

Bush: War over; time for 'broader peace'

WASHINGTON - President Bush proclaimed a triumphant end to the Persian Gulf war on Wednesday night and set his sights on a broader peace in the Middle East. "The time has come to put an end to Arab-Israeli conflict," he said, urging compromise in the troubled region.

A hero's welcome greeted Bush on Capitol Hill, exactly one week after he announced a conditional cease fire in the 42-day conflict.

"As commander in chief," Bush said, "I can report to you: Our armed forces fought with honor and valor. As president, I can report to the nation: Aggression is defeated. The war is over."

The House chamber was awash with red, white and blue from 600 American flags as lawmakers greeted the president.

With Saddam Hussein's army driven out of Kuwait, Bush announced the withdrawal of

American troops from the gulf. He said the first large contingent of soldiers would leave Saudi Arabia by midnight. More than 537,000 U.S. troops were sent off to war.

"This is just the beginning of a steady flow of American troops coming home," Bush told a joint session of Congress in a nationally broadcast speech.

"Tonight in Iraq, Saddam walks amidst ruin," Bush said. "His war machine is crushed. His ability to threaten mass destruction is itself destroyed. . . . For all that Saddam has done to his own people, to the Kuwaitis and to the entire world, Saddam and those around him are accountable."

The speech marked a sweet moment of personal triumph for Bush. Many congressional Democrats had second-guessed Bush throughout his seven-month showdown with

Saddam, urging him not to go to war and then not to launch a ground offensive.

"Our commitment to peace in the Middle East does not end with the liberation of Kuwait," Bush said.

Turning to the longstanding dispute between Israel and its neighbors, Bush said differences were "so painful and intractable. Yet, in the conflict just concluded, Israel and many of the Arab states have for the first time found themselves confronting the same aggressor."

"By now, it should be plain to all parties that peacemaking in the Middle East requires compromise," the president declared. "We must do all that we can to close the gap between Israel and the Arab states, and between Israelis and Palestinians."

A comprehensive peace must be grounded in U.N. Security Council resolutions calling on

Israel to withdraw from occupied territories and declaring the right of all nations in the region to live in peace within secure borders.

"This principle must be elaborated to provide for Israel's security and recognition, and at the same time for legitimate Palestinian political rights," Bush said. "Anything else would fail the twin tests of fairness and security."

He said other challenges still remain after the war, and he called for:

- Creation of security arrangements to produce a stable gulf.
- Control of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missiles that deliver them.
- The fostering of economic development to bring prosperity to all people in the Middle East.

POWs fly to freedom; turmoil in south Iraq

Snapping salutes and slapping high-fives, the last known American prisoners of the Gulf war flew to freedom Wednesday and a heroes' welcome from Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf. American paratroopers loaded their gear for their own "freedom bird."

Some of the 4,400 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division and sister units are expected to land Thursday at a Washington-area air base.

The U.S. military said President Saddam Hussein's government apparently regained control of rebellious Basra. But refugees from that southern Iraqi city denied it, telling Iran's news agency "the people" held Basra's government buildings.

Liberated Kuwait's prime minister, Crown Prince Saad Abdullah al-Sabah, said there would be no retaliation against Palestinians in Kuwait who allegedly collaborated with the Iraqis during their occupation of the emirate.

But hospital staff members and Kuwaiti resistance fighters confirmed to Associated Press correspondent John

Pomfret that scores of Palestinians were being beaten, shot, tortured with lighted cigarettes and otherwise "punished" for their alleged crimes.

In Damascus, Syria, Arab foreign ministers agreed on a long-term regional security plan: Egyptian and Syrian troops will guard the gulf oil states.

Their agreement also called for a U.N. peace conference on the Middle East.

Later this week, Secretary of State James Baker travels to the Mideast to meet with both the Arabs and Israelis to discuss the region's future.

Fifteen freed American POWs were flown aboard a chartered Red Cross plane from Baghdad to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. They were transferred to the U.S. Navy hospital ship, Mercy, docked in the gulf emirate of Bahrain.

The Americans and 20 British, Saudi and other POWs were exchanged for 294 Iraqi prisoners flown in to Baghdad by the Red Cross.

The ex-prisoners, in yellow jumps-

uits emblazoned "PW," waved or saluted as they stepped off the plane in Riyadh. One gave a high-five hand slap to a waiting American serviceman, before embracing him and walking away.

Two were brought out on stretchers and many appeared unemourished. Examining doctors said some airmen had been injured on their missions and most had been "slapped around," including three whose eardrums were perforated. But the doctors described them as "upbeat" despite their injuries.

"Every one of them's a hero," said U.S. commander Norman Schwarzkopf, in the Riyadh welcoming party.

The freed prisoners included an American woman, Army Maj. Rhonda Cornum of Freeville, N.Y.

Her arms were in bandages and slings, apparently having been broken when a search-and-rescue helicopter on which she was a crew member crashed last weekend.

The family of Sgt. Troy Dunlap,

who was aboard the same rescue helicopter, was told last weekend he had been killed. But then his name turned up on the list of POWs released to the Red Cross.

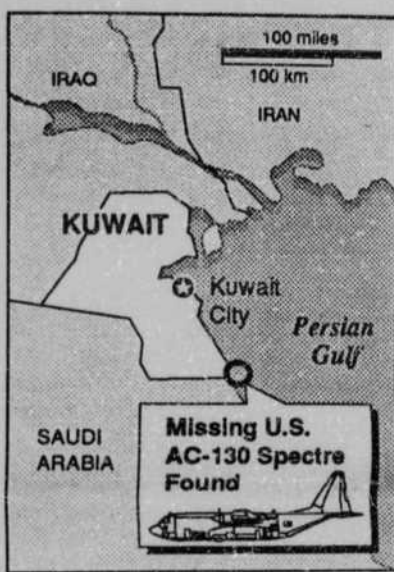
"It was probably the greatest news we've ever heard in our lives," said his stepfather, Mike Stubblefield, in Karnak, Ill.

The release left 24 Americans missing in action in the Gulf war.

Some bodies have now been located at the bottom of the Persian Gulf, where divers found the wreckage of an AC-130 gunship that disappeared Jan. 31, the Air Force reported. The plane carried a crew of 14.

The victorious allies have also demanded that Iraq free thousands of Kuwaitis abducted during the Iraqi occupation. Iraq's U.N. ambassador says his government is planning to allow all Kuwaitis to leave Iraq.

The U.S. command said senior allied and Iraqi officers would meet Thursday in Saudi Arabia to continue talks on establishing a permanent ceasefire.



More than 4,000 Palestinians jailed, beaten by Kuwaiti army

KUWAIT CITY - Kuwaiti army and resistance personnel are beating scores of Palestinians suspected of collaborating with occupying Iraqi soldiers, hospital and resistance officials said Wednesday.

Palestinians have been burned with cigarettes, hit with typewriters and chairs and had their fingernails pulled out, according to those familiar with the beatings.

At least 4,000 Palestinian and other suspected collaborators have been jailed since last Wednesday, when allied forces chased Iraqi invaders out of Kuwait, according to resistance officials manning three police stations.

"What we are giving them is

nothing compared to what we got from the Iraqis," said Aziz Ghuloum, a resistance fighter in charge of a police station in the Abiya section of Kuwait City.

A 22-year-old Palestinian medical student at Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital said five Palestinians with bullet wounds to the head or chest have been brought to the hospital since the Iraqi pullout.

Since then, he said he has treated between 35 and 40 Palestinians beaten up by the resistance and the army, and heard of about 20 more cases.

Officials at three police stations and two hospitals told similar stories of swift Kuwaiti retribution

against the Palestinian community for its perceived support of Saddam Hussein.

Resistance fighters accused their victims of denouncing members of the resistance, profiting from the Iraqi invasion by doing business with the invaders and stealing Kuwaiti property.

A doctor at the Al-Farwaniya Hospital said he and his colleagues had treated about 50 Palestinians over the past week.

Many have fractures, lacerations and contusions. One of the worst cases was a 22-year-old whose face was made unrecognizable by coagulated blood. The victim said he had been beaten for eight hours, the medical student said.

Band, families and friends greet returning Persian Gulf veterans

OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE - A cheering, flag-waving crowd of family and friends, braving Wednesday's bitterly cold wind, welcomed home 21 of the first U.S. troops returning from the Persian Gulf war.

"How sweet it is!" said Gen. George Lee Butler, commander of the Strategic Air Command headquartered at the base.

The homecoming ceremonies were closed to the public but hundreds of relatives and Air Force personnel lined up outside the 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing hangars for the homecoming.

Staff Sgt. Skip Johnstone, an aircraft mechanic, stepped off the military plane and gave a big white Teddy bear and a bear hug Wednesday to his girlfriend. He met her as a pen pal after he was sent to the Gulf and they met each other Wednesday for the first time.

When he spied the gathered crowd, Johnstone said, "I knew that it was over — that it was finally over."

Johnstone, 29, presented the stuffed animal and a kiss to Ann Musselman, 25, of Sioux City, Iowa.

Military officers told him to get on a bus being used to take the returning soldiers to another part of the base, but reassured him they had room for Musselman aboard.

Maj. Wayne Miller of SAC bomber operations, who helped plan the B-52 missions that pounded Iraqi positions during the air war, had a one-word reply when asked if he was surprised at how swiftly the Allies won victory in the war.

"No," Miller said.

Clinging to Miller, who had been in the Gulf since shortly after Iraq's

Aug. 2 invasion of Kuwait, was his wife, Ginger.

"I'm am so happy to have him back! It's been a long time," she said as the SAC band played "America, the Beautiful."

"How proud we are, how profoundly grateful we are. Your nation is proud of you," Butler told the soldiers as the crowd cheered in agreement.

"You should never underestimate what you've done. President Bush put the nation's defense on the line and some people said that was a big risk. But because of you, it never was a gamble. It was a sure thing," Butler said.

The returning troops, members of the 55th and other units, traveled on a KC-135 aircraft from Saudi Arabia to Mindenhall Air Force Base near Cambridge, England, before heading home to Nebraska, officials said.

The crowd of about 400, waving American flags and red, white and blue balloons, began cheering when the plane landed shortly after 4 p.m.

"I'm just sort of numb right now. I can't believe he's really coming back," said Penny Tory as she waited for her son Dirk Jacquet to arrive.

Jacquet, 20, is a member of the 55th who was called to duty about two weeks before he was supposed to give his mother away when she remarried on Sept. 1.

Rosa Delacruz, an Air Force member who did not go to the Persian Gulf, said she just wanted to welcome everyone back.

"I didn't get to go over there. I wanted to. But now I can be a part of it, welcoming them back," she said.

Gifts await returning troops

Americans are tying a yellow ribbon around a vast array of gifts, freebies and perks for troops who served in the Persian Gulf.

On top of hero's welcomes coast to coast, merchants, lawmakers and promoters are busy drafting shopping lists of goodies to shower upon the more than half a million men and women who served in the gulf.

With some restrictions, the freebies include a night's stay at a casino, steamboat cruises, treks through a movie studio, baseball games and hunting and fishing licenses.

Discounts of as much as 70 percent are being offered on several air-

lines. Restaurants, a winery owner and other smaller enterprises are putting together packages that cut prices for military personnel.

The troops will also find more bargains at state-run colleges and universities offering free tuition.

The returning members of the 253rd Transportation Company of the New Jersey Army National Guard will be able to make another trip to the sands. The Sands Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City is giving them a free overnight stay and a free meal at the casino's Italian gourmet restaurant.

Steamboat Casino River Cruises,

which will begin riverboat gambling on the Mississippi River off Iowa's eastern shore on April 1, is offering a free cruise for soldiers who are at least 21 years old.

"It's our way of saying, 'Welcome home and thank you for your gallant efforts in the Persian Gulf,'" said spokeswoman Carol Heaton.

Collette Tours of Pawtucket, R.I. is offering all returning soldiers a discount of \$150 per couple on a Collette land tour of seven days or longer.

"We've got your calm after the storm," is Collette's new motto.