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Dreams of a Monster

To defeat extremism we must understand that extremists have a vision, too.

By Daniel Chirot

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We Americans are ill-equipped to understand the phenomenon of monstrous tyranny. We prefer to believe that Saddam Hussein, like Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin before him, was merely a psychopathic, corrupt killer. That is why our leaders believed that if we overthrew the tyrant, his liberated people would rejoice and thank us. Most Iraqis certainly are relieved that Hussein can never return to torture and kill hundreds of thousands more, but how long they will thank us is another matter.

Saddam Hussein was not just a criminal who happened to get his hands on a whole country to use its army and police to feed his greed. Unlike the Mafia dons he supposedly admired, he was also an ideologue, and like other great tyrants of the 20th century, a thinker with a historical vision that resonated with many of his people and throughout his region.

Hussein was obsessed with the stories of the great Mesopotamian empires, and with Saladin, the (Kurdish) Muslim warlord who defeated the Christian Crusaders. His was the dream of the Baathist Party he joined as a young man, to create a great Arab secular, socialist state able to take from the arrogant West its technological prowess, to overcome it and restore the Arabs to their rightful place. His early personal sense of humiliation (he was beaten often by a brutal father) and his lust for revenge merged into a grander historical vision that was shared by political idealists all over the Arab world.

In this respect he closely resembled Hitler and Stalin, who, in their own minds, came to personify lofty, utopian goals of grandeur and who died confident that all the suffering they had imposed was justified because only by repression and mass murder could they make their weak people truly strong and victorious. Like these other monsters, Hussein was convinced that those who opposed him were not only personal enemies but traitors to a great cause.

Many U.S. thinkers and leaders believe in lofty historical goals too, but ours has been such a successful history that revenge is rarely part of that vision. Our democratic institutions are too strong to let any leader get away with anything close to Saddam Hussein's excesses. Also, Americans shy away from electing those who thrive on hate or who mobilize support by reminding us of times when we were humiliated. We can understand sacrifice for the sake of security and personal liberty, but not simply to avenge dishonor. Only in the South, with its tradition of oppression, honor and bitter defeat, can a bit of this be understood, but the Civil War and slavery, after all, ended 138 years ago.

Hussein's vision, like those of the other secular Arab nationalists, his fellow Baathists in Syria and Gamal

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Abdel Nasser in Egypt, had failed by the 1980s. Socialism never worked. The Christian West, particularly the United States and its hated client proxy, Jewish Israel, forged farther ahead in science and technology, and became more unbeatable than ever. After two unsuccessful wars against Iran and Kuwait, and a long, humiliating embargo, Hussein's more corrupt, less idealistic side emerged. His thoroughly debased sons, who shared his lust for power without his ideological and historical vision, were allowed to run amok. But underneath the tawdry lies and weakened army, Saddam Hussein continued to hope that he would be able to regain the upper hand. He still wanted to father a great Arab empire.

Long before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, the likelihood of realizing such dreams had almost vanished. His entourage had become little more than an extended family of crooks profiting from the old man's delusions. They lied to him about the true situation; tyrants' men rarely risk telling their bosses the dangerous, unpleasant truth.

Unfortunately Saddam Hussein's defeat does nothing to eliminate the sense of dishonor and shameful failure so widespread in the Arab countries and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Religion is seen by many of the most idealistic Arabs and Muslims as the last, best hope. Hussein's embarrassing end will certainly increase resentment of U.S. arrogance, demonstrate once more that his way was too secular, and feed the desire for revenge.

To think of radical Islamists as mere criminals or psychopaths entirely misses the point. We misjudged Saddam Hussein in his early days in power because we failed to understand his vision, and we risk making the same error if we fail to appreciate the idealism behind the new extremists. Their religious ideology will produce a new set of tyrants prepared to inflict death and destruction in order to advance their utopian dreams.

The first step toward a better policy is admitting that some of those who oppose us have a vision, too, no matter how grim it may seem. Do our leaders recognize this? Are we, as a people, prepared to deal with the consequences?

The writer is a professor at the Henry Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington and the author of "Modern Tyrants."

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