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THE HOUSE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

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Professional historians...tend, perhaps naively, to underrate the degree of unwisdom prevalent in the world of action, and too often expect political leaders to behave rationally—as men of goodwill with the advantage of hindsight define rationality. Mussolini's outwardly erratic course and irresponsible decisions, and above all his failure, have therefore aroused widespread contempt, which in turn has inhibited analysis of his intentions and actions on their own terms.

— MacGregor Knox

Iraq's response to the Coalition's military threat was dictated by the nature of the regime and of Saddam Hussein himself. While to Western eyes the choices Iraq made may appear dysfunctional or even absurd, the regime's responses to the threat and then the invasion were logical within the Iraqi political framework, even if later proven to be counterproductive. Saddam may have been, to a large extent, ignorant of the external world; he was, however, a student of his own nation's history and culture. Thus, the Iraqi response to threats and the invasion of Coalition forces was a function of how Saddam and his minions understood their own world, a world that looked nothing like the assessments of Western analysts.

As the massive buildup of coalition forces proceeded in 2002 and early 2003, two major assumptions governed Saddam's preparations. The first assumption was that the greatest danger the regime faced was an internal coup. In fact, Iraq's national history is littered with military coup attempts with one following another in dreary progression. Even Saddam's Ba'ath Party saw its first try at seizing power in the early 1960's collapse under the hammer blow of a military coup that overthrew the first efforts of the Ba'ath party to mold Iraq in accordance with its ideology. In response to the catastrophic defeat of Arab armies by Israel in the Six Day War, another military coup ushered the Ba'ath return to power on July 17, 1968, with Saddam as one of its leading players.

Saddam and his colleagues were determined that this time the military would not overthrow their new Ba'ath regime, and created a multitude of secret police organizations to ensure the unswerving loyalty of the population. These secret agencies immediately proceeded to infiltrate the military in order to ensure its loyalty. Once he had established himself in absolute power, Saddam set about creating a number of military organizations in addition to the regular army. In the desperate days of his war with Iran, Saddam created the Republican Guards to have a military organization closely tied to the regime and its ideology rather than to the country. With the best military equipment that Iraq's oil money could purchase, the Republican Guard, unlike most other private armies, established a regional reputation for military competence.

However, the fundamental purpose of the Republican Guard was to protect the regime from not only the Iraqi Army but also the Iraqi people. In the 1991 Gulf War, its units died in large numbers while accomplishing little against Coalition forces. However, when the Shi'a and others rebelled in March 1991 in reaction to the regime's military defeat at the hands of the Coalition, the Republican Guard proved its worth, putting down the rebellion with devastating effect. Yet even among the elite Republican Guard, connections to Saddam's family or to his tribe counted for more than military competence.

For the remainder of the 1990s, Saddam confronted increasing discontent among his population as United Nations sanctions significantly impacted the life of Iraq's people. The discontent spilled over into several failed coup attempts, including at least one by members of the Republican Guard. Hence the need to establish the Special Republican Guard, and then the Saddam Fedayeen, the Al Quds, and the martyrs brigades, as means

to ensure that Iraq's military forces would be too splintered to organize a coup. The regime's security was the priority in military affairs, not preparations to fight against an external enemy.

Because Saddam was unwilling to trust anyone except for his sons and a few close relatives, he forbade the military to train in anything resembling a rigorous fashion. Fearing that any training maneuvers might well turn into another coup attempt, Saddam severely restricted unit movements and even social contacts between senior officers. For commanders, Saddam only picked the most loyal, those tied to him by blood. Most of the competent fell by the wayside, retired if they were lucky, dead if Saddam had any reason to distrust them. Military effectiveness, at least in Western terms, ceased to exist.

The second assumption that Saddam made had to do with the nature of his opponents. Through the distortions of his ideological perceptions, Saddam simply could not take the Americans seriously. After all, had they not run away from Vietnam after suffering what to him was a "mere" 58,000 dead? Iraq had suffered 51,000 dead in just one battle on the Fao Peninsula against the Iranians. In the 1991 Gulf War, the Americans had appeared on the brink of destroying much of Iraq's military, including the Republican Guard, but then inexplicably stopped—for fear of casualties, in Saddam's view. Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo all added to Saddam's belief that the Americans could not possibly launch a ground invasion that would seriously threaten his regime. At best they might be willing to launch an air campaign similar to OPERATION DESERT FOX in 1998 with a few small ground attacks around Iraq's periphery. But from Saddam's point of view, the idea that the Americans would attack all the way to Baghdad appeared ludicrous.

A few senior military officers believed that the coalition might launch a ground

campaign, especially given the enormous buildup that was taking place in Kuwait. But even they believed that as in OPERATION DESERT STORM, the Americans would wage a sustained air campaign before they launched their ground forces on an invasion of Iraq. Therefore, the entire Iraqi leadership—military and civilian—was surprised by Coalition ground forces beginning their offensive into Iraq at the same time the air campaign was starting. Adding to their incomprehension were the speed and power of the American offensive, which were simply beyond their understanding of military operations and logistical capabilities.

Undergirding Saddam's assumption about the Americans was a profound misunderstanding of things military. Like the First World War generals, Saddam's conception of military effectiveness revolved around the number of casualties that an army suffered. To Saddam war was about warriors willing to die for their country, not about killing the enemy. In effect, he turned General George S. Patton's famous aphorism ("No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country") on its head. Thus, the lack of training in Iraq's military organizations never crossed Saddam's mind as carrying with it dangers in a war against a foreign opponent. Ignorant of military history, logistics, technological changes, and any conception of modern military operations, Saddam was incapable of addressing the looming threat in any sensible fashion.

Exacerbating all these difficulties was the atmosphere of fear that Saddam had instilled throughout his civil and military bureaucracies. Iraqis at all levels understood that in this regime the bearer of bad news was in almost every case punished severely. When Saddam developed a new plan for the defense of Iraq that made no military sense,

his generals with few exceptions applauded the wisdom of their great leader.

Once combat operations began, Iraqi commanders at the rapidly moving front reported one success after another against the invading Coalition forces. On 31 March 2003, the Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf (“Baghdad Bob”), reported to the international press:

Those mercenaries of the international gang of villains sent their failing louts, but the snake is trapped in the quagmire now. The lines of communications now extend over 500 kilometers. Our people from all sectors, fighters, courageous tribesmen, as well as the fighters of the valiant Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party fought battles and pushed the enemy back into the desert...Now hundreds of thousands of the fighters of the valiant Iraqi people are distributed in all places. Saddam’s Fedayeen and some small units of the Iraqi Armed Forces began to engage the louts of the villains of the US and British colonialism day and night. We have decided not to let them sleep...[W]e destroyed 13 tanks, 8 tracked personnel carriers, and 6 half-tracked vehicles.

In the West such comments appeared as palpable nonsense. But from the point of view of Iraq’s leaders, Baghdad Bob was largely reporting what they were hearing from the front. In such an atmosphere Iraq’s leaders could not make coherent decisions on what they were actually confronting.

The conduct of Coalition operations also helped to contribute to Iraqi misperceptions as to what was going on. The Ba’ath Party bureaucrats in the cities along the Euphrates reported that the fanatical Saddam Fedayeen attacks, in which the Iraqis died by the

thousands, were having an enormous success. What made these reports even more believable was the fact that the US Army's 3rd Infantry Division had screened off these cities, rarely entering them. "Baghdad Bob" was able to claim that the Americans had been driven back into the deserts with which few urban Iraqis had any experience. But those at the top appeared convinced that their strategy was working. When the US Marines pulled back from ad-Diwaniyah during the Coalition "pause" at the end of March to avoid giving away their next move, the Ba'ath regime was able to claim another success for Iraqi arms.

But the largest contributing factor to the complete defeat of Iraq's military forces was the continued interference by Saddam. Just as soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division were about to push through the Karbala Gap, Saddam decided that all of that fighting was a mere feint, with the real threat coming from American forces moving from Jordan. His attempted reorientation of Iraqi forces added to the list of targets destroyed by Coalition aircraft. More important was the fact that those defending the Karbala Gap were robbed of any chance to establish defensive positions that could hold the Americans for anything more than a couple of hours. Once the Americans were through the gap, the Iraqi regime was finished.

The arrival of American forces at Saddam International Airport must have brought some sense that things were not going well. The desperate claims of Baghdad Bob were becoming even shriller. Now the regime's military forces were literally falling apart at the seams, no longer possessing the ability to put together anything resembling an effective defense. Most of the Iraqi army were voting with their feet. Those who still desired to fight had to do so in small groups with no coordination and little leadership.

There were Iraqis who had suggested alternative courses of action. General Raad Hamdani, the commander of the Republican Guard II Corps, suggested a defensive approach in which Iraq's military forces would use urban landscapes to defuse the advantages that Coalition forces enjoyed with their superior technology. Such an approach would not likely have changed the outcome—the disparity between Coalition forces and those of the Iraqis was just too great—but it would have probably added considerably to the casualties the Iraqis could inflict on Coalition forces. However, Saddam and his advisors lived in a world determined by personal ideology and the narrow perspectives of people who grew up in small Iraqi villages. It is this insular mindset, and its subsequent manifestations, that this book describes.