

## The Charm of Saddam

*By Gary Kern*

John Nixon

*Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein*  
Blue Rider Press. 242 pp. \$25

Eric Maddox with Davin Seay

*Mission Black List #1: The Inside Story of the Search for Saddam Hussein*  
—As Told by the Soldier Who Masterminded His Capture  
HarperCollins. 267 pp. \$32

George Piro

“Saddam’s Confessions” CBS *60 Minutes*, 27 January 2008;  
“Saddam’s Interrogator,” PowerPoint presentation, George H. W. Bush Presidential  
Library, 7 November 2008;  
Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI: Twenty Interviews and Five Conversations  
with High Value Detainee # 1 in 2004, 2009;  
“Interrogating Saddam Hussein,” National Geographic Channel, 30 May 2010

Robert Ellis with Marianna Riley

*Caring for Victor: A US Army Nurse and Saddam Hussein*  
Reedy Press. 200 pp. \$42

Tyrants are charming, especially when they hold power, but sometimes even after they have lost it. What is that power? A chain of command with men in position to carry out orders and enforce them, a government structure prepared to legalize and record them, a body of collaborators and admirers happy to approve and applaud them, and a mass of subjects obliged to suffer and obey them. Plus one thing more: the mentality of the commander who believes himself supremely entitled to give them, and considers himself correct—or at least justified—in every one that he gives.

The charm comes when he temporarily suspends his brutalities and sits down to tea with a guest or interviewer; here he reveals unexpected style and grace, though not really much more than does the common man. The difference is that he could kill you—or once could—but chooses not to, and that gives his personality a boost. He tells a little joke or funny story, and when you laugh, he laughs along with you. It’s the gentleness of the butcher-wily Uncle Joe Stalin,

fascinating Marshal Hermann Göring, lovable Fidel Castro. And the Butcher of Baghdad, charming Saddam Hussein.

Despite the humiliating and deflating photos of his capture, his rumped appearance in front of the camera and the dismal “spider hole” from which he was evicted, plus a video shown repeatedly on the world screen of military medics searching his head for lice and shining a flashlight in his mouth in search of anything else (indicating that they must have shined it in the end as well), the deposed president of Iraq soon recovered his aplomb and sense of superiority—all it took was a good bath, a lot of rest, regular meals, a haircut and a trim of his new beard. Add a suit and a crisp white shirt without tie, and *voilà!*—his body lightened by nine months of roughing it cut a dashing figure. (The tie no doubt was denied so that he couldn’t hang himself.) John Nixon, the first man to get a chance to question him, describes how the tyrant at his very first debriefing subtly favored the translations of one interpreter over another, sowed dissension between the two (CIA and Army) and chuckled for an hour as the Americans squabbled in front of him. In the twinkling of an eye, he sat in the driver’s seat, except that, of course, he was a prisoner and wasn’t going anywhere.

There were other interesting things about that first encounter. It seems that no one really expected the fugitive leader to be taken alive, though he was HVT (High Value Target) No. 1 for US forces after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, with a \$25 million bounty on his head. But he had not been located at first, and his sons Uday and Qusay, HVTs Nos. 2 and 3, had been gunned down in a three-hour shoot-out in Mosul late in July 2003, so it was expected that the father, too, would go down firing. Instead, he emerged on December 13 from a hole in the ground on a farm southeast of Tikrit with his hands raised, and the Americans didn’t know what to do with him. First off, they punched him—“That’s for 9/11,” said one of the punchers—and kicked him; second, they confiscated a stash of dollars reported variously as \$750,000 and \$12 million (the amount is blacked out in the book); third, they figured they had to make sure he was in fact the former head of state. There was a widespread belief that Saddam used doubles, and they didn’t want to look like fools who had brought in an actor. But would an actor carry that much money?

John Nixon, a 6’5” career officer in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was the expert on the wanted man, and he was in Baghdad. He had written his master’s thesis at Georgetown University on Saddam Hussein and after joining the CIA in 1997 had refined his knowledge as a “leadership analyst” working on “Iraq Issue.” That is, he had studied the leadership situation in Iraq, everything about Saddam Hussein, his history, his relatives, his method of ruling, so as better to inform US policymakers. In recent years the president and his cabinet wanted not so much facts and figures on foreign countries as information about their leaders, their personalities, and styles. Arriving in Baghdad in October 2003, Nixon was aiding the Army Special Forces’ search for the elusive tyrant, turning the attention of the military toward his bodyguards, one or two of whom would almost certainly be his only contact with the outside world after he went into hiding. The trick was to locate the right one, interrogate him, get the directions and send in the Special Forces to collect the prize.

The problem was that the society was in free fall; the lives of twenty-six million people were thrown into chaos; traffic, communications, services all disrupted; the outlawed Ba’athist Army was running an insurgency against the US occupation; Al Qaeda terrorist Abu al-Zarqawi was in Iraq blowing up buildings and killing Shiites, who in return were running death squads against Sunnis; the quick American victory had turned into a civil war; gunfire, mortars, and

rockets were going off everywhere; rumors about Saddam Hussein were flying; and his bodyguards were not just individuals with such and such names, but rings of men based on level of duty, tribal relationship, and loyalty. Nixon and his aides picked up those guards who had been captured and held in Abu Ghraib prison, and drove them around Baghdad so they could point to houses where the leader, always on the move, used to stay for a night. All these leads, of course, were stone cold.

Then they got the driver who had driven him around the capital at the start of the US invasion so that he could bid farewell to the people in the streets. After this demonstration, which Nixon had seen on TV, Saddam stopped at random houses to find lodging for the night. From the driver, called “Samir” in the book, Nixon learned that Saddam went next to Ramadi with his sons and personal secretary, stayed there a few days and then split off, no doubt because Uday had been crippled by an assassination attempt in 1996 (attributed to the Iranians) and stood out boldly in any setting. Saddam left him in the care of Qusay and continued up north to the outskirts of Tikrit, his home town, where Samir dropped him off and lost track of him.

This scattered, *ad hoc* departure astounded American intelligence. Where were the underground tunnels, the scorched earth prepared for the invaders, the disguises and body doubles, the secret flight out of the country to safety—all discussed back at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, before the military attack of shock and awe? They didn’t exist. All anticipations of what Saddam Hussein would do were wrong. As Nixon later learned, Saddam had wearied of running the state, delegated management to others and written a novel while America was beating the drums of war. He had no strategic plan to meet the invasion, didn’t entirely believe it would come, and when it did, retreated to an area he knew as a boy.

So Saddam was somewhere in the vicinity of Tikrit, but Nixon was in Baghdad; thus he did not win the glory of locating HVT No. 1. Nixon was, however, on the spot when the captive was flown in to the Baghdad International Airport and brought to the nearby Battlefield Interrogation Facility (BIF) for positive identification. (The BIF was formerly a station for Saddam’s elite Republican Guard.) Nixon knew that the surest way to ID Saddam was by the Al-Bu Nasir tribal tattoos on his right hand and wrist, and a scar on his left leg from a bullet wound he had received in 1959 during a failed assassination attempt.

The target for that attack was the then-prime minister of Iraq, Abd al-Karim Qasim, who in July of the previous year had led a military coup that killed King Faisal II and ended the Hashemite monarchy. Wounded Saddam had swum across the Tigris River, made his way to Tikrit, and hidden out on an obscure farm (to which he would return in 2003). Then Saddam had made his way out of the country and studied in Cairo for three years before returning to help set up the modern Ba’ath Party of Iraq, a secular, socialist, authoritarian party dedicated to the renaissance (ba’ath) of Arab culture in Iraq. Aside from the physical signs, Nixon was told to think up some questions that only Saddam Hussein could answer.

### **The Real Saddam**

The first session, thrown together on the fly, was destined to be a farce. The military had a half-dozen men in uniform present; they had questioned Saddam before Nixon came in with his team of three men, all in civilian clothes, and they didn’t leave. The dingy little room was suddenly crowded with two groups of Americans in different clothing. Seeing Saddam sitting in a plastic chair wearing a white *dishdasha* and a blue, quilted windbreaker against the cold (the suit and white shirt came later), Nixon had a moment of hyper-reality. Here, finally, was the man he

had spent years studying, watching on television, describing in reports—in the flesh. The effect was quite stunning.

Focusing on the task, Nixon said through his Arabic interpreter that he had questions to ask, then asked the first one, which was singularly inept. It may be that only Saddam Hussein could answer when he had last seen his sons alive, but to throw dead sons in a father's face was not a tactful opening. Saddam gave a mean laugh—heh, heh, heh—and demanded to know who all these men were standing and sitting in front of him. “I’m the president of Iraq! Who are you?” One of Nixon’s team barked back that he was there to answer questions, not to ask them. Saddam settled back down and adjusted to the situation. He had been a prisoner for more than two years after the Ba’ath Party he had helped to power was overthrown in 1963, so the situation was not entirely new to him. (The Ba’ath Party came back in 1968, and he took command in 1979.) Then he saw an opening with the disputing interpreters and assumed a position of bemused superiority.

While this was going on, Nixon was able to observe and identify his telltale tattoos without having to ask to see them. Then, when Nixon asked Saddam if he had anything to tell them, the former president complained about the rough treatment he had received during his capture. He would not have treated President Bush that way, he declared. To show the bruises he had received, he lifted his *dishdasha*, and Nixon saw the scar on his leg. He asked Saddam if it was his famous wound, and received a positive answer. They had their man. And though he didn’t answer every question, Saddam did say they should ask him about politics, as he could teach them a lot. This showed his pride and willingness to talk. He also apologized for losing his temper: the men in the room were OK; it was the US government that was at fault. He didn’t want them to think he had bad manners.

Someone (Nixon doesn’t say who) asked the question that most concerned the White House and the seventh floor headquarters in Langley: Where were the weapons of mass destruction? That is, where were the WMD that Vice President Dick Cheney had conjured out of thin air with his “one-percent doctrine?” (which stated that if there was a one-percent chance of WMD, it should be treated as a one-hundred percent certainty.) Where were the WMD that CIA Director George Tenet had assured the White House would be a “slam dunk” to uncover in Iraq? The WMD that the captive terrorist Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi (1963-2009) had confirmed under torture in Egypt were within Saddam’s reach? (Al-Libi later recanted.) The WMD that posed an immediate threat to America and gave it the justification for rushing to war—where were they? Saddam replied: “You found me. Why don’t you go find those weapons of mass destruction?” But the US couldn’t, because they didn’t exist.

In a later session, he was similarly coy about his body double: “How do you know you’re not talking to a double right now? Maybe I’m a body double and the real Saddam is in hiding.” Then he broke out laughing and said there was only one man such as he. The body double was a myth, debunked by CIA experts before the invasion, but very beloved by Washington. After Bush and Rumsfeld left office, they repeated the myth in their memoirs, intelligence reports notwithstanding. And on the matter of his sons, as it turned out, Saddam was not sensitive. He considered them martyrs who had died a heroic death fighting a foreign invader. He proudly accepted their loss.

### **High Value Target #1**

John Nixon was too far away to participate in the frantic hunt for Saddam Hussein that had been run 118 miles up north. That hunt is described by the interrogator Eric Maddox in his

2008 book, *Mission Black List #1*. (He has also covered the ground in an episode of the CNN series *Declassified* (June 2016), and in talks at West Point (October 2016) and Liberty University (November 2018), among other venues. After running 300 interrogations in pursuit of the fugitive in Iraq, Maddox returned to America at the end of 2003 and was hired as a civilian interrogator for the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Thereupon he commenced to pursue wanted men around the world, conducting more than 2700 interrogations of prisoners from 25 countries and carrying out assignments in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines and various countries in Eastern Europe. Retiring from the DIA in 2014, he founded his own company as a consultant, negotiator, and motivational speaker, and proceeded to give talks on many subjects. Some of the talks can be seen online, and all of them are distinguished by one quality: high intensity.

As in many cases of a spectacular achievement, everything that happened earlier in his life seems in retrospect to be preparation for the big event. Maddox was an adopted son who grew up in a small town near Tulsa, Oklahoma, and spent his early years seeking a path in life.

Inspired to pursue a military career by an older friend who suddenly died and became a lifelong hero, he trained as a paratrooper, then went to the Ranger School and attained the rank of squad leader in the 82nd Airborne Division. On assignment in South America, he began to pick up street Spanish and got interested in foreign languages.

This interest led to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, where he passed an entrance exam and selected one of the most difficult languages for speakers of English: Mandarin Chinese. The Chinese program came with the option of either monitoring Chinese-language broadcasts or taking a course in interrogation; he thought the latter would be more interesting. During the eight-week course at the US Army Intelligence Center in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, he learned the rules of the US Army Field Manual 34-52 (1987-2006), which honors the Geneva Conventions, prohibits torture, and teaches the psychological skills of drawing information out of people reluctant or determined not to give it.

“Like anyone else,” he remarks in his book, “I’m really smart at some things and really dumb at others. It just happens that the things I’m smart at were helpful to becoming a good interrogator.” When the Al Qaeda terrorists attacked America in September 2001, he felt his chance to shine had come. “Suddenly,” he writes, “I knew what I was supposed to be doing: hunting down these sons-of-bitches to the farthest corners of the earth.” Yet, lacking Arabic, he was passed over for duty in Afghanistan and given “backwater deployments” interviewing Chinese living in America illegally. Eighteen months later, when the United States invaded Iraq, he answered a call for experienced interrogators with infantry training and late in July 2003 found himself a staff sergeant in the suffocating heat of Tikrit on a six-month assignment. At last he was in the thick of war, serving his country.

If his purpose was to hunt down 9/11 terrorists, he wasn’t going to find them in Iraq, but if it was to turn his interrogation skills to best use, he hit the jackpot. In Tikrit he was attached to the Fourth Infantry Division (ID), stationed at Camp Ironhorse, one of Saddam’s former palace complexes. It was situated in an area of rich farmland running along the Tigris River with fine cottages and estates of the ruling class, mostly relatives and cronies of the former dictator. The main building, a two-story mansion with a

balcony, was surrounded by gardens, lakes, and houses that had fallen into disrepair following the invasion. The grand entrance hall was filled with crates of ammunition; the marble floor retained only a few sofas and pieces of furniture; a few pictures of Saddam still hung on the walls. The bedrooms were furnished with double-bunk beds so that a soldier could throw his gear in the top bunk and sleep in the bottom. The kitchen was stocked with American foods and MREs—Meals Ready to Eat. A wide staircase led to the headquarters upstairs, where the elite Task Force resided, fifteen or so men responsible for US operations in the Sunni Triangle. (So they are described in the book, but later Maddox identified them as a Delta Force team attached to the Joint Special Operations Command).

Their mission in Tikrit was the same as in Baghdad, Mosul, and all the other cities of Iraq: to find the HVTs on the Department of Defense so-called Black List. Each carried a deck of fifty-two cards with three extra jokers on which were printed the photos and names of the fifty-five most wanted men. No. 1, the Ace of Spades, was Saddam Hussein, still at large; Nos. 2 and 3 were his sons Uday and Qusay, both killed in Mosul the day before Maddox arrived in the country. Only No. 6, the King of Clubs, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a top military advisor to Saddam, was thought to be living in the area of Tikrit and leading insurgent attacks.

On his first day at Ironhorse, Maddox asked a “terp” (interpreter) named Jared about the “target set”—the list of “bad guys” to be interrogated—and learned that most of the HVTs were believed to have fled the area. The Task Force was then focused on No. 6, al-Douri, who had a \$10 million bounty on his head. The hope was that he could be captured and provide intelligence that would lead to Saddam. But Jared had another idea. He advised Maddox to focus on Saddam’s bodyguards, all of whom were relatives of Saddam and many of whom might still be in the area. Since he was leaving Tikrit the next day, Jared kindly provided Maddox with a list of more than 200 names, noting relationships, life or death status, and other bits of information he had collected during his stay. One section of forty names listed members of the al-Muslit tribe, which was known to be particularly close to Saddam. In effect, Maddox was handed a treasure map that might lead to HVT No. 1, not No. 6.

As the book relates, he took the lead and developed a routine for finding the bodyguards. Together with Jeff, one of the camp’s three commanders (he appears with Maddox in the CNN feature), and Adam, the new terp, he questioned prisoners in one of the bedrooms of a guesthouse on Saddam’s palatial grounds, a place chosen for its air conditioning, since the outdoor temperature was often near 125 degrees. Each man questioned led to another person of interest for the Task Force to go out and apprehend in the dead of night. The information gathered began to build up family lines and hierarchies. Thus Maddox learned the bodyguard system as it existed when Saddam was in power: an outer circle of guards permanently assigned to specific sites; a middle circle that secured temporary locations to which Saddam might be moving; and an inner circle that stayed in constant contact with him. Possibly, thought Maddox, something of the system still remained.

Maddox’s first interviewee was a former lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi Army, Rafi Idham Ibrahim al-Hassan al-Tikriti. His name, like all male Arabic names, spells out his relationships:

Rafi [given name] Idham [father’s name] Ibrahim [grandfather] al-Hassan [tribe] al-Tikriti [place].

Rafi was submissive and ingratiating, and tried to make friends with his captors. Maddox allowed him to talk and tell stories, collecting as much general information as he could, then began to lose patience. What was his job? he asked through Adam. Rafi confessed that he worked at the palace. Not where he worked, snapped Maddox, but what he did! Rafi answered *hamaya*, which means bodyguard. Bodyguard for whom? Rafi says he was the lowest bodyguard for the president. Adam yells at him in Arabic: “Say Saddam, asshole! He’s not the president anymore.” Maddox asks Rafi why he had such a high rank if he was the lowest bodyguard. Rafi blurts out that he was related to Saddam. Now he was trapped. Maddox ran him through the family tree, and Rafi protested:

“But I hate Saddam,” Rafi insisted. “I will kill him myself. Thank you, Mister, for saving my country. Together we will make a powerful team to bring down the regime.”

“Bring down the regime?” I repeated. “You are the regime, Rafi. You’re Saddam’s nephew and one of his bodyguards. Do you know what that means?”

“But I hate—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Jeff shouted. [...]

“We got you, Rafi,” I continued. “We’ve got enough to put you in prison for the rest of your life.”

“But I want to help,” he whined.

“So help. Help me help you.” I leaned in again. “I don’t like you, Rafi. You’ve done nothing but waste my time. This is your last chance. Give me a reason to help you. If I don’t help you, nobody else will.”

Obviously Maddox was not the friendly sort of “gator.” As author, he explains that in this exchange he established the prisoner’s guilt (i.e., belonging to Saddam’s regime), then threatened him with prolonged incarceration, then offered him a chance to bargain. To reach this point, he continues, he had to speak with convincing emotion, yet at the same time think ahead to the next question and where it would lead. The goal, as always, was to get actionable intelligence—information that would lead to the next prisoner and the next stage of the hunt. Rafi, struggling to fulfill his side of the bargain, finally named two men working at a car wash who hated Americans. It was a paltry scrap of intelligence, hardly worth pursuing, and Maddox and his team considered the session a wash, though instructive.

His next detainee was an alcoholic bodyguard, Adnan al-Muslit, hung-over from a night of drinking and offering little resistance. Rafi, he reports, was not on the lower staff, but was one of Saddam’s inner circle. Adnan’s account leads to Saddam’s housekeeper, Tashin, who provides intimate details of the tyrant’s lifestyle, including the name of his favorite dish, *masgouf*, consisting of a carp caught in the Tigris, packed with salt and spices, and roasted over an open fire. Muhammad Haddoushi—Jared’s top suspect—was an expert at cooking the dish and was one of Saddam’s closest friends. All these domestic details are duly noted, since in the early stages of the hunt it is not clear what is significant and what is not; everything has to be added to the big picture. In a subsequent interview, Maddox learned that just as Rafi lied about his rank among the bodyguards, so Tashin conveniently neglected to mention that his brother was a driver for al-Haddoushi. Maddox has to catch up all the prevarications and put the pieces together. As it turned out, Al-Haddoushi was not so important: in Iraq there were more than a few others who could cook *masgouf*, the national dish.

Maddox understood that he was learning his craft by trial and error, but steadily honing his skills. His leverage over his detainees was obvious at the start of each interview: he had the

power over the length of their detention and ultimately over their life and death. They knew it, he knew it, so he didn't have to break them, though he might have to remind them of the stakes. He became more patient, less explosive, except when he heard an outright lie. His attitude toward the prisoners was not motivated by hatred and a desire to punish, he writes, since he saw them as soldiers who behaved as most soldiers would: they just happened to be on the other side. This neutral attitude toward them allowed him to concentrate entirely on the interrogation. He discovered that he was able to remember everything in it without taking notes. Afterwards he would write down a summary, and still later compare it to summaries of what his other informants had told him.

Coming to rely on his mental agility, he preferred to ask different questions at random, as in a disconnected conversation, not clearly leading in any direction or to any conclusion. This way the detainee was kept off guard and couldn't see where he was going. Simultaneously Maddox constructed in his mind both the profile of the prisoner and his timeline. Since he could see the pattern, and the prisoner could not, any contradiction or lie the prisoner might tell would leap out at him. Usually he saved it for the right moment, sprung it back on the prisoner, and demanded an explanation. His mind had become a steel trap.

Even so, for every detainee who provided good intelligence, he writes, ten did not; and for every one who provided actionable intelligence, twenty-five did not. All the more reason, then, not to be abusive, so that those who are released would have no reason to nurture a special grievance against the Americans. In an environment in which insurgents planted Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) along the roadside and fired Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) at US forces, such an apparently negligible result was not to be despised. And, amazingly, Maddox asserts that he did release detainees if he thought they had nothing more to reveal. He even set the terms of the contract at the start: tell us what you know, and you will be released; don't tell, and you may never go home.

This was an extreme coercion—a threat of life in prison—but not physical abuse. Even so, it would not pass the standards of the Army Field Manual, which states at the start: “The use of force, mental torture, threats, insults, or exposure to unpleasant and inhumane treatment of any kind is prohibited by law and is neither authorized nor condoned by the US Government.” The Third Geneva Convention (1949) provides the same protection for prisoners of war; the Fourth (1949), for civilian persons in time of war.

Nevertheless, using such coercive tactics, Maddox was able in the course of several weeks to pare Jared's list of 200 bodyguards down into workable numbers. Thirty-two men were in Saddam's inner circle, divided into two separate shifts of sixteen. After the US invasion, the number fell, as some men dropped out. Among those still in, ten or so had apparently become leaders of the insurrection. Four were from the al-Muslit tribe and were probably still in close contact with Saddam. He was almost certainly in the environs of Tikrit, even though all the houses had been swept by commandos in the first months of the war.

Officially, Black List No. 6, Izzat al-Douri, remained the chief HVT and the primary reason for the presence of the 4th ID Task Force in Tikrit. Unofficially, Maddox's search for Saddam's bodyguards was producing more raids, arrests, and interrogations than the search for al-Douri, and becoming the chief operation. Slowly it dawned on everyone at Camp Ironhorse that they were hunting No. 1, though they hesitated to inform headquarters in Baghdad until they had a firm lead. Baghdad, as the center of operations, had many more officers, many more

prisoners, and a stricter attention to bureaucratic propriety and paperwork. The hunt in Tikrit was relatively unencumbered, and no one wanted to risk bringing in the heavy hand of the top brass.

After nine weeks, the 4th ID Task Force ended its tour of duty without success, and a new team came to Tikrit. When Kelly, the new intelligence analyst, asked him for an accounting, Maddox decided to lay out the big picture. Both awed by the operation and appalled that nothing but Maddox's summaries had gone down on paper, Kelly asked him to draw up a diagram of names in boxes linked to other boxes that rose up to the big box at the top, just as in police investigations seen on TV. Maddox was happy to oblige, because he was confident in the logic of his search. When the new case officer had an accident at the firing range and was shipped out to Germany for surgery, Maddox was put in his place and given the freedom to name targets directly for the new Task Force. The new commander, called Bam Bam, was alert to the hunt and ready to lead the men out promptly on the midnight raids.

### **End Stage**

Very quickly, means of interrogations up and down and across the diagram of boxes, Maddox got to the top of Saddam's bodyguard structure. One guard, Muhammad Ibrahim al-Muslit, was running the show for Saddam. He could be seen in pre-invasion photos and films of Saddam in public, standing nearby, fat-faced and mustachioed like his master, also in military garb, looking almost like a double, but with an even bigger cleft in his chin. He got his orders directly from the boss and reported back to him.

The leaders of insurgency operations in the various cities reported to Muhammad Ibrahim at a cement shop in Tikrit or a house in Samarra, southeast of Tikrit. He provided them finds in the form of stacks of \$100 bills that he carried around in the trunk of his car.

He used to sleep at the cement shop or the rented house, but now, with Bam Bam's team closing in, he apparently slept at the homes of friends or relatives, or with his mistress. His home with wife and children fell inside the American zone, so he didn't go there. Numerous raids kept missing him by a matter of hours. Maddox's informants reported that he always got up from a meeting and left in the evening, and no one knew exactly where he went. The suspicion grew that sometimes it was to the hideout of a certain person outside of Tikrit.

The informants filled in additional details about the chief suspect: Muhammad Ibrahim had a brother, Sulwan, who owned his own farm in Kirkuk, 75 miles northeast of Tikrit, and co-rented the house with him in Samarra, 42 miles southeast. Sulwan was known to buy a lot of food, load it in his truck, and drive out of town at night, so it was assumed that he was taking groceries to the hideout. Muhammad Ibrahim also had a subordinate, Muhammad Khudayr, who co-owned a property with him in Samarra that had a hut and a pond stocked with fish caught in the Tigris nearby. After the death of another brother, Radman, Muhammad Ibrahim spent a lot of time with Khudayr fishing at the pond. It seemed there was a good chance of catching both Muhammads there.

Time was running out for Maddox, whose six-month assignment (five months in Iraq) was coming to an end. Fortunately, the Task Force grabbed a safe on one of its raids that was stuffed with \$1.9 million in \$100 bills. It was Muhammad Ibrahim's stash. This coup brought credit to the team, so it could continue to run raids for Maddox although they hadn't yet gotten the big one. His chief informants at this late stage were Basim Latif, the driver for Muhammad Ibrahim, who realized that he would likely be killed if released and therefore became very

cooperative; Amir, the eldest son of Thamir al-Asi, the man who co-owned the cement shop with Muhammad Ibrahim; and Omar, the son of Muhammad Ibrahim.

Maddox turned on the two young men. He shouted down Amir's protestation that he knew nothing and threatened to bring in his younger brother, a college student, so that the two of them could spend the rest of their lives together in prison. In other words, he gave the son the choice of protecting either his father or his brother. Maddox called in Basim Latif, well known to Amir, and used him to gain the young man's confidence, then the two of them—Basim and Amir—began to give new names and locations. As before, there was no physical coercion, but the leverage used on Amir enters into a dark area. Only several pages earlier, Maddox writes that he would never interrogate women relatives of a suspect, as "it would have gone against every moral code in the culture," but children of the suspects, apparently, were fair game.

After Amir, Maddox questioned Omar. Learning that Muhammad Ibrahim considered his son a weakling and kept everything hidden from him, Maddox asked him to tell what he knew about his uncle, Sulwan. Omar began talking and in the process revealed that he knew the location of the farm with the pond. Persuaded to tell, he understood that he could be responsible for the ruin not only of his uncle, but also of his disapproving father. Maddox told Omar it was not his fault, but his father's— he was the one who committed the crimes and brought down ruin on himself. The boy would just have to work it out.

In the end everything supported a raid on the fish pond in Samarra. Baghdad was informed and sent its team up for the operation. The first attempt failed for technical reasons. (The raids were carried out with night-vision surveillance, and one system didn't work.) The second raid captured not the two Muhammads, but two unknown fishermen. The first turned out to be a cook hired by Muhammad Ibrahim to make *masgouf*. The second was a cousin of the other Muhammad, Khudayr. Under heavy pressure, the cousin suggested that the two Muhammads might be staying at his uncle's place in Baghdad. Fortunately, Maddox was now in the capital on his way out of the country. He had brought along his cooperative informants to make a positive identification of the two Muhammads, should he be lucky enough to catch them.

He was. The raid by the Baghdad team delivered four men wearing hoods. The first was Khudayr, who said he had been sitting with Muhammad Ibrahim before the raid. The next two were not known, but the last revealed a cleft chin as the hood was being raised. With only two hours to go before catching a plane to Doha, Maddox had time only to state his conditions and leave. First, Muhammad Ibrahim knew where Saddam Hussein was and should not deny it; second, if he didn't reveal the location, Maddox was going to go after his family:

I will go after every brother, son, cousin and nephew you have. You are about to bring down hell on your family, and it won't be over until we find Saddam. If you don't tell me where he is, maybe they will. You can stop that right now. Give me Saddam, and I stop hunting them.

Muhammad Ibrahim began to stonewall, so Maddox tossed in something extra: "You will give me Saddam. When you do, I will allow you to leave here a free man. I will do that because you have given me the most wanted man in the world." Muhammad Ibrahim was responsible for attacks on both Americans and Iraqi citizens, and could be held for years, possibly even tried and executed. The offer of freedom under these circumstances was incredible. He replied that his family would not be safe if he gave up his secret. This answer meant that he admitted he knew

and was ready to bargain. Maddox then seized the opportunity often used in interrogation to paint a rosy picture of the future—the better future after the prisoner confesses.

Muhammad Ibrahim can end the old rule of terror and intimidation, Maddox told him. Once Saddam is gone and his link is broken with the insurgency, there will be no one to come after his family. A new Iraq can be built from the ground up. Muhammad Ibrahim can go home, his family will be safe, and he can stand at the head of the al-Muslit line. With this beautiful vision, Maddox concluded the session. Muhammad Ibrahim was sent back to his cell to ponder his decision. Should he change his mind, Maddox told him, he should bang on the door like crazy.

Maddox took his leave and on his way to the airport later that morning learned that Muhammad Ibrahim was banging. He ran back, agreed to Muhammad Ibrahim's demand to put the agreement in writing and signed by a superior officer, and finally got the prize: a map to Saddam's hideout in ad-Dawr, a rural area 10 miles or so southeast of Tikrit, which he drew to Muhammad Ibrahim's instructions. Maddox turned the map over to the Baghdad team, caught the plane and tried to keep up with events through inside contacts.

As the world later learned, on the night of 13 December 2003 US forces mounted a huge raid with 600 men on a little farm in ad-Dawr, roughly a quarter of the way from Tikrit to Samarra. The 4th Infantry Division cordoned off the territory and the combined task forces of Tikrit and Baghdad moved in. They took two sentries into custody and the owner of a rundown cottage named Qais, believed to be one of Saddam's cooks. At first they couldn't find the hideaway. Muhammad Ibrahim was present, but didn't want to reveal it and prompted Qais, who refused. Finally Muhammad Ibrahim went to the exact spot, kicked away the dirt and exposed a rope that led under carpets to a thick Styrofoam trapdoor. The soldiers took it from there, lifted the square lid and found Saddam below in what has since been called a spider hole.

It was six to eight feet deep, three to four feet wide and four to five feet long, with dirt-brick walls and a fluorescent light wired up at the top. Saddam, disheveled and disoriented, emerged with hands raised, holding a Glock pistol and saying, "I am Saddam Hussein. I am the president of Iraq, and I am willing to negotiate." Reportedly a soldier replied: "President Bush sends his regards." The Arabic interpreter, who had fled to America from Iraq in 1993, cursed him for imprisoning his rebellious Shiite father; Saddam told him to shut up and called him a traitor, for which Samir punched him several times in the mouth. The humiliated president was disarmed, taken into custody and sped in a MH-6 Little Bird helicopter to Baghdad.

News of the capture was announced the next morning in America, and Maddox entered new territory. For the next three months he was asked to give intelligence briefings at US military bases in the States and abroad. At Fort Bragg, North Carolina, he ran into Kelly, the intelligence analyst in Tikrit, who had been with the Task Force on the raid in ad-Dawr. He informed Maddox that in addition to the pistol and the money taken from the rat hole, there was a box of Cuban cigars. "We saved one for you," he said, extending it to Maddox. (There were also books and Saddam's battered green Koran.) Besides the cigar, Maddox received high military commendations, including the Legion of Merit. Inevitably, others would claim their share of glory, write books and give lectures on the capture of Saddam without mentioning a certain interrogator. But despite a wide range of accounts, it seems that no one has directly denied the central role of Eric Maddox in the search.

*Mission Black List #1*, co-authored by Davin Seay, has a thrilling, last-minute conclusion, but fails to report what happened to the Iraqis promised their freedom in return for full-throated, truth-telling cooperation. To find out, I took advantage of an opportunity to contact Eric Maddox online in March 2015. He replied:

Following the capture of Saddam, every detainee associated with Muhammad Ibrahim was released. Basim Latif received a \$250,000 reward for his cooperation. Muhammad Ibrahim remained in prison for approximately three years before he was released. I did not promise that I would release him, but I did promise him that I would release his family members that we captured who were involved in the insurgency. I released a good number of my prisoners over the last 12 years [2003-2015], but it occurs when they provide me with all the information that they can. I do not get all my prisoners to that level of cooperation, but the ones that do get to that level are all released. This includes prisoners of any insurgency and in any country.

So it would seem that everything turned out satisfactorily. We must assume that the two sons, Amir and Omar, were not emotionally destroyed by being forced to act against their fathers. Also that Muhammad Ibrahim was released after Saddam's death and not assassinated by the insurgents, and he himself did not return to the insurgency, which continued without him. And that all the other non-combatant citizens who were threatened with endless imprisonment were free to go after the capture of Saddam. All the same, the methods that Maddox used departed from those approved by the US Army Field Manual and international laws. He may have been conscientious and fair, but another practitioner of such methods might not be. It is to be hoped that his ace in the hole—the threat of prolonged or permanent imprisonment combined with the promise of release—is not currently being used *sub rosa* by the Defense Intelligence Agency.

The unofficial mission in Tikrit was a fantastic success, but the official mission—to capture the King of Clubs—came to nothing. Saddam's most capable commander, Izzat al-Douri, seen on the card with a bushy red moustache, a khaki Ba'ath uniform and a snappy beret, eluded all searches and interrogative leads. He was 61 years old at the end of 2003. Later reports indicate that he was nowhere to be found in the area of Tikrit, but had stolen away to Damascus with millions of dollars. Yet he hadn't abandoned the field. As Saddam Hussein's closest ally from the time of their youth (he was born in ad-Dawr), and his co-conspirator in the 1968 return of the Ba'ath Party to power, and his general in every major military campaign, with his striking visage and unusual nickname—the Iceman, acquired from his job delivering blocks of ice as a boy—al-Douri naturally inherited the mantle of Ba'ath Party leadership and the authority to coordinate Sunni efforts to expel the foreign invaders, overthrow the puppet government, and restore the regime. He could provide funds, plan maneuvers and command men from afar. And, when the opportunity presented itself, he could return. He didn't need orders from Saddam.

### **The CIA Debriefing**

After his positive identification of the captive Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti, John Nixon thought his work with the ex-president was done. But word came down that the CIA would get the first chance to interrogate him, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) would soon follow. This decision was announced by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on television, alarming the men in the field, because the Baghdad airport and its surroundings were within range of rocket fire and they wanted to keep a low profile, insofar as that was possible. Saddam was not going anywhere: he would be housed in the Battlefield Interrogation Facility (BIF), which also served as a prison.

Admiral William McRaven was in charge of his care and security. Converted from HVT #1 to High Value Detainee (HVD) #1, Saddam was not flown out of the country to a black site, to Guantánamo Bay in Cuba or to a maximum security prison in the USA. He was left in a cell (or locked room) near Airport Road in Baghdad, the most dangerous road in the world. Obviously his case would not be easy to handle; indeed, it would have been easier had he not survived capture, a point perhaps not lost on McRaven when eight years later he organized the special ops raid on the Osama bin Laden compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in which HVT #1 in the world at that time was double-tapped, positively identified, and then ceremoniously dropped in the sea.

The leader of Nixon's team, called "Charlie" in the book, had an idea: he wanted to strip off Saddam's clothes and throw cold water on him. This was an Enhanced Interrogation Technique used on Guantánamo prisoners, notably Detainee 063, Mohammed al-Qahtani, in conjunction with sleep deprivation, time disorientation, space disorientation, noise bombardment, bowel control, temperature control, sexual humiliation, and ego deflation. Nixon, opposed to coercive techniques, was alarmed. But Langley sent word that Saddam Hussein would be granted prisoner of war status with the full protection of the Geneva Accords. He was the former head of a nominally sovereign state known to everyone in the world, so his handling had to be careful, whereas a terrorist suspect was a "stateless combatant" known to no one, so practically anything could be done with him.

Within a week, a plan developed whereby the CIA would encourage Saddam to start talking, then the professional interrogators of the FBI would move in and start extracting incriminating information out of him that could be used in court. It was anticipated that he would be tried for links to international terrorists and crimes against the United States. Where, when, and by whom were to be determined. Consequently, Nixon and his team were told not to ask any questions about terrorism, the insurgency, or Saddam's crimes. In fact, they were advised not to interrogate him *per se*, but rather to "debrief" him. A CIA lawyer warned them not to dig into anything that might be used in court, lest they themselves have to give testimony.

Their mission, in short, was to talk about "ancient history," all those things not related to current events: Saddam's background, the formation of the Ba'ath party, relations with other countries. And, of course, they could ask repeatedly about weapons of mass destruction. How long did they have? A day, a week? They didn't know. They had no time to draw up a game plan or work slowly toward asking sensitive questions. They had no copies of seized Iraqi state documents that could give them an advantage in the questioning. Nixon and a fellow questioner called "Bruce" in the book shook their heads and decided that they were just going to have to "wing it." The third of the team was "Ahmad," the interpreter.

*Debriefing the President* is about Nixon winging it, figuring out ways to handle Saddam, playing "shamelessly" on his pride, getting him to open up and provide details that fit into the historical panorama that extended from ancient Babylon to twenty-first-century Iraq. The imposed limitation on the debriefing—no digging for "actionable intelligence"—worked to the advantage of the historian and political analyst in Nixon. He had his subject in front of him, a living Wikipedia, able to answer questions and reveal his thinking and character. Nixon had little to give him, but thought up a good incentive. There had been so many false stories and rumors about him, he would say, and now he had the opportunity to "set the record straight." Saddam understood: he could tell his true story before his death. Langley didn't interfere very much, and the FBI didn't show up as soon as feared. Nixon had three weeks to fill his notebooks and get to know his man.

Unfortunately, he couldn't allow Saddam the luxury of writing, though the bored prisoner desperately wanted to scribble. The military guards feared that if given a pen, he would use it to stab himself, a motive Saddam dismissed as absurd, since he was a known writer of speeches and novels. So the chance for Saddam to write his memoirs was lost with the CIA. Alas, sighs Nixon, Adolf Eichmann, kidnapped in 1980 by the Israeli Mossad and tried in Jerusalem, produced a 127-page memoir in addition to 3500 pages recording his interrogation. Saddam, however, like Eichmann, would have a chance to speak to the world at his trial.

His accommodations in the BIF were modest but comfortable. He was given a Koran and an Arabic translation of the Geneva Conventions; he was allowed to pray five times a day in accordance with Islamic practice, a privilege he used on occasion to get away from a troublesome Q&A session; he got three meals a day and a full night's sleep, but only after he was moved from a cell next to a door that banged all night as new prisoners were brought in; some days he had been too sleepy to answer questions. He requested reading materials and got an Arabic summary of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which he praised for its psychological acuity; he requested the Cairo trilogy of novels by a favorite author, Naguib Mafouz, but it's not clear whether he got it. He said his favorite literary work was Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. He complained repeatedly about the lack of intellectual materials, which he claimed was a denial of his civil rights.

Therefore he wanted to talk, or mostly to lecture; he was a leader who saw himself as the creator of the modern Iraq, who had brought the people out of barefoot ignorance on dirt roads to a high level of literacy and a high standard of living; he linked himself to the dawn of civilization and all the Iraqi heroes in between. When Nixon and Bruce allowed him to discourse on the legendary twelfth-century warrior Saladin, who had retaken Jerusalem from the Crusaders, he exclaimed with pride that Saladin like himself was born in Tikrit, but neglected to mention that Saladin was a Kurd. At the end of one such historical session, he turned back from the door before leaving and thanked the team warmly for the conversation; he was starved for it by months in the wild.

Nixon and his mates were blown away; they felt they had made emotional contact. They had decided at the beginning not to accord him the respect of addressing him as "Mr. President," but rather as "Saddam," an improper familiarity. But the familiarity gradually became acceptable after everyone got used to it. And so the debriefing went rather smoothly; they delved into many areas of interest, even Saddam's political assassinations and gas attack on the Kurds, with only occasional rough spots.

### **What Washington Got Wrong**

What Nixon learned was not what Washington and Langley wanted to hear. In almost every particular, the White House and the CIA got it wrong. For example, about his personal history: Saddam, they believed, had been beaten as a boy by his step-father, his biological father having died a few months before he was born, and his mother having married his father's brother two years later. To escape the cruel treatment, so the story goes, Saddam had run away from home, entered bloody politics and clawed his way to the top. That explained why he was so violent and cruel. When questioned about his step-father, however, Saddam said that he loved him. Ibrahim Hasan had favored him even over his own son and had sent Saddam to Baghdad because there was no chance for him to succeed in the intellectual backwater of Tikrit.

They also got it wrong about his method of ruling too, painting him as the Butcher of Baghdad who ruled by brute force and sheer terror. Nixon regards this view as a “crude caricature” of the man. Without question, Saddam was a ruthless despot, but Nixon learned that he was also a skilled manipulator who kept opposing factions of the majority (but repressed) Shiites and the minority (but enfranchised) Sunnis in line not by fear alone, but by gifts, promises, rewards—in addition to fear. The danger of Shiites conspiring with Iran was ever present, and he had the ayatollahs Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr killed in 1980 and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr killed in 1999 for this reason, but other Shiites he gave government positions; he even had Kurds in government. And he claimed to love them. He strove to maintain Sunni support by assuring them that he was their safeguard against the majority Shiites, yet was threatened by radical factions among them. The world accused him of attacking Iran in 1980 and starting the eight-year war, but he told Nixon he did so only after 548 violations of Iraq’s border, which he began to enumerate. For every action, he claimed, there was a provocation, a force he had to counter. He was wary, uncertain, not comfortably on top of the situation. Nixon came to believe that Saddam at the end was steadily losing power; the Shiites were stronger in 1999 than in 1980; they revered Sadiq al-Sadr and responded to his assassination by shooting government officials and attacking Ba’ath Party offices. They were constantly plotting and planning a coup. At the same time Saddam did not have the Sunnis, either, under full control.

And Washington got it wrong about his international relations. He told Nixon that he had no aspirations to expand his rule beyond his country, because he considered himself the father of modern Iraq and his people the finest race in the world. He was an enemy of Iran, quick to stifle Shiite conspiracies inside the country, but also an enemy of radical Sunni Islamists, hostile to any outside influence from Wahhabis, Salafists and Al Qaeda. His security force, the Mukhabarat, executed Kamel Sached late in 1998 when Sached was believed to have made a move toward Sunni fundamentalists. Saddam told Nixon that he had long wanted to retire, turn the command over to another and enjoy the writer’s life, but the need to balance the Shiite-Sunni hostilities and the absence of a reliable person to take his place kept him in power. Other commentators have confirmed that he was practically a recluse at the time of the invasion.

In Middle Eastern affairs, writes Nixon, Saddam was savvy and adept, but in the wider arena he was ill-informed and out of his depth. He did not understand America and its motives, and here is where Saddam got Washington wrong. He never fully grasped the impact of 9/11, which he saw as something that might bring Iraq and the United States *closer* together. Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were the work of Islamic extremists, Saddam thought the United States would need his secular government to help fight the scourge of Wahhabist militancy.

Nixon suggests that had American intelligence been keener and Washington not driven by neo-conservative manias of nation-building, and George W. Bush not bent on assassination, the United States might have found Baghdad an ally in the Middle East against the spread of Al Qaeda and its affiliates. America had supported Iraq in the war with Iran, but in the mid-1980s that support eroded. The Iran-Contra deal sold arms to Iran and conspired with that country for the future overthrow of Saddam, even while Washington continued to sanction the supply of chemical weapons to Iraq. Saddam was confused and hurt by the report of the deal—meaning probably the Tower Commission Report, published at the end of February 1987. This hurt was not feigned. In 2005 Nixon read Ba’ath Party records collected by the US military that showed Saddam had convened his cabinet (the Revolutionary Command Council) and agonized for two weeks over the exposé of Iran-Contra. Nixon regretted that he had not been furnished these documents prior to the debriefing.

Washington, in addition, got it wrong regarding Saddam's preparation for the US invasion. Saddam figured that if the US did attack, it would do so with the same force as in the Gulf War. The Iraqis would defend the nation but lose, yet in the long run would survive. He sent resources to Mosul, Kirkuk and Basra, but not to Tikrit, turned affairs of state over to deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz and other high officials, and continued to work on his novel. (His fourth, which he completed on the day before the attack, with a title that translates as *Begone, Demons!*). He also asked Aziz to critique it for him. He told the Nixon team in one of the first sessions:

You are going to fail. You are going to find that it is not so easy to govern Iraq.  
You are going to fail because you do not know the language, the history, and you do not understand the Arab mind.

Finally, Nixon also discounts the reports of Saddam's orders to kill members of the Bush family. The first report, received by the Clinton administration in May 1993, was that Saddam Hussein had sent a team to assassinate former President George H. W. Bush while he was making a triumphant visit to Kuwait the previous month. Clinton fired twenty-three Tomahawk missiles at the *Mukhabarat* headquarters in Baghdad, killing eight people, but in July the credibility of the assassination story was challenged: Kuwait had announced it, but the men arrested were known to be whisky smugglers, not assassins. Talking with Nixon, Saddam denied the charge, stating that once Bush Sr. had left office he was no longer considered a threat and no action was taken against him. Bush Jr., however, went on believing the story, and after becoming president and sustaining the shock of 9/11, told the emir of Bahrain in 2002 that Saddam had tried to kill his father and he was going to go after him. After leaving office in 2009, Bush Jr. repeated the story in his 2010 memoir, *Decision Points*. Obviously it was one of his main reasons for "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

The second such report, which arose after the invasion, was that Saddam had ordered the assassination of President George W. Bush's daughters, Jenna and Barbara, in retaliation for the death of his sons. The report was dubious on its face. Saddam was on the run, the nation was collapsing, and he probably had contact with only one trusted bodyguard. He would not use a cell phone in those circumstances; yet conceivably the bodyguard could have risked a call to activate a hit. Could money have been transferred, plans worked out? Washington took the report seriously and dunned the CIA in Iraq to track down the story. The CIA responded that the source it located (not identified) was dubious and the report was not credible. Washington kept on insisting, but despite its best efforts the team in Iraq could find no evidence of such a plot.

Nixon adds that George Tenet, head of the CIA, meanwhile suggested to Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defense, that perhaps Saddam Hussein would go after his daughters too. There was no evidence to support such an idea; it was simply Tenet's attempt to curry favor, against the work of his own agency. The fear of assassinations, nevertheless, very likely increased the zeal of the White House to track down Saddam and kill him. After his capture, the 9 mm Glock 18C pistol Saddam was carrying (unloaded) was mounted on a wooden plaque and presented to President Bush, who kept it next to the Oval Office as a personal trophy. Now it is property of the George W. Bush Library in Dallas, Texas.

### **What Nixon Got Wrong**

Which is not to say that Nixon got everything right. When he asked Saddam to name his favorite world leaders, the tyrant thought a moment and said Charles de Gaulle, Vladimir Lenin,

Mao Zedong, and George Washington, on the grounds that all of these men had founded a political system. Evidently he was thinking of himself in their number. He mentioned no Middle Eastern leaders, and when asked expressed a low opinion of all, except the late president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser. He did not name Stalin or Hitler, as Nixon had expected since everyone postulated that they were his heroes.

Of Stalin, Saddam said, in the context of praising Lenin as a thinker: “Stalin does not interest me. He was not a thinker. For me, if a person is not a thinker, I lose interest.” Alluding vaguely to Stalin’s collectivization program and his police state, he added that Stalin had a bad image and “his style was revolting.” Nixon concludes that academics and politicians who linked Saddam to the two blood-soaked dictators of the 20th century (Mao was the third) did so in order “to demonize the Iraqi strongman” and perpetuate a crude stereotype. Evidently he swallowed the line about George Washington without choking.

Unfortunately, Nixon missed reading an op-ed piece that appeared in the *New York Times* on 2 July 2004, six months after the debriefing, when Saddam was arraigned in Baghdad. The author, Simon Montefiore, a biographer of Iosif Stalin, writes that Saddam Hussein was “obsessed with Stalin” and “modeled himself on Stalin.” (Think moustache and honorific titles). He had Stalin’s works specially translated into Arabic on his shelves. He was born 500 miles from the little town of Gori in Georgia, where Stalin was born, and may have visited it. Certainly he visited Stalin’s private villas on the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia. Montefiore went there and asked the caretaker of the historical sites if any Westerner other than himself had come to see them. She replied no, but a certain Arab gentleman had come and visited all fifteen. Saddam held a Ba’athist conference in July 1979 in emulation of Stalin’s show trials of the 1930s. One member confessed his betrayal of the party onstage, and others in the audience were named, seized by guards, and taken out and shot. Saddam sat on stage impassively smoking a cigar. So it appears that Nixon was duped on the matter of Saddam’s personal heroes.

At their last session at the end of the year, when “Mr. Steve” (Nixon) informed the ex-president that he would be leaving, Saddam, though a germophobe, grabbed his hand and held it for five minutes. In grand style, he expressed his gratitude for such enjoyable and profitable conversations, and advised Nixon to be fair and just when he returned to Washington, as though he, the former president, were an Iraqi host bidding farewell to an esteemed foreign visitor to his chateau. He was six-foot one-inch tall, four inches shorter than Nixon, yet always stood erect and never seemed aware of the difference. It was the first time the two had made physical contact, and the reader is left in no doubt that it made a tremendous impression.

Shortly after Nixon left Iraq, Admiral McRaven met Saddam “as one senior commander speaking to another” and asked him to make a statement telling Iraqi insurgents to lay down their arms. Saddam refused even to read the proposed statement. He would accept only US negotiations with himself as leader of the nation, or capitulation and withdrawal of the occupation forces. It made no sense, he told Nixon’s replacement, to invade the country and then ask the occupied people to stop fighting. “If you want to stop the bloodshed, you should leave. You will lose nothing by leaving, but we will lose everything if we stop fighting.”

### **Return to Washington**

Nixon returned to Washington in January 2004 and made reports in writing and in person to his superiors in the intelligence community. The reports passed well, but Nixon himself was discontent. Already, in Iraq, he felt that the reports he and his colleagues in the field had to make

to Washington were an exercise in “dumbing down” information to meet the ignorant and preconceived notions of the people asking for them—chiefly the seventh floor in Langley and the White House. Although he had been persuaded that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the war, he now understood that the Bush team and the neocons invented the premise, misled the CIA, and made a monumental mistake. The idea that the invasion would be a “cakewalk,” as a former aide to President Reagan had said, was an example of “supreme arrogance and idiocy.” He decided to leave Iraq issue for a while and improve his knowledge of Iranian affairs. Thus he spent the next two years.

Coming back to the Iraq desk in 2006, Nixon took up the study of Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric heading one of the major factions in the worsening civil war. Al-Sadr first drew attention in June 2003, when he began to assemble an army to expel the invader and to fight for a Shiite state. In the turmoil of the first years, the US authority closed down his newspaper and declared him an outlaw; in return, he called for a *jihad* against the occupation. His growing Mahdi Army attacked coalition forces, killed native Sunnis, and clashed with opposing Shiite militias. The CIA file on al-Sadr painted him as a pudgy thug who liked to play video games, failing to mention that he was the son of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, founder of the Sadr movement, which had millions of followers. Muqtada al-Sadr inherited the leadership of this movement after his father was assassinated on Saddam’s orders in 1999. Now, when he figured in almost daily reports of murder and mayhem in Iraq, Nixon set about to correct and expand his file. Meanwhile, Saddam was brought to trial, sentenced, and executed at the end of the year.

Between February and June, 2007, Washington introduced 30,000 additional forces into Iraq (the “surge”), and Muqtada al-Sadr found it expedient to take a vacation in Iran. At the end of 2007, the White House sent a request to the CIA for a “deep dive” presentation on him. In a deep dive, a CIA expert goes into the Oval Office with a couple of colleagues, delivers a fifteen-minute exposition on a designated subject, and then fields questions from the president, vice-president, and any other high officials present. Nixon was honored to get the commission and felt that now, at last, he could use his informed analysis to make a direct impact on policy. He wrote the paper, vetted it with others in the Agency, and rehearsed it in front of questioners (a “murder board”). Finally, early in February 2008, he entered the Oval Office and met President George W. Bush.

The basic thrust of Nixon’s presentation was modest: al-Sadr was unhappy in Iran, having difficulty keeping his movement together in Iraq and might languish abroad, but if he did come back to Iraq he could still lead masses and become a major player. Nixon began his speech and found the president “fully engaged and interested,” but he got only halfway through before Bush began to pepper him with comments and questions.

The president was glad that he heard new things about al-Sadr and joked that both he and al-Sadr labored under the burden of the fame of their father. He laughed that al-Sadr was having a rough time in Iran. “Should we have killed him?” he asked Nixon, who answered that no, it would only have made him a martyr and increased his influence.

While President Bush was digesting this answer, Admiral Mike McConnell, director of national intelligence, mentioned that Nixon had been the first to debrief Saddam Hussein. The president asked about the dictator’s character and looked horrified when Nixon began to describe Saddam’s persuasive conversation and sense of humor, so that Nixon quickly had to back up and add that Saddam was actually a sarcastic, cruel, and evil man—and Bush was somewhat relieved.

Did Saddam know he was going to die? Bush inquired. He knew, answered Nixon. The president thanked him, and the half-hour dive was over. Nixon left with the assurances of his team that things had gone quite well.

Subsequently, Nixon was asked to write up a paper on Saddam for the White House, which was presented by a CIA team without him, and to make a presentation of the paper in person to Vice President Dick Cheney. Here he met an entirely different character, totally relaxed, professional, and considerate. Cheney put his nervous visitor at ease, asked him questions and listened intently. Unlike his superior, he was at home with complexity and subtlety, made no quirky remarks and kept his opinions to himself. However, his aides asked all the standard loaded questions about Saddam Hussein's connections with Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and providers of WMD, as though these phantoms had not already been dispelled.

Only a few months later, in May 2008, Nixon had a second meeting with the president. On this occasion a colleague called "Greg" was taking a deep dive on Iranian influences in Iraq, and Nixon was serving as backup. The president on this day, however, was irritable and impatient, got tired of the briefing, and brought up the question of Muqtada al-Sadr. Everyone turned toward Nixon, who had to make a report on the spot. Bush didn't like the "little punk," as he called him, doubted he could wield any influence, and disputed Nixon's assertions that he could. The president asked again if the US forces should have killed al-Sadr, and received the same answer. Nixon felt that he needed to say something about the nature of the Arab mind, which could be modern and sophisticated, yet guided by religious signs and omens. Bush didn't like it. When Nixon tried to explain that dreams do not mean the same thing in Iraq as they do in America, the president lost his composure altogether and started making juvenile wisecracks. Here the reader begins to realize that the title of the book has a satiric edge.

*Debriefing the President*—which president? Both of them? Bush had studied diligently, listened to countless intelligence reports, yet was completely lost in the desert sands. Mysticism, sectarianism, uncertainty—these were bugaboo to him. Saddam had read and studied too, attempted to create a secular society in the Middle East, yet misjudged America at every turn. Nixon proceeds to compare the two presidents point by point: both trusted instinct more than intellect, both thought themselves great men of history, both invaded foreign countries: the "brutal dictator" Iran and Kuwait, the "freedom fighter" Afghanistan and Iraq. Nixon does not say it, but both had a lengthy experience of killing. When he left the office of governor of Texas in January 2000, Bush held the record for US governors who presided over state executions— 154. His successor in office, Rick Perry beat the record with 319 from 2000 to 2015.

### **Critique of the CIA**

The second deep dive in the Oval Office became a plunge in hot water for Nixon, and in the weeks that followed the scalded man who had unhinged the president became "radioactive" in Langley. He persevered three more years at the Agency and retired in 2011. Five years later, after certain delays beyond his control, he evened the score with his memoir and a comprehensive critique of the Agency, which concludes the book.

The problem with the CIA, says Nixon, is that it operates under the institutional imperative of pleasing the president so as to maintain its funding and perquisites. This "service approach" makes it passive and dependent on the demands of the White House, which, in each of the three administrations that he witnessed, comes to office with serious shortcomings and needs more guidance from its intel agency. He faults the Clinton team for looking at foreign policy as a

“boutique item” that could enhance their domestic image, and dismisses them as “a collection of intelligent amateurs.” He had great hopes for the Bush Jr. team, because Bush Sr. had “handled the nation’s statecraft with sophistication and care,” but the son, with his Manichean approach to all issues into “for us” or “against us,” soon enough disappointed him. Nixon subscribes to the Colin Powell doctrine for going to war: an attack must be vital to national interests, the risks and costs must be thoroughly assessed, and there must be an exit strategy. But Powell and his doctrine, he laments, were “marginalized” by Bush and Cheney (although I would argue, worse, the elements were falsified.) Meanwhile, President Obama, Nixon observes, attended to the war he inherited in Afghanistan but had no interest in the one he inherited in Iraq. He was aloof and ineffective. As his final word, Nixon writes off the CIA as “a sclerotic organization.”

Yet Nixon steers around the Agency’s most stunning failure of all. In the summer of 2001, the CIA was taking a proactive approach by sending the White House almost daily warnings about signs of an impending terrorist attack inside the United States. The White House, wanting to advance the agenda it had established, downplayed and ignored these alarms. But simultaneously with its warnings the CIA failed to pass along to the FBI the evidence it was collecting of a particular national security threat: there had been an Al Qaeda conference in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in the first week of the year 2001, and two of its participants, Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, had entered the United States at Los Angeles International Airport in the second week of the year.

Had the CIA informed the FBI of their presence according to protocol, instead of keeping its intelligence to itself for reasons still not disclosed, the FBI could have put one or both under surveillance and probably rolled up the impending “planes operation.” So concluded the *9/11 Commission Report* in 2004. Al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar, unimpeded, helped Al Qaeda to hijack the Boeing 757, piloted by fellow conspirator Hani Hanjour, that plowed into the Pentagon on 9 September 2001, killing all 64 passengers and 125 people on the ground.

In his talk to young students at the Oxford Union Society in October 2017, Nixon summed up his experience as a CIA analyst, saying that there were many good people in the agency, just as there are many great universities and minds in America. But it all means nothing if the government won’t listen. He said he used to think that if you put correct analysis before the right person, it would be acted upon and would make a difference. He didn’t believe this anymore.

### **The FBI Interrogation**

After “Mr. Steve” said farewell to Saddam at the start of 2004, a certain “Mr. Bill” stepped in for a few weeks, then “Mr. George” introduced himself. This was George Piro, a thirty-five-year-old Lebanese-American flown in on a military transport. The FBI had arrived. Piro was one of only a dozen special agents in the Bureau, among the 12,000, who had a native ability in Arabic. With him, according to available sources, were Rod Middleton, former head of the FBI’s Bin Laden unit; Tom Neer, a behavioral psychologist; Todd Irinaga, a special agent; Thresa Felix and Carol Stroud, intelligence analysts; and an Arabic linguist, name not recovered. Piro, Middleton, and the linguist formed the interrogation team.

At this time Saddam was being held in the last of a series of low, long, barracks-style buildings constructed of reinforced concrete. The buildings were laid out parallel to each other, leaving spaces or “courtyards” in between, and the whole compound was surrounded by concrete walls and partitioned by plywood screens and Hesco barriers (big wire-mesh bags filled with

sand). The site was called Camp Cropper in honor of a staff sergeant who died in 2002, possibly while guarding the Pentagon, though there are different accounts of his death. Originally the camp had been a temporary holding station for the first Iraqi prisoners in the war, but after a riot and attempted breakout a new camp was built in its place in October 2003. This one was exclusively for HVDs. Probably it is the same place that Nixon called the Battlefield Interrogation Facility, since photos of Saddam's physical examination in December 2003 and of his cell in early 2004 show the same tile walls in the background. But possibly he was moved to another similar location within the Camp Cropper compound after Nixon left, as available descriptions vary in small details. In addition to the prison buildings, there were barracks for the soldiers, administrative offices, a clinic, a gym, and three trailers for interrogation.

Camp Cropper was in a foul-smelling stretch of desert next to the Baghdad airport in the southwest corner of the Camp Victory complex, about six miles due west of the Green Zone. It was built atop a landfill packed with feces, carrion, and medical waste. A city dump farther west, on the other side of a wall, burned garbage nearly every day, and raw sewage was sprayed over a nearby field. A manhole in camp oozed a foul sludge of an indeterminate nature that required three months of pumping to remove. These circumstances were hard time for a germophobe.

Saddam was the only prisoner in his building and was not taken out to a trailer to be questioned, as were others. His securely locked, windowless room was roughly 10 by 13 feet, white-tiled and air-conditioned. Its furnishings consisted of a low cot with pillow and blankets, a folding wooden table, two plastic chairs, a prayer rug, and two wash basins. A bathroom may have been down the hall; otherwise, there were port-o-johns outside. His possessions were a pair of brown sandals, a pair of socks, a pair of underpants, an undershirt, two *dishdashas*, a windbreaker jacket, a fly swatter, a Koran, and whatever food he could save from his meals for snacks. (He would get more possessions in time.) Cramped as it was, Saddam strove to make the room his own: he asked for Pine-Sol cleaner and scrubbed the premises with a rag and a bucket of water. He washed one *dishdasha* daily by hand, and slept soundly in the other *dishdasha* and his jacket, and often snored.

There were a few other features. The cell had a tiny camera concealed beside the light fixture in the ceiling so that he could be observed at all times. It was later exposed when a stronger 100-watt bulb was screwed in the socket and burned it out of its slot. According to Garrett Graff's 2011 book, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Global Terror*, someone put a photos of President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld on one wall in the building, and a poster of the deck of cards for the most wanted Iraqis on the facing wall, and those captured were checked off. Thus Saddam could never be in doubt as to who was holding him in prison and who was cutting down his former chain of command. He may not have known it, but a photo was surreptitiously taken of him in his underpants and smuggled out to *The Sun* tabloid newspaper; it also appeared on the front page of the *New York Post* on 20 May 2005. The photographer, never publicly identified, told *The Sun* he wanted to show the world that the strongman's day was done.

The interrogation room, apparently in the same building, was bleak: white cinderblock walls, an overhead fluorescent light and four folding chairs. Piro had Saddam sit with his back to the far wall while the team sat with their backs to the door, demonstrating their position of control. Later on, he had a comfortable armchair installed for Saddam, together with a carpet, wall tapestries, and soft lighting via lamps, to show that he could produce unexpected luxuries. He made sure that Saddam had no access to a clock, while he ostentatiously wore a big wristwatch to each session. Saddam needed to keep track of the time, and would have had to ask,

if he wanted to pray five times a day. All the same, sitting in a *dishdasha* and wearing his old sandals, he appeared confident and relaxed. Piro was the lead interrogator; Middleton, who also spoke Arabic, took notes. Possibly they reversed roles when other HVDs were interrogated, which could be on alternate days. The linguist probably also took notes and helped solve problems in translation when they arose.

Piro came prepared. During the month that Nixon was “winging it” with Saddam, he was reading up on his man and making plans. He watched the video of Dan Rather interviewing the Iraqi president a month before the invasion. He brought materials to show the tyrant, such as a video of happy Iraqis tearing down his statue in Firdos Square in April 2003 and batting its head with their shoes, or a documentary film showing his men draining the marshes south of Baghdad in 1991 and driving the Shiite “marsh Arabs” away amid great lamentation. Such showings were intended to take down Saddam’s pride a notch and spoil his self-image as father of the nation. Yet new liberties were also granted: Saddam got books, pencils, and yellow pads. The team yielded to his insistence and called him “Mr. President.” Then again, according to Graff, it restricted him, closing him off from the English language, which he fairly understood. His English-speaking guards were replaced by Puerto Ricans instructed to speak only Spanish around him. But this experiment may have been brief, as a group of English-speaking guards from Pennsylvania (discussed below) have told their stories for the last 10 months of 2004, without any mention of Puerto Ricans. The point of the kind/unkind treatment was to keep the prisoner unsettled and dependent on Piro’s control. Alternately playing both good and bad cop, Piro intended to build rapport with his prisoner and tease out his secrets. The FBI does not practice coercive interrogation.

Based on the presentation in the National Geographic 2010 documentary, “Interrogating Saddam Hussein,” it is clear that Piro and his team arrived at Camp Cropper with entirely false premises. Piro appears as a commentator in the film and states that they expected Saddam would play around with them for a while and then refuse to talk. They regarded him as a cunning adversary who would have to be seduced or broken before he would give up his tightly-held secrets. They were unaware that he wanted to talk about himself for hours and hours. Hence the elaborate attempt to play mind-games and reduce the prisoner to infantility. Obviously they did not consult with John Nixon in advance and learn of his experience, or, if they did, they discounted it.

The interrogation sessions lasted from two to seven hours a day, took place every two to three days, and lasted five months, from 7 February to 28 June 2004. FBI memos summarizing the sessions can be read online. Written in English, these memos make for interesting reading, but appear skimpy for such long sessions and some are redacted. None include classified information, such as Saddam Hussein’s foreign bank accounts, previous relations with the CIA, dealings with US businessmen and citizens, and nothing indicates that he was asked questions about such matters.

What most memos present are Saddam’s self-justifications, as he could always give detailed reasons why such-and-such actions had to be taken. In the very first session Saddam enumerates the improvements he brought to the nation: paved roads, potable water, electricity, health care, and education, all financed by state-owned oil production. He declares that “it is not only important what people say or think about him now, but what they think in the future, 500 or 1000 years from now.” He is sure the Iraqi people will judge him fairly, and he magnanimously wishes the United States such wonderful improvements, describing himself as a humanitarian.

Piro invited this easy discussion in order to get Saddam talking, but the FBI could not allow such self-serving effusions to go on too long. In Session #17, 24 March 2004, the interrogation becomes confrontational. Saddam is shown a documentary film on the screen of a laptop computer. It is called Saddam Hussein's Latest War in the memo, but is better known as *Saddam's Killing Fields*, written and narrated by Michael Wood (Maya Vision 1993), a documentary film that can be viewed on YouTube. It depicts the Shia uprisings of 1991, the draining of the Mesopotamian marshes south of Baghdad, and finally the eviction and/or relocation of 300,000 residents. Saddam is clearly upset by the film; he contests its accuracy and finally rejects it as propaganda that deserves no answer. He asks for permission to go pray and when he receives it says that the permission is "one sin less" for the US government.

In Session #19, 30 March 2004, the FBI returns to the subject, and Saddam responds more expansively that the region was beautiful and peaceful, but polluted with human and animal waste; it was teeming with mosquitoes and parasites, and ruinous to the health and longevity of its human inhabitants. That's why the draining was necessary. The film shows that they lived with water buffalo, washed in the same water that the beasts swam in, and drank from it. When pressed, he allowed that the place also provided shelter for Shiite rebels, saboteurs, and deserters; furthermore, Iran had used a hard-to-see road that ran through it, and that area had to be cleared for both those reasons. So his political motives were revealed. He said that he had stayed in the marshes for extended periods each year from 1974-1982, as part of his program of learning about the life of the people, and he found the place a nice one to visit for a few days, but insufferable for longer periods of time. It had to be drained, he concluded, for progress. (Since his deposal and death, areas of the marshes have been flooded again in an attempt to reclaim the wetlands, and marsh Arabs have been returning).

Piro did not write a book about his experience with Saddam, but he did appear on CBS's "60 Minutes" in a 27 January 2008 segment entitled "Saddam's Confessions." He also gave a forty-minute PowerPoint presentation in November 2008 at the George H. W. Bush Library in College Station, Texas, and, as mentioned, participated in a TV reenactment of the interrogation for National Geographic Channel in May 2010. All three features can be viewed online.

Remarkably, the "confessions" Piro obtained in six months are practically the same as Nixon obtained in one, albeit with more details. And both, in fact, do not depart markedly from Dan Rather's interview of Saddam in 2003, as the tyrant's answers remained fairly consistent. Since Nixon debriefed almost every day while Piro took breaks, including the whole month of April when Saddam went on a hunger strike, the number of sessions turned out to be roughly the same—twenty-five each.

Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, Saddam told Piro, were mostly destroyed by the United Nations inspectors, but Iraq itself finished off the last batch. He had promoted the fiction that he still possessed WMD in order to deter Iran from invading southern Iraq and trying to take two sites holy to the Shiites. He could not allow the inspectors to finish their work, he explained, because they would have given the show away to Iran. He regarded Iran as the nation's main threat. He expected that the United States, if it indeed attacked Iraq, would only bomb and not go all in for regime change.

Outside of the interrogation sessions, Saddam spent most of his free time writing. Often, at the start of a meeting, he would produce his latest poem and declaim it with delight to Piro, who joked in his library talk that the poetry was real torture, but helped to cement the relationship. He played on Saddam's love for his mother by referring to his sincere love for his

own, and brought cookies baked by his mother (shipped from California) for Saddam on his birthday. Yet on the same occasion he let Saddam know that the Iraqis were not celebrating the day, as they had been obliged to do in the past. Saddam repeated what he had told Nixon, that his sons were martyrs, but in a confidential aside admitted that they were also monsters.

Piro, of course, was always thinking. He wondered what Saddam didn't read him and arranged a sneaky maneuver. When Saddam left his cell to go to the exercise yard, the FBI interrogation team would creep into his room, lift his papers and take them to another room to photocopy, then return them to their proper place. They took a Polaroid shot of the stack of papers first to make sure that it was replaced exactly as it had been. The writing in Arabic was transcribed by the linguist, probably in a clear hand, as there is no mention of an Arabic typewriter. Piro, of course, could read Arabic, and he studied what Saddam was writing so as to gain an advantage in the face-to-face sessions. This way, he figured, he knew what Saddam was secretly thinking, unless Saddam suspected the maneuver and planted ideas there for him to read. Presumably the photocopies and transcription were kept by the FBI and translated, but they have not yet surfaced in the public record. This raises the possibility that perhaps, like Eichmann, Saddam did write a memoir.

Graff makes an intriguing observation that could only have come from Piro. Saddam immediately caught Piro's Lebanese accent in Arabic and politely imitated it when speaking to him so that Piro could understand him more easily. Piro, on the other hand, noticed that after many hours and days of conversing with Saddam, he was inadvertently acquiring an Iraqi accent. Despite the FBI ruses of alienation and control, the handler and his subject were drawing closer together. Saddam was inclined to like Piro, because his Lebanese accent identified him as Christian, and therefore partial neither to Sunni nor Shiite.

In only two places does Piro's account differ significantly from Nixon's. First, Piro says that Saddam admitted he himself had given the order to gas the Kurdish village of Halabja in April 1987, toward the end of the Iran-Iraq war, killing 5000 men, women, and children; whereas Nixon writes that Saddam claimed he had left the matter in the hands of his field commander, General Nizar al-Khazraji, and was angry when he learned of the attack. Not because Saddam felt any sympathy for the victims, mind you, but because the gassing gave Iran a propaganda advantage in the war. Piro, in addition, says that Saddam confessed he planned to reconstitute his WMD after UN sanctions against Iraq were lifted, an admission that provides an *ex post facto* justification for the war after the antebellum premise was invalidated by the invasion and fruitless search. Dick Cheney has used this justification in his various defenses of the war.

Yet Nixon had a chance to refute Piro's revelations. During a 28 December 2016 appearance on the news show "Democracy Now!" Nixon said that the Iraqi government records collected by the US military confirmed Saddam's original account of the Kurdish massacre. As for Saddam's supposed plan to rebuild his arsenal of WMD after sanctions were lifted, Nixon said that Saddam's actual answer to the question was: "I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people." That was his standard answer to all such questions, one that permitted him to keep his options open, but also permitted his interrogator to interpret it as a "yes."

In point of fact, the FBI memo of 11 June 2004 reveals that Piro himself raised the idea that Saddam would rebuild his WMD arsenal after sanctions were lifted. The relevant two paragraphs read:

Hussein recognized that Iran continued to develop its weapons capabilities, to include its WMD, while Iraq had lost its weapons capabilities due to the UN inspections and sanctions. Hussein was asked how Iraq would have dealt with the threat from Iran once the sanctions were lifted. Hussein replied Iraq would have been extremely vulnerable to an attack from Iran, and would have sought a security agreement with the United States to protect it from threats in the region. Hussein felt such an agreement would not only have benefited Iraq, but its neighbors, such as Saudi Arabia. Piro noted due to the history between the two countries, it would have taken some time before the United States would have entered into such an agreement with Iraq.

Further, Piro advised Hussein that paragraph 14 of UN Resolution 687 stated that the disarming of Iraq was part of a total disarmament of the entire region, yet that portion of the resolution was not practically enforceable. The threat from Iran would have loomed over Iraq, especially as Iran had continued to advance its weapons capabilities. Piro commented that under those circumstances, it would appear that Iraq would have needed to reconstitute its own weapons program in response. Hussein replied that Iraq would have done what was necessary and agreed that Iraq's technical and scientific abilities exceeded others in the region.

According to the memo, Saddam then complained about a British report on WMD, which he said was inaccurate and therefore was misleading Washington. However, when he felt that war with the United States was on the horizon, he allowed the inspectors to come back in to Iraq in order to avert it. But it was too late, and by the end of 2002 he felt that the war was unavoidable. He concluded discussion on the topic as follows:

Hussein reiterated he had wanted to have a positive relationship with Washington but was not given the chance, as the United States was not listening to anything Iraq had to say. Further, he was concerned about the United States's advanced technological capabilities and resources.

Three and a half years later, at the end of his appearance on "60 Minutes," Piro referred specifically to this conversation (it was not a formal interrogation) and assured Scott Pelley that Saddam was determined to reconstitute his WMD. Pelley asked which WMD. Piro answered: "All of them." Pelley persisted: "Chemical, biological, even nuclear?" Piro shook his head and said yes. This contention is not borne out by the memorandum in question, and there are no further declassified memos on this topic.

When President Bush Sr. introduced Piro for his library talk in November 2008, he cited the opinion of Joseph Persichini, assistant director of the FBI's Washington Field Office, that Piro's interrogation of Saddam was "probably one of the top accomplishments of the agency in the last one hundred years." Indeed, Piro was the first in the Bureau to interrogate a foreign head of state, and he also set the FBI record for length of a single-person interrogation. However, at the time it was underway, as author Will Bardenwerper reveals, Washington had doubts about the Baghdad team's success based on its weekly reports. Neer, the psychologist, proposed a controlled course of manipulation that would persuade Saddam to cooperate more fully in order to rehabilitate his image. This motive, however, had already been the reason for his conversations with John Nixon, so it is doubtful that anything would have changed.

In any event, Piro continued with his easygoing approach, though he made an effort to remain firm by reading about Saddam's atrocities before each interrogation session. When Piro heard from Saddam on that same day of 11 June 2004 that Iraq had destroyed its last stockpile of WMD, and then on the 28th that Saddam had never met bin Laden and considered him a dangerous zealot, he considered it a win. Bardenwerper indicates that the bigger success was

Middleton's interviews with Ali Hassan al-Majid ("Chemical Ali"), also at Camp Cropper, because al-Majid provided information on the gassing of the Kurds that could have been used in court. Unquestionably, the so-called "confessions" of Saddam obtained by Piro and Nixon are primary materials for a historical understanding of the tyrant and his actions, but none of these revelations had any impact on his subsequent trial or, it seems, on post-Saddam US policy.

Piro concluded his talk at the Bush Library with a disarming observation. Saddam was like two different men, he said. One was a heartless dictator, the other an ordinary man—"like you and me," only "very charming, charismatic and humorous." Like you and me—the implication is ominous.

### **The Gentle Doctor**

Arriving almost simultaneously with Piro, but by a truck convoy out of Kuwait, was Major Sergeant Robert Ellis, a male nurse from St. Louis. The 744th Military Police (MP) Battalion was rotating out of Camp Cropper, as was the 109th Medical Company, and the twelve-man 439th MP Detachment was coming in. Ellis, the medical man on the team, had no idea what assignment awaited him. When the departing lieutenant from the 744th led him down a long walkway to the last building in the compound, called "the wood," and told him to act confident, since the prisoner within was good at reading non-verbal signs, Ellis felt his "situational awareness" go up. They entered, walked down a hallway, passing empty rooms, opened a door, and Saddam Hussein stood up with a book in hand. Ellis, a large black man with a rough background, had to look up, but he was not intimidated. He instantly calculated that if Saddam tried to run, he could take him down. He said "As-Salaam-Alaikum," received the return greeting, took his patient's blood pressure and gave him his pills. And that was his first meeting with the prisoner code-named "Victor."

The 439th reservists came in from Camp Omaha at the end of January 2004 for a one-year tour of duty and immediately got down to work. They cleaned the filthy grounds, painted the cells, swept the floors, and kept the air conditioners running. Presumably they also combated the rodent problem, which was so bad that rats were crawling into the beds at night. They made sure Saddam and the other HVDs got two hot meals a day and kept them supplied with cold drinking water. They coordinated all movements and activities, responded to needs and complaints, and protected the detainees from any officials, either coalition or Iraqi, who, knowing of their incarceration, might want to subject them to interrogation or castigation. After April, when the scandal of US prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison shocked the world, the 439th understood that their performance had to be exemplary. This was a "no-fault mission."

The actual task of guarding "Victor" day and night fell to another team, this one drawn from the Charlie Company of the 2nd Battalion, 103rd Armor Regiment, of the Pennsylvania National Guard. These were all young men from the Scranton area who were just as surprised as the 439th by the high-level assignment they received. Each was given a perfunctory interview by the FBI upon their arrival at Camp Cropper and then sent ahead. Each had an awkward initial meeting with "the most hated man in the world," as one recalled him, and were amazed by his friendly manner. Then they settled down to the daily and often boring routine of serving him meals, helping him with problems, and mostly just watching him reading, writing, and going about his business.

A year later five of them had interesting stories to tell *GQ* magazine. Saddam, they reported, hated Fruit Loops cereal, but loved Raisin Bran Crunch. He ate no red meat, but

preferred chicken and fish. He liked all his food and drinks to be room temperature. One guard gave him a bag of Cheetos, and promptly wanted a bag every day; but then another gave him Doritos, and he became addicted to them. Each guard would sit with a magazine outside his door, which evidently was kept open, and watch him go through his eating ritual: wiping his tray, plastic utensils, and cup with wet wipes, which they supplied him, and drinking from a bottle or cup without touching his lips to the rim. They noticed that he would wash his hands after he had shaken hands with a visitor, but only after the person had left, so as not to be rude. Being so young, they regarded the 67-year-old man as something of a geriatric, and were mostly amused; but they got confused when he started telling them personal stories—about how he had fled Baghdad in a taxi when the shock and awe bombing began, about his sons who died as martyrs, about his love for his wives. He lamented that he had been betrayed by a close confidant, the only man who knew his hiding place. He showed them the Koran with burnt edges that he carried and pointed to a hole in its cover—he said it was a bullet hole. Saddam said he had kept it in his hideaway, where he used to lie and read when US forces were roaming the area. Otherwise he stayed in a nearby shack. He told them things that he had told Piro, that he had never joined with Osama bin Laden and that President Bush would never find any weapons of mass destruction, and knew it. They made no effort to get him to talk, yet talk he did, probably more than the higher officials would have wanted.

The guards had been given strict instructions not to start a conversation with him and not to engage in idle chatter if he started talking. They should be respectful, polite, and close-lipped, and reveal nothing about their own lives. But it was hard for them to hold him back. He took an interest in each one and addressed him by his last name. He asked about their names, he said, because he was writing a memoir. He asked Specialist Sean O’Shea, 19 years old, if he was married, and when he heard no, gave him some fatherly advice: Find a good woman who is not too smart and not too dumb, one who can cook and clean, and then . . . Saddam went through the motions of bending a woman over and spanking her on the behind. O’Shea nearly cracked up. Saddam started laughing and returned to his wash in the sink. O’Shea kept a diary, and some of his entries were included in the *GQ* article. The last: “The way that this guy acts around and toward us makes it hard to picture him doing the things he did. But we just have to keep reminding ourselves of that when we start to get too close.”

Robert Ellis wondered by what process he had been chosen to serve as the personal doctor to “Victor,” to care for the other 101 HVDs in the prison, and to manage the whole clinic as well. Could it be that such high-level assignments were random? His instructions were clear enough: keep No.1 alive at all costs, because Washington does not want him to die in US custody. Ellis understood that his purpose was “to keep him alive and healthy, so that they could kill him at a later date.” This rule may have applied to some of the other HVDs as well. He saw 20 a day and found most of them in poor shape; they were ages 40 to 70, mostly overweight, and suffering from chronic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, and hypertension. In many cases he had to put them on a diet and make them exercise. The clinic was woefully under-supplied, and he set about to improve its stores of medicines and equipment. In time he shaped it into a first-class facility, with an average response time of four minutes to an emergency on base. Detainees in other locations, hearing rumors about the “hotel prison,” made requests to get in. Its chief drawback, aside from the dismal interiors and the outdoor stench, plus the rats, were the frequent explosions from incoming rockets and mortars launched toward the airport, which kept everyone on edge.

Saddam was a model patient, strong and uncomplaining. But in May he began to have abdominal pains and had to be taken to the hospital in the Green Zone. This required a military operation with a helicopter transport and guards in “full battle rattle”—M4 rifles, Kevlar helmets,

flak jackets, side arms, and two-way radios. Fortunately, the 439th had practiced “Operation Hotel Victor” in advance, and everything went smoothly. One of their number, Lt. Col. Mark Kuhlenengel, had a special assignment. He was to accompany the hooded and handcuffed Saddam, sit next to him in the Humvee and Blackhawk helicopter, and be ready to jump on top of him and shield him with his body should there be any attack. At the hospital Saddam was swarmed by doctors and subjected to too many tests. After three prostate exams in quick succession, Ellis was ready to protest. He understood what they were doing, getting a great story to tell friends and acquaintances back home. Fortunately, a major noticed the commotion and made the doctors disperse. Saddam bore the indignity in silence. The following month he needed a hernia operation, and it went without a hitch.

Ellis conveyed his Iraqi experience to the veteran St. Louis reporter Marianna Riley, who fashioned a highly readable book, *Caring For Victor: A US Army Nurse and Saddam Hussein*. It is especially valuable for its attention to details, dates, numbers, and locations involved in handling the downsized dictator. The description of the camp, Saddam’s cell, and Piro’s secret spying on Saddam’s writing, noted above, are largely drawn from this book. It also features a number of black and white photographs, evidently taken by Ellis, that can be found nowhere else. The lead title, as in the case of Nixon’s book, carries a double meaning: Ellis cared for Victor in more than the medical sense.

Of all the Americans who have written about Saddam, Ellis got closest to him. And he got closest to Ellis. They met every morning for checkup at eight with Piro acting as interpreter. Then they met again in the evening at eight, usually without Piro present. They conversed in English, as Saddam’s ability in the language steadily improved. Ellis looked forward to these meetings and tried to finish all his daily tasks so he could see Victor last thing. Since he got up at 5 AM, he had little time in the evening to relax and watch a movie on a DVD tape before turning in.

Something in these meetings drew the two together. Ellis, ruminating at the end of his book, believes that it was the hard adolescence they both had endured. Ellis had grown up in the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis and had to fend for himself. He had even stabbed a bully to death, an act ruled as justifiable homicide, for which he spent a year in juvenile detention. After his tour of duty in Iraq, he read about Saddam and learned that as a boy he had carried a steel rod to club the thugs in his village and while still a teenager he had killed four of them. Apparently the two sensed something similar in their nature.

Among the many encounters that Ellis describes, three were outstanding. The first was when Saddam told “Dr. Ellis”—as he always respectfully called him—that he needed cigars and coffee to keep his blood pressure down. He was used to smoking four cigars a day and claimed that Castro had taught him how to smoke them. Ellis knew that this practice was not medically sound, but reflected that he wanted to treat the whole man, and mood was an important factor. He went to the bazaar in Camp Victory and purchased some Cuban cigars with his own money—Cohibas, a premier brand. Saddam, delighted, invited him to have a smoke with him in the rec yard. Ellis agreed, and Saddam taught him how to do it. For coffee, Saddam had a little packet of instant Folgers, which he stirred in a cup of cold water with his finger. Ellis marveled that the dictator who had built grand palaces could take pleasure in such small things, and Saddam told him that he had begun as a poor farmer and liked to return to those times. Later Ellis determined that the coffee and cigar routine actually did seem to keep Saddam’s BP down.

The so-called “exercise yard,” or “recreation yard,” a fenced-in area inside the last “courtyard,” was a special place for Saddam. It was simply a lot with dirt, weeds, and a tree. He sprinkled crumbs for the birds, who could fly in from above, and they flocked around him. He was upset on days when they didn’t come. He watered the weeds and tended them as though they were prize flowers, so Piro had his mother send some seeds. Kuhlenengel got a hose for him, and Saddam actually developed a small plot of grass with flowers and a little date tree. He ate the petals of flowers and made toothpicks out of twigs. With a couple of plastic chairs, he could turn the yard into his garden and invite others to come outside and have a talk and a cigar. Actually he needed someone to light him up, as he was not permitted to keep matches. In the beginning he could go to the rec yard twice a day, but later almost anytime he wanted. The 439th arranged “garden parties” at which the detainees could mingle in a “prison yard”—it’s not clear whether this was the same place.

The second episode Ellis describes was when Saddam wanted honey with his pancakes instead of maple syrup. He ate the same meals as the MPs and staff, but had a particular fondness for honey. Ellis managed to locate a couple of jars and gave him a serving in a little specimen cup. It made him so happy that Ellis couldn’t help feeling good for having produced it. He also saw how much Saddam trusted him. The third incident was conclusive: Ellis had to go back home in August to see his brother Larry, who was dying of multiple disorders resulting from a life of crime and drugs. Saddam, hearing of his sad duty, hugged Ellis before his departure and said: “I will be your brother.”

As a tough character, Ellis feared that he was being taken in, but at the same time believed that Saddam’s actions were unfeigned. The matter came to a crisis when he was with Saddam one night after taking an EKG reading. Saddam had laughingly pulled his chest hairs out by the fistful to make a clearing for the pads. Ellis was amused by his show of machismo. The patient was in a jovial mood, though his BP was very high. Ellis stuck the stethoscope in his ears so he could listen to his own blood flow. Saddam said, “So now I’m the doctor,” and gave what Ellis calls “an evil laugh.” The two played the role reversal for a moment until Ellis suddenly felt wrong. He was having too much fun. “I was enjoying my time with a mass murderer,” he reproached himself. “I was laughing with a demon.”

Here began Ellis’s self-examination, which continued on to the end. After he returned to St. Louis in January 2005, having served a year in Iraq, he took his wife Rita on a Caribbean cruise. She was an operating-room nurse like himself. They had married in July 2003, but not enjoyed a honeymoon due to his deployment. On the trip Ellis was restless. He couldn’t adjust. At port in the Cayman Islands he bought some Cohiba cigars; later, on ship, dressed only in his bathrobe and slippers, looking out at the ocean from their room, he lit up and relived the moment when Saddam taught him to smoke.

Ellis was experiencing a time dislocation, what used to be called shell-shock and now is called post-traumatic stress, only of a very special kind. There had been many bombardments and death-defying drives to the hospital in the Green Zone before he left, and he was glad to get out alive. Yet he missed Iraq and Saddam. He couldn’t understand how Saddam “got to me.” He gave Marianna Riley the interviews for his book to try to explain. In its last troubled pages he keeps struggling: how can he have such deep feelings for a man who killed so many people? A man the world considers a butcher?

Home from the cruise, Ellis was stricken with cancer, and after chemotherapy, depression and a long struggle, he died in March 2016.

*This is the first part of a two-part review essay.*

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