

[Back to index](#)**Immaculate Coercion ?****Some thoughts on Operations Desert Fox and Allied Force**

by Dr David Jordan
(University of Birmingham)

'We are not seeking to destabilize his regime.' Secretary of Defense William Cohen made this assertion at the afternoon Department of Defense briefing on 18 December 1998, when questioned about the purpose of Operation Desert Fox. Desert Fox was the latest in a long line of operations against the immovable Saddam Hussein. Rather like Operation El Dorado Canyon against Libya in 1986, the aim of Desert Fox was to demonstrate to a rather unpleasant dictator that attempting to spread instability would not be accepted. The possibility that the dictatorial regime might be part of the collateral damage was an unspoken hope, but not a deliberate aim. US diplomacy is currently conducted through three prime agencies: the State Department, Air Combat Command of the USAF and US Naval Aviation. This trend originates not in the spectacular success of aerial bombardment in the Persian Gulf in 1991, but in the darker days of Vietnam. It seems that the video game dimension of air warfare (the viewer sees a nice explosion, impressive damage but no body parts) is having an effect on US foreign policy. Imbued with what Roger Waters termed the 'bravery of being out of range', when careful and patient diplomacy does not bring quick results, aerial bombardment is turned to. This has several dislocating effects on the realities of dealing with foreign policy problems, the most serious of which means that in spite of military success, diplomatic objectives are ever more difficult to attain. Sophisticated diplomacy has given way to sophisticated weaponry and a paucity of ideas. This is now being seen all too readily in Kosovo, where US-led NATO air action seems to be the only response to the problem that the State Department can come up with.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the US armed forces were at their lowest ebb. Although the US armed services made hugely impressive recovery, Vietnam has coloured the approach to dealing with situations where military force might be appropriate. The overwhelming desire to see minimal friendly casualties has led to a reliance upon high technology Precision-Guided Munitions and their conveyance to enemy territory by aircraft. To limit the risk of casualties even further, the first wave of airpower sent in nowadays is often precision guided not by the brain of a human in an aircraft, but a computer chip. Once the cruise missiles have hit their targets degrading the air defence systems of the opposition, manned aircraft can be sent in. Operation Desert Fox demonstrated that this sometimes works very well, in spite of cynical press comment. Allied Force, on the other hand, shows clearly that a lack of clear policy means that although friendly casualties are minimal, the objectives are far from clear and the use of air power is consequently ineffective.

Desert Fox's origins lie firmly in the Gulf War; not only was the operation a result of Saddam Hussein's continuing intransigence, but its conduct owed much to the use of air power in the conflict. The TV-friendly images from Riyadh established a whole new foreign policy paradigm for the USA. And herein lies the problem of Desert Fox. Just as in Vietnam, the TV pictures from the 1991 conflict did not tell the whole story. Precision guided weapons were an undoubted success. The Iraqi air force commander no doubt found that his office was a mess after a 2,000-pound laser-guided bomb blew the walls of the building out. Countless other pictures of laser- and electro-optically guided weapons seemed to show that the era of 'one target, one bomb' had arrived. This was an illusion. We did not see the laser-guided weapons which went 'wild' and missed their targets. Like 'friendly fire', the dispassionate observer has to grit their teeth and accept that these things happen. Everything works perfectly until the guidance system decides not to function, and then the bomb goes where it pleases. The irony is that the design of the laser-guided weapon means that it is less dependent on ballistics, and will tend to miss the target by a **greater** margin than an unguided 'dumb' bomb if its guidance system doesn't work. To fly the laser-guided bomb to its target, the pilot of the aircraft aims to toss the bomb into a funnel of reflected laser energy (the laser energy being provided by the system designating the target), and the mechanical guidance fins on the bomb fly the weapon down the funnel. If they fail to work for any reason, the bomb becomes a small unguided aircraft looking for somewhere to crash. An old fashioned 'dumb' bomb simply follows orders given to it by gravity. Furthermore, the amount of precision-guided weaponry used was far less than the

World War Two style iron bomb, rockets, and cluster bombs, all aimed with through pilot skill and some clever aircraft avionics. A final consideration is that no matter how accurate your weapons, if the intelligence information which guides your targeting decisions is flawed, civilians using a military bunker as a shelter will die a horrible death and in large numbers.

These inconvenient facts were generally ignored. What Desert Storm demonstrated was that a combination of firepower and high technology could move warfare away from the traditional model. Troops were only needed to take over the ground vacated by a beaten enemy; where the enemy had decided to stay put, the might of armoured attack soon dealt with them. Troops could be saved from the rigours of ground war. Casualties could be numbered in the tens rather than the thousands. All thanks to air power and precision-guided weapons. As General David Deptula put it, air power no longer prepared the battlefield: it destroyed it.

This may have an element of truth in it. Troop casualties can be vastly reduced by the employment of massive amounts of air-delivered weaponry. The effect of being bombed by three B-52s (the standard formation) has an incredible morale effect. One Iraqi officer, asked why he had surrendered, said 'because of the B-52 attacks'. His interrogators were puzzled. 'But you weren't bombed by B-52s', they said. 'No – but I saw a unit which *had*', the Iraqi officer said with some feeling. Iraqi tanks and armoured fighting vehicles had been reduced in huge numbers, partly through the use of the A-10 attack aircraft (designed to destroy them) and partly through the use of 500-pound laser-guided bombs dropped by F-111s (which were not). The latter practice, prosaically known as 'tank plinking', had an enormous effect on the number of vehicles left to fight the Allies (which, when confronted by the M1 Abrams and the British Challenger tank, did not make much of an impact). All this is good news for the humble infantry man. It is excellent news for the politician, desirous of low casualty figures. It is bad news for sensible foreign policy.

Desert Storm gave the impression that air power can, with a little effort and a lot of investment, solve all problems. Why, then, did Desert Fox succeed in its aims, and why, at time of writing, is Allied Force proving to be a confused affair? The first answer comes in the conception of the two operations. It needs to be noted that an air campaign of the intensity of Desert Fox cannot depend upon the dictates of Congress deciding that the President's desire to befriend his interns merits impeachment. There is a common perception that Bill Clinton ordered the bombers in to deflect attention from his inability to keep his hands off members of the opposite sex (apart, it seems, from the First Lady) and the military simply said 'Yes, Mr President, we'll save you' and got on with it. This was hardly the case. A four-day air attack on military facilities requires extremely careful and precise planning. This had been under way for a considerable time before Kenneth Starr was to enjoy (or should that be endure?) his moment in court. This perception no doubt arises because unlike the Gulf War, the air attacks lasted for four days only. What damage could they achieve, we are asked. The answer, in simple terms, is 'lots.'

When Desert Fox opened, the targets had been carefully identified. The weapons used are formidable. The standard laser-guided bomb was not the only type of weapon to be employed. In the Gulf War itself, 288 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs) were launched from US Naval vessels. The Tomahawk remains in service, but in a much more accurate version (currently landing in Serbian factory complexes) as the guidance technology has improved further. The Air Force did not make much of a contribution to the despatch of cruise missiles in the Gulf War itself. During the Cold War, the USAF had employed B-52s armed with the AGM-86 Air Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM), which carried a nuclear warhead. Unbeknown to the world at large, in the latter part of the 1980s, it was decided to rearm some of the missiles with conventional warheads, containing 2,000 pounds of high explosive (the new weapon being known as a Conventional Air Launched Cruise Missile, or CALCM). Thirty five of these weapons were fired in 1991, with a further 13 being used in 1996 when operation Desert Strike was launched to try to persuade Saddam to behave. These weapons were impressively accurate in 1991. By the time of Desert Fox, they had been significantly improved. The warhead size has been increased to 3,000 pounds, while the guidance system relies upon an improved Global Positioning System (GPS). Essentially, GPS allows the missile's 'brain' to work out exactly where over the earth's surface. It then compares this position with the position of its target (already known to the missile) and then follows the directions until it and the target coincide. The new GPS system in the AGM-86C Block 1 is assessed as being twice as accurate as the previous model. Thus, the cruise missile was to dominate Desert Fox.

The plan for the operation was simple. The targets in heavily-defended Baghdad would first be hit by cruise missiles, since this minimised risk to pilots. In the second wave, the air defence system throughout Iraq would be attacked, to allow greater freedom of action for manned aircraft. The attacks by cruise missiles appear to have been devastatingly effective. Since Saddam, in yet another stunning display of good judgement, decided that the impeachment proceedings in Washington and the proximity of Ramadan would prevent any attack being made on him, he had not placed his forces on any particular

level of high alert, or moved them from their bases. Clearly, sanctions have at least prevented pirated copies of *Wag the Dog* from finding their way into the Hussein family VCR. Saddam may have been influenced by the fact that B-52s had not arrived on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, which had always been the sign that trouble was imminent in the past. The results of this surprise were significant.

Bomb damage assessment (BDA) suggests that the cruise missile attacks were hugely effective. It was first thought that the Ba'ath Party headquarters in Baghdad – the suspected hiding place of the documents which the UNSCOM inspectors wished to see – had been superficially damaged, since only a few neat holes in the roof were to be seen. It seemed that the CALCMs had not done their job. In fact, closer examination revealed that while the building was still standing, most of its interior was in fact lying in small pieces on the formerly neatly-manicured lawns. The missiles had punched their way in through the roof and penetrated deep into the building before exploding. Although it is hard for most of us to appreciate just how severe the damage caused to a building by just ten pounds of explosive can be, it does not take much imagination to work out that 3,000 pounds of explosive is going to create considerable damage. As far as is known, few, if any casualties were inflicted. The same can be said for most of the targets hit during the campaign. Although pictures of injured civilians were seen, the Iraqis made a few blunders in their propaganda. The BBC crew who were taken to see a residential block hit by a cruise missile made the unfortunate decision (for Iraqi propaganda purposes) to take a wide angle shot. A crater in the ground was visible, and the buildings had suffered extensive shrapnel damage. The problem was that the nature of the block was such that the detonation of a 1,000 pound warhead in the confined area of that particular block would have demolished it, probably killing all present. The detonation of a Surface to Air Missile (SAM) which had been launched in spite of the fact that there was no target for it to lock onto and which had headed back to earth would have inflicted remarkably similar damage to that shown on screen. The TV pictures also showed what was supposedly the engine of the cruise missile. We did not quite see the words 'made in Russia' on the side of the remnants, but the pictures add credence to the notion that a lot of the indiscriminate damage to the civilian areas was caused by SAMs falling out of the sky when their fuel ran out.

This is not to say that there were no civilian casualties. Anyone who believes that there were not must be either naïve or incredibly optimistic. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that many of the casualties seen in the TV pictures beamed around the world on the first night of the attack were injured by their own side. It is easy to take the view that they would not have been injured had the Americans not attacked; but it should be pointed out that the North Vietnamese generally avoided such problems by simply fusing their missile warheads to explode while still airborne if they did not acquire a target.

There were certainly heavy casualties among a defined target for attack, namely the Republican Guard. The Republican Guard were recognised as the mainstay of Saddam's regime in 1991, and had demonstrated this quite clearly by being the most unpleasant hosts to the UNSCOM inspectors. They were bombed heavily. The BDA pictures of the Al-Kut barracks, attacked by B-1Bs (which, incidentally, carries a heavier bombload than the B-52), display a large number of craters running through accommodation blocks. These scenes were repeated at other Republican Guard installations. Whether the Republican Guard lost large numbers of men or not, the point that they are now firmly targeted was made.

Finally, significant destruction was caused to Saddam's capacity to make WMDs and to his air defence system. These two points may seem controversial, but there are several key points to be made. First, to hide his WMD delivery systems (the Scud and its Iraqi variants) from the UNSCOM inspectors, Saddam took the precaution of having them dismantled and hidden. A number of the suspected hiding places were struck (the policy of keeping the inspectors out of certain places helped plan the target list). Furthermore, to rebuild the weapons, a special metal press is required. It seems that Saddam had only managed to invest in one of these, and it is now believed that this has been destroyed. The destruction of the remotely-piloted aircraft converted for the dispersion of chemical and biological weapons further 'degraded' Saddam's capacity to cause mischief in the near future. Perhaps the more controversial of the two claims made above is that the Iraqi air defence network was damaged. If this is the case, you may well be asking, how is it that USAF and RAF aircraft have been attacking Iraqi air defence sites on an almost daily basis? The answer cannot be definite, since the Pentagon are not saying, but a combination of BDA photographs and well-sourced rumour suggests that the central repair plant for SAMs and their radars was utterly destroyed in the attack. Saddam's continuing targeting of USAF and RAF aircraft in the no-fly zones may well be a desperate attempt to destroy an aircraft before the whole air defence network collapses about his ears through lack of maintenance.

Even here, Saddam may be fighting a losing battle. The Electronic Warfare capacity of the USAF and US Navy is such that when the Gulf War began, the jamming of Iraqi radar and communications systems was conducted with such brute electronic force that a polite protest was received from Bulgaria. Bulgaria's

difficulty was that the jamming was so extensive that it was interfering with its radar network. The Soviet Union's motto on the matter of confounding radar and communications networks ran roughly along the lines of 'jam one third, destroy one third and the rest will collapse by itself'. This was proved correct in 1991, and since the jamming and destructive capacity of the US forces has not diminished, it is not impossible to visualise the future destruction of the Iraqi air defence network.

Nonetheless, Saddam is still there. He may be shooting his generals on a regular basis (neatly ignoring the fact that only Joseph Stalin has got away with this sort of thing when facing a major military threat) to ensure he keeps his grip, but he is still there. Without ground forces, he will not be dislodged, unless there is a coup. Nonetheless, Desert Fox worked – it had limited objectives, which were not clearly understood by a sceptical press, and achieved them: the WMD capacity of Iraq was reduced considerably; the Republican Guard was weakened; military unrest was fermented, and, in spite of the rapid and ruthless response by Saddam, he must be a little worried. The recognition that the Iraqi opposition needs helping probably also is of concern to Saddam: it would seem that Desert Fox may mark the start of a coherent, careful and well-considered long-term plan which will ultimately topple Saddam. The past record of the US in this field does not exactly inspire confidence in success, but it may well happen. The removal of sanctions in some areas may well help add to Saddam's insecurity, since it would be more difficult for him to blame the US for shortages if sanctions on non-military essentials are lifted. Of course, there is always the risk that a tottering Saddam might use his weapons of mass destruction, but his behaviour during the Gulf War suggests that even he has his doubts as to what the US response would be if he did so (the word 'massive' ought to feature in his considerations). Somehow, be it an indigenous revolt or one inspired by the arrival of US tanks, Saddam's fate will be decided on the ground, and not thanks to air power. Desert Fox recognised this, even if this was not perceived at the time by a press more eager to tie the air assault in with Monica Lewinsky's lack of appreciation of the value of a good dry-cleaning service.

Just as we might think that the US has a considered policy for appropriate use of air power, along comes Allied Force. The mission, designed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of ethnic Albanians has given Serb forces and irregulars the chance to increase their rate of doing so. While it is folly to argue that the attacks are not having an effect on the Yugoslav military, and are not causing high civilian casualties, it is not difficult to contend that the situation could have been handled rather better. Military commanders are not, contrary to satirical belief, stupid people, and it is hard not to suspect that, while they are fully backing the plan laid down by their political masters (as they should do in a democracy), they might have the notion that ground troops could have solved problems. Ground troops would also cause political problems, especially with Moscow, though, so how to deal with the difficulties? There are a number of answers.

The presence of a hundred or more AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, would have made ethnic cleansing rather more difficult. The Apache's price tag gives a hint of its all-weather capability. Formations of AH-64s, equipped with eight Hellfire missiles, nineteen rockets and an external fuel tank to give them more loiter time operating out of Bosnia, Albania or Macedonia could perambulate across a wide area of Kosovo at a speed which enables them to locate targets in a manner which fast-mover attack aircraft cannot. While the USAF has the A-10 attack aircraft to deal with tanks and other targets, it has a very limited adverse weather capacity, and operating at night is difficult (were it not for skilled pilots, it might be impossible). The Apache has none of these difficulties: operating at very low level, at the dead of night and in foul weather, AH-64s have the ability to seriously inconvenience ground troops – ethnic cleansing on the scale seen would have been considerably reduced if the units carrying it out had been targeted around the clock. Why was this not done? The answer is probably 'risk'. Using AH-64s from the start would have required aircrews to operate in a potentially dangerous environment over hostile territory. In daylight operations, it is a fair to guess that there would have been some damage inflicted on the AH-64s (although in the Gulf, this was far lower than even optimists would have predicted), and possibly aircrew casualties. The main problem, though, is that there seems to be no clear objective. What is Allied Force trying to achieve, exactly? The worrying thing is that no-one quite seems to know.

Whether military action is the only way, or whether diplomacy should have been given a chance is now irrelevant. The key point is that the 'surgical' element to air power has blinded Western and especially US politicians. Military action is never easy. People die. Lives are shattered. Sometimes there may be no alternative to force. But if force is to be applied, it must be applied properly. Were Serbian air defences firing at passing airliners, then taking down their air defence network would be the correct answer. When the problem is groups of armed men on the ground massacring citizens of a different ethnic grouping, then a cruise missile hitting a radar site makes no difference. An attack helicopter or a Main Battle Tank does. Air power can destroy an enemy army's equipment, its manpower and even its morale. It cannot occupy ground, and it cannot protect civilians. It cannot overthrow dictators, and it cannot establish safe havens for persecuted ethnic groupings. Land forces can do all of these things. In Iraq and in Kosovo, the issue will be finally settled on the ground. All instances of military action beyond punitive raids require

ground troops. Field Marshal Auchinleck once made the remark that the time would always come when 'Private Snodgrass must advance to his front'. The new US foreign policy/power projection paradigm seeks to leave him in his barracks. This is misguided. Although the risks may be unappealing, if the US is to achieve the foreign policy objectives it strives for, it has to take them. The question remains, though, of whether it is willing to do so.

Links:

<http://www.af.mil/current/iraq2/>

<http://www.af.mil/current/iraq2/iraqcurrent.htm>

<http://www.af.mil/current/iraq2/archive.htm>

http://www.af.mil/news/factsheets/AGM_86B_C_Missiles.html

http://www.af.mil/news/factsheets/B_52_Stratofortress.html

<http://www.af.mil/lib/globalon/>

<http://www.xp.hq.af.mil/xpx/21/intro.htm>

http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/desert_fox/

NATO and NATO Southern Command sites for Kosovo:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/kosovo/>

<http://www.nato.int/latest/home.htm>

Tomahawk Cruise Missile fact sheet

<http://www.chinfo.navy.mil/navpalib/factfile/missiles/wep-toma.html>