IR Theory in Practice Case Study:
The Gulf War, 1990-1991

Section 4

Alternative Approaches to IR Theory and the Gulf War

From reading Chapter 12 of The Globalization of World Politics (3e.), *you should now be familiar with the basic Alternative theories in International Relations* (IR)*. You are advised to consult this crucial chapter if you have not done so already as its contents will not be repeated here. Where you see bracketed chapter references, for example (see ch.13), this refers to the relevant chapter in* The Globalization of World Politics (3e.)*.*

Introduction

Was it a coincidence that IR began to engage more thoroughly with alternative theoretical research about the same time as the first Gulf War? Can this move to incorporate more normative theory, historical-sociology, and feminist work, post-modernism, and post-colonial scholarship be explained simply as the discipline following the latest academic fad? What was it about the Gulf War that made these theories seemingly more attractive? In addition to this section you should consult the Realism, Liberalism, and Marxism sections of the case study for important alternatives to the theories discussed here. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 12 of *The Globalization of World Politics* (3e.) illustrate important aspects of the first Gulf War from some of these alternative theoretical perspectives. We will briefly focus on 1) the speed of war; 2) the "reality" of the Gulf War; and 3) identity politics as productive of war. As with the previous section, however, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways alternative theories might help you think about the 1990-91 Gulf War and its aftermath.

1) The "videographic speed of war"

How we can ever know what really goes on during a war? Apart from well-known cases of media manipulation and spin (Carruthers 2000), has the most advanced forms of technology increasingly used during warfare created a discrepancy between knowledge and reality? Increasingly mediated by technology and the speed of events has the "reality" of warfare becomes even further removed? Think of the TV images of the much-vaunted smart bombs and the regular media refrain of **video-game war**. Precision-guided munitions (PGMs) such as cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs were already by 1991 steadily reaching the goal of "single shot equals kill". Prior to the first Gulf War, the F111 Stealth Fighter was unproven in combat, yet during the conflict were used for the most

critical targets. These included telecommunication centres, intelligence headquarters, and Saddam Hussein's Baath Party offices. Other targets included oil refineries, power stations, weapons bunkers, aircraft shelters and Iraqi radar centres (to clear the path for non-stealth aircraft). For "post-modern" warfare, increases in altitude, speed, endurance and carrying capacity have become less sought after than improvements in agility, versatility and electronics. Remotely piloted vehicles and unmanned aerial vehicles are increasingly operational. So if battle is becoming faster what are the effects on our ability to comprehend war? The "multifarious effects of speed", wrote James Der Derian, include the "instantaneity of communication, the ubiquity of the image, the flow of capital, the videographic speed of war [which] have made reality a transitory, technologically contingent phenomenon" (1996: 279-80). Leaders have become much more aware of the need for a clean, surgical and to a certain extent "death-free" **representation of war**. But what happens when reality becomes increasingly dependent on technology? Does war, for all but those who are literally in combat, cease to exist at all?

2) A War That Didn't Happen?

This argument has been taken further by Jean Baudrillard who suggested, in a controversial and much cited text, that the combination of massive military superiority, the revolution in surveillance technology and information gathering have rendered the presentation of war on CNN as more important than events on the ground. Baudrillard argued that only simulation is possible because reality cannot be distinguished from revelation. This occurred to such an extreme during the Gulf War - in which the United States employed a ubiquitous propaganda-machine and enjoyed such a level of military superiority - Baudrillard felt vindicated in sarcastically stating, "**The Gulf War did not exist**".

Box 4.1 - Remember the Gulf War?
Remember the Gulf War? Or was it last season's hit show? The Gulf War was fought to demolish a memory [of Vietnam], but it was also a war that produced no memory. It was our first 'television war': not blood and guts spilled in living color on the living room rug, not the transparent, objective immediacy of the all-seeing eye… but a radically distanced, technically controlled, eminently 'cool' postmodern optic which, in the doing, became an instrument of the war itself.
Bruce Cumings, War and Television, p.103

How were even the most powerful of Western leaders to really know what they were seeing on the computer and video screen was "real"? If citizens no longer experience warfare in any meaningful sense can war truly be said to "exist" for them? In the words of David Campbell, interpretavism (his term for what we describe as 'postmodernism') "acknowledges the improbability of cataloging, calculating, and specifying the 'real causes' [of events and phenomena], and concerns itself instead with considering the manifest political consequences of

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adopting one mode of representation over another" (1992: 4). Have we lost (if it ever existed) the capacity to distinguish "reality" from the **simulation of warfare,** existence from make-believe? If so, as Campbell suggests, should we embrace the positive task of considering the political consequences of accepting one narrative of war and conflict over another? Should our task become one of exposing and 'de-naturalizing' truth claims about the events of 1991?

3) Identity Politics and Representations

For postmodernism, world politics is less about war between states than combat between rival interpretations of the world. If **knowledge is power** then the construction of reality and History becomes possible through discourse. Thus the manipulation of "Truths" is not something that occurs only in war-torn societies but also in the West.

Box 4.2 Danger and the Production of Identity
In announcing that the United States was sending military forces to Saudi Arabia, President Bush declared: 'In the life of a nation, we're called upon to define who we are and what we believe'. By manifestly linking American identity to danger, the President highlighted the indispensability of interpretation to the determination of a threat… [T]he boundaries of a state's identity are secured by the representation of danger integral to foreign policy. (*David Campbell*, *Writing Security, p.3*).

Both President George H. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein legitimated their behavior during the Gulf War in terms of symbolic practices. They did this not only to influence perception but also as a means to **construct their own identity**. So, for example, the most technologically advanced air power did not always have to be used to be effective in the war. Bush had an incentive to portray US weapons as omnipresent and infallible to reassure allies, impress public audiences, and increase the credibility of threats (Buzan and Herring, 1998:192-198). That the impact of Scud attacks was equally overstated and Allied intelligence about Iraq was often faulty is well known. What is less well perceived is that the effectiveness of Stealth aircraft and Tomahawk cruise missiles was exaggerated, in effect, to *produce* US national identity as victorious and as the technological hegemon.

Box 4. 3 Delta Force against Arab-Muslim desperadoes

Nearly every recent movie about American commandos pits a hulking Rambo or a whizlike Delta Force against Arab-Muslim terrorist desperadoes. Now it is as if an almost metaphysical need to defeat Iraq has come into being, not because Iraq's offense, though great, is cataclysmic, but because a small non-white country has rankled a suddenly energized supernation imbued with a fervor that can only be satisfied with subservience from shaikhs, dictators, and camel jockeys. The truly acceptable Arabs are those like Sadat who can be made to seem almost completely purified of their national selfhood - folksy talk show guests.

Edward Said, The Politics of Dispossession, p.298

Box 4.4: Soldiers got pregnant

war is no longer just for men. Not that this war was less sexist than others, but it was more complicated in gender terms… Children were left at home with fathers when their mothers went off to war… Soldiers got pregnant and were sent home; others cried on TV while showing pictures of their kids to the world. But all was not gentle sweetness and light. The inevitable women prisoners and women casualties were still shocking. And on the front lines, where the living meet the dead, war's old gender rules still applied, at least symbolically.

Chris Hables Gray, Postmodern War, p.42-3