

Saddam Hussein

The Totalitarian Dictator Who Ruled Iraq With Violence and Fear

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Part I

In 2006, the hanging of Saddam Hussein ended the life of one of the most brutal tyrants in recent history. The despot, known as Saddam, had oppressed Iraq for more than 30 years, unleashing devastating regional wars and reducing his once promising, oil-rich nation to a totalitarian police state. For decades, it had seemed that his hold on Iraq would endure, particularly after he lasted through disastrous military adventures against first Iran and then Kuwait, where an American-led coalition defeated his unexpectedly weak military in 1991. His own conviction that he was destined by God to rule Iraq forever was such that he refused to accept that he would be overthrown in April 2003, even as American tanks took over the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in an embarrassingly quick war.

Underneath all the big talk, underneath the religious-Koranic references, the tailored suits and the invocations of Iraq's glorious history, Mr. Hussein held onto the country through totalitarian violence. Mosques, airports, neighborhoods and entire cities were named after him. In school, pupils learned songs with lyrics like "Saddam, oh Saddam, you carry the nation's dawn in your eyes." The entertainment at public events often consisted of outpourings of praise for Mr. Hussein. At the January 2003 inauguration of a recreational lake in Baghdad, poets spouted spontaneous verse and the official translators struggled to keep up with lines like, "We will stimulate ourselves by saying your name, Saddam Hussein, when we say Saddam Hussein, we stimulate ourselves." This dictatorial penetration of everything in society – family, religion, entertainment, social clubs, the military, the government, and the media – is the very definition of **TOTALITARIAN RULE.**

While Mr. Hussein was in power, his statue guarded the entrance to every village, his portrait watched over each government office and he peered down from at least one wall in every home. His picture was so widespread that a joke quietly circulating among his detractors in 1988 put the country's population at 34 million — 17 million people and 17 million portraits of Saddam.



Battles and Bloodshed

Throughout his rule, he unsettled the ranks of the nation's only political party – the Baath Party with bloody purges of everyone who might oppose him. He packed his jails with political prisoners to defuse real or imagined plots. Aside from his secret police, he held power by filling the government's upper ranks with members of his extended clan. Their feuds with competing groups were like scenes from the film, the GODFATHER. Mr. Hussein's elder son, Uday, once beat Mr. Hussein's food taster to death in front of scores of horrified party guests. Total power meant total corruption and abuse.

As with other totalitarian governments, power was maintained through military power and war. Continual wars sapped Iraq's wealth and decimated its people. In 1980, Mr. Hussein dragged his country into a disastrous attempt to overthrow the new Islamic government in neighboring Iran. By the time the war ended in stalemate in 1988, more than 200,000 Iraqis were dead and hundreds of thousands more wounded. Iran suffered a similar toll. Iraq's staggering war debt, pegged around \$70 billion, soon had wealthy Arab neighbors demanding repayment. Enraged, he invaded Kuwait in August 1990 to steal their oil. (He was expelled by an American-led coalition in the Persian Gulf war seven months later.)

Yet in the twisted language of his Orwellian government, Mr. Hussein never suffered a setback. After the gulf war ended with the deaths of an estimated 150,000 Iraqis, he called "the Mother of All Battles" his biggest victory and maintained that Iraq had actually repulsed an American attack. "Iraq has punched a hole in the myth of American superiority and rubbed the nose of the United States in the dust," Mr. Hussein said – after losing totally.

His defeat in Kuwait, followed by more than a decade of tense confrontations with the West over his suspected weapons programs, ultimately led to his overthrow. The extended bloodbath that followed the invasion, with the monthly death toll of Iraqi civilians estimated roughly at 3,000 by the end of 2006, made some nostalgic for even the oppressive days of Mr. Hussein, when public security was not an issue. His repressive ways were credited with keeping the fractious population of 26 million – including 20 percent Sunni Muslims, who dominated; 55 percent Shiite Muslims; 20 percent Kurds plus several tiny minorities including Christians — from shattering along ethnic lines. Even people who hate Saddam must admit that his totalitarian power may have been the one thing keeping the divided nation of Iraq from breaking up in civil war. Still, Saddam's rule was one of the most brutal dictatorships in the history of that unhappy country.