

B427. "Stop Obsessing Over Saddam" USA Today (August 12, 2003) p. 13A.

Bernard Trainor, a retired Marine Corps general and military analyst, called the deaths of Saddam Hussein's sons Uday and Qusay "a tremendous blow to the Baathist regime and a real boon for those Iraqis seeking a Saddam-free future.

"This is a major event that can only be topped by getting Saddam himself," Trainor said shortly after their demise last month.

The Christian Science Monitor quoted unnamed U.S. officials who "believe that capturing or killing Hussein is vital to quelling the guerrilla-style campaign" against U.S. forces. And even as keen an observer as Martha Raddatz of ABC News holds that if we caught Saddam, it would help enormously.

So one would assume that if the U.S. captured Saddam during the next few days it would have a grand effect on the situation in Iraq and the Middle East in general.

Don't hold your breath. We have a tendency to believe that we can change societies by changing leaders; actually, we cannot. That's because, as a rule, major social forces are at work. They cannot be redirected overnight just because we finally take care of Saddam and his sons. Or, for that matter, if we finally got rid of Osama bin Laden.

For one thing, Iraqis are very nationalistic. They have a long history of suffering from -- and fighting -- foreign occupiers. The British after World War I were the last foreign power to occupy the country. Although nationalism then was much less rampant than it is today, the Iraqis fought the British tooth-and-nail, causing them tens of thousands of casualties.

These days, many Iraqis are relieved that the United States has removed Saddam from power. But they also do not want to replace Saddam's regime with one imposed by foreigners. Iraqis have made clear that they want to use the freedom the American military has granted them -- to form their own government.

Typically, Fawzi Shafi, the editor of a new weekly Iraqi newspaper who welcomed the removal of Saddam from power, has become an opponent of the United States since the end of the war, calling the U.S. Army "an offensive occupier." Does anybody believe that such sentiments will be assuaged because Saddam is killed or captured and tried?

Another reason Saddam's capture won't immediately change things is that about 60% of all Iraqis are Shiites. The overwhelming majority of them want a strict Islamic republic similar to Iran's. They abhor American culture, which they consider secular, hedonistic and lascivious. They do not want women out in public without their heads covered. They already have bombed several stores that were selling alcohol. Most importantly, several Shiite leaders have been calling on their followers to form an army to drive U.S. forces out of their holy cities.

Will the Shiites embrace a secular society because Saddam is finally out of the picture?

The United States is making the same mistake by attributing so much significance to catching bin Laden. Al-Qaeda is a loose network of largely independent groups. Their motives are a mix of religious fanaticism and macho adventurism. The future of these groups of terrorists will be determined much more by our learning about the people involved, their cultures and the reasons for their hatred toward us and by working with them as well as our own special forces rather than by eliminating one leader.

Indeed, one reason the United States has such great difficulties in Afghanistan is that it is fostering a national leader, Hamid Karzai, rather than working with the local warlords, who are the natural heads of the various ethnic groups that make up that society.

American culture is drenched in psychological terms, which lead us to personalize social forces and international relations. As a nation, we pay too much attention to which foreign leaders our president is chummy with and which he dislikes. For example, it is foolish to believe that if President Bush and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder had just got along better, the Germans would not have objected so strongly to our intervention in Iraq.

I am not claiming that catching Saddam and making changes in the leadership won't have any impact. Some of Saddam's followers may despair. More people will be willing to risk cooperating with us.

There might even be a lull in the guerrilla attacks. But in the longer run, the Iraqis want us out, and they reject the largely imported leaders we are imposing on them. For nationalistic and religious reasons, most Iraqis will not cooperate with us and will continue to insist on running their country, their way -- even if we erase Saddam from their dinars, topple all of his statues and exhibit his body on television, as we did with his sons.

Once we stop personalizing the news, we'll be ready to realize that the best way for the United States to proceed is not to stand in the way of major social forces. In Iraq, that means that the U.S. should let the secular and religious Iraqis confront each other as they grope to find a way to form a joint government. Let them gradually take responsibility for running water, electricity and safety in the streets.

Saddam or no Saddam, they want to run their own country, something we surely can appreciate once we stop focusing on the personalities involved.

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