Bush's decision to go to war against Iraq, and chronicle the war's conduct. All these analyses are accessibly written while presenting conceptual material that is relevant to undergraduate- and graduate-level syllabi. Bakich's bibliographical essay provides a useful resource for scholars. The book will fit well in classes that focus on foreign policy decisionmaking, US grand strategy, or post-Cold War history. Its analysis provides a vivid demonstration of how grand strategic thought can play a crucial role in shaping crisis management.

One of the most compelling parts of the *The Gulf War* is its description of how the conflict gave Bush an opportunity to "globalize" the New World Order (55-81). Bush developed the New World Order concept in 1989 in response to political challenges in Europe such as the unification of Germany, the preservation of US leadership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and a desire to move the US-Soviet

---

<sup>1</sup> University Press of Kansas, "Landmark Presidential Decisions," <https://kansaspress.ku.edu/search-grid/?series=landmark-presidential-decisions>.

relationship “beyond containment.” Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait gave Bush an opportunity to “elevate the main precepts of his grand strategy to the global level” (55). The crisis also allowed Bush to add new pieces to that grand strategy: placing the United Nations at the center of collective security and working closely with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to demonstrate that former rivals could collaborate to solve global problems.

Bakich’s narrative firmly refutes common caricatures of Bush as being a pragmatist who lacked strategic vision. Instead, Bakich portrays a president whose actions advanced new thinking about international order and the United States’ global role. This argument has appeared in prior works, such as Jeffrey Engel’s *When the World Seemed New* or Kristina Spohr’s *Post Wall, Post Square*.<sup>2</sup> But these works treat the Gulf War as one element of a more wide-ranging discussion of Bush’s presidency, in chapters that can be difficult to excerpt for teaching. The focus and accessibility of Bakich’s *The Gulf War* thus constitute a valuable contribution to the literature.

Another compelling feature of Bakich’s analysis is the contrast it describes between the “well-managed, methodical” way Bush decided to go to war with the “poorly conceived and sloppily executed” manner in which Bush handled the war’s ending (103-104). This contrast was partly driven by circumstance. Once US forces entered Kuwait in 1991, Iraq’s military collapsed so fast that Bush did not have much time to react. This haste spawned several problems, such as the fact that much of President Saddam Hussein’s military was able to escape from Kuwait, and the negotiation of a ceasefire that permitted Iraq to fly armed helicopters near Kuwait’s border. Iraq used these helicopters to brutally suppress the Shiite uprisings on which Bush was counting to overthrow Saddam’s regime.

*The Gulf War* is not the first work to criticize the way Bush ended the war—indeed, Bush himself later admitted that he wished he had handled matters differently<sup>3</sup>—but Bakich does an especially good job of showing how this experience stands in sharp relief to Bush’s competence in managing other aspects of the conflict (and he once again presents this material in a lucid manner that is suitable for classroom discussion). Bakich also shows that the mistakes Bush made at the war’s end were not obvious at the time. For example, Bakich explains that “none of Bush’s civilian advisors and none of the Joint Chiefs of Staff objected to the idea of ending the war after one hundred hours of ground fighting” (100). He observes that “few in the administration believed that Saddam would survive the war” anyway (101). He argues that Bush had credible fears that media coverage of US aircraft annihilating defenseless Iraqi soldiers would stimulate significant blowback against Bush from his allies and thereby cause the United States to relinquish the moral high ground that Bush had worked so hard to cultivate. Bakich’s treatment of Bush’s handling of the end of the Gulf War is thus critical, but empathetic; it serves as a reminder of how difficult it is to make foreign policy decisions under fire.

The most novel aspect of Bakich’s analysis is his claim that the Gulf War “was both a success and a failure” whereas the conflict has conventionally been treated as a decisive victory for the United States (7). The crux

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World After 1989* (William Collins, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (Knopf, 1998), 484-490.

of Bakich's criticism is that "the war did not, and perhaps could not, facilitate Bush's grand ambitions" for establishing a New World Order (7). For example, while Bush had hoped that the Gulf War would cement US-Soviet cooperation, the conflict ended up straining relations with Gorbachev, who resented the way Bush repeatedly rebutted Soviet efforts to mediate a peaceful solution to the crisis. Whereas Bush's primary goal in launching Operation Desert Storm was to protect the sanctity of international borders, the war drew the United States into open-ended commitments to police Iraq's behavior *within* its borders (e.g., protecting the Kurds and conducting weapons inspections). The decisive military outcome of the Gulf War fueled beliefs that US power was essentially unbounded in the post-Cold War world, which may be partly responsible for subsequent fiascos, such as the 2003 Iraq War. Bakich thus concludes by arguing that "the Gulf War did usher in a new world order, but it wasn't the one Bush had anticipated" (116).

This point has merit but it only goes so far. Few foreign policy decisions produce unmitigated successes. And the Gulf War accomplished many of Bush's goals. The United States and its allies crushed Iraq's military and set the precedent that the international community would not tolerate the violent revision of borders. The Gulf War demonstrated the potential for multilateral collaboration in the post-Cold War world and it invigorated the United Nations. Saddam Hussein remained in power, but he never again posed anywhere near the same degree of threat to international peace as he had before 1991 (even if subsequent US administrations argued otherwise). The fact that the United States ended up assuming responsibility for events inside Iraq's borders raises important questions about why US leaders expanded their ambitions once the war was over, but it does not suggest that Bush failed to achieve the goals he had set at the start of the conflict. All of these gains came at minimal cost to the United States given the war's surprisingly low casualty count and Bush's ability to convince other states to contribute more than \$50 billion to defray US military expenses.

Bush's handling of the Gulf War thus likely deserves to retain its reputation for being one of the most successful episodes of military decisionmaking in modern history. But any attempt to weigh the costs and benefits of major foreign policy choices is a subjective enterprise, and Bakich masterfully presents the case in a manner that allows readers to draw conclusions for themselves. In doing so, the book provides a powerful demonstration of how war is politics by other means, and how military outcomes can only be judged in light of broader, grand-strategic goals.

**Jeffrey A. Friedman** is an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *The Commander-in-Chief Test: Public Opinion and the Politics of Image-Making in US Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2023) and *War and Chance: Assessing Uncertainty in International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019).