

Decision arrived at days ago

Aides say president
'calm, expectant' as
operation unfolded

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WASHINGTON — "Just the way it was scheduled," a calm President Bush said as bombs and missiles began raining on Baghdad halfway around the globe.

It was just before 7 p.m. EST Wednesday, and the president was in the Oval Office using a remote control to zap between CNN and ABC for up-to-the-moment television news reports from the scene.

Watching the developments with Bush were Vice President Dan Quayle, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and White House Chief of Staff John Sununu.

It was hardly the picture of war depicted in the movies, where the president is huddled with brass-laden generals in a dimly lit war room. The White House "situation room" was in full operation, but the president spent the fateful evening in the Oval Office and in his personal quarters.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, who darted in and out of Bush's inner sanctum throughout the evening, described the president as "calm and expectant ... very matter-of-fact."

The decision to attack on Wednesday night was made at least 48 hours before the first shell exploded, and detailed strategic plans for the attack were worked out "over the last several weeks," Fitzwater said.

However, he stressed, "it could have been changed" if Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had given the United Nations coalition bandied against Iraq any indication of an impending withdrawal from Kuwait.

Bush began watching television news reports about 6 p.m. EST as he phoned congressional leaders to inform them the assault was under

PRESIDENT: Bush 'calm' as jets, missiles fly

From A-1

way. U.N. coalition partners were notified about and agreed to support the offensive in advance, Fitzwater said.

Ironically, while global military logistics appeared to be operating smoothly, Bush suffered a temporary crosstown communications shafu when he initially could not contact House Speaker Tom Foley.

Aides scrambled and quickly discerned the problem — Foley was out of pocket buying clothes at Brooks Brothers.

The first public acknowledgment of the massive U.S.-led attack came at 7:09 EST when Fitzwater marched into the White House briefing room and read this statement from Bush:

"The liberation of Kuwait has begun.

"In conjunction with the forces of our coalition partners, the United States has moved under the

code name Operation Desert Storm to enforce the mandates of the United National Security Council. As of 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Operation Desert Storm forces were engaging targets in Kuwait and Iraq."

Fitzwater said he wrote the president's statement on Tuesday, and that after it was delivered, Bush gave him "an attaboy" in the Oval Office.

The mood at the White House during the day Wednesday had been a little tense, but appearances were business as usual for the most part and there were no outward signs that an attack was imminent.

In fact, much of the White House press corps had already begun heading home for the evening when the assault started because most reporters thought there would be no action Wednesday night.

Likewise, the ever-present

throng of protesters stationed outside the White House over the past several days had dwindled to only a few dozen die-hards.

Bush, who claims Houston as his legal voting residence, spent much of the day in private meetings, not all of them related to the Persian Gulf conflict.

Reporters had access to the president only for a few moments Wednesday afternoon during a photo opportunity in a policy session with new Education Secretary Lamar Alexander.

Bush not only prayed — and asked the world to join him — but he also took the extra step of asking internationally known Evangelist Billy Graham to spend the night at the White House on Wednesday.

"He is someone that the president has frequently turned to for spiritual guidance," Fitzwater said of Graham.