George Bush’s second year in office provided the two defining events of his presidency, the budget crisis and the war in the Gulf. The former was a leadership débâcle whereas the latter showed President Bush in a far more favourable light, particularly if the analysis is concentrated primarily, as it will be here, on the seven months between Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait at the beginning of August 1990 and the cease fire agreed at the end of February 1991. During this critical period Bush’s foreign policy leadership is not easy to fault if it is measured simply by the fulfilment of goals. At an early stage the President decided that Iraq’s aggression had to be reversed and seven months later he presided over the triumphant achievement of that objective. On this occasion, far from being excessively cautious, Bush came across as a bold and resolute leader who kept his nerve in the face of many dangers and uncertainties.

THE CHRONOLOGY

To review in bare outline the chronology of this crisis. On the evening of 1 August 1990 (early morning on 2 August in the Middle East), word reached Washington that Iraqi forces had moved into Kuwait. The President issued a statement condemning the invasion as ‘naked aggression’ and calling for ‘the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces’. Later that night, Bush signed executive orders banning all trade with Iraq and freezing both Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets. Meanwhile Thomas Pickering, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, was instructed to call an emergency session of the Security Council. At that meeting, which went on through the night, a resolution condemning the invasion and calling for immediate and unconditional withdrawal was agreed to by a vote of 14–0 with Yemen abstaining.¹

This was the first of a remarkable series of resolutions relevant to the crisis in Kuwait passed by the Security Council in the period between 2 August 1990 and 29 November 1990. Of twelve resolutions, five were agreed to unanimously by the
15 members of the Council; three passed by 13–0 with Cuba and Yemen abstaining; one was agreed by 14–1 with Cuba voting against; one received a vote in its favour of 13–2 with Cuba and Yemen voting against, and one passed by a vote of 12–2 with Cuba and Yemen voting against, while China abstained.2

At 8 a.m. on 2 August the National Security Council came together and before the meeting began the President told reporters in front of television cameras: ‘We’re not discussing intervention. . . we’re not considering any military option. . . . I am not contemplating such action.’ Later that day in Colorado Bush appeared to shift his position, saying to the press: ‘We’re not ruling any options in, but we’re not ruling any options out.’3

On his return to Washington from Camp David on 5 August, the President, in speaking to the press, spoke of ‘Our determination to reverse out this aggression – this will not stand, this will not stand this aggression against Kuwait.’4 On 6 August the UN Security Council agreed by a vote of 13–0 to impose sanctions against Iraq. On the same day King Fahd indicated his willingness to accept foreign forces to assist in the defence of Saudi Arabia. Two days later President Bush appeared on television to announce to the nation the deployment of American troops to the Middle East saying that ‘the sovereign independence of Saudi Arabia is of vital interest to the United States.’ The President also stressed however, that ‘The mission of our troops is wholly defensive.’5 This force in support of ‘Operation Desert Shield’ was to grow to 230,000 men and women by late October 1990. On 25 August the UN Security Council voted 13–0 in favour of a resolution effectively authorizing military action to enforce the sanctions against Iraq agreed earlier. This was the first occasion in the history of the UN that individual countries were authorized ‘to enforce an international blockade, an extraordinary diplomatic victory for the administration.’6

At the beginning of October the US Congress gave overwhelming support to the Bush Administration’s efforts so far to deter Iraqi aggression – the House by a vote of 380–29, and the Senate by a vote of 96–3. On 8 November the President at a news briefing announced that the size of US forces committed to ‘Operation Desert Shield’ was to be increased –