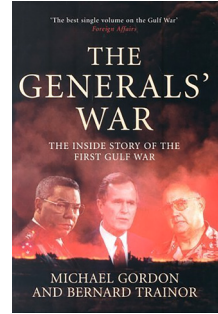


## Book Reviews

# The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the First Gulf War



By Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor

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Reviewed by Wing Commander Mal Craghill

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### Introduction

Viewed in isolation, the 1991 Gulf War was a stunning success. In response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, America assembled a huge multinational air, land and maritime force in the Middle East and within seven months had completed the biggest all-arms operation in decades to rout Saddam Hussein's forces and liberate Kuwait. Analysed in greater detail though, can the events of 1990 and 1991 be viewed as a success? In this fascinating and comprehensive volume, first published in 1995, Michael Gordon and US Marine Corps (USMC) Lieutenant General (retired) Bernard Trainor draw on interviews with key personnel and a mixture of classified and declassified US Government reports as well as studies, books and articles to draw out the detailed lessons of the Gulf War. They describe failings in US Government policy in the Middle East, inter-service rivalries between the branches of the US Military, breakdowns in the civil-military relationship and quarrels between senior military officers which badly affected the conduct of both DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM and led to what some viewed as an incomplete victory, with Iraq's military forces still a threat, and Saddam Hussein still in power.

Gordon has been the chief military correspondent on the New York Times for over 30 years, with assignments in Washington D.C., Moscow and London. Trainor served for 39 years in the USMC, fought in Vietnam, and held senior posts including Director of Plans and then Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans, Policy and Operations in the USMC Headquarters. He subsequently

became a military correspondent for the New York Times, and then Director of the National Security Programme at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Together they have produced a valuable (albeit highly US-centric) volume of immense interest to any military historian or strategist, but of particular relevance to scholars of joint campaign planning and those (military and civilian) given the responsibility of high command.

Gordon and Trainor approach their work chronologically, beginning with an overview of the geopolitical context. They argue that America, preoccupied with the collapse of the Soviet Union and planning for a 'peace dividend' reduction in its military, misread Iraq's belligerence towards Kuwait, underestimating Iraq's economic problems following its long, attritional war with Iran. America believed that Iraq would respond to diplomacy and economic engagement, and thus neglected military deterrence even as Iraq's behaviour became ever more aggressive throughout 1990. The cautious approach of General Colin Powell, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (born of his Vietnam experience, and often codified as the "Powell Doctrine") and the lack of strategists in General Norman Schwarzkopf's somewhat under-resourced Central Command Headquarters are both cited as contributory factors.

With Kuwait overrun, the book turns to the assembly of a coalition force to defend Saudi Arabia and the planning of offensive operations to liberate Kuwait. The central themes which emerge here are of each Service championing their own agenda, and how Schwarzkopf's overbearing (if not bullying) command style led to subordinates withholding information and working in isolation both through lack of direction from him, and in fear of his explosive temper. Air planners seized their opportunity to champion the value of strategic bombing with precision weaponry to destroy the Iraqi regime and force a withdrawal from Kuwait without the need for a costly ground war. Army planners saw this as both unrealistic and a threat to their Service, conscious of difficult budgetary battles ahead, and set about assembling a sizeable invasion force to retake Kuwait – which would inevitably draw air component assets away from strategic bombing to target the Iraqi Army, and particularly the well-equipped Iraqi Republican Guard Corps (IRGC). The USMC was eventually ordered into a largely land-based posture, but was determined to play a decisive, rather than diversionary, part in the plan; and the US Navy is described as being aloof and rather divorced from the overall planning effort.

The authors describe how Schwarzkopf allowed planning to continue in silos – against Powell's wishes – right through to the commencement of DESERT STORM and beyond, and how the lack of regular engagement between Dick Cheney (Secretary of State for Defense), Powell and Schwarzkopf meant that a clear strategy was never established and mistrust between these three key figures grew. Coupled with a lack of truly joint planning across the air, land and maritime components, this meant that America's first opportunity to test the doctrine of Air-Land Battle – fast paced, coordinated all-arms warfare designed to overwhelm an enemy – would not be given its best chance of success. Other key strands are well drawn out, including the absolute centrality (and, frequently, ignorance of) logistics considerations; the difficulties of operating with coalition allies; the perils of ignoring key strategic concerns such as the Scud

missile threat (with its potential to draw Israel into the war); and the importance of an accurate, fused and widely understood intelligence picture.

Once offensive operations to liberate Kuwait commenced, the authors describe how the lack of a joint planning staff came home to roost and how Schwarzkopf's refusal to establish a Joint Targeting Board, to adjudicate between competing target sets, was a key failing. Notable intelligence lapses are also highlighted: Iraq's desire to fight an attritional war and its inability to withstand superior coalition firepower, doctrine and training were missed; assumed knowledge of sea mine dispositions led to two capital ships being hit; and a lack of shared understanding of Iraqi capabilities, intent and morale led to wildly differing risk appetites between key commanders in the main US Army-dominated attack into Iraq. But perhaps the most significant lapse, Gordon and Trainor contend, was the decision to allow the USMC thrust into Kuwait to commence ahead of the Army's main attack through Iraq, designed to cut off Iraqi forces inside Kuwait. Almost inevitably, this resulted in a mass retreat of Iraqi forces which saw thousands of armoured vehicles (including much of the remaining IRGC) escape into Iraq before the coalition's main attack force could prevent them.

Even in victory, with Kuwait liberated, failings continued in the high command. A lack of post-war planning, President Bush's failure to give Schwarzkopf any riding instructions for the ceasefire talks, and Schwarzkopf's lack of political prowess left the Iraqi Government in a relatively strong position and led quickly to a brutal Iraqi suppression of the US-inspired uprising in Southern Iraq and the establishment, in 1992, of a no-fly zone over its southern provinces.

There are some themes not well drawn out by the book: the validity of competing approaches to air targeting are left largely unexplored; the need for a compelling political-military narrative, understood by all and infused throughout the planning process is underplayed; and the positive contributions of some coalition members are not well addressed. These do not, however, detract from the overall value of what is a vivid, comprehensive and honest assessment of the events leading up to, during and after the 1991 Gulf War. *Foreign Affairs* has described this as "The best single volume on the Gulf War", and the lessons it contains for high command, strategy formulation and operational planning are as relevant now as they were over two decades ago.

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