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Saddam's secrets

THERE IS AN assumption that Saddam Hussein's upcoming trial will validate the Iraq war -- but watch out.

The trial -- starting as soon as next month -- may not be great news for the United States. In fact, it may allow the former Iraqi dictator to publicize some obscure but extremely sordid aspects of the US relationship with him and make a very public defense against the validity of the constantly changing reasons for the current Iraq war. The trial could easily backfire and go haywire from the US government's point of view.

The United States has coordinated holding Saddam for over a year and a half with no trial yet. It appears that Iraq wants to start the trial, while we are happy with the delays.

Unquestionably, Saddam was a horrible and untrustworthy tyrant who led a regime that killed hundreds of thousands of his own people with chemical weapons. As General George Casey, commander of our Iraq troops, told Congress June 23 in foreshadowing the trial, Hussein conducted "tyranny for three decades."

Yet Saddam could easily point out that our interests were protected when he was in power and remind the world of US and European support and arms to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq conflict. Even more embarrassing to the United States, he could bring out that the CIA used and paid him (he could even show financial records if he wanted to) "as their instrument for more than 40 years . . . Saddam was seen by US intelligence services as a bulwark of anticommunism," UPI reported on April 10, 2003. As early as 1959, Saddam began his CIA links by serving on a "CIA authorized six-man squad tasked with assassinating then Iraqi prime minister General Abd al-Karim Qasim," states UPI. For years afterward, Saddam provided intelligence to us in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Of course, the CIA will not comment or says "ridiculous," which may be true but is no denial. CIA reticence is hardly new-- secrecy is its job. Thank goodness for open media.

Ten days after the UPI story, Reuters reported similar information from Roger Morris, a former State Department foreign service officer who was on the NSC staff during the Johnson and Nixon administrations: "There's no question" about the paid link, he said.

While Saddam was obligated to keep his apparent CIA connection secret while in progress, he is hardly obligated to do so now, at his trial or in media sidebars, given that we captured and imprisoned him.

Moreover, the bulk of the actual charges happened prior to Gulf War I, not II. President Bush I decided to leave him sanctioned but not destroyed. The charges against Saddam include killing huge numbers of Kurds, possessing and constructing weapons of mass destruction, and invading Kuwait. That only makes it clear that these actions were from 15 or more years ago,

before the first Gulf War. Before the whole world, the trial will spotlight that we had nothing new for the new war in Iraq -- little to explain it other than rationalizations after initial reasons evaporated.

Did he have any significant link to Al Qaeda? No, says the 9/11 Commission.

Did he have current WMDs? No, says everyone now.

One of the few legitimate issues is that he possessed missiles that traveled 10 percent farther than the allowable distance. If that were a poll, it would almost be within the margin of error.

Embarrassing to the United States, his lawyers will point out that, as requested, Saddam submitted a report -- some 12,000 pages -- to the United Nations stating that he had destroyed all WMDs, and he even went to the field where he'd destroyed many to demonstrate the fact. We did not want to believe him at the time, but the report turned out to be true. He'll then point to Secretary of State Colin Powell's absolute statement to the UN showing WMD locations which turned out to be vacuum factory trucks.

No doubt Saddam tempted the United States to look for weapons of mass destruction when he declared his nation's sovereignty, blustering that "evil people" who threatened Iraq would be "left in the dustbin of history." The bluster notwithstanding, international pressure and sanctions were actually working.

In his initial appearance in court last June, Saddam's calling the trial "theater by Bush," showed he will be no shrinking violet. When the trial unfolds, while we see that Saddam may be guilty of the violations he is accused of from years ago, we will also likely hear him reveal secrets we are uncomfortable with on perhaps the world's biggest stage. If we are to demand honesty, then honesty must also be our policy to end the lies and deceit all around.

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