

REVIEW ESSAYS

A REFLECTION OF SADDAM'S BIOGRAPHY

Brenda L. Connors

Post, Jerrold M., and Amatzia Baram. *Saddam Is Iraq: Iraq Is Saddam*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, 2002. 69pp. (no price given)

This book is a psychological assessment of the style of decision making, motives, and perceptions of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Its focus is on the deterrence of Saddam's use of weapons of mass destruction before Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

The first author is Jerry Post, a psychiatrist, former CIA analyst, and current director of George Washington University's Political Psychology Program, and the other, Amatzia Baram, is a professor of Middle Eastern history.

Brenda Connors is senior fellow in the Strategic Research Department, Naval War College. The Director of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense since 1996, has supported her investigations into nonverbal communication research and its application to international and military affairs. Her research assesses the human body and its signals to infer propositions regarding leadership style, performance, cognition, emotion, and credibility. Her most recent publications include "Saddam's Telling Movement Signature," published in the Providence Sunday Journal, 27 July 2003. A primer titled Body Leads: A New Approach to Understanding Leadership and Performance Style, with accompanying CD-ROM produced in 2002, is forthcoming from the Naval War College Press. Brenda Connors, a former Department of State officer, holds a B.A. and M.A. in political science from Tufts University and is a certified movement analyst.

The book's title captures the psychological theme of Saddam's grandiose self-concept that renders him and Iraq indistinguishable. Yet the authors show that beneath such grandiosity lies devastating psychological trauma for which grandiosity is only partially an effective compensation. Post and Baram relate the story of Saddam's early life in great detail to construct a picture of his fundamental psychology. Deep isolation, abuse, and resultant rage during Saddam's first twenty years created in him a messianic ambition and an insatiable pursuit of power and control that made him well adapted to revolutionary Ba'athism and the fragmentation of Iraqi politics. Post and Baram argue that in this context, and that of the Middle East more generally, Saddam cannot be considered "mad" but

rather a judicious “political calculator, dangerous to the extreme.” Though Saddam is “paranoid” and suffers from “malignant narcissism,” in their view he is nonetheless a “rational actor.” They build their argument convincingly and offer insights by intimately connecting Saddam’s “psychological architecture” to domestic and foreign policies that proved quite successful. For example, the book contains documented analyses that argue how Saddam’s psychological view of himself and the world enabled him to exploit skillfully the United States and the Soviet Union, and later the United States, the United Kingdom, and the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

The book concludes with the statement that Saddam would not accept exile because his main goal was “survival in power.” A life not in power would be death for the dictator. The exile conclusion proved correct, but the notion that a life not in power would kill Saddam reveals the limitations of this analysis. For Saddam, one could argue the struggle to survive at any cost, in or out of power, lies at the basis of his psyche.

This book demonstrates the power and pertinence of such psychological studies, but it also provides examples of the difficulties that can attend such an approach to leadership assessment. For example, studying someone from afar involves collecting enough “reliable” data, which is often difficult, if not impossible, and there are many levels of interpretation that separate actual events from the account of an adversary. A key issue is how meaningful it can be to describe someone as clinically paranoid and suffering from malignant narcissism, while at the same time asserting that he is a judicious political calculator and a rational actor. The authors cannot have it both ways. Either Saddam must be psychologically and politically out of touch with reality, at least to some extent, or there is little point in using this approach.

In fact, it can be argued that both Saddam’s psychology and his political actions stem from one and the same source. Analysis of an adversary requires that we appreciate him from “his” perspective.

Each of us has experienced the ability to identify someone because of the familiar way they hold themselves, gesture, or walk. We also, impressionistically, use those same sorts of physical cues to help evaluate an individual’s intentions. Nonverbal communication researchers (of whom this reviewer is one) systematically examine these kinds of commonsensical observations. Moreover, a formal, rigorous study of identity can be derived from recurrent patterns of physical movement and expressions that underpin personality characteristics, motivations, and decision-making style.

The field of movement analysis has made notable progress, especially through the use of modern technology to permit close study of so-called

microexpressions related to emotions, cognition, and performance that are generally not under the conscious control of the subject under observation.

A great strength of this direct observation approach is that it eliminates the data problem so often acute in more traditional methods of investigation. The observer has direct contact through video with the subject's visible physical movements. Therefore, the primary repository of intelligence about Saddam and his perspective is himself, and that information is detectable through direct analysis of his physical behavior, which underlies his thought and action in all contexts. The personality issues described by Post and Baram are represented on the deepest level in Saddam's body—his biography is reflected in his patterned expression.

Not surprisingly, Saddam has long been the subject of movement analysis. Most noticeable in him is a disconnection between the movement of his arms



The Umm al-Maarek (Mother of All Battles) mosque, built as a tribute to the 1991 Gulf War, was completed on Saddam's birthday in 2002. It is a vast edifice of gleaming white limestone and blue mosaic. The inner four minarets, each forty-three meters high (for forty-three days of aggression) are in the form of Scud missiles. The outer four minarets, each twenty-eight meters high, were built to resemble the barrel of a Kalashnikov rifle, pointing skyward. Saddam's actual birth date (28 April 1937) is embedded into the mosque's very design.

(*New York Times* photo by Tyler Hicks, 13 December 2002)

and his torso. While observing him making speeches and public appearances, he displays his arms to especially emphasize his status and power. In a sense, Saddam's arms *are* his power. They are as visceral and personal to him as his next breath, unconsciously integral to his identity. This is reflected in his quintessential wave to the crowds—a symbolic gesture to “relate,” but the appendage is so controlled that the arm is energetically detached from the torso.

As a form of self-compensation, Saddam relates to his “military arms” as powerful appendages to compensate for his fractured self (and the torso/arm connection). The authors link Saddam's psychological architecture directly to the Mother of All Battles mosque, which has four minarets shaped like Scud missiles and four others shaped like assault rifles. Behaviorally, however, Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction are one and the same, virtual appendages of the man, which, as this profile rightly suggests, made exile or relinquishment out of the question—the equivalent of further dismemberment.

Saddam's effective routing of the international community in its attempt to expose fully his weapons and inventories powerfully fed his need to prevent this

dismemberment. It is likely that he enjoyed considerable pleasure at his success. These observations are consistent with the essentially impoverished self that is Saddam, as described in the book. The psychophysical data enables us to understand more clearly what those weapons mean to Saddam psychologically, and therefore the poor prognosis of any policy designed to cut off his access to them.

It also makes sense of his self-destructive decisions over the weapons inspections to defy the United States directly, when, as so many have observed, if he had negotiated a little here, or withdrew a little there, the American position would have been seriously undermined. Certainly many U.S. planners expressed concern in 1990 that Saddam, at the last minute, would partially withdraw from Kuwait while retaining its northern oil fields. From a psychological viewpoint, for Saddam, that strategically wise move was very unlikely.

A similar example of disunity of expression occurred during Saddam's February 2003 interview when he told an astonished Dan Rather that he had won the 1991 Gulf war. While we can presume his statement reflects to a degree calculated defiance against the United States to garner Arab support, direct analysis of his expression reveals a high degree of segmentation in his gesticulation. This is a reflection of the sort of compartmented cognition that suggests both that he believed what he was saying and that he is assuredly not psychologically in touch with reality.

In a last example, Saddam's physical body attitude communicates his passive detachment, symptomatic of how he was organized to survive early in his difficult childhood. It also provides him with a patterned sense of "timelessness," which offers another explanation for his being "out of touch" and his tendency to ignore ultimatums and deadlines, so that he can continue to exude the belief that he remains powerful. While today deposed, Saddam surely tells himself that he is here to stay, and his notion of permanence is abetted by the seemingly delusional belief in his weapons, again pointing to the intimate connection between them and Saddam's psyche.