

Understanding Saddam

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To understand tyrants like Saddam Hussein does not mean to condone. Yet without an understanding of such brutality, there can only be an escalating cycle of attack and counter-attack. Such problems can never be resolved in this way. So how can we make sense of the seemingly irrational and monstrous behaviour of a man such as this?

The starting point is to recognise that all tyrants and dictators carry a deep wound to the psyche. We know this from accounts of the childhoods of Hitler and Stalin. Let us begin with the circumstances of the birth of Saddam Hussein. During his mother's pregnancy Saddam's father died of cancer and his brother also died from a brain tumour. Saddam's mother was beside herself with grief at this double loss, first trying to kill herself by throwing herself under a bus and then, when this failed, to abort Saddam by repeatedly smashing a door against her abdomen. After Saddam was born, his mother, who was in a deep depression, entirely rejected him. His maternal uncle took charge of him until the boy was three, when he was returned to his mother, who by then had remarried. For the next seven years Saddam was brutally abused, physically and psychologically, by his stepfather. At the age of ten he ran away to live with the same uncle, who went on to fill the boy's head with stories of the great heroes of the Arab world such as Nebuchadnezzar, Saladin and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

To understand why these stories had such a profound impact on Saddam's teenage mind, we can turn to what is known from research into the aftermath of early trauma. Studies in human development, including the formation of the criminal mind, show that a child must protect himself against the unbearable pain of rejection and abuse by building up a defensive shell to shield the vulnerable core of his personality from further pain. This defence hardens the heart so that the capacity for empathy for others is destroyed. Worse still, in order to overcome the experience of abject powerlessness, there develops a compensatory need to wield absolute power over others, and the compulsion to inflict on others what was once done to oneself. The tables are turned and the victim now becomes the bully, one who shows no mercy since none was shown him.

What is such a person to do with his life? If he has the necessary will, ruthlessness and ambition, the acquisition of power can make him a leader of his nation. The absence of empathy for others allows for any amount of killing in order to get to the top and stay there -the end will always justify the means. Once in power, control can be maintained over a whole population by a reign of terror.

In Saddam's case, during his teenage years, he was nourished on ideologies that encouraged him to envisage himself as saviour of his people. Consequently, he believes himself to be a great man worthy of a place in the history of the Arab nations.

Men like Saddam, with gross disturbances in their emotional development, often become hardened criminals and murderers; in this country they end up serving life sentences or are indefinitely detained in special hospitals such as Broadmoor.

At the core of the paranoid and grandiose personality of the dictator there is still to be found the anguished impotence of the terrified child. When attempting to safeguard the world against tyrants such as Saddam, we must always take account of the

traumatised child. If we can manage to do this, we will not react blindly to our own fear, but will be able to hold in mind the fear of the tyrant - the fear that leads to those crimes against humanity that are commonly called evil. We can then view men like Saddam with understanding, no matter how monstrous their behaviour.

The problem of aggression is not solved by naming the perpetrators of violence as 'evil' and in believing that the threat to the security of the world can be removed by simply eliminating them. Aggression can never in this way be eliminated from the face of the earth, since it is the tragic product of the 'shadow' side of the human condition. We need to be aware that tyrants, despite their deeds, belong to the human family, and that if they do have to be confronted, militarily or otherwise, it must be done not with hatred and the need to demonise but with compassion and insight.

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