

US media, government scramble to obscure criminal dealings with Hussein

By Joseph Kay and Alex Lefebvre
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Despite the orgy of self-congratulation that greeted the capture of Saddam Hussein, this is yet another “victory” that is proving to have unforeseen and bitter consequences for the Bush administration.

As reports begin to seep into the press of the history of dirty dealings between the former Iraqi president and the administrations of Reagan and Bush senior, one must suspect that the present occupant of the White House, not to mention his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, regret that the military forces that located Hussein did not shoot him on the spot rather than take him into custody.

Now the administration confronts the danger that a trial of Hussein—especially one held under international auspices that affords the ex-president the opportunity to mount a genuine legal defense—will expose the direct and deep involvement of the United States government in the most serious crimes of which Hussein stands accused, particularly the use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

Recently declassified national security documents draw a devastating portrait of Washington’s use of Hussein in pursuit of its geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Even as it became aware that Iraq was using chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Iraqi Kurdish insurgents, the US government continued shifting its policy to provide critical political, military and economic support to Hussein’s regime.

This history exposes the administration’s rationale for invading and occupying Iraq and placing Hussein on trial as utterly false and hypocritical. Iraq’s use of chemical weapons, alongside its alleged possession of other so-called weapons of mass destruction, was a principal justification for the war. The documents establish irrefutably that key figures in the Reagan and Bush administrations were Hussein’s enablers and accomplices in his crimes.

Hussein himself is clearly aware of the potentially explosive character of the history of his relations with the US government. When captured, his first words were: “My name is Saddam Hussein. I am the president of Iraq and I want to negotiate.” On what basis can Hussein, whose army had been defeated months ago, seek to negotiate? His only leverage over the US government is his ability to expose its ruthless maneuvering in the Middle East over the past quarter century.

The declassified documents (publicly available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>) provide insights into the nature of the Baathist regime’s ties with the American government during the 1980s.

What is particularly troubling for ruling circles in the US is that many of the principals involved in those relations on Washington’s side—Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney, the elder Bush and a number of others—either occupy leading positions in the current administration or are intimately connected to it. Any attempt to brush aside US-Iraqi relations in an earlier period as the bygone policy of a previous government is plainly untenable.

Official disquiet over these ties found expression in the *New York Times*’s publication of a nervous article—buried on page 10 of the newspaper—calling attention to the national security documents and

recounting Rumsfeld’s diplomatic missions to Baghdad 20 years ago.

The relations between the US and Hussein began fairly early in the latter’s career in the Baath Party. Hussein, fiercely anticommunist, was viewed by British and American officials as a person with whom they could deal. However, up until the early 1980s the two countries had no official diplomatic ties. Iraq had terminated all official diplomatic relations with the US after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

This changed with the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, particularly after the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Iran began to achieve victories against Iraq in 1982. The increasingly desperate position of the Iraqi army also prompted Hussein to begin using poison gas. Iran charged Iraq with violating the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning chemical weapons use—to which Iraq was a signatory. The documents indicate that the US was well aware of Iraq’s use of the weapons by 1983, at the latest.

It was in this year that momentum began to build in Iraq and the US for resuming official diplomatic ties. On the US side, the issue of Hussein’s chemical weapons use was viewed as a public relations problem that would give Iran political ammunition against Iraq and make it harder to conduct US-Iraqi relations in the open.

A State Department directive from Under Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, then the number three man in the State Department, to US personnel in Baghdad dated November 21, 1983, reads: “We are considering how to respond to development of the [chemical weapon] issue in the UN. We do not wish to play into Iran’s hands by fueling its propaganda against Iraq.”

The directive instructed US envoys to make sure that in bringing up the issue of Iraqi chemical weapons use, no lasting damage was done to US-Iraqi relations: “We raise the issue [of chemical weapons] now neither to enter into a confrontational exchange with you, nor to lend support to the views of others; but, rather, because it is a long-standing policy of the US to oppose use of lethal CW [chemical weapons].”

In December 1983, Rumsfeld (the current secretary of defense who was at the time the CEO of a large pharmaceutical firm, G.D. Searle) visited Iraq as a personal envoy of President Ronald Reagan. Included in the points to be discussed by Rumsfeld in the 1983 meeting is the statement that the US government “recognizes Iraq’s current disadvantage in a war of attrition since Iran has access to the Gulf while Iraq does not and would regard any major reversal of Iraq’s fortunes as a strategic defeat for the west.”

Rumsfeld later told King Hussein of Jordan—who was a principal collaborator in US-Iraqi relations—that the US was worried Iraq’s defeat could seriously endanger other countries in the region, particularly the US client state Saudi Arabia. This could entirely cut off US access to Persian Gulf oil.

Rumsfeld met with Iraqi minister Tariq Aziz and Saddam Hussein. According to detailed notes of his meeting with Saddam Hussein, he did not mention chemical weapons. He and his Iraqi counterparts did, however, discuss steps to move Iraq closer to the US and further from the

USSR, the political climate in the Middle East, and the construction of an oil pipeline to the Mediterranean port of Aqaba, which would be out of the range of Iranian strikes. Bechtel, the politically well-connected engineering firm that is currently cashing in on the “reconstruction” of Iraq, was to build the pipeline.

In March 1984, Iraq’s battlefield use of chemical weapons became so obvious that the US government felt obliged to issue a statement condemning it. The statement denouncing the chemical weapons use contains the following extraordinary passage: “The United States strongly condemns the prohibited use of chemical weapons wherever it occurs.... [However,] the United States finds the present Iranian regime’s intransigent refusal to deviate from its avowed objective of eliminating the legitimate government of neighboring Iraq to be inconsistent with the accepted norms of behavior among nations and the moral and religious basis which it claims.”

Apparently, the US has since overcome its moral qualms with “eliminating the legitimate government” of Iraq.

Iraq reacted strongly against the statement, despite repeated American attempts to assure the government in Baghdad that the statement was issued solely for purposes of public consumption and did not indicate a change in US commitments to improve relations with Iraq. Rumsfeld was hurriedly sent back to Baghdad (in March of 1983) to deliver this message. At that time, Secretary of State George Shultz told Rumsfeld to assure his hosts that “our interests in (1) preventing an Iranian victory and (2) continuing to improve bilateral relations with Iraq, at a pace of Iraq’s choosing, remain undiminished,” despite Iraq’s illegal use of chemical weapons.

The US continued to minimize the issue of Iraqi chemical weapons use throughout the conflict. When, in 1988, the northern Kurdish town of Halabja was gassed and the Iraqi regime widely blamed, the US government moved to provide cover for Iraq. A State Department document notes that, in dealing with Congressional proposals to formally condemn the use of chemical weapons, “we should oppose legislation that uses inaccurate terms like genocide, and should try to keep the maximum amount of flexibility for the Administration in handling the issue.”

The attitude of the US government to Iraqi use of chemical weapons was part of a strategic orientation to aid Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War. To this end, the US provided intelligence information and ensured that Iraq had sufficient supplies of weapons.

The Reagan administration pushed for US government financing of Iraq through the Export-Import Bank and other US institutions. As was revealed in the so-called Iraqgate scandal that emerged in the early 1990s, the US government looked the other way as Iraq used loans from American official and private institutions to fund purchases of arms. All of this was contrary to the government’s stated policy of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war.

This policy of support for the Hussein regime continued up until the day Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. To the complete surprise of Hussein—who was led to believe that the US was neutral in the conflict—the first Bush administration organized an air and ground war against Iraq. The turn against the Iraqi regime was completed by the second Bush administration, with the consequence that Hussein, instead of being supported by the US, now finds himself on the verge of execution for war crimes.

What changed? How did Hussein go from being a friend of the US to a pariah? The documents give clear proof that his use of chemical weapons and the like had nothing to do with it. Rather, the US made a strategic shift in the early 1990s. The growing strains within the Soviet Union—which would lead to its complete disintegration—meant that new vistas were opening up for American imperialism.

A dominant section of the American ruling elite—including as a prominent member Donald Rumsfeld—saw the decline of the Soviet Union

as an opportunity for American imperialism to advance its interests without constraint. Whereas it once felt obliged to deal with people like Hussein in order to project its interests internationally, the US is now determined to assert these interests directly. Hence the drive for the direct military occupation of Iraq, a policy unthinkable for the US only two decades ago.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the US ruling elite is so wary of a Hussein trial. This fear was expressed in a December 18 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Judicial Colonialism.”

The *Journal* begins by arguing against an international tribunal for Hussein. “The fear seems to be,” write the editors, referring to those who support an international trial, “that Saddam might not be able to get a fair trial in Iraq, as if there’s some global suspense about his guilt. Worse, Iraqis might be so barbaric as to impose the same death penalty on Saddam that he imposed on so many thousands of his own people.”

Instead of an international tribunal, the *Journal* advocates a trial in Iraq, which, under the current circumstances, can only mean a trial staged by the Iraqi stooge regime under the supervision of the American military occupation. The newspaper’s editors praise members of the Iraqi Governing Council for declaring that the trial will be public and televised. “In a public trial that includes fulsome testimony, [Bush, Blair and the Iraqi Governing Council] have the chance to educate the people of Iraq about the scope and detail of Saddam’s reign of terror.”

The *Journal*’s sarcastic comment about the “global suspense about [Saddam Hussein’s] guilt” makes clear that what it wants is a show trial, a public exhibition of Hussein for propaganda purposes, in which only evidence contributing to a predetermined guilty verdict and execution will be admitted. Any serious examination of the history of Hussein’s regime and role of the US government would be excluded from the trial envisioned by the *Journal*. The last thing that the *Journal*—and the ruling circles for which it speaks—wants is for the trial to raise uncomfortable issues, as is clear when the editors turn to their rationale for opposing an international tribunal.

“Exhibit No. 1,” the editorial states, “is the trial of former Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic, currently going on at the Hague.... Proceedings are being broadcast back home, and Milosevic, who is representing himself, is making the most of it.... This week he inserted himself into the US elections, trying to discredit Wesley Clark, who was appearing as a witness.... Giving Saddam Hussein a similar platform could be a disaster for Iraq’s reconstruction, emboldening the Baathist remnants and suggesting to ordinary Iraqis that Saddam still might return to power...”

The *Wall Street Journal* is furious that Milosevic—who, like Hussein, is a right-wing bourgeois nationalist—has been given an opportunity in the trial to challenge the accusation that he is guilty of war crimes and genocide while president of Yugoslavia. His defense has rested, in part, on denouncing the role of the United States in fostering the breakup of the Yugoslav federation and launching a war against Serbia.

Nor are these sentiments unique to the *Wall Street Journal*. The *New York Times* voiced a similar view in a December 21 article by Jeffrey Rosen, entitled “Pursuing Justice: Perils of the Past.” Also citing the example of Milosevic, Rosen writes: “There is certainly a risk of embarrassment when the degree of American support for Iraq in its war with Iran in the 1980s is aired. The details revealed could even undermine Washington’s credibility.”

Recognizing the hypocrisy of the American government’s handling of Hussein does not imply any sympathy for the man himself. Hussein should be tried and held accountable for his crimes, but not by the Bush administration and its servants in the Iraqi Governing Council. Such a trial would be a mockery of international law, in which Hussein’s former accomplices now assume the role of his prosecutors.

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