Q114 – Why did the United States enter the Persian Gulf War?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The United States entered the Persian Gulf War to force the Iraqi military out of Kuwait. On August 2, 1990, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded oil-rich Kuwait. The next day, the United Nations Security Council demanded the Iraqis withdraw.

Instead, Saddam annexed Kuwait. The United States organized a coalition of thirty-five nations to expel the Iraqis. Three military operations followed.
In Operation Desert Shield, three-quarters of a million troops massed in Saudi Arabia – including more than half a million Americans. Operation Desert Storm followed – a mammoth air campaign to paralyze Iraq's military using Stealth bombers, Cruise missiles, and laser-guided smart bombs. Five weeks later, Operation Desert Sabre began – an overwhelming ground campaign. Iraqi troops retreated or surrendered. In four days, the allied nations liberated Kuwait.
Saddam stayed in power but agreed to respect Kuwait's sovereignty. Saddam agreed to other terms – for example, letting UN inspectors ensure he destroyed his stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.
When aggressors strike, the world often turns to America. But should America respond? The Persian Gulf War met the criteria laid down by General Colin Powell, who was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
Among those criteria: Iraq threatened a vital national security interest of the United States – oil. Diplomacy was exhausted, the objective was attainable, and the exit strategy plausible: our troops would come home in a matter of weeks. The war also enjoyed widespread support at home and abroad.
The Persian Gulf War was as short as it was successful. In 42 days, at the cost of 300 lives among the coalition, the Iraqi military was defeated and Kuwait liberated.