INSEAD

Faculty & Research

Entering the Inner Theatre of a Despot: The Rise and Fall of Saddam Hussein

by

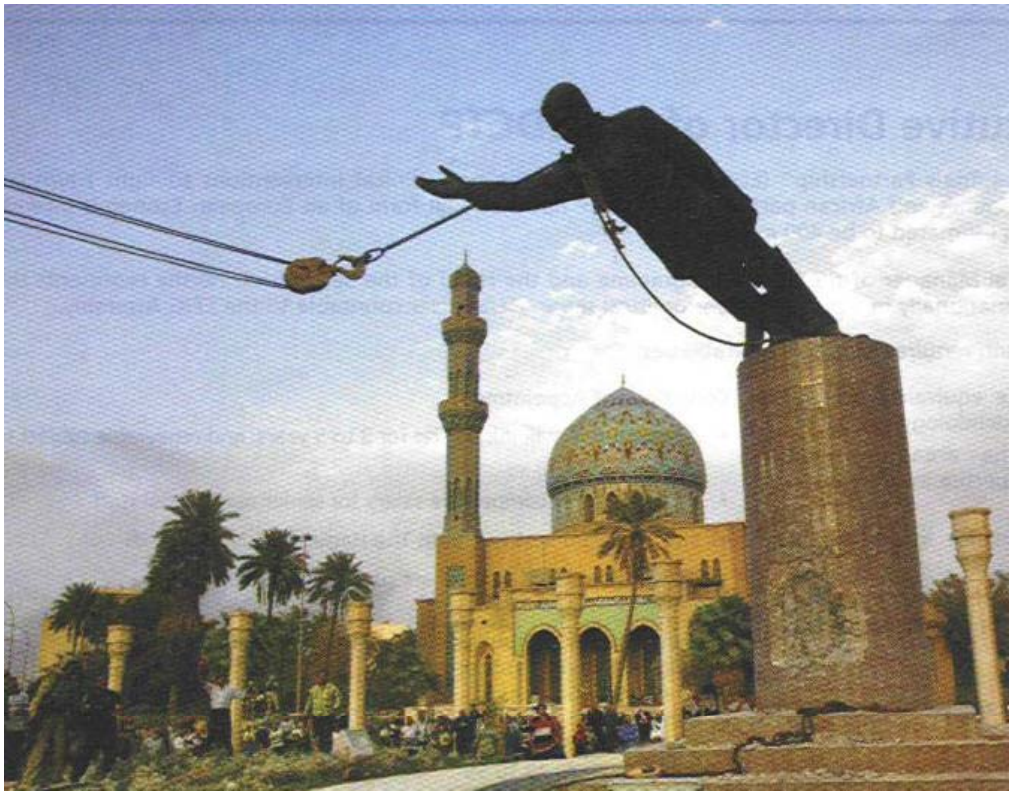
M. Kets de Vries

2003/40/ENT

Working Paper Series

Entering the Inner Theatre of a Despot: The Rise and Fall of Saddam Hussein

Manfred Kets de Vries[1]



[1] Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Clinical Professor in Leadership Development, INSEAD, France & Singapore

Abstract

This article investigates leadership by terror, a form of leadership that is both an ageless phenomenon and a contemporary problem. The article attempts to enter the despotic mind and understand how the despot functions. It also highlights the peculiar psychological interplay between despotic leaders and their followers and explores the collusive group dynamics between leaders and led. In examining the ways people become desensitized to violence and are co-opted to go along with the practices of a despotic regime, it offers groupthink, obedience to authority, identification with the aggressor, and dehumanization of the enemy as dynamics that pave the way for leadership by terror. Finally, the article ends by entering the inner world of the led, looking at how a despot's subjects cope with the terror enacted by a tyrannical regime.

For the purpose of representation, one of the better-known contemporary despots has been selected: Saddam Hussein. His rise and fall will allow us to better understand the inner theatre of despots generally. The example of Saddam Hussein demonstrates the sadistic disposition, the paranoia, the malevolent antisocial behavior, the megalomania, the tactics of terror, and the flawed reality-testing that characterize the behavior of most despots.

KEY WORDS: Leadership; despot; despotism; tyrant; totalitarianism; terror; groupthink; obedience to authority; fight-flight; dependency; megalomania; paranoia; malevolent antisocial behavior; narcissistic injury; aggression; identification with the aggressor; violence; sadism; revenge; war.

> Most Iraqi officials have been in power for over 34 years and have experience dealing with the outside world. Every fair-minded person knows that when Iraqi officials say something, they are trustworthy.
>
> —Saddam Hussein in a February 4, 2003, interview by British labor politician Tony Benn

Introduction

This article investigates leadership by terror, a form of leadership that is both an ageless phenomenon and a contemporary problem. Attempting to enter the despotic mind and understand how the despot functions, it looks at the sadistic disposition, paranoia, malevolent antisocial behavior, megalomania, tactics of terror, and flawed reality-testing that characterize despotic leaders.

The article also highlights the peculiar psychological interplay between despotic leaders and their followers and explores the collusive group dynamics between leaders and led. In examining the ways people become desensitized to violence and are co-opted to go along with the practices of a despotic regime, it argues that groupthink, obedience to authority, identification with the aggressor, and dehumanization of the enemy are dynamics that pave the way for leadership by terror. Finally, the article ends by entering the inner world of the led, looking at how a despot's subjects cope with the terror enacted by a tyrannical regime.

For the purpose of representation, one of the most controversial contemporary despots has been selected: Saddam Hussein. His rise and fall will allow us to better understand the inner theatre of a particular despot, but he will also stand in as a proxy for *all* despots, from antiquity to modern times, helping us to understand both their motivation and their behavior.

The Making of a Despot

Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq for over two decades, had the dubious distinction, especially in the latter portion of his tenure, of being the world's best known and most hated Arab leader. Though he once had a modicum of popularity, his ideas gradually lost resonance in the Arab world, where secular liberals and Muslim conservatives alike despised him. In a region where despotic rule is the norm, he was exceptional: he was more feared by his own people than any other head of state has been. Through an elaborate network of secret police and informers, he succeeded in maintaining strict control and rooting out dissidents. Under his reign, the capacity for cruelty by a despot reached new, previously unimagined heights. For example, he used chemical weapons not only against the people of Iran but also against his own people. His kill tally has been estimated at approximately two million people.

Contrary to his regime's daily avalanche of triumphant propaganda regarding its successes, the reality of Saddam Hussein's rule was starkly different. He succeeded—despite the country's vast oil wealth—in making Iraq bankrupt, its economy and infrastructure shattered by years of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. That invasion, in August of 1990, can be viewed as one of the great military miscalculations of modern history. Despite his devastating defeat there at the hands of the elder President Bush in the Gulf War (code-named Operation Desert Storm), Saddam Hussein managed to retain power, an extraordinary accomplishment, given the psychological as well as military defeat. Increasingly isolated from his people, keeping the company of a diminishing circle of trusted advisers—a group largely drawn from his immediate family and from the extended clan based around the town of Tikrit, north of Baghdad— the endgame came when the US-led coalition forces, headed by his nemesis, George W. Bush Jr., decided to topple his regime in early 2003.

It is difficult to separate truth from fiction in the rather murky accounts we have of Saddam Hussein's history, mainly because he not only invented large portions of his own personal myth but assiduously muddied the truth. We do know that he was born in 1937 in the desert town of Tikrit and that his family was extremely poor (Darwish

and Alexander 1991; Karsh and Rautsi 1991; Rayski 1991; Aburish 2001; Cockburn and Cockburn 2002; Coughlin 2002). The name given to him at birth—Saddam—can be viewed as an ominous sign of things to come, as it means "the one who confronts." He never knew his father, who is variously said to have disappeared, died, or been murdered before the younger man's birth. While pregnant with Saddam, his mother was also mourning the recent death of her oldest son. It is said that she repeatedly attempted to commit suicide and to terminate her pregnancy, but a neighboring Jewish family intervened to save the life of the unborn baby – all in all, not an auspicious start in life for a child.

Starting life with a dead or absent parent imposes a formidable burden on a child. That burden is increased when, as we might suppose in this case (given the missing father and the mourned older son), a mother's feelings are ambivalent toward her offspring. If we add to the mix a malevolent stepfather—Saddam Hussein's mother married a second husband, who was violent toward the youngster—we all but guarantee a child the self-perception that he is unwanted. And nothing in those early years would have contradicted such a perception: Saddam Hussein's childhood was filled with verbal and physical abuse, humiliation from his stepfather and others, violence, and crime. Fatherless, he was teased and attacked relentlessly by the other children in the village. Deprived of an education by his stepfather, who sent him out to steal as a youngster, Saddam Hussein ran away from home at the age of eight to go to school—or so runs the official version. It is said that by the age of ten the boy was familiar with the use of guns (and may even have carried one from that point on).

There is not much hope that an individual starting from such a disadvantaged beginning will make something of his life—at least, not unless there is someone who shows a particular interest in the developing child, someone who believes that the child has capabilities and promise. In Saddam Hussein's case, this supportive role seems to have been played by his mother's brother, Khayrallah Tulfah, a schoolteacher in Baghdad who took an interest in his nephew. Khayrallah Tulfah had had been thrown out of the Iraqi army years earlier because of the role he played in an abortive pro-Nazi coup that was suppressed by the British forces in the Second World

War. This event gave the older man a lifelong hatred of Britain and "imperialism," an outlook that would be shared by his nephew.

Saddam Hussein's ambition was to become an army officer, an ambition that Khayrallah must have encouraged. A military career was the only guarantee of upward mobility in Iraq at that time, with the country torn apart by coups and countercoups. Saddam Hussein's poor grades kept him out of Baghdad's military academy, however, a disappointment for which he later compensated by proclaiming himself a field marshal (a term generally reserved for the military) when he came to power.

Early on, Saddam Hussein steeped himself in the political plotting that characterized Iraq's turbulent internal affairs. In 1956, at the age of nineteen, he participated in an attempted coup against the Iraqi monarchy, and a year later he joined the Ba'ath party, which in 1968 would become the state's political organization. The Ba'ath party professed a kind of socialist pan-Arabic ideology, but it was actually based on ideas of German National Socialism and Italian fascism. From his school years onward, Saddam Hussein seems to have had no personal life outside the Ba'ath party.

Saddam Hussein first came to prominence when, with his uncle, he unsuccessfully attempted in 1959 to assassinate the then ruler of Iraq, General Abd al-Karim Qassem. The official account of this incident refers to Saddam Hussein's willingness to make sacrifices to the point of martyrdom in order to end an unacceptable regime. We see the beginnings of the merging of man and myth in a tale of fearlessness, shrewdness, loyalty to party and people, and iron discipline. It was the coup of 1968, however, that brought the Ba'ath party to power. Saddam Hussein was promoted to the Regional Command Council, where he led a special force responsible for terror and assassination. He became an interrogator and torturer in the Qasr al-Nihayyat, or Palace of the End, so called because it was the place where King Faisal II and his family had been gunned down in the 1950s. Saddam Hussein set about building up the party's internal security system, the Jihaz Haneen (or "Instrument of Yearning"). He rose quickly through the ranks, not the least due to his extreme efficiency as a torturer. His power increased until he became deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command

Council (the real power in the country), behind General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, who was president (and a distant relative of Saddam Hussein).

On National Day, July 17, 1979, Saddam Hussein declared himself president, taking the place of al-Bakr, who had resigned conveniently the previous day, purportedly because of ill health. For more than twenty years, Iraq would be run exclusively by the Ba'ath party, which in turn would be controlled entirely by Saddam Hussein. Life under the Ba'ath party soon came to mirror its leader. Once in power, Saddam Hussein instituted a single-party system, tightened the grip of the command economy, created a formidable network of secret police and intelligence services, and placed his own tribal allies in strategic positions. He became the leader, the president, the ideologue, and the father of the tribe and nation, all in one. The population was kept in check by the activities of his secret intelligence services, which enforced policy through torture and punished in various ways a constant stream of "enemies of the people" to demonstrate the dangers of failing to conform to the regime. Saddam Hussein placed informers everywhere, ready to report any suspicious activity. The rigid regime that evolved over the years strongly resembled that of Stalin, a hero whom Saddam Hussein had studied extensively.

But what did Saddam Hussein wanted to achieve? What motivated him to seek power and then to wield it so unbendingly? He himself would have said that he was searching for a new kind of world order, perhaps a renaissance of the Arab nation. When interviewed at the height of his power, he dwelled nostalgically on the fact that his region had once been the shining light for other nations, that the Arab nation was "the source of all prophets and the cradle of civilization" (Matar 1981) p. 237). He viewed it as his mission to unite the Arab peoples against foreign usurpers and superpowers, a rallying cry that touched a responsive chord in the impoverished and displaced Arab masses. One enemy in particular was singled out—the Zionists. Saddam Hussein perceived himself as the successor of previous glorious leaders: Nebuchadnezzar, who brought the bound Jewish slaves back from Palestine, and Saladin, who defeated the Crusaders in the 12th century.

Evoking the glory of Arab history, Saddam Hussein claimed to be leading his people to new glory. Endless billboards with Saddam Hussein's portrait presented him variously as military hero, pre-biblical warrior, modern nationalist, people's protector, and architect of the modern state. Eventually, almost three thousand statues and murals would be erected in his honor all over the country. His photographs would number fifty million (almost two for every Iraqi), with one placed prominently in every house. To add to this personality overdose, the Iraqi people were forced to consume a daily diet of propaganda, rich in fawning praise of the president. His name was everywhere; for example, Baghdad's airport was called Saddam International Airport. Iraqi schoolchildren recited his sayings en masse, and they wore T-shirts printed with his image and wristwatches that had his portrait on the face. Because Saddam Hussein portrayed himself as the personification of the ideal Iraqi character, he was accompanied everywhere by men who, as nearly as possible, looked like him in manner, dress, and appearance. When seen on television, he was sometimes hard to distinguish from the mustached men in uniform who surrounded him, an admiring gallery of clones.

Saddam Hussein was a survivor. In the spring of 1991, after the Gulf War, it seemed that the only alternatives for him were death or disgrace. He had lost "the mother of all battles," the territory that he still controlled was deeply divided, and the economy was in ruins. His grief-stricken and demoralized people openly cursed him as *muka'ab shaytan,* triple devil, and rebellion raged in fourteen of the eighteen Iraqi provinces. Within weeks, however, he had succeeded in reasserting his authority despite the effects of postwar UN sanctions, which hit the Iraqi people hard.

Postwar reconstruction after Operation Desert Storm was more rapid than Western observers had anticipated. Bridges, roads, oil refineries, and public buildings damaged or destroyed in the fighting were quickly rebuilt; public services were restored to prewar performance levels. To the series of enormous billboards celebrating the achievements of the president another was added: "President Saddam Hussein—the symbol of struggle and reconstruction."

It was not only the physical infrastructure that was quickly restored: the cowed and terrified Iraqis who had been given a taste of Western views were soon forced into silence again by the reappearance of the secret police. Huge portraits of their president were repaired and again lined the streets, as if his rule had never been questioned. Whatever hopeful opposition had sprung up in the chaos of the war was now disorganized and fragmented; those who had participated in a failed uprising after the Gulf War were tortured and executed with extreme cruelty. Contrary to all Western expectations, which had almost universally forecast Saddam Hussein's overthrow, he had regained a tight hold on Iraq. His brinkmanship with the United Nations in his attempts to avoid the destruction of his country's chemical and nuclear arsenals was masterly; he teetered constantly on the edge of exhausting the patience of the outside world but rarely overplayed his hand.

Saddam Hussein's resilience, against overwhelming odds, was remarkable. Perhaps his single-mindedness was what saved him. Undistracted by the political ideology that drives so many dictators, he wanted only one thing: to hold on to power, whatever the cost. His ability to do so, despite the disasters he brought to his country, was astonishing. Could anyone have predicted that this poor boy from Tikrit would turn out the way he did? That he would, by some measures, be so "successful," and that his success would lead to such disastrous results? (If anybody had predicted the latter—and said so along the way—that prophet certainly would not have survived to repeat his warning.) Saddam Hussein's infamy, the suffering he forced on his people, the atrocities he inflicted against the Kurds by using poison gas against them, the economic ruin of his country, and the disastrous ecological damage he inflicted on an entire region formed a legacy that will be remembered for a long time. It will be remembered, too, that the person depicted on so many billboards turned out to have feet of clay.

The Question of the Leader's Character

Given the sheer scale of the horrors that Saddam Hussein inflicted on the Middle East, any attempt to analyze his inner theatre must be at best feeble and at worst collusive.

But those very horrors, crying out in the voices of the dead, demand that we attempt the analysis.

As the example of Saddam Hussein illustrates, when a despotic leader takes charge of a country, the demons of his[2] inner theatre become the demons of the society. The despot's desires, ideals, and hatreds become the fears and wishes of his subjects. The despot's law becomes the law of the country; the despot's ethics, the source of all morality; the despot's grandiose fantasies, his subjects' fantasies; the despot's paranoia, their paranoia; the despot's pain, their pain. Rarely, though, has a political order resembled its creator as closely as Iraq came to mirror Saddam Hussein. It is essential, therefore, that we attempt to decipher his sadistic and paranoid behavior, his megalomania, and his ability to keep an iron hold on the will of his people.

Saddam Hussein's behavior is characterized by extreme violence. All of us feel, and exhibit, a certain degree of aggressiveness at times, indeed it has been argued, from an ethological point of view, that aggression is needed for the survival of the species (Lorenz 1966; Tinbergen 1968). Even if a certain level of aggression is instinctive and necessary in the human race, however, a case can be made for a "malignant" aggression that is not instinctually programmed but rather is of a characterological nature (Fromm 1973). The salient characteristics of this form of aggression are interpersonal abrasiveness and the attainment of narcissistic satisfaction through intimidating and humiliating others. Saddam Hussein typifies a leader in whom malignant aggression patterns have been internalized, and have influenced not only his own behavior, but also that of his followers.

The Twilight Zone: Malevolent Antisocial Behavior

We have all known people who show signs of antisocial behavior. Although they are unpleasant to be around, they function adequately in the work world (if not the social sphere). Fortunately, few of us know, or will ever meet, someone with the most extreme form of antisocial behavior: malevolent antisocial personality disorder.

[2] Because most despotic leaders of nations are in fact men, I am using the pronouns *he* and *his*.

Malevolent antisocial personalities, whose behavior reflects elements of paranoia and sadism, are the least attractive among people with antisocial tendencies; they demonstrate extremely callous, vengeful, belligerent, and brutal behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Lacking proper parental controls while growing up, malevolent antisocials never learned how to moderate their aggression. Later, as adults, when blocked in any endeavor, they exhibit a violent temper that can flare up quickly and without regard for others.

Antisocial personalities, who are often labeled *sociopaths,* generally function adequately in intellectual dimensions, despite their socially repugnant behavior. This contrast makes the "twilight zone" of their behavior especially difficult to understand. Like colorblind people who cannot distinguish between certain colors, antisocial personalities seem to be unable to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior. Because they have no sense of boundaries, social or otherwise, the role of tyrant comes naturally to them.

Malevolent antisocials' lack of empathy is another defining characteristic. Because these people cannot identify with their victims (or do so only briefly, opportunistically), the latter can be destroyed and discarded at will: it is as if the victims were merely lifeless objects, not living human beings. Antisocials are often sadists who have no moral qualms about destroying their victims or impounding their victims' possessions. On the contrary, they feel a sense of entitlement.

This lack of empathy arises from malevolent antisocials' belief that they must look out for themselves, regardless of the cost to others. Because they perceive the world as a hostile place, they anticipate betrayal and punishment and favor preemptive aggression. Having victimized themselves in the past, they want to make sure they are never again under another's control. The best way to ensure that is to do the victimizing themselves. Thus aggression, uncontrolled and intimidating, is their preferred operating mode. They want to have absolute and unrestricted control over others.

Sadism: The Ultimate Means of Control

Expressing superiority through sadistic behavior is one way malevolent antisocials try to overcome feelings of self-contempt (Horney 1945). Craving vindictive triumph, they attempt to counter their impotence with omnipotence. People possessed of what psychologists call "the sadistic personality" are typically irritable, argumentative, abrasive, malicious, and easily provoked to anger. They nurture strong hatreds and experience a persistent need to destroy and dehumanize people they see as a source of their frustration (Kets de Vries and Perzow 1991; Kernberg 1992). They are generally extremely dogmatic, closed-minded, and opinionated, rarely giving in on any issue even when evidence supports another view. Believing that force is the only way to solve problems, they use physical violence and/or verbal cruelty to establish their dominance and achieve their will. Worse, they take pleasure in the psychological and physical suffering of others; they *enjoy* humiliating and demeaning people in the presence of others. They are fascinated by violence, weapons, martial arts, injury, and torture (Shapiro 1981; Millon 1986; American Psychiatric Association 1987). Despite these inclinations, sadistic types often remain very detached from awareness of the impact of their activities.

Because of the violence that most sadistic types experienced in early childhood, they have no understanding that people can possess good qualities. Someone whom others experience as kind, sadists experience as weak, inadequate, and unreliable. Sadistically inclined people believe only in the power of might: they identify with powerful, cruel figures and get pleasure out of the suffering and destruction of the weak. As a result, they create a fearful world in which the biblical injunction is reversed to "Fear thy neighbor as thou fearest thyself." When this injunction is the motto of a person in a position of leadership, the expectation that others will act in a hostile manner becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: others follow suit, responding with hostility.

Saddam Hussein fits the sadistic profile. He was the object of displaced anger from many different sources in his childhood—his stepfather, for example, and many other members of the violent community he grew up in. The belittlement, teasing, and humiliation that characterized his early years were a breeding ground for the

acquisition of a sadistic disposition. Although in some individuals constant belittlement leads to a depressive reaction, Saddam Hussein stood up to his tormentors and fought back (energized, perhaps, by his uncle's support). As each successful counterattack built up his confidence, the psychological balance gradually shifted from impotency to potency.

Under the rule of Saddam Hussein, aggressive behavior reached new, frightening, and one might even say imaginative proportions. Many of his contemporaries have commented on Saddam Hussein's barbarous methods of domination and intimidation—and on the perverse pleasure that those cruelties gave him. Even as a young man, Saddam used cruelty as a spectator sport. For example, when he was Information Minister of Iraq and wanted to demonstrate his displeasure over the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War, he announced that a Zionist plot had been discovered and had fourteen alleged Zionist plotters hanged in a public square, leaving their dangling bodies on display.

Years later, after he had gained absolute control of Iraq, techniques of torture reached incredible heights. It has been estimated that the regime had perfected more than hundred different measures of torture (Coughlin, 2002). But as is true of his life as a whole, it is hard to know what is reality and what is distortion in those reports. Nonetheless, with so much smoke, we can assume that there must have been a fire somewhere—and a pretty big one at that. Let's see what the smoke reveals:

On July 18, 1979, just after he became president, Saddam Hussein invited all the members of the Revolutionary Command Council and hundreds of other Ba'ath party leaders to a conference hall in Baghdad. He addressed the audience, informing them wearily that there had been a betrayal—a Syrian plot. As Saddam took his seat, Muhyi Abd al-Hussein Mashhadi, the secretary-general of the Revolutionary Command Council (who had been secretly arrested and tortured the day before), appeared from behind a curtain to confess his own involvement in the putsch. Saddam then read names off a list and obliged each person selected, all of whom were in the audience and none of whom had expected this unprovoked ordeal, to read out a confession of alleged participation in this Syrian-backed plot against Iraq and the party. The terror-

stricken remainder of the audience responded by shouting “Long live Saddam” and “Death to the traitors” (Darwish and Alexander, 1991; Karsh and Rautsi, 1991). When all sixty "traitors" had been removed, Saddam again took the podium and wiped tears from his eyes as he repeated the names of those who had “betrayed” him.

To reinforce his message of terror and make it clear who was in charge, Saddam Hussein had this event filmed and had copies distributed to top officials in the Ba’ath party and the military. Afterward, twenty-two of the selected “conspirators” were sentenced to death by “democratic execution”—that is, by firing squads manned by fellow party members, including Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein personally gave those people participating in the executions handguns with which to dispatch their fellow party members. The more fortunate “conspirators” received lengthy prison sentences. The remaining party members—about three hundred in all—left the hall shaken, grateful to have avoided the fate of their colleagues and certain who was now in control of the country. Videotapes of the purge were circulated. The fabrication of plots (as a means to eliminate rivals alleged to have participated) and the use of terror would become major weapons in Saddam Hussein’s campaign to align the masses behind his leadership.

Atrocious acts were Saddam Hussein’s hallmark throughout his reign. A few more examples, to illustrate:

- In the early 1980s a number of bureaucrats working in the Housing Ministry in Baghdad were accused of corruption—probably with some cause. With the other bureaucrats forced to watch, he had a number of the accused hanged.
- When Saddam cracked down on Shi’ite clerics, something he did with ominous regularity, he executed not just the mullahs but also their families, as a guarantee that unwanted piety would not interfere with the government.
- When one of his senior officers, Lieutenant General Omar al-Hazzaa, was overheard making negative comments about him, Saddam ordered not just that he be put to death but that prior to his execution his tongue be cut out. For good measure, to warn others not to try such behavior, he also had the tongues of his sons cut out while their wives were forced to watch. The general and the

male family members were executed. In addition, Al-Hazzaa's homes were bulldozed, and his wife and daughters were left on the street.

Sadism is in the eyes of the beholder, however—certain anecdotes about Saddam Hussein suggest that a considerable number of his subjects believed that he really cared about them. This apparent blend of kindness and malevolence is common in sadistic types, but it is *only* "apparent." The perceived kindness is actually deceit, a form of playacting designed to manipulate the "audience." Lacking any center within themselves, sadists play different roles, depending on the particularities of the situation. They make a compensatory attempt to show that they are capable of genuine friendliness and concern, that there is more to them than mere coldness. Such behavior often "succeeds," in the eyes of the sadist: it puts others off-guard, encouraging them to say things that they pay for—and regret—later. Saddam Hussein could cry over his children one minute, the very picture of compassion, and go on to order the execution of a group of dissidents the next.

Given this emotional confusion, it is no surprise that the quality of interpersonal relationships of these kinds of people is downright abysmal. Their capacity to love, to relate intimately and affectionately with another person, is markedly impaired. Lacking the compassion, ethics, and moral values that characterize most humans, they experience only superficial and shallow emotional reactions (despite an occasional empathic façade), and thus their relationships have little depth. Their only emotional "strength" is hostility: they are champions at ignoring the feelings of others, failing to cooperate, and being irritable (Millon 1996).

In addition, like all his sadistic counterparts, Saddam Hussein was socially isolated by his fear that intimacy might lead to humiliation. He could never allow himself the luxury of relaxing his vigilance. Preferring to play it safe by playing it solo, he was untrusting and harsh in the context of intimate relationships. This isolation also fed the development of a strong paranoid disposition.

Paranoia: Suspicion as a Way of Life

Paranoia has been called the "disease of kings." Persecutory paranoia and paranoid grandiosity are common ingredients in the world of power and politics, unfortunately all too often exaggerated (sometimes grotesquely so) in the case of tyrants.

Healthy suspiciousness is an adaptive mechanism for leaders. Being vigilant in the presence of perceived or likely danger is simply an extension of any leader's wish to survive. That suspicion must always be moderated by a sense of reality, however, lest it slip over into paranoia. Effective leaders ground their behavior in sound political practices that limit and test danger, and they rely on trusted associates to help them stay safe and sane.

While most of us can distinguish between real danger and safety (though we might not always choose wisely!), some see danger *everywhere* and hostile intent in *everyone.* Paranoid leaders fall into this category. They distort information and engage in delusional thinking and faulty reality-testing. In their efforts to deal with perceived dangers, they create what looks to them like a logical world. (Acute dangers require drastic measures, after all.) In fact, though, while their reasoning may be rational, the assumptions on which their logic is based are false. In other words, paranoid behavior is rationality run amok.

Such leaders typically question the trustworthiness of everyone around them and suffer from delusions of conspiracy and victimization. Fearing that others may do them harm, they listen for—and find—hidden meanings in even the most innocent remarks. If a cursory check disproves their particular suspicion of danger, paranoid leaders do not feel relief; instead, they search ever deeper for confirmation of that suspicion. If that effort likewise fails, they may claim to have special knowledge of the inner experiences of the potential offender. In other words, lacking proof, they *create* proof. Over time, their suspiciousness becomes their prevalent, habitual mode of thinking (Shapiro 1965; Meissner 1978; American Psychiatric Association 1994).

Why does caution remain healthy suspicion in some people and become destructive paranoia in others? Researchers of character who focus on the behavior of infants and

young children have introduced the concept of the *paranoid-schizoid position* as a normal phase of early human development (Klein 1948; Klein 1959). In this position (or phase), the young person splits the images in his or her inner world into either "good" or "bad." Using a defense mechanism known as *projective identification,* the child then "expels" those parts of the self experienced as "bad" and "deposits" them into someone else.

Over time, if normal development takes place with age-appropriate frustration, the infant passes naturally out of the paranoid-schizoid position, learning to tolerate both aggressive and loving internal imagery. The developing child, gaining the capacity to tolerate ambivalent feelings, comes to realize and accept that such varied imagery makes up both self and others. At that point, the loved (but flawed) other can become internalized for the child in a stable way that guarantees security.

However, in some people this human capacity for splitting, projection, and externalization, begun early as an adaptive defense mechanism, remains operative throughout the lifespan, becoming dysfunctional when it outlasts the need that spawned it. Such individuals never progress beyond a world of extreme images of good and evil, enemies and friends; they are never able to integrate good with bad. Such people—Saddam Hussein among them—continue living in a world of divided, hostile imagery; they persist in using primitive defense mechanisms as common ways of functioning. Believing that all bad things come from the outside and all good things from within, they cannot accept that some of the bad things that happen to them are a consequence of their own actions.

Both projective identification and the tendency to split the world into good versus evil are signs of paranoid thinking. Seeing the world as incapable of compromise, paranoid leaders must constantly wage war with external enemies. Seeing badness as originating outside themselves, they look for others to blame—and eliminate—for any setbacks they experience. And yet, despite these precautions, such leaders have an "internal persecutor" forever present. Their own externalized "bad" images—those images that they have tried for years or decades to disown—follow them like shadows that cannot be escaped. Children who feel constantly surrounded by enemies, whether

from actual violence or from hostile internal imagery, may develop elaborate fantasies as a way of enhancing injured self-esteem. Eventually, these secret fantasies may evolve into full-fledged delusions.

Saddam Hussein, growing up in a hostile, lonely world, certainly had the kind of experiences that often arrest development to the paranoid-schizoid position. Knowing what we do about his background, we can feel no surprise that he would split the world into good and bad, blame others, or be distrustful and suspicious. From infancy on, his circumstances were harsh, unkind, and lonely, necessitating constant vigilance and mistrust. The quick temper, irritability, and violent reactions that the adult Saddam Hussein revealed in office were reactivations of his memories of those circumstances. He preferred violence to helplessness, choosing the former as his primary form of relating to others. He also chose violence over loneliness, as do most victims of cruel treatment: children who have been exposed to harsh environments generally prefer relating via violence to not relating at all. Satisfying human attachment needs is so essential to psychological survival that children—and some adults—will do anything to keep loneliness at bay (Bowlby 1969).

Saddam Hussein projected his turbulent inner theatre onto his environment, creating a world characterized by violence and megalomania, a world in which nobody could be trusted. This projection was his (unconscious) way of settling his account with his past, of managing his archaic but still powerful feelings of helplessness, humiliation, and rejection. His paranoia, and the measures he took to face "danger," were correspondingly powerful.

Many of Saddam Hussein's persecutory delusions centered on his fear of assassination. This fear was not just fantasy, of course, since he had been on both the giving and the receiving end of coup attempts. He escaped death in his failed 1959 attempt to assassinate Iraqi President Abd al-Karim Qasim. He avoided the ultimate punishment in 1964 for his part in a failed Ba'ath party uprising. He survived being trapped behind Iranian lines in the Iran-Iraq war. He survived a number of attempted coups d'état. In 1991, he survived America's smart-bombing campaign against

Baghdad. He survived a nationwide revolt after the Gulf War, only to eventually find his nemesis in the second George Bush in 2003.

Toward the end of his regime, Saddam Hussein lived in a world of bunkers, bodyguards, and food-tasters. Once seen regularly in public, he became increasingly afraid to make public appearances. Because of his fear of assassination, he had to eschew such luxuries as a regular place to sleep and a fixed routine. In his appearances, he increasingly relied on the use of doubles. It is estimated that he had at least eight men who could impersonate him at public functions. In the later years, most of his appearances took place on television, with his messages broadcast from secret locations. People who met with him on business of one sort or another were transported to and from him in buses with blackened windows, sometimes after hours of unnecessary driving, so that they could not see (and report) their destination. Once in his presence, visitors were not allowed to approach or touch him. He was afraid (being something of an expert at poisons) that by shaking hands with him, someone could transmit poison. Sometimes his guests were stripped naked for a body search to ensure that no poison or explosives were concealed in intimate areas of their bodies; and some guests were asked to rinse their hands in a blue chemical solution to expose or wash away potential toxins that could be transferred in a handshake. Likewise, everything he ate was first sent to his nuclear scientists, who x-rayed it and tested it for radiation and poison. The food was then prepared under the supervision of his personal bodyguards. Not surprisingly, movies involving intrigue, assassination, and conspiracy (such as *The Day of the Jackal, The Conversation*, *Enemy of the State,* and *The Godfather*) were his favorites.

People with persecutory delusions typically fear victimization as well. Because they live in a world full of enemies that need to be destroyed, they are chronically resentful and angry, always ready for a fight. Even when paranoiacs *have* control, however, they cannot trust it. Though they attempt to surround themselves with people considered to be loyal, they constantly test that loyalty. The only people who can survive long in the atmosphere of sycophancy that develops are flatterers, but even at their most ingratiating they cannot prove their love and loyalty, as Saddam Hussein's followers discovered. Knowing that mere suspicion was enough to cause execution,

his inner circle engaged in complex intrigue to ward off personal victimization and to further their careers. They knew, for example, that they could both curry favor and get a potential rival out of the way by suggesting to Saddam Hussein that the rival in question was involved in a coup plot. Such political games created a political environment fraught with fear and anxiety—a paranoid vicious circle.

Narcissism: Looking Out for Number One

Malevolent antisocial personalities, besides incorporating a blend of paranoid and sadistic features, also have a touch of the narcissistic disposition. An early, devastating "narcissistic injury" (or wound to the self-image), with its compensatory self-aggrandizement, fuels the thoughts and actions of most antisocials. Results include excessive self-reference and self-centeredness, grandiosity, entitlement, exhibitionism, recklessness, a drive for retribution and vindication, a low tolerance for frustration, and narcissistic rage when thwarted (Kernberg 1975; Kets de Vries 1989; Kernberg 1998).

In Saddam Hussein, narcissistic compensation took the form of conviction that his path was divinely inspired and that greatness would be his destiny. His propaganda machine, at his behest, called him Anointed One, Glorious Leader, Direct Descendant of the Prophet, President of Iraq, Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, Field Marshal of the Army, Doctor of Law, and Great Father of the Nation. Day after day, the nation's television, radio, film, and print were devoted to celebrating his every word and deed. As mentioned before, Saddam Hussein erected giant statues of himself to adorn all the public spaces of his country. He commissioned romantic portraits, some of them twenty feet high, portraying the nation's Great Uncle as a desert horseman, a wheat-cutting peasant, or a construction worker carrying bags of cement. He ordered genealogists to construct a plausible family tree linking him to Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. He also put on display in a Baghdad museum a 600-page hand-lettered copy of the Koran that had been written with his own blood, which he had donated a pint at a time over three years to symbolize a (fabricated) link of bloodlines to Muhammad. He viewed himself among a pantheon of great men—conquerors, prophets, leaders and presidents, scholars, poets, and scientists. Saddam Hussein's compensatory attitude to his poverty as a child in Tikrit could also be seen

in his preoccupation with massive construction projects, whether palaces or elaborate weapon systems.

Inviting Self-destruction

The distrust that underlies narcissistic isolation can be the downfall of leaders with a malevolent antisocial character. Seeing enemies in every friendly face, they are attracted to (and invite) danger. They walk (and often cross) a thin line between adventurousness, recklessness, impulsiveness, and indifferent cruelty. But many exceed the limit one time too many. The killing business is a dangerous venture, one that invites retaliation. Perhaps, given the provocative behavior that antisocials typically adopt, they are looking, at an unconscious level, for punishment.

Saddam Hussein's disastrous war with Iran and his refusal to follow the United Nations' disarmament resolution are good examples of this blend. Sometimes the creative, nonconforming explorations of malevolent antisocials lead to novel solutions; more often, though, these explorations transgress the limits of acceptable behavior, bringing antisocials into conflict with established mores and inflicting great pain on others. Because antisocials do not care what others think (though as narcissists they do enjoy the attention of an audience), they forge ahead regardless of the world's disapproval, engaging in brinkmanship that can lead to their downfall.

The average antisocial personality has a limited arena in which to exercise his or her conflicts. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, could extrapolate the emotional conflicts and deprivations of childhood, and his resentment toward specific children and adults, onto the social situation. Iraq, under his rule, grew to mirror his interior world. His aggression found a perfect outlet in war, an activity that gave him an opportunity to test the limits of the forbidden. But because he respected no boundaries, his cruelty and callousness concerning human life became his lasting signature. In that legacy, he joins a long line of other despots, such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Kim Il-Sung, Robert Mugabe, and Fidel Castro.

Regression in Groups: Creating a Culture of Conspiracy

Saddam Hussein's presence at a "historical moment" in the Middle East—that is, at a vulnerable time in that region's history—created a situation of complementarity between the script in his inner theatre, as described above, and the preeminent concerns of a society in transition (Erikson, 1971). The changes taking place in the physical and political landscape gave Saddam Hussein the chance to act out the script of that inner theatre on a much larger public stage. Thus the population's hunger for leadership, which Saddam Hussein recognized as a window of opportunity, facilitated his rise to the top; the population was predisposed and willing to transfer to him all the power he needed.

The plot of the *Zabibah and the King* (a rather amateurish, pedantic romantic fable written by Saddam himself) illustrates Saddam's efforts to mold the mindset of his people. Set in a mythical Arabian past, it recounts the simple story of a lonely king who falls in love with Zabibah, a rustic beauty who (like Saddam Hussein's mother) has been abused by her brutish husband. As the two talk together, she advises him that "the people need strict measures so that they can feel protected by this strictness." The tale continues by describing how dark forces invade the kingdom—forces that bring to mind the US-led coalition that launched Operation Desert Storm. Infidel outsiders pillage and destroy the village, aided by Zabibah's jealous husband, who rapes and then kills her (an allusion, perhaps to the imagined "rape" of Arab countries by Western nations). Fortunately, the king defeats the forces of evil and kills Zabibah's husband. As the king experiments with giving his people greater freedom, they respond by fighting among themselves. When the king dies, they recognize his greatness and realize that he had their best interests at heart. They also once more recall the martyred Zabibah's sage advice that people need strict measures, the moral being that a ruler (meaning Saddam Hussein) knows best!

Like many other despots around the world and across the ages, Saddam Hussein was a master at this form of psychological manipulation. Looking for conspiracies and identifying enemies became his way of creating structure in society, of keeping his

subjects subjugated. In the name of strengthening virtue within the nation—on the surface a very attractive proposition—he advocated the eradication of all "evil." Defining the "evil" outside helped both him and his followers in their efforts at self-definition and gave them a sense of purpose.

When Saddam Hussein consolidated his empire, he transformed a loosely constructed tribal structure into a totalitarian, highly centralized state. Driven by the obsession never again to be in the role of the underdog (like had been the case in childhood), Saddam Hussein demanded absolute obedience. He created a heady mix of party, tribe, secret police, and oil wealth encapsulated in the politics of fear, anxiety, and greed. No appointment could be made without his approval. No decision could be made without his consent. Every official in his empire was beholden to him. Everything that happened in his domain, however slight, was brought to his attention and dealt with as he ordered. It was as if he feared that if he condoned the little offenses, the floodgates would be opened and he would lose control completely.

He made himself the senior executive, the sole source of the law, the ultimate court of appeal, the commander-in-chief, the father of the tribe, and the chief ideologue (suppressing religious influence and leadership). Thus the executive and the judiciary were both concentrated in his hands. Helped by his oil wealth, he became a nation-builder, but he grounded that nation on violence, terror, and a paramount quest for control.

With the rapidity and inevitability of contagion, Saddam Hussein's paranoid operational code created further paranoia. During his reign, he created a national culture that left no options: one participated, or one was eliminated. And participating meant propagating yet more suspicion and mistrust, creating (and killing off) yet more scapegoats. Ironically, that shared task of finding and destroying scapegoats would facilitate group identity formation.

A Culture of Conspiracy

Typically, the tyrannical leader and his followers create a common culture characterized by shared delusions of grandeur and persecution (Kets de Vries and Miller 1984; Kets de Vries 1989). Such a leader encourages his subjects in the fantasy that he loves them all equally, that each of them is especially chosen. The followers, for their part, engage in an interactive process known as "mutual identification" (Freud 1921). This recognition of the self in the other fosters the feeling among members of the populace that they are not alone and thus encourages group cohesion and solidarity. This cohesiveness is especially appealing in a society in a state of upheaval. Heard in the chaos of political upheaval, a paranoid message disseminated by an absolute despot is particularly attractive. The despot's tendency to engage in dichotomous thinking—to present his dreams of the future in stark black-and-white terms—introduces certainty into an otherwise unpredictable world. With friends and enemies clearly differentiated by the despot, choices can be made without hesitation.

Thus paranoia is not only the disease of leaders; it is also that disease's snake-oil cure, granting both leader and subject (spurious) clarity. Paranoid thinking from the top leaves no room for gray areas, no room for adversaries, no room for compromise, no room for reflection. Because for the insecure such clarity is liberating, despots who present the world in absolute terms are able to release a tremendous amount of energy from their followers. The action and struggle that paranoid thinking dictates fuel the group process. The despot's subjects experience a sense of purpose when they heed his call; they gain a sense of direction. They know where to go, what to do, and whom to fight.

The reason that followers are most prone to tyrannical rule in times of crisis is that anxiety and confusion make people more susceptible to regressive pulls. Feeling lost, they give in to the lowest common denominator of emotional impressions. Caught up in that emotional whirlwind, they become less selective in both thought and action; in short, they become more gullible. When social and cultural institutions are disintegrating, the illusions of powerful leadership are tempting. Manipulative leaders, adept at simplification and dramatization (and knowing well the gullibility of their followers), take advantage of the situation and present themselves as merchants of

hope. Like snake-oil salesmen, they offer "salvation" in various forms; like the sirens of Odysseus, they lead people astray with their illusions.

Unfortunately, followers who relinquish autonomous psychological functioning and buy into the collective fantasy of a despotic leader rarely recognize the destructive path they are on. They want so desperately to believe the proffered images of unlimited power, regal grandeur, and awe-inspiring majesty that they fail to see what the leader really stands for. They cheerfully shake hands, cementing a Faustian bargain, not recognizing the high price that will eventually have to be paid. They are blind and deaf to their future of self-destructiveness, social disruption, and economic decline.

How is this kind of "culture of conspiracy" generated? Leaders like Saddam Hussein, who are governed by a paranoid/malevolent antisocial outlook, tend to be extremely talented at engaging their subjects in a cosmic battle of good against evil. Their own paranoia encourages in followers the development of two of the most basic emotional states to be found in groups: the fight-flight assumption and the dependency assumption (Bion 1959). These basic assumptions—which take place at an unconscious level—create a group dynamic that makes it hard for people to work together productively. They encourage pathological "regression" to more archaic (that is, primitive) patterns of functioning and combat emerging anxiety by channeling it outward. Freed from the constraints of conventional thinking, groups subject to such regression retreat into a world of their own. The result is often delusional ideation or a detachment of ideas from reality—fertile soil for the proliferation of totalitarian ideologies.

Let's look at the two regressive assumptions in turn. The *fight-flight assumption* reflects a common tendency within groups to split the world into camps of friends and enemies (Bion 1959; Volkan 1988). In groups characterized by this assumption, an outlook of avoidance or attack predominates. Subscribing to a rigid, bipolar view of the world, these groups possess a strong desire for protection from and conquest of an enemy. This group tendency coincides with paranoid leaders' natural disposition, discussed earlier.

Because conspiracies and enemies already populate their inner world, such leaders are only too happy to encourage the group tendency toward splitting. They inflame their followers against real and/or imagined enemies, using the in-group/out-group division to motivate people. The shared search for and fight against enemies results in a strong conviction among participants of the correctness and righteousness of their cause, and it energizes them to pursue that cause.

Groups prone to the *dependency assumption* are looking for a strong, charismatic leader to show the way. The members of such groups are united by common feelings of helplessness, neediness, and fear of the outside world. They readily give up their autonomy when they perceive help at hand. While their unquestioning faith in their leader contributes to goal-directedness and cohesiveness, it impairs critical judgment. Though they are willing to carry out their leader's directives, it is up to him or her to take all the initiative, to do all the thinking.

Both the fight-flight assumption and the dependency assumption enforce a group's identity. Paranoid leaders, by radiating certainty and conviction, create meaning for followers who feel lost, giving the latter a highly reassuring sense of unity. As followers eliminate doubters and applaud converts, strengthening that unity, they become increasingly dependent on their leader, and increasingly unable to perform accurate reality-testing. For example, the true believers among Saddam Hussein's followers continued to sign on to wild schemes and expansionist dreams, articulated in his typically confused, jargon-laden, quasi-messianic rhetoric, even after the regime had been defeated militarily in the war against Iran and in Operation Desert Storm. The same kind of behavior was demonstrated by many senior members of the regime (particularly the information minister) even at the point when the game was up, and US tanks were entering Baghdad.

Saddam Hussein encouraged both the fight-flight assumption and the dependency assumption. Feeling in himself the human urge to regress to these more archaic forms of functioning, he was more than willing to take advantage of and build on the same human weakness in others. By oversimplifying his complex world into distinct us-

versus-them categories, he defined a clear path out of chaos; by making his people anxious and uncertain, he increased their dependence on him. Riding these waves of regression helped him combat the demons of his inner world and build a powerful nation.

Externalizing his internal demons, war provided an ideal forum in which Saddam Hussein could take advantage of regressive individual and group processes. By harnessing the general feelings of anxiety of his people, he was able to transform a private war with his inner demons into an actual war. What better way to deal with aggression than by blaming an outsider—by vanquishing a foe? What better way to act out paranoia than by attacking the enemy within, killing one's own people? And if the cause of a setback was unclear, there were always Zionists to blame.

It is important to keep in mind that there were, of course, benefits to be had by being close to the leader. Saddam Hussein's endeavors gratified a number of psychosocial needs in those followers who earned the leader's favor. Being part of his inner circle may have been a place of high risk, but it was also a place of great reward. As in the heyday of Louis XIV's Versailles, to be *somebody* one had to be part of the inner circle. It was Saddam Hussein who provided the main excitement. He was master of ceremonies, the leader who rolled the dice of life and death. What more exciting game could there be?

With all these enticements, the Ba'ath party attracted a large number of people in search of power, honor, fame, glory, and wealth. There were enticements for regular folks too: in the beginning of his rule, Saddam Hussein was smart enough to see the benefits of strengthening the economy to help the population at large. Thus he pursued a state-sponsored industrial modernization program that tied an increasing number of Iraqis to the Ba'ath-controlled government. Initially, this and other economic policies were quite successful. They led to a wider distribution of wealth, greater social mobility, increased access to education and health care, and the redistribution of land. The quadrupling of oil prices in 1973 and subsequent oil-price increases brought on by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran greatly enhanced the success of Saddam Hussein's economic program. The more equitable distribution of income convinced

many Iraqis who had previously opposed a centralized government of the value of a strong ruling party. For the first time in modern Iraqi history, a government—albeit it a ruthless one—had achieved some success in forging a national community out of the country's disparate social elements. There was terror, but there was also economic prosperity.

Still, the main beneficiaries of that prosperity, and of Saddam Hussein's munificence, were a rather select group of people. Most of Iraq's state party elite, the bureaucracy, and the leading business classes, were drawn from a core group of people closely allied to his own tribal region. More than 85 percent of the highest-ranking officers in the Republican Guard, Special Republican Guard, and presidential special security service eventually would be made up of people from that region. Blood ties, intermarriages, ideological bonds, economic interests, and a communality of guilt strengthened the bonds between these individuals. The lucky few were shown enormous generosity by the same regal hand that meted out death and imprisonment.

Predictably Unpredictable

Saddam Hussein created a culture of conspiracy and reward that formed a tribal sense of cohesiveness for the Iraqi people, but he did not stop there. He also set up an infallible infrastructure of control based on disequilibrium among his top lieutenants. Not surprisingly, Saddam's followers were encouraged to develop their own paranoid and sadistic tendencies, in support of Saddam's policies.

Like many despots before him, who shared his passion for total domination, Saddam Hussein was a master at creating uncertainty. He did so primarily by the tactics of divide-and-conquer. He knew well the value of information, and he manipulated it astutely. He was adept at playing people against each other, using a divide-and-conquer policy to prevent his inner circle from uniting against him. For example, he often gave his senior people assignments with incomplete or overlapping authority, thereby fostering intense competition.

The consequence of such information (mis)management was that paranoia was rampant among Iraqi citizens at all levels. Saddam Hussein's followers divided themselves into factions that fought among each other constantly, thereby weakening their own positions. And that was exactly what Saddam Hussein had in mind. By bestowing favors to one group, then to the other, he made sure that none of the factions got the upper hand. With this delicate balancing act, he monopolized all the decision-making power, effectively destroying any internal opposition to his rule.

Saddam Hussein rotated his key advisors, reshuffling them whenever he thought they were becoming too comfortable. This kept them from learning too much about any one thing and prevented them from building their own regional power base. On the surface it looked as if Saddam Hussein sought the counsel of these advisors, but in reality their role was purely perfunctory. In the manner of despots before and after him, he would state his opinion up front and expect his advisors to agree. As far as he was concerned, their only function was to execute his orders. Knowing that any opposition to his leadership would be quashed immediately—people who disagreed with Saddam Hussein plummeted out of favor or—sometimes literally—dug their own grave—the advisors toed that line (and all others that their president drew), applauding even his most nonsensical actions.

He supplemented this strategy with a sophisticated espionage system that informed him of any insurrection (or hint thereof). His ability to form and shift alliances depending on the expediency of the situation, his talent at eliminating actual and imagined enemies, and his aptitude for maintaining overlapping networks of spies to discover, intimidate, and undermine any form of opposition served him well. The divide-and-conquer leadership style that these combined strategies comprised—the style favored by despots everywhere—put Saddam Hussein, like a spider, in the middle of a web of information.

Deliberate, unpredictable violence has a devastating effect on those who are witnesses to the brutality, and on those who hear of it secondhand. The horror of such violence plunges people into a psychological abyss, breaking their will and enforcing total subjugation. Like mice watching an advancing cobra, followers are spellbound by the

behavior of a despotic leader—so spellbound that they can do nothing to stop the advance. A review of totalitarian regimes suggests that when a certain degree of submission has been reached, the populace is prepared to accept anything. Once that submission point has been reached, saying, "Hail to Saddam" was the only option open to them.

Institutionalized Violence: A Tyranny of Self-Deception

Given the danger of mere proximity to Saddam Hussein, the obvious question is, Why did his subjects hang around? Why did they not flee rather than become active collaborators in his terror? Most likely, they had very little choice. If someone was asked to be part of Saddam Hussein's entourage, refusal was not an option. Any transgression of the leader's wishes invited retaliatory action. Fleeing the country and opting for refugee status was not an attractive proposition either, in large part because any relatives remaining behind would face the retaliation the fleer had escaped.

But this explanation is not the whole answer. Saddam knew that even totalitarian rulers cannot act alone; they cannot be islands onto themselves. They need others who are prepared to participate in whatever they inflict on their population and the world outside. In short, despots need bloodthirsty henchmen. Using all the symbolism he had at his disposal—combined with the giving of material rewards—Saddam Hussein pulled a considerable part of the populace into his web. He was able to do so because of the peculiarities of human nature.

Undeniably, Saddam Hussein had a group of "willing executioners" ready to carry out his sadistic commands. Glory and material awards aside, participating in Iraqi violence had its own attractions. Acts of violence provided Saddam Hussein's specially selected henchmen with an ideal outlet for their aggression, resulting in a powerful high, a collective (and addictive) euphoria. Allowed to engage in the most violent of acts without consequences, his henchmen explored (and apparently delighted in) their capacity for evil—a capacity that lies barely submerged in all of us. They experienced a compelling godlike power over life and death. They could spare lives or take them—the latter with honor rather than guilt.

Moreover, engaging in the violence of rape, torture, and killing created feelings of group solidarity among them; they shared a collective complicity that negated alienation and contributed to nation-building. And for the march to glory, military might was a necessity. Thus the Iraqi soldiers needed to be hardened to face the enemy unflinchingly. They had to be trained in violence, taught to use deadly force when necessary—be it via traditional, chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons—and desensitized to violence so that they could tolerate the cruelty that they were asked to inflict. To that end, military and civil police were involved in a process of gradual brutalization: they moved from watching more experienced colleagues commit violent acts to participating in ever more violent acts themselves. They were also taught to divest certain target groups of human qualities. Researchers have shown that violent socialization of this sort makes people more prepared to commit atrocities (Von Lang and Sibyll 1983; Athens 1992; Grossman 1996; Rhodes 2002). We have seen ample evidence of that fact in concentration camps in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao Zedong's China, and Radovan Karadzic's Bosnia. Thus violence and terror became the guardian angels of Saddam Hussein's special agents.

In this process of desensitization to violence, Saddam Hussein's own family was not left out. His son Uday is said to have once boasted to a childhood playmate that he and his brother, Qusay, had been taken to prisons by their father to witness tortures and executions—presumably to toughen them up for the difficult tasks that would lie ahead. And the desensitization worked, not only on Saddam Hussein's sons but on his followers: when Saddam Hussein rationalized mass killings by referencing predestination and divine mission, many of his people believed him, accepting their assigned tasks in those killings as a sacred duty.

Groupthink

There are peculiar intrapsychic and interpersonal psychological dynamics at play when it comes to persuasion to violence. A good example of this dynamic is the "Milgram Experiment," a social-psychological investigation that explored obedience to malevolent authority (Milgram 1975). In this experiment, subjects were made to believe that they were giving electric shocks to a test-taker, who pleaded desperately (but fictitiously) for the shocks to stop. The results, based on a random sample of the

population, showed that people are remarkably willing to yield to people in a position of authority. The "collaborators" abandoned their humanity and abdicated responsibility for that choice. Allowing the authority figure to absolve them for their actions, they delegated their guilt to others. Although they knew that what they were doing was hurtful and unnecessary, they lacked the will and courage to act on their convictions. Going along with the authority figure, relaxing their conscience, rationalizing their behavior—this was easier than taking a stand and protesting the shocks.

When reflex-like obedience to authority becomes a way of life in a given society, a collective mindset emerges and what psychologists call "groupthink" takes over (Janis 1971). Collective pathological regression of the sort described earlier makes people revert to more archaic patterns of behavior and more absolutist forms of thinking. We have all seen, in group settings, how individual judgment and behavior can be influenced by the forces of group dynamics. People in a group typically do not feel responsible for the decisions made by the collective, and they are reluctant to question the appropriateness of any given decision. Because the group is working toward a common goal, there is an illusion of unanimity regarding the means to that end. An unquestioning belief in the morality of the group's actions allows individuals to overlook or even support atrocious acts. Sometimes there are people in a group who play the role of "mind-guards," preventing adverse information from coming to the fore and resorting to rationalization when things do not go as planned.

The Process of Dehumanization

Groupthink is one way of explaining regressive, violent behavior patterns. But groupthink combined with dehumanization of "the other" is an even more formidable weapon in the depot's arsenal. Dehumanizing the enemy paves the way for leadership by terror, because it allows ordinarily humane people to become active participants in the regime's atrocious acts (Erikson 1963; Des Pres 1976). This complex psychological process, which combines defenses such as denial, repression, depersonalization, isolation of affect, and compartmentalization (i.e., disconnecting related mental representations and walling them off from each other), facilitates the use of terror. To perceive another person as human requires empathic or vicarious

reactions based on perceived similarity. Dehumanization shuts off empathy by implying that the victims are not individuals in their own right. They are not like us—people with feelings, hopes, fantasies, and concerns. Instead, they are subhumans or demonic forces bent on destroying that which the perpetrators hold dear. And clearly something that evil requires different treatment, unusual methods. Any atrocity that addresses the problem is permitted. Defenses such as these help bypass the moral inhibition against killing. When the enemy is a subhuman or nonhuman—an inanimate object, even—its destruction need not be hampered by the restraints of conscience.

As the Milgram experiment demonstrated, people are eager to please those in authority. Psychologists talk of the "idealizing transference" and submission to an overpowering, uncompromising force, but what it comes down to is this: when followers please the leader, they feel a sense of oneness with him or her (Kohut 1971; Kets de Vries 1993). There is an illusionary merger between leader and led that allows the underlings to feel a temporary sense of omnipotence. For a moment, they know what it is to have the power of the leader. They feel absolved of any moral responsibility—that lies with the leader—and they feel bonded to both the leader and the other group members by their shared action, even if that action is both cruel and deadly. When the leader is a despot, the identification that followers feel leads them to imitate his violent acts. What he did to them, they can (and should) do to others. They will do everything they can to demonstrate political solidarity. These players encourage and support the leader, realizing that it is in their self-interest to change roles from passive bystander into proactive participant.

In playing the latter role, they may have not only a feeling of righteousness about their participation, but also an expectation of reward for their loyalty—a reward that takes the form of power, prestige, or protection from the leader's wrath. They want to become so important to the leader that he will never see them as expendable, and to that end they take whatever preventive action they can, such as informing on others. If they play their role well, they tell themselves, it will be those others who will be sacrificed on the altar of terror.

The Inner Theatre of the Followers

Totalitarian societies invade the private, inner world of the individual. This intrusion leads to psychological difficulties, as people struggle to maintain a modicum of individuality. Many people lose that struggle, swept away by the leader's charisma and tactics of intimidation. Psychological defenses do not offer much protection against tyranny, but sometimes they are all that the victims (and those co-opted) have to rely on.

Identification with the Aggressor

Some people, in an effort to cope psychologically with despots, resort to the defensive process known as "identification with the aggressor" (Freud 1966). When people find themselves in situations of great distress, they feel a basic need to retain an element of psychological security. A tyrannical regime, especially in its more advanced stages, certainly qualifies as distressing. The violent and unpredictable behavior of the leader, and his coercive use of power, strike terror and paranoid anxiety into the hearts of his followers. To cope with these feelings, people develop an ambivalent relationship with the leader. They feel frightened by him, but attracted too, and lured by the protection he seems to offer. Perhaps *awe,* with its blend of dread and admiration, best captures the followers' ambivalence (though if people have the choice, they generally choose admiration over dread).

In full-fledged identification with the aggressor, individuals impersonate the aggressor, assuming the aggressor's attributes and transforming themselves from those who are threatened to those making the threat. These victims (or victims-to-be) hope to acquire some of the power that the would-be aggressor possesses. The more extreme the actions of the leader, the more aggressive the self-defense must be—and thus the more tempting it is for subjects to gain strength by becoming part of his system and sharing his power. Victims become informers, for example, or sub-guards in prisons or concentration camps, and in those "aggressive" roles they sometimes act more barbaric toward their fellow prisoners than the real guards do, resorting—though they know well the pain—to psychological and physical torture.

This defense is an illusionary effort at gaining control over an uncontrollable situation. The hostility does not simply go away, of course; it comes out eventually, transformed and displaced toward people out of favor (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik et al. 1950). We see evidence of this process among Saddam Hussein's followers.

Dissociative Thinking

Given that throughout history there have been abundant volunteers for the posts of assistant despot and deputy conqueror, we can surmise that we *all* have a dark side capable of cruelty. Likewise, we all possess defenses against cruelty. Our arsenal includes, but is not limited to, identification with the aggressor.

Some people resort to dissociative thinking to handle the violence and terror of a totalitarian regime. Dissociation is a common mechanism by which people cope with overwhelming, stressful experiences (Steinberg and Schnall 2000). It is a way of coping that has run wild. As an occasional tool it can be lifesaving: when faced with a tiger in the wild, a person needs to stand back and assess the situation without emotion. As an everyday coping device, it is excessive: people who rely on dissociation not as a one-time fix but as a way of life disconnect themselves from the world, looking at themselves as an outsider would. Dissociative people carry out a charade, putting on a bland, unfeeling mask in public to cover the turmoil within, as did a majority of Iraqis, for many years.

Fleeing into Despair

While some victims and henchmen of tyranny take refuge in dissociation, others flee—but not far enough to do any good. The best example of this is withdrawing, becoming depressed, giving in to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. People who take this route engage in nonstop self-recrimination. Despairing of a life free from violence and cruelty, they become morose, tearful, joyless, fatalistic, and hopeless about the future. Devoid of their former vigor and focus, and seeing themselves as worthless and inconsequential, they are unable to initiate action. They expect the worst, and that is usually what they get. Eventually, they either become

resigned to the situation, withdrawn and apathetic, or they welcome violent acts by the regime against them as a way to stop the work of worrying.

Fighting for Freedom

The best defense is a good offense, as we so often hear in the world of sports. In a society of sheep served by a government of wolves, there are generally a few citizens who are unwilling to baa. Knowing that human liberty is lost when people become sheep, they stand up to the demagoguery of the despot. They take a stand, refusing to accept any deterioration of individual freedom and human rights. Rather than painting the despot in pretty colors, distancing themselves from the violence, or fleeing into despair, they take a combative posture, refusing to participate.

People who take the "fight" position understand exactly the Faustian bargain they have been asked to participate in—material advantages in exchange for dishonesty, hopelessness, cruelty, and destruction. Some freedom-fighters are swayed initially by the sirens of a utopian ideology but stand up for freedom once they see the excesses of their leadership; others recognize the new order for what it is from the outset. However they come to their determination, they stick with it: at great risk to self and family, they defend their convictions. Many heroic examples—most of whom died for their efforts—can be found in Adolf Hitler's Germany, Joseph Stalin's Russia, and Mao Zedong's China.

He Who Lives by the Sword Will Die by the Sword

Saddam Hussein both built up and tore down the Iraqi people. He created a powerful military machine in the Middle East, but he did so by legitimizing violence, weaving it throughout the country's social structure. Upholding "Saddamism" meant forcing on the populace a rigid mindset of defiance to the West (a reaction to years of colonialism and humiliation), but at the price of individual liberty, democracy, and modernization. But instead of advancing the Iraqi cause, this approach contributed to its decline.

Saddam Hussein's inability to form attachments, his incapacity to connect with others, was transformed by hardship into a desire to destroy others. By institutionalizing that desire, Saddam Hussein destroyed the moral fiber of his society. At the end of his reign, a large part of the Iraqi population, thoroughly socialized to violence, had cognitively and emotionally restructured the moral "value" of killing, exempting it from their own conscience. Loyalty to the system as created by their leader took precedence over all other considerations, and that same loyalty protected them from moral liability for actions executed in the line of duty. But when morally abhorrent conduct is enacted by what seem to be decent people in the name of a leader or a secular or theocratic ideology, the absolution of conscience is generally only superficial and temporary; the emotional cost is itself often deadly.

Saddam Hussein seemed to be locked in a psychic prison of his own making. His wounded and wounding psychological makeup led to his eventual day of reckoning. Though unrestrained physically—there were no boundaries to constrain him, no countervailing powers to control him—he was not able to combat the psychological forces of narcissism, paranoia, and sadism. Eventually, hubris sent him across moral boundaries from which he could not return. His craving for admiration, affirmation, and power prompted such extremes of cruelty that he eventually overreached himself, destroying his own power base, a fall that came with a high price to the society he had controlled for so long.

Bibliography

Aburish, S. (2001). Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge. New York, Bloomsbury.

Adorno, T., E. Frenkel-Brunswik, et al. (1950). The Authoritarian Personality. New York, Harper.

American Psychiatric Association (1987). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the Mental Disorders, DSM-III-R. Washington, American Psychiatric Association.

American Psychiatric Association (1994). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, DSM-IV. Washington, American Psychiatric Association.

Athens, L. H. (1992). The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

Bion, W. R. (1959). Experiences in Groups. London, Tavistock.

Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and Loss. New York, Basic Books.

Cockburn, A. and P. Cockburn (2002). Saddam Hussein. London, Verso Books.

Coughlin, C. (2002). Saddam: The Secret Life. London, MacMillan.

Darwish, A. and G. Alexander (1991). Unholy Babylon. London, Victor Gollancz.

Des Pres, T. (1976). The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps. New York, Oxford University Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1963). Childhood and Society. New York, W.W. Norton & Society.

Freud, A. (1966). The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense. Madison, Conn., International Universities Press.

Freud, S. (1921). Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. J. Strachey. London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. **7**.

Fromm, E. (1973). The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Grossman, D. (1996). On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society. Boston, Little, Brown.

Horney, K. (1945). Our Inner Conflicts. New York, Norton.

Janis, I. L. (1971). "Groupthink." Psychology Today **Nov**: 43-46.

Karsh, E. and T. Rautsi (1991). Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography. New York, Free Press.

Kernberg, O. (1975). Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism. New York, Aronson.

Kernberg, O. (1992). Aggression in Personality Disorders and Perversions. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Kernberg, O. (1998). Ideology, Conflict, and Leadership on Groups and Organizations. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Kets de Vries, M. F. R. (1989). Prisoners of Leadership. New York, Wiley.

Kets de Vries, M. F. R. (1993). Leaders, Fools, and Impostors. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Kets de Vries, M. F. R. and D. Miller (1984). The Neurotic Organization. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Kets de Vries, M. F. R. and S. Perzow (1991). Handbook of Character Studies. New York, International University Press.

Klein, M. (1948). Contributions to Psychoanalysis, 1921-1945. London, Hogarth Press.

Klein, M. (1959). The Psychoanalysis of Children. London, Hogarth Press.
Kohut, H. (1971). The Analysis of the Self. New York, International Universities Press.
Lorenz, K. (1966). On Aggression. London, Methuen.
Matar, F. (1981). Saddam Hussein: The Man, the Cause and the Future. London, Third World Center for Research and Publishing.
Meissner, W. W. (1978). The Paranoid Process. New York, Jason Aronson.
Milgram, S. (1975). Obedience to Authority. New York, Harper & Row.
Millon, T. (1986). A Theoretical Derivation of Pathological Personalities. Contemporary Directions in Psychopathology: Toward the DSM-IV. T. Millon and G. L. Klerman. New York, The Guilford Press**:** 639-669.
Millon, T. (1996). Disorders of Personality: DSM IV and Beyond. New York, John Wiley.
Rayski, B. (1991). "Saddam Hussein." Globe, March: 12-23.
Rhodes, R. (2002). Masters of Death. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.
Shapiro, D. (1965). Neurotic Styles. New York, Basic Books.
Shapiro, D. (1981). Autonomy and Rigid Character. New York, Basic Books.
Steinberg, M. and M. Schnall (2000). The Stranger in the Mirror: Dissociation--The Hidden Epidemic. New York: Cliff Street Books.
Tinbergen, N. (1968). "Of War and Peace in Animals and Men." Science **160**: 1411-1418.
Volkan, V. (1988). The Need to have Enemies and Allies. Northvale, N.J., Jason Aronson.
Von Lang, J. and C. Sibyll, Eds. (1983). Eichman Interrogated. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.