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Samuel Helfont’s outstanding new book explores US-Iraqi relations in the 1990s through a global lens. Helfont argues that the Gulf War and the ongoing struggle to enforce United Nations resolutions against Iraq constituted both a “test case” of the post-Cold War liberal international order and eventually a point of fracture for that order (p. 9). To support this argument, he deploys a wide range of English and Arabic sources, particularly the Ba’th Party archives at the Hoover Institution.

Most scholars already recognize that US president George H. W. Bush envisioned the Gulf War as a test of a “new world order.”[1] He and his successor Bill Clinton hoped that US-led collective security measures would defeat aggression, encourage economic openness, and maintain stability in key regions. Most scholars are also familiar with Iraq’s obstruction of inspections, smuggling operations, and other attempts to frustrate US designs. [2]

Less familiar, however, is the story of how Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s regime identified and exploited fissures in the international order to break up the Gulf War coalition and undermine the inspections and sanctions the United Nations imposed after the Gulf War. The Iraqis recognized that many nations of this coalition were reluctant to support a lengthy and harsh containment policy that the United States seemed determined to enforce indefinitely.

The Iraqi regime recognized this weakness and attacked it by offering oil deals, decrying US hegemony, and highlighting the public health effects of sanctions. They targeted specific nations in strategic ways. They encouraged Russia and France to resist US hegemony and restore preexisting ties and used their influence among Palestinians in Jordan to pressure that government to permit illicit trade. They provoked crises that they knew would exacerbate fissures between the United States and its partners. In addition, fascinating documents show how Iraq influenced transnational networks of student associations, religious
groups, NGOs, academics, and media to intensify discontent with US policy in numerous countries.

The Iraqis recognized the importance of narrative, portraying themselves as a Third World, Arab nationalist underdog resisting imperialist and Zionist bullies. Iraqi intelligence targeted politicians as varied as US presidential candidates Gary Hart and Patrick Buchanan for influence. Helfont also shows how Iraq cynically used the public health crisis to delegitimize sanctions in global public opinion, shifting the blame from Iraq for noncompliance to the United States for heartlessly besieging a poor nation. In one case, Iraqi officials changed expiration dates on a Dutch charity’s shipment of milk powder to justify rejecting the shipment in order to maintain the human deprivation that the regime turned to its advantage (p. 170).

By the mid-1990s, France, Russia, China, and other nations were defecting from the containing coalition. They increasingly called for sanctions relief, asserted that inspections had run their course, and refused to endorse US efforts to use force to punish Iraq for obstructive behavior. By the end of the 1990s, much of the world was moving toward normalization with Iraq while the United States struggled to keep constraints in place. While the fracturing of this coalition cannot be attributed solely to Iraqi efforts, Helfont convincingly shows how the Iraqis opened these fissures further and hastened the defection of key states. This is a fascinating study in the use of soft power by authoritarian states, an understudied but critical dimension of their foreign policies.

This book advances two important historiographical fronts. First, it globalizes our understanding of the Iraq War’s origins. Helfont portrays Saddam and his regime as strategic global actors, often more perspicacious about world politics than common stereotypes suggest. They detected important trends and nudged them in favorable directions.

However, there was also an ironic effect to Iraq’s success in fracturing the US-led coalition. The H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations worked hard in the 1990s to garner international support to legitimize their Iraq policies, in accordance with their belief in collective security. However, by the decade’s end the United States had grown frustrated with many countries’ refusal to cooperate on Iraqi issues, and US policymakers increasingly saw no other possible outcome than regime change.

Members of the George W. Bush administration placed little faith in the ability of international coalitions to deal with “rogue states” like Iraq, particularly after the shock of 9/11. They grudgingly sought UN support for renewed inspections in 2002, quickly abandoned those inspections, and invaded Iraq without UN approval at the head of a shallow coalition, in contrast to the broad and deep coalition of the Gulf War. As Helfont puts it, “in a bitter irony, the breakdown in global order that he [Saddam] worked so hard to accomplish also untethered the American power that ultimately overthrew his regime” (p. 184).

As US pressure mounted from 2002 to 2003, Saddam expected nations like France and Russia as well as transnational protest networks to restrain the Americans; this strategy had worked in the 1990s, after all. But this underestimated US frustrations with multilateral approaches to security as well as its intensified sense of vulnerability post-9/11. Helfont concludes that the second Iraq War drove the final nail in the coffin of H. W. Bush’s cooperative, rules-orientated, collective security-based system, replacing it with a more unilateral, US-dominated order that also floundered in Iraq in the coming years.

Second, Helfont’s book is equally important for understanding the post-Cold War world, especially the 1990s. Iraq was, in a sense, ahead of the curve.
of world politics in openly challenging the liberal world order. Its actions revealed how contested global order was even at the height of US hegemony and how a mid-sized regional actor could rally many countries’ discontent with that order. Countries like France, Russia, and China may have backed certain aspects of the US-led system, such as defeating open aggression, while resisting others, such as human rights interventions, efforts to restrict trade, and long-term infringements on national sovereignty. That challenges to the liberal order have only intensified since the 1990s makes it especially important to understand the multi-decade clash with Iraq and that nation’s own geopolitical agency.


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Notes


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