

Book Review: Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein by John Nixon

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In Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein, John Nixon tells the fascinating story of Saddam Hussein's capture and interrogation. At the same time, writes Joe Devanny, Nixon excoriates the George W. Bush administration's approach to intelligence and policy in the build-up to the Iraq war. This is a short, highly readable book, suffused with controlled anger at the intelligence community's shortcomings, but also offering some striking lessons for would-be intelligence analysts and policymakers, underlining the risks of unchallenged assumptions and the pitfalls of decision-making with imperfect information and political bias.

Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein. John Nixon. Bantam Press. 2016.

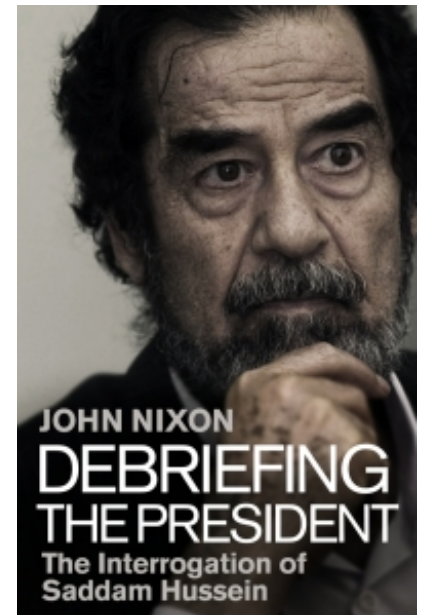
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Intelligence analysts enjoy unfettered access to information about their 'targets' in order to produce deep insights for the benefit of policymakers and political leaders. Despite the breadth and depth of this access, analysts commonly operate at one remove: they never actually get to meet their targets. For John Nixon, the terms of this deal were turned upside down. As a leadership analyst of Iraq for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Nixon was one of the first people to interrogate Saddam Hussein following Hussein's December 2003 capture.

Nixon's *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein* vividly conveys the best and worst aspects of a career in intelligence analysis. He clearly relished his analytical role as one of the US intelligence community's resident experts on Saddam, spending several years poring over every available scrap of information to form a picture of what made him tick. And at the heart of this book is the fascinating story of how Nixon was involved in the search for Saddam after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Then, hours after special operations forces had apprehended a suspect, it was Nixon's responsibility to travel to the detention site and perform an identification check to see if they really had found and detained Saddam Hussein.

It may surprise readers that Nixon had to frantically write down his checklist in the hours immediately preceding the first interrogation, compiling a list of questions and things to look out for in the identification process, including tribal tattoos on Saddam's right hand. Nixon reflects that no-one in the US government had expected Saddam to be captured alive, believing he would fight to the end.

This is but one, and by no means the worst, mistake catalogued by Nixon in the US preparations to invade and occupy Iraq. Having spent years trying to join the CIA, Nixon narrates his difficult first few years in the Agency, citing several examples of the bureaucratic frustrations that can await eager, newly-minted intelligence analysts: his managers gave him a hard time, were sceptical as to whether he had anything to offer and reportedly chose to take advice from within their social circle rather than on the basis of expertise. Nixon laments a bureaucratic culture in which telling senior officials and political leaders what they *wanted* to hear distorted the process of telling them what they *needed* to hear.



This process worked on two levels: directives *from above* to find information that confirmed existing assumptions (where are the WMD?), and influence *from within* the Agency's management shaping the flow of information upwards to smooth over dissent and remove contextual insights deemed interesting but not useful for senior policy customers. Nixon laments the CIA's 'service-provider' culture – blamed on George Tenet's leadership (1996-2004) – which has devalued the Agency's contribution to policymakers' understanding of key issues. As one example, he criticises the proliferation of 'pithy one-page memos,' regarded as 'crack cocaine for consumers of classified information' but reducing the Agency's ability to disseminate deeper analysis. Less plausibly, Nixon argues that policymakers are 'too busy to know what they should be focusing on', such that intelligence analysts should wrestle back control over the agenda. Analysts should feel that policymakers welcome independent insights, but *pace* Nixon, intelligence is a service to policymakers, who will always be in the driving seat, as they should be in a democratic system.



Image Credit: Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of V Corps and Joint Task Force Seven, and Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, Coalition Provisional Authority administrator, talk to reporters at the Baghdad Forum, 14 December 2003, about the capture of Saddam Hussein by coalition forces a day earlier in Tikrit, Iraq ([Staff Sgt Steven Pearsall CC0](#))

In his own words, Nixon 'played a very small part in a very large disaster in American foreign policy: the Iraq War'. *Debriefing the President* is laced with professional frustration and suffused with controlled anger about the Bush administration's approach to Iraq. At one point, this anger overflows in an ill-judged, two-page comparison of Saddam and Bush, noting their similarly 'haughty' and 'imperious' manners, that both were 'fairly ignorant of the outside world' and 'surrounded themselves with compliant advisers and had little tolerance for dissent'. Nixon's criticism is not confined to Bush, but his critique of Obama's Iraq policy is more measured, pointing to Obama's failure to deal effectively with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-14), to renegotiate an agreement to keep US forces in Iraq and generally to devote sufficient attention and resources to Iraq policy.

Although Nixon mostly blames the Bush administration, he does not exempt the CIA from censure. He claims that the Agency's management 'slavishly sought to do the president's bidding – as it usually does – in an effort to get a seat near the center of power and justify its budget'. Nixon is guilty, to a degree, of failing to recognise the responsibility of senior officials to protect the Agency's standing, and indeed its budget. The challenge, of course, is to uphold the integrity of the intelligence process at the same time as ensuring a sound relationship with the White House. Controlling for Nixon's anger and frustration, he has nevertheless marshalled compelling evidence that the

CIA at times fell short of maintaining this delicate but important balance.

Nixon writes of the lack of good intelligence and understanding of Iraqi politics before 2003. In particular, he highlights ignorance of the risks of Sunni-Shia tensions that were to engulf post-invasion Iraq. He attributes this shortcoming to a systemic inability to understand the complexity of Iraqi politics and society underneath the grip of Saddam's repressive regime. In 1999, for example, Nixon claims the CIA didn't recognise the significance of the murder of Shia cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, whose son, Muqtada, would become a leading Shia opponent to the Coalition Provisional Authority and new Iraqi government. The bitter sectarian conflict that followed the invasion demonstrates the terrible consequences of this intelligence and policy failure.

Nixon argues persuasively that the true dynamics of Saddam's regime eluded the US intelligence and policy communities in part because of the dated, patchy and partisan sources of information they relied on to inform their assessments. They missed, for example, the fact that Saddam had largely disengaged himself from foreign policy decision-making: he preferred to spend time on other pursuits, such as writing novels. Nixon states that prior to the invasion there were fragments of evidence pointing to some of these facts, but these were lost in the noise of more prevalent, inaccurate information, and the wider rush to war.

Nixon clearly disliked the flood of new CIA analysts assigned to cover Iraq before and after the 2003 invasion. These new analysts were either 'green' and lacked 'analytical skills' or else 'careerists looking for a new horse to ride in the race for promotions [...] The era of analytic mediocrity had begun, and Iraq was its first casualty'. For Nixon, what matters is that intelligence analysts are afforded the time and space to become genuine experts: 'The right answer comes when you have analysts with depth, not when you have a large analytic cadre.'

Given its compelling story, Nixon's short, highly readable book should inspire anyone contemplating a career in intelligence analysis. Nixon's enthusiasm for his craft exudes from every chapter. But the book also sounds a sharper, more cautionary note, counselling would-be intelligence analysts about the pitfalls lurking in their possible future, the frustrations of working in a big, politicised bureaucracy, the limits of intelligence and the structural barriers to making a significant contribution to government. Indeed, at times, Nixon's reminiscences about the CIA's culture and senior leadership are so caustic that readers of this book may think twice about wanting to join the Agency and about its capacity to deliver strong, independent assessments to the White House.

US intelligence experts have done much to develop the practice and profession of intelligence analysis, from Sherman Kent onwards. But the investment by successive US administrations in time, expertise and significant sums of money to improve its analyses hasn't always led to better decision-making. Nixon notes Obama's scepticism of intelligence agencies for precisely this reason. Nixon argues convincingly that intelligence analysis has its limits: it should focus on information and insight and forswear prediction and policy advice. Intelligence analysts need to develop deep subject-matter expertise as much as new analytical techniques and, above all else, policymakers and political leaders must be reflective and confident enough to afford intelligence its due weight and attention in the policymaking process. Moreover, senior intelligence officials must safeguard the independence and integrity of the analytical process from direct and indirect politicisation. These would be salutary lessons at any time, but they have become even more salient since the election of President Donald Trump.

Surprisingly, Nixon claims that he struggled to find an interested publisher when he first pitched the book in 2011. This is perhaps proof of how interest in Iraq had waned since 2003, only to surge again with the rise of ISIS. In this respect, the book's fate is itself a commentary on a salient shortcoming of US and wider Western foreign policy: a deficit of strategic patience and the concomitant failure to appreciate the longer-term impact of false economies, especially those relating to our investment in understanding areas of major operational activity.

Dr Joe Devanny is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Security Analysis, part of the Policy Institute at King's College London. Follow him on Twitter @josephdevanny. [Read more by Joe Devanny](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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