

# THE WAR OF THE PUNDITS



Stansfield Turner

By Don Kowet  
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**P**unditry — declared all but dead a few months ago — is back with a vengeance.

Hogtied by press restrictions since Iraq invaded Kuwait Aug. 2, network newscasts and talk shows have counted on Washington's diviners and dowsers to fill the vacuum created by the void of dramatic television footage from the Persian Gulf.

These so-called "Rolodex commandos" have been talking their heads off on TV and opining at length on newspaper Op-Ed pages. Appropriately, a squadron of retired military men has been leading the assault, commanded by network consultants such as CBS' Gen. George Crist, NBC's Col. William Taylor and CNN's Col. Harry Summers. And there are free-lance Clausewitzes, such as the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William Crowe.

A review of the press coverage reveals that House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin is ahead in the category of Most TV Talk-Show Appearances by an Office-Holding Politician, with ex-CIA Director Stansfield Turner and ex-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger topping the Former Office-Holder charts.

Meanwhile, Washington's Brookings Institution is winning the Think Tank Relay Race, with TV appearances by a quartet of house "experts," including ABC Middle Eastern consultant Judith Kipper. Curiously, only one conservative civilian — Heritage Foundation Vice President Burton Pines — has gotten the chance to gab for the network cameras — on NBC's "Today."

As usual, the media are drawing their pundits from the pool of savants who have held a Cabinet post

(with former secretaries of state and defence in feverish demand) or ambassadorship. Specialists who claim expertise in Middle Eastern affairs by virtue of having written a book about the subject also are in demand. So are writers on foreign policy and military matters. So is just about everybody.

And as tension has increased, Iraq's pair of embattled ambassadors to the United States and the United Nations, Mohamed Al-Mashat and Abdul Amir Al-Anbari, have been performing a "We are a peace-loving nation" routine in tandem with television interviewers who play straight men.

Daily reporters, news magazine writers and television anchors also have been getting into the act.

The question is, after over three weeks of prognosticating and pontificating, how correct have these pundits proven to be in their predictions?

Until Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's tanks began their blitzkrieg through tiny Kuwait, U.S. television and newspapers were oblivious to the imminent threat.

For instance, four days before the Iraqi invasion, the networks' Sunday punditry panels all were debating U.S. domestic politics: ABC's "This Week With David Brinkley" was discussing the merits of Supreme Court nominee David Souter; CBS' "Face the Nation" was focusing on whether the Republican Party was collapsing; and NBC's "Meet the Press" was arguing about the "decline" of conservatism.

As late as one day before the Iraqi onslaught, there wasn't the slightest hint of a potential Iraqi/Kuwaiti clash published in the New York Times, The Washington Post or The Washington Times.

But predictably, afterwards only

The Washington Post \_\_\_\_\_  
 The New York Times \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Washington Times 51 \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Wall Street Journal \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Christian Science Monitor \_\_\_\_\_  
 New York Daily News \_\_\_\_\_  
 USA Today \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Chicago Tribune \_\_\_\_\_

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one pundit anywhere admitted his fallibility, publicly apologizing for his cloudy crystal ball.

"If you want me to be entirely frank with you," Michael Dewar of the International Institute of Strategic Studies told CBS "This Morning" host Harry Smith on the day of the Iraqi invasion, "I was interviewed by a BBC team only 24 hours ago, and while I said [Saddam Hussein] might nibble at Kuwaiti territory — and now I have to eat my words — I also said that I didn't think he would go as far as outright invasion."

In contrast, on CNN that same day, former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger was able safely to state, by hindsight: "It was almost foreordained that [Iraqi president Saddam Hussein] would move in some manner militarily against Kuwait."

Added Sen. David Boren on "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour: "I'd have to say it's not completely a surprise."

Mr. Dewar had forgotten punditry's prime directive: Never render a definite "yes" or "no" verdict unless you are clever enough to blur that prophecy by a bunch of triple negatives.

Consider, for example, Adm. Crowe's exemplary low-risk response to a question put by ABC's Forrest Sawyer on "Good Morning America."

"Is there a chance that Iraq will just continue to push right on over to those Saudi oil fields?" Mr. Sawyer asked.

"I don't know how high the probabilities are," Adm. Crowe responded, "but I don't think we can assume that they're not eventually going to do that, either in the short or the long term."

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Adm. Crowe's mastery of such phrases as, "It severely complicates the calculus," and, "It's a very, very difficult dilemma," and, "It's an open question," confirm his reputation as a pundit who rarely is proved wrong.

"To a journalist who has spent substantial time in Saudi Arabia over the past decade, the Saudi reaction in coming months is fully predictable," wrote the Wall Street Journal's Karen Elliot House.

"The Saudi royal family [has] only one policy . . . a policy that hopes for the benefits of an American security blanket without paying the political price of allowing an American presence in the kingdom." Miss House went on to warn the United States not to be "deterred by Saudi Arabia's cowardice."

The problem with this stinging anti-Saudi blast was that Miss House's piece appeared on Aug. 7 — the day the Saudis invited in U.S. troops.

Two days before, NBC correspondent Fred Francis told "Meet the Press" anchor Garrick Utley that he understood from "senior administration officials" that the Saudis "will not" change their minds.

Mr. Utley: "They'd rather live with the devil in Kuwait than face a war."

Mr. Francis: "You bet."

Would the Saudis cut off the Iraqi pipeline passing through their territory? asked CBS' Lesley Stahl on "Face the Nation."

"No," said James Schlesinger.

"That's the purpose of [the Iraqi] intimidation."

Miss House wasn't the only pundit who showed poor timing. On Aug. 6, a day before President Bush announced the United States was sending troops — including the 82nd Airborne Division — to Saudi Arabia, former White House communications director Patrick Buchanan wrote in a column in The Washington Times:

"An America that packed up and abandoned Lebanon, after 250 Marines were lost in a single explosion, is not going to send the 82nd Airborne up the Euphrates Valley to rescue Kuwait."

Most experts agreed that Mr. Bush definitely wouldn't take military action in the Persian Gulf.

"I don't think we have any intention of intervening militarily," Mr. Schlesinger said on CNN's "Day-

watch." "We have exhausted what we can do economically and diplomatically."

"For all of the military might America has built since 1939, it is almost as paralyzed in the face of this aggression as it was a half-century ago, when Hitler swallowed victim after victim in Europe," said U.S. News & World Report.

On NBC's "Meet the Press," New York Times Washington correspondent R. W. Apple compared Mr. Bush to Britain's Neville Chamberlain appeasing Adolf Hitler.

"Senator [William] Cohen, there's a Republican in the White House," Mr. Apple said. "He's a man everybody has been calling a very lucky president for 18 months. His luck seems to have run out."

### **'No U.S. ground forces will be deployed'**

"For the U.S. to introduce ground troops I think would be insane," said former National Security Council adviser Robert Hunter on CNN's "World Day." "We would be out-classed. We wouldn't have a chance."

"As far as talking about ground forces, of course not," said Sen. Lloyd Bentsen.

Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, appearing on CNN's "Newsmaker Saturday," chided Adm. Crowe because, he said, "With all of the \$300 billion and all of the buildup of defense spending at this moment, we seem rather helpless in the Middle East."

### **'We cannot count on our allies'**

Mr. Metzenbaum was part of the punditry consensus that argued the United States could expect scant support from its allies. The Japanese and French "can't be counted on," he warned.

Of course, hardly anyone expected support from the other Persian Gulf states, who were either intimidated by Iraq's military prowess or reluctant to break "the bonds of Arab unity."

If Mr. Hussein should "Afghanisthanize" Kuwait, "what will the rest of the Arab world do?" Miss Stahl asked on "Face the Nation." "Will they just accept that and that will become the new status quo?"

"Given the history of the Arab world, they may just accept that," said correspondent Alan Pizzev. "They'll be nervous, but I don't see them doing very much about it."

"We're now trying to convince the Turks and the Saudis to close [their] pipelines," New York Times Middle Eastern correspondent Thomas

Friedman told CBS' "This Morning" co-host Paula Zahn. "They're not going to do that."

Bryant Gumbel on "Today": "We get word this morning, just moments ago in fact, that Egypt has decided that it will not join any multinational force to defend Saudi Arabia against Iraq."

Miss Zahn, to CBS Middle Eastern consultant Fouad Ajami: "Fouad, we've got the Arab leaders meeting in Cairo right now. We understand there is a plan that's being floated that would allow several Arab countries to, in essence, buy off Saddam Hussein."

Mr. Ajami: "Right."

Miss Zahn: "In essence, what they're offering is what, war reparations?"

Mr. Ajami: "Right."

Miss Zahn "[Giving] back to Iraq \$2.4 billion worth of oil money?"

Mr. Ajami: "Right."

Wrong.

### **'Sufficient food supplies'**

"Today" co-host Deborah Norville: "The estimates are there is at least six months' worth of food — in most of the critical categories — to last the Iraqis."

Mr. Al-Anbari, the Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations, on "This Week With David Brinkley": "I assure you that [despite the embargo and naval blockade] we'll have enough food to eat."

Mr. Al-Anbari, on Nightline a week later: "When our babies are starving, foreign babies in Iraq will have to suffer, too."

### **'King Hussein's carrying a message'**

"Good Morning America co-host Charles Gibson: "King Hussein of Jordan is in the United States this morning. . . . The king reportedly is carrying a letter to Mr. Bush from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein."

Every major U.S. media entity said King Hussein was conveying a personal message to Mr. Bush from the Iraqi president. After the Bush/Hussein powwow, Jordan's king revealed that the "message" didn't exist.

The only pundit who got that story right was Jean Abinader, president of the U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce. On CNN's "Crossfire," co-host Michael Kinsley asked, "What is this secret message that everyone says King Hussein is carrying from Saddam Hussein to President Bush?"

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"Well, the [Jordanian] foreign minister assured me that there was no secret message," Mr. Abinader replied.

"You mean he has no proposal?" asked the program's other host, Patrick Buchanan. "You're saying that the King of Jordan, when he sees the president tomorrow, is not going to have any proposal to lay on the table?"

"I'm saying that," said Mr. Abinader.

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### **'Hussein will not play the hostage card'**

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"I think Saddam has far bigger stakes to work with than playing with what he would consider penny ante stuff, such as American hostages," Col. William Taylor of Washington's Center for Strategic Studies told Miss Norville on "Today."

Miss Norville, on another broadcast: "There are not only children and Iraqis in Iraq, there are also many Westerners. Do you think they're in greater danger of having supplies withheld from them?"

Stephen Johnson, president of Americares, a U.S.-based relief group: "No, I don't think there's any danger of having supplies withheld from them."

But after three weeks of short-sighted punditry, "Meet the Press" anchor Garrick Utley still stands tall as the media's most myopic tea-leaf reader. Two days before U.S. troops started shipping out to Saudi Arabia, Mr. Utley closed his program by offering Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia as the predecessor for the pattern of events about to unfold in the Persian Gulf.

"The reactions then were not that different from what we may see now," Mr. Utley said. "Initial outrage over naked aggression, followed by appeasement by some and finally, yes, acceptance by most."

If Mr. Utley's prophecy referred to the world's politicians, it has turned out dead wrong. But maybe he was predicting the behavior of his profession.