
AN INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK C. SMITH

Seven years after the end of the Gulf War and the trumpeting of the now-belittled notion of a "New World Order," the United States and its Western and regional allies are confronted by prickly security situations in an area stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Balkan Peninsula. Critics of U.S. foreign policy argue that there has been little rethinking of the U.S. approach to the thorniest issues: the feasibility of implementing the 1995 Dayton Agreement, the continued use of sanctions against Iraq, the unchanging unilateral isolation of Iran and the uncertain status of the Kurds in northern Iraq.

Additional questions have been raised over decisions concerning U.S. action or inaction – the usefulness of assaults on long-tenured U.S. adversaries such as Saddam Hussein or the almost inevitable "mission creep" in the use of military troops in places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina. The following interview with a key member of the Department of Defense policymaking team explores some of these issues.

Frederick C. Smith has worked at the Pentagon for more than 19 years serving in various U.S. foreign policy positions. As Director for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs from 1988-1994, he helped formulate U.S. policy during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Prior to that, he served as Director for Policy Analysis from 1982-1988. Smith is a graduate of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a founder of The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs. In May 1994 he was appointed Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs.

Second Thoughts on Saddam and the Gulf War?

There has been some second guessing about the Gulf War. Do you think that the war was successfully concluded?

Yes. The decision President Bush made at the time was the correct decision. The objective of the Gulf War was clear: to liberate Kuwait, and this was accomplished. Even during the last day or two of the war, in late February 1991, we were already being criticized from some quarters about continuing to prosecute the war because it was becoming such a turkey shoot. To have tried to

This interview was conducted October 9, 1997, by Ward Pincus of The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs.

extend the mandate and to change the objectives would have been extremely costly.

Is there anything that could have been done in the prosecution of the war that would have eased the uncertainty that exists today concerning Saddam Hussein's continued leadership of Iraq?

As far as the actual prosecution of the war, no. It was a massive undertaking done with minimum casualties. What you are suggesting, I think, is whether we should have gone after Saddam. We might have, it's conceivable, taken some action that would have tried to target Saddam individually. That would have been extremely difficult, but if we had, and then somebody else replaced him, we might have found out months or a couple of years later that this person wasn't any different than Saddam himself. It's all problematic now as to what would have happened. I think the Gulf War was successful. I don't think we should apologize. We ought to take credit for what we did.

In the manner the United States implemented its military strategy, was there a message it was sending to political leaders in the region other than that it wanted a return to stability and the status quo?

The overall message, not just to the region but to the entire world, was that aggression would not pay. If Iraq could invade a country like Kuwait and get away with it, countries everywhere, not just in the Gulf region, would believe that they could invade with impunity. The overall message was clear: countries have to abide by international norms and standards and respect the territorial integrity of others.

The Gulf's Worst Nightmare?

What is the current U.S. assessment of Iran's development of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction?

It is one of our major concerns. There are a number of intelligence reports about Iran's indigenous capability as well as how much external assistance they will require to develop that capability. We have had talks, most recently with Russia, for example, about the possible export of materials that would assist Iran in its development of weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps more troubling than its nuclear weapons are the chemical and biological weapons, as well as the missile systems that would deliver them. If you talk with the regional states in the Gulf, they are more concerned with Iran today than with Iraq.

For example, the United Arab Emirates has a feud with Iran over several islands. Bahrain is particularly concerned about Iranian involvement in its internal affairs with its Shi'i population. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman are all concerned. Iran is still a strategic prize in the Gulf region given its size and resources, and it's especially dangerous given its current regime and policies.

What are the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council asking from the United States in response to the threat they perceive from Iran?

They support our presence in the region. Just having U.S. Navy ships in the Gulf is comforting to these countries. More specifically, they are starting to look at theater missile defense systems to counter some missile threats. They also are interested in talking with us about programs to combat chemical and biological weapons. But on a day to day basis, our military presence is something they are interested in and have asked us for.

What is the nature of the pressure that policymakers are feeling from U.S. business and oil interests to change the dual containment strategy that limits business activity vis-a-vis Iran and the Caspian Sea region?

Because of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, probably more pressure is coming from other countries, European countries, that don't support this legislation. They are upset because the law mandates that if any company from any country engages in more than \$40 million in investment in Iran's oil or gas industry, the law calls for sanctions against that company.

It's all about Oil

In Daniel Yergin's The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power, he describes the importance of oil supplies during World War II and makes the argument, put simply, that U.S. supply was key to the Allied victory. How important a role does the supply of oil and strategic access to oil play in military policymaking today?

Access to Persian Gulf oil is a vital interest to the United States. To call it "vital" means that the United States will fight to defend it. Defending this interest was one of the primary reasons we took the strong action we did against Iraq in 1990 and early 1991. The oil supply and energy are still as much a vital interest today as in World War II. The supply line, the "tooth-to-tail" ratio, is essential. The teeth are your combat forces, but for every combat force you have in the front line, you have three or four keeping them logistically supplied. An army can't fight without the logistic lines. Some countries would completely overextend themselves if they got very far outside of their own boundaries—Even Iraq. Iraq was able to invade Kuwait because Kuwait was defenseless. After the invasion, it moved a lot of its logistical forces into Kuwait. But would they have been able to go through the Gulf? Having an ability to extend your forces is something that very few countries can do, strictly due to logistics. Supplying your forces is a huge problem and it's something we do pretty well.

An Uncertain Future for the Kurds

The current situation in northern Iraq doesn't seem to be a long-term tenable situation. And in the short term, it generates destabilizing activities such as the regular incursions into Iraq by Turkish troops attacking Kurdish Workers' Party bases. What is the solution for northern Iraq?

Our policy is to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq. We are not in favor of a new Kurdish state there. The Kurds in Iraq need to be integrated with the

Iraqi government, if that government would take into account their interests. Right now, that's a pie in the sky hope or solution. Many countries have different ethnic groups. A country like India has many ethnic and religious groups, and it is a democratic system that is able to be governed. So Iraq, ideally, has to make some sort of accommodation for these people. That's a long way off obviously because they don't have a democracy.

In the short term, have policymakers determined that whatever bad is coming out of the current situation in the region will have to be put up with? Are you waiting for something to change in Baghdad?

The United States has talks in Ankara with the different factions of the Kurds, and we try to work with them. Within the Kurdish population there is a lot of animosity and tension and groups fighting each other. Certain Kurdish groups are creating problems for countries like Turkey. Turkey is taking the actions it deems necessary to protect its people. We are not trying to tell Ankara how to handle the situation.

Is Washington pursuing a wait-and-see policy until something changes in Baghdad, such that the United States is prepared to put up with whatever instability derives from this situation?

It's not a wait-and-see situation, because as I said, we are meeting with the Kurdish groups and are trying to initiate and sustain talks between the Kurdish groups so that they do not fight among themselves. We certainly don't condone terrorist activities by the different factions. People from the State Department are spending a lot of time in that area dealing with this crisis. It is not a wait-for-change-in-Baghdad policy. It's a more active involvement with the Kurds. This issue of the Kurds has been going on for centuries, and I don't see any easy near-term solutions.

Of course, another issue that is of significant concern for the United States is the situation in the former Yugoslavia. What are the issues involved as NATO decides what action to take vis-a-vis people like Radovan Karadzic?

The NATO troops and other forces sent in—first the IFOR, implementation force, currently the SFOR, the stabilization force, and now they are talking about a DFOR, the deterrent force, as possibly the next steps—were given very specific missions to stop the violence, to separate the warring factions, to create zones of peace, and they've accomplished that. They have been successful from a military standpoint. To extend that mission and get them into policing functions or to try to find war criminals, that's a different mission, which was not part of their initial charter. Because NATO and IFOR and SFOR have been successful in what they have been sent in to do, doesn't mean they are best equipped or suited to do some of these other things that people are now looking at them to do. We can't just turn to the military time and time again because other groups' capabilities are not able to stand up to some of these responsibilities.

Which groups are those?

They are trying to form an international police force and strengthen the current police forces throughout Bosnia, to keep some law and order. The United States and the European countries know that we don't use our military forces to maintain internal law enforcement and that military troops are not trained to do that.

What were the issues that did allow these troops to implement operations such as overseeing the transfer of control of radio and police stations to forces loyal to Biljana Plavsic?

I would hate to comment. It really is getting into the daily operations of what some of these troops are doing. They *are* being extended into some other areas which they weren't initially intended for. I don't think these forces are turning their backs on some of this, but it's mission creep, which is dangerous and should be avoided. It's mission creep, really.

Keep'em Guessing

Given the U.S. military's successful operations during the Gulf War and the current deployment of U.S. troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina, are there myths about the U.S. military or U.S. government that are manipulated or utilized by policymakers as they devise policy or the deployment of U.S. troops?

I would say no. Most of the myths and misperceptions about the U.S. military and U.S. government and our capabilities are just that, myths. I wish the United States could control events and have as much capability, intelligence capability, as people think we have. People simply think we know everything and that we have perfect knowledge of every situation.

However, if we are talking about "uncertainties" rather than myths, then I might say yes, when a country doesn't know how we will react. One example is the March 1996 heightening of tensions between the United States and China over China's military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait. In that situation, China didn't know exactly what we would do. That's OK. If you look at it in terms of uncertainty, where we don't have a specific declaratory policy on something and somebody doesn't know how we will respond, that's OK.

Are there any myths that you must deal with when U.S. troops or officers are involved in operations or training exercises with non-NATO countries who haven't worked previously with the United States very well? Do you find as you implement these operations that you are confronted with their perceptions and mythologies? For example, do they come away with the impression that "Americans can walk on water?"

They are favorably impressed. As these countries, former Warsaw pact countries, work with us they are amazed at the planning we do, how we equip ourselves and the different procedures we follow. They are impressed by how we treat our people, with respect and dignity. A lot of their enlisted people were treated as pawns, if you will. As they are exposed to the American way

of managing the military, they are favorably impressed. So I don't think they come away thinking that we walk on water, but they are impressed.

However, it is different when you get into the area of technology. We take visitors to our space command where we can detect things happening all over the world. We show them the facility so they know that if they were ever to try to exercise their missile capability, for example, that we would know. Showing them certain capabilities and discussing it with them has a good effect.

