

Why Troops Went To Gulf

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By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

The war has been over now for more than a year. We should be proud that our success was won with so little loss of American and allied lives. What still surprises me is the fact that even now, so few Americans appear to understand why we were there in the first place. Here is the answer I came up with.

The American peace movement's contention that the war in the Gulf was over oil is partially correct. It was, though, the other part of America's reason for fighting that proved more important in the conflict of arms.

Ultimately, it was American idealism that provided the impetus to fight. Prior to Operation Desert Storm, it is not surprising that Gulf War protesters found few sympathetic ears. They were opposing two of the strongest and most consistent currents in American political culture.

The people of the United States are strongly influenced by two competing values in the international arena. The first of these two values is pragmatic self-interest. Pragmatic self-interest is best reflected in those Americans who believed that we needed to go to war to protect our oil interests in the Middle East.

Their argument is essentially economic. The pragmatists have a legitimate perspective. America consumes more oil per capita than any other nation. Saddam Hussein, if he had come to control a larger percentage of the world's oil, could have potentially put oil prices into an ever-rising spiral that could have adversely effected our economy.

Another possible pre-war scenario suggested that a more powerful Saddam could lead the Arab World into

a dangerous confrontation with the West by again using oil as a weapon — like the Arab oil producers did in the 1970s. Both possibilities could have spelled serious economic disruption for America, and produced even more serious problems for our allies.

The other part of our reason for fighting was native American idealism.

The idealism is reflected in those who took the position that Saddam Hussein was evil and therefore must be destroyed. The author and educator, Dr. Sam Sarkensian, calls it the American "messianic spirit." It is difficult to argue with those who took this moral high ground. Saddam proved himself to be every bit the stuff of nightmares. He attacked and then sacked Kuwait, took Western hostages, attacked Israel civilian population centers, tortured native Kuwaitis, mistreated prisoners of war and destroyed the delicate environment of the Persian Gulf by dumping millions of gallons of crude oil directly into the sea.

Through the convergence of American self-interest and idealism we can clearly see that the war in the Persian Gulf was not just about oil. Neither was the war just about restoring Kuwait to sovereignty.

The American form of democracy continues to represent both mainstream American values. Our form of government will never please everyone; no government can. But allow me to suggest that American pragmatists and idealists had common cause in prosecuting the Gulf War.

Finally, it is important to make the point that of the two values, pragmatic self-interest and idealism, when it came to a fight, idealism was the more important of the two. Americans never have, and never will, fight and die for issues of pure economics. Our nation's true strength is reflected in the ideals embodied in our Constitution. The soldiers who fought in Kuwait and Iraq ultimately fought in the attempt to destroy Saddam Hussein's evil. Unfortunately, our country and her allies attained our legal goal by restoring Kuwait, but failed in our unstated yet heartfelt desire to end the reign of a tyrant.