

## **Maintaining the Myth of Saddam Hussein and the Terrorists**

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*In his press conference this week, President Bush was adamant that he was not planning to lose his job next November. But to keep it, he had to do more on Tuesday evening than simply persuade us that the war in Iraq is going well. He had also to persuade us that he had been right to invade Iraq in the first place.*

*On Tuesday, the President chose to defend the wisdom of that key decision in the same way that he has defended it regularly since the invasion. He presented the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as part of the wider war on terrorism: as the logical and essential next step in that war after the defeat of the Taliban. Getting rid of Saddam, we were told in March 2003 and are being told now, was a victory in the war on terror. We have, the President said when declaring major combat operations over, 'removed an ally of al-Qaeda and cut off a source of terrorist funding'. In the heady optimism of the invasion period, both the President and his senior advisers were invariably explicit on that: that Saddam Hussein had direct links to al-Qaeda, and possessed weapons of mass destruction that al-Qaeda was keen to acquire. These days they are rarely that explicit. These days the linkages and the sharing of weaponry are presented in a more opaque fashion, but they are presented nonetheless.*

*So at the press conference, in the litany of horrors that the President laid out, the current violence against US troops in Iraq was linked to earlier terrorist atrocities. It was presented in a sequence that included the murder of commuters in Madrid, children in Jerusalem, tourists in Bali, Marines in Beirut and innocent office workers on 9/11. The impression created by the President on Tuesday was of a single and on-going movement of terrorist resistance: one that, as he said, had now lost both the 'shelter of the Taliban' and 'an ally in Baghdad'.*

*Since there were no WMDs, one of the journalists asked him, 'how do you explain to the American people that you got that so wrong?' The President chose not to answer directly. He chose instead to repeat that 'Saddam Hussein was a threat because he coddled terrorists.'*

*The big problem for a President who is keen to defend his judgment, however, is that Saddam Hussein may have 'coddled' many people, but he did not 'coddle' al-Qaeda. There was no Iraqi involvement in the attacks of 9/11. The big problem for a President who is also keen to defend his integrity is that, Tuesday notwithstanding, he too is aware of that fact.*

*We now know from many sources, including the much respected Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, that far from being allies, bin Laden and Saddam detested and feared each other, 'the one for his radical religious beliefs and the other for his aggressively secular rule and persecution of Islamists'. We also know that bin Laden had regularly called for the overthrow of the Baathist regime, and had offered his fighters to Saudi Arabia to resist Iraqi aggression at the time of the first Gulf War.*

*We are not alone in this knowledge.*

*President Bush himself quietly acknowledged last September that there was no known connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks on 9/11. Colin Powell did the same in January. The man who had told the UN a month before the invasion that Iraqi denials of ties to al-Qaeda 'are simply not credible', was obliged a year later to concede that he had 'seen no smoking gun, concrete evidence about the connection'.*

*By attacking the Baathists in Baghdad as part of the wider war on terrorism, the Bush Administration actually went off after the wrong people.*

*So why does the President continue to leave the impression in the mind of the American public that Saddam Hussein's regime was in some manner linked to al-Qaeda, and that its fall weakens the terrorist network?*

*Is it because he cannot admit that his policies have actually created the linkage that they were designed to destroy? Is it because he cannot admit that his determination to overthrow Saddam Hussein predated 9/11? Is it because he cannot admit that the invasion of Iraq has actually strengthened the radical Islamic forces that it was designed to negate?*

*If so, it is surely time to reflect upon the possibility that invading Iraq without UN approval was exactly the wrong response to the terrorist attacks launched upon us in September 2001. It is surely time to recognize that, if winning the war on terrorism was the real goal of US foreign policy in March 2003, invading Iraq in so unilateral a manner has actually made winning that war harder. It is perhaps even time to see that, if reducing the threat posed by radical Islam to US homeland security was the aim, no policy could have been invented which was less likely to succeed in the long term than that of using predominantly US troops to depose an Arab dictator.*

*But then, recognizing those things might indeed jeopardize President Bush's ability to hold on to his job in November. Indeed, perhaps they should.*