

U.S., Kuwait Mark Gulf War 20th Anniversary

By Lisa Daniel
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25, 2011 – This week marks 20 years since the United States, as part of a 34-nation coalition, drove Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi army out of Kuwait, returning that nation to sovereignty and reshaping the U.S. military to the force it is today.



A formation of armored vehicles, manned by U.S. soldiers and Marines, stand ready to lead a convoy of coalition forces through the parade grounds established for the 50/20 celebration in Kuwait City, Kuwait, Feb. 21, 2011. The celebration commemorates the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait during the first Gulf War and the 50th anniversary of Kuwait's independence from Great Britain. It also honors the veterans of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and recognizes the long standing and successful partnership that is indicative of U.S. friendships in the region. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. M. Benjamin Gable
(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

U.S. service members will join military members from dozens of other coalition countries tomorrow in a grand military parade through the streets of Kuwait City, in what the Kuwaiti government is calling its country’s “Golden Jubilee.” The event also marks the 50th anniversary of Kuwait’s independence from Great Britain and, U.S. military officials say, will recognize the important strategic alliance between Kuwait and the United States.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will join 22 presidents, 64 heads of state and other senior officials attending the ceremonies.

“Twenty years ago, Kuwait and the United States formed an unbreakable alliance, which has grown into a comprehensive partnership that promotes freedom, prosperity and democracy in the Middle East region and the

world,” Army Lt. Gen. William G. Webster Jr., commander of U.S. Third Army, said in a statement to the Kuwaiti people.

The celebration comes as history is being made in the Middle East where citizen uprisings in recent weeks have prompted revolutions against repressive governments that have spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Iran, Libya and elsewhere.

The Kuwaiti government on its website says Iraq’s invasion was “a critical point in modern Arab history.” It goes on to say that “the Kuwaiti government and its people will never forget all those who stood with them and supported them during the period of brutal invasion.”

The first Gulf War was sparked when then-Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein ordered an invasion of Kuwait after that nation’s government defied his demands to cut oil production to allow for increased prices.

On Aug. 2, 1990, three armored divisions of Hussein’s Republican Guard crossed into Kuwait, sped toward the capital of Kuwait City and, within days, overran Kuwait, according to Army historian Richard Stewart’s “War in the Persian Gulf: Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, August 1990-March 1991,” published by the Center of Military History.

Many Kuwaitis fled to neighboring Saudi Arabia -- the largest foreign supplier of U.S. oil. Many Saudis feared Hussein would unleash his million-man army on their country next. At the urging of President George H. W. Bush, Saudi King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, on Aug. 6, 1990, approved moving U.S. military assets onto Saudi soil, opening the door to “the most concentrated and complex projection of American military power since World War II,” Stewart wrote.

Under the direction of then-Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney -- who would later serve as vice president to President George W. Bush when U.S. forces pushed into Iraq to topple Hussein in March 2003 -- and Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr., then-Centcom commander, U.S. forces amassed a buildup of nearly 200,000 troops in Saudi Arabia by late September 1990 as part of Operation Desert Shield.

The U.S. commitment to drive Iraq’s army out of Kuwait would grow to 697,000 soldiers, Marines and airmen, and include the deployment of 108 Navy ships to the region, Webster noted in his anniversary message to the Kuwaitis.

America wasn’t alone during the first Gulf War. The Bush administration built a 33-member coalition that included longtime western allies such as Great Britain, France and Canada, as well as Iraq’s neighbors in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Oman, and Qatar, as well as Pakistan.

“The United States assembled an unprecedented and broad coalition to redress the strategic balance in the Middle East upset by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait,” according to a Joint Staff paper about the war. The first Gulf War “ushered in an era of coalition warfare in which the United States has generally sought the approval and support of other governments and international agencies before intervening in a regional crisis,” the paper said.

Coalition troops assembled in the region as civilian leaders worked with the United Nations to pressure Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. When embargos and other measures were exhausted, the U.N. set a Jan. 15, 1991, deadline for the Iraqi military to depart Kuwait. Hussein ignored the deadline.

“The hammer fell on Iraqi forces early in the morning of Jan. 17,” Lt. Col. Les’ Melnyk, an Army National Guard historian, wrote in “Mobilizing for the Storm: The Army National Guard in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.” In the United States, where it was still Jan. 16, he noted, “the air and missile attacks coming in over Baghdad were broadcast live as the [television] networks broke in on their evening lineup,” allowing Americans, for the first time, to watch a real-time, play-by-play of their military at war.

“It was the most stunning bombing campaign in the history of the world,” Melnyk wrote.

For 38 days, the aerial bombardment put on full display weapons and equipment that could not have been imagined when U.S. troops fought their last major war two decades earlier in Vietnam.

“There were silent airplanes that could not be tracked from the ground, bombs that could be steered to hit a target the size of a chair, missiles that could destroy other missiles in midair, and satellites that could tell a person in the middle of the trackless desert where they were,” the U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission wrote of the Gulf War.

The Iraqis’ counterattack of aging Scud missiles was no match for the coalition, which

dropped at least 88,500 tons of bombs during more than 100,000 sorties, destroying all significant Iraqi targets, allowing for the U.S.-led ground war, Operation Desert Storm, to begin Feb. 24.

With the Vietnam War as their previous point of reference, American broadcasters and politicians speculated that the ground war would change the coalition's good fortunes, Melnyk noted. Hussein had used chemical weapons before and there was reason to believe he would again, he said.

That proved not to be the case. Just 100 hours after the ground war began, it was over. By Feb. 27, Iraq's ground forces were in full retreat, and Bush declared a cease-fire and the liberation of Kuwait.

The United States suffered 148 combat deaths and 145 non-combat deaths during the seven-month conflict. In addition, 467 U.S. service members were wounded in action.

The Gulf War was a significant turning point for the U.S. military in many ways, not the least of which was proving it could fight alongside its Arab allies.

"The coalition proved that Western and Arab forces can and will stand together, and can do so with speed and precision," Webster wrote in his letter to the Kuwaitis.

The first Gulf War also solidified confidence that National Guard and reserve members could effectively fight alongside active duty troops, Melnyk said. "We take it for granted today, but before the Gulf War, and in the 20 years since then, the [Guard and] reserves have been part of virtually every contingency operation, large or small, that the military has engaged in," he said.

The war also vindicated changes in military training, doctrine and structure, and the investment in high-tech equipment that took place throughout the 1980s, Joint Force historians said. It further validated laws that strengthened the role of joint forces and that of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and combatant commanders, they said.

"The Gulf War marked the emergence of the United States as the dominant and continuing force for stability in the Persian Gulf region," they wrote. "Perhaps most importantly, overwhelming victory in Operation Desert Storm reaffirmed America's faith in its armed forces and, to some extent, in itself, its products, performance, purpose and dedication."

Biographies:

[Navy Adm. Mike Mullen](#)

[Army Lt. Gen. William G. Webster Jr.](#)

[President George H. W. Bush](#)

[President George W. Bush](#)

Related Sites:

[U.S. Third Army Commander's Message to Kuwaiti Citizens](#)

[U.S. Third Army Division](#)



Kuwaiti soldiers at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, march in formation during rehearsals for the Feb. 26 celebration parade in Kuwait City, Feb. 21, 2011. U.S. support for the celebration, which commemorates the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait during the first Gulf War and the 50th anniversary of Kuwait's independence from Great Britain, showcases the historical importance of the enduring relationship between the United States and Kuwait. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. M. Benjamin Gable

[Download screen-resolution](#)

[Download high-resolution](#)



Kuwaiti troops bear the flags of partner nations during rehearsal at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Feb. 21, 2011, as they prepare to march with coalition troops in a Feb. 26 celebration honoring the liberation of Kuwait as well as the spirit of unity forged during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. M. Benjamin Gable

[Download screen-resolution](#)

[Download high-resolution](#)