QUICK KILL?

But did the Gulf War attain its objectives? Was it, in fact, futile, asks JACK SPENCE, head of Leceister University's department of politics.

There is almost universal consensus in the West that the Gulf War was a good thing.

For many, the case is deemed to be self-evident:

- For the first time since 1945, one state (Iraq) occupied the *entire* territory of another (Kuwait) in clear violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. (Tibet's absorption by China in 1954 presumably doesn't count, as neither were members of the UN, and the Charter's provisions could not, therefore, apply).
- A nasty, grubby dictator had to be taught an exemplary lesson as failure to do so would simply encourage him in his bid to become the hegemonic power in the Middle East, and threaten the unimpeded supply of oil to Western consumers.
- Economic sanctions — the first line of defence of the United nations against aggression — would not have worked against a regime ruthless enough to force its people to accept the resulting hardship. Military intervention was, therefore, entirely justified on both legal and political grounds.
- The end of the Cold War and the inability of the Soviet Union to support a former ally gave the West, and in particular the United States as the sole surviving superpower, an unparalleled opportunity to fashion a new international order combining Western values of freedom and justice, and one which would guarantee stability against threats of disruption by maverick states.
- And all this was to be done under the legal and moral rubric of the UN, the authority of which had at least been vindicated as its founders intended over four decades ago.

At first sight this case is impressive. Indeed, for those critics who invoke the double standard, claiming it was hypocritical to defend the sovereignty of Kuwait and ignore, for example, Soviet intervention in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), or Israeli subversion of the West Bank of the Jordan and the Lebanon, there appears to be a legitimate retort: Western inaction on these occasions (for sound reasons of *real-politik*) does not mean that we should refrain from acting positively in defence of legal and moral principle when circumstances permit. As Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats, put it: "Because we can't do everything, it doesn't mean we should do nothing."

But surely, in this context — critics argued — it was worth giving UN-sponsored sanctions a decent chance to exert their long-term impact on the Iraqi economy and, by implication, the viability of Hussein's regime? It was clear, however, that the Bush administration in doubling up its military presence in Saudi Arabia in November, three months after the crisis erupted, had no faith in the willingness of the American public to sustain the long haul implied by sole reliance on a sanctions strategy. Yet this was precisely the policy followed by the West in relation to the Soviet Union for over forty years: containment by a combination of nuclear deterrence and firm political will, even if this meant the sacrifice of justice for a Soviet oppressed Eastern Europe for the sake of pan-European order via the mutual recognition of spheres of interest.

And, of course, this strategy did ultimately ensure the collapse of Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe and rapid decline in Moscow's capacity to play a dynamic superpower role. Sadly in the Gulf case, this option was dismissed long before sanctions had any

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Dilemmas of young writers

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conversational. She offers Fraser coffee and koeksusters and observes that his proposed book is unlikely to be very interesting because Hattingh "led a very quiet and uneventful life"!

In a rage, Fraser storms out. He cannot tolerate having this platteland unsophisticate pronouncing on the value of his work. Earlier he wondered whether he could climb into his subject's skin sufficiently to capture her thoughts and motivations; after his childish outburst the reader knows his biography is bound to fail.

The strength of this story relies chiefly on the care with which Medalie portrays his characters, and here another difference between Medalie and Vladislavic is apparent. For Medalie, character is all important. It is the vehicle through which all events are mediated.

For Vladislavic, by contrast, character is entirely peripheral, often to the point of non-existence. The people who do find their way into his stories are incidental — they are there as human pegs across which the canvas of the narrative is stretched. His characters, such as they are, with one or two exceptions, are themselves all Missing Persons.

Vladislavic's brand of satire, forged in crude and farcical times does not lose its legitimacy and impact as the political power relations shift in this country. If anything, in the present confusion of a society rife with ironies, inconsistencies, uncertainties and incompetencies, this kind of writing remains as forceful and necessary as ever. But it remains, too, a responsive literature, shackled to time and place, and it faces the danger that as the initial impulse behind each story recedes into the past, so the stories will lose their power.

Medalie's work is less bound by specific events. Microcosm by microcosm and character by character he seeks the inner mechanisms, the cogs which turn and propel people through each day. He is listening out for a few authentic trans-historical South African voices, and if this collection is anything to go by, his hearing is remarkably acute. ●

A speedy defeat – then no control

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prospect of biting: Western governments and their publics clearly no longer had the stomach to pursue a patient, consistent policy. The appetite for the 'quick kill' was overwhelming.

A more profound objection to the arguments advanced by Western leaders in support of the war was the dangerous and ultimately self-defeating confusion of interest and principle implicit in their presentation. Thus, the case for military intervention in the Gulf was a potent example of what George Kennan (a leading exponent of "realist" international theory) once described as the "legalistic-moralistic tradition" of US foreign policy: the belief that America is the sole custodian of justice and freedom in the international community — and its government, therefore, morally and legally entitled to impose its vision of global order on distant lands and peoples, however remote and different their value systems.

In other words, the protection of national interest — whether political of economic — always has to be justified by appeal to high principle, and in the particular case of the Gulf crisis this was the protection of state sovereignty at all costs.

The real question is whether the objective of the enterprise was well defined, properly limited and with sufficient thought given to the political consequences of military action in pursuit of vital interest.

By contrast, the 'realist' critique of this idealistic tradition of thought and behaviour emphasises the need to be prudent in the calculation of interest and what is required to defend it. Thus, going to war in the Gulf for the sake of a principle — however sacred — was bound to be self-defeating; a high risk venture because it led to the perception of Saddam Hussein as the personification of evil, raising expectations at home and abroad that nothing less than his destruction would be sufficient — an open-ended and ideologically defined objective. Far better, so the realist might argue, to be blunt and specific about what was really at stake, namely the uninterrupted flow of a commodity (oil) vital to the Coalition partners for their industrial and commercial survival.

After all, if Kuwait had been the world's largest broccoli producer, would the West have intervened so massively in defence of its economic interests in the Gulf area?

Whether Western governments have done enough to conserve energy or find alternative sources to oil is a separate issue; faced with an immediate threat to supply the West, and the US in particular, was bound to react firmly.

And here there are grounds for an indictment of Coalition policy in the Gulf crisis. President Bush, for one, was inconsistent and muddled in his definition of the Coalition goals. On the one hand, he stressed the limited objective of expelling Iraq from Kuwait; on the other hand, he more than hinted at the desirability of destroying Iraq's military capability, actively encouraged Saddam Hussein's opponents to topple their oppressor and appeared to support the creation of a war crimes tribunal to try the erring Iraqi leadership.

The first was a sensibly limited and specific objective suggesting that the Coalition's quarrel with Hussein would cease once Kuwait was liberated. This strategy had the merit of neatly combining moral principle with national interest. It was based on a widely supported series of UN Security Council resolutions designed to avoid the fragmentation of Iraq with all that might have involved for an unstable post-war balance of power in the Middle East as Iran, Syria and Israel jockeyed dangerously to fill the vacuum. A model of sophisticated realism in the making of foreign policy, you might say!

Yet by simultaneously calling for internal revolt and, by definition, the destruction of Saddam's regime, the President and his allies have lost control of events following the initial and speedy defeat of Iraq's armed forces. It is true that in terms of Security Council resolution 678 the UN had a mandate to take measures to promote peace and security in the area"; what Bush *et al* had in mind, no doubt, was the replacement of Saddam by an Iraqi military oligarchy willing to come to terms with the Coalition and commited to maintaining the integrity of the Iraqi state. Instead Bush and his supporters got a Kurdish and Shiite uprising fuelled by false expectations of American assistance and which Saddam has put down with terrifying ferocity.

True, Iraq's territorial integrity will probably remain intact, but under the leadership of the man Bush repeatedly compared to Hitler, and was sworn to depose.

Interest and moral principle were, therefore, pulling in opposite directions. The failure to combine them into meaningful and consistent policy represented the worst of all worlds for the Coalition. The resulting damage to US standing is self-evident, caused by failure to spell out clearly and concisely what American war aims were at the beginning of the conflict, and thereafter to hold to them consistently.

Failure in this context might, it is true, be reversed by arming the Kurds and the Shias and resuming the war to end Saddam's reign of terror. The argument that this breaks the UN Charter provisions on domestic jurisdiction does not stand up; genocide is forbidden by a UN Covenant of 1948, and the Security Council has the right to take forceful measures against those who practise it.

The outlook, therefore, remains bleak: imminent withdrawal of US forces from the Gulf rules out any resumption of military action against Iraq. Yet whatever short-term domestic gains accrue to the Bush administration from its success in avoiding large-scale casualties in the war, and a repetition of the Vietnam syndrome, the allies, in liberating Kuwait, have created new intractable problems for themselves.

Consider the rage expressed throughout the Arab world at what appears to be blatant US-led imperialism. (Whose oil is it anyway?)

For those immersed in the "politics of despair", the West remains guilty of applying appalling double standards with respect to for example, Israeli occupation of the West Bank. For those initially convinced of the case for tough action against Iraq, there is the horrifying spectacle of mass murder and dispossession of an entire people. There is, too, the impotence, the failure of the United States and its allies to punish those responsible, let alone prevent any of it happening in the first place.

None of this bodes well for Mr Bush's new international order. Certainly, intelligence forecasting of crises that might threaten that order will have to improve, not to mention the capacity to signal intentions of likely reaction to threats of aggression.

The ambiguous response (to put the kindest interpretation on what occurred) of Ambassador April Glaspie to Hussein's probing about US policy in the event of attack on Kuwait, recalls the encouragement given by Dean Acheson (UN Secretary of State) to North Korea in 1950. South Korea, he declared, was outside the strategic perimeter of Western commitment. The result was three years of war ended by return to the *status quo ante*.

Optimistic talk of a new security system involving, for example, an effective arms control regime limiting arms sales to the Middle East underestimates the sheer difficulty involved in devising a protective alliance umbrella in which all the states in the region will feel secure.

Nor can such a structure provide for Israel, so long as the Palestinian problem remains unsolved.

Nor will the creation of regional order in the Middle East be easy while so many governments resist mounting popular pressure for democratisation (one important consequence of the war).

Their states bear little resemblance to those which in Western Europe were able, in 1949, to create in NATO a viable and lasting alliance structure based on common interests, an identifiable external enemy, a deeply rooted historical experience as viable states, and a commitment to similar economic and political values. This is hardly the case with the countries in the Middle East, many of whose peoples will bitterly resent any attempt to impose an alliance system on the region, however much their rulers may desire it for their own self-protection from *internal* revolt. In other words, intervention of this kind in the vain moralistic hope of combining order with justice for the region may well, paradoxically, provoke popular discontent, and weaken, in the process, the very governments which a new security system is supposed to protect.

'None of this bodes well for Mr Bush's new international order'