



Capital Games by DAVID CORN

Saddam Gone

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It is not unheard of for good to come from bad. George W. Bush misled the United States into war and occupation. His administration was recklessly negligent in its planning for the post-invasion period. It has poorly managed the challenges of nation building in Iraq, ensnaring the United States in an ugly (and lethal) mess. And he has alienated America from much of the world. Yet Bush has bagged Saddam Hussein, the butcher of Baghdad.

The capture of such a murderous fiend is good news. Hussein deserves to rot for the rest of his days in the underground rat's nest where he was found. But the apprehension of Hussein does not justify the war. In a way, it is the least that Bush could have done, after invading under false pretenses. He told the American public that it was necessary to bomb, invade and occupy Iraq--rather than engage in more aggressive weapons inspections--to neutralize the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. He claimed that his administration possessed incontrovertible proof that Hussein had such awful weapons and maintained operational links with al Qaeda. Seven months after entering Iraq, the Bush administration has not been able to produce evidence to support its central case for war. Instead, Bush and his comrades have increasingly discussed the war as an operation to free the Iraqi people from the repression of Hussein. And nabbing Hussein certainly has allowed Bush and the defenders of the war to push further this after-the-fact justification. Following Hussein's capture, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist disingenuously exclaimed, "The reason we were in that country in the first place are being realized." Not at all. Hussein was found not with WMDs but with \$750,000. But what was good politically for Bush was also good for Iraq and the world.

The celebratory tone accompanying much of the media coverage of Hussein's apprehension, though, may be more triumphal than warranted. There was no immediate indication Hussein's arrest would have a direct impact on the

Washington--a city of denials, spin, and political calculations.

They may speak English there,

but most citizens still need an interpreter to understand its ways and meanings. David Corn, the Washington editor of *The Nation* magazine, has spent years analyzing the policies and pursuing the lies that spew out of the nation's capital. He is a novelist, biographer, and television and radio commentator who is able to both decipher and scrutinize Washington.

In his dispatches, he takes on the day-by-day political and policy battles under way in the Capitol, the White House, the think tanks, and the television studios. With an informed, unconventional perspective, he holds the politicians, policymakers and pundits accountable and reports the important facts and views that go uncovered elsewhere.

Check out David Corn's new bestselling book, *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (Crown Publishers). For information, visit www.bushlies.com.



insurgency. The circumstances in which he was discovered did not suggest he was playing a day-to-day leadership or coordinating role in the anti-America insurgency. It may be that his capture will discourage the thuggish Ba'athist loyalists who have been attacking US targets and engaging in terrorist actions. And perhaps other Iraqis who had worried about Hussein's possible return to power will now be more willing to support or go along with US actions in Iraq. But it is also possible that if the de-Husseined Ba'athist wane--which would be a development worth cheering--some Islamic forces opposed to the occupation, which previously did not want to be identified with the violent Ba'athist remnants, might feel freer to engage in anti-American violence of their own.

To use two cliches, it's *too soon to tell* how--or if--Hussein's capture will alter the *reality on the ground*. When US military forces blew away his two sons, Uday and Qusay, some pro-war commentators were quick to predict a turning point in the war, asserting that this high-profile win for the US forces would surely demoralize the anti-US guerillas. Instead, the counterinsurgency gained strength. Given that the Pentagon still does not have a clear picture of who is fighting the US forces--and why--it is tough to calculate what the snatching of Hussein means in strategic terms. His capture could have little effect on the political transition that has bewildered the White House. Interviewing Democratic presidential candidate Wesley Clark after the news broke, CNN's Judy Woodruff asked, "What are the issues left to talk about regarding Iraq?" The answer: plenty--such as how to rebuild Iraq, how to revive a government there, and how to end the US occupation. But on the all-important issue of what to do in Iraq, the apprehension of Hussein might not change much.

It also raises the knotty matter of what to do about Hussein. A trial in Iraq? And who would be in charge? The Americans? The US-appointed governing council? Or a trial before an international court, perhaps in the Hague? Imagine the spectacle. Some overly imaginative conspiracy-minded Bush foes had previously speculated that the United States already had Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden (remember him?) on ice and that the Bush administration planned to trot them out as part of an October surprise next fall. That was foolish supposing. Karl Rove is not that masterful a manipulator. But consider how a Hussein *trial* in the weeks or months before the 2004 election might assist Bush's reelection efforts (and draw attention from the efforts of the Democratic nominee). Who's going to schedule that trial? And will Hussein be given a chance in such a proceeding to challenge Bush's charge on WMDs? Or to provide his account of what Donald Rumsfeld told

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him way back in 1983 during a face-to-face meeting, when Rumsfeld visited Hussein as an envoy for President Reagan and cozied up to the guy who was fighting the ayatollahs of Iran. At that time, Hussein was using chemical weapons against Iran--a topic that presumably will come up in a trial of Hussein. Last year, Rumsfeld claimed he had "cautioned" Hussein about using such weapons, but declassified State Department records of the meeting indicated he had not.

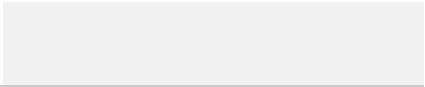
Slapping chains on a dictator is an achievement. But there remains no reason to believe this dramatic accomplishment for Bush is progress in the so-called war on terrorism. The day of Hussein's arrest, one of the tenuous elements of the tenuous case linking Hussein to 9/11 further evaporated. *The New York Times* reported that a captured Iraqi intelligence officer whom some supporters of the war claimed had met 9/11 ringleader Mohamed Atta was telling his American interrogators that such a meeting never happened. (The CIA and the FBI had already concluded there was nothing to the allegation that Atta had huddled with this Iraqi.) And on the day the US military disclosed it had caught Hussein, *The Washington Post* noted on its front page that "al Qaeda continues to receive ample funding not only to carry out its own plots but also to finance affiliated terrorists groups and to seek new weapons." One might wonder if al Qaeda leaders were watching the news coverage of Hussein's capture and snickering, "Suckers."

The war on terrorism's number-one distraction has now been taken out. Let the Iraqis celebrate. Let Hussein be punished to the max--though no punishment devised by mortals can fit his crimes. Let Bush and his crew do a modest victory dance. But let us not forget that Hussein--as brutal as he was--was not the main threat to America and that his capture does not guarantee success in Iraq or the (more correctly named) war against al Qaeda.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT DAVID CORN'S NEW BOOK, [*The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception*](#) (Crown Publishers). A *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER! *The Library Journal* says, "Corn chronicles to devastating effect the lies, falsehoods, and misrepresentations....Corn has painstakingly unearthed a bill of particulars against the president that is as damaging as it is thorough." For more information and a sample, check out the book's official website: www.bushlies.com.

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