



Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein by John Nixon.

New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016. Pp. 242. ISBN 978-0-399-57581-5.

Review by Thomas G. Palaima, The University of Texas–Austin (tpalaima@austin.utexas.edu).

Debriefing the President is a well-written account of former CIA senior leadership analyst John Nixon's interrogation of Saddam Hussein, beginning on 20 December 2003, one week after Saddam's capture. His chief concerns were Saddam's aims and expectations as president of Iraq and the constraints on his plans and actions prior to the US invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003. He investigates the alleged WMDs (weapons of mass destruction) and supposed links between Saddam and terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda; the alleged plots against President George H.W. Bush (hereafter, "Bush senior") and the daughters of President George W. Bush (hereafter, "Bush"); and even Saddam's alleged use of a body double for security reasons. We also get a short sketch of relations between the United States and Iraq during and after the Cold War.

Nixon describes in detail what he learned while debriefing Saddam and how American policymakers used that information. Chapters 1–9 and the epilogue focus on Iraq, Saddam, and the debriefings. Chapters 10–14 concern Nixon's two briefings of President Bush in February and May 2008 and his thoughts on the fact that sound intelligence did not lead American civil and military leaders to choose the best courses of action for the United States.

The author "was an enthusiastic supporter of Bush in 2000," having been "deeply troubled by the Clinton administration's handling of foreign affairs" (189). He no longer retains that enthusiasm. For him, the Iraq War is a cautionary tale of the needless human suffering inflicted by the ill-advised use of military power in high-sounding operations like "Iraqi Freedom" and "New Dawn."

Among intelligence personnel and foreign policy makers, the old admonition to "keep your friends close and your enemies closer" translates to: the more you know about your potential, perceived, or real enemies, the better you can protect yourself from them or even build mutually beneficial relations with them. The key to leadership analysis is discerning what makes other leaders think, act, and react as they do. Hence, good foreign policy rests on astute historical and biographical research into the intricacies of the cultures and political systems within which foreign leaders operate. It also requires living with ambiguity.

In Nixon's experience, President Bush was incapable of even trying to see the world from Saddam Hussein's perspective. Instead, he bullied those who proposed alternative views or courses of actions. He was impervious to intelligence reports that conflicted with his own preconceived ideas. By contrast, Bush senior

understood the many shades that went into analysis and assessment. He knew that there were few whole truths in intelligence.... [But] after 9/11, George W. Bush told the world that they were either for us or against us. Many experts thought this Manichean worldview was a product of the terrorist attacks. In fact it was the way Bush viewed everything. (191–92)

Without engaging in polemics or excessive irony, Nixon offers a clear-eyed assessment of the self-interested motives that produced the unintended mistakes and maleficent actions of American foreign policy regarding Iraq from the Gulf War onward. After 9/11, the CIA massaged information to reinforce the fixed ideas of Bush and his advisers, especially Vice President Dick

Cheney. The leadership of the CIA cooperated in this to avoid the president's disfavor or a reduction in its funding and status within the wider intelligence community.

Nixon gives readers what is tantamount to intelligence data about Saddam Hussein and President Bush in the period 2001–8. Few Americans know Saddam's rags-to-power story. Born into poverty and ignorance in Iraq's hillbilly province of Tikrit, he lost his father as a child and did not learn to read till *age nine*. As an adult, he left home and navigated through the minefields of Iraq's sectarian and barely post-colonial politics. He became president of Iraq thanks to the support of a Sunni religious minority among whom potential rivals for power were always lurking.

How many of us know that Saddam in the early two-thousands was far more absorbed in writing long, complex historical and allegorical novels¹ than in Iraq's foreign policy? Or how stupefied he was that any American leader would imagine him collaborating with al-Qaeda? Or that he went abroad only twice in his life and ruled in constant fear of potential internal threats to his power?

Nixon is at his best in recounting his debriefing sessions with Saddam, enabling us to grasp something of the Byzantine and perilous Iraqi political system. Imagine a US president so distrusting of his Secret Service as to recruit a 250-person bodyguard force comprised of friends, family members, and fellow tribesmen, all in the context of rival religious and regional factions (48–49).

A serious drawback of Nixon's book is the dearth of certain historical details, precise references, and clear timelines. This is odd, given the author's characterization of leadership analysis as "focused on the person and his or her relation to the politics of the moment ... [and] putting together the giant jigsaw puzzle with small but important pieces gleaned from clandestine reporting and electronic intercepts" (33). Yet the book has no index of all the "small but important pieces"—whether people, events, and places, or the nature of Islam and the Iraqi, Iranian, and Arabic cultures. There are a mere ten footnotes and page references are not given for the few published works cited in the text. The chronology and specifics of the (two?) weeks of Nixon's interrogation of Saddam are hazy (125). We are told that "debriefing of Saddam should have been carried out over months, not days or weeks" (74), but given no notion of how many sessions Nixon, his interpreter, and his polygrapher had with him nor how long each lasted, except for the last, "the shortest" at twenty-five minutes (154–55).

The first session began unexpectedly on 20 December 2003, but footnote mentions of "debriefing notes" dated 4, 12, and 13 January 2004 (4, 107–8, 158) do not specify whether those are the dates of actual sessions or of their (lengthy) transcriptions. Nixon never says when exactly he left Iraq, only that Admiral William McRaven, who headed the military side of the operation, discussed with him at their last morning meeting a plan to ask Saddam "to make a statement requesting Iraqi insurgents to lay down their arms" (157), which McRaven in fact did on 13 January 2004, "soon after" Nixon left Iraq. Saddam rejected the proposal and later explained to Nixon's successor as interrogator that any such proclamation should be the result of a dialogue between the occupier and captured leaders of the occupied, adding,

But the occupier who comes across the Tigris to our country and asks the occupied to stop fighting—that is not logical. We will say, "If you want to stop the bloodshed, you should leave." You will be losing nothing by leaving, but we will be losing everything if we stop fighting. (158)

1. His 713-page *Fortified Castle* was published in 2001, and *Begone, Demons* was likely finished in March 2003.

This eminently logical reasoning is footnoted as “debriefing notes, January 4,” a seemingly impossible date for a debriefing conducted by Nixon’s replacement.

Plainly, the author is not giving a detailed history of his interrogations so much as clarifying how the compromising of sound intelligence vitiated US foreign policy actions in Iraq. On 30 December 2006, Nixon was on execution watch at CIA headquarters stateside. President Bush and American soldiers and contract troops had almost fully put paid to a debt his father still owed the free world for not “pushing on to Baghdad” and deposing Saddam during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Americans had been “rescued” from WMD attacks that could have completed the job started by al-Qaeda, aided—the story goes—by Iraq, on 9/11. Americans are still bringing democracy to the Iraqi victims of the Butcher of Baghdad.

In this fairy-tale context, Nixon explains, the acting US Ambassador in Iraq signed off on the execution of Saddam Hussein, “buckling under pressure from the military, who wanted to unload Saddam onto the Iraqis and be rid of him once and for all” (232).

I thought Saddam’s execution would be televised because it would show the world, especially the Iraqis, that he died according to the rule of law. Instead, the exchange took place in the dark of night, after midnight.... What the world saw the next day was, in my opinion, shocking. On a cell phone video, Saddam was seen ascending a makeshift scaffold and facing down his persecutors. We saw an angry lynch mob of Shiites shouting revenge against their onetime Sunni overlord. This was not what the United States was supposed to be fighting for. This was not what our young men and women were dying for. This was not what President Bush had promised a new Iraq would be.... For me the final pillar justifying Operation Iraqi Freedom had just collapsed. Saddam was not a likable guy. The more you got to know him, the less you liked him. But we had come to Iraq saying that we would make things better. We would bring democracy and the rule of law. No longer would people be awakened by a threatening knock on the door. And here we were, allowing Saddam to be hanged in the middle of the night. (232–33)

Nixon describes having to put up with weirdly impious jokes and derogatory remarks by President Bush during what should have been a serious briefing (8 May 2008) about Shia militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr. He advised Bush against assassinating Sadr, who might well self-destruct, if the United States were to stop playing the bogeyman. Bush called Sadr “a punk and a thug” (178) and “practically retarded” (176). “Bush looked at me and said. ‘There were people who said I should let Saddam be Saddam, and I proved them wrong.’ I wanted to say, ‘And that worked out so well?’ But I just said, ‘Yes, you did, sir’” (182).

Even John Nixon could not speak truth to bullying power.