

# White House, US military respond to outrage over Hussein's execution

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5 January 2007

In response to international revulsion at the savage circumstances of Saddam Hussein's execution, US military and State Department spokesmen sought to distance themselves from the act Wednesday, while White House press aides essentially shrugged their shoulders.

The sectarian lynching of Hussein, captured on video that shows the condemned man being taunted by executioners and witnesses moments before his death, has provoked protests in Iraq—in Tikrit, Samara and Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad—as well as other parts of the Muslim world.

The execution was widely denounced in Europe. Italy's center-left government announced Tuesday, in a largely meaningless gesture, that it would seek a worldwide moratorium on the death penalty at the United Nations. One of Hussein's lawyers, Emanuel Lodo, has written to the UN requesting an international inquiry into the execution.

British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott felt obliged to call the manner of Hussein's death "deplorable" and "totally unacceptable." Both the frontrunners in the upcoming presidential election in France criticized the execution. Right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy called the killing a "mistake" and Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal expressed her "disgust" at the hanging.

At the UN on Thursday, Philip Alston, an American law professor and legal expert with the organization's Human Rights Council, declared that Hussein's trial and execution had significantly violated international human rights law. The previous day UN human rights chief Louise Arbour appealed to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to prevent the executions of two of Hussein's co-defendants, Barzan Ibrahim al-Hassan and Awad Hamad al-Bandar, which are apparently scheduled for this weekend.

Meanwhile, the American political and media establishment was principally busy justifying the execution, explaining it away, or, absurdly, denying any US responsibility for it.

At a Baghdad press conference Wednesday, Maj. Gen. William Caldwell, a Pentagon spokesman, repeatedly asserted that the Hussein execution was a purely Iraqi affair. Caldwell made the extraordinary claim that the Iraqi government had never given up "legal custody" of Hussein. "They have always maintained legal custody of him," he said. "We have never had legal custody. We have only had physical control. And so all we did was return physical control of him back to the Iraqis . . . And then at that point it's a sovereign nation. It's their system."

How can one make any sense of this fiction? The US invaded Iraq with the express purpose of toppling Hussein's government, tracked him down with a massive effort, held him captive in a secret location, organized his trial and ensured a death sentence, but, in the end, that was all simply a matter of "physical control," while its own creation, the "sovereign" Iraqi government, retained "legal custody" over the former president all this time—including, presumably, during the period when it didn't yet exist.

On four separate occasions, at the press conference, Caldwell repeated that the US military "had absolutely nothing to do with" the procedures, "control mechanisms" or facility involved in the execution.

When it was pointed out to Caldwell by a reporter that not only had the US military delivered Hussein into the hands of his executioners (only minutes before his death), but that "coalition forces were involved in the transfer of his body" to a village north of Tikrit, the major general acknowledged that the "Multinational Force" had first provided a helicopter to transport Hussein's dead body, along with a number of Iraqis, back to the Green Zone. "And then the next day—or later that day . . . we were asked once again if we would provide helicopter lift support again to move some Iraqis [along with the corpse] from the International Zone up to the vicinity of Tikrit." But Hussein's body "remained at all times in the government of Iraq's control."

Another journalist observed out that the US military seemed to be distancing itself from the event. Ludicrously, Caldwell replied, "We're not trying to distance ourselves from anything. We just actually had no physical participation."

"Would we have done things differently?" said Caldwell. "Yes, we would have." He never cared to spell out how the US would have organized the lynching "differently." Caldwell, according to reporters, seemed "disheartened" and "disappointed" by the entire episode. The dismay of American military commanders is no doubt genuine; they have every reason to believe that the brutal state killing will provoke more intense violence for which US forces will pay a price. At the same, there may be frustration that the military is hamstrung by the Iraqi government and its operations.

The US embassy in Baghdad apparently expressed its concerns about the execution to the Maliki regime. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told the press Wednesday that American officials had questions about conducting the execution on a Muslim festival day as well as procedural matters, in addition

to the taunting and the videotaping of Hussein's death.

The Bush White House, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed by the event. When asked by a reporter Wednesday during his brief White House Rose Garden appearance whether Hussein's death had been handled appropriately, Bush simply ignored the question and walked back into the Oval Office.

Deputy press secretary Scott Stanzel told the media that Bush was not "focused" on the execution, but "on the new way forward in Iraq."

At a press briefing later in the day White House press secretary Tony Snow expressed his general lack of interest in the atrocious scene in Baghdad. Asked if he had any "qualms" about the execution, Snow claimed that Hussein "was executed after a long trial, a long and public trial that met international standards." In fact, Hussein's legal proceeding was a kangaroo court staged under the guns of a foreign occupier, with judges selected and coached by the same occupiers while witnesses and defense lawyers were intimidated and murdered.

After referring briefly to "concerns" about the manner of the former Iraqi president's death, Snow took the offensive, complaining that "it's interesting because there seems to be a lot of concern about the last two minutes of Saddam Hussein's life and less about the first 69 [years] in which he murdered hundreds of thousands of people. That's why he was executed." The callousness of such a remark hardly needs commenting upon. If "the last two minutes" of someone's life are a matter of no consequence, then why not bring back death by boiling, beheading, drawing and quartering and burning at the stake—all practiced in England under Henry VIII?

Asked whether Bush had seen the video of Hussein's execution, Snow replied, "I don't think so." Permit us to be skeptical. Bush is the pathetic, sadistic individual who presided enthusiastically over the executions of 152 people while governor of Texas, and who mimicked mockingly the pleas for mercy of condemned prisoner Karla Faye Tucker. According to reports, the US president likes to show off the pistol found on Hussein at the time of his capture, now kept on display in a study next to the Oval Office, as a trophy.

Snow later returned to his central theme, "The one thing you've got to keep in mind is he [Hussein] got justice."

When reporters pointed out that the "spectacle" in the Baghdad execution chamber would hardly do wonders for Iraqi "national reconciliation," Snow merely repeated meaningless phrases about how the Maliki government understood "that reconciliation is going to be a critical piece."

The White House may pretend that nothing significant has happened, but not everyone is fooled. Elements within the American media were perturbed by the execution and what it revealed about US prospects in Iraq.

The *New York Times* devoted a lengthy piece to the issue again Wednesday, co-authored by John Burns and James Glanz, which expressed obvious anxiety and did its best to provide an alibi for the Bush administration. The article asserted that as "the shock of those scenes [of the execution] reached a new crescendo in Iraq, American officials said that they had worked until the last hours of Mr. Hussein's life to persuade Prime Minister Nur Kamal al-Maliki to delay the execution . . . But when Mr. Maliki decided to

go ahead with the hanging, the Americans said they made no further attempts to stop it, having concluded that they could advise the Iraqis against the execution, but not prevent it if the Iraqis persisted, out of respect for Iraqi sovereignty." Again, the laughable "sovereignty!"

Jim Hoagland in the *Washington Post* commented Thursday that "the Iraqis who put Saddam Hussein to death made the sadistic dictator look almost noble by their own depraved standards of behavior in that moment." He continued, "Iraqi national unity—as conceived and manipulated by the Bush administration for its own ends—has turned out to be fool's gold . . . Bush now faces the prospect of an insurgent 'government' declaring control over Anbar province and other Sunni-dominated areas in a matter of months—with open support from Iraq's Arab neighbors—if trends continue."

Right-winger John Gibson of *Fox News Channel* commented Tuesday that Maliki's rush to hang Hussein "makes the whole process seem much less like Iraq law in action than a Shiite revenge squad in action." He went on to say that if the violence should continue, "the only sane thing for us to do is say, adios."

The claim is now being floated in the US media that the inherent barbarism of the Iraqi people was revealed by the scene in the execution chamber—this is entirely spurious and self-serving. Reactionary clerical and backward social elements no doubt exist, but the overwhelming responsibility for the present catastrophic state of affairs in Iraq lies with the American government and military.

Two wars, sanctions for more than decade, an illegal invasion and occupation, the whipping up of religious and ethnic divisions to facilitate US colonial rule, the destruction of the infrastructure and social institutions, the deaths of more than one million Iraqis due to US policies—this has created the basis for the current horrifying bloodletting.



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