

AGAINST ALL REASON

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REPORTING THE CAPTURE OF SADDAM HUSSEIN: 'LET THERE BE LIGHT' IN IRAQ

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The headlines screamed along with a haunting picture of a bearded Saddam Hussein: "Saddam the prisoner" (*The Guardian*), "Saddam captured" (*The Times*), "The tyrant is now a prisoner" (*The Independent*), "The tyrant is a prisoner" (*Financial Times*).

The event of the capture of Saddam Hussein, or rather the US approved mediated representation of the capture, just like the events of September 11 or the 'shock-and-awe' bombing of Baghdad, was a spectacle for consumption of audiences throughout the world. How did the guardians of the free press (particularly newspapers, who do not have to respond to pressures of just-in-time news unlike the television news channels) react to and report this event on the morning after in the UK? A rhetorical analysis of most major newspapers published in England (broadsheet as well as tabloids, published on Monday 15 December) in terms of their reporting, leading articles and editorial comments on the 'news' of the arrest of Saddam Hussein questions the extent to which papers merely report an event. This essay is therefore an analytical exercise in examining the construction of news through representations. It challenges the glorification of the freedom of press in liberal democracy, which is based on an objectivist notion of news reporting: journalists merely report on events existing 'out there' as objectively as possible.

The dominant, self-congratulatory, liberal narrative goes something like this:

Unlike liberal democracies, dictatorial regimes do not allow freedom of press. An important ingredient in the survival tactics of such regimes is the misuse of news as propaganda. Remember Hitler and Goering's propaganda machine? Remember Saddam's Iraq, which is, now relegated to the dustbins of history, thanks to 'our'

brave leaders and soldiers? Let us all now come together for truth and reconciliation and build a free, prosperous, democratic Iraq. The 'hand of history' affords us the opportunity to save poor Iraqi people. We can, we should, we must, let them see the Light.

But what provides 'us' with the moral certainty to bomb, invade, occupy and attempt to rebuild Iraq? What allows us to be liberators? What makes us act like white knights in the shining armour? The answer is a certainty in our moral (and of course military) superiority, our courage to take on Evil, our ability to know what is Evil, and most importantly, our capacity to fight for the good (and maybe even god). Those who criticise us of being imperialist forget that this is 21st century and we are fighting for democracy, fighting for the good of the Other. We are liberal Western democracies with free press which makes our system accountable. Let us share the fruits of our civilisation with the hitherto oppressed. Let more news reporters report the news. We should count our lucky stars for living in a democracy where we have free press. At least no one is hanging us for speaking out.

This is indeed a self-serving narrative that is based on the erasure of the history of liberal democracy and its 'illiberal' actions in international politics. Mainstream media, for several reasons that have been explored and highlighted by many scholars and commentators, remain an instrument in perpetuating the myth of benign Western liberal democracies having to deal with chaotic illiberal world out there. Next year maybe when Chalabi & Co are crowned as true democratic leaders of Iraq, in their Oscar ceremony speech they may thank the mainstream Western media for teaching Iraq what free press really means – construction of news in the service of the 'authority'. Authority here is far more extensive than mere government or even corporations, it includes a shared belief in superiority of the dominant ideas (this includes nationalism, modernism, development, free market, liberal democracy and so on). Of course the slant on a particular story may differ depending on the publicly recognised bias of particular news media, but there is a strong tendency to will to power and to participate in a media circus without any significant critical challenging of the givens (with very few exceptions).

Let us bring out some common themes that characterised the reporting of the capture of Saddam Hussein and see if they merely report an event or construct it in a manner serving the interests of the dominant powers.

A 'bearded, dishevelled, and apparently disoriented' (*The Guardian*) Saddam Hussein peers from the front page of most newspapers. The sound bite of the occupying forces main person in Iraq, euphemistically called 'the Americans' chief administrator', Paul Bremer, provided the subject matter for many headlines:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we got him”. Some headlines ran as such: “We got him” (*The Daily Telegraph*), “Ladies and Gentlemen...We got him” (*The Sun*), “Ladies and Gentlemen...We got him” (*Daily Record*). While it was Bremer’s sentence which may become part of memorable quotes over time, it is the picture which is heavily coded. The picture of Saddam Hussein in this state combines related narratives of: a tyrant humbled, a monster tamed, a bully revealed as coward, the fall of a dictator, NOT as a result of popular uprising nor of resistance within the country, but because of an act of aggression and occupation committed by foreign states in the name of security (main stated goal with its ingredients of Weapons of Mass Destruction, regional stability, terrorism), liberation (of long oppressed Iraqi people and spread of democracy) and self-interest (the understated aims of securing Iraqi oil, setting up American military bases, reinforcing Israel’s overwhelming military power in the region, teaching Saddam Hussein a lesson, reminding the world that no one can and no one should challenge American world dominance).

News reports borrowed heavily on some of these narratives, and ignored others. The motif of monster humbled was common. “Rarely do monsters of history have to account for their crimes” (Leading editorial starts with this in *The Times*), while for the *Daily Mail* “for now, it is enough that a monster of depravity is no longer a threat. This is a good day for Iraq and the wider world”. The theology of Good and Evil was ever present. Saddam’s status as an Evil (pronouncing him as the “Evil tyrant” as by the *Daily Star*) seemed to underline the invading and occupying forces as Good. The reporting of the news bought the line of Americans and British as liberators without much hint of irony. In the *Financial Times* Amity Shlaes writes that the “Bush has lived up to his father’s original impulse [she quotes father Bush positively as possessing a crusading attitude “I look at today’s crisis as ‘good’ vs ‘evil’. Yes it is that clear”] and shown that the US does, indeed, follow through”. Writing with even more excitement, *Daily Express* reported the event as “It is the mother of all mugshots, and it marks the end of a tyrant” courtesy “American and British liberators”, Saddam being described as “the village whore’s son”. The event was hailed as truly liberating, even more so than the ‘fall of Baghdad’ marked by the toppling of Saddam’s statue. Anyone watching the toppling live on the TV would recall how for a short while some American soldier had covered the statue’s face with the American flag before taking it down and using the Iraqi flag. Instead of taking this supposed ‘faux pas’ as symbolic of the nature of Iraq’s liberation (one representing American hegemony cloaked under the name of Iraqi freedom), the media has ignored the event since then. Saddam’s capture prompted *The Guardian*, a liberal newspaper which had taken a sceptical line toward the war, editorial to proclaim: “Here was a more truly liberating, emancipating moment than the bloodily chaotic fall of Baghdad to Americans arms last spring”. Similarly *The Times* emphasised the therapeutic value of the

arrest for according to it, as long as Saddam remained at large, “Iraq could not recover. The body politic was still infected, the psyche still tormented”.

The manner of Saddam’s surrender drew comments from all newspapers and contrasts were drawn between his earlier statements urging Iraqis to fight and defy the invaders and his own lack of resistance. American Maj-Gen Raymond Odierno’s triumphant statement that “He was just caught like a rat” was reiterated by all the newspapers who competed to characterise Saddam in as colourful language as possible. For *The Guardian* he offered no resistance maybe because he was “just a coward, as bullies usually are”. But it was difficult to compete with *The Sun* with its headlines about the “Shamed...shaved...Butcher of Baghdad”. It reported that the “runaway dictator”, a “cowardly tyrant...was found skulking like a rat in the squalid pit”, “meek as a lamb”.

Another US-UK government line that was adopted by the reports uncritically was how Saddam Hussein’s capture would provide an opportunity for ‘rebuilding’ Iraq. This reflects a tendency amongst mainstream media to take the words of authority at their face value: peace, rebuilding, reconstruction, order, stability, democracy, and human rights are what the occupation is mainly about. The leading editorial of *The Times* writes that “Only with his capture can justice and reconciliation now begin”, while *The Daily Telegraph* writes that the “American-led mission to rebuild a democratic Iraq has taken a giant step forward”. For the *Daily Record* the capture is “a huge victory for America and Britain in the struggle to bring peace to Iraq”. There is hardly any questioning of US-UK’s self-appointed role as liberators, their role in bringing war, destruction, disorder, destruction, puppet governance, and humiliation to Iraq.

Somehow, the capture of Saddam was taken as victory of the ‘War argument’ and a vindication of Bush and Blair. Bush’s chances of re-election soared while Blair got a reprieve from his critics. *The Sun* reported with glee how Britain’s “faint hearted European neighbours” fell in line in offering their pleasure at Saddam’s arrest. For *The Daily Telegraph*, this was an eye-opener for the opponent states who “wrongly interpreted [the war] as a new form of American unilateralism”. The capture as vindication of pro-war arguments is baffling given that those opposing the war were not defending Saddam Hussein but were questioning Bush-Blair line that Iraq posed a great enough threat (through its Weapons programme and mad dictator) to warrant a war and were highlighting US-UK support to Saddam when he committed most atrocities against his own people and neighbours. These anti-war arguments remain unchallenged but very few newspapers raise them. Some reports do mention that the main rationale for going to the war was that elusive WMD, but this is underemphasised, giving readers the impression that Saddam’s capture is almost a goal in itself.

While most newspapers do recognise that resistance to the occupation will continue, there is a tendency to caricature resistance in a manner that toes the US-UK line: those who resist are terrorists. *The Times* asks whether the arrest will “halt the terrorist campaign against the coalition forces, the UN and aid agencies”. *Financial Times* brands resistance as insurgency in “the defence of Sunni privileges” while *Daily Mail* sees it as handiwork of “Saddamite terrorists”. Christopher Hitchens in *The Daily Mirror* describes the “so-called resistance”: “throwing off all secular disguise, they have adopted the rhetoric and method of jihad”. While most newspapers acknowledged that resistance had little to do with Saddam Hussein, *The Sun*, with its almost unique ‘intelligence’ sources reported that: “it was understood that intelligence found evidence that Saddam had been coordinating terror attacks by foreign fanatics”. For the occupying forces and the mainstream media which follow their line, those who are fighting the occupation are terrorists, Saddam loyalists, Baathists, foreigners, Al Qaida, Islamists, fundamentalists, members of privileged Sunni minority, part of ‘fanatic’ Shia majority – anything but ordinary Iraqis. In the view of occupying forces and the mainstream media, the entity of ‘Iraqi’ people is reserved for those who may possibly support the occupation.

The reports of Saddam Hussein’s capture also pondered over what next. While some expressed the need to reaffirm our ‘civilised’ status by treating him with “the dignity of common humanity” (*The Times*), others highlighted the ‘right’ of Iraqis to deal with him. There were talks of “much deserved execution” (*The Times*). While *Daily Star*’s headline was “Hang him”, *Daily Express*’s was “Now should he die?”. Interestingly many who accepted the US-UK argument for invading and occupying Iraq suddenly started talking about the Iraqi people’s right to self-determination when it comes to what to do with Saddam Hussein. Lest some “faint-hearted” Europeans shy away from executing him!

Very few attempts were made to question the role of the West, especially the US and the UK in shaping and supporting Saddam Hussein’s regime. *The Guardian* commented “But the guilt for his deeds is not entirely his alone”, and *The Independent* and *The Daily Mirror* in their editorials did take the line that the war was still unjustified. But most news reports either remained silent or underplayed the complicity of the occupying forces in supporting Saddam at times when he committed most of the human rights violations. It is this silence that reveals the hypocrisy of the ‘free press’ as a pillar of liberal democracy. It is this silence that has been highlighted repeatedly by the non-mainstream media but it seems to be falling on deaf ears. The free press remains loyal to the King. It is indeed a pillar of the liberal democracy, a form of government that contrary to its idealised sales pitch remains one based on lies, hypocrisy, protection of the privileged, violence, and a denigration of the Other.

The dictator has been caught and the cut out of the ‘Evil monster’ has been temporarily placed in the attic to be brought out when needed next. The monster of yesterday has metamorphosed into a ‘rat’, incoherent yet unrepentant. “Saddam, mighty dictator caught like a rat in a hole” (*Daily Mail*), an “Ace in the hole” (*Daily Mirror*). It has turned out to be a ‘mouse’, a laughable/lamentable anti-shadow of an image of bravado and defiance constructed through the pain and blood of thousands of people. The image of Saddam has transformed into a lost humiliated man. What we see and read is almost an obituary to a ‘monster’, but the story of the man-who-was-a-dictator will continue. Because this story goes beyond Saddam Hussein, it goes beyond Iraq. The Saddam saga is only a small part of wider narrative of modernity which has been based on imposition of an imperial world order where order is privileged over justice, where stability is promoted over people, where liberation, human rights and democracy remain a convenient tool in the hands of the privileged.

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