Bombing of Iraq (1998)

The December 1998 bombing of Iraq (code-named Operation Desert Fox) was a major four-day bombing campaign on Iraqi targets from December 16, 1998, to December 19, 1998, by the United States and United Kingdom. The contemporaneous justification for the strikes was Iraq’s failure to comply with United Nations Security Council resolutions and its interference with United Nations Special Commission inspectors.

The operation was a major flare-up in the Iraq disarmament crisis. The stated goal of the cruise missile and bombing attacks was to strike military and security targets in Iraq that contribute to Iraq’s ability to produce, store, maintain and deliver weapons of mass destruction. The bombing campaign had been anticipated since February 1998 and incurred wide-ranging criticism and support, at home and abroad.\(^2\)

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates initially announced they would deny U.S. military the use of local bases for the purpose of air strikes against Iraq.\(^3\) It became one of the roots of the 2003 invasion of Iraq which resulted in the deposition of the Ba'athist Iraqi government.

1 Background

U.S. President Bill Clinton had been working under a regional security framework of dual containment, which involved punishing Saddam Hussein’s regime with military force whenever Iraq was challenging the United States or the international community.

On October 31, 1998 Clinton signed into law H.R. 4655, the Iraq Liberation Act.\(^4\) The new Act appropriated funds for Iraqi opposition groups in the hope of removing Saddam Hussein from power and replacing his regime with a democracy.

The Act also said that:

> Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize or otherwise speak to the use of United States Armed Forces (except as provided in section 4(a)(2)) in carrying out this Act.

Section 4(a)(2) states:

> The President is authorized to direct the drawdown of defense articles from the stocks of the Department of Defense, defense services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training for [Iraqi democratic opposition] organizations.

Just prior to Desert Fox, the U.S. nearly led a bombing campaign against Saddam called Operation Desert Thunder. It was abandoned at the last minute when the Iraqi leader allowed the UN to continue weapons inspections.\(^5\)

2 “Degrading”, not eliminating

A B-1B is loaded with bombs at Ellsworth AFB on December 17, 1998.

Clinton administration officials said the aim of the mission was to “degrade” Iraq’s ability to manufacture and use weapons of mass destruction, not to eliminate it. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked about the distinction while the operation was going on:\(^6\)

> “I don’t think we’re pretending that we can get everything, so this is – I think – we are being very honest about what our ability is. We are lessening, degrading his ability to use this. The weapons of mass destruction are the threat of the future. I think the president explained very clearly to the American people that this is the threat of the 21st century. […] [W]hat it means is that we know we can’t get everything, but degrading is the right word.”

The main targets of the bombing included weapons research and development installations, air defense systems,
weapon and supply depots, and the barracks and command headquarters of Saddam’s elite Republican Guard. Also, one of Saddam’s lavish presidential palaces came under attack. Iraqi air defense batteries, unable to target the American and British jets, began to blanket the sky with near random bursts of flak fire. The air strikes continued unabated however, and cruise missile barrages launched by naval vessels added to the bombs dropped by the planes. By the fourth night, most of the specified targets had been damaged or destroyed and the Operation was deemed a success and the air strikes ended.

3 Military operations

Two F/A-18C Hornet pilots discussing the results of an air strike conducted on 17 December

U.S. Navy aircraft from Carrier Air Wing Three (CVW 3), flying from USS Enterprise (CVN-65), Carrier Air Wing Eleven (CVW 11), flying from USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70), and Patrol Squadron Four (PATRON FOUR), flew combat missions from the Persian Gulf in support of ODF. Of significance, the operation marked the first time that women flew combat sorties as U.S. Navy strike fighter pilots and the first combat use of the U.S. Air Force’s B-1B bomber from the 28th Air Expeditionary Group stationed at RAFO Thumrait, Sultanate of Oman. Ground units included the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable), of which 2nd Battalion 4th Marines served as the ground combat element; based from USS Belleau Wood (LHA-3) Amphibious Ready Group, which included USS Germantown (LSD-42) USS Dubuque (LPD-8). The U.S. Air Force sent several sorties of F-16s from the 34th Fighter Squadron, and 522nd Fighter Squadron into Iraq to fly night missions in support of Operation Desert Fox; they were based at Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base, Kuwait.

On the second night of Operation Desert Fox, aircrews flying 12 B-52s took off from the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and launched 74 conventional air launched cruise missiles (CALCMs). The missiles found their mark striking multiple Iraqi targets including six of President Saddam Hussein’s palaces, several Republican Guard Barracks, and the Ministries of Defense and Military Industry. The following evening, two more B-52 crews launched 16 more CALCMs. Over a two-night period aircrews from the 2nd and 5th Bomb Wings launched a total of 90 CALCMs. The B-1 bomber also made its combat debut by striking at Republican Guard targets. Also on Dec. 17, USAF aircraft based in Kuwait participated, as did British Royal Air Force Tornado aircraft. The British contribution totaled 15 percent of the sorties flown in Desert Fox.

By December 19, U.S. and British aircraft had struck 97 targets, and Secretary of Defense William Cohen claimed the operation was a success. Supported by Secretary Cohen, as well as United States Central Command commander General Anthony C. Zinni and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton, President Bill Clinton declared “victory” in Operation Desert Fox. In total, the 70-hour campaign saw U.S. forces strike 85 percent of their targets, 75 percent of which were considered “highly effective” strikes. More than 600 sorties were flown by more than 300 combat and support aircraft, and 600 air dropped munitions were employed, including 90 air launched cruise missiles and 325 Tomahawk land attack missiles (TLAM). Operation Desert Fox inflicted serious damage to Iraq’s missile development program, although its effects on any WMD program were not clear. Nevertheless, Operation Desert Fox was the largest strike against Iraq since the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, until the commencement of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

4 Reaction

In reaction to the attack, three of five permanent members of the UN Security Council (Russia, France, and the People’s Republic of China) called for lifting of the eight-year oil embargo on Iraq, recasting or disbanding UNSCOM, and firing its chairman, Australian diplomat Richard Butler.

5 Criticism

5.1 Accusations of U.S. interference in the U.N. inspection process

Iraq stopped cooperating with the U.N. special commission in the first month of 1998, but diplomacy by Kofi Annan brought fresh agreement and new modalities for the inspection of sensitive sites. Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz had earlier accused UNSCOM officials of acting as spies for the United States, charges later supported by Scott Ritter and Bill Tierney.

In a 2005 interview Ritter criticized the Clinton administration’s use of a blocked inspection of a Ba’ath party headquarters to justify the bombing.
Public perception is that the Iraqis were confrontational and blocking the work of the inspectors. In 98% of the inspections, the Iraqis did everything we asked them to because it dealt with disarmament. However when we got into issues of sensitivity, such as coming close to presidential security installations, Iraqis raised a flag and said, “Time out. We got a C.I.A. out there that’s trying to kill our president and we’re not very happy about giving you access to the most sensitive installations and the most sensitive personalities in Iraq.” So we had these modalities, where we agreed that if we came to a site and the Iraqis called it ‘sensitive,’ we go in with four people.

In 1998, the inspection team went to a site. It was the Baath Party headquarters, like going to Republican Party headquarters or Democratic Party headquarters. The Iraqis said, “You can’t come in – you can come in. Come on in.” The inspectors said, “The modalities no longer apply.” The Iraqis said, “If you don’t agree to the modalities, we can’t support letting you in,” and the Iraqis wouldn’t allow the inspections to take place.

Bill Clinton said, “This proves the Iraqis are not cooperating,” and he ordered the inspectors out. But you know the United States government ordered the inspectors to withdraw from the modalities without conferring with the Security Council. It took Iraqis by surprise. Iraqis were saying, “We’re playing by the rules, why aren’t you? If you’re not going play by the rules, then it’s a game that we don’t want to participate in.” Bill Clinton ordered the inspectors out. Saddam didn’t kick them out.[13]

However, in his 1999 book Endgame Ritter explained that he was the one who had originally pushed for the fateful inspection of the Ba’ath party headquarters over the doubts of his boss Richard Butler and also planned to use 37 inspectors. It was temporarily cancelled due to the fact that Iraq broke off cooperation in August 1998:

But it was the site where that second piece of information led us that contained dynamite. From a description provided by our source, I had easily identified the building in question, which was located in Baghdad’s downtown Aadamiyah section. The ten crates of missile parts were stashed in a basement of the Baghdad headquarters of Saddam’s own Ba’ath party. If we could achieve surprise and surround the site before the Iraqis could evacuate the crates, we would obtain the ultimate catch-22 situation: let us inside as promised and we would find the prohibited material; bar our entry and violate the Kofi Annan compromise, and in the process invite a devastating air strike by the United States. UNSCOM would be prepared to camp out around this site until the situation had been resolved one way or the other.

The countdown to a perhaps decisive four-day blitz of confrontation began, with the first inspection – Ba’ath party headquarters – due to take place on July 20. On short notice I was able to reconstitute my intelligence support. The first two inspection teams were dispatched to Bahrain. I was set to arrive there on the 18th. I would be joined by my deputy chief inspector as well as several operations staff. All of us were veteran inspectors, requiring no additional training. Instead, the clock was stopped.

The U.S. and U.K., Butler told me, were uncertain about going ahead. He needed to consult with them, he said, and on the 15th – my thirty-seventh birthday – I found myself pacing the floor of my office on the thirtieth floor of the United Nations Secretariat Building in New York, waiting for the results of these talks.

Butler came back. It was all bad news. The inspection was canceled. My carefully assembled team dispersed.

Clinton administration officials, torn between pressure from the Republicans to go forward and a reluctance to respond to any Iraqi confrontation (and there was sure to be one) with military force, had tried to convince Butler to postpone the inspection until “a more opportune time.” Butler was convinced. To me, he called it a case of “bad timing.” I viewed it as something else -- an appalling lack of leadership, not only in Washington and London, but also on Butler’s part. He was allowing a golden opportunity to slip through his fingers. I said as much in a long, critical memorandum that I wrote to him the next day.

The onus of leadership fell on him, I said, and if he would seize the initiative, Washington and London would have to follow. That may have been somewhat naive, but I firmly believed, I wrote, that UNSCOM was fighting for its very existence as a meaningful disarmament body, and inspections aimed at uncovering concealment remained imperative. It was a fight worth fighting, I said, recommending that we go ahead with the planned inspections regardless of the naysayers, though not without...
continuing to seek support. “In reengaging on concealment,” I concluded, “the Special Commission will be waving a red flag in front of the Iraqi bull. It is essential that this red flag be backed by a sword, or else the commission will not be able to withstand the Iraqi charge. In short, the Special Commission’s push on concealment must be 100 percent.”

It was as hard-hitting a memorandum as I could make it. Butler accused me of overstating the lack of resolve in both Washington and London. But my argument over the need to get a concealment-based inspection on track did resonate with him. He authorized me to put together an updated inspection plan to take place following his August visit to Baghdad.

I didn’t have much time. July was half through, and I needed to get a new forty-odd-person team assembled, trained, and deployed prior to Butler’s arrival in Iraq on August 2. We would use the same basic inspection concept that had been prepared for July; the intelligence on both sites, I was assured by sources, was still valid but not for much longer. I would make use of some twenty-five inspectors resident in Baghdad with the monitoring groups, and I added twelve experts, selected on the basis of what the team needed for the planned inspection. I had a five-person command element fly to Bahrain with the twelve experts to train them. They were to stay in Bahrain after the training to carry out last-minute preparations and receive intelligence updates until they flew into Iraq on the same plane that would take Butler out on August 5. Somehow it all came together. The inspections would begin on the morning of the 6th.

I’d learned to read Butler’s body language and he was getting a little nervous as we flew deeper and deeper into Iraqi territory. The reality of what we were about to do had begun to hit him. Duelfer teased him about how the Iraqis could solve everything if they just shot us out of the sky. Butler was not amused. He kept asking probing questions, reassuring himself that these inspection targets were of a legitimate disarmament character. “What makes us go to that site?” he asked. How do I explain it to the Iraqis? ... How do I explain this site to the Security Council? ... What do we expect to find at this one? ... What happens if the Iraqis stop us from entering?”[14]

5.2 Inspectors not thrown out

The claim that UNSCOM weapons inspectors were expelled by Iraq has been repeated frequently. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, in his February 5, 2003 speech before the U.N. Security Council, called for action against Iraq and stated falsely that “Saddam Hussein forced out the last inspectors in 1998”.[17] The claim has appeared repeatedly in the news media.[18] However, according to UNSCOM inspector Richard Butler himself, it was U.S. Ambassador Peter Burleigh, acting on instructions from Washington, who suggested Butler pull his team from Iraq in order to protect them from the forthcoming U.S. and British air strikes: “I received a telephone call from US Ambassador Peter Burleigh inviting me for a private conversation at the US mission... Burleigh informed me that on instructions from Washington it would be ‘prudent to take measures to ensure the safety and security of UNSCOM staff presently in Iraq.’ ... I told him that I would act on this advice and remove my staff from Iraq.”[19]

5.3 Facilities not known to be producing WMD

Former U.S. Army intelligence analyst William Arkin contended in his Washington Post column January, 1999 that the operation had less to do with WMD and more to do with destabilizing the Iraqi government.

It is clear from the target list, and from extensive communications with almost a dozen officers and analysts knowledgeable about Desert Fox planning, that the U.S.-British bombing campaign was more than a reflexive reaction to Saddam Hussein’s refusal to cooperate with UNSCOM’s inspectors. The official rationale for Desert Fox may remain the “degrading” of Iraq’s ability to produce weapons of mass destruction and the “diminishing” of the Iraqi threat to its neighbours. But careful study of the target list tells another story.

Thirty-five of the 100 targets were selected because of their role in Iraq’s air defense system, an essential first step in any air war, because damage to those sites paves the way for other forces and minimizes casualties all
5.4 Distraction from Clinton impeachment scandal

Some critics of the Clinton administration, including Republican members of Congress, expressed concern over the timing of Operation Desert Fox. The four-day bombing campaign occurred at the same time the U.S. House of Representatives was conducting the impeachment hearing of President Clinton. Clinton was impeached on December 19, the last day of the bombing campaign. A few months earlier, similar criticism was levelled during Operation Infinite Reach, wherein missile strikes were ordered against suspected terrorist bases in Sudan and Afghanistan, on August 20. The missile strikes began three days after Clinton was called to testify before a grand jury during the Lewinsky scandal and his subsequent nationally televised address later that evening in which Clinton admitted having an inappropriate relationship.

The Operation Infinite Reach attacks became known as “Monica’s War” among TV news people, due to the timing. ABC-TV announced to all stations that there would be a special report following Lewinsky’s testimony before Congress, then the special report was pre-empted by the report of the missile attacks. The combination of the timing of that attack and Operation Desert Fox led to accusations of a *Wag the Dog* situation.

5.5 Criticism of the extent of the operation

Other critics, such as former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said the attacks did not go far enough: “I would be amazed if a three-day campaign made a decisive difference.” Kissinger said just after the operation...
ended.

[W]e did not do, in my view, enough damage to degrade it [Iraq’s programs for weapons of mass destruction] for six months. It doesn’t make any significant difference because in six months to a year they will be back to where they are and we cannot keep repeating these attacks. [...] At the end of the day what will be decisive is what the situation in the Middle East will be two to three years from now. If Saddam is still there, if he’s rearming, if the sanctions are lifted, we will have lost, no matter what spin we put on it.

There were dozens of Iraqi civilians killed by missiles that missed their targets, possibly as many or more Iraqi military, and no U.S. or British casualties.

While the bombing was ongoing, the Vanguards of Conquest issued a communiqué to Islamist groups calling for attacks against the United States “for its arrogance” in bombing Iraq.

According to Charles Duelfer, after the bombing the Iraqi ambassador to the UN told him, “If we had known that was all you would do, we would have ended the inspections long ago.”

6 See also

- Cruise missile strikes on Iraq (1993)
- Cruise missile strikes on Iraq (1996)

7 References

[21] Dr Brian Jones “confused” by Prime Minister’s evidence to Hutton, BBC, July 11, 2004
[22] A failure of intelligence, BBC Panorama, July 9, 2004
[26] Hitchens, Christopher. “No One Left to Lie To” Verso. 1999
[27] Interview with Kissinger and Brzezinski. Mission Accomplished? Newshour with Jim Lehrer
8 External links

- Overview of Operation Desert Fox - DefenseLink
- Operation Desert Fox - BBC News
- Transcript of President Clinton’s speech announcing the attack - CNN
- Iraq attacked in 'Operation Desert Fox' - CNN
- Strike on Iraq - Operation Desert Fox - CNN
- Operation Desert FoxE: Effectiveness With Unintended Effects
- Operation Desert Fox
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9.1 Text

- **Bombing of Iraq (1998)**

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