
SADDAM'S DEATH WAS SUPPOSED TO MARK A □□□□ ERA' FOR IRAQ. IT DIDN'T LAST FIVE MINUTES

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06.01.2017

Washington Post, 06 Jan 2017

The former Iraqi president had repeatedly expressed the sentiment to some of the people responsible for him during his three years in captivity: You'll wish you had me back. A decade later, his words seem perversely prophetic

Ten years ago, on a Friday, at 6:00am Baghdad time, former Iraq president Saddam Hussain was led up a flight of stairs in his old Istikhbarat military intelligence headquarters in Baghdad's Kadhimiyah district. The site was rumoured to have housed torture chambers where supposed enemies of the state had suffered during his rule. Masked executioners led the former president towards a large noose. He followed obediently, with no visible fear, refusing to wear a hood. As pro-Shiite shouts of Moqtada, Moqtada, Moqtada pierced the morbid stillness, cameras whirled and flashed, creating a spectral aura.

A voice shouted, Go to hell.

Saddam replied: The hell that is Iraq?

Midway through his recitation of the Shahada, the Islamic profession of faith, the floor dropped from under Saddam, an audible crack echoing inside the warehouse-like structure as his neck was broken. Within a few minutes, he was dead.

In a statement shortly after the execution, the then US president George W. Bush said that while the execution wouldn't immediately end the sectarian violence already tearing apart Iraq, it would mark an important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy that can govern, sustain and defend itself, and be an ally in the war on terror. Saddams death was supposed to give birth to a new era in Iraq and the region.

However, the new era didn't last five minutes. A cluster of Shiites wildly celebrated beside Saddams body, creating a sense of an undisciplined lynching rather than a clinical state-sponsored operation. Within hours, at least 75 people were killed in bombing attacks across the country.

The United States military, meanwhile, announced the deaths of six more US soldiers, making that December the most violent month for US service members in two years.

Billowing smoke now obscures the sunrise in towns across the Middle East, 10 years after Saddams execution and 13 years after Bush's promise that a free Iraq is going to be one that will have an amazingly positive effect on its neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is now a charnel house.

At the time of the execution, the Arab Spring had yet to ignite □ and be mercilessly extinguished. Though Syria and Libya remained repressive dictatorships, relations with Libya were the best they had been in decades, with the Bush administration moving to restore full diplomatic relations with Muammar Gaddafis regime. Egypt, too, appeared reliably stable, though critics of Hosni Mubarak remained unsatisfied by the scope or pace of the limited reforms he had agreed to. Always-volatile

Yemen remained under the control of corrupt autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh, who famously referred to the challenge of holding the fractious country together as dancing on the heads of snakes. The embers of violence in Iraq, already beginning to burn brighter in sectarian bloodletting that was growing worse by the day, had not yet flared into a conflagration that would spread across the borders.

They soon would, though. The regions dictatorships would prove to be a tinderbox that, once lighted, would consume the lives of more than 400,000 in Syria, thousands in Egypt, Libya and Yemen and eventually between 200,000 and 500,000 in Iraq itself. Millions would flee their homes, causing a humanitarian crisis for which the world was utterly unprepared. Within a few years, refugees would pose a threat to Europes social fabric and a new terrorist organisation named Daesh (the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), even more lethal and barbaric than Al Qaida, would be born. With Irans Sunni foe Saddam eliminated, the Shiite theocracy became ascendant, exercising a powerful influence over the new Iraqi government, expanding its reach into Yemen as Al Houthi rebels took over the capital, positioning itself to help push President Bashar Al Assad to victory in Syria.

Who can forget former US secretary of defence Donald Rumsfelds pronouncement – delivered with the unwavering confidence that characterised his leadership – that the Iraq War might last five days or five weeks or five months, but it certainly isnt going to last any longer than that? As it turns out, the current struggle to liberate Mosul – for the third time, this time from Daesh, that didnt even exist when Saddam was killed – is now projected to last longer than Rumsfeld had assured us the entire war would. Just this week, the first of 1,700 soldiers from the Armys 82nd Airborne Division hugged their loved ones goodbye before deploying to Iraq. The youngest were five years old when the US launched the invasion to remove Saddam.

One wonders how anyone, most notably the wars architects, can cling to the view that delivering Saddam to the gallows was worth the trillions of dollars spent, not to mention the 4,500 service members killed, the more than 30,000 wounded, or the hundreds of thousands of violent deaths across the region since his overthrow. That doesnt even count the millions forced to flee the violence with little more than the clothes on their backs, or the terror threats that are now a routine feature of American and European landscapes. None of the American policymakers responsible for this have been held to account as their British counterparts were in the United Kingdoms damning Chilcot Report.

All this brings to mind something I learned while reporting for my book on Iraq. Saddam had repeatedly expressed the same sentiment to some of the people responsible for him during his three years in captivity: Youll wish you had me back.

It is disturbing even to entertain this notion, spoken as it was by a ruthless tyrant with so much blood on his hands. It is especially disturbing when I think about brave friends and fellow soldiers whose belief in their mission never flagged, some struck down in the prime of their lives. Yet, when viewed in relation to the cataclysmic chain of events set in motion by the war to remove him from power, Saddam Hussains words seem perversely prophetic.