Like many, I found it hard to think about anything but the war during the last half-year. The engines of destruction trivialize our puny efforts to teach and write about justice, social order, meliorism. Yet it is difficult to discuss the war because of the profound disagreements about its justification and strategy. I will say nothing, therefore, about the military actions themselves, but focus instead on the costs of war.


Before the war, our leaders indulged in male fantasies of power. U.S. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney proclaimed that the only path to peace and stability in the Gulf was for Saddam Hussein to "go back to Baghdad with his tail between his legs."1 George Bush warned that Saddam Hussein had to be convinced that "he's going to get his ass kicked." After the war Bush boasted: "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." Former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing praised Bush as "a great president who has erased the shameful stain of Vietnam." (Some of us believe that our mistake was in fighting the Vietnam war, not in losing it. From that perspective, the Gulf war illustrates the warning that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.)

A senior American official admitted that "all along, we worried about the implications of a diplomatic success." Although the air war was launched only in January and the ground war in February, military planning for both began last September, and the timetable was fixed at the end of October. When Iran's president offered to help end hostilities, State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler promptly replied: "What's to mediate?" As the bombing intensified, some Americans asserted that we might have to destroy Iraq in order to save it. We had heard

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that before—in Vietnam. Unfortunately, we seem to be much better at destroying societies than at rebuilding them: witness Grenada, Nicaragua, and Panama. When the Soviet Union sought to act as an intermediary to forestall a ground assault, Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said, "It's time the Soviets got out of the negotiating process."

The government has repeatedly recalculated the war's cost. Before fighting began, Congressional Budget Office predictions covered a $60 billion range ($28-$86 billion). Before the ground war started, the Bush Administration upped its own estimate to $58-77 billion for fiscal 1991. The military acknowledged that the air war alone cost $500 million a day, a figure it expected to double when the ground war started. Both were probably conservative.

High-tech weapons saved Allied lives (by killing Iraqis), but they were frightfully expensive: $1.35 million for each Tomahawk cruise missile, $20-70 million for each airplane downed. We were constantly reassured that the allies (primarily Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the other Gulf states, Germany, and Japan) would defray most of this cost. And, of course, we were enormously thankful that only a few hundred Americans died (although before the war, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Colin Powell anticipated, and was prepared to accept, several thousand casualties). But these comforting reassurances ignore several things.

First, the war was no less wasteful if others were paying. The loss seems likely to equal the U.S. savings and loan fiasco—but concentrated in less than a year rather than spread over five to ten.

Second, estimates omitted the military and civilian damage to Iraq—much of which will have to be rebuilt. (Not, apparently, by the U.S. The day after the ceasefire, President Bush declared that "not one dime" of taxpayers' money would go to the reconstruction of Iraq; a February poll indicated that 74 percent of Americans agreed.) This oversight was not accidental. The United States consistently refused to estimate Iraqi casualties. Allied leaders planning the air war expected that six weeks of bombing would kill 100,000 to 120,000 Iraqi soldiers. On the day after the war ended, General Norman Schwarzkopf's subordinates said the ground assault had killed tens of thousands. A month after the war's end, General Powell acknowledged that U.S. intelligence still had not provided an estimate of Iraqi dead, adding: "It's really not a number I'm terribly interested in."

Marlin Fitzwater, President Bush's press secretary, was even more explicit: "You will not find Americans feeling guilty [about a U.N. report that "near-apocalyptic" bombing sent Iraq back to a "pre-industrial age"]. People think we fought the war decisively, we fought it well, and we fought it as discriminatingly as we could. Were there thousands of Iraqis killed? Yes. Do we know how many? No...The fact is that the Iraqi deaths are attributable to the invasion of Saddam Hussein [into Kuwait]. So you will not find America feeling guilty for Saddam Hussein's invasion and destruction of his own people." Fitzwater claimed to be unaware of the U.S. military's own estimate of 100,000 killed. Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams insisted, "The idea that we bombed Baghdad back to the Stone Age is clearly not true."

In addition to the loss of life and damage to infrastructure, the financial consequences were likely to be disastrous to Iraq. Kuwait was demanding $60 billion in reparations. U.S. compa-