

This paper was presented on January 30, 1991 in the midst of the Gulf War to an audience at Alumni House on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. An earlier version had been distributed widely via electronic mail, starting on December 31, 1990. It was published in print in *Peace Research* 23 (1991): 25-32.

Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf

George Lakoff, Linguistics Department, UC Berkeley

Metaphors can kill. The discourse over whether to go to war in the gulf was a panorama of metaphor. Secretary of State Baker saw Saddam Hussein as "sitting on our economic lifeline." President Bush portrayed him as having a "stranglehold" on our economy. General Schwarzkopf characterized the occupation of Kuwait as a "rape" that was ongoing. The President said that the US was in the gulf to "protect freedom, protect our future, and protect the innocent", and that we had to "push Saddam Hussein back." Saddam Hussein was painted as a Hitler. It is vital, literally vital, to understand just what role metaphorical thought played in bringing us in this war.

Metaphorical thought, in itself, is neither good nor bad; it is simply commonplace and inescapable. Abstractions and enormously complex situations are routinely understood via metaphor. Indeed, there is an extensive, and mostly unconscious, system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. Part of this system is devoted to understanding international relations and war. We now know enough about this system to have an idea of how it functions.

The metaphorical understanding of a situation functions in two parts. First, there is a widespread, relatively fixed set of metaphors that structure how we think. For example, a decision to go to war might be seen as a form of cost-benefit analysis, where war is justified when the costs of going to war are less than the costs of not going to war. Second, there is a set of metaphorical definitions that allow one to apply such a metaphor to a particular situation. In this case, there must be a definition of "cost", including a means of comparing relative "costs". The use of a metaphor with a set of definitions becomes pernicious when it hides realities in a harmful way.

It is important to distinguish what is metaphorical from what is not. Pain, dismemberment, death, starvation, and the death and injury of loved ones are not metaphorical. They are real and in this war, they could afflict hundreds of thousands of real human beings, whether Iraqi, Kuwaiti, or American.

War as Politics; Politics as Business

Military and international relations strategists do use a cost-benefit analysis metaphor. It comes about through a metaphor that is taken as definitional by most strategic thinkers in the area of international politics, **Clausewitz's Metaphor**:

WAR IS POLITICS PURSUED BY OTHER MEANS.

Karl von Clausewitz was a Prussian general whose views on war became dominant in American foreign policy circles during the Vietnam War, when they were seen as a way to rationally limit the use of war as an instrument of foreign policy. Clausewitz is most commonly presented as seeing war in terms of political cost-benefit analysis: Each nation-state has political objectives, and war may best serve those objectives. The political "gains" are to be weighed against acceptable "costs." When the costs of war exceed the political gains, the war should cease.

There is another metaphor implicit here: POLITICS IS BUSINESS, where efficient political management is seen as akin to efficient business management. As in a well-run business, a well-run government should keep a careful tally of costs and gains. This metaphor for characterizing politics, together with Clausewitz's metaphor, makes war a matter of cost-benefit analysis: defining beneficial "objectives", tallying the "costs", and deciding whether achieving the objectives is "worth" the costs.

The New York Times, on November 12, 1990, ran a front-page story announcing that "a national debate has begun as to whether the United States should go to war in the Persian Gulf." The *Times* described the debate as defined by what I have called Clausewitz's metaphor (though it described the metaphor as literal), and then raised the question, "What then is the nation's political object in the gulf and what level of sacrifice is it worth?" The "debate" was not over whether Clausewitz's metaphor was appropriate, but only over how various analysts calculated the relative gains and losses. The same was true of the hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where Clausewitz's metaphor provided the framework within which most discussion took place.

The broad acceptance of Clausewitz's metaphor raises vital questions: What, exactly, makes it a metaphor rather than a literal truth? Why does it seem so natural to foreign policy experts? How does it fit into the overall metaphor system for understanding foreign relations and war? And, most importantly, what realities does it hide?

To answer these questions, let us turn to the system of metaphorical thought most commonly used by the general public in comprehending international politics. What follows is a two-part discussion of the role of metaphorical reasoning about the gulf crisis. The first part lays out the central metaphor systems used in reasoning about the crisis: both the system used by foreign policy experts and the system used by the public at large. The second part discusses how the system was applied to the crisis in the gulf.

Part 1: The Metaphor Systems

The State-as-Person System

A state is conceptualized as a person, engaging in social relations within a world community. Its land-mass is its home. It lives in a neighborhood, and has neighbors, friends and enemies. States are seen as having inherent dispositions: they can be peaceful or aggressive, responsible or irresponsible, industrious or lazy.

Well-being is wealth. The general well-being of a state is understood in economic terms: its economic health. A serious threat to economic health can thus be seen as a death threat. To the extent that a nation's economy depends on foreign oil, that oil supply becomes a 'lifeline' (reinforced by the image of an oil pipeline).

Strength for a state is military strength. Maturity for the person-state is industrialization. Unindustrialized nations are 'underdeveloped', with industrialization as a natural state to be reached. Third-world nations are thus immature children, to be taught how to develop properly or disciplined if they get out of line. Nations that fail to industrialize at a rate considered normal are seen as akin to retarded children and judged as "backward" nations. Rationality is the maximization of self-interest.

There is an implicit logic to the use of these metaphors: Since it is in the interest of every person to be as strong and healthy as possible, a rational state seeks to maximize wealth and military might.

Violence can further self-interest. It can be stopped in three ways: Either a balance of power, so that no one in a neighborhood is strong enough to threaten anyone else. Or the use of collective persuasion by the community to make violence counter to self-interest. Or a cop strong enough to deter violence or punish it. The cop should act morally, in the community's interest, and with the sanction of the community as a whole.

Morality is a matter of accounting, of keeping the moral books balanced. A wrongdoer incurs a debt, and he must be made to pay. The moral books can be balanced by a return to the situation prior to the wrongdoing, by giving back what has been taken, by recompense, or by punishment. Justice is the balancing of the moral books.

War in this metaphor is a fight between two people, a form of hand-to-hand combat. Thus, the US sought to "push Iraq back out of Kuwait" or "deal the enemy a heavy blow," or "deliver a knockout punch." A just war is thus a form of combat for the purpose of settling moral accounts.

The most common discourse form in the West where there is combat to settle moral accounts is the classic fairy tale. When people are replaced by states in such a fairy tale, what results is the most common scenario for a just war. So:

The Fairy Tale of the Just War

Cast of characters: A villain, a victim, and a hero. The victim and the hero may be the same person.

The scenario: A crime is committed by the villain against an innocent victim (typically an assault, theft, or kidnapping). The offense occurs due to an imbalance of power and creates a moral imbalance. The hero either gathers helpers or decides to go it alone. The hero makes sacrifices; he undergoes difficulties, typically making an arduous heroic journey, sometimes across the sea to a treacherous terrain. The villain is inherently evil, perhaps even a monster, and thus reasoning with him is out of the question. The hero is left with no choice but to engage the villain in battle. The hero defeats the villain and rescues the victim. The moral balance is restored. Victory is achieved. The hero, who always acts honorably, has proved his manhood and achieved glory. The sacrifice was worthwhile. The hero receives acclaim, along with the gratitude of the victim and the community.

The fairy tale has an asymmetry built into it. The hero is moral and courageous, while the villain is amoral and vicious. The hero is rational, but though the villain may be cunning and calculating, he cannot be reasoned with. Heroes thus cannot negotiate with villains; they must defeat them. The enemy-as-demon metaphor arises as a consequence of the fact that we understand what a just war is in terms of this fairy tale.

Metaphorical Definition

The most natural way to justify a war on moral grounds is to fit this fairy tale structure to a given situation. This is done by metaphorical definition, that is, by answering the questions: Who is the victim? Who is the villain? Who is the hero? What is the crime? What counts as victory? Each set of answers provides a different filled-out scenario.

As the gulf crisis developed, President Bush tried to justify going to war by the use of such a scenario. At first, he couldn't get his story straight. What happened was that he was using two different sets of metaphorical definitions, which resulted in two different scenarios:

The Self-Defense Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, the US and other industrialized nations are victims, the crime is a death threat, that is, a threat to economic health.

The Rescue Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, Kuwait is victim, the crime is kidnap and rape. The American people could not accept the Self-Defense scenario, since it amounted to trading lives for oil. The day after a national poll that asked Americans what they would be willing to go to war for, the administration settled on the Rescue Scenario, which was readily embraced by the public, the media, and Congress as providing moral justification for going to war.

The Ruler-for-State Metonymy

There is a metonymy that goes hand-in-hand with the State-as-Person metaphor: **THE RULER STANDS FOR THE STATE.** Thus, we can refer to Iraq by referring to Saddam Hussein, and so have a single person, not just an amorphous state, to play the villain in the just war scenario. It is this metonymy that was invoked every time President Bush said "We have to get

Saddam out of Kuwait."

Incidentally, the metonymy only applies to those leaders perceived as illegitimate rulers. Thus, it would be strange for us to describe the American invasion of Kuwait by saying, "George Bush marched into Kuwait."

The Experts' Metaphors

Experts in international relations have an additional system of metaphors that are taken as defining a "rational" approach. The principal ones are the Rational Actor metaphor and Clausewitz's metaphor, which are commonly taught as truths in courses on international relations. We are now in a position to show precisely what is metaphorical about Clausewitz's metaphor. To do so, we need to look at a system of metaphors that is presupposed by Clausewitz's metaphor. We will begin with an everyday system of metaphors for understanding causation:

The Causal Commerce System

The Causal Commerce system is a way to comprehend actions intended to achieve positive effects, but which may also have negative effects. The system is composed of three metaphors:

Causal Transfer: An effect is an object transferred from a cause to an affected party. For example, sanctions are seen as "giving" Iraq economic difficulties. Correspondingly, economic difficulties for Iraq are seen as "coming from" the sanctions. This metaphor turns purposeful actions into transfers of objects.

The Exchange Metaphor for Value: The value of something is what you are willing to exchange for it. Whenever we ask whether it is "worth" going to war to get Iraq out of Kuwait, we are using the Exchange Metaphor for Value plus the Causal Transfer metaphor.

Well-being is Wealth: Things of value constitute wealth. Increases in well-being are "gains"; decreases in well-being are "costs." The metaphor of Well-being-as-Wealth has the effect of making qualitative effects quantitative. It not only makes qualitatively different things comparable, it even provides a kind of arithmetic calculus for adding up costs and gains.

Taken together, these three metaphors portray actions as commercial transactions with costs and gains. Seeing actions as transactions is crucial to applying ideas from economics to actions in general.

Risks

A risk is an action taken to achieve a positive effect, where the outcome is uncertain and where there is also a significant probability of a negative effect. Since Causal Commerce allows one to see positive effects of actions as "gains" and negative effects as "costs", it becomes natural to see a risky action metaphorically as a financial risk of a certain type, namely, a gamble.

Risks are Gambles

In gambling to achieve certain "gains", there are "stakes" that one can "lose". When one asks what is "at stake" in going to war, one is using the metaphors of Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles. These are also the metaphors that President Bush uses when he refers to strategic moves in the gulf as a "poker game" where it would be foolish for him to "show his cards", that is, to make strategic knowledge public.

The Mathematicization of Metaphor

The Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles metaphors lie behind our everyday way of understanding risky actions as gambles. At this point, mathematics enters the picture, since there is mathematics of gambling, namely, probability theory, decision theory, and game theory. Since the metaphors of Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles are so common in our everyday thought, their metaphorical nature often goes unnoticed. As a result, it is not uncommon for social scientists to think that the mathematics of gambling literally applies to all forms of risky action, and that it can provide a general basis for the scientific study of risky action, so that risk can be minimized.

Rational Action

Within the social sciences, especially in economics, it is common to see a rational person as someone who acts in his own self-interest, that is, to maximize his own well-being. Hard-core advocates of this view may even see altruistic action as being in one's self-interest if there is a value in feeling righteous about altruism and in deriving gratitude from others.

In the Causal Commerce system, where well-being is wealth, this view of Rational Action translates metaphorically into maximizing gains and minimizing losses. In other words:

Rationality is Profit Maximization

This metaphor presupposes Causal Commerce plus Risks-as-Gambles, and brings with it the mathematics of gambling as applied to risky action. It has the effect of turning specialists in mathematical economics into "scientific" specialists in acting rationally so as to minimize risk and cost while maximizing gains.

Suppose we now add the State-as-Person metaphor to the Rationality-as-Profit-Maximization metaphor. The result is:

International Politics is Business

Here the state is a Rational Actor, whose actions are transactions and who is engaged in maximizing gains and minimizing costs. This metaphor brings with it the mathematics of cost-benefit calculation and game theory, which is commonly taught in

graduate programs in international relations. Clausewitz's metaphor, the major metaphor preferred by international relations strategists, presupposes this system.

Clausewitz's Metaphor: War is Politics, pursued by other means.

Since politics is business, war becomes a matter of maximizing political gains and minimizing losses. In Clausewitzian terms, war is justified when there is more to be gained by going to war than by not going to war. Morality is absent from the Clausewitzian equation, except when there is a political cost to acting immorally or a political gain from acting morally.

Clausewitz's metaphor only allows war to be justified on pragmatic, not moral, grounds. To justify war on both moral and pragmatic grounds, the Fairy Tale of the Just War and Clausewitz's metaphor must mesh: The "worthwhile sacrifices" of the fairy tale must equal the Clausewitzian "costs" and the "victory" in the fairy tale must equal the Clausewitzian "gains."

Clausewitz's metaphor is the perfect expert's metaphor, since it requires specialists in political cost-benefit calculation. It sanctions the use of the mathematics of economics, probability theory, decision theory, and game theory in the name of making foreign policy rational and scientific.

Clausewitz's metaphor is commonly seen as literally true. We are now in a position to see exactly what makes it metaphorical. First, it uses the State-as-Person metaphor. Second, it turns qualitative effects on human beings into quantifiable costs and gains, thus seeing political action as economics. Third, it sees rationality as profit-making. Fourth, it sees war in terms of only one dimension of war, that of political expediency, which is in turn conceptualized as business.

War as Violent Crime

To bear in mind what is hidden by Clausewitz's metaphor, we should consider an alternative metaphor that is not used by professional strategists nor by the general public to understand war as we engage in it.

WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT.

Here, war is understood only in terms of its moral dimension, and not, say, its political or economic dimension. The metaphor highlights those aspects of war that would otherwise be seen as major crimes.

There is an Us/Them asymmetry between the public use of Clausewitz's metaphor and the War-as-Crime metaphor. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was reported on in terms of murder, theft and rape. The American invasion was never discussed in terms of murder, assault, and arson. Moreover, the US plans for war were seen, in Clausewitzian terms, as rational calculation. But the Iraqi invasion was discussed not as a rational move by Saddam Hussein, but as the work of a madman. We portrayed Us as rational, moral, and courageous and Them as criminal and insane.

War as a Competitive Game

It has long been noted that we understand war as a competitive game like chess, or as a sport, like football or boxing. It is a metaphor in which there is a clear winner and loser, and a clear end to the game. The metaphor highlights strategic thinking, team work, preparedness, the spectators in the world arena, the glory of winning and the shame of defeat.

This metaphor is taken very seriously. There is a long tradition in the West of training military officers in team sports and chess. The military is trained to win. This can lead to a metaphor conflict, as it did in Vietnam, since Clausewitz's metaphor seeks to maximize geopolitical gains, which may or may not be consistent with absolute military victory. Indeed, the right wing myth that the Vietnam War was fought "with one hand tied behind our back" uses the boxing version of the sports metaphor. What is being referred to was the application of Clausewitzian principles in Vietnam to limit our involvement in that war.

War as Medicine

Finally, there is a common metaphor in which military control by the enemy is seen as a cancer that can spread. In this metaphor, military "operations" are seen as hygienic, to "clean out" enemy fortifications. Bombing raids are portrayed as "surgical strikes" to "take out" anything that can serve a military purpose. The metaphor is supported by imagery of shiny metallic instruments of war, especially jets.

The First Days of the War

All these metaphor systems were apparent in the TV coverage of the first days of the war. The Fairy Tale: American soldiers were "heroes." They had used their magic weaponry to smite the demonic enemy. There was voluminous TV reportage on the magical quality of the weapons.

Sports: Commanding officers told their troops "This is our Super Bowl." The actual Super Bowl half-time activities mixed war and sports imagery interchangeably. Pilots returning from bombing runs gave each other "high-fives" and waved their index fingers in the air proclaiming "We're number one!" Casualty estimates was given in the form of a scoreboard. The major American tactic was named after a football play.

Cost-benefit: Within hours of the first bombing, Pentagon officials and Republican politicians started declaring that the enormously expensive development of weapons over the last fifteen years was "well worth it" and a sound investment.

Medicine: Endless pictures of surgical strikes.

In short, the War brought the basic metaphors into full view. Those things highlighted by the metaphors were shown vividly and often. But what was hidden by the metaphors was largely undiscussable.

Part II: Application of the Metaphors

Is Saddam Irrational?

The villain in the Fairy Tale of the Just War may be cunning, but he cannot be rational. You just do not reason with a demon, nor do you enter into negotiations with him. The logic of the metaphor demands that Saddam Hussein be irrational. But was he?

Administration policy was confused on the issue. Clausewitz's metaphor, as used by strategists, assumes that the enemy is rational: He too is maximizing gains and minimizing costs. Our strategy from the outset was to "increase the cost" to Saddam Hussein. That assumed he was rational and was maximizing his self-interest.

At the same time, he was being called irrational. The nuclear weapons argument depends on it. If rational, he should follow the logic of deterrence. We have thousands of hydrogen bombs in warheads. Israel is estimated to have between 100 and 200 deliverable atomic bombs. It would have taken Saddam Hussein at least eight months and possibly five years before he had a crude, untested atomic bomb on a truck. The argument that he would not be deterred by our nuclear arsenal and by Israel's assumes irrationality.

The Hitler analogy also assumes that Saddam is a villainous madman. The analogy presupposes a Hitler myth, in which Hitler too was an irrational demon, rather than a rational self-serving brutal politician. In the myth, Munich was a mistake and Hitler could have been stopped early on had England entered the war then. Military historians disagree as to whether the myth is true. Be that as it may, the analogy does not hold. Whether or not Saddam is Hitler, Iraq wasn't Germany. It has 17 million people, not 70 million. It is economically weak, not strong. It simply was not a threat to the world.

Saddam Hussein is certainly immoral, ruthless, and brutal, but there is no evidence that he is anything but rational. Everything he has done, from assassinating political opponents to invading Kuwait can be seen as furthering his own self-interest.

Kuwait as Victim

The classical victim is innocent. To the Iraqis, Kuwait was anything but an innocent ingenu. The war with Iran virtually bankrupted Iraq. Iraq saw itself as having fought that war partly for the benefit of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where Shiite citizens supported Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. Kuwait had agreed to help finance the war, but after the war, the Kuwaitis insisted on repayment of the "loan." Kuwaitis had invested hundreds of billions in Europe, America and Japan, but would not invest in Iraq after the war to help it rebuild. On the contrary, it began what amounted to economic warfare against Iraq by overproducing its oil quota to hold oil prices down.

In addition, Kuwait had drilled laterally into Iraqi territory in the Rumailah oil field and had extracted oil from Iraqi territory. Kuwait further took advantage of Iraq by buying its currency, but only at extremely low exchange rates. Subsequently, wealthy Kuwaitis used that Iraqi currency on trips to Iraq, where they bought Iraqi goods at bargain rates. Among the things they bought most flamboyantly were liquor and prostitutes, widows and orphans of men killed in the war, who, because of the state of the economy, had no other means of support. All this did not endear Kuwaitis to Iraqis, who were suffering from over 70% inflation.

Moreover, Kuwaitis had long been resented for good reason by Iraqis and Moslems from other nations. Capital rich, but labor poor, Kuwait imported cheap labor from other Moslem countries to do its least pleasant work. At the time of the invasion, there were 800,000 Kuwaiti citizens and 2.2 million foreign laborers who were treated by the Kuwaitis as lesser beings. In short, to the Iraqis and to labor-exporting Arab countries, Kuwait is badly miscast as a purely innocent victim.

This does not in any way justify the horrors perpetrated on the Kuwaitis by the Iraqi army. But it is part of what is hidden when Kuwait is cast as an innocent victim. The "legitimate government" of Kuwait is an oppressive monarchy.

What is Victory?

In a fairy tale or a game, victory is well-defined. Once it is achieved, the story or game is over. Neither is the case in the Gulf crisis. History continues, and "victory" makes sense only in terms of continuing history.

The president's stated objectives were total Iraqi withdrawal and restoration of the Kuwaiti monarchy. But no one believes the matter will end there, since Saddam Hussein would still be in power. General Powell said in his Senate testimony that if Saddam withdrew and retained his military strength, the US would have to "strengthen the indigenous countries of the region" to achieve a balance of power. Presumably that means arming Assad of Syria, who is every bit as dangerous as Saddam. Would arming another villain count as victory?

What could constitute "victory" in the present war? Suppose we conquer Iraq, wiping out its military capability. How would Iraq be governed? No puppet government that we set up could govern effectively since it would be hated by the entire populace. Since Saddam has wiped out all opposition, the only remaining effective government for the country would be his Ba'ath party. Would it count as a victory if Saddam's friends wound up in power? If not, what other choice is there? And if Iraq has no remaining military force, how could it defend itself against Syria and Iran? It would certainly not be a "victory" for us if either of them took over Iraq. If Syria did, then Assad's Arab nationalism would become a threat. If Iran did, then Islamic fundamentalism would become even more powerful and threatening.

It would seem that the closest thing to a "victory" for the US in case of war would be to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait; destroy just enough of Iraq's military to leave it capable of defending itself against Syria and Iran; somehow get Saddam out of power, but let his Ba'ath party remain in control of a country just strong enough to defend itself, but not strong enough to be a threat; and keep the price of oil at a reasonably low level.

The problems: It is not obvious that we could get Saddam out of power without wiping out most of Iraq's military capability. We would have invaded an Arab country, which would create vast hatred for us throughout the Arab world, and would no

doubt result in decades of increased terrorism and lack of cooperation by Arab states. We would, by defeating an Arab nationalist state, strengthen Islamic fundamentalism. Iraq would remain a cruel dictatorship run by cronies of Saddam. By reinstating the government of Kuwait, we would inflame the hatred of the poor toward the rich throughout the Arab world, and thus increase instability. Even the closest thing to a victory doesn't look very victorious.

If we weaken Iraq's military, the result would most likely be civil war within Iraq. This has been considered by the U.S. administration, which has decided that it could not allow either a Shiite victory (which would strengthen Iran) or a Kurdish victory (which would threaten Turkey). This means that we would not prevent a defeat, and most likely, a slaughter of Shiites and Kurds by Saddam Hussein's Sunni minority. Would this be "victory"?

Considering the tens of thousands of man hours that have gone into the planning how to "win" the war, very little time and effort has been spent clarifying what "winning" would be.

The Arab Viewpoint

The metaphors used to conceptualize the gulf crisis hide the most powerful political ideas in the Arab world: Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. The first seeks to form a racially-based all-Arab nation, the second, a theocratic all-Islamic state. Though bitterly opposed to one another, they share a great deal. Both are conceptualized in family terms, an Arab brotherhood and an Islamic brotherhood. Both see brotherhoods as more legitimate than existing states. Both are at odds with the state-as-person metaphor, which sees currently existing states as distinct entities with a right to exist in perpetuity.

Also hidden by our metaphors is perhaps the most important daily concern throughout the Arab world: Arab dignity. Both political movements are seen as ways to achieve dignity through unity. The current national boundaries are widely perceived as working against Arab dignity in two ways: one internal and one external.

The internal issue is the division between rich and poor in the Arab world. Poor Arabs see rich Arabs as rich by accident, by where the British happened to draw the lines that created the contemporary nations of the Middle East. To see Arabs metaphorically as one big family is to suggest that oil wealth should belong to all Arabs. To many Arabs, the national boundaries drawn by colonial powers are illegitimate, violating the conception of Arabs as a single "brotherhood" and impoverishing millions.

To those impoverished millions, the positive side of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was that it challenged national borders and brought to the fore the divisions between rich and poor that result from those lines in the sand. If there is to be peace in the region, these divisions must be addressed, say, by having rich Arab countries make extensive investments in development that will help poor Arabs. As long as the huge gulf between rich and poor exists in the Arab world, a large number of poor Arabs will continue to see one of the superstate solutions, either Arab nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism, as being in their self-interest, and the region will continue to be unstable.

The external issue is the weakness. The current national boundaries keep Arab nations squabbling among themselves and therefore weak relative to Western nations. To unity advocates, what we call "stability" means continued weakness.

Weakness is a major theme in the Arab world, and is often conceptualized in sexual terms, even more than in the West. American officials, in speaking of the "rape" of Kuwait, were conceptualizing a weak, defenseless country as female and a strong militarily powerful country as male. Similarly, it is common for Arabs to conceptualize the colonization and subsequent domination of the Arab world by the West, especially the US, as emasculation.

An Arab proverb that was reported to be popular in Iraq before the US invasion was "It is better to be a cock for a day than a chicken for a year." The message is clear: It is better to be male, that is, strong and dominant for a short period of time than to be female, that is, weak and defenseless for a long time. Much of the support for Saddam Hussein among Arabs is due to the fact that he is seen as standing up to the US, even if only for a while, and that there is a dignity in this. Since upholding dignity was an essential part of what defined Saddam's "rational self-interest", it should be no surprise that he was willing to go to war to "be a cock for a day." Just surviving a war with the US makes him a hero in much of the Moslem world.

What is Hidden By Seeing the State as a Person?

The State-as-Person metaphor highlights the ways in which states act as units, and hides the internal structure of the state. Class structure is hidden by this metaphor, as is ethnic composition, religious rivalry, political parties, the ecology, and the influence of the military and of corporations (especially multi-national corporations).

Consider the "national interest." It is in a person's interest to be healthy and strong. The State-as-Person metaphor translates this into a "national interest" of economic health and military strength. But what is in the "national interest" may or may not be in the interest of many ordinary citizens, groups, or institutions, who may become poorer as the GNP rises and weaker as the military gets stronger.

The "national interest" is a metaphorical concept, and it is defined in America by politicians and policy makers. For the most part, they are influenced more by the rich than by the poor, more by large corporations than by small business, and more by developers than ecological activists.

When President Bush argues that going to war would "serve our vital national interests", he is using a metaphor that hides exactly whose interests would be served and whose would not. For example, poor people, especially blacks, are represented in the military in disproportionately large numbers, and in a war the lower classes and those ethnic groups will suffer proportionally more casualties and have their lives disrupted more. Thus war is less in the interest of ethnic minorities and the lower classes than the white upper classes.

Also hidden are the interests of the military itself. It is against the military's interest to have its budget cut, or to diminish its own influence in any way. War justifies the military's importance and its budgetary needs. The end of the cold war promised to reduce the size and influence of the military. This war has guaranteed the continued influence of the military. Given that Air Force General Brent Scowcroft heads the National Security Council and that he played a major role in advising the president to go to war, it would appear as if the military played a decisive role in maintaining its own influence.

Energy Policy

The State-as-Person metaphor defines health for the state in economic terms, with our current understanding of economic health taken as a given, including our dependence on foreign oil. Many commentators argued prior to the war that a change in energy policy to make us less dependent on foreign oil would be more rational than going to war to preserve our supply of cheap oil from the gulf. This argument may have a real force, but it has no metaphorical force when the definition of economic health is taken as fixed. After all, you don't deal with an attack on your health by changing the definition of health. Metaphorical logic pushes a change in energy policy out of the spotlight in the current crisis.

I do not want to give the impression that all that is involved here is metaphor. Obviously there are powerful corporate interests lined up against a fundamental restructuring of our national energy policy. What is sad is that they have a very compelling system of metaphorical thought on their side. If the debate is framed in terms of an attack on our economic health, one cannot argue for redefining what economic health is without changing the grounds for the debate. And if the debate is framed in terms of rescuing a victim, then changes in energy policy seem utterly beside the point.

The "Costs" of War

Clausewitz's metaphor requires a calculation of the "costs" and the "gains" of going to war. What, exactly, goes into that calculation and what does not? Certainly American casualties, loss of equipment, and dollars spent on the operation count as costs. But Vietnam taught us that there are social costs: trauma to families and communities, disruption of lives, psychological effects on veterans, long-term health problems, in addition to the cost of spending our money on war instead of on vital social needs at home, as well as the vast cost of continuing to develop and maintain a huge war machine.

Barely discussed is the moral cost that comes from killing and maiming as a way to settle disputes. And there is the moral cost of using a "cost" metaphor at all. When we do so, we quantify the effects of war and thus hide from ourselves the qualitative reality of pain and death.

But those are costs to us. Recall that something can be a cost to us only if it is one of our "assets." The "cost-benefit" metaphor therefore rules out certain possible costs. Consider the oil spill in the gulf and the oil well fires, which are major ecological disasters to the region. It was known in advance that Saddam Hussein would cause the spill and start the fires if we invaded. The American military decided that these would be "acceptable costs." What that means is that American soldiers would not be affected that much. But since the ecology of the region is not an American "asset", it could not be a significant "cost" to the US. Had the oil spill and fires occurred in Florida or Texas, the assessment of "cost" would have been very much higher.

What is most ghoulish about the cost-benefit calculation is that it is a zero-sum system: "costs" to the other side count as "gains" for us. In Vietnam, the body counts of killed Viet Cong were taken as evidence of what was being "gained" in the war. Dead human beings went on the profit side of our ledger.

There is a lot of talk of American deaths as "costs", but Iraqi deaths aren't mentioned. The metaphors of cost-benefit accounting and the fairy tale villain lead us to devalue of the lives of Iraqis, even when most of those actually killed will not be villains at all, but simply innocent draftees or reservists or civilians, especially women, children and the elderly.

America as Hero

The classic fairy tale defines what constitutes a hero: it is a person who rescues an innocent victim and who defeats and punishes a guilty and inherently evil villain, and who does so for moral rather than venal reasons. Is America a hero in the Gulf War?

It certainly does not fit the profile very well. First, one of our main goals was to reinstate "the legitimate government of Kuwait." That means reinstating an absolute monarchy with an abysmal record on human rights and civil liberties. Kuwait is not an innocent victim whose rescue makes us heroic.

Second, the actual human beings who are suffering from our attack are, for the most part, innocent people who did not take part in the atrocities in Kuwait. Killing and maiming a lot of innocent bystanders in the process of nabbing a much smaller number of villains does not make one much of a hero.

Third, in the self-defense scenario, where oil is at issue, America is acting in its self-interest. But, in order to qualify as a legitimate hero in the rescue scenario, it must be acting selflessly. Thus, there is a contradiction between the self-interested hero of the self-defense scenario and the purely selfless hero of the rescue scenario.

Fourth, America may be a hero to the royal families of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but it will not be a hero to most Arabs. Most Arabs do not think in terms of our metaphors. A great many Arabs see us as a kind of colonial power using illegitimate force against an Arab brother. To them, we are villains, not heroes.

Fifth, America had been supporting and supplying arms to Saddam Hussein prior to his invasion of Kuwait, during years when he was no less villainous to the Iraqi citizenry. Classic heroes don't help out and provide arms to well-known villains.

America appears as classic hero only if you don't look carefully at how the metaphor is applied to the situation. It is here that the State-as-Person metaphor functions in a way that hides vital truths. The State-as-Person metaphor hides the internal structure of states and allows us to think of Kuwait as a unitary entity, the defenseless maiden to be rescued in the fairy tale. The metaphor hides the monarchical character of Kuwait and the way the Kuwaiti government treats its own dissenters and foreign workers. The State-as-Person metaphor also hides the internal structure of Iraq, and thus hides the actual people who will mostly be killed, maimed, or otherwise harmed in a war. It also hides the political divisions in Iraq between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. The same metaphor also hides the internal structure of the US, and therefore hides the fact that it is the poor and minorities who will make the most sacrifices while not getting any significant benefit. And it hides the main ideas that drive Middle Eastern politics.

Final Remarks

Reality exists. So does the unconscious system of metaphors that we use without awareness to comprehend reality. What metaphor does is limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with. Because of the pervasiveness of metaphor in thought, we cannot always stick to discussions of reality in purely literal terms.

There is no way to avoid metaphorical thought, especially in complex matters like foreign policy. I am therefore not objecting to the use of metaphor in itself in foreign policy discourse. My objections are, first, to the ignorance of the presence of metaphor in foreign policy deliberations, second, to the failure to look systematically at what our metaphors hide, and third, to the failure to think imaginatively about what new metaphors might be more benign.

It is in the service of reality that we must pay more attention to the mechanisms of metaphorical thought, especially because such mechanisms are necessarily used in foreign policy deliberations, and because, as we are witnessing, metaphors backed up by bombs can kill.

Postscript

On March 6, 1991, President Bush went before Congress and declared victory in a war he justified as follows "The recent challenge could not have been clearer. Saddam Hussein was the villain; Kuwait the victim."