

# Living in the Past:

## Saddam's Present and Future

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



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**S**addam Hussein's dejected look as an U.S. Army medic looked in his hair for lice will go down in history. His expression of puzzlement, just a few hours after his capture on Saturday night, was, as they say, a picture. Indeed, it has since appeared on the cover of a thousand newspapers and magazines.

But what was he thinking? Was this man angry with himself for surrendering? Or was he secretly relieved? What of the reports now that he is being arrogant and unhelpful to his inquisitors? Is he plotting his next move?

All these questions perhaps boil down to one simple question. Do the answers provided by Western minds adequately explain why this man ran "like a rat" from hovel to hole for eight months after the collapse of his regime? I fear the answer is "No."

It might well be that Saddam did not intentionally surrender without a fight. Trapped down a dark hole without electric light and with an inoperable fan, he probably became befuddled. Like a drowning man, he reached up to the first person to open the polystyrene hatch.

Robbed of the chance to go down fighting, dead Americans at his feet, Saddam, in my opinion, missed writing his own version of Iraqi (and Arab) history. He also lost the chance of committing suicide -- and leaving generations of left-wingers the opportunity to argue that, in fact, American soldiers murdered him.

The possibilities of what has really been going on in Saddam's mind over the last few months are more than the obvious ones. And, unless there is a good analysis there is a chance that the opportunities offered by his arrest will be squandered.

Instead of just being increasingly depressed by his regime's defeat last April, Saddam has had a more powerful core motivation -- to survive. Running from place to place, there was no time for a strategic vision. He has had to rely on his native cunning. As a street fighting thug-cum-dictator, it has been his most dependable instinct. (By contrast, any strategic vision, requiring a perception of the wider world, has always been poor.)

Saddam is a creature of Mesopotamia -- the land of two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Over the generations,

the Arabs of this area have suffered both flood and famine. It is a tough upbringing. One learns to survive.

Saddam's home village of al-Ouda close to Tikrit, is on the banks of the Tigris. His last bolt-hole was ten miles south, at ad-Dawr (which can also be spelled "al-Dour"). This is the hometown of the al-Douri tribe, whose most famous scion has been Izzat Ibrahim, Saddam's yet-to-be-captured deputy and the King of Clubs in the U.S. "most-wanted" list.

Family, tribe, and tribal loyalty were the most key tests of political loyalty in Saddam's Iraq over the last 24 years. Even in the years before he became president, the same factors were also crucial. In 1959 he swam across the Tigris, near his final hideout, while fleeing, wounded by a bullet, after a failed assassination attempt of the then dictator. Until these gut instincts came up against American night-vision equipment and computerized analysis of multi-inputs of intelligence information, they worked well.

As long as Saddam is alive, he will conclude he is surviving. And, by his logic, there is hope for his political return.

He would have been boosted by the meeting he had with the four members of the Iraqi Governing Council a few hours after his arrest. Despite his lack of any real military bearing, Saddam has a leadership instinct that made him capable of dominating a room. It was entirely predictable that he was contemptuous of the Iraqi politicians, who even Americans admit, have yet to develop many political skills.

Paul Bremer might be an effective bureaucrat but his demeanor would not have put the fear of God into Saddam. Nor would the Iraqi ex-leader been fazed by the diminutive-but-intellectual appearance of Lt.Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top U.S. commander. Being smaller in stature than the Iraqi leader was indeed a key to further promotion, but try as he might, General Sanchez will never look like a thug. (By contrast though, that Maj. Gen. Raymond Odierno, the local U.S. commander in Tikrit, looks like one mean s.o.b.)

So memo to the interrogators of the CIA: Forget equal opportunities. Put together your meanest-looking teams of interrogators. Play on Saddam's vanity, his bombast, his constant need to justify himself. Offer no future to him but get him to talk about his past.

Despite his lack of education (he won a university degree by turning up armed to his exams), Saddam is not stupid. Rather he has a good intelligence, is analytical, and extremely shrewd. Do not be deceived by his polite manners and do not think he finds a cot and a prison cell to be demeaning. Despite his palaces, he is comparatively unostentatious -- as his last sanctuary indicated. He does have a penchant for cigars though -- so, please, don't give him one.

Keep him isolated. Keep him ignorant. Until he starts to drop, noose round his neck, he will probably think there is hope of a glorious return. And, although it sounds crazy, as the angry demonstrations in the Sunni Triangle indicate, there are some Iraqis who think the same.

Capturing him alive was great news for the quality of mercy of the U.S. Army. It also enables the emerging legal system of the nascent new Iraq to start off with a world-class but cut-and-dried case. But don't underestimate the risk that, in the intervening interval, other people will try to obstruct these conclusions and Saddam himself will be plotting to reverse them until the end.

Simon Henderson is a biographer of Saddam Hussein and an associate of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. His latest book, *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy*, has just been published by the Institute. ♦

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