Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 is often regarded as the quintessential classic oil war: the country launched a major conflict aimed at grabbing its neighbor’s petroleum resources in the absence of an ongoing war. Even oil war skeptics regularly identify this case as an exception to their argument that states avoid fighting for petroleum resources. Some classic oil war interpretations of the conflict emphasize Iraq’s purported oil greed, asserting that Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait because he believed that aggression would be profitable. By seizing his neighbor’s resources, Iraq would reap enormous wealth and become the world’s dominant petroleum producer. As evidence of the state’s oil ambitions, these “greedy” narratives also emphasize Baghdad’s complaint, before the invasion, that Kuwait was slant drilling into the transboundary Rumaila oil field to “steal” Iraqi resources. As the Duelfer Report, on Iraq’s pre-2003 weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, claimed, “The impulsive decision to invade in August 1990 was precipitated by . . . negotiations over disputed oil drilling along the common border.”

Other classic oil war interpretations argue that Saddam was acting out of oil need, not oil greed. In the months before the attack, they observe, Iraq faced an oil-related economic crisis. The state had emerged from its war with Iran with expansive debts and needed abundant petroleum revenue to repay them. Yet oil prices were declining, largely as a result of other Persian Gulf producers—particularly Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—exceeding their OPEC output quotas. Iraqi leaders feared that, if the price of oil did not rise, they would no longer be able to finance domestic social spending, which would threaten
their regime’s security. Eventually, Saddam concluded that seizing Kuwait’s oil fields offered the only possible means of alleviating his state’s economic and political crisis.

Yet even this “needy” oil war interpretation is an oversimplification. Iraq’s economic crisis, alone, did not drive its international aggression. Instead, the economic threat was magnified by Saddam’s conviction that the United States was driving Kuwait’s and the UAE’s actions. He reached this conclusion because, like Japanese authorities before World War II, he believed that the US government was determined to resist his country’s regional rise. If manipulating international petroleum output and prices failed to quash Iraq and overturn its Ba’athist regime, the United States would resort to other, more aggressive tactics, most likely with the assistance of its regional ally, Israel. It was this belief, that Iraq faced a broader existential threat, that precipitated Saddam’s attack. This conviction also enabled Saddam to assert, after the conflict, that he had won the war. Although Iraq had obtained no petroleum payoffs—and was actually worse off economically than before the conflict, as a result of international sanctions—the state had confronted the world’s sole superpower in the “mother of all battles” and survived.

Even with this broader incentive for aggression, however, Saddam approached his oil gambit circumspectly. Like the perpetrators of oil spats, the Iraqis launched their attack in a dispute scenario. From Baghdad’s perspective, Iraq and Kuwait were engaged in a long-standing territorial contest, which involved, at a minimum, the islands of Warba and Bubiyan, at the eastern terminus of the states’ land boundary, and, at a maximum, the entirety of Kuwait. Because of this ongoing territorial disagreement, Iraq’s aggression had a patina of legitimacy for some international observers. The dispute also meant that, if Iraq acquired Kuwait, it would gain more than oil resources. The state would also enhance its economic and military security by improving its sea access and strengthen the regime’s domestic standing by defeating a longtime opponent.

In addition, like the aggressors in oil campaigns, Iraq did not rush to seize foreign petroleum resources. Instead, Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait was an “act of last resort.” Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the Iraqi leader did not attack because he believed that he had received a “green light” from US ambassador April Glaspie. Instead, Saddam recognized that the United States would retaliate for his aggression, economically and militarily. To forestall that response, Iraqi authorities initially attempted to manage their crisis in other ways. They initiated domestic economic reforms. They repeatedly approached other Gulf oil producers, asking them to rein in their petroleum output and cancel Iraq’s war debts. They also sought reassurance from American officials that the United States did not harbor hostile intentions toward Baghdad. Saddam refrained from launching his invasion until all of these alternative, peaceful initiatives had failed.
Iraq’s oil gambit was therefore initiated instrumentally, selectively, and reluctantly. These characteristics suggest that, if the Iraqi invasion offers the strongest historical evidence of classic oil wars, believers are on shaky ground. Decision makers’ willingness to fight for oil, even in this most likely case, was highly circumscribed. Hence, if we choose to call oil gambits classic oil wars, we must recognize that these conflicts look quite different from the greedy petroleum grabs that we usually imagine. Fighting for oil is not an appealing prospect, even for the world’s most ruthless leaders. Nor is it an appealing prospect for unrivalled superpowers; as I will argue in a postscript to this chapter, the United States’ subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not a classic oil war.

**Fighting for Survival**

Unlike oil campaigns, Iraq’s oil gambit did not occur in the midst of an ongoing war; the state’s conflict with Iran had ended almost two years earlier. Nonetheless, the Iran–Iraq War set the stage for Saddam’s attack; indeed, it is difficult to imagine Iraq invading Kuwait without it. To sustain the earlier conflict, Iraq had borrowed extensively from Arab and Western creditors. By the time Tehran agreed to a ceasefire in August 1988, Baghdad owed over $80 billion. Servicing these war debts constituted a major financial burden for the Iraqi government, consuming at least $5 billion annually. Meanwhile, the country’s annual gross domestic product (GDP) was only $25 billion. In addition, Iraq needed to finance domestic reconstruction, which was expected to cost $230 billion, and maintain social spending for a population that was exhausted by war and eager for a return to normalcy. Saddam himself heightened Iraqis’ peacetime expectations by trumpeting the state’s supposed “victory” in the Iran–Iraq War. The regime therefore faced a mounting domestic crisis. Officials feared that if they failed to improve economic conditions, Iraqis’ already degraded standard of living would continue to fall, intensifying hostility toward the government and eventually leading to a domestic uprising.

To a large extent, Iraq’s trajectory is therefore consistent with Germany’s and Japan’s before World War II. All three states engaged in initial acts of aggression, which heightened their petroleum needs, provoking economic and political crises. Eventually, each state concluded that further foreign conquest offered the only means of fulfilling its expanded oil requirements. One difference between these cases, however, was the character of aggressors’ petroleum needs. Japan and Germany were oil consumers, so their initial attacks increased national demand for oil resources; the states required more petroleum to sustain their ongoing wars in China and Europe. Iraq, in contrast, was an oil producer, deriving 60 percent of
its GDP and 95 percent of its foreign currency earnings from petroleum sales. Consequently, Iraq’s initial act of aggression—its war with Iran—increased Baghdad’s need for oil revenue. After the conflict, the Iraqi government required high oil prices to service its debts and cover domestic expenses.

To officials’ great consternation, however, international oil prices were falling. From January to July 1990, they dropped from $20.50 per barrel to $13 per barrel. Iraq’s budget was based on an $18 per barrel price, so the collapse constituted a major financial burden. The principal cause of the price drop was Kuwait and the UAE exceeding their OPEC production quotas. The two countries had increased their oil output during the Iran–Iraq War to compensate for the belligerents’ lowered production. When the conflict ended, Kuwait and the UAE resisted reducing their output to accommodate the Iranian and Iraqi oil supplies that were returning to the market. In 1989, Kuwait’s output exceeded its OPEC quota by approximately seven hundred thousand barrels per day. Because of this overproduction, Iraq could not pump its way out of its economic crisis; any increase in oil output would trigger a further drop in oil prices.

Instead, the Iraqi government attempted to improve its economic situation through domestic reforms. These were initiated in the early years of the Iran–Iraq War and expanded after the ceasefire. They included a massive privatization initiative, which transferred most land and agricultural production from state to private hands. The government also sold many state-owned industries and opened the economy to increased foreign investment, with the aim of expanding nonpetroleum exports. Economic productivity initially rose, as a result of major cuts in the workforce. However, only a small proportion of the population benefited from the reforms. Income inequality, which was previously minimal in Iraq, increased dramatically, along with unemployment. The removal of price controls on many goods, including foodstuffs, triggered inflation. In addition, cutbacks on state support for imports precipitated shortages of basic goods. Meanwhile, international creditors, concerned about the government’s lack of financial transparency and ability to service its debts, began to cut back on their lending. By the late 1980s, Iraq was worse off economically than it had been before the reforms. Domestic discontent intensified and threatened a collapse in civil order.

The Iraqi government could have improved its financial position by reining in military spending. After the ceasefire, Baghdad demobilized only a small portion of its armed forces and continued to invest heavily in weapons research and development, so military expenditures remained high. However, in the Iraqis’ view, domestic and international security concerns precluded larger cuts. Broader demobilization would intensify domestic instability, as Iraq’s tattered economy could absorb no further increases in the workforce and discontented ex-soldiers would pose a serious threat to the regime. Internationally, the Iraqi government
continued to view Iran as a significant security threat. The Islamic Republic’s capabilities had been degraded by the war but not eliminated, and Iran possessed an inescapable demographic advantage over Iraq. The Iranian government also refused to implement the states’ August 1988 ceasefire or negotiate a permanent peace treaty. Consequently, Iraq was determined to maintain a military advantage over its former adversary to discourage future aggression. In addition, Iraqi officials believed that they needed to deter attacks from their other long-standing regional adversary: Israel.

Baghdad therefore faced a major economic crisis related to oil revenue, which threatened to escalate into a political emergency. However, these dire conditions, alone, failed to provoke international aggression. Instead, it was Saddam’s belief that the United States was driving the crisis that elevated these conditions to a perceived existential threat. In the two years between the end of the Iran–Iraq War and his invasion of Kuwait, Saddam became convinced that the United States was irremediably hostile to his regime. He assumed that the US government was driving Kuwait’s and the UAE’s overproduction, interpreting it as the Americans’ latest tactic in a long-standing plan to resist Iraq’s regional rise and remove him from power. If manipulation of Iraq’s oil revenue failed to unseat him, Saddam believed, the United States would eventually turn to assassination attempts, air-strikes, missile strikes, or an occupation to overturn his regime and undermine the country. As Saddam put it later, “They wanted to force our status backwards . . . to crush us spiritually and force us to abandon our role.”

Saddam’s perception of the United States’ implacable hostility was grounded in historical experience. In public and private statements, the Iraqi leader repeatedly referred to the United States as an “imperialist” power that aimed to maintain a hegemonic role in the Middle East. He believed that American aspirations in this pursuit were twofold; their core interest was the region’s oil and their secondary goal was to support their ally, Israel. To advance this “imperialist–Zionist” agenda, Iraqis surmised, the United States would oppose any local state that threatened its access to oil resources or challenged Israel. Accordingly, Iraqi leaders assumed that US officials had been hostile to the Ba’ath regime since it took power in 1963 because of the party’s anti-imperialist stance. This antagonism had intensified, they believed, when Iraq fully nationalized its oil industry in 1972. In doing so, the state removed control of petroleum resources from Western hands and obtained expansive oil revenue to fuel its economic and military development, thereby increasing its regional power.

Saddam also assumed that Iraq was the object of American ire because it was the “natural” leader of the Persian Gulf region. He based this grandiose assessment on the state’s six-thousand-year cultural legacy, often comparing himself to historical leaders, such as Saladin. In addition, after Egypt signed the Camp
David Accords in 1978, Saddam, like many other Arab leaders, believed that the state had forfeited its right to further regional leadership. Saddam asserted that Iraq, which had persistently championed the Palestinian cause, was Egypt’s natural successor. Yet he also assumed that, by taking on the mantle of Arab leadership, Iraq would incur intensified “imperialist–Zionist” opposition.\textsuperscript{30}

The first significant evidence of American hostility, Saddam believed, was the United States’ support for the Kurdish rebellion against Baghdad from 1972 to 1975. The Nixon administration provided the Kurds with arms and financial assistance and facilitated equipment transfers from the Israeli government to Kurdish forces so they could sustain their military campaign. As discussed in chapter 5, Kurdish pressure eventually compelled Saddam to accept the Algiers Agreement with Iran. The Iraqi leader held Washington partly responsible for this “humiliating” outcome, as he was well aware of the United States’ involvement in the conflict. In 1975, Saddam complained to an American delegation that “US strategy in the region was a pincer movement involving Israel and Iran directed at destroying the Iraqi revolution.”\textsuperscript{31} He interpreted the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force’s positioning in the Persian Gulf in 1980, as well as Israel’s attack on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, as further evidence of the “imperialist–Zionist” conspiracy against him.\textsuperscript{32}

The episode that solidified Saddam’s perceptions of the United States’ unremitting hostility, however, was the Iran–Contra scandal. In the early stages of the Iran–Iraq War, the United States remained formally neutral and refused to sell weapons to Saddam’s regime. However, it provided significant material support to Iraq, allowing it to purchase dual-use technologies, including trucks and helicopters. It also supplied Baghdad with signals intelligence and targeting data. Nonetheless, in a televised speech in November 1986, President Ronald Reagan revealed that the United States had been selling arms to Iran, first through the Israelis and then directly. Saddam was incensed by the apparent betrayal. “Iran-gate,” as he referred to it, was a “stab in the back,” which appeared to substantiate his belief that the United States was unreliable, perfidious, and determined to resist any increase in Iraq’s regional authority. This conviction would color Saddam’s subsequent interactions with his perceived adversary, encouraging him to interpret all apparent opposition in the worst possible light.\textsuperscript{33} In his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie one week before the invasion of Kuwait, the Iraqi leader observed that “new events remind us that old mistakes were not just a matter of coincidence.”\textsuperscript{34}

After the ceasefire with Iran, Saddam anticipated that the United States’ antagonism toward his regime would intensify. Although Iraq had been economically harmed by the war, it emerged from the conflict as the region’s strongest military power. As a result, Saddam surmised, Iraq posed the greatest threat to
the “imperialist–Zionist” agenda and would therefore be subject to more aggressive American containment efforts.\textsuperscript{35} In addition, Saddam recognized that, following the collapse of the USSR, the United States would have a freer hand in the Gulf, as it would no longer be constrained by the threat of Soviet retaliation. As sole superpower, Washington could pursue its agenda against Iraq more vigorously.\textsuperscript{36}

Iraqi–American interactions from 1988 to 1990 appeared to confirm Saddam’s suspicions. After the Iran–Iraq War ended, the United States did not remove its military forces from the region. Instead, ships that had been deployed to the Gulf to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers remained in place. Saddam interpreted the open-ended presence as evidence of the United States’ continued interest in maintaining its regional hegemony.\textsuperscript{37} Around the same time, in autumn 1988, both branches of Congress passed bills condemning Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against the Kurds and proposing economic sanctions.\textsuperscript{38}

A year later, a scandal concerning the Italian Banca Nazionale Lavoro (BNL) threatened Iraq’s access to US agricultural exports. Since 1983, the Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) program had been providing loan guarantees to banks that lent Iraq money to buy US agricultural products. By 1987, Baghdad was one of the program’s largest customers. However, upon discovering that the BNL had diverted agricultural credits to facilitate Iraqi military purchases, multiple US government agencies pushed the White House to terminate the funds. Iraqi authorities perceived this initiative as a major security threat, as the state depended on US agricultural exports to feed its increasingly restive population. On October 6, 1989, in his first meeting with Secretary of State James Baker, Iraqi foreign minister Tariq ʿAziz protested the potential cutbacks, observing that they would endanger Iraq’s ability to “feed its people” and attract further international lending.\textsuperscript{39} Baker reported that ʿAziz also accused the United States of “interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs and . . . conducting clandestine efforts to subvert their government.”\textsuperscript{40}

To reassure Baghdad, the White House and State Department obtained approval for $1 billion in CCC credits for Iraq in 1990. However, only half of that amount was immediately released; the second tranche was held in suspension, nurturing Iraqi suspicions of US intentions.\textsuperscript{41} Baghdad’s paranoia intensified in February 1990, when a Voice of America broadcast compared Saddam’s regime to recently fallen dictatorships in Eastern Europe; the Iraqi leader interpreted the message as a direct threat. A week later, the State Department issued another report condemning Iraq’s human rights record, and at the end of the month, after Iraqi missile launchers were discovered near the Jordanian border, Congress threatened to terminate all CCC lending. In March, US officials criticized Iraq for executing Farzad Bazoft, an Iranian-born journalist employed by the London Observer, whom the Iraqis accused of spying.\textsuperscript{42}
Iraqi authorities believed that the United States was targeting their military capabilities, in particular, in order to sustain Israel’s regional military superiority. In March, British scientist Gerald Bull, who was assisting Iraq in weapons development, was assassinated. The Iraqis blamed Mossad, Israel’s national intelligence agency, which they assumed was acting with US assistance. Soon after, several European customs operations intercepted weapons materials, including possible nuclear triggers, bound for Iraq.43 By spring, the regime had become convinced that another Israeli assault on its weapons or industrial facilities was imminent.44 In early March, multiple senior Iraqi officials told the former assistant secretary of state Richard Murphy that they anticipated an Osirak-style attack. Later that month, Iraqi diplomat Nizar Hamdoon conveyed the same concern to the United Kingdom’s chargé d’affaires.45

This conviction also motivated Saddam’s infamous “burn half of Israel” speech at the beginning of April. The statement was intended as a deterrent; Saddam warned that he would retaliate against Israel if it attacked Iraq.46 However, the White House immediately condemned the statement as “deplorable and irresponsible” and the Western media presented it as a signal of Saddam’s aggressive intent. The Iraqis, in turn, interpreted this depiction as an American rhetorical campaign aimed at legitimizing an Israeli strike. The United States also responded to Iraq’s apparent belligerence by continuing to block distribution of the second CCC tranche, and by May, members of Congress had introduced several bills calling for sanctions against Iraq.47 ʿAziz reported later, “I was convinced . . . in April the Americans had stopped listening to us and had made up their minds to hit us.”48

Faced with a burgeoning economic crisis and apparently unremitting US hostility, Iraqi leaders believed that they needed to take action to resist the intensifying existential threat. Invading Kuwait was one potential recourse. By occupying its neighbor, Iraq would gain control over additional oil resources, including the entirety of the giant transboundary Rumaila field.49 Baghdad could therefore collect additional petroleum revenue, either by selling Kuwaiti resources or by enforcing production cutbacks, which would increase international oil prices and, consequently, the rents Iraq received from sales of its own and Kuwaiti oil. In addition, by controlling 20 percent of the world’s petroleum reserves, Iraq would secure a dominant position in OPEC and global oil markets. Finally, by seizing Kuwait, Iraq would eliminate a portion of its war debts, obtain an outlet for its dissatisfied military forces, and acquire its neighbor’s gold reserves and other valuable assets.50

Militarily, an invasion of Kuwait would be easy. Iraq’s limited demobilization after the Iran–Iraq War, coupled with its continued military spending, meant that the state retained the strongest force in the region. Kuwait’s terrain was difficult to defend and the country’s military was weak. It would not be able to resist an
Iraqi attack or retaliate extensively against Iraq’s oil infrastructure. Invasion obstacles were therefore low. The Iraqis also hoped that occupation obstacles would be limited, because of domestic political strife that destabilized the sheikdom from 1989 to 1990. “Disgruntled” Kuwaitis might be sympathetic to invaders that removed the ruling Sabah family. Lastly, Saddam likely hoped that other Arab countries would refrain from retaliation. Within the region, Kuwaitis were widely regarded as arrogant, and other OPEC members, including Saudi Arabia, were also irked by their overproduction. Hence, local states might be less inclined to come to Kuwait’s aid, reducing international obstacles.

Iraq was also tempted to seize Kuwait because of the states’ ongoing territorial dispute, which had begun in the early twentieth century. In 1913, the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the territories that would become Kuwait and Iraq, and the United Kingdom, which had established itself as Kuwait’s protector in 1899, agreed to a convention identifying Kuwait as an autonomous *qaza* (district) within the Ottoman Empire. The outbreak of World War I prevented the accord’s ratification. However, Kuwaitis believe that it established their state’s independence. In contrast, Iraqis, whose country was created by merging the Ottoman *wilayat* (provinces) of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, argue that, as a *qaza*, Kuwait was never formally separated from Basra. Hence, the region remained part of Iraq: its “nineteenth province.” Since their own state’s independence in 1932, Iraqis have periodically exploited this legal technicality to assert their authority over all or portions of Kuwait. From 1933 to 1939, Iraqi newspapers, likely with government support, published articles calling for the country’s incorporation into Iraq. In 1938, the Iraqi foreign minister, Taufiq as-Suwaidi, submitted an aide memoir to British diplomats, declaring Iraq’s authority over the entirety of Kuwait. The next year, Iraq’s volatile King Ghazi publicly asserted that Kuwait was part of Iraq. In June 1961, a week before Kuwait achieved independence, Iraqi prime minister Abd al-Karim Qasim reiterated the claim. None of these initiatives were driven by oil ambitions. In 1961, for example, Qasim recognized that occupying Kuwait would not be worth the effort, for oil or any other purpose. As political journalist Peter Mansfield states, “Garrisoning a hostile Kuwaiti population supported by the rest of the Arab world would create endless problems for Iraq and Kassem [sic], although mercurial, could be rational in his strategic thinking.” Instead, Iraqi leaders used their territorial claim to improve their bargaining positions on other issues. In 1961, the fiercely anti-imperial Qasim was attempting to compel Kuwait to renounce its defense agreement with Britain in order to reduce Western influence in the region. In the late 1930s, Iraq’s central concerns were cross-border smuggling and access to the Persian Gulf.
The Gulf access issue was the primary disagreement underpinning Iraq and Kuwait’s enduring territorial dispute. As observed in chapter 5, Iraq’s Persian Gulf coastline is only forty miles long. Since the 1930s, Iraqi leaders have persistently sought to annex or lease the islands of Warba and Bubiyan, at the eastern terminus of Iraq and Kuwait’s land boundary, in order to enhance their country’s meager sea access. In 1938, as-Suwaidi aspired to shift the bilateral boundary south, to incorporate the islands and adjacent sea lanes, in order to accommodate a new Iraqi port at Umm Qasr. This effort failed so, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Iraq repeatedly asked Kuwait to cede the islands in exchange for diplomatic recognition, boundary demarcation, or fresh water from the Shatt al-ʿArab. To further sweeten the deal, Baghdad even offered to let Kuwait maintain its oil rights in any ceded territories: further evidence of Iraq’s limited petroleum ambitions. Nonetheless, the Kuwaitis persistently refused Iraq’s proposals, and joint boundary commissions, active from 1966 to 1967, failed to resolve the issue.

The dispute intensified in the late 1960s, largely as a result of Iraq and Iran’s escalating Shatt al-ʿArab disagreement, which threatened the former’s Persian Gulf access. In 1969, when Iran abrogated the Tehran Treaty, claiming a thalweg boundary in the waterway and providing naval escorts for Iranian commercial ships, Iraq stationed troops in Kuwaiti territory, near Umm Qasr. After the immediate crisis passed, the state failed to withdraw its soldiers. In late 1972, after Kuwait refused Baghdad’s request for a loan, Iraq stationed more troops in the border areas. The next year, Iraqi forces occupied a Kuwaiti border post at as-Samita, killing two Kuwaiti guards. Following Arab mediation, the Iraqis withdrew from that post. Yet they remained in the other border zones. Meanwhile, further negotiation efforts from 1970 to 1978 also failed to produce a territorial accord.

By the end of the decade, both countries’ positions on the dispute had hardened. The Algiers Agreement, which granted Iran equal sovereignty over the Shatt al-ʿArab, strengthened Iraq’s determination to acquire alternative Persian Gulf access routes. However, Kuwait’s increasingly antagonized National Assembly issued a resolution pledging to retain all of the state’s sovereign territory. In the early 1980s, Kuwaiti authorities refused multiple Iraqi requests for an island lease so the state could enlarge its port facilities at Umm Qasr. The Kuwaitis also consolidated their symbolic authority over the contested territories by building an unnecessary bridge from the mainland to unpopulated Bubiyan in 1982 and garrisoning forces on the island in 1984. Iraq was unable to react to these perceived provocations because of its dependence on Kuwait’s support in the Iran–Iraq War.

The conflict confirmed Iraqi fears about overreliance on the Shatt al-ʿArab. During the war, the waterway was blocked by sunken boats, and after it ended,
Iran’s refusal to implement the ceasefire precluded clearing the channel. The war and its aftermath also exposed insecurities in Iraq’s oil transportation outlets. In April 1982, Syria closed its main pipeline, leaving Iraq with only a one-million-barrel-per-day export route through Turkey. In January 1990, when Turkey interrupted the flow of the Euphrates River for a month to fill the reservoir behind the Ataturk Dam, Baghdad could not protest, because it did not want to threaten this pipeline route. These constraints increased Iraq’s commitment to enlarging and diversifying its oil export facilities on the Gulf coast and securing adjacent sea lanes. Yet border discussions with Kuwait in August 1988 and February 1989 again failed to produce an accord.

By 1990, Kuwait and Iraq had built up intense bilateral acrimony over the boundary issue, which increased the appeal of Iraqi aggression. It appeared more justified, given Iraq’s historical claims to the neighboring territory and Kuwaitis’ apparent indifference to Iraq’s economic security. It also meant that a successful occupation would generate additional, nonoil benefits. It would convey island authority, which would improve Iraq’s Persian Gulf access by creating a viable alternative to the Shatt al-ʿArab. It would also enhance the regime’s domestic standing, as Saddam could portray himself as the “liberator of usurped Iraqi lands.” Yet, despite these added incentives, coupled with relatively low invasion, occupation, and international obstacles from local countries, Saddam still initially refrained from attacking Kuwait.

The Iraqi leader’s hesitation arose from his fear of international retaliation by the United States. Contrary to the conventional interpretation of Iraq’s invasion, which asserts that Saddam attacked after receiving a “green light” from Ambassador Glaspie, the Iraqi leader was aware that the US government would retaliate, economically and militarily, for his invasion. There was significant precedent for economic punishment; Iraq was already suffering under some US trade restrictions, which would likely be extended to Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil if he launched an attack. Iraqi leaders also entertained no doubts about a US military response to their aggression. In January 1991, on the eve of the coalition air campaign, ʿAziz told Baker, “We have been expecting US military action against Iraq. . . . This conduct on our part wasn’t the result of ignorance.” Later, ʿAziz rejected the “green light” interpretation of the Glaspie meeting, stating, “She didn’t tell us . . . that the Americans would not retaliate. That was nonsense you see. It was nonsense to think that the Americans would not attack us.”

Given the likelihood of US retaliation, the outcome of an invasion was uncertain at best. It is therefore unsurprising that Iraq initially refrained from attacking its neighbor, instead responding to its escalating crisis with alternative, peaceful activities. As noted earlier, one of these was domestic economic reforms, which failed to improve the regime’s economic standing. Another was international
diplomacy. This strategy had two targets: Iraq’s Arab creditors and the United States. From late 1989 through mid-1990, Iraqi officials repeatedly approached Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar, trying to persuade them to cancel Iraq’s debts, offer the state new loans, and abide by their OPEC production quotas. Iraqi authorities rationalized the first request, to cancel their war debts, by arguing that Iraq had been fighting its war with Iran on behalf of all Arabs, in order to resist Tehran’s threatening, revolutionary regime. Moreover, the Iraqis argued, the region’s other oil-producing states had already reaped enormous economic benefits from the war. Since Iraqi and Iranian oil output had dropped during the conflict, other producers had dramatically increased their resource revenue by making up the difference. Iraq had therefore already repaid its debts.  

Some of the Gulf states responded to these diplomatic entreaties with concessions. Saudi Arabia canceled most of Iraq’s war debts, partly in exchange for a nonaggression pact. Kuwait, however, was more recalcitrant, despite repeated Iraqi requests. These were initiated at an OPEC meeting in November 1989, where Iraq asked that the price of oil be raised to $21 per barrel, with the promise that it not fall below $18. Since Kuwait’s oil minister did not respond to this appeal, Saddam sent another request directly to the country’s ruler, Emir Jabir. The emir assured the Iraqi president that Kuwait would abide by its OPEC quota but soon violated his pledge by continuing to overproduce. In January 1990, when Iraq’s deputy prime minister, Sa’dun Hammadi, visited Kuwait to request debt forgiveness and a $10 billion reconstruction and development loan, the emir offered only a $500 million loan and did not reduce national oil output. 

After an Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) summit in February, where Iraqis asked various Gulf state leaders to forgive their state’s war debts and provide another $30 billion in loans, Iraq’s oil minister, Isam al-Chalabi, personally delivered the same message to Jabir. He also asked the Kuwaiti leader to abide by his state’s production quota, with no tangible results. At an OPEC meeting in May, al-Chalabi again pushed for members to respect their quotas in order to keep oil prices above $18 per barrel. Kuwait announced some cuts but continued to overproduce. Later that month, the tone of Iraqi appeals became more heated. At a special Arab summit in Baghdad from May 28 to May 30, Saddam aired his grievances against Kuwait and the UAE. In a private session, he accused the states of deliberately undermining Iraq through their overproduction. For every $1 drop in the price of oil, he claimed, Iraq lost $1 billion in annual revenue. Saddam equated overproduction’s impacts with warfare: “We say that war is fought with soldiers and much harm is done by explosions, killing, and coup attempts—but it is also done by economic means. . . . Therefore, we would ask our brothers
who do not mean to wage war... This is in fact a kind of war against Iraq. Were it possible, we would have endured. But I believe that all our brothers are fully aware of our situation... We have reached a point where we can no longer withstand pressure.”

Despite the limited effectiveness of these diplomatic endeavors, Iraqi officials persisted in them for another eight weeks. In late June, an Iraqi delegation, including Hammadi, traveled to various Gulf states to discuss oil production and loans. At their meetings in Kuwait, the Iraqis asked for a $10 billion loan and quota adherence. The Kuwaitis again refused to forgive Iraq’s debts and offered only another $500 million, dispersed over three years. On the oil production issue, Kuwait refused to lower its output and may have implied that it had the right to increase it. Historians Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb write that “Hammadi, rightly or wrongly, seems to have gotten the impression... that Kuwait would not be bound by the OPEC quota.” On July 10, oil ministers from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and the UAE finally agreed to an $18 price target. However, the Kuwaitis again proved unreliable. A day after promising to rein in production, Kuwait’s oil minister said that his state would review and potentially revise its position in the fall. He also suggested that Kuwait would propose eliminating the quota system entirely at OPEC’s meeting in October 1991.

Given this resistance, “by mid-July Baghdad felt it had almost exhausted diplomatic methods of resolving the dispute.” On July 16, ‘Aziz submitted a memorandum to the chairman of the Arab League (dated July 15), detailing Iraq’s complaints against its neighbor. The document claimed that “the officials of the government of Kuwait... have attempted in a planned, predetermined, and continuous process to take advantage of Iraq and to cause it harm with the intention of weakening it after the end of the ruinous war which lasted eight years... This policy was pursued out of selfish and narrow interests and goals which we cannot any longer but consider as suspicious and dangerous.” The memorandum characterized Kuwait’s overproduction as “a planned operation” which, for Iraq, “means a loss... of several billion dollars in revenue this year at a time when it is suffering from a financial crisis because of the costs of its rightful defense of its own land.” The memorandum reiterated that Kuwait’s overproduction and theft were “tantamount to military aggression” and mentioned that, when Iraq had raised the issue before, Kuwait and the UAE had responded with “insolent statements.” For the first time, Iraq brought the Rumaila oil field into the dispute, accusing the Kuwaitis of slant drilling into the reservoir and siphoning off Iraqi reserves. The memorandum asked Arab League members to persuade Kuwait and the UAE to change their behaviors and implement a price increase to $25 per barrel. It also again requested debt cancellation and demanded compensation
from Kuwait for the $2.4 billion of oil that it had purportedly “stolen” from Rumaila during the Iran–Iraq War.83

Kuwait’s July 19 response to Iraq’s memorandum was intransigent. The state denied sole responsibility for the oil price collapse, defended its right to drill in Rumaila, and offered no financial assistance or promises on oil output.84 Iraqi leaders interpreted this obduracy as a sign of the United States’ involvement in the price collapse. Their reasoning was deductive; they assumed that, without American support, such a small, militarily weak state would not willfully defy all of Iraq’s demands.85 As the July 15 memorandum had asserted, “We can only conclude that those who adopted this policy directly and openly and those who supported it and pushed for it were carrying out part of an imperialist Zionist plan against Iraq and the Arab nation.”86 In their July 21 rejoinder to Kuwait’s response, the Iraqis were even more explicit in their accusations, asserting that “the Kuwaiti Government’s policy was a US policy.”87 The announcement, a week later, of joint naval exercises between the United States and the UAE appeared to confirm Iraqi suspicions, as did the movement of US ships and KC-135 aerial tankers to positions closer to Kuwait and the UAE.88

Believing that the United States was the driving force behind Iraq’s intensifying crisis, Saddam’s diplomatic initiatives also targeted US officials. ʿAziz had initially aired the regime’s grievances to Baker in October 1989. In February 1990, Saddam lectured Assistant Secretary of State John Kelly about the post–Cold War geopolitical situation in the Persian Gulf, attempting to persuade him that the United States should use its newfound “free hand” for “constructive purposes” rather than “blindly” following Israel.89 When Iraq hosted a congressional delegation led by Senator Robert Dole in April, Saddam again highlighted his fear of a US-backed Israeli attack and attempted to clarify that his “burn half of Israel” speech had been intended as a deterrent. He asserted that Iraq preferred good relations with the United States, but only if Americans felt the same way.90

On July 25, following the announcement of US–UAE naval maneuvers, Saddam summoned Glaspie for their infamous private meeting. In the meeting, the Iraqi leader spoke at length about the economic crisis facing his state and his belief that the United States was inciting Kuwait’s and the UAE’s behavior. Glaspie viewed these sentiments as sincere; in 1991, after Operation Desert Storm, she observed that Iraqi officials were “quite convinced the United States . . . was targeting Iraq. They complained about it all the time. . . . Day after day, the Iraqi media since February [1990]—literally every day—was full of these accusations. And I think it was genuinely believed by Saddam Hussein.”91 During the meeting, Saddam also warned the ambassador that the United States should not “force Iraq to the point of humiliation at which logic must be disregarded.”92
Over the previous ten days, Iraq had already begun moving troops to its border with Kuwait. During his meeting with Glaspie, Saddam claimed that the mobilization was a tactic to persuade Kuwait to change its behavior; “How else can we make them understand how deeply we are suffering?” he queried. The mobilization caught the attention of Arab leaders, provoking a flurry of further negotiations. These initially appeared to bear fruit; after meeting with Saddam on July 24, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak left with the impression that the crisis would soon blow over. In addition, at an OPEC meeting in Geneva from July 26 to July 27, the organization’s member states, including Kuwait and the UAE, finally agreed to adhere to their production quotas in order to achieve a $21 per barrel oil price. Yet Saddam had little faith that the Kuwaitis would keep their word, and a subsequent meeting in Jiddah on July 31 gave little reason for optimism.

In addition, following Saddam’s meeting with Glaspie, the United States did not back down. Rather than attempting to reassure Iraq of its benign intentions, on July 27, the Senate voted to block any further CCC guarantees to Iraq and all deliveries of militarily useful equipment. Saddam’s conviction that the United States was determined to defeat him appeared to be confirmed. The credit cut-off, coupled with Iraq’s escalating budgetary crisis, meant that the state literally could no longer feed its population. Meanwhile, the regime had exhausted all alternative means of improving its situation. Domestic economic reforms had merely intensified popular animosity, while international diplomacy had failed to eliminate Iraqi war debts, increase oil prices, or alleviate US hostility. Saddam therefore turned to foreign aggression; Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2.

Before launching the invasion, Saddam was uncertain about its outcome. The Iraqi president knew that seizing Kuwait would be easy, militarily. Yet he anticipated US retaliation and recognized that American forces severely outnumbered his own. Saddam hoped, nonetheless, that the United States would prove to be a paper tiger. He told Glaspie that the American public was unwilling to stomach significant casualties. In addition, his speech before the ACC in February had highlighted the United States’ withdrawal from Lebanon in 1983, following bombings of the US embassy and Marine Corps barracks that killed over two hundred soldiers, as evidence of this weakness. Saddam conjectured that, if Iraqi forces could kill a sufficient number of Americans, the United States might forgo further military involvement in Kuwait and Iraq.

To increase the likelihood of Iraqi military success, in late July, Saddam decided to seize the entirety of Kuwait, instead of only the contested northern border regions of Ritqa and Qasr, which contained the Rumaila oil field and the disputed islands. The Iraqi leader believed that expanding the scope of the invasion would impede a US response, as he mistakenly assumed that Saudi
Arabia would not permit US troops to be stationed in its territory.\textsuperscript{101} In addition, to eliminate one incentive for American retaliation, after the invasion, Saddam repeatedly offered to sell the United States and other consumer states Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil for less than $25 per barrel.\textsuperscript{102} He hoped that, if Iraq demonstrated that it was still a reliable petroleum supplier, third-party states might accept the occupation.

Even if this strategy failed and the United States proved to be a more committed adversary, the possibility of losing to the Americans was a risk that Saddam and other Iraqi leaders were willing to take. If Iraq failed to act, they believed, the Baʿathist regime would inevitably collapse as a result of domestic instability or international attacks perpetrated by Israel and the United States. The Iraqis therefore perceived their invasion as defensive; as Saddam stated later, it was a means of “defending by attacking.”\textsuperscript{103} In meetings after the conflict began, the president also insisted that he had no other choice if he wanted to save his state.\textsuperscript{104} Speaking to Yemeni president ʿAli Abdullah Saleh on August 4, Saddam observed that his regime could not survive without supplying food and other public goods to its people. He also asserted that Iraq had exhausted all peaceful, diplomatic methods of persuading Kuwait to alter its behavior. In a meeting with Russian special envoy Yevgeny Primakov on October 6, Saddam claimed that Iraqis had been backed into a corner, leaving an invasion “the only choice we had.”\textsuperscript{105} He and his advisers also blamed the United States for precipitating the confrontation. In ʿAziz’s words, “We were pushed into a fatal struggle in the sense of a struggle in which your fate will be decided. You will either be hit inside your house and destroyed, economically and militarily. Or you go outside and attack the enemy in one of his bases. We had to do that, we had no choice, we had no other choice. Iraq was designated by George Bush for destruction, with or without Kuwait.”\textsuperscript{106}

Iraqi authorities hoped that, by occupying Kuwait, they could “change the balance of power in [their] favor.”\textsuperscript{107} However, this aspiration was soon dashed. The UN quickly imposed sanctions on sales of Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil, and the Saudis allowed Western troops to operate in their territory. After an exhaustive targeted bombing campaign in January 1991, coalition ground forces began to engage Iraqi troops in mid-February. By the end of the month, they had pushed Iraqi forces out of Kuwait and declared a ceasefire. However, President George H. W. Bush decided not to continue the counterattack, allowing Saddam to remain in power. Noting the United States’ failure to occupy Iraq or overthrow him, the Iraqi leader concluded that he had won the war.\textsuperscript{108} This conviction is counterintuitive to outside observers, partly because it calls classic oil war interpretations of the invasion into question. If oil was a significant target of Iraqi aggression, the attack failed miserably. Iraq did not increase its petroleum resources or revenue and, from an oil standpoint, was worse off after the war than it had been before it,
because of the international economic sanctions that curtailed Iraqi petroleum sales until the mid-1990s. However, if we recognize that Saddam’s fundamental goal was survival, not oil, his assertion becomes more credible.

Iraq’s original invasion plan, which targeted only Kuwait’s northern provinces, also undermines classic oil war arguments. If petroleum was a central goal of the Iraqi attack, Saddam should have had more expansive invasion plans from the beginning. Instead, Iraq’s war planning left much of Kuwait’s petroleum untouched. This restraint suggests that the state had limited interest in its neighbor’s oil per se. Instead, the invasion had a different aim: sustaining the regime’s survival. Saddam believed that attacking Kuwait and controlling some of its resources might help him achieve that end. Hence, the oil grab was a gambit, aimed at accomplishing a different, broader goal.

Should we nonetheless label oil gambits classic oil wars, since these attacks target petroleum resources? If we do, we must also acknowledge that these conflicts look very different from what many of us have assumed. Oil gambits are not launched by greedy states attempting to increase their wealth by acquiring foreign petroleum resources. Instead, they are perpetrated by desperate states who view these resource grabs as their only possible means of survival. Leaders initiate these conflicts reluctantly, after exhausting all other means of satisfying national oil needs. And they are still selective in their targeting, reserving international aggression for dispute scenarios. Finally, oil gambits are exceedingly rare; only one has occurred since petroleum became a critical strategic resource. Altogether, the Iraqi case—and the lack of additional, historical oil gambits—provides further evidence of countries’ disinclination to fight for oil.

**Postscript: The US Invasion of Iraq (2003)**

In March 2003, the George W. Bush administration accomplished what the first Bush administration had not: US forces advanced to Baghdad and overthrew Saddam Hussein. Many observers assumed that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a classic oil war. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in late 2002 revealed that 75 percent of French respondents, 76 percent of Russian respondents, and 54 percent of German respondents believed that the United States was planning to invade Iraq because it “wants to control Iraqi oil.” This belief was even more prevalent in the Arab world; 83 percent of people surveyed in Jordan, a US ally, agreed with the statement. Members of the Bush administration, however, rejected oil war interpretations of the conflict. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld notoriously asserted that the invasion “has nothing to do with oil, literally nothing to do with oil.” David Frum, one of Bush’s speech writers, also claimed,
“The United States is not fighting for oil in Iraq.” On the other side of the Atlantic, Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted, “The war in Iraq has nothing to do with oil, not for us, not for the UK, not for the United States.”

These official claims are questionable, given long-standing British and American interests in the Persian Gulf’s petroleum resources. Nevertheless, I agree that the 2003 invasion was not a classic oil war. The Bush administration did not overthrow Saddam to obtain control over Iraq’s petroleum resources. Nor did the United States invade Iraq to benefit American and British oil companies. This does not mean, however, that the invasion was entirely divorced from petroleum concerns. In particular, US officials’ desire to increase global oil output, coupled with their fear that a revenue windfall would empower Saddam, may have contributed to their pursuit of regime change. However, as Greg Muttitt observes, fighting to facilitate the expansion of another country’s oil output is different from “want[ing] the oil itself as some form of imperial plunder” (emphasis in original).

There is abundant evidence that the United States was not prosecuting a classic oil war in Iraq. First, the Bush administration’s prewar planning contradicted this aim. To exploit Iraq’s oil resources, it would be necessary to occupy large sections of the country over the long term. However, the Bush administration expected to begin drawing down American forces within a few months of the invasion and depart entirely in less than a year. US planning documents also envisioned a speedy restoration of local control over the Iraqi oil industry. In September 2002, Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy, created the Energy Infrastructure Planning Group (EIPG) to “develop a comprehensive contingency plan for protecting, repairing and operating Iraqi energy infrastructure.” The planning guidelines produced by the EIPG asserted that “Iraqi petroleum resources belong to the people of Iraq,” that oil production “should involve existing Iraqi personnel and organizations,” and that the United States would restore “production and marketing responsibilities to a stable Iraqi authority as soon as practicable.” Since these classified briefings were never intended for public consumption, it is likely that they reflected the administration’s actual intentions. When President Bush was briefed on the petroleum plans in February 2003, he agreed that the United States should “give them [Iraqis] full control as soon as possible.”

At first glance, the United States’ behavior during the invasion appears to belie these commitments. Military planners prioritized the seizure of oil installations; Iraq’s Persian Gulf export terminals and the Rumaila oil field were some of their preliminary targets. In addition, after entering Baghdad, US forces notoriously defended the Ministry of Oil, while leaving other government buildings unguarded. However, these initiatives do not prove that the Bush administration
was attempting to acquire long-term control over Iraq’s oil resources. Given the state’s overwhelming dependence on petroleum revenue, failing to immediately secure its oil infrastructure would have provoked accusations that US forces had endangered Iraq’s national patrimony, especially since rapid production shutdowns could permanently damage oil reservoirs. Moreover, within a few months of the invasion, it became evident that, if the United States’ top priority was controlling Iraq’s oil, it had bungled the job. After their initial advance, US troops failed to defend many of the facilities they had captured, allowing extensive looting. Three months after the invasion, key sites remained unsecured.

Second, the United States’ administrative choices after toppling Saddam fail to support classic oil war arguments. Although Iraqi exiles participated in the pre-war planning process, after the invasion, General Jay Garner, the leader of the original US occupying authority, selected Thamir al-Ghadban, an internal Iraqi technocrat, as interim oil minister. Al-Ghadhban had served as the Ministry of Oil’s planning director before the war and was unlikely to defer to US preferences regarding the management of Iraqi petroleum resources. The Bush administration also appointed Philip J. Carroll, the former CEO of Shell USA, as senior American adviser to the oil ministry. Carroll resisted efforts to de-Ba’athify the ministry, insisted that Iraqis retain ultimate decision-making authority over their oil, and ignored calls to privatize the industry. “I told everyone that I would have no part of it,” Carroll stated. “For 25 million people to lose control of the one thing they have that is of value would be highly irresponsible.” The Bush administration accepted this approach; in September 2003, when the Coalition Provisional Authority legalized foreign ownership of most of Iraq’s public companies, it omitted the oil industry. US government and oil company representatives subsequently encouraged Iraqi officials to accept greater foreign investment in their petroleum projects, in order to increase resource output. However, the state retained ultimate control over its oil and investment decisions.

The Bush administration’s willingness to rapidly restore local authority over the national government and oil industry may have reflected its awareness of the obstacles to classic oil wars. In 1991, members of the previous Bush administration had refrained from invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam because they recognized that there would be intense international opposition to expanding Operation Desert Storm beyond its original mandate of defending Kuwait. Officials also anticipated that regime change would lead to a prolonged US occupation, provoking intense local resistance. As Paul Wolfowitz, then undersecretary of defense for policy, stated, “A new [regime] in Iraq would have become the United States’ responsibility. Conceivably, this could have led the United States into a more or less permanent occupation of a country . . . where the rule of a foreign occupier would be increasingly resented.”
Many of the US officials involved in the 1991 decision, including Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powell, became prominent members of the George W. Bush administration. They were therefore cognizant of the obstacles to conquering Iraq and seizing its petroleum resources. The EIPG’s briefings, which were presented to National Security Council deputies, also highlighted these impediments. The group emphasized the risk of invasion obstacles, noting that, if Iraqis defended their oil installations, “battle damage and collateral damage could be significant.” The EIPG also anticipated deliberate sabotage of oil facilities and cautioned that US engineers should be prepared to “fight over 1000 well fires, if necessary.” President Bush expressed similar concerns, observing, as the invasion began, that “if they really blow them [the oil wells], it will be years” before they could operate. Accordingly, the administration assumed that conquering Iraq would result in a short-term drop in the country’s oil output. These losses would be compounded if Saddam launched missiles at Kuwaiti or Saudi oil facilities in retaliation for a US attack, as some officials expected.

The administration also recognized the international and occupation obstacles to grabbing Iraq’s oil. Rumsfeld later recalled that he “was concerned that people across the Muslim world would believe that the United States sought to establish a colonial-type occupation for the purpose of taking Iraq’s oil.” The EIPG noted that some American activities, such as aggressively increasing Iraq’s oil output or using resource revenue to pay for the occupation, would be “highly controversial,” as they would substantiate popular suspicions “that [the] incursion is driven by oil considerations.” The group warned that these activities “could generate domestic Iraqi opposition.” A study cosponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy reiterated this concern, stating, “If the United States appears to be taking over Iraq’s oil sector, guerrilla attacks against U.S. military personnel guarding oil installations are likely.”

The EIPG and Council on Foreign Relations/Baker report encouraged the Bush administration to engage in aggressive public diplomacy to counter these perceptions in order to moderate local and international opposition to the invasion. As the latter stated, the United States must “reassure Iraqis and the international community about the limited nature of its intentions” to offset “the widely held view that the campaign against Iraq is driven by an American wish to ‘steal’ or at least control Iraqi oil.” The EIPG proposed a number of themes for public diplomacy, including “We want to work with the Iraqis themselves and the international community in administering petroleum proceeds for the benefit of the Iraqi people” and “We will not administer oil assets on a long-term basis.” However, administration principals recognized that the best way to limit local and international retaliation was to quickly restore Iraq’s authority over the industry. They proceeded accordingly.
Lastly, the Bush administration was keenly aware of the investment obstacles to seizing Iraq’s oil. Vice President Dick Cheney, in particular, had extensive knowledge of the global oil industry, based on his experience as CEO of Halliburton, a major oil services company. He and other US officials knew that international oil companies would not invest in Iraqi oil projects until the country had a stable government that could issue legitimate contracts. Any agreements established with an interim, US-led administration could later be challenged, potentially resulting in major financial losses. Representatives of BP explicitly told the British government that they “would not wish to be involved in opaque, ambiguous arrangements” that preceded the creation of a sovereign Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{141} Phil Carroll concurred; foreign companies “will want to see an Iraqi government, and have confidence in it, before sinking down large sums of money.”\textsuperscript{142} The only way to attract investment capital to Iraq’s oil industry was to let Iraqis control it.

Given these invasion, occupation, international, and investment obstacles, prosecuting a classic oil war in Iraq would have been a “gamble of enormous proportions,” and there is no compelling evidence that the United States was attempting one.\textsuperscript{143} It is also implausible that the invasion aimed to benefit American and British oil companies.\textsuperscript{144} The United States did award a massive, no-bid contract for postwar petroleum infrastructure repairs to Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR), a Halliburton subsidiary. However, this decision was pragmatic, not an attempt to enrich Cheney’s former employer. Very few firms were capable of executing the reconstruction project, KBR was already a preferred contractor for the US Army’s Logistics Civil Augmentation Program, the company’s employees possessed the security clearances necessary to work on a classified project, and the administration did not have time to complete a competitive bidding process before the invasion.\textsuperscript{145} Over the long term, however, the United States would not be able to compel a sovereign Iraqi government to preferentially issue contracts to American and British oil companies. Instead, Iraqi officials would select the corporate partners that offered them the best financial terms and technological prowess—if they allowed foreign oil companies to participate in their industry at all.

The Bush administration did not invade Iraq to control its oil.\textsuperscript{146} Nor was it trying to grab Iraq’s petroleum resources for US oil companies. Yet that does not mean that the 2003 invasion was divorced from petroleum objectives. Oil has been one of the US government’s core interests—if not its primary interest—in the Persian Gulf since the 1940s.\textsuperscript{147} Were it not for the region’s petroleum resources, it is unlikely that the United States would have intervened in Iraq in 1991 or 2003.\textsuperscript{148} In addition, in 2003, the Bush administration had a specific, oil-related incentive to overthrow Saddam.\textsuperscript{149} In the early 2000s, the United States was confronting an apparent energy crisis. California began to experience rolling blackouts in
June 2000 and, the following year, several prominent policy groups reported that, at current production rates, global oil output would not keep pace with rising demand.150

Iraq offered an escape from this resource dilemma. If the international community lifted economic sanctions, the state could accept the foreign capital and materials it required to significantly boost its oil output and help satisfy global petroleum demand.151 Yet the Bush administration was loath to pursue this strategy, as officials believed that Saddam would use the revenue windfall from increased oil sales to accelerate his development of WMD and renew his attacks on his oil-endowed neighbors. As Cheney vividly opined in August 2002, “Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror, and seated atop 10 percent of the world’s oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world’s energy supplies, directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.”152

Regime change would remove this obstacle. A less hostile Iraqi government could collect more oil revenue without threatening regional or US security. Dposing Saddam would therefore help the United States advance its core oil interest in the Persian Gulf: maintaining a steady flow of affordable petroleum supplies. Once that was accomplished, US forces could withdraw from the country. There was no need to retain direct, sustained control over Iraq’s oil resources or guarantee their extraction by US oil companies; the Bush administration merely needed to install a competent local authority. Secretary of State Colin Powell summarized this strategy when he asserted, in July 2003, “We have not taken one drop of oil for U.S. purposes. Quite the contrary. We put in place a management system to make sure that Iraqi oil is brought out of the ground and put onto the market.”153

Debate persists about whether the United States actually invaded Iraq to increase the country’s oil output. Some authors claim that this was the Bush administration’s primary goal, while others, such as F. Gregory Gause III, assert that “there is no evidence from the public record that oil considerations played [this] role . . . in the Bush administration’s decision to go to war.”154 Even if the United States did launch the invasion for this reason, the case does not contradict the book’s central finding: that states are reluctant to fight for petroleum resources. Even unrivaled superpowers avoid classic oil wars.