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The official US response to the capture of Saddam Hussein: a degrading spectacle

By David Walsh
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The official American response to the capture of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein must provoke feelings of deep disgust. It requires a political and media establishment from whom all traces of democratic or humane instinct have been eradicated to react with a display of such ignorance, vindictiveness and sadism.

There is irony in the fact that only a regime as depraved as the current one in Washington could create by its actions a degree of sympathy for Hussein, a right-wing nationalist thug and former ally of the US.

Banner headlines screaming “We’ve got him!,” the innumerable and tedious variations on the “rat” caught in his “hole,” countless news items citing the event as George W. Bush’s “ultimate Christmas present”—what does this all add up to? Victor’s justice, with an unspeakably backward and repellent quality to it.

The capture of Hussein, an inevitable event given the current disposition of military forces and the free hand that American forces have to bribe, bully and torture, is only the latest and most dramatic in a series of such episodes. Since the re-eruption of naked American colonialism in the 1980s, the US has demonized a long list of foreign leaders and “brought to justice” figures like Manuel Noriega of Panama in 1989 and Slobodan Milosevic of the former Yugoslavia in 2001. The process is thoroughly stereotyped by now. A thread connecting between these individuals and others, including Osama bin Laden, is their former association with the US government, military or CIA.

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The stupidity and hypocrisy of the American media knows few bounds. After years of pontificating about Hussein's palaces—and this coming from multimillionaires—the media pundits now point to his inglorious end in “a mud-caked hole in the ground,” as though the undignified condition were of his own choosing. The *New York Post* of Rupert Murdoch, as is generally the case, offered the foulest example of gutter journalism, commenting that Hussein looked “every bit like a subway panhandler while a medic checked his scalp for lice.... Even after he'd been cleaned and shaved, it was obvious that he'd lost the will to fight: His eyes were blank, his face a mask of submission.”

This is pretty rich. Hussein was hiding for months from the most lethal military force on the planet. His sons have been murdered. What sort of condition was Hussein likely to be found in? And as for his comportment, can it be truly said that he behaved with less fortitude than an American president would under similar conditions? American politicians regularly burst into tears when they lose a primary election. The scene of Richard Nixon's resignation, in the East Room of the White House in August 1974, prompted this comment from one journalist: “Sometimes one wished that his agonized wife would take this wretched slobbering, spluttering man away by the arm and propel him into some windowless vehicle for transport to obscurity.”

Kill or torture Hussein?

Journalists are now pressing Bush and his cohorts with questions about the possibility of executing Hussein. At his Monday news conference, he was asked by one reporter: “Do you think that execution should be an option?”

Bush smirked, “He will be detained. We will work with the Iraqis to develop a way to try him that will stand international scrutiny, I guess is the best way to put it.... I've got my own personal views of how he ought to be treated, but I'm not an Iraqi citizen. It's going to be up to the Iraqis to make those decisions.” And the assembled reporters pretended to believe his last point.

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein has many crimes to answer for. But so, for that matter, does George W. Bush and those among his associates whose launching of an aggressive war against Iraq constitutes, if the precedent of the Nuremberg trials retains any standing, a crime. What legal, let alone moral right have American government officials—whose hand-picked man in Baghdad, Ahmad Chalabi, is a convicted felon—to put Hussein on trial? They all have unclean hands. The tribunal proposal is another example of Washington's criminality and flouting of international

law. Bush administration officials simply make things up as they go along, according to the military, political or electoral needs of the moment.

And the media laps it up, as do the tops of the Democratic Party. The inevitable Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, candidate for his party's presidential nomination, quickly joined the chorus calling for blood. If an international or Iraqi tribunal could not execute Hussein, Lieberman said, "he should be brought before an American military tribunal and face death."

Providing a glimpse into the depths of depravity to which the US media has sunk, Leslie Stahl of CBS News's prestigious *60 Minutes* program queried Rumsfeld Sunday night on the advisability of torturing or killing Hussein. She asked, "Let me raise the whole question, for lack of a better term, [of] torture. Let's say he's not forthcoming. Would we deprive him of sleep, make it very cold where he is, or very hot? Are there any restrictions on the way we treat him to get him to cooperate more than he has been?" When Rumsfeld indicated that the US would not torture "this person," she pursued the matter, "Sleep deprivation, that kind of thing. You're ruling it completely out, is that what you're telling us?"

Later this revealing exchange took place:

Stahl: "Did it cross your mind at all once you heard it was likely that they knew where he was and he might be captured—that it would be better if he were killed? Would it just be better if he weren't alive?"

Rumsfeld: "Well that's a fair question. You know, I have a lot of things I worry about and try and think through, and that was one thing I could do nothing about. We either were going to kill him or capture him, and our policy is we try and capture and not kill and if we're not able to capture and we can kill, we do it."

We might as well be listening in on a conversation between two Mafia wise guys.

The desire to humiliate and terrorize is uppermost in the minds of Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz and the Bush brain-trust, as well as their servants in the media. The demeaning handling of Hussein, in contravention of the Geneva Conventions, including the medical examination broadcast to a worldwide television audience, is intended to intimidate not only the Iraqi resistance and general population, the Arab world and all those who might consider opposing US imperialism around the globe, but, in the final analysis, the American population as well. The message is: all resistance is futile, we will

trample on you too.

To whom is such a display intended to appeal today? The most backward and morally depraved section of the US population, the semi-fascist base of the Republican Party, the social and psychological type whose counterparts in the ancient world used to whoop at the sight of a man or woman thrown to the lions. Celebrating this barbaric episode speaks to their own lack of humanity.

The degrading of Hussein follows the obscene display of his sons' corpses earlier this year. No one in the US media will recall the howls emitted by the Pentagon when the Arab satellite channel Al Jazeera broadcast footage of dead and captured American soldiers last March. At the time Rumsfeld piously told the press, "The Geneva Convention indicates that it's not permitted to photograph and embarrass or humiliate prisoners of war."

The spectacle of official America celebrating over Saddam Hussein's capture, with its air of a particularly primitive and bloodthirsty ritual, will horrify and outrage masses of people. It becomes more and more apparent, and this is a relatively recent feature of modern social life, that the American ruling elite inhabits a political and moral universe that is distant and alien from the lives and feelings of the overwhelming majority of humanity, including American humanity. In decent-minded people such goings-on can only evoke feelings of shame, the sense of witnessing something unclean.

Whatever Bush and company can claim to represent is foreign and hostile to the most honorable traditions and ideals of the American people. They exist in another world.

Iraqis have no cause to celebrate

There is no reason to doubt the list of Hussein's crimes, although no US commentator will point out that the worst of them were committed when he was in a de facto alliance with Washington. However, reporters were quick to note a subdued mood in the Iraqi population. The experience of eight months of American military rule, combined with a natural and inevitable instinctive hostility to foreign, colonial occupation, have disabused all but the most naïve or corrupt Iraqis of any illusions in US "justice." A recent poll indicated that 91 percent of the population had little interest in the hunt for or prosecution of members of the former regime.

Joshua Logan of Reuters, for example, writes: "Joy at the capture of Saddam Hussein has given way to resentment towards Washington as Iraqis confront

afresh the bloodshed, shortages and soaring prices of life under US occupation. Many were ecstatic to see Saddam in the dock and hoped he would answer for his deeds but said they would not rush to thank America—in their eyes the source of their problems since a US-led coalition toppled Saddam in April.” Resistance attacks on US forces and Iraqi collaborators continued unabated following Hussein’s capture.

Arab public opinion throughout the Middle East was similarly hostile, responding to the obvious attempt by the American military to humiliate and degrade the former leader. Even those interviewed by Western media outlets who were pleased with Hussein’s capture deplored the fact that it was Bush and the US military who brought him down.

The mood in the American population was markedly subdued as well, outside of the pockets of pro-war zealots and despite (or perhaps because of) the media bombardment. The *Washington Post* published the results of a poll indicating that only 15 to 23 percent thought the arrest would “help a great deal.” Nine in ten Americans felt “big challenges” remain in Iraq. Forty-two percent of the population continued to argue that the war was not worth fighting. Twice as many Americans say the war is going worse than expected than think it is going better than expected.

A CNN-Gallup poll found the same general result, that the capture of Hussein had relatively little impact on attitudes toward the war or Bush.

The general response in the US is one of caution, skepticism, apathy. Bush made a pompous and lying “address to the nation,” as though many cared to listen to what he had to say. Why should anyone in America rejoice over Hussein’s capture, an event that will not bring the end of US military intervention one day closer, save the life of one Iraqi or American soldier, improve the state of international or regional stability or remedy the increasingly desperate economic condition of broad layers of the population at home?

Hussein’s crimes pale in comparison

If every crime attributed to Hussein since the Baathists took power for good in 1968 were true, his hands would still not be stained with a fraction of the blood spilled by a series of US presidents over the same general period. Under Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, four million Vietnamese lost their lives as the result of US intervention, along with an estimated one million Cambodians and half a million Laotians. In Indonesia in 1965, a CIA-supported coup resulted in the deaths of another half a million people.

Between 1954 and 2002, 300,000 Guatemalans are estimated to have met their deaths as the result of US-backed government repression. Another 100,000 are thought to have died in El Salvador.

In Argentina and Chile in the 1970s, with the capable assistance of the Nixon-Kissinger and Carter-Brzezinski regimes, military butchers tortured and murdered 50,000 people. Hundreds of thousands, if not more, Iraqis, including half a million children, have encountered a tragic fate as the result of the two wars conducted by US forces, and a decade of devastating sanctions under Bush and Clinton.

The Afghan catastrophe since 1979 has resulted in another one million deaths, and one should add the lives of 3,000 innocent Americans lost in the terrorist attacks of September 2001, which was one of the byproducts of the disastrous US encounter with the Central Asian nation.

And for all the talk about the Kurds, the US has stood shoulder to shoulder with the worst oppressor of that people, the Turkish regime. Indeed, the arrest of Hussein, carried out with US assistance, resembled nothing so much as the capture of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999.

Treatment of captured enemies

In more civilized times even the most implacable enemies were treated with dignity. Napoleon Bonaparte, whom a contemporary British account termed “that bloody miscreant, who has so long tortured Europe” and whose cruelty “is written in characters of blood in almost every country in Europe and in the contiguous angles of Africa and Asia which he visited,” was treated with respect aboard the *Bellerophon* when he surrendered in July 1815, and this was after a first escape and subsequent military campaign.

And what of the treatment of Gen. Robert E. Lee, who had led a rebellion against the United States in defense of slavery, resulting in the deaths of 600,000 Americans? Consider the response of his dedicated enemy, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, at Appomattox in April 1865: “Whatever his [Lee’s] feelings, they were entirely concealed from my observation; but my own feelings, which had been quite jubilant on the receipt of his letter [proposing negotiations], were sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was not the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.”

Some might argue that these are not appropriate analogies; after all, Saddam Hussein is neither a Napoleon nor a Lee. No doubt he is not. But then, Bush is neither a Wellington nor a Grant. In any event, it is not so much a question of the character and actions of the vanquished, but those of *the victor*. Hussein's brutal and illegal treatment is a further sign of the political, moral and cultural degeneracy of the American ruling elite.

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[Top of page](#)

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