

UNMAKING MYTHS

VIRGINIA I. POSTREL

Francis Fukuyama says the Persian Gulf crisis doesn't prove we've returned to history, as he and Hegel define it. But when you're sending troops to the land of Mohammed to confront the ruler of Babylon, it looks like history to the rest of us.

This first encounter with post-Cold War history will do much to define the way Americans think about foreign policy—and about the role of open societies in a world filled with closed and violent ones—for decades. Already, we are seeing evidence that some cherished myths are less true than we once imagined.

Myth number one: "The open society is its own worst enemy. Democracies fail." This is the hardest myth to give up, the belief that the world's bullies really are big, tough, and inevitably victorious. We cherish our freedom and proclaim its superiority. But always there is that nagging doubt: When it comes to a struggle, won't we lose? After all, dictators can just do whatever they want—no Congress, no media, no polls, no demonstrations... Wouldn't it be better if we would all get with the program, all march in the same direction, all be more like Iraqis?

Well, no. Winning the Cold War ought to be Exhibit A in the case for self-esteem. It turns out that the messy individualism of free societies is more a strength than a weakness. Not only can they outproduce their autocratic adversaries, but over the long run they also do a better job at making policy. They can change their minds without executing anyone; all that happened to Jimmy Carter was an embarrassing electoral defeat. Our politics are as adaptable as our economies.

Consider the relative positions of Saddam Hussein and George Bush, and it

becomes clear why it's easier for Bush to take a vacation. Neither Colin Powell nor Dan Quayle will try to seize power in his absence.

Then there's the question of advice. When some of his officers suggested that invading Kuwait might not be such a wise move, Saddam Hussein had them killed. Yet it seems inarguable that even Hussein's territorial ambitions would have been well served by counsel to stay cool and wait a few years.

By contrast, American presidents get plenty of advice—more than they often want. For the most part, they can count on the sincerity, if not the wisdom, of the advice givers. Even those with one eye on the polls and another on the TV cameras have, in some sense, the country's interests at heart. And the cacophony of views encouraged by a free press and a competitive politics means that most options, and most pitfalls, get discussed.

This process of advice and dissent makes some people nervous. They fear that talking too much about what the United States should do in the world makes it hard to act decisively. If the president is inclined toward indecision, that may be true. But not all advisers urge forbearance.

Nor is forbearance synonymous with indecision. Indeed, the deluge of punditry urging an immediate bombing attack on Iraq—in the foolish belief that we could just bomb Saddam back to the Bronze Age and go home—is driven by the fear that the American people will get restless and won't have the patience for a drawn-out confrontation.

This brings us to *myth number two: "America lacks staying power."* As *The New Republic's* editors write, "These Arabs had to have been dismayed by the observation of the U.S. commander in the

Gulf, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, that 'there is not going to be any war unless the Iraqis attack.' If that is truly American policy, they fear, the Iraqis will simply time their next move until after the Americans get tired and go home. Once home, Hussein knows, G.I. Joe won't come back. And he will get tired.... Better on all counts to have gotten this matter over with quickly—which is to say militarily, by strikes against Baghdad's infrastructure of mass terror."

The issue of staying power is at the heart of a lot of self-doubts. But the United States has had troops in Europe for 49 years, first fighting a hellish war, then acting as a tripwire for global Armageddon. If that's not staying power, I don't know what is.

The truth is, Americans are awfully patient, especially when nobody's getting killed. (If anything, we're too patient; surely the Koreans can manage without us.) The United States is winner and world champ at fighting cold wars.

People like *TNR's* editors are actually worried about hot wars. If we'd just drop some bombs, they seem to believe, we could get in and out before anybody realized how horrifying wars are. Aside from the naiveté of assuming that bombers can topple a government as easily as they can take out a nuclear power plant, this urge to fool the public is short-sighted.

The public finds out, if not from the media then from the body bags. And if you haven't been straight with people—about goals as well as tactics—you have a real problem. Support at home will wither, just as the pundits predict. And there is always the possibility that the troops *should* come home, that the country shouldn't stick with intervention merely to prove a point.

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Myth number three: "The press is the enemy." A corollary to myths one and two, this idea springs from the "living room war" experience of Vietnam. To a large degree, however, people were startled by Vietnam because they had been insulated from that ancient truth—that wars, even "good wars" fought by good men, are hell—and because nobody credibly explained what the point was. Having gone through the shock of rediscovery, people are now far more equipped to realistically assess the likely costs and potential benefits of military action.

Sam Donaldson may make a fool of himself in the Saudi desert, but the ability to reveal what's going on—and to make people who cover up look bad—works in favor of U.S. efforts, as long as those efforts in fact express Americans' values. Saddam's inept attempts to manipulate the media have backfired. Putting

hostages on TV hasn't made people eager to capitulate; it's made them mad.

And Iraq's refusal to let reporters into Kuwait or to let journalists talk with hostages casts doubt on whatever its representatives say. For Iraq's ambassador to tell Ted Koppel that journalists will of course be welcome to visit Kuwait "in due time" is to confess to atrocities.

Back before Saddam Hussein was daily news, he gave Diane Sawyer a bizarre interview. In it, he kept insisting that, just as in Iraq, it's a crime for Americans to insult their president. Finally, Sawyer politely informed Hussein that people who insult the president of the United States not only don't go to jail, "they get their own television shows."

It may be exasperating for presidents to tolerate Sam Donaldson, but they have an advantage over the world's Husseins. They're harder to take by surprise. ■

Americans are very concerned about the environment, but it's hard to find any major bloc of voters who are actually suffering. By all objective measures, the environment is cleaner than it was 20 years ago. Death rates for most types of cancer are down. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that the air quality in most major cities is remarkably better. Our fresh water supply has recovered from the brink of destruction. And despite economic growth and population increases, America's consumption of petroleum has remained constant for the last decade.

In the absence of any real harm, it isn't clear that a nebulous emotional concern for the environment can be turned into votes for costly environmental measures. And these measures will be costly. For example, California's "Big Green," a catchall environmental initiative on the November ballot, will cost citizens of the Golden State \$3 billion to \$12 billion. That's about \$1,000 to \$4,000 a person.

And the proposition no longer appears headed for a landslide victory. In a *Los Angeles Times* poll taken in late August, California voters were split 44 percent to 42 percent in favor of Big Green. So much for tapping into voters' concerns.

The initiative's dwindling support illustrates the hazards of relying on environmentalism as the ticket to surefire electoral success. This is a divisive issue with plenty of losers—many of whom make up traditional Democratic constituencies.

Big Green, for example, bans a number of commonly used industrial chemicals and calls for sharp reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. These provisions would make industrial production much more costly and undoubtedly lead to manufacturing layoffs. If Republicans could make this connection clear, they could speed up the exodus of blue-collar workers from the Democratic Party.

Big Green also bans a number of common pesticides—a requirement popular with environmentalists but not with farmers. Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic candidate for governor, originally resisted

GOING GREEN?

CHARLES OLIVER

Over the last decade, Republicans have ridden the issue of taxes to electoral victory. Ronald Reagan and George Bush won three consecutive landslide victories, in part by painting their Democratic opponents as tax-and-spend advocates of big government. At the state and local level, other Republican candidates have emulated this strategy with only slightly less success.

Meanwhile, Democrats have been searching for a similar issue that will win for them the hearts, minds, and, most important, votes of the American people. The nuclear freeze, competence, the deficit, protectionism—all have been used by Democratic candidates, with little success.

The latest entry in the "Issue that will Define the Democrats in the 1990s" sweepstakes is environmentalism. But it isn't clear that this issue will be much more useful than any of the others in putting Democrats in office.

In the '70s, inflation had pushed many

middle-class taxpayers into high tax brackets, and the process showed no signs of slowing. Inflation was in the double digits by the end of the Carter presidency. Real people were suffering real harm. And the Republicans seized on the problem and offered a solution: cut taxes.

This solution imposed no costs on anyone, except possibly the government bureaucrats who found their annual budget increases cut. It was the perfect win-win electoral issue.

Further, making taxes the issue allowed Republicans to expand their constituency. When many blue-collar workers, small-business owners, and other traditionally Democratic voters found themselves pushed into high tax brackets, the Republican stand on taxes seemed more appealing than anything the Democrats had to offer. For the first time many Democratic households voted Republican.

By contrast, polls may show that