

Snatching Modest Victory From the Jaws of Triumph

How Schwarzkopf's ego, Powell's ambition, and miscommunication on the ground failed to close the deal on a potentially decisive win

BY DAVID EVANS

The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf

Michael R. Gordon and Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *Little, Brown, \$27.95*

On March 3, 1991, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf met a delegation of Iraqi generals over coffee and bottled water in a dust-blown tent at Safwan, a junction just north of the Kuwaiti border, to negotiate the terms of the peace.

Kuwait was liberated. The Gulf War was over. One of the Iraqi generals, Lt. General Sultan Hashim Ahmad, wanted the U.S. Army divisions sitting triumphantly astride Highway 8 to withdraw from Iraqi territory.

"We are sure you know how much we paid . . . casualty-wise, I mean," Ahmad said, suggesting that Schwarzkopf should be flexible given the high price the Iraqis paid in blood.

"We are here to talk about now," Schwarzkopf interjected.

"I have just mentioned this for history," Ahmad replied.

Schwarzkopf said dismissively, "History will be written long after you and I are gone."

With publication of *The Generals' War* on the anniversary month of the war's beginning in January 1991, the history that Schwarzkopf said would be written long after he and the Iraqi gen-

erals were gone already is starting to come out. Michael Gordon, chief defense correspondent for *The New York Times*, and retired Marine Corps Lt. General Bernard Trainor tell a thoroughly researched tale, using many heretofore secret documents and drawing on extensive personal interviews with virtually all of the top American generals. The picture that emerges, to draw on Schwarzkopf's own football analogy for the campaign, was a "Hail Mary" that had the other team in retreat, but didn't score a touchdown.

The Republican Guard divisions, which Schwarzkopf had sworn from the beginning were to be destroyed utterly, instead escaped. Battered and mauled, they streamed north out of Kuwait. These linchpins to Saddam Hussein's power were able to reorganize and crush the Shiite and Kurdish rebellions that broke out in the immediate aftermath of the war. Indeed, some of those same Iraqi divisions would threaten a second advance into Kuwait in 1994, prompting a hasty American troop deployment into Kuwait to deter them. *U.S. News & World Report* had it right shortly after the war when it published a cover story on the Desert Storm campaign titled "Triumph Without Victory." The American-led coalition forces had executed a stunning 100-hour blitzkrieg to liberate Kuwait. The triumph is

David Evans is the director for national defense programs at Business Executives for National Security, an organization dedicated to creating a more efficient American defense establishment. He spent five months covering the Gulf War as military affairs correspondent for the Chicago Tribune.

indisputable. The victory, though, was fleeting.

Now, with the publication of this superb and gripping history, we have a much better appreciation for the achievements and failures of American generalship in the Gulf War. The support and miscues of the generals' political masters are told here as well. George Bush gave the military all the forces it requested to crush the Iraqi army, but in the crucial hour of decision, when the Army's leading divisions stood poised like an enormous coiled spring to smash the retreating Republican Guard divisions north of Basra, the president ended the war. It wasn't a pack of noisy, scribbling journalists who robbed Schwarzkopf of decisive victory; it was his own commander-in-chief. Gordon and Trainor chide Schwarzkopf, no shrinking violet, for not being more forceful in requesting another 24 hours to finish the job.

To be sure, Schwarzkopf was under pressure to end the war and avoid the specter of Western forces slaughtering a fleeing Arab army. However, he had been asked point-blank by General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who was on his way to a meeting with Bush about the decision to end the war, if he had achieved all of his objectives. Schwarzkopf said that he had. If he was robbed of complete victory, Schwarzkopf picked his own pocket.

However, Schwarzkopf did not have a clear view of the situation. The ambiguity was as much the result of the inevitable fog of war as it was Schwarzkopf's location and his personality. In his Riyadh headquarters more than 300 miles from the fighting front, Schwarzkopf had not consulted with his field commanders. On the scene, they had

the better view, and many felt that driving to the Basra canals would have cut off the fleeing Iraqis with minimum slaughter, and with minimal additional U.S. casualties. But they weren't asked, and

Lt. Gen. John Yeosock, commander of all the U.S. Army forces, was reluctant to ask his volatile commander-in-chief to reconsider. Colonel Paul Kern, a brigade commander in General Barry McCaffrey's hard-charging 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, said after the war, "I knew this would be a military decision that would be debated for years to come in terms of where we stopped. The sense was there: 'success, but.'"

Fatal Distraction

For Powell, "sanctions, but" is the moniker that could be attached to America's top military officer. Privately, Powell favored economic sanctions to avoid a war with Iraq he thought was ill-advised. By late October, however, Bush and his top advisors clearly were

unwilling to have American troops sit in the Saudi desert for the 12 to 18 months U.S. intelligence estimated it would take for sanctions to impose real pain on Iraq. At an October 31 White House meeting, Powell proposed a doubling of U.S. forces. It was a canny "win-win" ploy. Bush might think the price was too high and stick with sanctions. Then again, those massive forces just might frighten Saddam Hussein into abandoning Kuwait without war; if not, the "Powell Doctrine" would be put in motion and the Iraqi army would be hit with overwhelming force.

Robert Gates, then deputy national security advisor and present at this key meeting, re-



was that the military put their gigantic requirements on the table—moving VII Corps from Europe, six carrier battle groups, activating more reserves—and Bush did not blanch.”

Like many senior military advisors, Powell was skeptical of the heady promises of Colonel John Warden, a top Air Force planner, that the war could be won with negligible loss of American life through a strategic bombing campaign against Iraqi nerve centers. That plan, dubbed “Instant Thunder,” would attack the snake’s brain in Baghdad but did not plan to attack the body, the Iraqi army in Kuwait. Powell, disappointed and unimpressed, said, “I want to leave their tanks as smoking kilometer fence posts all the way to Baghdad.” For their part, Navy officers took one look at Warden’s scheme and instantly dubbed it “Distant Blunder.”

The book is full of such juicy details. As it turned out, the air campaign failed to meet its own objectives. Unquestionably, the pilots pressed their attacks with gallantry and skill, but the effects were less than promised. Despite massive attacks on Iraq’s command and control system, the Iraqis were able to coordinate salvos of Scud missile launches. The F-117 stealth jets weren’t as completely stealthy as the public was led to believe. Aerial decoys and jamming planes occasionally were employed to help mask the attacking F-117s. Foul weather foiled attacks; laser-guided bombs didn’t always hit their targets; and the Iraqis parked military vehicles in civilian neighborhoods, knowing coalition air planners would be reluctant to target them. There are object lessons aplenty here for those urging a bombing campaign in the Balkans.

Schwarzkopf planned all along to launch a ground campaign to liberate Kuwait. The planning and execution of that campaign, though, violated the age-old precept: unity of command. Schwarzkopf divided the front into a sector where Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Walt Boomer and his two divisions of Marines would be free to devise their own plan for attacking into Kuwait. The Army was given its sector, further to the west, to envelop the Iraqi forces. Instead of appointing a ground component commander to oversee the Army and Marine efforts, Schwarzkopf reserved that role for himself. As such, he was wearing two hats: commander-in-

chief (CINC) of all forces in theater, and ground forces commander. Seeing the potential problem, Air Force Lt. General Charles Horner reportedly urged the CINC to appoint someone comparable to his position as air component commander as the ground component commander.

Schwarzkopf demurred. By doing so, he avoided the potential controversy of appointing a senior Marine Corps officer over Army divisions, or vice versa. But, as one officer in Schwarzkopf’s headquarters during the war recently told me, “The danger of a dual-hatted CINC is that he’s torn between the larger needs of the theater and advocating what his own component can do.”

While Schwarzkopf was determined to show what the Army could do, he didn’t change his plan in the face of altered circumstances. When Iraqi armored forces launched spoiling attacks into Saudi Arabia in late January 1991, and were summarily repulsed, it was evident that coalition forces were facing an inept, outgunned, and dispirited foe. The Marines’ Boomer decided that when the ground offensive was launched, his forces would go all out. Once hit, Boomer reasoned, Iraqi resistance would shatter.

Schwarzkopf stuck to his plan to launch the Army’s assault the day after the Marine attack. The marines would “fix” the Iraqis in place while the Army’s mobile forces churned across the desert in a huge swinging arc west of Kuwait to cut them off. The Marines, though, had no intention of just “fixing” the Iraqis; they planned to overrun them in a bold dash north.

As it happened, Boomer had taken the Iraqis’ measure, and he was right. His Marines punched through Iraqi defenses much faster than expected. As one Marine colonel remarked to me shortly after the war, “The reaction in Riyadh was, ‘Oh shit, the war’s going to be over before the Army gets into it.’” Schwarzkopf then launched his VII and XVIII Corps hours sooner than planned, but the vital VII Corps, comprising the main armored “punch,” dithered. Advancing units were kept on line, limiting the speed of advance; some units were halted for up to nine hours on the first night.

All the while, Iraqi units were streaming north. Many escaped as the Army failed to slam the door behind them, despite the notable efforts of some division commanders to push boldly forward. For reasons not satisfactorily explained, the authors

assert that the Air Force was unable to bomb inside a fire-support coordination line Army commanders had established well in front of their advancing units. By the authors' account, this empty space was inadequately covered by Army attack helicopters. Yet before the war, the two services hailed the "synergistic effects" of Joint Air Attack Teams composed of Air Force A-10 jets and Army AH-64 attack helicopters operating together inside the fire support coordination line. Despite all the recent emphasis on jointness, there was a major failure of air-ground coordination which inexcusably enabled the retreating Iraqis to evade the full wrath of U.S. airpower. As Gordon and Trainor point out, Schwarzkopf's war plan "was joint more in name than fact. Each service was allowed to attack the way it preferred, with little thought to how an attack in one area would affect the fighting in another."

Despite Schwarzkopf's imposing physical presence and his angry tirades at subordinates, Gordon and Trainor argue that he wasn't tough enough. He gave the Marines too much freedom, they claim, and he didn't stand up to Powell, Dick Cheney, or the White House when the pressure was on to end the war at the wholly symbolic 100-hour mark when there was still unfinished business. The authors also aim their guns at the political leadership over Schwarzkopf. For example, they point out that Bush had described Saddam Hussein as "worse than Hitler," but in the campaign against this new "Hitler," Bush ordered his armies, as it were, to stop at the Rhine. If there was a breakdown in coordination between America's armed forces, there also was a breakdown in coordinating America's military with its political objectives. These are tough indictments, rendered fairly and documented impressively in the best book yet to appear on the Gulf War. □

Learn more reading the news:

Perspectiva
 Tuesday or Wednesday
 16 pages of news
 16 pages of news

Spanish

- World news monthly
- \$25 annual subscription

German

- World news quarterly
- \$18 annual subscription

Standpunkt
 Tuesday or Wednesday
 16 pages of news
 16 pages of news

**INTERMEDIATE READING LEVEL
 BILINGUAL GLOSSARY
 FREE GRAMMAR GUIDE
 FOR NEW SUBSCRIBERS**

EDUCATIONAL NEWS SERVICE
 Box 60478-WMO FLORENCE, MA 01060

**FREE brochure
 1-800-600-4494**

The Washington Monthly

JOURNALISM AWARD

FOR OCTOBER 1994 IS PRESENTED TO

Chris Adams
**The New Orleans
 Times-Picayune**

The blueprints to the St. Jude Medical Center in New Orleans were a monument to a bloated and arrogant health industry. The sprawling, \$300 million complex, Adams writes in his three-part series, was "premised on the widespread illusion that no matter how much hospitals and doctors charged, no matter how sophisticated and elaborate the medical services they offered, no matter how duplicative the services, the insurance industry would just go on paying the bill." But when insurance companies began opting for less expensive health care, such as HMOs and managed care plans, occupancy rates sank below 35 percent and the hospital began to lose millions. Adams' exhaustive description of St. Jude's collapse is a parable of the health industry's hubris and consequential fall, and a strong case for why reform is needed now more than ever.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, or radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation. Please send nominations to Monthly Journalism Award, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.

Nominations for stories published or aired in November or December will close February 1. The winners will be announced in the March issue.