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The Life and Death of Saddam and Osama

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Is Saddam Hussein alive or dead? Should he be wanted dead or alive? For years, such questions were of huge import. Now they don't matter at all.

Why don't they matter? The Bush administration is faced with a win-win situation regardless of the fallen Iraqi leader's fate—a very different situation than that presented by the fate of Osama bin Laden.

If Saddam Hussein is dead, his fate becomes the *déjà vu* all over again (sic) of a majority of fallen tyrants as big as Nazi Germany's Hitler or as small as Liberia's Samuel Doe. His death can show that tyranny does not pay, and that sooner or latter it must be swept away by the natural order of things with some help from the defenders of what is right and just.

Regardless of the manner of his death — suicide, a wartime casualty through bunker-busting bombing, assassination through poison, shooting or stabbing, or even a natural medical demise — the Iraqi government (aka regime) has been changed. The beginnings of a freer, democratic Iraq that can better meet the needs of the Iraqi people can finally stir — or so the talking heads of the Bush administration can say.

And if he is alive? His power is gone. There is no place to reconstitute a next act, because there is no stage that would be willing to accept any further play.

In some ways, Hussein could be said to suffer even more in a relatively powerless state of life than in whatever experience might have immediately preceded his demise. This could especially be the case when he would contemplate on all he had lost and all that he would feel entitled to — as might be expected from someone whom psychiatric experts have termed a malignant narcissist.

Whether Hussein is dead or alive, the Bush administration would be able to broadcast a pet mantra for the benefit of all terrorists, terrorist supporters, and the audience of the general global public: "You can run, but you can't hide."

The same win-win situation applies not only to the Bush administration but also to virtually all political actors who may be wondering how Saddam Hussein's fate affects their own interests. As with the Bush administration, these others — as diverse as terrorist groups, non-governmental humanitarian organizations and national governments—can use Hussein's life and death so that either works in their favor.

Terrorist groups can use either version of Saddam Hussein's fate as a rationale for recruiting, planning, and carrying out further acts of terrorism. Both a live and a dead Saddam can allow humanitarian organizations to go about the business of fund-raising, obtaining and transporting resources, and physically and even spiritually saving people. Saddam—whether alive or dead—can motivate the

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realpolitik of one national government, the humanitarian-laden foreign policy of another, and the totalitarianism or state-sponsored terrorism of yet another government that is a part of some axis of evil. (It is true, of course, that even as everyone wins, all wins will not be equal.)

However, before we conclude that a win-win situation is the coin of the realm after the demise of leaders with blood on their hands, let's look at the case of Osama bin Laden.

Here the Bush administration is faced with a lose-lose situation. If bin Laden is still alive, he may well be able to have contact with and provide guidance to those he controls and to those he inspires. His very existence also may serve to rub salt in a festering wound — that of the only remaining superpower from which he is still running and hiding and against which he may still be planning and suborning.

And if bin Laden is dead? Unlike the publicized death of Hussein, the publicity attendant to bin Laden's death could well reinforce an image of the terrorist leader as martyr. This could not only energize practicing terrorists but help create new ones. So bin Laden as dead or alive matters to the Bush administration and presents real problems. However, not much can be done about them.

As even the most cursory readers of history and observers of the human condition may realize, some people are worth more dead than alive. Others are worth more alive rather than dead. The same applies when people are proven most useful through love, hate, or fear of them. Saddam Hussein is truly in the dustbin of history. Live or dead, Osama bin Laden is not.

(See Black, J. (2002). The murder of memory: Freud, Moses, and the death of Rabin. *Mortality*, 7, 83-95; Gerami, S. (2003). Mullahs, martyrs, and men: Conceptualizing masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Men & Masculinities*, 5, 257-274; Los, M. (2002). Post-communist fear of crime and the commercialization of security. *Theoretical Criminology*, 6, 165-188; Rucker, D. D., & Pratkanis, A. R. (2001). Projection as an interpersonal influence tactic: The effects of the pot calling the kettle black. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 1494-1507).