

Saddam's Totalitarianism

II

The Great Military Leader

Saddam Hussein adored the macho trappings of the armed forces, appointing himself field marshal and dressing his ministers in olive-green fatigues. If he was a poor military strategist, he was fortunate in his first choice of enemy. The fear that an Islamic revolution would spread to an oil producer with estimated oil reserves second only to Saudi Arabia tipped the United States and its allies toward helping Saddam; so they provided weapons, technology and, most important, secret satellite images of Iran's military positions and intercepted communications.

The war lasted for eight years - until 1988 - with both sides terrorizing each other's civilian populations by rocketing major cities. But the March 1988 mustard gas attack on the Iraqi village of Halabja by its own government was perhaps the most gruesome incident. The gas attack killed hundreds of civilian families – women and children. It has become a famous war crime.

In keeping with a ruler who used violence to achieve and sustain power, Mr. Hussein's most widespread investments were in his military. He ended the Iran-Iraq war with one million men under arms.

By then Iraq had embarked on extensive projects to acquire a homegrown arsenal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Iraq had also become a regional power, and Mr. Hussein expected to dominate the Arab world. Accordingly, Hussein's next target was another neighbor, Kuwait, which Iraq had long considered part of Iraq and coveted for its deep-water port and its oil. In 1990, his army swiftly occupied the tiny, immensely wealthy little country, provoking an international crisis.

Mr. Hussein declared the country Iraq's 19th province, installing a puppet government. Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab states were shaken

and outraged, while the United States and other Western countries feared for the oil fields ringing the Persian Gulf. The United Nations imposed a trade embargo and economic sanctions.



The United States and eventually 33 other nations deployed forces to the region and warned of a wider war if Mr. Hussein did not withdraw. He held onto Kuwait despite repeated threats from the United States, which dominated the military coalition by dispatching some 500,000 American soldiers. Hussein lost the war.

Washington and its coalition allies hoped that the war would bring Mr. Hussein's downfall. Even before the war ended, President George H. W. Bush encouraged the Iraqi people to overthrow him, but there was no coherent plan. The ground offensive against Iraq ended after 100 hours. Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense, warned that sending American forces to Baghdad would get them stuck in a "quagmire."

This decision enabled much of the elite Republican Guard to escape with minimal losses. The first Bush administration did little to support Shiite and Kurdish uprisings that erupted immediately after the war. Mr. Hussein crushed them.

Oil, Food and Weapons

For the next decade, Mr. Hussein repeatedly brought Iraq to the brink of renewed warfare by refusing United Nations weapons inspectors the access required to catalog and destroy Iraq's arsenal of unconventional weapons, as specified in the cease-fire agreement.

The United Nations maintained strict economic sanctions against Iraq until 1996, when some oil exports were allowed to pay for food, medicine and war reparations. The sanctions, devastating to Iraqis, proved a boon to Mr. Hussein and his subordinates. The Government Accountability Office in the United States Congress estimated that the Iraqi leader stole at least \$10 billion from the program by making oil trades off the books and demanding kickbacks.

Rarely traveling abroad, and surrounded by often uneducated cousins, he had a limited worldview. Saad al-Bazzaz, an Iraqi writer and editor, said that Mr. Hussein, having risen so far beyond the village and cheated death so often, believed that God anointed him.

Controlling a Nation

Iraq under Mr. Hussein had a stifled quality. Imprisonment, torture, mutilation and execution were frequent occurrences, at least for those who chose to dabble in anything vaguely political. Simple information like the weather report was classified. There was no freedom of expression — even foreign newspapers were banned — and no freedom to travel. Contact with foreigners was proscribed.

There were widespread reports that Mr. Hussein himself periodically carried out the torture or even execution of those he felt had crossed him. In the summer of 1982, for example, Riyadh Ibrahim Hussein, the health minister, suggested during a cabinet meeting that Mr. Hussein step down to ease the negotiation of a cease-fire with Iran. Mr. Hussein recommended that the two retire to another room to discuss the proposal. When they did, a shot rang out. Mr. Hussein returned to the cabinet meeting alone, although in later interviews he denied killing anyone. The minister's widow was sent his dismembered corpse.

By 2003, Iraq's military was anemic, weakened by sanctions and constant changes in command, not to mention the fact that Mr. Hussein, suspicious of coup attempts, barred any rigorous maneuvers and repeatedly created new popular militias. Commanders also constantly lied to him about their state of preparedness. Mr. Hussein cited both Vietnam and the hasty American withdrawal from Somalia in 1994 as evidence, and did not take the threat of regime change seriously. He so much believed his own publicity about his success in fighting the first gulf war that he used it as a blueprint for the second. But when American military forces attacked Iraq, defeat came quickly for this "great military leader."

Saddam hid, apparently using up to 30 hiding places and the aid of loyal tribesmen to escape capture despite a \$25 million reward. He issued periodic messages encouraging the insurgency. In December 2003, his location was divulged by a clan member captured in a raid on a Baghdad house. Less than 11 hours later, 600 American soldiers surrounded two farmhouses near the banks of the Tigris in a village about nine miles southeast of Tikrit, the tribal seat. Hussein was discovered lying at the bottom of an eight-foot-deep hole. His first words when he emerged, nervous and disoriented, were, "I am Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq, and I am willing to negotiate," in halting English.

A Special Operations soldier there shot back, "President Bush sends his regards," the military said later. The main indication that the filthy, dilapidated concrete hut close by had been used by the former Iraqi president

Mr. Hussein was kept in solitary. He lived in a relatively spartan cell consisting of a bed, a toilet, a chair, a towel, some books and a prayer rug. Then he was put on trial for war crimes. Mr. Hussein was combative throughout his trial, using it as a platform to encourage the insurgents.

Mr. Hussein often tried to draw parallels between himself and the famous leaders of Mesopotamia, the earliest civilization in the region, as well as Saladin, the 12th-century Kurdish Muslim military commander who expelled the crusaders from Jerusalem. What preoccupied him, he said, was what people would be thinking about him in 500 years. What people really remember is that Saddam was hanged like a common murderer in the years following his failed war.