Whose Interests Were at Stake? — And Who Was at the Table?

Mary P. Rowe

Most articles analyzing the Gulf War from a negotiation perspective will be written by knowledgeable colleagues who know the Gulf region and whose expertise lies in the area of world peace. One expects thoughtful analysis of the balance of power in that region, and creative integration of the interests of many of the "players": several of the world's great religions and their subgroups, many vital and creative countries and their leaders, important, ancient cultures like the Kurds, major economic interests. Such analysis is sorely needed. This short note, by contrast, is perhaps impractical. It speaks mainly of the interests of individuals as individuals.

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Once upon a time, when one of the children was sixteen, my husband and I set the Friday night curfew together with that child. The kids went off to a dance; our sixteen-year-old was driving. . . . and then did not come home on time. It got late, and my husband and I were very concerned. We worried and worried. We stayed awake for what seemed like hours, until we heard the kids come safely home. *I think now about three or four hundred thousand parents and grandparents of Iraqi soldiers who still may be praying for a knock on the door telling them that their son was not killed in an unknown desert hole in the sand.*

Longer ago than that, my generation of young mothers watched over each baby to protect him or her from infection or accident. We ate carefully in pregnancy. We boiled bottles. We fed vitamins and (more or less) balanced foods to each child. *Now I think about the four or five hundred thousand (or more) babies and young children at risk in Iraq from malnutrition and cholera and other epidemics, who still cannot find safe water to wash in or drink.*

Mary P. Rowe is Special Assistant to the President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as Adjunct Professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Her mailing address is: MIT 10-213, Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

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And millions (it has to be millions, if the figures are right) of Iraqi and other parents and children mourning the death or crippling of a child or parent who was in harm's way. And I think of several hundred Westerners who lost their lives, and the estimated several hundred thousand or more Middle-Easterners who died.

In my work as an ombudsman, I worry about the plainly increasing number of young adults who seem to be incapable of reasonable human relationships in universities and in the workplace. I meet many young people having trouble forming close and loving relationships. *So I think about the families of U.S. service people who went to the Gulf, the kids left behind, elderly parents who were left alone and very lonely. I try to estimate how many human relationships have been damaged by the Gulf War.*

From time to time I wonder about Global Warming. As I tend my garden I think, "Massachusetts seems warmer in the last few years." *What damage was done before all the Kuwait fires were out? Will they prove to have significant long-term effects? Would I want to eat a fish caught south of Kuwait? Or plant a garden in the oily twilight, down-wind?*

I read about increasing poverty in the United States, the need for education to improve. One U.S. child in four is poor. Six percent of the U.S. population is scientifically literate. *What was the opportunity cost of the Gulf War, in "Peace Dividend" dollars?*

When I began teaching about negotiation and conflict management in the workplace, I taught the classic "Sources of Power in Negotiations." Like the rest of us who teach this subject, I began with Legitimate Authority, Rewards, Sanctions. . .you know the list. Then I began to reflect on my experience as an ombudsman, noting the fact that violence is now more common in U.S. universities and companies, and so is plain human meanness. So I divided "Sanctions" into "Sanctions" (meaning legitimate sanctions) and "Force" (which I define as sabotage, threats of violence and serious work disruption, etc.). *Now I think about young people in the Gulf region and in the United States who have learned a lot about just one source of negotiating power, namely force. In a world where we try to teach about the power of good relationships and elegant integrative solutions, how many people have learned an unshakable, permanent lesson about force?*

Most of all when I reflect on the Gulf War, I think about stakeholders and who was at the table. The most important questions that we teach in negotiation are: Whose interests are at stake? What are those interests? Who will represent these interests; *Who is at the table?* What are the options for meeting those interests and/or whose interests will be met? Then I think to myself that half of those whose interests were at stake are women. Many more than half are children, born and yet to be born.

Did anything good happen here? Will there now be the chance of long-lasting peace in the Gulf region, instead of further war? Did we stop Saddam Hussein from things much worse than that which happened? Will lots of women now win the vote much sooner in the Gulf region? Were there lots of U.S. servicemen and women who stopped drinking alcohol permanently, because of the months in Saudi Arabia? Did lots of U.S. citizens learn more about world geography and about Islam? Has the world now become enough smaller that more and more hitherto-insular people will now be thinking

more and more about the interests of other people? Plainly, some good things happened.

But then I think: Could we have gotten more of the interested parties to the table? Could we have met more of their interests? Suppose U.S. and European and Asian women had insisted on a chance to talk with Iraqi women? Suppose an international peace-keeping force of ten thousand unarmed women had been sent under U.N. auspices, last Fall, to the Iraqi border? I sit here estimating how little this would have cost. Would Saddam have attacked thousands of unarmed women under U.N. auspices? Could they have effected a long-enough timeout so that negotiations could take hold for more peaceful options to have worked?

The questions that I keep asking myself are these: Who gained? Who paid the price? What options did individuals have?