

Saddam Hussein's capture will not resolve Iraqi quagmire

The Editorial Board
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The capture of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, hidden in a hole at a farmhouse outside the central Iraqi city of Tikrit, has been the occasion for full-throated exultation on the part of the Bush administration, the US occupation authorities in Iraq and the American media.

Erstwhile opponents of the illegal US invasion have been swept up in the wave of Washington's triumphalism. Germany's chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French president Jacques Chirac wasted little time in sending their craven congratulations to George Bush.

There is no doubt that the gloating in both the White House and the media will continue for many days to come. Having demonized Hussein as the equal of Hitler, his apprehension is treated as a milestone in the birth of a "free" and "democratic" Iraq. This interpretation of events evades a number of inconvenient questions.

The first was posed by a reporter at the press conference held at the headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad to announce the capture. "Was it possible to run the guerrilla war from a hole underground," he asked.

The answer is clearly no: Saddam Hussein was not some mastermind coordinating attacks that have risen recently to the level of 55 a day across the entire territory of Iraq. He was a hunted individual, apparently moving from place to place and preoccupied with his own survival. US military sources noted that no communications equipment, even cell phones, were found with Hussein and two companions.

US officials declined to discuss how they learned of his whereabouts and whether anyone would claim a \$25 million bounty on his head. There was some initial speculation that he may have been turned in by hostile elements within his own former ruling Baathist Party.

The tactical success in nabbing Hussein may have a short-term effect in bolstering the sagging prestige of the occupation. It is hardly, however, the basis for resolving the intractable problems besetting the US attempt to recolonize Iraq, or for that matter suppressing the growing nationalist resistance of the Iraqi people.

Curiously, in their breathless reports of Iraqi celebrations over Hussein's fate, the US television networks repeatedly broadcast footage of two demonstrations in Baghdad. The first was that of supporters of the Iraqi Communist Party waving red flags emblazoned with the hammer and sickle, while the second was organized by a Shiite Muslim faction carrying portraits of ayatollahs. While both these tendencies have collaborated to one degree or another with the US occupation, neither seems a likely foundation for some new and stable US-backed regime.

US officials have also declined to clarify how they will deal with Hussein now that he is in custody. General Ricardo Sanchez, commander of US occupation troops in Iraq, deflected questions about whether he would be turned over to Iraq's Governing Council or brought before a special tribunal whose creation was announced just days earlier. He limited himself to saying that the US military would continue "processing" the former Iraqi president.

Whatever is done with Hussein will be a case of victors' justice. The

Iraqi Governing Council and the new tribunal are both creations of Washington and have no legitimacy. The US occupation authority has no basis under international law to carry out any trial of former Iraqi officials.

In any case, if war crimes charges are to be brought in relation to Iraq, the most serious one of all would be leveled against the Bush administration itself for plotting and prosecuting an unprovoked war of aggression.

There are good reasons for Washington to want to avoid any public prosecution of Hussein. Occupation officials described him as "cooperative" upon his capture Saturday. This adjective could equally be used to describe his relations with US administrations over a whole number of years.

Indeed, his regime's greatest crimes against the Iraqi people—the Iran-Iraq war, the suppression of the Shiites and Kurds, etc.—were carried out with Washington's active support. This involved the direct participation of some of those who now play the leading roles in US policy, such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Bush's new special envoy, former secretary of state James Baker.

Who is the man now in US custody and how did he arrive at his present unenviable position? The answer to these questions is bound up with the domination of Iraq by US imperialism throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the fate of Arab nationalism.

The path that led Hussein to power in Iraq began in 1957 when at the age of 20 he joined the Arab Baath Socialist Party. The Baathists have frequently been described in the media as "national socialists," but this definition is useful only within strict limits. To equate Baathism with Nazism and Hussein with Adolf Hitler, as both Washington and the Zionist regime in Israeli have frequently done, is a deliberate distortion.

Iraq is a backward and historically oppressed country, not an imperialist power bent on global conquest. Hussein led a ruthless dictatorship that systematically repressed the Iraqi working class. There was a definite distinction, however, between the kind of nationalist movement he led and the semi-feudal, comprador regimes that were installed by British imperialism, like that of Nuri al Said, who was regarded as a traitor by his own people and the entire Arab world.

Nationalist regimes like that in Iraq came to power in a whole series of countries, bringing with them a national and social agenda that was bound up with the emergence of a mass anti-colonial movement. In comparison to the colonial puppet regimes that preceded them—as well as with the feudalistic monarchies and emirates of the Gulf—they carried out policies that led to definite changes in living standards and conditions for masses of people. These including improved health care, education and increased social rights for women. They also carried out policies, in the case of Iraq and other Middle Eastern regimes, that antagonized the major imperialist powers, particularly the nationalization of oil resources.

The contradictions of the Baath Party

The Baath Party was established during the Second World War as part of a growing wave of nationalism and anti-colonialism sweeping the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Its founders, French-educated Syrian intellectuals led by Michel Aflaq, advanced a Pan-Arabist program aimed at overcoming the region's backwardness, division and foreign domination. It advocated Arab unification to erase the "lines in the sand" that were the legacy of the colonial carve-up carried out in the aftermath of World War I and divided the Middle East into a collection of economically and politically unviable states. It also called for the creation of a secular and democratic government.

The party's slogan was "One nation, from the Atlantic to the [Persian] Gulf." Like other parties in the region, as well as in Africa and Asia, however, the Baathists were organically incapable of carrying through a consistent struggle against imperialism. Once they emerged as the principal political instrument of a small, weak and rapacious national bourgeoisie in both Iraq and Syria, the interests of the local ruling elites in maintaining the state structures inherited from colonialism proved too powerful to achieve unity even from Damascus to Baghdad. Indeed, the two regimes remained bitter enemies during most of the period following the Baathists' rise to power in both countries.

In Iraq, the principal conflict remained that between the regime and a working class that was the most organized and politically developed in the entire Middle East.

Hussein emerged within this complex and contradictory movement as part of a layer of bourgeois nationalists who were fanatically hostile to communism and were prepared to do business with the major imperialist powers. In 1958, he was jailed for assassinating his brother-in-law, a Communist Party member. Five years later, he returned to Iraq from exile after the Baath Party joined a coup that overthrew the left-nationalist leader General Abdel-Karim Kassem and brought the party to power briefly. The overthrow of Kassem was carried out with the support of the CIA, which supplied the coup's organizers with the names and addresses of Iraqi Communists so that they could be rounded up and executed.

In 1968, a second military-backed coup brought the Baathists to power, which they maintained until the US invasion earlier this year. Hussein took charge of internal security, becoming the real power in the new regime.

The Baathists came to power in Iraq in the context of a strategic alliance between Washington and the dictatorship of the Shah in neighboring Iran. Together, the US and the Shah's regime pressured Iraq during this period to make unfavorable concessions in relation to the disputed boundary on the Shatt-al Arab.

Both to further Iranian interests and in retaliation for the Baathist regime's nationalization of US oil interests in Iraq, Washington and Teheran, with the collaboration of Israel, acted to foment and support a Kurdish nationalist rebellion against Baghdad. CIA arms and funding were supplied to the Kurdish groups, while the Iranian military provided direct logistical support.

When the political winds shifted abruptly in Iran, bringing the Shah's police state crashing down and an Islamic fundamentalist regime to power, Washington's own policy in the region shifted as well. Now it forged closer ties with Iraq, urging it to strike back over the border dispute and to actively oppose any spread of the Iranian revolution. In particular, it feared that Iran would stir up a Shiite revolt that would spread through the key oil-producing regions of southern Iraq and eastern Saudi Arabia, threatening US supplies.

Iraq's response to Washington's new strategic orientation found its expression in a massive purge of the Baath Party and the ascension of Hussein to the presidency in July 1979. The main target of this purge was

the former alliance formed with the Iraqi Communist Party, which had joined the Baathists in a national coalition government. The execution of Communist Party members, together with the Baathists most closely associated with this alliance, served as a clear olive branch to Washington. Little more than a year later, the Iraqi regime launched a war with Iran over the Shatt al-Arab.

While Iraq's ends were limited and Hussein opportunistically hoped that they could be achieved as a result of his newfound US support, the military action was a political blunder. Iraq became embroiled in a murderous conflict that was to claim as many as a million casualties and which was fueled by the politics of the Iranian revolution.

It was during this period that Washington forged the most intimate ties with Hussein, funneling billions of dollars worth of aid and weapons, including advanced military and communications technology, to the Baathist regime.

In May 1987, in the midst of the conflict, US support for Hussein found its most dramatic expression when an Iraqi fighter fired an Exocet missile into the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf, killing 33 American seamen. Washington's reaction was to exonerate the Iraqi regime and to blame the attack on Iran, the target of the US military buildup of which the Stark's deployment was a part. Barely a year later, the USS Vincennes, a US warship sailing in Iranian territorial waters, brought down an Iranian commercial airliner with a missile, killing all 290 people aboard.

Many of the figures now playing key roles in US policy had their own friendly dealings with Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. Donald Rumsfeld, serving as the special envoy of the Reagan administration, flew to Baghdad at the end of 1983 for private talk with Hussein in which he extended a US invitation to establish direct diplomatic relations.

Rumsfeld returned to Baghdad in March 1984 for talks with then-Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, and it was announced that full ties had been resumed in all but name only.

As secretary of state in the first Bush administration, James Baker orchestrated a massive US effort to aid and illegally arm Iraq. Baker issued the clearances for Iraq to obtain military technology including materials for biological and chemical weapons. He also initiated a program under which the CIA organized arms deals between Baghdad and US allies such as the Pinochet regime in Chile and the apartheid regime in South Africa as well as various NATO countries.

The massacres, gassings and other atrocities that the Bush administration has invoked to portray Saddam Hussein as the worst tyrant since Hitler and to justify the US invasion of Iraq were, for the most part, carried out during this period. It was the high-water mark of the US-Iraqi alliance, and Washington supplied the weapons used in these incidents.

This was not merely a US venture. As the trademark of the missile used to sink the USS Stark makes clear, France also cemented intimate ties with Saddam Hussein. In the case of France, the individual most responsible was Jacques Chirac, who has just sent his congratulations to Bush on the former Iraqi president's capture.

Provocation over Kuwait

In the wake of the Iran-Iraq war, the US-Iraqi alliance was to break apart over the murky dispute between Baghdad and the Kuwaiti emirate. Iraq's historic claim over Kuwait—which it viewed as an artificial creation of British imperialism—became intermeshed with a series of other conflicts. Kuwait was deliberately driving down oil prices on the world market as well as carrying out horizontal drilling to siphon oil from the al-Ramallah fields in southern Iraq. Under conditions in which Kuwait was demanding immediate Iraqi repayment of billions of dollars worth of debts incurred

during the war with Iran, these actions represented a gross provocation that threatened Iraq's economic and political stability.

In the midst of this conflict, Saddam Hussein held a meeting with US ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie, who declared that Washington had "no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait." She added that Secretary of State Baker had "emphasized" that the US had no interest in the matter. Hussein took this declaration as a green light to launch an invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. After an eight-year de facto alliance with the US against Iran, he believed he could count on Washington's acquiescence.

Again, the Iraqi dictator had vastly miscalculated. There is strong reason to believe that the Glaspie interview was a deliberate attempt to lure Iraq into attacking Kuwait in order to provide the pretext for realizing long-standing US plans to establish a direct US military presence in the Persian Gulf. Washington was also ready to dispose of a troublesome ally whose services were no longer required.

Hussein confronted a vastly changed geopolitical situation. Like the leaders of many other bourgeois nationalist regimes, he had consolidated his power in large part by balancing between Moscow and Washington, tilting first one way and then the other. By 1990, such maneuvers had become untenable. The Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy under Gorbachev was already firmly on the path of capitalist restoration and was seeking US support by giving away everything it could. Hussein found his regime was also on this auction block in Moscow.

Nothing he could have done would have avoided a US war that claimed an estimated 100,000 casualties and left Iraq in ruins. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the conflict, when Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north rose up against Hussein, Washington demonstrated once again that it still valued the Iraqi dictator as a force for stability in the region.

With the US military occupying a fifth of Iraq's territory, Washington ordered that no action should be taken to halt the Hussein regime's savage repression of the Shiite and Kurdish rebels. Indeed, a directive was issued to allow Iraqi attack helicopters to fly unhindered. As the *New York Times* noted on April 11, 1991, the revolts "brought the United States and its Arab allies to a strikingly unanimous view: whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country's stability than did those who have suffered his repression."

The decade following the Persian Gulf War was marked by a furious campaign by elements on the extreme right of American politics for a war to conquer Iraq. One of the primary sins of the Clinton administration in the view of this layer was its failure to prosecute such a campaign. Once the Bush administration was installed in the White House, these elements from the right-wing Republican think tanks took over key positions, including virtually the entire civilian leadership of the Pentagon, and set about preparing the "preemptive" war that toppled Hussein.

In a televised address Sunday afternoon, Bush read out a "message to the Iraqi people" declaring that the capture of Hussein ended "dark and painful era" and signaled the arrival of "hopeful day."

The US president claimed that the event would further a US policy aimed at bringing "sovereignty for your country, dignity for your great culture and, for every Iraqi citizen, the opportunity for a better life."

Far from granting the Iraqis sovereignty, the Bush administration has embarked on a program to recolonize Iraq and seize its oil wealth and strategic geopolitical position in order to further a program of global US hegemony. The occupation has stripped increasing layers of the Iraqi people of their dignity, creating growing popular support for attacks on US forces. As for opportunity, that is being granted in unlimited amounts to corrupt, politically connected corporations like Halliburton to loot both Iraq's resources and US taxpayer funds, while Iraqis face mass unemployment and poverty.

The apprehension of the former Iraqi dictator will do nothing to legitimize either the illegal occupation or the stooges that Washington has

selected to form a regime with an "Iraqi face." Nor in the end will it halt the escalating bloodshed that is claiming the lives of both Iraqis and young American soldiers.

The Bush administration clearly hopes that Hussein's capture will bring a more or less rapid disintegration of Iraqi resistance to the occupation. Over time, however, it is likely to have just opposite effect. The unintended impact of the capture of the former Iraqi president will be that of further delegitimizing the US occupation and thereby intensifying the conflict.

The question will inevitably be raised all the more forcefully: If Saddam Hussein is no longer a threat, then why are 130,000 US troops still in Iraq? The obvious answer is that the US has no intention of leaving. It has carried out a predatory war and intends to maintain a permanent occupation to assure itself unrestricted control of the vital energy resources of the region.

While the ties between Hussein and Washington have been largely concealed from the US public, they are widely known among the politically literate population of Iraq. The real question is whether the likes of Rumsfeld and Baker are to be regarded as accomplices of Saddam Hussein's crimes, or whether Hussein himself was merely the accomplice in the greater crimes of US imperialism.

Bush's empty vow that Saddam Hussein will face "justice" must be answered with the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all US forces and that all those US officials responsible for the present war as well as the previous policies that claimed the lives of hundred of thousands of Iraqis be held accountable for these crimes.



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