

Means Without Ends:

Assessing American Statecraft During Operation Earnest Will



[Photo](#): An armed U.S. Navy LTV A-7E Corsair II from Attack Squadron VA-94 Shrikes is launched from the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise (CVN-65) during "Operation Praying Mantis" on 18 April 1988 in the Persian Gulf. (Wikimedia Commons).

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Executive Summary

Operation Earnest Will, the U.S. Navy's effort to escort reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Persian Gulf between 1987 and 1989, was the largest American naval surface operation since World War II.¹ The operation took place against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War, a bloody eight-year conflict that threatened the stability of the Persian Gulf, the flow of global energy resources, and the regional influence of the United States. The operation was driven by a combination of strategic imperatives: protecting vital oil shipping lanes as defined by the Carter Doctrine,² denying the Soviet Union an opportunity to expand its influence in the Gulf, and restoring American credibility among Gulf Arab allies following the Iran-Contra scandal.³ The Reagan administration practiced sound statecraft in the lead-up to the operation, exhausting diplomatic and economic tools before committing military assets. However, once Earnest Will began, the administration escalated militarily without articulating a clear political endgame. Iran, isolated diplomatically, economically strangled by sanctions and the arms embargo, and facing a superior U.S. naval force, nonetheless continued attacking international shipping because measured violence in the Gulf was effectively its last remaining strategic option.⁴ The U.S. climbed an escalation ladder without offering Iran a viable offramp, and bilateral confrontation only ended after Iran faced substantial battlefield losses against Iraq.

¹Andrew R. Marvin, "Operation Earnest Will—The U.S. Foreign Policy behind U.S. Naval Operations in the Persian Gulf 1987–89; A Curious Case," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 81; David B. Crist, "Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea," *Policy Focus* 95 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009), 1.

²Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union Address Delivered before a Joint Session of the Congress," January 23, 1980, American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu; Janice Gross Stein, "The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place: The United States in the Gulf," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89): 146.

³Marvin, "Operation Earnest Will," 89; Christian Richer, "'No Sense in Military Terms': Reconsidering the Surprising Use of Force in a Gray Zone Conflict," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 23, no. 3 (2024): 170.

⁴Bruce Riedel, "Lessons from America's First War with Iran," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 101–106.

Introduction: The Ross Statecraft Framework

In *Statecraft* (2007) and its successor *Statecraft 2.0* (2025), Ambassador Dennis Ross defines statecraft as knowing how to best integrate and use every available asset, including military, diplomatic, intelligence, public, economic, and psychological tools, to meet clearly defined objectives.⁵ Critically, Ross argues that statecraft involves influencing others, both those who are already friendly and share American purposes and those who do not, and that it requires more than simply orchestrating available resources. Rather, it requires putting means into a broader context of goals and capabilities.⁶ The central theme that Ross identifies across decades of American foreign policy is not a lack of capability, but a failure to meet this standard. Administrations commit military assets before defining what success looks like, over-rely on force while neglecting the diplomatic track, and apply coercive pressure without offering adversaries a credible path to compliance. Ross draws his clearest positive contrast from the 1991 Gulf War, an intervention with explicitly stated objectives, a coordinated coalition that integrated both friendly and unfriendly parties, and a defined terminus on the American commitment.⁷

Operation Earnest Will, the U.S. Navy's effort to escort reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Persian Gulf between 1987 and 1988, offers a compelling and genuinely mixed case through which to evaluate the practice of statecraft. The Reagan administration initially practiced sound statecraft in the lead-up to the operation, exhausting diplomatic and economic instruments, strengthening allied relationships across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and making a calculated decision to escalate militarily only when those measures proved insufficient.⁸ Once

⁵ Ross, *Statecraft*, 2007; Ross, *Statecraft 2.0*, 2025.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard A. Mobley, "London and Washington—Maintaining Naval Cooperation despite Strategic Differences during Operation Earnest Will," *Naval War College Review* 74, no. 2 (Spring 2021);

the military phase began, however, the administration climbed an escalation ladder without articulating a political endgame and left Iran with costs but no viable offramp. While the operation achieved tactical successes, those outcomes owed more to Iranian exhaustion and Iraqi battlefield success than to deliberate design.

Strategic Context

Major U.S. naval operations in the Persian Gulf at the end of the 1980s followed a highly active period of regional and Cold War confrontation. Several important milestones set the stage for the operational environment in which Earnest Will took place. In December of 1971, the British Navy formally withdrew from the Persian Gulf, ending over 150 years of continuous presence and with it the protectorate system which covered Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Trucial States, and Oman.⁹ The withdrawal was a watershed moment in great power politics in the Gulf, and reflected the evolving priorities of the UK at the time, as outlined in the formal declaration of intent by the Labour government in 1968.¹⁰ The U.S. was overextended militarily in 1971 such that it could not afford to sustain the commitment required to fill the vacuum left by the UK.¹¹ With the U.S. military already focused on the war in Vietnam, instability in Latin America, and deterring the USSR in Europe and around the world, the Nixon administration opted instead to rely on Iran, then under the rule of the Shah, and Saudi Arabia to ensure stability and protect U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf.¹² Between Iran, armed to the teeth with the latest American weapons, and Saudi Arabia, rich in both oil and regional influence, the Nixon administration struck a balance that enabled the flow of oil and denied influence to the USSR.

⁹Marvin, "Operation Earnest Will," 83.

¹⁰Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

¹¹Marvin, "Operation Earnest Will," 83.

¹²Marvin, "Operation Earnest Will," 83.; Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 147.

This strategy, known as the Nixon Doctrine, was rendered obsolete in 1979 following the overthrow of the Shah during the Islamic Revolution in Iran.¹³ With the memory of the Arab Oil Embargo still fresh in the minds of American citizens, President Carter explicitly addressed the imperative nature of ensuring a stable and secure Persian Gulf in his State of the Union in 1980. President Carter stated that:

*“Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”*¹⁴

This commitment, known as the Carter Doctrine, set the stage for U.S. military involvement in the Gulf during the tumultuous decade that followed by clearly defining U.S. priorities. The U.S. and Western Europe were highly reliant on energy resources from the Persian Gulf, and the Arab Oil Embargo highlighted the fragility of American power in the face of major disruptions in global energy markets.¹⁵ Therefore, according to the Carter Doctrine, if any state were to disrupt the shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. would justify intervention on the basis of protecting the “vital interest” that was access to energy resources.

Operation Earnest Will: Lead-up and Decision

Just nine months after President Carter articulated his strategy, Iraq invaded Iran hoping to capitalize on the chaos that followed the Islamic Revolution.¹⁶ Despite the post-revolution

¹³Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 83–84.

¹⁴Carter, “State of the Union Address,” January 23, 1980. Quoted in Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 146.

¹⁵Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 146.

¹⁶Richer, ““No Sense in Military Terms,”” 165.

chaos, Iran resisted, denying Iraq a swift victory, and forcing a protracted war of attrition. Early in the war, Iran destroyed Iraqi oil terminals positioned at the end of the strategically important Fao Peninsula to harm Iraqi revenue flows.¹⁷ Though Iraq lost its only port, it retained the ability to export oil through pipelines in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and continued importing weapons and dry goods overland via ports controlled by its Arab neighbors.¹⁸ Iran, on the other hand, relied entirely on the Persian Gulf, and particularly its loading terminal on Kharg Island, to maintain revenue flows and sustain its war effort.¹⁹ Iranian reliance on the Gulf was quickly identified as a strategic vulnerability by Iraqi leadership, which ultimately sought to exploit it during the Tanker War phase later in the war.

Initially, President Ronald Reagan approached the Iran-Iraq war in a strategic manner following his election in 1980. Despite the release of the American hostages held by Iranian revolutionaries upon his inauguration, his administration still regarded the Islamic Republic with suspicion and hostility. As such, though the U.S. technically remained neutral throughout the war, the administration developed a “tilt” towards Iraq.²⁰ With the war in a stalemate and neither side willing to negotiate, the U.S. launched Operation Staunch as a means to halt the flow of weapons to Iran.²¹ Operation Staunch sought to block Iranian revenue and arms flows through sanctions and a unilateral arms embargo. Even though Iraq had initiated the war, Iran was perceived as a pariah and a threat by both the U.S and the regional Arab countries, justifying the tilt in favor of Iraq.

¹⁷Ibid., 174.

¹⁸Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 85; Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 147n21.

¹⁹Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 85.

²⁰ Carlos Osorio, ed., “Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein: The U.S. Tilts toward Iraq, 1980–1984,” National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 82 (Washington, DC: National Security Archive, George Washington University, February 25, 2003), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/index2.htm>.

²¹Riedel, “Lessons from America’s First War with Iran,” 102–103; Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 2.

Despite Operation Staunch, Iran still retained the ability to inflict damage on Iraqi forces and maritime interests. While the U.S. feared the export of terrorism abroad and the harassing of international shipping, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states perceived the Shiite revolutionary ideology led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as an explicit threat to their regimes and did what they could, short of military action, to support Iraq and prevent an Iranian victory. These efforts mostly took the shape of tens of billions of dollars in loans, as well as access to ports for the import of critical materials given the loss of Iraq's sole port earlier in the war.²²

With front lines stalled, Iraq broadened its target bank as a means to pressure Iran into accepting a ceasefire. After engaging in a low-intensity maritime campaign, attacking 43 Iranian ships between 1981–1983 with no retaliation, Iraqi attacks spiked in 1984 and provoked the first Iranian reciprocal attacks, officially initiating the Tanker War.²³ Notably, Iranian reprisal attacks were directed at non-Iraqi ships given the destruction of the port at Fao Peninsula. As a result, insurance rates, mostly controlled by Lloyd's of London, skyrocketed.²⁴ The UK declined to protect Arab shipping despite Lloyd's exposure and historical ties, which aligned with the initial European policy of non-intervention in the conflict.²⁵ After the Iranian attack on the Kuwaiti tanker *Umm Casbah*, the GCC asked the United Nations Security Council to address Iranian attacks on neutral shipping, resulting in UNSC Res. 552.²⁶ The resolution condemned Iranian attacks on neutral shipping and demanded freedom of navigation for non-belligerent states, strengthening the justification for international intervention.²⁷

²²Richer, ““No Sense in Military Terms,”” 168.

²³Ibid., 166.

²⁴Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 87, 99.

²⁵Mobley, “London and Washington.”; Richer, ““No Sense in Military Terms,”” 175.

²⁶Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 85.

²⁷Ibid.

The Reagan administration took several non-kinetic approaches to addressing the tanker crisis in the Persian Gulf before executing Operation Earnest Will. Diplomatically, the U.S. successfully supported UNSC Res. 552, which supported the GCC allies and aligned with the tilt towards Iraq while maintaining official neutrality. The efforts of Operation Staunch did complicate matters for Iranian military leaders, but failed to force Iran to negotiate a comprehensive settlement. Sanctions and the arms embargo were thus insufficient, and Iran categorically refused to engage with the U.S. directly nor provide an interlocutor. President Reagan did make efforts to deter Iran from attacking GCC countries by selling Hawk surface-to-air missiles to Kuwait and the UAE, and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft and F-15 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. The intention of the administration “was to create a GCC with some teeth in it,” according to then-Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Richard Armitage.²⁸

Though the new Saudi jets successfully deterred the Iranian Air Force, the “teeth” were not adequate to force Iran to the negotiating table, nor halt its attacks on neutral shipping. Furthermore, a successful Iranian offensive in February 1986, which resulted in the capture of the Fao Peninsula, provided Iran with a critical piece of leverage.²⁹ Iranian forces pushed to within 10 miles from the Kuwaiti border and the oil exporting terminal at Khawr Abdallah, which ultimately pushed Kuwait to turn to global powers for protection.³⁰ Though technically neutral in the conflict, the degree to which Kuwait supported Iraq via loans and overland transport can be understood through geography. The Iraqi territory between Kuwait and Iran,

²⁸Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 1.

²⁹Ibid., 2; Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 85; Richer, ““No Sense in Military Terms,”” 167.

³⁰Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: 1980–1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 50.

including the Fao Peninsula and Shatt al-Arab river, was an invaluable buffer that protected Kuwait from Iranian expansionism.³¹

On December 23, 1986, Kuwait formally requested information from the U.S. embassy regarding the implications of reflagging some Kuwaiti tankers under the American Flag, and whether they would be eligible to receive U.S. Navy protection.³² Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger promoted the idea as an opportunity to reestablish American credibility following the Iran-Contra scandal and establish a strong military presence in the Persian Gulf, ultimately curtailing Iranian expansionism.³³ Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Richard Murphy called for the assembly of a supportive coalition, including both GCC and European states, rather than immediate unilateral U.S. action.³⁴ The U.S. Navy opposed the prospect of reflagging and protecting Kuwaiti tankers to some extent, cautioning against the redeployment of forces from the Atlantic and Pacific fleets, and the risk of getting directly involved in the Iran-Iraq war,³⁵ though the opposition was not sufficient to prevent the operation from continuing.

Kuwait initially requested support from both the U.S. and the USSR; under the initial proposal, the U.S. would be responsible for six ships and the Soviets would be responsible for five.³⁶ President Reagan categorically rejected the involvement of the USSR in protecting Kuwaiti ships, and instead responded to the request by committing to protect all eleven tankers. Herein lies a primary, albeit publicly unstated, driver for the Reagan administration's policy in the Persian Gulf in 1986: Having exhausted diplomatic efforts to discourage Iranian attacks at

³¹ Ironically, it would be Iraqi expansionism that would most directly threaten Kuwait just a few years later.

³²Crist, "Gulf of Conflict," 2.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Richer, "'No Sense in Military Terms,'" 168; Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 148.

the U.N., taken measures to strengthen GCC defenses and deterrent capabilities, and failed to force Iran to negotiate through sanctions and embargo, the Kuwaiti request presented an opening to take an escalatory step in pursuing an “ends.”

What the “ends” was that the Reagan Administration was pursuing, however, is a complicated matter, as both ensuring freedom of navigation and specifically adhering to the Carter Doctrine were both used as justification for the mission. The administration utilized both arguments in lobbying congress and the American public, reasoning that protecting oil exports in the short term was a vital American interest, and that deferring to the Soviets would directly contradict the Carter Doctrine and threaten the future of U.S. access to Gulf resources. President Reagan directly addressed this intersection in a radio address on May 29, 1987. He referred to the oil shocks of the 1970s and argued that “[t]his could happen again if Iran and the Soviet Union were able to impose their will upon the friendly Arab States of the Persian Gulf, and Iran was allowed to block the free passage of neutral shipping.”³⁷

In the lead-up to Operation Earnest Will, the Reagan administration took a calculated approach to addressing the challenges presented by the Tanker War. The administration clearly defined the complementary goals of protecting shipping and denying the USSR an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence, and attempted to pursue these goals through diplomatic and economic means before deploying military assets.³⁸

Execution, Escalation, and The Ending

The first Kuwaiti oil tankers escorted by U.S. ships were the *Bridgeton* and the *Gas Prince*, both reflagged with the American Flag and owned by a Delaware-based holding

³⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks on United States Policy in the Persian Gulf,” May 29, 1987, American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu. Quoted in Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 97–98.

³⁸ Mobley, “London and Washington.”

company.³⁹ The convoy left its port on July 22, 1987, two days after the UNSC passed Resolution 598.⁴⁰ The new resolution called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of forces to international boundaries, and the Security Council was charged with considering appropriate action against any party that did not comply within two months.⁴¹ As Iran held the Fao Peninsula and Iraq held no meaningful Iranian territory, the resolution was quickly rejected by Iranian leadership. The international community generally supported the resolution, as Iran was perceived as a destabilizing regional actor after years of tanker attacks, despite the war beginning with an Iraqi invasion, though the U.S. had intentionally structured the wording of the resolution to ensure an Iranian rejection. Rather than pursuing a multilateral diplomatic approach to the ongoing crisis which could have provided both belligerent states with an acceptable offramp, the U.S. chose instead to build credibility for a military operation on the basis of a resolution it knew Iran would reject. Regardless, the U.S. was now armed with two UNSC Resolutions (552 and 598) and a sizable contingent of naval assets and amphibious assault troops in the Persian Gulf, and thus ready for Earnest Will to begin.

Though both the U.S. and Kuwait were legally non-belligerent states, both viewed Iran as a threat. Similarly, Iran resented the degree to which Kuwait had supported the Iraqi war effort, the public American policy tilt towards Iraq, including the ongoing arms embargo on Iran, and especially the fallout from the Iran-Contra scandal, which severely damaged U.S. credibility to Iranian leadership. Marine Gen. George Crist, then the commander of CENTCOM, planned an escort based on the principles of deterrence. Neither CENTCOM leadership nor the Intelligence Community (IC) thought direct Iranian attacks on the convoy or the American escort ships as

³⁹ Crist, "Gulf of Conflict," 3.

⁴⁰ Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 162; Richer, "No Sense in Military Terms," 171.

⁴¹ Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 162.

likely.⁴² This sentiment was echoed by Secretary of Defense Weinberger in a 1987 report to Congress stating that: “it is considered unlikely that Iran would seek a direct confrontation with the U.S. by directly or overtly attacking a U.S.-flag merchant ship.”⁴³ President Reagan summed up the collective attitude in October of 1987 after the U.S. destroyed two Iranian observation platforms in response to prior Iranian actions: “We’re not going to have a war with Iran. They’re not that stupid.”⁴⁴ Though all-out war did not ultimately develop between the U.S. and Iran, these assumptions ultimately proved inaccurate.

The first convoy, which began on July 22, 1987, included three ships providing close escort, a U.S. Navy P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft, carrier-based tactical aircraft, and U.S. AWACS aircraft based in Saudi Arabia. The following night, an Iranian logistics vessel laid a string of nine North Korean SADAF-02 mines directly across the path of the convoy.⁴⁵ The *Bridgeton* hit one of the mines, and immediately presented a new challenge to the military and political establishment. Iran was clearly not deterred by the U.S. naval presence, nor were they afraid to target U.S. assets directly. To add to the complicated nature of this development, the primary threats posed by Iran did not emanate from their conventional air force or navy; these forces had been severely degraded by years of war and the U.S. arms embargo.⁴⁶ Rather, Iran employed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-commanded small boats, highly maneuverable and armed with light and medium weapons, to lay mines and harass mariners.

⁴²Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 3; Richard A. Mobley, “Fighting Iran: Intelligence Support During Operation Earnest Will, 1987–88,” *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 3 (September 2016).

⁴³Caspar W. Weinberger, *A Report to the Congress on Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, June 1987), 17. Quoted in Richer, “No Sense in Military Terms,” 163. See also Mobley, “Fighting Iran.”

⁴⁴Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 205. Cited in Richer, “No Sense in Military Terms,” 164.

⁴⁵Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 7; Mobley, “Fighting Iran.”

⁴⁶Richer, “No Sense in Military Terms,” 173–174.

Neither the U.S. Navy nor the IC predicted that Iran would threaten Earnest Will operations in such a way that resembled a “guerilla war at sea,”⁴⁷ and CENTCOM lacked both plans and equipment to adequately address it. The mining of *Bridgeton*, which caused no casualties, did not alter the overall strategic calculus for the convoy element of the mission, but a new maritime counterinsurgency operation had to be developed in response to Iranian actions. This opened the door to further escalation, as more American troops and assets entered the Gulf, increasing the concentration of potential targets for Iranian attacks. That being said, it also provided an opportunity for the U.S. to deepen its strategic foothold in the Gulf without the necessity of fighting an all-out war, while developing innovative techniques to fight a low-intensity, asymmetrical maritime conflict.

Admiral Harold Bernsen, then the Middle East Force commander, proposed a plan to CENTCOM based on Operation Sea Float from the Vietnam War.⁴⁸ The plan called for the establishment of several floating patrol bases which, when paired with naval and helicopter patrols, would prevent Iran from employing its asymmetrical tactics to lay mines or harass shipping. The plan was implemented, and moderately successful. Increased U.S. presence complicated Iranian efforts and resulted in two notably direct confrontations between U.S. and Iranian forces. Iran took heavy losses from the capture of the *Iran Ajr* logistics vessel, which had been detected as preparing for a mining operation,⁴⁹ as well as from U.S. actions protecting a scouting mission weeks later. These confrontations did ultimately deter Iran from attacking U.S. forces directly, though it instead attacked the Kuwaiti harbor instead. In mid-October 1987, Iranian forces attacked the *Sea Isle City*, a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker, with captured Iraqi

⁴⁷Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 4.

⁴⁸Ibid., 4–5.

⁴⁹Mobley, “Deterrence Without Escalation,” 73.

Silkworm anti-ship cruise missiles.⁵⁰ This attack, which injured a U.S. Navy captain,⁵¹ reflected the inherent vulnerabilities of increasing American presence in the Gulf, and prompted retaliatory action ordered by President Reagan.

In the six months following initial U.S. deployment, Iranian attacks on shipping nearly doubled, rising from 37 during the previous six months to 66.⁵² With Earnest Will ongoing and Iran undeterred, the Reagan administration decided to increase the pressure on the IRGC in 1988. This was a methodical, highly intentional move intended to communicate to Iran the degree to which the U.S. Navy resolved to protect international shipping, and that the sporadic, albeit persistent, Iranian attacks were unacceptable to American leadership. The strategic goal of this escalation was not clear, however. While the ultimate decision to initiate Operation Earnest Will was rationalized by the need to protect vital resources and freedom of navigation, simultaneously establishing a foothold in the Gulf to deny influence to the USSR, the slow climb up the escalation ladder in 1987–88 was not accompanied by an articulated “end.”⁵³

Despite the absence of a well articulated strategy, the U.S. forces in the Gulf continued to escalate militarily. Tactically, this pressure was successful, and Iran paid dearly for its continued attacks. In one notable instance, the USS *Samuel B. Roberts*, a U.S. Navy Oliver Hazard Perry-class guided missile frigate, identified the Iranian frigate *Sahand* steaming straight towards it. The captain decided to call the Iranian’s bluff, and refused to pull away from what would have resulted in a head-on collision or exchange of fire. The Iranian ship was successfully deterred by the aggressive approach.⁵⁴ However, the *Samuel B. Roberts* hit an Iranian mine days later,

⁵⁰Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 3; Mobley, “Fighting Iran.”

⁵¹Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 7.

⁵² Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 155.

⁵³ G. M. Hughes, “Strategy in the Reflagging and Escort of Kuwaiti Tankers” (Washington, DC: National War College, 2005), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA437005.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Crist, “Gulf of Conflict,” 7.

leading to the most intense U.S. attack on Iranian targets, which ultimately contributed to the end of both the Iran-Iraq war and Operation Earnest Will.

On April 14, 1988, the *Samuel B. Roberts* sustained extensive damage from the aforementioned Iranian mine, injuring several sailors and almost sinking the ship.⁵⁵ President Reagan ordered U.S. forces to destroy two Iranian oil platforms and the Iranian frigate *Sabalan*, which had earned an infamous reputation for attacking neutral shipping, in an operation titled Praying Mantis. The single-day engagement resulted in another tactical victory for the U.S. Two Iranian vessels were sunk after additional Iranian forces mobilized, in addition to several IRGC speedboats, the two oil platforms Sassan and Sirri, and an F-4 Phantom jet. Iran took dozens of casualties while the U.S. lost no men to hostile fire.⁵⁶

Operation Praying Mantis finally delivered a limited strategic victory to the U.S. Navy, as Iranian forces halted their attacks on U.S. forces and the reflagged ships. Iran kept its conventional navy in port for the rest of the Iran-Iraq war, and IRGC small-boat attacks decreased significantly. The U.S. had successfully established itself as the dominant naval force in the Persian Gulf, diminished Iranian morale, and altered the battlefield in such a way that enabled a ceasefire to be reached later in 1988.

Operations Earnest Will and Praying Mantis were not sufficient, however, to create the necessary conditions for both Iran and Iraq to be willing to negotiate. Only after Iran lost both its leverage and its will were such negotiations possible. The two critical pieces of leverage that Iran lost in 1988 were the Persian Gulf, sufficiently addressed by the U.S. Navy especially after Operation Praying Mantis, and the Fao Peninsula, which an Iraqi offensive successfully recaptured in April 1988.⁵⁷ Iranian will to continue fighting, which could be determined by the

⁵⁵ Mobley, "Deterrence Without Escalation," 73.

⁵⁶ Crist, "Gulf of Conflict," 7–9; Mobley, "Deterrence Without Escalation," 73.

⁵⁷ Richer, "No Sense in Military Terms," 177; Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 152.

statements of Supreme Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was damaged but not broken by the end of June 1988. The tragic downing of the civilian airliner Iran Air Flight 655, however, which resulted in the deaths of all on board,⁵⁸ ultimately pushed Iranian leadership to negotiate an end to the war with Iraq. With no leverage, a damaged navy, and the perception that the U.S. was willing to inflict catastrophic damage to civilians (despite the shootdown occurring accidentally during an engagement with the IRGC), Ayatollah Khomeini agreed to negotiate a ceasefire, finally ending the eight-year war.⁵⁹

Strategic Assessment

In retrospect, U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf between 1986–1989 through Operation Earnest Will succeeded in enhancing American standing in the Middle East, protecting allies and vital resources, and inflicting adequate harm on Iranian forces to create conditions for a ceasefire. The decision to accept Kuwait's request for reflagging and protection of tankers, on the condition that the USSR be excluded from any similar operation, further strengthened U.S. geopolitical stature and prevented an enduring Soviet presence in the Gulf, which would have been a major strategic vulnerability. The operation, however, illuminated both the value and limits of coercive military action which does not escalate into war. Neither the Iran-Iraq War, nor the Tanker War within it, ended purely as a result of U.S. operations.

While Operation Earnest Will ultimately contributed to a ceasefire and the end of the Iran-Iraq War, a critical assessment of U.S. strategy reveals significant shortcomings in both conception and execution. Perhaps most telling is the observation that the decision to deepen U.S. involvement was driven by a desire to restore American credibility following the

⁵⁸ Crist, "Gulf of Conflict," 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid.; Mobley, "Deterrence Without Escalation," 76; Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 166–167.

Iran-Contra scandal, rather than by a coherent strategic vision.⁶⁰ The administration had pursued secret arms negotiations with Iran as a means of building credibility with Tehran, and when those negotiations became public, the resulting damage to American standing among Gulf Arab states necessitated a dramatic show of resolve.⁶¹ This circular logic, in which the damage caused by one misguided policy was used to justify another, reflects shortcomings in the execution of good statecraft. Three concrete improvements, each grounded in the historical record, would have brought the operation closer to the statecraft standard. All three were technically feasible, though American leadership failed to construct the strategic architecture to act on them.

Define the objectives before committing. The decision to reflag Kuwaiti tankers consolidated four competing objectives into a single operation without resolving their inherent tensions. Protecting Kuwaiti shipping and adhering to the Carter Doctrine, denying Soviet influence, restoring post-Iran-Contra credibility, and containing Iranian expansionism were treated as complementary when they were often in conflict. Policymakers pursued actions that were specific to the time and place of the threats to international shipping, rather than to a larger, more deliberate strategic design.⁶² Furthermore, the scope of American deterrence was defined in response to Iranian actions rather than proactively, which essentially “invited a challenge.”⁶³ A pre-commitment review addressing the question of how success would ultimately manifest would have reduced ambiguity and shaped all subsequent decisions. The 1991 Gulf War offers a useful contrast: that intervention had a clearly defined objective, a well communicated and coordinated coalition structure, and a clear end goal.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 156-157.

⁶¹ Ibid., 156.

⁶² Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will,” 100-101.

⁶³ Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 150-151.

⁶⁴ Ross, *Statecraft*, 2007; Ross, *Statecraft 2.0*, 2025.

Address the mine countermeasure gap and build a coalition. The mining of the *Bridgeton* on the very first escorted convoy was not a surprise in retrospect. Weinberger's 1987 congressional report accurately identified terrorism, anti-ship missiles, and small boats as possible threats, but did not mention mines despite Iran's history of mining operations. Furthermore, Soviet escorts of Kuwaiti tankers had entered the Gulf in May 1987 with two minesweepers, and one of those tankers still struck a mine.⁶⁵ The U.S. Navy underestimated the Iranian mining threat, and intelligence assessments had incorrectly suggested Iran possessed relatively few mines.⁶⁶ A formal request for mine countermeasure support from allies, built into the operation from the outset, would have closed this operational gap and avoided the embarrassment of *Bridgeton* hitting a mine on day one. Such a request would have required a substantial diplomatic effort leading up to Earnest Will, ideally launched months before execution. NATO allies were already somewhat displeased with unilateral U.S. decisionmaking in the Middle East, and thus reluctant to contribute to a mission that did not directly impact them. This displeasure stemmed from President Carter's unilateral creation of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), the precursor to CENTCOM, in 1979 in response to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The U.S. had then attempted to convince its NATO allies to broaden the scope of NATO to include contingencies in West Asia as a means to complement the RDF and secure the Gulf. NATO allies flatly rejected these requests, and little effort was made by the U.S. between 1980-1986 to constructively address the Persian Gulf through NATO to restore trust and bridge gaps between allies. Ultimately, NATO allies' contributions to Gulf

⁶⁵ Richer, "No Sense in Military Terms," 175-176.

⁶⁶ Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 149.

policing and minesweeping came as a result of U.S. coercion and leverage rather than as a result of aligning interests.⁶⁷

Pursue a diplomatic track in parallel, not in sequence. Stein (1988) argues that the deterrent and diplomatic strategies worked against each other throughout 1987, and that Washington made no serious effort to provide Iran with an acceptable offramp.⁶⁸ Twice in 1987 the U.S. had an opening to do so: In August, the U.S. and UK convinced Saddam to briefly cease attacks on shipping and Iran responded in kind. Iraqi attacks resumed at the end of the month and Iranian attacks followed, but no serious diplomatic effort was made to bridge gaps during the respite.⁶⁹ Furthermore, UNSCR 598 was deliberately designed for an inevitable Iranian rejection, and this was allegedly communicated to Saddam directly.⁷⁰ Though this aligned with the U.S. tilt towards Iraq, the U.S. climbed an escalation ladder with Iran without an articulated offramp, relying on military pressure alone to produce a political outcome.⁷¹ Stein argues the resolution could have been paired with an attempt to open a back channel through the UK to see if pragmatists around Iranian President Rafsanjani had room to maneuver.⁷² The Ross framework is explicit on this point: leverage only works when the adversary understands both the cost of defiance and the benefit of compliance.⁷³ Iran was repeatedly shown the cost of defiance, but the U.S. failed to offer the benefit of compliance.

Conclusion

⁶⁷ Charles A. Kupchan, "NATO and the Persian Gulf: Examining Intra-Alliance Behavior," *International Organization* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 319–20.

⁶⁸ Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 162-163.

⁶⁹ Mobley, "Deterrence Without Escalation," 79-80.

⁷⁰ Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 162n64.

⁷¹ Hughes, "Strategy in the Reflagging and Escort of Kuwaiti Tankers."

⁷² Stein, "The Wrong Strategy," 163; Mobley, "London and Washington."

⁷³ Ross, *Statecraft*, 2007; Ross, *Statecraft 2.0*, 2025.

Operation Earnest Will offers a useful case through which to evaluate the Ross framework. The Reagan administration demonstrated the virtues Amb. Ross describes in the lead-up to the operation, sequencing its use of instruments, cultivating relationships with friendly Gulf states, and establishing a deliberate threshold for military commitment.⁷⁴ When applied to the military phase, however, the same framework exposes the failures Amb. Ross identifies across decades of American foreign policy.⁷⁵ The administration misread its adversary, allowed the scope of its commitment to be defined by Iranian actions rather than prior design, and pursued military escalation without a corresponding effort to put its means into a broader context of goals and capabilities.⁷⁶ The three improvements stated above were technically possible. The administration had the time and expertise to devise a broader strategic vision, allied minesweeping capabilities were available, and diplomatic openings emerged. The lack of a cohesive strategy, itself a detractor, inhibited the ability of U.S. decision makers to demonstrate ideal statecraft. Amb. Ross argues that statecraft requires influencing both friendly parties and adversaries alike, and that leverage is only effective when an adversary understands both the cost of defiance and the benefit of compliance. Ultimately, Iran was made to understand the former, but never meaningfully offered the latter.

⁷⁴ Mobley, “London and Washington;” Marvin, “Operation Earnest Will.”

⁷⁵ Ross, *Statecraft*, 2007; Ross, *Statecraft 2.0*, 2025.

⁷⁶ Stein, “The Wrong Strategy,” 150-151; Mobley, “Deterrence Without Escalation,” 72-74.

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