

“He Knows Perfectly Well What He Authorized”

Interviewee: Robert M. Gates

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As deputy national security advisor to President George H. W. Bush during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, Robert M. Gates participated in high-level planning for Operation Desert Storm. Gates discusses the military’s approach to offensive strategy in the wake of the Vietnam War and President Bush’s response for the Gulf War.

Robert M. Gates: I will tell you one story, I don’t know if anybody else has told, and that is the story about the meeting where the President [George H. W. Bush], the famous October 30th meeting, when the President is briefed on the offensive strategy and what it would take, because I’ll never forget it.

The President had been pushing very hard for an offensive strategy and the truth, to throw Saddam [Hussein] out of Kuwait. And the truth of the matter is that the military, the chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] were very content with the deployment of 200,000 to 215,000 troops to Saudi Arabia that essentially protected Saudi Arabia, and they had no enthusiasm for an offensive effort to throw Saddam out. And the President kept pushing and pushing and pushing and finally the military agreed to put together a plan and come over and see us. This was during— and they came over with their briefing. And [Norman] Schwarzkopf’s deputy gave the briefing. Colin [Powell] was there, it was the Gang of Eight [war council] plus the briefer who was Schwarzkopf’s deputy.

In a shortened version, what happened was— My experience with the military over the years has been that they are so accustomed, after Vietnam, to civilians wanting to use military force that any time a President demands a contingency plan to consider, the military puts together a force that is so overwhelming that the President will balk at the cost and at the disruption and everything else and not do it. This is exactly what happened when President Reagan, for example, was considering an invasion of Libya in 1985 and the military came forward with a proposal that looked like D-Day, for the Libyans for God’s sake. We’re talking about three carrier battle groups, divisions and so on and so forth, and that’s essentially what I think the military strategy was in this meeting with Bush, to put together a package that was so daunting he would say, “Well, let’s stand pat.”

So the briefer starts out, “First we’ll need the Seventh Corps out of Germany.” Okay, you’re going to take the heart of NATO’s [North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s] defense, that had been in Germany since 1945, where everything is painted dark green and you’re going to

move it from Germany to Saudi Arabia, the two heaviest divisions in the American Army. Okay. “Then we’ll need six carrier battle groups.” We had never put six carrier battle groups in the same theater of action since there were aircraft carriers, and we’re looking, that’s sort of a hundred ships or something like that by the time you count all of the other stuff.

Remember, this is a week before the mid-year elections. And then the poison pill. If that hadn’t gotten him, this one would. “Oh, and you’ll have to activate both the National Guard and the [Army] Reserves.” In other words, you’re going to reach into every community in America and take people away from their homes and their jobs. To the day I die I’ll never forget, Bush pushed his chair back, stood up, looked at [Richard B.] Cheney and said, “You’ve got it, let me know if you need more,” and walked out of the room.

Cheney’s jaw dropped. Powell’s jaw dropped. Cheney looks at [Brent] Scowcroft and says, “Does he know what he just authorized?” And Brent smiled and he said, “He knows perfectly well what he authorized.”

End of excerpt.

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