

## The Capture of Saddam Husain

By

William R. Polk

The American forces in Iraq and a significant portion of the Iraqi people deserve their moment of euphoria over the capture of Saddam Husain. Few will sympathize for him. But now that a few days have passed, we would be wise to ponder three questions raised by his capture: why he was captured? How does capturing him affect the guerrilla war in Iraq? And what new directions in policy there might his capture make possible?

The first question is why he was finally tracked down. The answers are both geographical and social. Iraq is a small country, and in most of it (unlike Afghanistan) no one could elude the sophisticated satellite and aerial surveillance. For anyone to hide in the desert for extended periods, he would have to be brought water and food. To supply him, his supporters would have to travel and could be tracked. Whatever else he is, Saddam is not a fool and would have known this. So, obviously, he would have to “hole up” (which is precisely what he did) in some part of the small agricultural area along the Tigris-Euphrates river system.

The social answer to the question is more interesting. Saddam obviously knew that he could not hide in Kurdish controlled areas or in the mainly Shi'a south. Neither Kurds nor Shi'is would have shielded him. But, in the Sunni center of Iraq, his kinsmen had a stern obligation to protect him.

Why would these people have protected him? The answer lies in the ethics and traditions Arabs have inherited from the desert origins of their society. In the desert, no person can survive in isolation. He absolutely depends upon others for food, water and protection. Every cultural resource is aimed to secure “hospitality.” It is the absolute imperative of bedouin society. Any outsider can demand it and all those he encounters are required to give it to him even if they hate him.

This is not a theoretical or esoteric notion. Arabic culture, of which Iraq is a part, is highly traditional. Its values have been encoded in a body of classical poetry every schoolchild memorizes. The absolute imperative of loyalty to kinsmen and the protection of the guest become as deeply ingrained as a religious catechism. Failure to protect and sustain the visitor or kinsman incurs infamous shame.

Thus, Saddam would have known that his kinsmen had to give him what protection they could and for as long as they could.

“Could” is the key word. Even in the primitive desert societies, it was accepted that some men would act in such an outrageous fashion as to bring down upon the whole group unacceptable retaliation. Then, the offenders could no longer be protected or even

tolerated. Finally, to save the society, the felonious member would be expelled and the protection of his hosts would be withdrawn. Expulsion of such violent men forms a second theme in the classical tradition.

We don't yet know exactly how the "hunter-killer" team of CIA agents and Special Forces, known as Task Force 121, actually got their information. But, probably, they did it by subjecting some of his relatives to intense pressure. Then, one of them presumably decided that continuing to protect Saddam had become life-threatening to the whole group. So, just as we are told in the classical poetry, protection was withdrawn and, in tribal terms, he became an outlaw. The mechanisms of tribal society and culture that had originally saved him thus ultimately doomed him.

So will the capture of Saddam stop the guerrilla war in Iraq? The short answer is 'no, it will not.'

From his various hideaways, Saddam could not have directed the series of actions – sometimes as many as fifty a day and scattered all over Iraq – that have grown into a guerrilla war. Any communications between him and any of the involved groups would long since have led to his capture. Only by maintaining a nearly absolute isolation and silence could he have eluded capture for so many months. Thus, it is practically certain that the various groups involved in the attacks on American and British forces were motivated by other considerations and mounted by different people.

What were the other considerations? In addition to many local reasons for hostility to occupation forces – anger at the loss of jobs, desire for retaliation for the death of family members, and all the irritations that are inevitable in any military occupation – there is the fundamental force of nationalism. Still today, nationalism is the most powerful inspiration of societies all over the world. It is stronger than such ideologies as Communism and such diverse religions as Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism. Iraqi nationalism was not caused by and was not embodied in Saddam Husain. His capture will not diminish it.

In fact, it is likely, I believe, that his removal from active participation in Iraqi affairs will release the energies of some who had been inhibited by dread of his possible return. With him out of the way, people who held back for fear that he just might be able to make a comeback will now feel free to vent their angers against the foreigners.

Who are these people? The latest estimate by the CIA station in Iraq is that they now number at least 50,000. Given that the occupation is now less than a year old that is a very impressive number. Indeed, far more impressive in the scale of Iraq than at the same stage of the Vietnam War. And, as we learned from Vietnam such numbers must be multiplied by the much larger groups of more or less passive supporters. Further, with Saddam removed and with the irritations of foreign occupation remaining, they are almost certain to multiply. Indeed, they have already: in July Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz estimated the number at only 20,000; if those numbers are accurate, opponents have more than doubled in four months.

Already, the opposition is at least as strong among the previously suppressed Shi'a community as among the Sunnis. My hunch is that sooner or later, even Kurds, who have suffered a long history of American duplicity, being alternatively encouraged and then dropped, will begin to find cause to oppose the occupation. Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'is probably will not unify but will continue, as they are apparently now doing, to act on local impulses and under local leaders. In short, groups actively struggling against American domination are spread widely across the whole spectrum of Iraqi society.

Faced with this situation, what might the capture of Saddam Husain offer those who plan American policy? Even if the military reality is not encouraging, and the future prospects are worse, the symbolism could be crucial. If, proclaiming it as a turning point, the Americans move rapidly toward withdrawal and the reconstitution of Iraqi sovereignty, enough Iraqis might begin, themselves, to rein in the more radical of their fellows. That has been the lesson of conflicts around the world: only natives can control their own societies.

Thus, although not in itself conclusive for the Iraq campaign, the capture of Saddam Husain could afford the American government with a unique opportunity to revise its policies. In short, this could be a turning point in the war. But, if the opportunity is not seized quickly, America will find itself drawn deeper into the Iraqi quicksand.

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