

## **Shoring Up Iraq, 1983 to 1990: Washington and the Chemical Weapons Controversy**

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*President Ronald Reagan's White House leaned toward Baghdad during the Iran–Iraq War because it sought to prevent an Iraqi defeat. Though the White House deemed Iraqi chemical weapons use abhorrent, it found the implications of an Iranian victory or expanded Soviet influence in the Middle East far more alarming. Newly released documents from the Iraqi state archives now allow an exploration of the chemical weapons controversy from both Iraqi and American perspectives. This evidence, along with sources from American archives, demonstrates that Washington and Baghdad had radically different assessments of the Iran–Iraq War. American officials hoped to mould Iraq into a useful ally, but Saddam interpreted American support as subterfuge. Saddam's hostile view of American intentions indicates that Washington had less influence over Iraqi behaviour during the 1980s than both contemporary American officials and many scholars writing since have realised. To insist that Washington could have deterred Iraqi chemical weapons use overstates American clout.*

Before the United States decided that Saddam Hussein was evil and needed to go, American policy-makers spent a decade exploring the notion that he might be a useful, if somewhat unsavoury ally. Testing that proposition found Washington tying itself into knots—to no avail. In the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war, Saddam's forces attacked Iranian soldiers with poison gas. The Administration of Ronald Reagan repeatedly protested Iraqi chemical weapons use but never threatened to downgrade relations in response. Once Iraq's eight-year war against Iran ended, Saddam began his final Anfal campaign, unleashing his military against the waning Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq. Because of the Reagan Administration's past responses to Iraqi poison gas attacks, Saddam presumably calculated that Washington was unlikely to rush to the Kurds' defense or punish his government. But because of Iran-Contra and the revelation of covert American arms sales to Iran, he also feared that not crushing the Kurdish insurgency quickly would

allow the Americans, Iranians, and Israelis to conspire against him. Only with Saddam's invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990 did Washington finally acknowledge that American interests and Saddam's intentions did not align.

Reagan leaned toward Baghdad during the Iran–Iraq War because the White House sought to prevent Iraqi defeat. Until early 1988, his Administration and its representatives in Iraq feared that Iran could win the war. Even those within the Administration who questioned White House Iraq policy admitted that an Iraqi loss portended grave consequences for American interests in the region. At the least, they believed, it would bolster the fundamentalist government in Tehran, sow discord in the Gulf States, and press America's regional allies to accommodate Tehran. It could also open the Middle East to greater Soviet influence. No less alarming was the potential emergence of another Islamist state along Iranian lines, or Iranian control over more of the region's oil. With these fears in mind, Washington declined to punish Iraq for its chemical weapons use and shielded Baghdad from condemnation at the United Nations (UN). Even after the Iran–Iraq War ended, White House support for Baghdad continued, but by then, Administration strategic considerations had evolved.

When Congress passed sanctions legislation in September to punish Iraq for using lethal poison gas against Iraqi Kurds during the final Anfal campaign, the Reagan Administration torpedoed it. No longer apprehensive about an Iranian victory, it now believed that closer ties with Iraq could help moderate Saddam's behaviour. Sanctions legislation, too, would imperil growing American economic interests in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Administration had spent most of the past two years trying to convince Saddam that Iran-Contra had been an aberration rather than a long-term plot against him. The sanctions legislation—punishing Baghdad for assaulting the Kurds—threatened to derail these efforts.

Unsurprisingly, analyses of American Iraq policy in the 1980s have not judged the Reagan Administration kindly. After the Persian Gulf War, a number of studies argued that American support for Iraq in the 1980s emboldened Saddam, helping convince him that he could attack Kuwait without major consequences. When examining the American response to Iraqi chemical weapons use, these studies have criticised Washington for looking the other way. Implicit in their arguments is the idea that the Reagan Administration could have influenced Saddam's behaviour by making the Iraqi dictator pay a higher price for his human rights violations. One study, for example, argues that the Reagan Administration missed three opportunities to act against Iraqi chemical weapons use: in 1983 to 1984 when Iraq began experimenting with poisonous gas and before re-establishing American–Iraqi diplomatic relations; after Iraqi attacks on Halajba in March 1988; and finally when Saddam crushed the Kurdish rebellion after agreeing to a ceasefire with Iran in August the same year. The first opportunity was the most important.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, scholars exploring American–Iraqi relations had no access to Iraqi archival sources. This is starting to change. Recent releases have shed light on Saddam’s strategic considerations and the inner workings of his regime.<sup>2</sup> Amongst other findings, doubt is cast on whether American support for Iraq during the 1980s encouraged Saddam to think that Washington would tolerate his invasion of Kuwait.<sup>3</sup> But this begs the question about what else new sources might reveal about American–Iraqi relations in the 1980s.

This exegesis adds to the existing conversation by revisiting Iraqi chemical weapons use. It explores Reagan Administration responses and the evolution of its position over time. If the non-use of chemical weapons had been a precondition for renewing diplomatic relations or if Washington had imposed sanctions or otherwise downgraded ties after Iraq used poison gas in its 1986 defense of Al-Fao and 1988 attack on Halajba, would Saddam’s behaviour have changed? Also crucial is why Washington found an Iranian victory unthinkable and how the revelation of American arms transfers to Iran affected Administration responses to Iraqi chemical weapons use. Finally, how did Saddam interpret American intentions, responses to his poison gas use, and secret dealings with Iran?

Crucially, Saddam’s assessment of the “game” differed radically from the American perception. American officials had no illusions about Saddam’s ruthlessness but, by 1988, the pro-Iraqi faction in the White House and State Department officials on the ground insisted that American policy was helping to moderate Iraqi behaviour. They believed that this trend would continue so long as the United States expanded its economic ties with Baghdad. American military officials in Iraq, too, argued that the United States Department of Defense and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense enjoyed co-operative relations.<sup>4</sup> Yet captured Iraqi documents reveal that Saddam and his top advisers considered the Americans their main strategic threat. Secret American arms deliveries to Iran between 1985 and 1986 had confirmed Saddam’s longstanding fear of an American–Iranian–Israeli conspiracy to topple his regime.<sup>5</sup> David Newton, the American Ambassador to Iraq during Iran-Contra, assumed that it took six months to rebuild America’s relationship with Iraq following revelation of these secret arms sales.<sup>6</sup> He was wrong. According to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, fears of Washington’s perfidy convinced the Iraqi leadership that they had to crush quickly the Kurdish insurgency once war with Iran ended to avoid an “inevitable” American–Israeli–Kurdish conspiracy against Baghdad.<sup>7</sup> Saddam’s vehement hostility towards the United States—even during the high point of ostensible co-operation between the two Powers—indicates that Washington had less influence over Iraqi behaviour during the 1980s than both contemporary American officials and many scholars writing since have realised.

The United States and Iraq had spent over a decade without diplomatic relations when the 1979 Iranian Revolution took Washington by surprise.

Visiting Tehran little more than a year before, President Jimmy Carter had referred to Iran as “an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.”<sup>8</sup> After anti-American revolutionaries seized power in Tehran, Washington found its longstanding “Twin Pillars” policy in tatters. Begun under President Richard Nixon, this strategy aimed to make Iran and Saudi Arabia—the twin pillars—well-armed regional surrogates.<sup>9</sup> In fact, even before Nixon expanded weapons sales to Iran, Washington had relied on the Shah to support the chief American goals in the Middle East—denying Soviet access to the Persian Gulf and ensuring “Free World” access to oil.<sup>10</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Iran’s revolution now threatened to wreck everything. The United States initially responded by taking a neutral stance toward the Iran–Iraq War whilst supporting the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets. But when Saddam began losing to Iran in 1982, his predicament offered Reagan’s White House an alternative.

Opportunism and Iranian threats compelled Saddam to attack Iran in September 1980, but the conflict did not develop as he had hoped.<sup>11</sup> After thrusting into Iranian territory, Iraq’s offensive stalled. By 1982, Iranian forces had reversed their initial losses and invaded Iraq. A June 1982 Special National Intelligence Estimate revealed, “Iraq has essentially lost the war with Iran. . . . There is little the Iraqis can do alone or in combination with other Arabs, to reverse the military situation.” No less troubling, the report feared that Iranian victory would benefit the Soviets and force the Gulf States to appease Tehran.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Tehran grew bolder in its efforts to spread revolution—attacking Kuwait, fomenting riots in Mecca, and sponsoring a coup in Bahrain. America’s allies in Egypt and the Persian Gulf trembled at the prospect of Iranian victory, but their military weakness meant that they could offer Saddam little but money.<sup>13</sup> Thus began the American opening toward Iraq.

Changes in American policy unfolded incrementally. On 26 February 1982, the State Department removed Iraq from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. A year later, Baghdad began receiving intelligence on Iranian troop movements. In autumn 1983 Washington initiated Operation Staunch. Conceived to prevent Iran from acquiring new weapons or spare parts on the international arms market, Staunch cut western arms sales to Tehran. The Reagan Administration also hoped the operation would calm Iraqi suspicions about Washington’s intentions. Besides helping Baghdad with intelligence and isolating Iran, the Americans extended agricultural credits to forestall an Iraqi financial crisis in March 1983.<sup>14</sup> Washington’s tilt reflected a consensus that secular Iraq—despite being a repulsive regime—was a lesser evil than fundamentalist Iran. Allowing Iraq to lose its war with Iran was not an option, even if Saddam sometimes behaved egregiously.

This behaviour took a turn for the worse in August 1983, the first time the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) detected Iraqi chemical weapons use. Saddam started using gas as the war entered a dangerous new phase.

In August, Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) collaborated with the Iranians in their offensive at Haj Omran.<sup>15</sup> Saddam's domestic adversaries had now entered the fray. Despite Saddam's escalation, the White House moved forward in improving relations.

Between 1983 and 1984, the Americans had the best opportunity to curb Iraqi chemical weapons use by making it a precondition for restoring diplomatic relations.<sup>16</sup> During a May 1983 meeting with Iraq Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, Secretary of State George Shultz insisted that Iraq expel the terrorist Abu Nidal before any further progress was possible. Pressure worked here.<sup>17</sup> But expelling Abu Nidal cost the Iraqis little, whilst forswearing poison gas use would have left them without their weapon of last resort at a perilous hour in their conflict. Jim Placke, a senior State Department official, later said that Iraq saw chemical weapons as vital: "If we had tried to make it a condition of restoring relations, relations would never have been restored."<sup>18</sup> Aziz affirmed as much in a 1984 interview: making chemical weapons central to Washington's Iraq policy would poison the atmosphere between the two Powers and appear as evidence of preparation for an Israeli attack against Iraqi industrial complexes.<sup>19</sup>

A different White House policy would not have curbed Iraqi chemical weapons use. Saddam believed that he needed chemical weapons to defend Iraqi sovereignty and endangered Iraqi territorial integrity in 1983–1984. In 1983, KDP rebels joined the Iranians in two attacks. Saddam saw the Kurdish–Iranian threat as part of a broader American–Iranian–Israeli conspiracy against Iraq. His worst fear was the nightmare of the "imperialists"—Americans—Iranians, and Israelis closing in around his country.<sup>20</sup> Ba'athist ideology posited insidious Persian–Jewish links dating back to antiquity, and Saddam viewed Israel through an anti-Semitic lens, alternately seeing the Israelis as an American instrument or the United States under Jewish–Zionist control. Experience and paranoia made Saddam particularly wary of the United States. He knew that the Iranians and Americans had supported the Kurdish rebellion against Iraq during the mid-1970s whilst officially denying involvement. When the Iranian Revolution toppled the Shah, Saddam's interpretation was an American plot to undermine his regime. In Saddam's conspiratorial worldview, the United States also had a hand in the 1981 Israeli attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor. And he suspected that the Americans had been arming the Iranians throughout the war. If the Americans insisted on Saddam abandoning chemical weapons before moving forward with normalising relations, it would have re-enforced his view of the United States as a treacherous and conspiratorial Power bent on his defeat. Granted, Iraqi military weakness pressured Saddam to make concessions, but the Iraqis had other backers—the Soviets, French, and Chinese. In addition, American law prohibited American arms transfers to Iraq, and Iraq's precarious battlefield position gave Saddam little room to wait for Congress to change its mind about his regime.

Additionally, with existing knowledge about Reagan's foreign policy during his first term, it is ahistorical to think the president might have reacted differently to Iraqi chemical weapons use. After all, Reagan nominated Ernest Lefever as assistant secretary of state for human rights, a man who told Congress in 1979, "the United States should remove from the statute books all clauses that establish a human rights standard."<sup>21</sup> Though Lefever later withdrew his nomination, Reagan ignored human rights violations in China, Yugoslavia, and US-allied states in Latin America. His Administration also disregarded heroin distribution in Afghanistan and overlooked Pakistani efforts to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>22</sup> He came to office hoping to roll back Soviet power, so human rights violations mattered primarily when they occurred in the Soviet Union or another Soviet-allied state. Iraq was no Soviet ally, but intelligence analysts worried in 1983 that that situation could change. The bottom line, according to analysts, was that Iranians wanted to overthrow Saddam, and Saddam would be more likely to improve American-Iraqi ties than any potential successor regime.<sup>23</sup> Throwing up obstacles like chemical weapons as the Iranians threatened to push into Iraq and potentially endanger Saudi Arabia and Kuwait made little sense. Still, the Reagan Administration sought to deter Iraqi chemical weapons use, but for geopolitical rather than human rights concerns.

With Iraq reeling, Reagan sent special envoy Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad to establish direct contact with Saddam in December 1983. The former Ford Administration White House chief of staff met with Saddam and Aziz to discuss Baghdad's needs. A State Department Report noted that Washington should discuss chemical weapons use in private with the Iraqis: "to deter further use of CW as well as to avoid unpleasantly surprising Iraq through public positions we may have to take on this issue."<sup>24</sup> Another State Department recommendation advised caution so as not to "provide Iran with a potent propaganda weapon against Iraq." The State Department remained concerned primarily that Iraqi chemical weapons use would "play into the hands of those who wish to escalate tensions in the region" and constrain the American ability to support Iraq.<sup>25</sup> The talking points and report for Rumsfeld mention nothing about chemical weapons, but they note that Washington "would regard any major reversal of Iraq's fortunes as a strategic reversal for the west."<sup>26</sup>

Following Rumsfeld's visit, American officials worked to deter Iraqi chemical weapons use without damaging improving American-Iraqi ties. The State Department blocked a shipment of Iraq-bound chemicals after American diplomats in Baghdad warned that Iraq had threatened to use gas to repel an imminent Iranian offensive.<sup>27</sup> The Iraqis reacted furiously after State Department spokesman, John Hughes, criticised Iraqi chemical weapons use on 5 March. Although Hughes balanced his criticism by blasting Iran for refusing to end the war, both the Iraqis and the American intelligence community feared that ties were deteriorating.<sup>28</sup> Days later, Shultz met with Ismet Kittani, an American-educated Iraqi diplomat, to reassure him

that policy toward Iraq had not shifted course. Kittani learnt that American opposition to chemical weapons use reflected longstanding policy and not a pro-Iranian turn. Washington's ban on the sale of chemicals used to manufacture mustard gas to both Iran and Iraq re-enforced Shultz's claim.<sup>29</sup> But recognising that the Iraqis remained suspicious of American intentions, Shultz highlighted American efforts under Operation Staunch. In April, as the UN pondered what to do about Iraq, Placke pressed for Iraqi co-operation in avoiding anything "that would lead to difficulty and possibly embarrassing situations."<sup>30</sup> The Iraqis complied with these wishes over the next few months, but only because Iran launched no further offenses.

American-Iraqi reconciliation culminated with the re-establishment of diplomatic relations on 26 November 1984. That day Shultz reminded Aziz about the American position on chemical weapons.<sup>31</sup> On the surface, the two sides appeared to have reached a satisfactory arrangement. The Iraqis would hold back the Iranians. American aid, on the other hand, now included intelligence, high technology exports, Operation Staunch, pressure in the UN, and efforts to help Iraq build new oil pipelines. Still, not everyone in Washington approved of the new relationship. Richard Perle in the Department of Defense was particularly sceptical. Iraq's nuclear programme and its ties to Warsaw Pact countries rather than Baghdad's chemical weapons use bothered him.<sup>32</sup> In retrospect, the White House could have more forcefully reiterated its position on chemical weapons during the Rumsfeld meetings, but Shultz emphasised the American position when speaking to Aziz. The Administration saw chemical weapons as something that could potentially embarrass the United States, but at this stage, it viewed chemical weapons as a lesser evil than an Iranian victory.

In 1985, the State Department responded to Iraqi chemical weapons use with private pressure on Aziz and cautious public statements. After the State department concluded that Iraq had used poison gas to repel Iran's Badr offensive against the Baghdad-Basra highway, Shultz met Aziz.<sup>33</sup> Following this closed session, State Department spokesman, Bernard Kalb, chiding Iranian aggression, became reticent when reporters pressed about chemical weapons; he stated only that "the Iraqi government is aware of the fact that the US government strongly condemns the lethal use of chemical weapons." For his part, Aziz denied that Iraq had ever used lethal poisonous gas, insisting to reporters that Shultz had mentioned nothing about it during their meeting.<sup>34</sup> The following day, citing confirmation from European physicians treating Iranian victims, Kalb read an official statement accusing Iraq of using chemical weapons.<sup>35</sup> Kalb's earlier hesitance to accuse Iraq directly and his insistence on portraying Iran as the aggressor suggested American reluctance both to single out Iraq for criticism and embarrass Aziz by making it appear as though he was called to Washington for a reprimand.

The next round of poison gas attacks came the following spring. Smashing across the border, the Iranians attacked Iraq's Al-Fao peninsula, hoping to choke off Iraqi oil exports and access to the Persian Gulf. American

intelligence reports, passed to Saddam through Jordan's King Hussein, considered the Iranian assault a diversion. The Iraqis shifted their forces in response to meet what they believed would be the main Iranian thrust elsewhere and, by the time they realised the attack on Al-Fao was real, they lost territory to Iran for the first time in five years. Saddam thought the Americans had deliberately deceived him and launched large-scale chemical attacks to repel the Iranians.

Saddam's defeat at Al-Fao exacerbated his long-standing apprehensions about American intentions. He came to power in 1979 with a deeply hostile view of the United States and, after the 1984 American–Iraqi rapprochement, still suspected that Washington was aiding Iran. Even before Al-Fao, Saddam alleged that the Americans were feeding him faulty information. Clearly, Saddam had a sense that America was unalterably duplicitous and bent on harming Iraqi interests.<sup>36</sup> Following the Al-Fao debacle, he told his advisers that the Americans had “tried to trick us.”<sup>37</sup> Had the United States pressed him harder over chemical weapons use at Al-Fao, Saddam would have presumably thought it part of an American plot. But if Al-Fao heightened his suspicions, Iran-Contra confirmed everything he feared.

In November 1986, Saddam learnt that the Americans had been providing Iran with TOW anti-tank weapons and spare parts for Iranian Hawk anti-aircraft missiles. The Iran-Contra Affair, which Saddam termed “Irangate,” convinced him that America wanted Iran to win the war. American–Iraqi relations would never recover. Saddam's response betrayed the depth of his existing suspicions: “This is nothing new,” he told his inner circle, “it is close to what we expected.”<sup>38</sup> He drew several conclusions from the affair, none comforting. American arms sales could prompt other western countries to follow suit or press Moscow to begin aiding Tehran to counter American influence. Worse yet, Saddam feared that his Arab backers, who provided most of his funding, would lose their nerve and come to terms with the Iranians. Most importantly, Irangate confirmed Saddam's anxiety about an Israeli–Iranian–American conspiracy, “It's Zionism,” Saddam concluded, “Zionism.”<sup>39</sup> To Saddam, American support since 1982 had been nothing but a ruse.<sup>40</sup>

Reagan addressed the weapons transfers during a 13 November speech and in a letter to Saddam a few days later. The United States, Reagan said, had sold Iran only “defensive” weapons. He wrote, “our policy has been, and still is, to restrain shipment of arms to Iran. We have been careful to ensure that what we released to the Iranians . . . would not alter the balance in the conflict or prolong the war.” Reagan justified secret contacts with Iranian government figures by arguing that it would help “foster an Iranian government which will pursue moderate policies, friendship, and tolerance towards its people and other nations in the region.” According to Reagan, his weapons transfers had nothing to do with American hostages held by Iran's allies in Lebanon, but were rather an attempt “to draw the Iranians into a dialogue which would, among other goals, end the war.”<sup>41</sup>



Saddam found the president's justifications unconvincing. Following Reagan's speech, he held six high-level meetings with his advisers to ponder this "stab in the back."<sup>42</sup> Now believing that the Americans were out to get him personally, Saddam replied to Reagan on 18 November: "What has shocked us and caused our great surprise—and frankly, even aroused our suspicions—is that the process of your rapprochement with Iran has involved supplying that country with quantities of US military equipment."<sup>43</sup> The alleged Israeli role particularly irked him—"Israeli officials have stressed that the continuation of war between Iran and Iraq serves their interests in the region." He thought Reagan's assertions about seeking to end the war through dialogue and arms transfers were risible: "Our government, Mr. President, cannot be convinced that those with whom you have been having a dialogue in Iran will agree to end the war as long as the first thing they requested from you was arms!" Finally, Saddam remonstrated that Iran's size and population made it necessary for Iraq to possess certain combat superiorities as compensation. Dismissing Reagan's claims about "defensive" weapons, Saddam observed, "when the Iranian side receives equipment contributing to the nullification of the elements of our superiority, the end result is in favor of Iranian superiority." Saddam concluded by urging Reagan "to reconsider this grave and harmful approach."

Jordan reacted to Irangate with equal pique. King Hussein lambasted the American president for violating Washington's declared neutrality policy, making a mockery of Operation Staunch, and providing Iran "with the means to threaten the main elements of Iraq's ability to defend its territory and *our world*, namely its Armor and Air Force." In a radio interview a few months later, the King claimed the Americans had almost zero credibility in the region.<sup>44</sup> Irangate had imperilled the American position in much of the Arab world. With Saddam apparently now standing on high moral ground, the Reagan Administration was far less inclined to criticise his battlefield tactics.

Soon thereafter, National Security Advisor Frank Carlucci sent a memorandum to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger entitled "Shoring up Iraq." Carlucci described American efforts to placate Saddam: "We have been very active in re-invigorating our effort to cut off all arms going to Iran, recognizing the need to overcome the impressions created by our ill-fated initiative." In case Weinberger doubted how far the National Security Council (NSC) wanted to lean, Carlucci concluded, "we will need to monitor the war closely and be prepared to take additional steps if the Iranians appear to make more headway." Carlucci added a handwritten note: "Cap—We are in full agreement on where we ought to be going in this area!"<sup>45</sup> In the wake of Irangate, an embarrassed Reagan Administration laboured to rejuvenate ties with Iraq and undermine Iran's war effort "without undercutting our formal posture of neutrality in the war."<sup>46</sup> Carlucci demonstrated that in reality, the American position was anything but neutral.

The strongest indication of Washington's desire to mend fences with Baghdad came with muted White House reaction to the 17 May *USS Stark* incident. An Iraqi Mirage F1 fired two Exocet anti-ship missiles at the American frigate, killing thirty-seven crewmen. Immediately apologising to Reagan, Saddam claimed that Iraq had "no intention whatsoever to strike against a target belonging to your country."<sup>47</sup> The White House obligingly accepted Saddam's apology and agreed to a joint American–Iraqi review of the incident in Baghdad. Although expecting compensation, the Americans dealt with the Iraqis as though the attack was a misunderstanding between allies and declined raising the reparation matter during the review. In all, the Reagan White House dealt with the *Stark* incident more or less as Lyndon Johnson's Administration had dealt with a 1967 Israeli attack on the *USS Liberty*. Shultz, in fact, blamed the Iranian threat to Gulf shipping that had compelled the United States Navy (USN) to maintain a heavy presence in the region, and thereby increased the likelihood of American ships drifting into the line of fire.<sup>48</sup> Saddam received a pass.

Following the *Stark* incident, and despite unfolding evidence of Iraqi war crimes, White House policy remained unchanged. If anything, the Administration showed less concern with chemical weapons use. Although the UN confirmed that Iraq now used chemical weapons on civilians, the White House did not condemn the brutal Anfal counterinsurgency campaign against the Kurds.<sup>49</sup> Previously, Washington had given low-key condemnation of internationally verified Iraqi chemical weapons use. After Irangate, it kept mum. Saddam's attacks on the Kurds had begun in April in response to a joint Iranian–Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) raid on Kirkuk in October 1986 that followed the breakdown of Iraqi–PUK talks. Both leading Kurdish factions now allied with Tehran against Baghdad. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) noted in an August report that Iraqi forces had embarked on a resettlement campaign, destroyed some 300 Kurdish villages, and used "chemical agents" to crush the Kurdish insurgency.<sup>50</sup> Nothing in the record indicates that American officials brought the matter up with the Iraqis. Washington's silence implied indifference, or at least recognition that Iraqgate had left the Administration in no position to make new demands. The Iranians still controlled Al-Fao, and Iraq's military situation was as perilous as ever. Iraq mattered to Washington far more than did the Kurds.

Antipathy toward Iran and discomfort over Iran-Contra made the Administration unlikely to let anything short of another Iraqi attack on American forces damage bilateral ties. During 1987, despite Iraq's first poison gas attacks against its own civilians, American criticism remained more subdued than ever over the course of the war. Aziz returned to Baghdad in December following a meeting with Carlucci's successor, Colin Powell, confident that his government and the Reagan Administration were seeing eye-to-eye on the conflict. Both sides preferred ending the war in Iraq's

favour and strengthening American–Iraqi ties. Saddam was seemingly in the driver’s seat.

On 16 March 1988, Iraqi forces used chemical weapons to attack Halajba, an Iranian-occupied village in Iraqi Kurdistan. The attack occurred just weeks after American diplomats reported that Iraq had made a permanent shift toward moderation.<sup>51</sup> Baghdad’s assault on Halajba killed soldiers, insurgents, and civilians alike. It differed from prior gas attacks because the Iranians welcomed western reporters to visit the battlefield and verify chemical weapons use. Iranian forces had dug in some 30 miles inside Iraq, so Halajba was accessible from Iranian territory.<sup>52</sup> Photographs and despatches soon brought the tragedy into living rooms around the world. Americans and other Westerners had seen headlines about Iraqi chemical weapons use from time to time, but they never before saw photographs and videos of dead Kurdish women and children.

With the media spreading these horrific images, the White House condemned Iraq. State Department spokesman, Charles Redman, noted in his condemnation that “there were indications that Iran may have also used chemical artillery shells in the fighting.”<sup>53</sup> Yet the Department’s condemnation did not mark change in American policy. In the weeks following Haljba, American officials prevented Iran from initiating a Security Council debate on chemical weapons. After American pressure, the UN passed only a watered-down, non-binding condemnation against Iraq on 9 May.<sup>54</sup>

As the United States protected Iraq at the UN, American–Iranian animosity almost spilt over into a small shooting war in mid-April. Reacting to Tehran’s mining in the Persian Gulf, the USN sank or damaged six Iranian ships and attacked oil platforms during Operation Praying Mantis.<sup>55</sup> Given his hostility toward the Americans, Saddam regarded the operation as an attempt to rob him of his glory. He also interpreted it as a transitory disagreement between his Iranian and American enemies. “America wants to strike at Iran,” Saddam reasoned, “and at the same time to seduce Iran.”<sup>56</sup> The Reagan Administration assumed it was rebuilding trust; Baghdad remained as hostile as ever.

Dealing with the Kurdish uprising took on new urgency in Baghdad after Iraq scored a series of victories starting with the re-conquest of Al-Fao in April 1988. Meeting with Saddam during the summer, Aziz warned, “I think Zionism, America, and the West will play the Kurdish issue to stain Iraq’s reputation and stain the personal figure of Mr. President Saddam Hussein.” Saddam agreed that Iraqi Kurds were “traitors and agents for Israel and Iran,” saying that PUK leader Jalal Talabani sought to conspire with Iraq’s enemies and carve a Kurdish nation out of northern Iraq.<sup>57</sup>

That same summer, Talabani visited Washington, no doubt fanning Saddam’s paranoia. American officials recognised that acknowledging Talabani would anger the Iraqis. In April, the State Department had urged

Reagan to dismiss a letter from Talabani: "(he) is a well-known bitter opponent of Pres. Saddam Huseyn (sic) of Iraq, and the telegram is part of his pattern of attack against the Iraqi government . . . . To answer would lend him personal political credence."<sup>58</sup> Reagan followed their advice; but outcry over Halajba probably helped Talabani get a visa and travel to Washington, where he met with State Department Iran–Iraq War Office Director Laurence Pope. For his part, Pope earned a rebuke from senior officials. The enraged Iraqis responded by cancelling Aziz's upcoming visit with Shultz.<sup>59</sup>

The State Department attempted to assuage Iraqi concerns. Spokesman Charles Redman told reporters at a 15 June press conference that "US policy is that the Kurds should satisfy their aspirations peacefully within the framework of existing states in the area."<sup>60</sup> To drive the point home, Assistant Secretary Richard Murphy privately informed the Iraqis:

the President has instructed me to reaffirm our commitment to a strong relationship with Iraq, based upon support for Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in Iraq's internal affairs. We are not supporting and we will not support any individuals or groups who threaten Iraq's unity and territorial integrity.<sup>61</sup>

Murphy's message confirmed that Reagan viewed Baghdad's problems with the Kurds in the same manner as Saddam—an Iraqi internal affair. But Saddam presumably maintained his suspicions. Irangate was fresh in his mind and, to a conspiratorial man, impossible not to draw ominous conclusions from Talabani's visit.

To the Reagan Administration, on the other hand, Murphy's message showed that America remained firmly committed to Iraq. From Washington's perspective, this was clearly the case. Although the White House condemned Saddam's chemical weapons use at Halajba, it had also shielded, more importantly, Iraq from a potential Security Council resolution. Moreover, Murphy mentioned nothing about Baghdad's campaign against the Kurds—but Administration indifference towards the Kurds was unsurprising. Without economic clout, a popular Kurdish figure with whom American elites could sympathise, like the Dalai Lama, or a large American Kurdish population, the PUK lacked the political capital to have a voice in Washington. In addition, Kurdish insurgents had Marxist leanings and a record of co-operation with both the Iranians and the Soviets. Why change policy when the outcome Washington had long desired was finally in sight? By June 1988, the Iraqis turned the tide of battle, and the Iranians were crumbling.

On 20 July, exactly one month after Murphy's message to Baghdad, Tehran accepted UN Resolution 598, agreeing to a ceasefire. The United States had long pressed the Iranians through sanctions and diplomatic isolation to accept a UN ceasefire, but Tehran had held out, demanding that Iraq be assigned responsibility for starting the war. The Iraqis responded to

the truce announcement by launching one more drive to recapture lost territory, and it was not until 8 August that UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar convinced both sides to implement the ceasefire beginning on 20 August.<sup>62</sup>

A day before the ceasefire took effect, an assessment of the war's implications landed on CIA Director William Webster's desk. It concluded that the war had "considerably weakened Iranian strategic value to the US." After the ceasefire, Iran would no longer threaten Persian Gulf shipping. In addition, the United States would have no need for Iranian oil: Iraqi, Saudi, and Kuwaiti excess capacity could "easily make up for even a total cut-off in Iranian production." Because of the Iranian regime's fundamentalist nature, the report reckoned Tehran would be unwilling to allow increased Soviet influence. Finally, the report warned that improving relations with Iran would damage American ties with the Arab countries, especially Iraq, "as Baghdad—remembering the Iran–Contra Affair—would suspect that the United States was again favoring Iraq's arch enemy."<sup>63</sup> In short, improved relations with Iran would not assist in realising the chief American strategic interests in the Gulf—keeping the Soviets out and secure oil. And the cost would be steep. With the Irangate albatross still hanging from its neck, the Reagan Administration remained sensitive about its image in Iraq and the rest of the Arab world, which limited its leverage in dealing with Saddam.

The Iran–Iraq truce began on 20 August, and five days later, Saddam launched his final Anfal campaign against the Kurds. Washington had anticipated Saddam's operation. An earlier CIA report warned, "Iraq would almost certainly deploy sufficient troops to crush the (Kurdish) rebellion" once the war ended.<sup>64</sup> Another assessment, released just days after the truce began, noted that Iraq would most likely strike back at the Kurds "with a vengeance" using chemical weapons.<sup>65</sup> Actual events confirmed these warnings. On 31 August Richard Schifter, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, notified Shultz that "Iraq has begun to use poison gas against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq."<sup>66</sup> After Morton Abramowitz at the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research affirmed on 2 September that Saddam was using chemical weapons against the Kurds, Murphy suggested that the Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, talk informally with Iraqi Deputy Foreign Minister Nizar Hamdoon to bring home American concerns. Having served as ambassador to the United States from 1984 until earlier in 1988, Hamdoon was something of a Washington insider.<sup>67</sup>

Glaspie met with Hamdoon on 4 September. She emphasised the White House desire for a closer relationship with Iraq and its determination that "better relations with other states like Iran will not be at the expense of Iraq." Baghdad's actions against the Kurds had not yet changed anything. She warned Hamdoon, however, "the conduct of the Kurdish campaign may strain our ability to foster this cooperation to which we both aspire." The

Administration could not support Iraq indefinitely if chemical attacks against the Kurds continued. Hamdoon replied that fighting with the Kurds would be over “in a few days,” but he also said it would be impossible, for now, to allow foreign access to Kurdish areas. Glaspie reported to Washington that Hamdoon had probably exceeded his brief by letting her know that the fighting would be over soon, but she also noted that he “carefully avoided any comment or admission on the chemical warfare question.”<sup>68</sup> Glaspie made her point. The Iraqis would need to finish their operation against the Kurds quickly or change tactics so as not to embarrass the Reagan Administration. The Iraqis, of course, aimed to defeat the Kurds before they could conspire with the Americans and Israelis against Baghdad. Saddam had no fears about embarrassing Washington; he feared the Americans could use the Kurds to topple him or break up his country.

Redman made the Reagan Administration’s first public comment about Anfal on 6 September, the day after columnist William Safire raised genocide charges and transformed the issue by evoking Holocaust comparisons.<sup>69</sup> Redman expressed concerns with the human rights implications of Iraq’s campaign but noted, “the United States has received no information to confirm Kurdish allegations of widespread Iraqi use of chemical weapons against the Kurds.”<sup>70</sup> Other officials had previously confirmed poison gas use, so Redman’s statement may have reflected disagreement within the State Department.<sup>71</sup> If so, he opted for an interpretation more favourable to Saddam. Two days later, he acknowledged Saddam’s assault against the Kurds but tacitly rejected genocide charges: “the US government is convinced Iraq has used chemical weapons against Kurdish *guerillas*.”<sup>72</sup> That same day, Shultz met with Iraqi Minister of State Saddoun Hammadi and, claiming “incontrovertible proof,” bluntly accused Iraq of using poison gas. Denying these accusations, Hammadi tried to steer the conversation toward discussing the deadlocked truce negotiations with the Iranians. Shultz again warned, “CW use is unacceptable.”<sup>73</sup>

The Reagan Administration had heretofore given Saddam a pass. Shultz now accused the Iraqis of lying and drew a firm line. Outcry over Iraq’s campaign against the Kurds had finally compelled the White House to change its tune. Iraqi chemical attacks had made international headlines for over a week. Even right-wing columnists pressed the Administration to act. The Pell *Prevention of Genocide Act*, introduced by senators Clairborne Pell, a Democrat, and Jesse Helms, a leading Republican, passed with unanimous Republican support on 7 September just as Shultz met with Hammadi.<sup>74</sup> This support signified a vote of no confidence in Reagan’s stance. Worse yet, it threatened to wrest control of Iraq policy away from the White House. Shultz’s warning and the Pell Act, however, came too late for the Kurds. By 4 September, the Iraqis nearly completed their operation.

The Iraqis found the developments in America deeply troubling. Washington ended military co-operation with them once the ceasefire began,

giving another possible signal of impending conspiracy.<sup>75</sup> When meeting with American executives from Bechtel Corporation on 10 September, Saddam's closest adviser, Hussein Kamil, blasted the Pell Act as "part of (a) Zionist conspiracy to embarrass and undermine Iraq after its 'victory' over Iran."<sup>76</sup> American officials dismissed Iraqi allegations of Zionist conspiracy and influence as the default Iraqi fall-back position, but captured Iraqi documents demonstrate that Saddam believed in such hokum. Whereas the Reagan Administration now worked feverishly to quash sanctions legislation, Saddam assumed the White House was actually behind the Pell Act. When meeting his advisers on 17 September, he rehashed the litany of American perfidy—betrayals at Al-Fao and during Irangate—and described what the Americans were now doing to destroy him. He thought the Americans had recently tried to assassinate him and interpreted State Department criticism of Iraqi chemical weapons use as evidence that Washington was again backing the Kurds.<sup>77</sup> Washington, however, was oblivious to the depths of Iraqi hostility and Saddam's assumptions of American treachery.

Meanwhile, the Reagan Administration was doing everything it could to convince Baghdad of its goodwill. A few days after the Senate passed the Pell Act, Democratic Congressman Tom Lantos introduced a companion House bill. William Burns, senior director of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs at the NSC, warned Powell, "Iraq will be highly disappointed if the President doesn't veto the bill." With the NSC and State Department attacking the Pell/Lantos legislation for being poorly written and counterproductive, Burns told Powell that the bill was "rapidly becoming a crisis point in US/Iraqi relations."<sup>78</sup> Other State Department officials feared that a tough stance would harm "our position within the Arab world." A chemicals ban would also "deny US firms the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of Iraqi oil and chemical industries."<sup>79</sup>

White House damage control eventually defeated the sanctions legislation but did little to calm Iraqi fears. After extensive White House pressure, Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, the Democratic Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, torpedoed the original Pell Act by arguing that it was a revenue bill raised unconstitutionally in the Senate.<sup>80</sup> Now the Administration turned its attention to Lantos. It sent Deputy Assistant Secretary A. Peter Burleigh to outline White House opposition before a 20 September House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting. Committee members grilled him for what he described as a "bloody" two-and-a-half hours, showing no inclination to consider his suggestions despite warnings that the bill threatened to "unravel US/Iraqi relations and jeopardize potential multi-billion dollar commercial opportunities."<sup>81</sup> Though Burleigh failed to persuade the Committee, the White House soon got its way. Rostenkowski and his allies stripped the final version of the Lantos bill and its companion Senate legislation, attaching them to an omnibus foreign affairs bill that the Senate defeated on 21 October. Pell, the first lawmaker to propose sanctions

against Iraq, was enraged that a few senior members of the House thwarted “the overwhelming majorities” favouring sanctions.<sup>82</sup>

After Reagan left office in January, President George Bush continued his predecessor’s Iraq policy. The State Department prepared a report for his first day in office, “Guidelines for US–Iraq Policy,” which argued that the “lessons of war” could potentially transform Iraq into “a status-quo state working within the system, and promoting stability in the region.” Noting that “oil imports from Iraq have skyrocketed,” the report also concluded the Department of Agriculture found “Iraq one of its best customers for commodities.” Conceding Iraq’s abysmal human rights record, the report recommended that Bush concentrate on discussing Iraq’s population as a whole rather than “one minority.” “In no way,” the report warned, “should we associate ourselves with the 60 year old Kurdish rebellion in Iraq or oppose Iraq’s legitimate attempts to suppress it.”<sup>83</sup> Bush received advice to improve relations. His October 1989 National Security Directive outlined policy in the Persian Gulf that followed these recommendations.<sup>84</sup>

Although both the Bush and Reagan administrations assumed incentives for Iraq could moderate its behaviour, the Iraqis continued to view Washington as its enemy. Iraq’s UN ambassador, Barzun Ibrahim al-Tikriti, told Saddam in September 1989 that the Americans wanted to weaken Iraq to achieve hegemony in the Middle East. He also warned about American invasion “from the inside out”—implying American ties to the Kurds—and spoke of a potential plot to kill the Iraqi dictator. A month later, Aziz told the new secretary of state, James Baker, that Iraq had evidence that Americans were seeking to overthrow Saddam.<sup>85</sup> Washington did not intend confrontation with Iraq, but hostility and conspiracy were exactly what Saddam expected.

Like its predecessor, the Bush Administration opposed sanctions on Iraq, yet Congress wanted to punish Baghdad for its past chemical weapons use and more recent threats to attack Israel with poison gas.<sup>86</sup> On 26 April 1990, the White House sent the assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asia Affairs, John H. Kelly, to appear before a House Foreign Affairs Committee discussing new sanctions legislation. Kelly, the first Bush Administration official to have met with Saddam, warned Congress that punishing Iraq meant “the American farmer and the American exporter” would be punished. He spoke positively of Iraqi participation in chemical weapons conferences and assured committee members that Iraq had not used poison gas since August 1988.<sup>87</sup> Unconvinced, Congress defied the White House and imposed sanctions on 27 July 1990 that cut \$700 million in loan guarantees to Iraq.<sup>88</sup> Six days later, Saddam’s forces invaded Kuwait.

The Persian Gulf War reversed Bush and Reagan’s tilt towards Iraq. Bush’s policy had followed the parameters emplaced at the end of Reagan’s presidency, and both leaders supported Baghdad as a means to secure American hegemony in the Middle East. With the “Twin Pillars” policy in ruins and Washington’s Gulf State allies too weak to repel serious internal



or external threats, the Reagan Administration assessed the course of the Iran–Iraq War with concern. In 1982, when Iran stood poised to defeat Iraq and foment instability across the region, Reagan decided that supporting Baghdad was the best option. Though the White House deemed Iraqi chemical weapons use abhorrent, the implications of an Iranian victory or expanded Soviet influence in the Middle East were far more alarming. As the Soviet and Iranian threats receded in the late 1980s, Washington deluded itself into thinking that American economic and political might could moderate Saddam’s behaviour. Of course, Washington also understood that American firms and government agencies anticipated handsome profits from trade and reconstruction deals once the war ended. Underlying everything was America’s petroleum addiction. Throughout the 1980s and beyond, American dependence on Middle Eastern oil translated into a strategic imperative to dominate the region. Collaborating with an unsavoury regime that committed war crimes with impunity was one hidden price paid at the petrol pump. But for all its labours, Washington never exercised the leverage over Iraq that Reagan Administration officials and later chroniclers imagined.

Whilst any counterfactual is speculative, it is unlikely given the evidence from Iraqi archives that firmer American opposition to Iraqi chemical weapons use would have deterred Saddam. American aspirations notwithstanding, Saddam’s partnership with the Americans was never more than tactical. He loathed the United States and imagined Washington secretly conspiring against him. Irangate confirmed such fears. Saddam saw his Kurdish opponents as Iranian and Israeli pawns, construing American concern for the Kurds as further evidence of Washington’s complicity in the plot. On the battlefield, Saddam faced potentially decisive setbacks until 1988 and feared that his nation could split into three if he were unable to use everything in his arsenal to hang on. In addition, Russian and French arms and Soviet intelligence were more important than anything the Americans offered.<sup>89</sup> Above all, Saddam wanted to survive. In repelling Tehran’s offensives, pushing the Iranians out of Al-Fao, and defeating the Kurdish insurgency, Saddam did what he thought necessary to maintain power. The Persian Gulf War of 1991 demonstrated that only the implied threat of nuclear retaliation was enough to deter Iraqi chemical weapons use.

Irangate proved decisive for American–Iraqi relations—with widely different American and Iraqi perceptions of the episode and its consequences. For Saddam, events like Irangate made it even more necessary to move quickly to crush the Kurdish insurgency before the Americans could use his internal enemies against him. On the American side, Irangate pushed Washington toward unequivocal and misguided support for Iraq. In the Reagan years, some officials opposed the tilt toward Baghdad but, after Irangate, pro-Iraqi voices predominated. Saddam, on the other hand, interpreted efforts to shore up Iraq as a stratagem designed to bolster American dominance over the region. Each side’s distortions persisted after the

Iran–Iraq War. Where the State Department and White House believed their Iraq policy paid dividends—American exports to Iraq and Iraqi oil production increased sharply—Saddam expected an inevitable violent confrontation with the nation he once referred to as the “arch-Satan.”<sup>90</sup>

Finally, this episode offers lessons about diplomatic perceptions and the limits of American power. In diplomacy, there is a perception that both parties in a negotiation share some sort of common understanding of the problem they are addressing. Reagan and Saddam both recognised in the early 1980s that the Iraqis were close to defeat and that the Iranians sought to spread Islamic revolution throughout the Middle East. Here their understandings aligned. But in estimating each other’s intentions and the steps needed during and after the war to meet their regional aims, Washington and Baghdad worked at cross purposes. In its desire to mould Iraq into a useful ally that might eventually become a second pillar in the region, the White House did penance for Irangate by unequivocally supporting the Iraqis in the war and quashing sanctions legislation at home. Saddam interpreted this support as a trick, certain that America’s hegemonic aims represented the greatest long-term threat to his own ambitions.

Saddam’s decision to use chemical weapons was his alone. As the world’s leading Power, the United States wielded considerable influence, but to insist that it could have deterred Iraqi chemical weapons use overstates American clout. American support for Iraq during the 1980s was morally questionable, especially after Halajba and the final Anfal campaign. Downgrading relations after either event may not have saved lives, but it would have given expression to the outrage felt by the American people and it would have aligned White House views with those of the public. But blaming the United States for the tragedies endured by Iraqi Kurds oversimplifies what happened and smacks of the backhanded chauvinism that John Lewis Gaddis described in the early 1980s—the belief that “violence and terror have no independent existence in the world, and that they appear only as the result of action (or inaction) by the United States.”<sup>91</sup>

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## NOTES

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79. Hare and Holmes action memorandum “US Policy Toward Iraqi CW Use” to Shultz, 13 September 1988, NSA. Interestingly, Bechtel representatives told Iraqi officials that they would evade sanctions and continue doing business in Iraq regardless of what happened in Congress. See United States Embassy Baghdad to Secretary of State, “Minister of Industry Blasts Senate Action,” 13 September 1988, *Ibid.* For the basic outlines of what happened in 2003, see P. Chatterjee, *Iraq Inc.: A Profitable Occupation* (New York, 2004), pp. 61–83, 87, 92–97.

80. Power, *Problem From Hell*, p. 227, 551n130. Power explains that Rostenkowski argued that because oil imported from Iraq was subject to an import levy, loss of this import would reduce Treasury revenue, thus making the sanctions bill a revenue bill. Though Power disagrees with Rostenkowski's logic, she notes that he still "killed" the bill.

81. Burns memorandum to Negroponte, 20 September 1999 and Burns memorandum to Negroponte, 23 September 1999, both RRL Folder "Iraq 1987–1988" Box 4, 2/2, Burns Files.

82. D.B. Ottaway, "Israel Uneasy over Word of Syria–Soviet Arms Deal; Long-Range Bomber Reportedly Involved," *Washington Post* (25 October 1988), p. A24.

83. "Guidelines for US–Iraq Policy, 20 January 1989, NSA.

84. National Security Directive 26: US Policy Toward the Persian Gulf, 2 October 1989, NSA.

85. Brands and Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards," p. 648.

86. C. Krauss, "Bush Aide Opposes Sanctions on Iraq," *New York Times*, (16 June 1990).

87. "Testimony of Assistant Secretary John H. Kelly Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Sub-Committee on Europe and the Near East," 26 April 1990, NSA.

88. S.A. Holmes, "Congress Backs Curb Against Iraq," *New York Times* (28 July 1990), p. A5.

89. Operation Staunch never fully stopped the flow of arms from American allies to Iran, and the Chinese and North Koreans helped make up the difference by increasing aid to Tehran. The Americans sold Saddam trucks and helicopters that could be retrofitted for military use, but in dollar terms, Iraq purchased 87 times more arms from the Soviets and 22 times more from the French. The French provided Saddam with extensive intelligence assistance, and the Soviets had by far the largest intelligence presence in Iraq. They also assisted Iraq develop its SIGINT capability. See Brands and Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards," pp. 636–38.

90. "Text of President Husayn's (sic) 10 Nov Press Conference," 12 November 1980, Foreign Broadcast Information Service–Middle East and Africa, pp. 80–220.

91. J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York, 1982), p. 297.