

Why the British hate Iraq so much

by Mark Burdman

Instant Empire: Saddam Hussein's Ambition for Iraq

by Simon Henderson

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A blurb on the back cover describes *Instant Empire* as “thoroughly researched, balanced and complete.” It may well be the product of much research, but, with rare exceptions, it is neither balanced nor complete. Henderson’s book is tailored to the prevailing consensus, which portrays Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis as the essence of all evil, in order to divert attention from the much greater evil being practiced by the Anglo-Americans and their various allies around the world, especially that evil being unleashed by the global economic collapse which the Anglo-Americans make believe doesn’t exist.

Obviously, there is money to be made in peddling the view put forward in *Instant Empire*, but there is also cultural-political manipulation involved. This is a British-authored book, published in the United States. Since the average American knows no history, it is easy to mold Americans’ perceptions by tailoring some historical facts and items of interest to a production that might make for the script of a Hollywood horror-thriller movie, filled with espionage intrigues, ugly murders and tortures, and brutal dictators (with moustaches and, if you find the right photographs, shifty eyes).

The absurdity centers around the *leitmotif* that Iraq, its modern history, and its population are sort of an epiphenomenon of the fantasies of Saddam Hussein. Virtually every fact of Iraqi economic life reported by Henderson is interpreted as part of a weapons procurement program, or as part of Saddam’s effort to control the Iraqi population by terrorizing them into submission. While various facts in the overall account may be true, undoubtedly Henderson, who has been to Iraq many times and who has worked professionally on

Iraq for years as a *Financial Times* writer and in other capacities, knows better. If he can manage to meticulously enumerate the 20 or so varieties of torture allegedly practiced by Iraq’s security forces, why does he appear to be so ignorant about other features of Baathist Iraq, for example that Iraq, in the period of the leadership of the Iraqi Baath Party and Saddam Hussein, had built up a thoroughly modern health system, with trained doctors, and guaranteed free health care (a “luxury,” by the way, that a significant portion of Americans, especially the growing number of poor, is denied—and which many Iraqis are now denied thanks to 120,000 bombing sorties over a six-week period earlier this year)?

Elsewhere, he says that Saddam has won “genuine support from colleagues and many ordinary people in Iraq who admire his abilities.” Why? An open-minded reader might wonder if certain features of Saddam’s life, rather than pointing to some ultimate horrific evil design, might express in microcosm the recent history—and aspirations—of Iraq as a whole. Take this passage, about Saddam’s early life in Takrit: “Life was hard in the Takrit area. There was no electricity or water supply. The intensely hot summers were unrelieved by air-conditioning even for the rich, and during the winter rains, mud spread everywhere. A photograph of the house in the village of Oujah where Saddam lived during his childhood, shows a windowless single-story building made of mud, straw, and wood.” Compare this account to the fact, never mentioned by Henderson, but known to any expert on Iraq, that until the Gulf war, almost all of Iraq was supplied with electric power, and that most inhabitants were supplied, daily, with plentiful clean drinking water. Wouldn’t such dramatic progress establish an emotional identification of many Iraqis with their leaders, and pride in Iraq’s accomplishments?

Now, of course, thanks to the American military strategy of targeted bombing of civilian infrastructure, in a war that Henderson supported, there is a kind of macabre *status quo ante*, with the entire population being sent back decades, to live the conditions Saddam endured in childhood. Is that likely to make Iraqis angry at Saddam, or at those whose willful intent was to send Iraq back several decades in time?

Henderson reports that one of the things that shaped Saddam’s life and attitudes, was Britain’s “vengeful” treatment of Iraqi officers who supported the 1940s coup of Rashid Ali. This was done by the British “to let the Arab world know the costs of opposing British imperial power.” Saddam’s uncle, an Army officer, received such treatment, and Saddam always thought of these events as “humiliating,” so much that “he seems to have maintained this antipathy towards the British, never visiting Britain and preferring to give interviews to journalists from almost any other country.”

Of oil and demographics

So, it is understandable if anti-British views are widespread among Iraqis. What is less understandable, and also

involved in that story of “vengeful” British treatment, is why the British hate Iraq so much. The Gulf war was essentially a *British*-orchestrated campaign, even if George Bush has tried to bask in a non-existent glory. The issue went beyond the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. One recalls that section of the Gulf crisis memoirs of Soviet special envoy Yevgeni Primakov (appearing in *Time* magazine in February under the title, “The Inside Story of Moscow’s Quest for a Deal”), where he describes his meeting with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in October 1990. According to Primakov’s account, she launched into a one-hour monologue. The theme was that the purpose of the Gulf military effort must be “not to limit things to a withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but to inflict a devastating blow at Iraq, ‘to break the back’ of Saddam and destroy the entire military, and perhaps industrial, potential of that country. Mrs. Thatcher did not mince any words. No one should interfere with this objective.”

Why, indeed, are the British obsessed with the idea of *destroying* Iraq? Two good clues are found in Henderson’s chapters dealing with Iraqi oil and Iraqi population growth. He doesn’t draw out the strategic implications, but the astute reader can do so.

Henderson’s chapter on Iraqi oil stresses the fact that Iraq has the world’s second largest oil reserves, after Saudi Arabia. He concludes, “Iraq, with or without Saddam, will be an important country because of its huge oil reserves and production potential for years to come.” One imagines British physiocrats salivating. But then there is the other point: Iraq, under the Baath leadership, has always involved countries *other than Britain* in its oil exploration, development, and other business activities. Among countries brought in, over the years, to help Iraq with oil exploration, according to Henderson’s listing, are Japan, France, Italy, Brazil, India, and the Soviet Union.

On population, Henderson writes that in 1987, “Saddam, in a speech to the national women’s federation in Baghdad, reminded women of their patriotic duty to have large families: ‘We hope that the Iraqi woman’s inclination to work would not divert her from producing children. If the population decreases in such a way as to threaten national security, not only women’s opportunities will be threatened, but also the whole country.’”

Elsewhere, Henderson writes: “Casualties and fatalities during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War—as many as 100,000 Iraqis lost their lives, and several times that number were wounded—only marginally slowed Iraq’s population growth. The rate of growth is calculated at 3.3%, one of the highest in the world, but considered low by ambitious Iraqi government planners. Between 1957 and 1991, Iraq’s population almost trebled (from 6.3 million to 18 million), and is expected to reach 22 million by the year 2000. (Given Saddam Hussein’s appreciation for history, he has probably noticed that 22 million is also the estimated population for the period of the height of Arab civilization,

from 700 to 1100, before the region was devastated by the Mongol invaders, and then Ottoman neglect.) Rapid population growth always brings with it unpredictable social pressures, and in Iraq’s case differences in birthrates between the various ethnic and religious communities could cause instability.”

This last paragraph is truly flabbergasting. Henderson’s snide comment about “Saddam Hussein’s appreciation of history” can’t negate the historical reality he reports here, that Iraq’s population, up to the Gulf war, was *far below* that of over 1,000 years ago! It was then destroyed by the Mongols and Ottomans. And undoubtedly the British, insofar as they were the mandate power in Iraq, or paramount in shaping Iraq’s policy, in most of the period from the end of World War I through 1958, were committed to keeping the population at a level of *less than one-third* what it was in the latter parts of the last millennium.

In this, one reads the real motive for British antipathy toward Iraq as a nation, and for Anglo-American insistence, through strangling the country by sanctions and embargo, that conditions be created in Iraq for millions of children to die in the coming months. Today, one hears growing talk in British and continental European circles, about the “Islamic demographic threat,” or what Anglophile German think-tanker Michael Stuermer has warned would be Islam’s “revenge of the cradles.” In the United States, President George Bush is a backer of the perspective enunciated by Henry Kissinger and cohorts, in a 1974 National Security Council memorandum, defining population growth in the developing world as a *national security threat* to the U.S. So, when Saddam warns that too little growth might “threaten national security” for Iraq, he is in direct clash with the Bush-Kissinger powers-that-be.

Whatever else Iraq may be, it is a developing nation that has sought economic and technological progress, an independent oil policy, and an expanding population. Iraq’s weapons program should be seen in this context, not exclusively in the realm of Saddam’s ambitions. Developing nations have a right to be secure, and a more “balanced” author than Henderson might be less dismissive of Iraqi fears of Israeli and other threats to their security (especially since, in one of his rare objective passages, he documents that author Farzad Bazoft, whom Iraq executed for spying, was in fact a British intelligence agent on a spying mission when apprehended by Iraqi authorities). This right, above all when it is linked to population growth, is anathema to the British, and their co-thinkers in the United States, France, and elsewhere, who believe they are the gods of Mount Olympus, dictating the terms to a humanity which is in fact being made increasingly wretched and poor by their policies. So, while Henderson’s book might some day grow into a marketable movie script, another book needs to be written, to explain what really makes Iraq and Iraqis tick, particularly for those of us who don’t yearn for Iraq’s destruction.