

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL/ZILKHA ROOM

THE INTERROGATION OF SADDAM HUSSEIN  
AND U.S. POLICY IN IRAQ

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, March 22, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

**Moderator:**

BRUCE RIEDEL  
Senior Fellow and Director, Intelligence Project  
The Brookings Institution

**Featured speaker:**

JOHN NIXON  
Author, Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein  
Former Senior CIA Analyst

\* \* \* \* \*

## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. RIEDEL: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Brookings Institution and to another one of our series of talks on intelligence issues presented by the Brookings Center for Security and Intelligence in the 21st Century. I'm delighted to be here today with John Nixon, author of a fascinating new book, "Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein."

MR. NIXON: Should I hold it up so everybody can see?

MR. RIEDEL: Yes, hold it up. This is not my attempt to get a copy without paying for it.

MR. NIXON: It is mine, though.

MR. RIEDEL: Good. John served in the Central Intelligence Agency for 13 years before retiring in 2011. Among many things that he did, he ended up becoming the lead CIA interrogator/debriefer of Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein is a figure that stands out in all of our lives. He ruled Iraq, or misruled Iraq, for more than three and a half decades. He has the rare distinction of being someone who invaded two of his neighbors and got his country into two disastrous wars -- actually into three disastrous wars -- which ultimately led to his undoing. John not only was his debriefer he was also one of the CIA's leading experts on who Saddam Hussein was. So we have the rare fortune of someone who really knows about this individual and who, very rarely for an American, actually had a chance to meet him.

Our format today is very, very simple. I'm going to ask John a series of questions for about a half an hour, 40 minutes, and then I'm going to open it up to you and take 2 or 3 questions at a time for you to answer. We do have a microphone when we get to the audience participation part.

One last thing I would ask you to do, if you have a cell phone or any other kind of laptop device, please put it in storage. We don't require that you put it underneath in the hold, you can have it in the cabin, but please turn it off so we don't hear your very interesting ring tones.

With that, let me ask a very simple opening question. How is it that you ended up being the CIA's chief debriefer of Saddam Hussein?

MR. NIXON: It's a very interesting journey that I took. I had studied a lot about Saddam during my graduate school days at the Georgetown University. I was in the National Security Studies program there that was eventually folded into the School of Foreign Service. And then I was recruited by

IRAQ-2017/03/22

the Agency and I interviewed with a number of offices. But I didn't get any sort of inclination of which one was going to take me until the day before I was to show up at work somebody called me and they said you'd be working an Iraq issue. And I thought, oh this is great, because this is exactly what I wanted to work on. And I was a leadership analyst in Iraq issue in the Directorate of Intelligence, the DI as it was known then. I think it's called the DA now. The Agency loves to change around names and monikers and initials. But it was the DI then and so I did that for three years and I -- one of the things that I experienced when I got into the Agency, at least back then in 1998, was all the sudden I walked in on my first day and everybody was speaking jargon, everybody was talking about the morning meeting. They were saying, well who's going to the sivits and what does the ADDI want, and we're going to do a PDB on -- and I felt like I was watching Spanish television but not knowing Spanish. (Laughter) And I realized very soon that I had a lot of work to do and I needed to get up to speed with these people because the team that I worked with, my first team, was really sharp and really, really smart. And I came from an academic background and I suddenly realized that there was a whole world of information that I had not been privy to and that I had to get up to speed on. And so basically Saddam Hussein and his family and their hijinks became my world and became something that I studied every day. And as I say in the book, I began to live and breathe Saddam and it was just -- it's just something that you have to do if you want to be an expert and if you want to be taken seriously in the intelligence community.

MR. RIEDEL: And then you did a TDY to Baghdad?

MR. NIXON: Yes. Well, by 2003 I had moved over to Iran issue, but I still retained a very strong interest in Iraq. A very good friend of mine, a mentor of sorts, Judy Yaffay, I remember her telling me that if you want to know what's happening in Iran you have to know what's going on in Iraq, and if you want to know what's going on in Iraq you have to know what's going on in Iran. So I started working on Iran. And then there was a -- once the war started there was a request for people, for intelligence officers to volunteer. And so I went out there in October of 2003 to replace what was then called the HVT 1 Analyst. HVT 1 was Saddam's designation, that's High Value Target number 1. And I was supposed to basically work at the station and interface with the Special Forces and then try to help them find Saddam. And at first it was tough going. Being in Baghdad in 2003 was a lot like the film Groundhog Day. It was like every day seemed the same, no matter what. And there was also a lot of what -- in order to get

IRAQ-2017/03/22

anything done you had to build up relationships with people, people in the military, people in the intelligence community that were out there, and people in what stood for a diplomatic community, which was the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority. And that's how you got things done. And every day was like pushing a boulder up a hill. And at the end of the day you'd say, god, it feels great, I got this boulder finally up the hill, and then the next morning you'd walk out of your trailer and there would be the boulder, you know, and you'd have to do it all again same the next day. But I was doing that and then in November I was starting to despair a little bit about whether or not we were going to find him, but then through a series of raids, and some were purely accidental, Special Forces got a bead on where Saddam was through a facilitator, a bodyguard. And they were eventually able to capture the bodyguard that we had kind of identified for them as being, you know, key for understanding where Saddam might be, and that's what led to his capture.

MR. RIEDEL: And then you met him for the first time.

MR. NIXON: Yeah.

MR. RIEDEL: Here you are having lived and breathed Saddam Hussein, kind of dysfunctional figure in many ways --

MR. NIXON: Yes.

MR. RIEDEL: -- and you're facing him face to face as -- were you identified as CIA to him or?

MR. NIXON: No. No, no. That night of the capture, about 7 o'clock, things really started to speed up, and by 8 o'clock we got word that the military had picked somebody up and they were bringing him down from the Tikrit area to Baghdad. And it was at that point that -- the chief of station was not there, but the (inaudible) happened to be in Iraq at the time and he asked me how I would identify him. And I told him, you know, there are things that you could look for, you know, tribal markings, tribal tattoos on his hand and wrist. You know, I said he has a scar on his leg from a bullet wound. And he said, we've got to make sure it's not one of these body doubles. And I remember I was like, oh my god. One of the most persistent myths about Saddam Hussein was the body double. Everybody believed -- and to this date there are people that still believe that the body double existed, or exists. There were no body doubles. And it just seemed that the more we told people this, whether it was in our written

IRAQ-2017/03/22

products or in our briefings, the more the myth persisted. But this was one night, when he said that, instead of saying, sir, there are no body doubles, I just said you're absolutely right, sir, we have to make sure about this, and I'm your man. So they put me in the suburban and we went out around midnight and we got out there and then we sort of waited for about two hours until the military had finished shaving Saddam and cleaning him up. And also they were questioning him and giving him a physical examination. And then somebody said, okay, guys, it's your turn.

So we walked down this hall and it was sort of like being back stage at a rock concert, but instead of groupies it was military guys in fatigues. And we get down there and then this door opens and he's just sitting there, kind of like -- sort of like he comes here every Saturday night (laughter), and almost as though -- and he acted as though we were his guests. And I think the thing that struck me most about that first encounter was just how calm and collected he was. And that I think a characteristic of his upbringing and his experience as a revolutionary political player in Ba'ath politics. And also just that by his nature and the way he sort of had his security apparatus always around him, he just seemed to be always prepared for almost anything. And so we walked in and we began to question him and he at first was very -- it was very contentious at first. You know, I said something to him and he said -- and he just went (chuckling sound) -- and he had this mean laugh -- and he said, through an interpreter of course, who are you guys, identify yourselves to me. Are you Makubarat, Istikhbarat? Who are you? What are your names? And then the head of my team stepped in and said we are here to ask you questions, you're not to ask us questions. You're here to answer our questions. And Saddam listened and he said -- and then we went on. And he actually answered most of the questions that I had.

Now, I saw the tribal markings and I saw the scar on the leg, and I have to say to you right now, the minute I laid eyes on him I knew it was him. One of the things that you do as a leadership analyst is you look at a lot of video tape and you look at a lot of pictures because you're always getting questions about leaders because in the press, both our press and international press, there's always rumors about people being sick or people being infirm or people being killed and that they're not alive anymore. And so you're always looking at video tape and the latest video tape. And after years of doing this, you know, and this person is sitting two feet away from me, there wasn't a doubt in my mind. So we talked and one of the most interesting things that happened that first night was there were two

IRAQ-2017/03/22

interpreters in the room. There was a military interpreter and there was a CIA interpreter. And the CIA interpreter was interpreting and the military interpreter started to get kind of nasty with us. Our interpreter would say something and he'd be like no, no, you misinterpreted that, that's wrong, he said this, and then he would explain it, and then they would argue a little bit. And then a few minutes later, no, no, again, you're interpreting that wrong. And Saddam was sitting there the whole time and after a while Saddam started doing this, sort of like he was at a tennis match. And then he got a smile on his face, and then he would (gesturing). Our interpreter would ask him a question, he'd turn to the military interpreter and go (gesturing) (laughter). And the military interpreter would respond, he would say like, you know. One time he was like (gesturing).

MR. RIEDEL: And that leads me to one of the --

MR. NIXON: But the thing is -- if I can just one --

MR. RIEDEL: Please, go ahead.

MR. NIXON: The point is though, Saddam was able to get two organizations on the same side, one in uniform, one in civilian clothes -- it became very tense. And he got these two sides to start disagreeing with one another. And it's sort of a metaphor for how he ruled his country.

MR. RIEDEL: It gets to one of the most fascinating observations in the book, which is that the CIA and the U.S. government didn't seem to have a plan for how to interrogate, debrief, or even deal with Saddam Hussein, which when you think about it, we certainly had a lot of time to think about this or prepare for it.

MR. NIXON: Yes.

MR. RIEDEL: And yet when we got there it's kind of a metaphor for the whole war and the whole invasion.

MR. NIXON: Yes, absolutely. Everything seemed to be done on the fly. Another myth that we were dealing with constantly -- because there is a lot of reporting supporting this myth -- was that Saddam was going to go down with the ship, that he had suicide belts and suicide vests that, in fact, he could take out a whole city block just with the amount of explosives that he can just press a button and. So now the U.S. military, to be fair, has to be careful about that because it's their folks who are going to get killed if that happens. But the more I talked to people the more I realized that everybody seemed to

IRAQ-2017/03/22

believe that he was going to -- like he would die in a blaze of glory, whereas our CIA psychiatrist -- and this had been going back for years, this is one of the first things I remember learning about him from our own people, that psychologically speaking Saddam Hussein is not a martyr, he's not a person who's going to kill himself. He's somebody who sees himself as the living embodiment of the greatness of his nation and his cause, and that losing him would be to lose Iraq. And so therefore he's a survivor, he's going to be somebody who's going to want to survive for another day. And I think the same could be said for people like Gaddafi and Khomeini and Bin Laden. And yet for some reason -- and I've seen this with a lot of leaders, people think -- like Bin Laden, same thing. In the press I read they thought there were suicide belts and he's going to go down and try to take as many out as they can. And it's just psychologically speaking these are not -- so we were -- Bruce is right, Washington was I think very much caught by surprise, so much so that when Saddam gave himself up and we captured him, we were waiting for Washington to sort of tell us what to do in terms of how do you want to handle this. And they took about seven days. And during that first seven days nobody talked to Saddam. And, in fact, he even said to one of his guards like on day three or four, he said why is nobody coming to speak to me. I don't understand that. Because Saddam really didn't want to sit in his cell all day long with nothing to do and nothing to read and nothing to write. And strangely enough we found out through CNN like almost six days in that Rumsfeld told a CNN reporter that the CIA was going to take a lead in debriefing Saddam Hussein, which made us all very happy and the military very happy. The only thing he didn't provide was the coordinates of the building so that anybody could take a shot at us.

But there's something that happens also when someone is captured, and that is the shock of capture can lead them to divulge certain things that maybe they might not have because it's sort of -- people being taken into custody can be very upsetting. And I don't know if that would have happened with Saddam, but we'll never know because, again, we didn't have anything to do with him for seven days and I thought that was a terrible waste. But eventually we got started, or roughly around the 19th or 20th of December. And that was another sort of eye opening instant, because rather than the contentious Saddam -- that day was very interesting simply because whether you love him or hate him, or whatever you think of him, I will say that I thought that Saddam Hussein was one of the more charismatic people I've ever met in my life, and that when he walked into a room you felt a change in the room. And

IRAQ-2017/03/22

some people have this and some people don't. Bruce has it in spades. But the thing is, you know, he came in and they took the hood off him and he just sort of looked around a little bit at us and then he started working the room. He just started shaking our hands and making small talk with us in his limited English. You know, sun shining, how are you, nice day. And so we got down to talking and we didn't really have a whole lot of carrot sticks to offer on this because we really didn't know what was going to happen with him. There was no operating judiciary in Iraq and we didn't think the Bush administration would necessarily turn him over to the International Criminal Court, so we couldn't necessarily say, Saddam, we'll talk to the judge and see if we can get a year off or something. And as far as, you know, sticks, the head of the team at one point had considered using enhanced interrogation techniques, but fortunately that was squelched by Washington. And Saddam was given Geneva Code protections.

So we got down to talking and basically we said, you know, we want to talk about history and we want you to know that whatever you say will be read at the highest levels of our government, meaning the president of the United States. And talking about history really appealed to Saddam because he was very interested in history, and also the idea that what he said would be read by George Bush also appealed to him. And he, you know, he responded to this and he said yes, history is very important, historians are like people who can see through the night. And then he put the finger up. And I came to realize that when the finger came up that meant you better listen. And when he was in power that meant you really better listen. And he said, but I will not submit to interrogation. And we said oh, we're not going to interrogate you, no, no, no. We'll just talk about history. Of course we're going to interrogate him and of course we're going to talk about things that he doesn't want to, but we just said okay. And then from that point on it was like off to the races.

MR. RIEDEL: Well, of course the \$64 million question every American wanted to know was where are the weapons of mass destruction, what happened to the weapons of mass destruction. I'm sure that was the question Washington wanted you to bring home the bacon on more than anything else.

MR. NIXON: It was the only question that Washington seemed to want to know. The Agency had a few questions that they wanted -- you know, I had a number of topics that I wanted to talk about, but certainly there were priorities. And the one question that came from -- the instructions were



IRAQ-2017/03/22

this, basically, keep him talking, find out what you can, and wait for the FBI to show up because the FBI is going to take over the debriefing process once they get out to Iraq because this was going to eventually lead some way to some sort of an adjudication process and they wanted the FBI to be able to be the ones who would go into a courtroom and give evidence against Saddam.

So, to find out what we can really referred to though weapons of mass destruction. And we talked a great deal about WMD with Saddam. And my successor, a guy named Bill, who was a former UNSCOM inspector, spent a great deal of time talking to him about this as well. And both he and I came to the same conclusion, that Saddam didn't have weapons of mass destruction, or did have nuclear weapons of mass destruction, and that he didn't have any programs going and he was not about to start any programs up. Now, this differs a little bit from what Charles Duelfer has said in the Duelfer Commission, he has claimed that Saddam was going to restart his program once he got out from underneath sanctions, but I've never seen any evidence, and I certainly didn't see any evidence from talking to Saddam or talking to any of the other HVTs that we talked to. And it was the beginning of a series of sort of startling insights, I felt startling insights about Saddam. In the larger arc of things, of Saddam's career, I think we had a fairly reliable set of knowledge, but as I talked to him and as we began focusing on more granular parts of his life and what he was doing and things that we didn't know about, things started to emerge that really made me question a lot of what we had thought prior to that. And WMD, certainly I was a believer in WMD as was everybody I knew. In fact, I participated in many, many briefings with our liaison partners within the intelligence community, with academics, and I never heard anybody ever question whether or not Saddam had a weapons program going or whether he wanted to get a nuclear weapon. We did hear stuff in the media, but based on what at time seemed compelling information that we had in the intelligence world, the stuff that we heard in the media we tended to discount.

But in going back, another thing that we also noticed about Saddam was his lack of engagement. He was sort of disengaged from the day-to-day running of his country and had turned more and more things over to some of his more senior lieutenants. He was still president of Iraq, he still regarded himself as such, and he still wanted to make the big decisions, but he looked to be more and more interested in sort of other pursuits. And I remember right before I made the switch from Iraq to Iran

IRAQ-2017/03/22

as an analyst, seeing little hints of this, and I feel it was very unfortunate that we never pursued those hints because they were accurate. And we had a tendency at the Agency, and I think throughout the intelligence community, and in our government certainly, to see Saddam as this master manipulator who was playing the Mighty Wurlitzer, if you will, and who was always outthinking us and outfoxing us and trying to get out from underneath sanctions, which he probably would have done had events not intervened. But that was a very inaccurate assessment because he was not like that near the end. At the end he was very interested in writing a novel. And he had written novels before, but he was working on a draft and he was sending drafts to Tariq Azia, his former foreign minister, like a week before the invasion. And even his son, Uday, was talking to his girlfriend in Germany and saying, oh, why don't you come to Baghdad, I'm going to be -- this is 2003 -- he would have been I think -- he was born in '64 -- so 39 -- it's going to be a great party. By the time Uday's 39th birthday happened I think he may have been dead. So I mean this is -- it's a very bizarre kind of story, but the thing is Saddam was not really I think the same Saddam that we saw in the 1980s and the 1990s.

MR. RIEDEL: Looking back on -- it's now 15 years since then Vice President Cheney told us that Iraq not only had weapons of mass destruction programs, but implied that he had a nuclear bomb. I won't ask you to psychoanalyze Vice President Cheney, although that would be fascinating as well, looking back on it how did the intelligence get this so wrong, in your opinion?

MR. NIXON: How many hours do we have? Gosh, that's a good question. I think there were several reasons. One is I think there's a certain amount of group think that I think happens in the intelligence community that gets passed on even though we're all cognizant of the dangers of group think and try to do everything that we can. But there was such a pervasive feeling that this is just bedrock truth. And I think there was an inability to ask ourselves really, really tough questions. And also there are parts of the intelligence community -- certainly I speak from an analytic standpoint -- that as far as analysis goes sometimes people get lazy and sometimes people forget to question their initial assumptions. And there's also a part of this bureaucratic structure of the CIA in which writing pieces tend to -- you know, language tends to get blessed from on high and you end up using that language over and over again. And I'll tell you right now, the minute you start cutting and pasting anything you're not an analyst anymore, number one, and number two, you're not thinking about the subject anymore. And it's

IRAQ-2017/03/22

the most dangerous thing any analyst can do. And then, finally, there is the fact that, you know, we as Americans we love to sort of -- when a country doesn't do something or a leader doesn't do something that we like, we say we're not going to have diplomatic relations and we beat our chest and we try to isolate them. And we try to look strong to our domestic community, domestic supporters, and, you know, the only thing is we don't realize how much we hurt ourselves by not recognizing a nation, having a diplomatic presence in that country. It's entirely possible that if we would have had an embassy and a station in Iraq in the years before the war, it's entirely possible we still would have made these same mistakes, but at least we would have had a chance. Certainly, by 2003 our sources of information had really dried up and we relied a great deal -- I went back and looked at a lot of reporting after my experience with Saddam, and some of the things that I read, and especially some of the things that I thought were good, and I came back and I was like, oh my god, what the hell were we looking at. You know, what were we reading. Who the hell was disseminating this, this is garbage. And, you know, it's part of the whole fiasco that is Operation Iraqi Freedom. I know myself and a lot of the other analysts, we all had the sense that we were trying to do something good for Iraq. And we all feel very badly at how things have turned out. And I think we feel badly about that because it's very hard to find a success story out of this whole thing.

MR. RIEDEL: Well, let's go through a little bit of the history. August 1990, Saddam invades Kuwait. Did you talk about that decision with him?

MR. NIXON: Oh yeah.

MR. RIEDEL: Did he seem to have any regrets or?

MR. NIXON: It was the closest I ever got to Saddam saying he had made a mistake. Saddam never, never admitted to mistakes. At times it was sort of like talking to a 15 year old. He never made mistakes, everybody was against him, and no matter what I do nobody is going to like it. So therefore, you know, I'm going to do what I'm going to do. So anybody who has a 15 or 16 year old out there might share that feeling. But the thing is, the closest I got to him to acknowledge a mistake, I said to him, I said let's talk about Kuwait. And he just kind of put his hands up, he goes, oh the subject gives me such a headache. And it was sort of this feeling of like he knew that after this he had gotten him behind the eight ball and he never got out from behind it. And we talked about this and there have been a

IRAQ-2017/03/22

lot of things said about what he said. I think the FBI said that Saddam had insulted the honor of Iraqi womanhood because the emir of Kuwait had said that he was going to turn every Iraqi woman into a prostitute. Maybe that was said. That wasn't the reason why he invaded. I think the chief reason that Saddam decided to invade Kuwait -- first of all, you know, when a president or a leader invades a country or decides that he's going to make war on a neighboring country, we like to think that there are studies done and that that president meets with his advisors, that he gets all of the input from the intelligence community and option papers are produced and implications are raised and what might the fallout be. Saddam did none of that. He just decided one day at an RCC meeting that he was going to teach them a lesson. And the lesson was for this Saddam was trying to rebuild his country after the Iran-Iraq War, he was tens of billions of dollars in debt, and he basically told the Emirates and the Kuwaitis and the Saudis that he could not get any sort of international financing from places like the World Bank or the IMF because all of these debts were outstanding, and that he was asking them to forgive his loans. And basically their response was no, we're not going to forgive them, but you can just pay us back when you can. And Saddam said, no, you don't understand, I mean I can't rebuild my country and I have this giant army of a million men standing around with nothing to do and I've got to keep paying them. Because, you know, in Iraq having a large standing army with nothing to do is something that can be very bad for any leader. So and then response was well, no, just pay us when you can. And so Saddam saw that as the height of ingratitude and an insult to him personally.

One of the things that I got from Saddam when I was talking to him was how important money is. Now, I understand money is important to all of us, but for some reason to Saddam it was a visceral thing. And I think it stems from the fact that Saddam was a poor boy from Tikrit who never really had anything. He was a poor boy who grew up to make good and get to climb to the top of the political structure in his country. And whenever we talked about money Saddam's demeanor would change, would get very serious. And he just felt this -- and it was the source of his pride and the source of his power. And to be insulted like that I think was just too much for him.

MR. RIEDEL: Saddam of course not only invaded two of his neighbors, but he butchered thousands of his own people, particularly Kurds in the Anfal Campaign, and Shiite after the uprising in 2001. It's got to be kind of a strange experience for someone who's been an academic and an

IRAQ-2017/03/22

intelligence analyst to be sitting down with someone who was a mass murderer at the same time in the same room with him. Did you ever get any sense of second thoughts about that or --

MR. NIXON: No.

MR. RIEDEL: -- that was just being the ruler of Iraq?

MR. NIXON: No. You know, at one point we were talking about the Kurds and he said to me, he said I love the Kurds, I don't know what it is about them. Maybe it's because they're not city folk and they're not filled up with these ideas, that they're just plain and simple people. And I used to love to go visit them, but their political leaders, around the time of the early '60s, began to change things. And I think he was being genuine. I mean, I remember at the time thinking if you love the Kurds you certainly had an odd way of showing it, but I think that he was being genuine in the sense that he did love Kurds, but that anybody -- Saddam always had a place in his regime for Kurds or for Shiite, but the but there was that they had to support him. And if they didn't support him and supported somebody else, he saw that as treasonous and that's punishable. And, you know, one of the things that we discovered during this time is we talked about Halabja. That was the most contentious debriefing part that I had with Saddam. That's when he got the angriest with me and he really lost his temper. And it was difficult talking about these things with him because he would get very confrontational, naturally, but also in any sort of a debriefing process you want to sort of spend a little time of sort of developing a rapport before you start getting into the really tough issues. And Saddam -- we never knew -- during the time that I was there, we never knew exactly when our time with him was going to be over because day to day we weren't sure -- because we had been told almost every day that the FBI would be out here any day now. And by the time I left on January 12 or 13 they still weren't there. So we couldn't do a lot of rapport building, so we would have to sort of jump into these topics very, very quickly. And when we talked about Halabja, Saddam really got very, very upset and very angry and very like sort of leaning forward in his chair and talking through clenched teeth and breathing very heavily. And it was a little frightening, to be quite honest with you. He could be charming at time, but he could be frightening and really nasty and arrogant. You know, he was sort of a jumble of contradictions in that sense.

But one of the things is he said to me, you know, I did not give them -- I had asked him if he had made the decision about Halabja at an RCC meeting and he just said I didn't make that decision

IRAQ-2017/03/22

and then he put up the finger and went into this, I'm not afraid of you, I'm not afraid of President Bush, I will do what I have to do to protect my country, but I did not make that decision -- or did not give that order, that's what he said. And I didn't believe him at first. And this is one of the tricky things about talking to Saddam Hussein is that even when he was telling the truth -- like he was so secretive and so suspicious that even when he was telling the truth it was hard to believe him. And I found myself -- I didn't believe him and then I started going through the record and seeing what some of the other HVTs said, which supported what he said, and then looking at some of the documentation, which supported what he said, and then I came to the conclusion that he did not -- that Halabja was a decision that was made on the battlefield by Nezar Pesraji, who was the general in charge of Anfal.

And Saddam actually was very upset about this, not because of the loss of life, but because the use of chemical weapons had happened in Halabja at -- it was in PoK territory, which PoK was aligned with Iran and he was afraid that Iran was going to use this to besmirch Iraq's name with the international media.

MR. RIEDEL: You describe an America that had a hard time understanding Saddam Hussein.

MR. NIXON: Yes.

MR. RIEDEL: I get the sense that the opposite was true as well, that Saddam Hussein didn't really understand America or how America operated.

MR. NIXON: Yes, very true. Saddam really understood -- I thought he understood his country very well and I thought he understood Iraqis very well. He understood their wants and their needs. He was a lot like -- you know, I hate to say this and I'm not making any connection to any other comparison with Lyndon Johnson, but he was a lot like Lyndon Johnson in the fact that he was a very transactional leader and he always knew how to kind of cajole people and to give them gifts and when to threaten. He had a lot of skills in that sense. But he was very good at reading his own people. But when it came to the larger international community, when it came to understanding international relations, and certainly when it came to the United States, he was out of his depth.

And, again, he was a rather poorly educated -- although by comparison with others, I mean he was actually better educated -- but I thought he was a rather poorly educated hometown boy

IRAQ-2017/03/22

that made good. And he had never really traveled outside of Iraq very much. As far as America goes, he said a number of things that just showed me that he just had no concept of how like our government worked or how things got done. I remember talking him to about Nizar Hamdoon and telling him what an asset he was to Iraq, because he is the former Iraqi Ambassador to the United States and then he was at the UN as the ambassador there. And he was a formidable guy, formidable intellect I thought, and also a very good spokesman for the regime. And you got a sense that Saddam kind of was like yeah, you know, but he also -- we talked about 9/11 one day. And this was really kind of fascinating, but I said to him, Saddam, a lot of people think that you were involved in 9/11 and he's like how can people think that, didn't you read the letter? And I said what letter are you talking about? He said I sent a letter, I gave it to Tariq Aziz, and I sent a letter to the American people. And I think he had given letters to some NGO, Voices in the Wilderness I think. And he said, didn't you get the letter? He gave it to Ramsey Clark. Didn't you read that letter? Didn't the American people see this? And I had to say to him, you know, Ramsey Clark is kind of a fringe like figure and he's not necessarily considered a mainstream voice that you want to use to reach out to the American people. And he just had this look of incredulity.

Another time we were talking about Monica Lewinsky and the Clinton scandal and said what's an intern. (Laughter) And so I tried to explain to him what an intern was and he was just like -- and he couldn't grasp the concept at all. And then he kind of fell back on well, you know, she's Jewish isn't she. And I said yes she is. And he said it's the media was stirring all this stuff up and the media is owned by Jewish people and this is all a Zionist conspiracy because Iraq is -- Clinton administration is being easy on Iraq so the Zionists aren't happy about that, so now they've created this scandal to damage the Clinton administration. So everything always came back to that they were trying to harm him and Iraq. And, again, just a clear misreading of everything concerning America.

I don't mean to go on, but one of the most interesting things was when we said to him about 9/11, I said what was your reaction to 9/11, he said it was relief. I said what do you mean, and he said well I was relieved to know that now the United States would understand that the same people that oppose them, the same people that flew airplanes into their buildings would now know that I'm dealing -- they're my enemies as well, and that America with all of its intelligence and money and power would have to come to the conclusion, would have to the conclusion that we have the same enemy and that this

IRAQ-2017/03/22

would change policy in the United States and they would see that the United States and Iraq are on the same side.

MR. RIEDEL: I'm going to come to your questions in just a couple of minutes. But I want to fast forward in the book a little bit to later in your career when you're now briefing George W. Bush. And I'll put my words on it, not yours. I got the impression that these so called deep dive briefing sessions for the president were more entertainment than they were necessarily education, or more geared to get the president to say to the Agency I really love you and I love what you're doing for me, rather than necessarily to confront him with what might be unpleasant realities. So am I reading that right?

MR. NIXON: To a certain degree I think yes. I think there was a feeling in the Bush administration by that point that -- well, first of all, the inter Agency process that was supposed to produce ideas for the president and options for the president had clearly broken down. And early in the administration that wasn't considered a bad thing, you know, because that meant that they could do what they wanted to. But the thing is, by 2007-2008 I think there was a feeling that there's a lot of untapped knowledge that was out there, particularly in the minds of analysts, that it might be helpful to have people come into the Oval Office and talk to the president because maybe it might spur some new thinking or what have you. But I mean that's the way I would hope that it was, I would hope that that's what spurred this. But I found that a lot of the times, especially when dealing with President Bush -- Vice President Cheney was a lot different. Vice President Cheney, he was very skilled, he was a much more savvy player, and he was much more skilled at asking questions and certainly asking questions and not giving any clear hint of why he's asking this question, whereas President Bush was the opposite. It was more of a validation process for him and he just sort of leaned -- first of all, he liked to have very, very knowledgeable smart people come in and then try to sort of use his down home folksy way and cut them off and show that he was the boss and you have to listen to him. But also he had this way of saying well, the mail is still a threat, huh, don't you agree? And he did this about Saddam, he did this about Soder, which was another briefing I did with him. And, you know, I mean the man's a thug, that's all he is, don't you agree? And he would put you -- the way he would question you, he would sort of back you into a corner and you would say yes and no, Mr. President. And he really didn't like get yes and no answers, it



IRAQ-2017/03/22

was either yes or no. And he didn't like nuance and he didn't like -- he thought that if you gave him sort of an ambiguous answer you were trying to evade the question. And a lot of times he would back you into this corner, so it would make you sound like you were sort of an apologist, or defending Muqtada al-Sadr or defending Saddam Hussein when that was not the case at all. But it made for a very difficult trip to the White House. And, you know, I got into one very long 30 minute -- I don't know what it was, it was this sort of question and answer period that I tried to tell the president that Muqtada al-Sadr was probably a force that -- a person that was going to remain a force in Iraqi politics for a long time, for some time to come. And in fairness to President Bush, he was receiving a lot of different viewpoints from a lot of different people, and I think for someone like him that must have been hard to -- he was one of these people who didn't -- again didn't want nuance, didn't understand ambiguity, and felt that there was always a right and a wrong answer. And it's very hard -- if you're getting all different viewpoints it becomes very hard to assimilate those viewpoints and come up with a conclusion.

MR. RIEDEL: I know all of you are thinking about some other leader today in comparison to these, but the book is not about that administration. As I said earlier --

MR. NIXON: My next book is going to be called "George, We Hardly Knew You."

(Laughter)

MR. RIEDEL: Okay. Let's open it up to your questions. There's a microphone. Please identify yourself. I'm going to take two or three questions at a time. Ladies first, right up here in the front.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. This has been fascinating. I was wondering whether during the time you were talking with Saddam, was he aware do you think that the end result was going to be his execution?

MR. RIEDEL: Right behind there.

MR. DETTKE: Thank you. Dieter Dettke, Georgetown University. The question that I'm interested in is when did the Bush administration know there were no nuclear weapons and no weapons of mass destruction? I mean go back to March 2003, when the invasion took place. Wasn't there enough indication already that there were no weapons of mass destruction at the time in March? And then look at the fact that the inspection, the UN inspection process was interrupted on March 19, of course. Now, why did that happen? Why was it so necessary to interrupt the inspection process that was going well since

IRAQ-2017/03/22

November-December, right? I mean there were no obstacles put up anymore by Saddam, so they had total access. And weren't the assets -- I mean intelligence assets of Iraq of the Bush administration that indicated before March of 2003 no weapons of mass destruction?

Thank you.

MR. RIEDEL: More on this side. Right here in the front.

MR. NIXON: Thank you. Picking up on the WMD question, did you talk to Saddam at all about why he was so obstructionist with the UNSCOM inspectors in the late '90s after Hussein Kamel defected, after they turned over all those documents, and the chicken farm episode, at which point he had no more WMD materials, and yet they're still blocking UNSCOM inspectors from entering lots of facilities? Did you talk to him about that contradiction in him trying to prove that he was no longer holding these weapons, at the same time being so obstructionist with the inspectors in that period?

MR. RIEDEL: Okay. The execution. Yes, absolutely. He fully understood that -- he said to me that he knew that this would lead to his execution, that -- I mean this is December of 2003 and again we had no -- there was no clear indication just how he was going to be handled from this point on, who was going to try him, or anything like that. But I knew that this was probably going to lead to his execution and he said as much to me. And he was pretty clear eyed. Now, that didn't necessarily mean that he wasn't always trying to maybe interest us in a deal. I think there were times when Saddam would really perk up, when he would feel that maybe I can kind of get the Americans to see things my way and maybe we can do a deal of some sort. But, you know, once we kind of came back to the Bush administration about weapons of mass destruction, from talking to him, because really he was the last -- I mean that was the real last stone unturned, you know, then I think the Bush administration just lost interest in him and, you know, they were just more than happy to see him executed. And certainly the Malaki government was -- it's really a fascinating thing. Prime Minister Malaki had all these problems since he came into office, but once he executed Saddam it was like he got a new rebirth and a new sense of purpose in being prime minister. And that was really fascinating.

But I personally was disturbed by -- I mean I understand Saddam did many bad things and I knew it was going to lead to his execution. As I mention in the book, I had hoped that the execution would have been done that it would bring a sense of justice, sense of closure to Saddam's victims. I had

IRAQ-2017/03/22

hoped that people would see that a rule of law has been established and that maybe this is the reason why there's a new Iraq. But instead it was done the way it has always been done in Iraq, which is kind of like just an execution, done in the middle of the night. It was sort of like when they put Abdel-Karim Qassim's body on television in the '60s. And I just remember thinking, this is not what we came here to do, but.

As far as WMD goes, and your question about UNSCOM, Saddam I believe had real, real issues with UNSCOM, not just because of intrusion on sovereignty, which is important, but I think that Saddam saw UNSCOM for what it was, which was also an intelligence gathering operation. And I think that Saddam knew that there was a lot of intelligence officials embedded in the UNSCOM process and that he knew what they were there for, and it wasn't just to verify weapons caches or inventories, it was there to find regime vulnerabilities. You know, one of the questions I always get asked is why didn't he just comply with the international community's wishes. And if it's just them trying to inventory weapons, yeah, that's going to be problematic but it's possibly solvable and probably doable, but if it's also putting people in on the ground in Iraq to kind of get at regime vulnerabilities, then it becomes perfectly understandable why he was so willing to not cooperate.

MR. RIEDEL: I'm just going to add my two cents on the question that you raised about the knowledge about WMD in the Bush administration and remind you of the famous meeting in which George Tenet says it's a slam dunk. We've also focused on Tenet said, but very few people have actually looked at that meeting in its context. In that meeting the president, the vice president, and senior officials had all gathered together to hear the intelligence community, represented by George Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin, present the case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. And when John McLaughlin was done the president said to the two of them, that's it, that's all you have. And then George Tenet, much to his regret, throws in the killer line, oh, my god, it's a slam dunk. Much to his regret because that will be the line that is used when he's ousted from being director to characterize his whole position.

What's really important about that meeting is that when the president and vice president confronted with the evidence, they recognized themselves wasn't very good evidence. It was a pretty slim picking.

IRAQ-2017/03/22

Let's take some more questions. Right here in the front. See I pick people in the front because I'm very nearsighted and I can't see anybody in the back (laughter). Remember that when you come next time.

QUESTIONER: Tamira Talibani, Georgetown University. So we are aware of in October 2002 Saddam Hussein gave full amnesty to the prisoners, including political prisoners. Sort of building up on that, did he share any thoughts or expectations about the security situation of Iraq post war, and was he aware of that in any way? Was he aware of the deteriorating security situation and such?

Thank you.

MR. RIEDEL: Let's take one more. The gentleman right there on -- yes, you.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible), former professor at Baghdad University. I understand that Saddam doesn't understand the United States' system and how to deal with them, but after your investigation did you think also that American intelligence office doesn't understand Saddam and his regime?

MR. RIEDEL: And we'll take one more. How about right up here in the front.

QUESTIONER: Lou Gagliano. Do you think the intel that we were gathering at the end from whatever sources was biased against Hussein and really wanted him out and they were just feeding bologna, so to speak?

And second question, what is the real future politically of Iraq in the region?

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you. That's a simple one. (Laughter)

MR. NIXON: Okay. Your question about -- did he know -- yes, he did. He did know. He could hear very easily bombs going off and IEDs on the road. He was housed fairly close to the road and so it was not hard for him to hear -- airport road that it -- not hard for him to hear explosions. And at times he would say -- you know, he said to me -- and there's a passage in the book and a lot of people have focused on this because it's really -- there were times that he was very prescient. And one of them is he said, you know, you're going to fail here. And I remember thinking but, Saddam, you're our prisoner, your government is no more, how are we going to fail? And he said you don't understand our history, you don't understand our culture, you don't understand our language, and you don't understand the Arabic mind, and that's why you're going to fail. And I remember thinking, sitting there -- I didn't want to give him the

IRAQ-2017/03/22

benefit of me agreeing with him, but I remember thinking I think you've got a point. And he was right. And he also said at one point, and I came back to this years later and I saw this passage in my notebook, and I remember thinking, my god, he said Iraq is going to become -- now that you have me here and now that you've come in Iraq is going to become a playground for terrorists and -- it's going to be a playing field I think was his phrase for terrorists. And it's going to get worse and it's going to spread.

Let's see, what was the other question?

MR. RIEDEL: His impressions of America.

MR. NIXON: Oh, right, right. And do Americans have a very poor understanding of Iraq. Yes, I would say largely speaking. The intelligence community has some very smart people on the Middle East and the State Department also has some very smart people. I think that when I came in in 1998 I was really impressed with some of the skill and really deep understanding of some of the analysts, but after 9/11, as the number started to be beefed up to deal with the Middle East and with the war on terror, I saw a dilution the quality of some of the analysis that -- and to be quite honest with you, I think the intelligence community as a whole was focused on the Soviet Union for so long, and even then we got things wrong with them. The thing about intelligence is it's not perfect and it's not like -- you don't know everything. And it really helps sometimes when you have a president who understands that as opposed to the last three or four presidents, who feel that we have a crystal ball in the basement and that we can just consult it every now and then and give them the answer they want. So we could definitely do a better job and I think there's a case that could be made that it's because of our focus on the Soviet Union and European culture, which is natural for Americans to sort of want to be focused on, the Middle East can sometimes -- it's sort of like a dog whistle in the sense that the dog whistle gets blown and Middle Easterners will hear that whistle, that sound, but Americans have deaf ears and they don't even hear it, let alone understand what it means. And I would have thought my -- my hope had been after 9/11 that that was going to be like our Sputnik moment, that was going to be the moment in which Middle Eastern studies would be catapulted in academia and that our government would pour money into this so that we would build a generation of Middle East experts who could help us. But I don't think that ever happened and certainly it's not going to happen in a Trump administration.

IRAQ-2017/03/22

And as far as the intelligence, some intelligence was given to us from partners that was good. There was a lot of intelligence that was passed that was bogus and that did have an absolute purpose of being deliberately misleading. You know, two words, Ahmed Chalabi. That says it all right there. One of the misfortunes of 9/11 though was, you know, this sort of perfect storm of this catastrophic event and then this deluge of information that is churned up and now is being sort of put out there because nobody wants to be holding onto the information -- like if there had been an intelligence report that had all the names of the hijackers that had been held back, can you imagine the uproar that would have been. So now Agency, the Pentagon, everybody is pumping out their bilge water. And then you also get a lot of new analysts who are working, for example, on Iraq, as we beefed up our numbers. And I think it was sort of a perfect storm in the failure of analysis.

And also there is something that has happened to the intelligence community, and I talk a little bit about this in the book. There's something that has happened in the intelligence community, and that is the tendency to prioritize current intelligence over strategic intelligence, constantly feeding the appetites of policy makers on a day to day basis with the latest and the greatest, which is like catnip to them. But it comes at a price, and the price is your analysts no longer are thinking in terms strategically, they're no longer thinking in terms of longer timeframes, and they become experts on this day to day thing. But when you say to them, okay, but what does all this mean, where is this going to be in 10 years, you know, it's sort of a deer in the headlights look. And I don't think from all indications that that has changed. And that's a shame because this -- when I used to go and look at current intelligence -- a lot of times if I was working on something I'd go back and see what we had written over the past six months, and I'd look at all these memos and these things and I would be like this is worthless, it's not even good historically. And therefore it's sort of like -- current intelligence to me is sort of like a Diet Coke that gets poured in and it tastes really good and it's really bubbly, but you don't want to drink the Diet Coke a week after it's been sitting out in a glass.

MR. RIEDEL: Let's try to take some in the back maybe.

MS. MARR: Phebe Marr. I'm a historian of Iraq and I've also spent time

MR. NIXON: Can I ask you a question?

MS. MARR: Beg your pardon?

IRAQ-2017/03/22

MR. NIXON: Can I ask you a question?

MS. MARR: No, I've forgotten --

MR. NIXON: No, when is your book coming out?

MS. MARR: Hopefully soon, hopefully soon.

MR. NIXON: I'm waiting for it.

MS. MARR: Okay, good. I wonder if I could get you back a little bit more in 1991 and the infamous discussion with April Glaspie. I'm just fascinated on Saddam's motivation and what he took away from that meeting. Did he expect the United States, you know, to come in -- and I remember hearing from the policy community that there was some thought that the situation was so dire afterwards that he might actually leave or be bribed to leave or something like that. That wasn't my opinion, but I'd be very interested in hearing yours. So I wonder if you --

MR. NIXON: That he would be bribed to leave in 2003? Is that what you're --

MS. MARR: No, no. I'm back in 1991.

MR. NIXON: Okay, okay.

MS. MARR: And the going into Kuwait.

MR. NIXON: Well, I asked him, I said why didn't you just put Ali Hassan on the throne, or somebody on the throne, and just leave, and pull out our army? Basically you already achieved what you had wanted. And he just looked at me and he said why would I do that? And it's like Kuwait is ours. Ask any Iraqi, Kuwait is ours. There's not Iraqi who's going to tell you that this is a separate country.

As far as April Glaspie goes -- and to be honest with you, and I think there are a lot of Iraqis even today who believe that -- and not just Sunni, I think there are lots of Shiite Iraqis that maybe look at Kuwait the same way. But as far as April Glaspie goes, we talked a little bit about her. More about his thinking about what he wanted to do. But I think that Saddam walked away from that meeting hearing what he wanted to hear. And it was unremarkable to him I think. It didn't seem to be anything that really stood out in his mind. He just said he had met with the American ambassador, she said that they didn't have -- personally, I think if we had been clearer -- first of all, I've always felt that April Glaspie did her job and that she became kind of the scapegoat of this thing. And one of the most interesting aspects of that whole time is what the first Bush administration is dealing with in terms of you've got -- in

IRAQ-2017/03/22

the first two years they're in office you've got the deterioration of the situation of the East European satellite countries of the Soviet Union as they all break away from Moscow, you've got the Tiananmen Square, you've got reunification of Germany, the fall of communism in the Soviet Union. I mean all of these things, these high priced ticket items of the Cold War, these absolute musts of the Cold War are happening. And I think that the Bush administration just doesn't see or is not paying attention to what's going on in Iraq. And also, truth be told, the intelligence agency, the analytic assessment of the Agency at the time was that Saddam was going to lick his wounds, that Saddam had -- they had finally brought a close to the Iran-Iraq war and that Saddam was going to lick his wounds and rebuild his country and that he was not going to be a menace to any of his neighbors because he couldn't be. And I think that you take a combination of those, put them together, and you have an administration that's not paying sufficient attention to somebody who can be very unpredictable, and also somebody who has his own calculation that, as I said, a guy who is deeply in debt, money is very important to him, he wants to be able to rebuild his country. He also wants to make sure his military isn't so bored that they start plotting against him. It's a pretty volatile mix.

MR. RIEDEL: Let's take another round of questions. Right her with this gentleman.

MR. KRUPANSKY: Hi, thanks. My name is Jack Krupansky; unaffiliated. Are there any specific lessons you can offer from your experience with Saddam that you think we should apply to current leaders, like Assad in particular, and Putin as well?

MR. RIEDEL: Over here.

MR. NIXON: That's a great question.

QUESTIONER: Thanks. Three quick questions. One, I've never understood how it can be said that Saddam Hussein used weapons of mass destruction on his own people, or the Kurds I guess, but we didn't find any. So just if he had them why didn't he have anything at all? I mean, so also is it typical that interrogators are reliant on translators as opposed to knowing the language themselves? And the third thing, was it hard to get your book through the CIA, whoever CIA has?

MR. NIXON: That's another session altogether.

QUESTIONER: Oh, okay.



IRAQ-2017/03/22

MR. NIXON: Okay. Your question about leaders, what lessons. First of all, we have to do a better job of understanding world leaders. I think it's great that the Agency has -- it used to be our own separate office, but the leadership analysis doesn't get its due I think in the Agency at times. But a lot of times a policy maker will say well let's going on in Zimbabwe or what's going on in Iran, but when a crisis hits, when the heat gets turned up it's not so much what is Iran up to anymore, it's what does the supreme leader want, then who is the supreme leader, tell me about him. I think that the Agency does a good job in leadership analysis. They have some really great -- I worked with some truly great leadership analysts, but we can always be better.

As far as our government goes, we have this weird, weird tendency in American foreign policy to kind of look at world leaders and when they do something we don't like we try to ostracize them and then we eventually at some point we become kind of obsessed with them and then our media becomes obsessed with them. And then the final stage -- it's almost like cancer, you know -- it's like the final stage is we call them Hitler. We say this person is just like Hitler. And it sounds great to our domestic audience, it sounds like we're being tough. You know, Hillary Clinton called Putin Hitler. But we don't realize that when we do that we climb out on a ledge and we shut the window, we can't get back in. Because once you've called somebody Hitler it becomes incredibly difficult to -- you can't negotiate with Hitler, you can't find common ground with Hitler. You've got to get rid of him. And we close off our options. And I think a lot of times our policy makers and our politicians don't understand that.

What was the -- that was that question --

MR. RIEDEL: WMD against the Kurds and that there wasn't any WMD.

MR. NIXON: Well, no, there was no nuclear WMD. I mean Saddam had stockpiles of chemical weapons that have been located. So I mean it's not that he was WMD-less, but we knew about those things, we knew about some of the things that had been discovered during the UNSCOM process. And, in fact, The New York Times did a very length exposé -- not exposé but long pieces on the ramifications and the health ramifications for many of these soldiers who came upon some of these stockpiles and what happened.

And what was your other question?

MS. MARR: Oh, they were (inaudible).

IRAQ-2017/03/22

MR. NIXON: Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, that's a great question. Saddam understood English very well. He spoke English very poorly. But a lot of times when I was talking to him, as far as my Arabic language skills go I mean I wouldn't have gotten very far, and some people say I have a distinct problem with English as well. But it would be better, but it's not a game closer. I know the FBI person who succeeded us was an Arabic speaker, but he also had a number of other FBI people in the room who were helping who didn't speak Arabic. So they had to do it through a translator. And in fairness, George Piro, who is the FBI special agent involved, yes he knew Arabic, but he didn't really -- in fairness he was put in a very tough situation by being given this incredible assignment at the very last minute and then he had to become an expert on Saddam in a month, which is impossible. And you don't go in front of Saddam Hussein with just having read a few reports and a few cables, because one of the first things he always did -- talking to Saddam Hussein was like cat and mouse all the time. And I would ask a question and I'd say, well what about Muqtada al-Sadr, he's like (sighing noise). Tell me about -- we're talking about Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who was his father -- and Saddam said, hmm, refresh my memory, I'm not sure I remember him. And so then you would have to tell him. And it was his way of kind of trying to figure out what it is you knew so that he then could figure out what it is he would tell you. And it was constantly like that. And sometimes it was just, you know.

What was really important was maybe not so much of the language, but having the subject matter expertise in the room because a lot of times he would try to sort of fob off answers that were very statesman like. Talking to Saddam Hussein was like reading a really bad Washington memoir because we'd always try to use these high, high motivations. And I'd say like what do you think was the greatest achievement of your regime, and he would be like well the year we tried to change the Iraqi constitution and make it more pluralistic. I think that was the high point for me. And I would sit there and say yes, okay, aside from that what was -- so. And then you would have to go on. It was sort of like peeling back an onion.

And we had one more. What was the?

MS. MARR: (OFF MIC).

MR. NIXON: Oh, gosh. Bruce and I were just talking about this. All told, I mean I originally gave them the manuscript in 2011, got it back in a few months, then I didn't do anything with the

IRAQ-2017/03/22

manuscript for about two years. And then about 2015 I gave it back to them and then that took -- all told it took about 14 or 15 months. And the problem with this that it is such an un-transparent process that your mind kind of runs away with you and you start thinking of all these conspiracy theories of what's going on, why are they not giving this back to me, I'm really getting angry about this, and they're doing this because they want to screw me or they don't want the truth to come out. And really what it boils down to and what I've come to figure out is that it's more a bureaucracy that's overtaxed and unmanned. And part of that is I don't think the Agency has ever really embraced the idea of people leaving the Agency and writing books. It's always seen this as some sort of a betrayal. But they're shouting against the wind because one of the things is that they've had so many employees in recent years who have come in and then left and are now working not only on books but on screen plays and sitcoms and god knows what else.

MR. RIEDEL: I'll take another round. Over here, this gentleman.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm David from Johns Hopkins. Can you explain the discrepancies between your impression of Saddam earlier in your career when you were studying him versus after meeting him?

MR. NIXON: Discrepancies? Sure, sure.

MR. ALIF: Hi, John. Thank you for so much for speaking and writing about Saddam. I think I really appreciate. My name is Ali Alif. I'm from GW. Two questions for you. Did Saddam reach out to Osama bin Laden when he was in Sudan and the hint to this question, how many times? Same question, how did you make sure he was answering your question in good faith? I've read an independent piece about you asking him about his back pain and I believe he wasn't telling you the truth for proving you wrong and not giving you the credit as being you fully understand his character.

So thank you.

MR. NIXON: As far as discrepancies and what I learned about him prior to and after. There was a lot of mythology attached to the figure of Saddam Hussein over the years. Some of it had been put on him by commentators and analysts and academics based on things that they had heard. Some of it I think Saddam promoted himself. I mentioned the body doubles being one of them. Another thing was this -- I remember attending a lecture by a noted scholar, Omatsi Ibaram, who I've read his books and I don't always agree with them but I always find them very interesting and well worth reading,

IRAQ-2017/03/22

but I remember him telling us this story about how Saddam was a young man and he said -- you know, his father died before he was born and then he was raised by his step father and Saddam was -- his mother was a bit of a soothsayer, a bit of a kind of an oddball, even by Tikriti standards, and he would sometimes be pushed around by his friends and playmates and what have you. And it must have been difficult for basically an orphan in a society where the father figure is so important, in which the father is sort of -- you gain your prestige from him but also he's your protector as well. And Omatsi told a story about how one day Saddam had a gun and the kids kind of came to give him a hard time and everything and he just sort of lifted up his jacket and showed them the gun and they backed off. And it's from that stems his need for nuclear weapons. Now, there was more detail to it, but that was the point he was making. Now, I kind of talked to Saddam about this and he just laughed. And he said everybody had guns, what are you talking about. And if you didn't have a gun you went and found one. And it was such an interesting way of breaking through kind of like this myth.

There was another time when I was talking to him and he was describing just his childhood. And another thing was that his stepfather beat him and that he was -- and this is another reason why Saddam is looking to get weapons of mass destruction, because he's trying to protect himself because he grew up in this dysfunctional household and his stepfather beat him and was brutal to him. And I told him this, and he said I love my stepfather. He was the most wonderful man I knew. He is the person who made me what I am. He saw that there was nothing here and he was the one who told me to go to Baghdad, to move to the big city and to seek my fortune there because he knew that I would never achieve it at home. And I had no reason to believe that he wasn't telling me the truth. Again, there were times when Saddam could be very -- you just wouldn't believe him, and then there were times when you just got a sense that he was speaking from the heart.

As far as the question about how do I know -- well, Osama bin Laden, that's a question that we got asked a lot, both before 9/11 and certainly after 9/11 at the Agency from policy makers. And we never came to any other conclusion other than these were incidental contacts, that these organizations, as terrible as al-Qaida is, Osama bin Laden had contacts with a lot of people and that a lot of times this is the way business happens in the region. But we never found any sort of substantive ties between Saddam's regime and al-Qaida.

IRAQ-2017/03/22

And certainly when I was talking to him in captivity we talked about this. Saddam basically felt that al-Qaida and his regime had conflicting goals and that he had never -- these were the people that threatened him. Saddam said that he didn't fear -- he never said I'm afraid of things and he never said I fear anything. And I think that was true, he didn't fear things. But he had concerns. And his one -- one of his most profound concerns was the threat of Sunni extremism to his regime. He said that was more of a threat than the United States or Iran because Sunni extremism could kind of -- it was one thing if the Shiite misbehaved, it was another thing if the Kurds misbehaved. They could be identified through his intelligence apparatus and his security apparatus fairly easily. But if the Sunni community misbehaved then that's something that could rot his regime from within. And he was always very, very careful about that. And even to the end, when I mentioned how disengaged he had become, that was one area where he had always maintained a very strong interest and remained engaged in. Whenever it came to his security, this is the thing that allowed him to live as long as he did. So that's something that was very important to him.

MR. RIEDEL: I'm going to bring it to a halt here. I know that many of you have more questions. The book is going to be for sale in the back of the room and John has agreed to sign copies. So you have your chance to get in one more question if you buy the book. (Laughter)

I do want to underscore I think this hour and a half does beautifully -- this is a really fascinating episode. We rarely have the opportunity that you had and I want to thank you not only for coming here today, but for writing this book. Because there aren't going to be many times in history when the United States captures one of its enemies and actually gets to talk to him. We need to know what happened, we need to know what goes on in those debriefings.

So thank you very much for doing that and thank you for coming to Brookings.

MR. NIXON: Thank you for having me. (Applause)

\* \* \* \* \*

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020