

Jim Hoagland

America's Frankenstein's Monster

Iraq's army will not fare as well in this war as it did against Iran. This time, the Iraqis won't have the United States to help them.

At least, not directly. But Saddam Hussein does have the fruits of a secret six-year intelligence exchange with the United States to draw on as he fights American forces.

Saddam knows more about American battlefield intelligence capabilities than all but a handful of other foreign leaders, thanks to Ronald Reagan, William Casey and aides. The fact that Saddam still has secure communication channels to his corps commanders in the middle of history's heaviest air raids suggests that he knew enough about U.S. interception and jamming abilities to take special steps to thwart them.

The Iraqi-U.S. intelligence connection was the poisonous acorn from which sprouted a giant oak of misunderstanding between Baghdad and Washington. Casey's CIA was so busy telling Saddam our secrets that it had little time or stomach to gather his. Reagan and Casey also forgot to warn Saddam that there were limits to American tolerance of brutality and aggression. The oak of misunderstanding helped produce the Persian Gulf War.

An American official involved in the U.S. decision to give the Iraqis coordinates on Iranian troops' positions and other data derived from U.S. satellite photography offers a different metaphor. The exchange was to be "the bait on the hook," this official says, a policy morsel to draw the Gulf's most militarily powerful Arab state away from the Soviet Union.

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The more cynical, hidden reason was to keep Iraq in the war and bleeding Iran. But that devious scheme was lost sight of as U.S. policy makers convinced themselves that Saddam had the makings of becoming "our S.O.B." With coaching from the CIA and the State Department, the Iraqi strongman would moderate. Instead, he became America's own Frankenstein's monster.

The existence of the Iraqi-U.S. intelligence connection was exposed in 1986. Iraqi officials publicly (and falsely) complained that Washington had provided Baghdad with doctored intelligence to cause Iraqi defeats. What was not exposed was that the exchange began two full years before Washington and Baghdad established diplomatic relations in July of 1984.

In 1982 Iraq was still on the State Department's list of governments that sponsored terrorism. But Saddam's regime was removed from that list at about the time the CIA began turning over its secret data; that is, at a time when Iraq was in no direct danger of being overwhelmed by Iranian troops and when notorious terrorist groups were still based in Baghdad.

With no secure channels into Baghdad, Washington routed the intelligence data through the U.S. Embassy in Amman. It was so sensitive that Jordan's King Hussein personally oversaw the

transfer to Baghdad. By 1985 Casey had opened a CIA shop in Baghdad to manage the traffic. Not even the "accidental" Iraqi fighter attack on the USS Stark in May of 1987 interrupted the flow before the war's end in 1988.

"My sense was that it was primitive raw data on coordinates and troop positions, but it saved the Iraqis from being overrun in several key battles," recalls Howard Teicher, who directed political military affairs on the White House's National Security Council staff from 1983 to 1986. "You have to ask now what Saddam learned about us from what he was seeing. He seems to have switched quickly to more secure land-line communications to his commanders after we neutralized his microwave relay network. It is fair to ask when he began to build in so much redundancy."

Teicher's own story is Washington policy making as farce. I first met him in 1978, when he was a young government analyst already predicting that Iraq would invade Iran. His detailed analyses of Iraq's growing military capabilities and ambitions were well ahead of the curve. But when Teicher put these into a secret policy paper at the Pentagon the next year, senior Carter administration officials kicked it back to him, ridiculing the idea that

Iraq would invade Iran—a year before that happened.

Opposing cuddling up to Iraq led Teicher onto the periphery of the Iran-contra scandal, which cost him his NSC job. Now in private business in Washington, one of the best analysts of Iraq's military is unconsulted by a government at war with Iraq. He is not even consulted by the talk shows. *Sic transit gloria* Washington.

The point is not to recite individual past judgments, right and wrong, on Iraq. The point is that the entire system failed. The CIA developed a vested interest in seeing Saddam as a customer, as our kind of dictator. It is hard to believe that intelligence gathering on Saddam and his regime was as vigorous as it should have been. We forgave Saddam too quickly when he

apologized for the Stark and then gassed his own citizens for that to have been the case.

The "bait on the hook" gave the practitioners of espionage a dominant position in the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. Saddam promptly assigned one of his top intelligence operatives as his ambassador to Washington. The United States did in Baghdad what it did in other Arab capitals during the past three decades: It made the CIA station chief more important in local eyes than the U.S. ambassador.

Washington will be tempted to repeat this mistake in dealing with the brutal, secretive governments of the Middle East. Syria, a coalition partner against Iraq, is a current candidate. But the blood borne on Desert Storm shows what folly reliving that bit of history would be.