

# Imprimis

December 2006 • Volume 35, Number 12

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## Saddam's Iraq and Islamic Terrorism: What We Now Know

### Stephen F. Hayes

Senior Writer, *The Weekly Standard*

Eugene C. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Journalism,  
Hillsdale College



**STEPHEN F. HAYES**, a senior writer at *The Weekly Standard*, is a graduate of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and DePauw University. Before joining *The Weekly Standard*, he was a senior writer for National Journal's Hotline. He also served for six years as Director of the Institute on Political Journalism at Georgetown University. His work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, *Reason* and many other publications. He has appeared on numerous television and radio programs, including NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, *FOX News Sunday*, CNN's *Late Edition*, and NBC's *Meet the Press*. He is the author of *The Connection: How al Qaeda's Collaboration with Saddam Hussein Has Endangered America* and of a forthcoming biography of Dick Cheney to be released this spring.

*The following is adapted from a speech delivered on November 9, 2006, at Hillsdale College, during the author's two-week residency to teach a seminar on investigative journalism.*

I woke up early on the morning of October 26, 2003. I was in Baghdad, staying at the famous al Rashid Hotel. From that hotel, CNN broadcast images of the first Gulf War to the entire world. In January 1993, as George H.W. Bush prepared to leave office and Bill Clinton prepared to assume the presidency, an American-made missile (TK) crashed into the lobby of the al Rashid, destroying the piano in the Western-style lounge.

On this day, I prepared for another long day hopping from helicopter to helicopter following Paul Wolfowitz around. Wolfowitz, regarded by many as the intellectual architect of the war, was in Iraq for the second time since the beginning of the war. I had also been with him on his first trip in July, when Iraq was still relatively calm, and attacks against coalition troops were sporadic and usually unsuccessful. We had even walked through downtown Mosul, in northern Iraq, without our bulletproof vests and helmets.

It was a false sense of stability. Things had gotten worse in the three months between that trip and this one. The night before we arrived at the al Rashid, a Black Hawk helicopter had been shot out of the sky by insurgent rockets. I spoke with my wife from Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, and she was nervous. Her colleagues at CNN had heard rumors of threats against the al Rashid and she knew we were headed to Baghdad. "You're not staying at the al Rashid, are you?" I told her we were. There's nothing to worry about, I said. I'm traveling with the No. 2 official from the Defense Department. If ever



a location would be under the tightest of security, it would be the al Rashid.

At 5:59 a.m., we got our wake-up call. My roommate, James Kitfield from the National Journal, volunteered to take the first shower. I had been out later than he had the night before, sipping a few Heineken tallboys at the al Rashid bar with other reporters, officials from the Coalition Provisional Authority, and Iraqis such as Kanan Makiya, who had returned to their country with the hope of making it hospitable to democracy.

As Kitfield headed to the shower, I found that I couldn't sleep. I stood at the picture window of our room on the 11th floor. In the distance on my left, I could see Saddam Hussein's old parade grounds. I had long been fascinated by the monuments that mark the beginning and end of the parade route—identical sets of arms holding two swords that cross over the street. The blades form arches, maybe ten stories high. The street below those swords is paved with the helmets of dead Iranian soldiers—casualties of the Iran-Iraq War that consumed much of the 1980s. The burly arms that hold the swords were said to be exact replicas of Saddam Hussein's—down to the hair follicles.

I surveyed this hideous manifestation of Saddam's megalomania and began to devise a plan. We were not scheduled to visit the parade grounds—an oversight, in my view. So I thought about the best way to convince Wolfowitz and his aides that a short side-trip would be worth the time.

As I looked out over downtown Baghdad, I noticed a bright blue box sitting under some trees just beyond the wall that separates the al Rashid Hotel grounds, along with the secure Green Zone, from the rest of Baghdad. That it was out of place—a small patch of color in a landscape that was otherwise desert brown to the horizon—seemed curious but not threatening.

A moment later, I watched as the first rocket left the blue trailer and whizzed over the wall toward the hotel. Then came another, and another, and another, and another, and another—flares of orange on a straight-line trajectory into the lower floors of the hotel. I suppose I expected them to stop, figuring whoever was shooting would have to pause and reload. So for probably 15 or 20 seconds, I stood at the window and watched. I looked in vain for the people firing at us. And the rockets just kept coming.

It finally occurred to me that standing in front of a window was not a good place to be, so I turned and ran out of the room. In the time it took for me to get from the window to the door—maybe two seconds—one of the

rockets hit our floor. The hallway was filled with smoke, so, taking my cues from two soldiers crawling on their knees and elbows, I dropped to the floor. The door to my room shut behind me. Remembering that Kitfield was still in the shower, I pounded on the door to get his attention, but he was already on his way out, wearing only a towel. He joined me in the hallway, and we waited until the concussive blasts had ended.

The hallway had already begun flooding. Six rooms down from ours, an internal wall had been blown into the hall by the rocket. The smoke seemed to be getting thicker, and there were shouted warnings of a “big fire,” though I never saw one. I stopped in the room next door to ours, where NBC News cameraman Jim Long and veteran Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski were standing in front of the window. Long was shooting video of the smoke near the blue trailer.

I walked down the hall to survey the damage. It was restricted to one room, but extensive. Water on the 11th floor was more than ankle-deep. The man staying in the room that was hit, Lt. Col. Charles Buehring, was a top adviser to L. Paul Bremer, the civilian administrator of Iraq. Buehring did not survive his injuries. As I walked down the 11 flights of stairs to the lobby, I noticed a small drop of blood near the fourth-floor landing. By the time I reached the ground floor, the white tiles were mostly covered with red footprints—some showing the treads of shoes, others the imprints of bare feet. In all, 16 al Rashid guests were injured.

The preliminary investigation would reveal that the attack could have been far worse. The blue trailer held 40 anti-tank rockets—20 Russian and 20 French. Just 29 of the 40 rockets fired. Seventeen of those 29 hit the building. And only six of the 17 rockets that hit the building exploded. So six out of 40 did what they were supposed to do.

The subsequent investigation at first focused on a senior Iraqi regime official and his contact at the hotel, the head of catering at the al Rashid, who, it turns out, had long been an informant for Iraqi intelligence. But then came a surprise: Everywhere investigators looked, they turned up evidence that pointed to a collaborative effort between Saddam loyalists and Islamic fundamentalists affiliated with al Qaeda. It was the kind of cooperation—between secularists and Islamic radicals—that the U.S. intelligence community had long assured us would never happen. And yet it did. Again and again and again. And it is still happening throughout Iraq today.

I did not come here today to defend the Iraq War, although I am certainly willing to do

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that. I know people of goodwill disagree about the necessity and conduct of that war—and President Bush was reminded of that fact on November 7. Rather, I'd like to look at a fundamental misconception about that war—particularly among elites—and consider what it says about our conduct of the Global War on Terror and our prospects for winning.

For five years, beginning just days after the attacks on September 11, one question has dominated the national debate: Is Iraq part of the War on Terror or a distraction from it? This was debated prior to the 2002 elections, when Congress voted by heavy margins to authorize war. It was a central issue in the 2004 presidential campaign. And, in a sense, it was one of the primary issues in the recent congressional elections. And yet, as much as this is the fulcrum of the national debate on U.S. foreign and defense policy over the last half decade, few people have addressed it seriously.

War opponents have taken to making claims that are demonstrably false. Representative Jack Murtha, a longtime hawk and leading critic of the Iraq War, appeared on *Meet the Press* last spring. He told Tim Russert: "There was no terrorism in

Iraq before we went there. None. There was no connection with al Qaeda. There was no connection with terrorism in Iraq itself." Before that, a Kerry campaign spokesman told us, "Iraq and terrorism had nothing to do with one another. Zero." Network television anchors tell us the same thing. A high-profile *Washington Post* columnist described Iraq's connections to terrorism as "fictive." And on it goes.

The Bush Administration has neglected to respond to those challenges. What is the truth about Iraq and terrorism? Why doesn't the public hear about it? And why does it matter?

## Failed Intelligence

In the months and years before the Iraq invasion, the U.S. intelligence community—with a few notable exceptions—believed that secularist Iraqis would never work with radicals like Osama bin Laden and that fundamentalists would never cooperate with an infidel like Saddam Hussein.

On what did they base these opinions? Not much.

Before 9/11, the U.S. intelligence community never penetrated the senior leadership of either Iraq or al Qaeda—two of America’s most dangerous and determined enemies. Think about that. Bob Woodward interviewed the head of the Iraq operations group at the CIA, who told him that CIA reporting sources inside Iraq before the war were thin. How thin? “I can count them on one hand,” he said, “and still pick my nose.”

In July 2004, a report from the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded: “The Central Intelligence Agency did not have a focused human intelligence collection strategy targeting Iraq’s links to terrorism until 2002. The CIA had no [redacted] sources on the ground in Iraq reporting specifically on terrorism.” And that same report quoted an unnamed Intelligence Community official who made this breathtaking admission: “I don’t think we were really focused on the [counterterrorism] side, because we weren’t concerned about the [Iraqi Intelligence Service] going out and proactively conducting terrorist attacks. It wasn’t until we realized that

there was the possibility of going to war that we had to get a handle on that.”

Again, think about that. Saddam Hussein claimed that the Mother of All Battles, as he called the Gulf War, never ended. His government harbored several of the world’s most notorious terrorists—Abu Abbas and Abu Nidal among them. Within days of the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, his government facilitated the escape from U.S. authorities of the Iraqi who mixed the chemicals for that bombing. Less than two months later, his intelligence service botched an attempt to assassinate George H.W. Bush on a visit to Kuwait. By the late 1990s, he was supplying chemical weapons expertise to terrorist-friendly Islamic fundamentalists in Sudan. He wired \$150,000 to his intelligence chief in Prague to blow up the U.S. government’s headquarters of Radio Free Europe. An Iraqi government-run newspaper called Osama bin Laden an “Arab and Islamic hero” and there were several credible reports—including some from open sources—that Saddam Hussein offered bin Laden safe haven in 1998.

All of this, and yet the U.S. intelligence community wasn’t “really focused on the [counterterrorism] side” of the threat from Iraq. I’d submit to you that that was an oversight.

Let’s spend a moment on two of those matters:

On October 2, 2002, a young Filipino man rode his Honda motorcycle up a dusty road to a shanty strip mall just outside Camp Enrile Malagutay in Zamboanga City, Philippines. The camp was host to American troops stationed in the south of the country to train with Filipino soldiers fighting terrorists. The man parked his bike and began to examine its gas tank. Seconds later, the tank exploded, sending nails in all directions and killing the rider almost instantly.

The blast damaged six nearby stores and ripped the front off of a café that doubled as a karaoke bar. The café was popular with American soldiers. And on this day, SFC Mark Wayne Jackson was killed there and a fellow soldier was severely wounded. Eyewitnesses immediately identified the bomber as a known Abu Sayyaf terrorist.

One week before the attack, Abu Sayyaf leaders had promised a campaign of terror directed at the “enemies of Islam”—Westerners and the non-Muslim Filipino majority. And one week after the attack, Abu Sayyaf attempted to strike again, this time with a bomb placed on the playground of the San Roque Elementary School. It did not detonate. Authorities recovered the cell phone that was to have set it off and analyzed incoming and outgoing calls.

As they might have expected, they discovered

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## Ignorance as Policy

several calls to and from Abu Sayyaf leaders. But another call got their attention. Seventeen hours after the attack that took the life of SFC Jackson, the cell phone was used to place a call to a top official in the Iraqi embassy in Manila, Hisham Hussein. It was not Hussein's only contact with Abu Sayyaf.

One Philippine government source told me: "He was surveilled, and we found out he was in contact with Abu Sayyaf and also pro-Iraqi demonstrators. [Philippine Intelligence] was able to monitor their cell phone calls. [Abu Sayyaf leaders] called him right after the bombing. They were always talking."

A subsequent analysis of Iraqi embassy phone records by Philippine authorities showed that Hussein had been in regular contact with Abu Sayyaf leaders both before and after the attack that killed SFC Jackson. Andrea Domingo, immigration commissioner for the Philippines, said Hussein ran an "established network" of terrorists in the country. Hisham Hussein and two other Iraqi embassy employees were ordered out of the Philippines on February 14, 2003.

Interestingly, if the Iraqi regime had wanted to keep its support for Abu Sayyaf secret, the al Qaeda-linked group did not. Twice in two years, Abu Sayyaf leaders boasted about receiving funding from Iraq—the second time just two weeks after Hisham Hussein was expelled. The U.S. intelligence community discounted the claims.

Then there is the case of Abdul Rahman Yasin, an Iraqi who had come to the United States six months before the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. In the days after the attack, Yasin was detained twice by the FBI. Although he offered investigators details of the plot, he was released on the assumption that he would be a cooperative witness. Released. *Twice*. The second time the FBI even drove him home. According to the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee report, Yasin promptly "fled to Iraq with Iraqi assistance." His travel was arranged by the second secretary of the Iraqi embassy in Amman, Jordan. In 1994, a reporter for ABC News went to the home of Yasin's father in Baghdad and spoke with neighbors who reported that Yasin was free to come and go as he pleased and was "working for the government." So an Iraqi participant in an al Qaeda attack on the U.S. mainland fled to Iraq—with Iraqi government assistance—after those attacks.

These are just two examples among hundreds of things that we knew about Iraq and terrorism before the war. And we knew these things despite the woeful state of our intelligence operations in Iraq. You might say these are things we learned almost by accident.

We now know much more about Iraq and terrorism. In the three-and-a-half years since the war began, the U.S. government has collected more than two million "exploitable items" from Iraq. That's a term of art to describe documents including payroll logs, audio and videotapes, strategy memos between senior Iraqi regime officials, letters between government agencies and computer hard drives of top Iraqi ministers. In these documents we have an extraordinary history of prewar Iraq. In these documents we can get answers to the many outstanding questions of what Saddam Hussein was doing in the years leading up to the most recent Iraq War and, in some cases, what he was doing once the war began. It is such a potential treasure trove that you would think the U.S. government would have doubled or tripled its teams of analysts and translators in order to mine this information for clues about Saddam's weapons, his secret allies, and his relations with a wide variety of terrorists.

But the U.S. intelligence community, now led by John Negroponte, has steadfastly resisted serious attempts to exploit and release the information captured in postwar Iraq. As of March, three years after the war began, the U.S. intelligence community had fully translated and analyzed less than five percent of the documents captured in postwar Iraq. In some cases, they actually *fought* efforts to increase their budgets—something that is unheard of in the intelligence bureaucracies. At one point, a little more than a year into the document exploitation project, senior intelligence officials tried to have the project shut down altogether.

Why is this? Why would our intelligence community choose ignorance? There are several complicated reasons. But I suspect the most important one is simple. In those years that the U.S. intelligence community wasn't "really focused" on Iraqi terrorism, the Iraqi regime had been.

Consider just a couple examples of what we have learned from a review of just the small percentage of documents that have been translated.

\* In 1995, a senior Iraqi intelligence official met with Osama bin Laden. After the meeting, Saddam Hussein agreed to broadcast al Qaeda propaganda on Iraqi government-run television and to let the relationship develop through discussion and agreement.

- \* In 1998, a confidante of bin Laden visited Baghdad as a guest of the Iraqi regime, staying in the Iraqi capital for two weeks at government expense. The document corroborated telephone intercepts the U.S. government had not previously been able to understand.

And what about the two items I mentioned before—Iraq's support for Abu Sayyaf and its relations with Abdul Rahman Yasin?

- \* A fax from the Iraqi Embassy in the Philippines to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry in Baghdad, dated June 6, 2001, confirms that the Iraqi regime had been providing arms and weapons to Abu Sayyaf—the al Qaeda affiliate in the Philippines responsible for the death of Mark Wayne Jackson.
- \* Iraqi financial records confirm that the government supported, harbored and financed Abdul Rahman Yasin, the 1993 World Trade Center bomber, throughout the 1990s.

## Who Cares?

Skeptics ask: Isn't this just history? Why does this matter now?

To answer that question, let us return to Baghdad. It is April 2003, just days after U.S. Marines toppled the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square. David Dunford, a career foreign service officer, was working alongside other Americans and several Iraqis in the old Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. Dunford had been recruited to come to Iraq to help the Iraqis set up a new Ministry.

The team sifted through the detritus of the bombed-out building. Walls were black from smoke. One office had a pile of ashes in the middle, all that was left of the files of one senior ministry official. Elsewhere, they found employment records, personnel documents, and other relatively unimportant documents.

But there were important ones, too. Dunford and his Foreign Ministry team unearthed a memo from the director of Iraqi Intelligence to other senior Iraqi regime officials. An Iraqi translated it for them on the spot. Dated February 2003, a month before the beginning of the war, it read like a blueprint for the insurgency. Dunford and his colleagues turned it over to

the CIA and heard nothing about it ever again, despite several requests for more information.

This description comes from Paul Bremer, the former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, who saw a copy of the document months after it was found. “The document,” Bremer said, “listed orders for point-by-point strategy to be implemented after the probable collapse of the regime beginning with the order of ‘Burn this office.’” Bremer continued: The document called for “a strategy of organized resistance which included the classic pattern of forming cells and training combatants in insurgency. ‘Operatives’ were to engage in ‘sabotage and looting.’ Random sniper attacks and ambushes were to be organized. The order continued, ‘Scatter agents to every town. Destroy electric power stations and water conduits. Infiltrate the mosques, the Shiite holy places.’”

Let's remember the chronology. The document was written shortly before the U.S. invasion of Iraq and found immediately after. It was provided the same day to an intelligence team called the “fusion cell” in Baghdad. Thus we had documentation in April 2003 that an insurgency had been planned. And yet Donald Rumsfeld and others said repeatedly throughout that spring, and the following summer and fall, that there was no insurgency.

I called David Dunford to talk about what he found. As an aside, I should point out that Dunford is a strong critic of the Bush Administration and its foreign policy. He has had harsh words for the “ideological” components of the reconstruction.

I knew about the insurgency memo from an Iraqi who worked with Dunford. The Iraqi told me about another document found in the same batch of files. I did not mention the second document to Dunford when we spoke. I started the conversation by asking about the insurgency memo. Dunford remembered finding it, but told me that he did not recall details about it. Then, without prompting, he added this: “I do remember one document that we found that was a list of jihadists, for want of a better word, coming into Iraq from Saudi Arabia before the war. That suggested to me that Saddam was planning the insurgency before the war.”

The jihadist document listed “hundreds and hundreds” of fighters who had come from several countries in the region, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and Syria. There were other similar lists found throughout Iraq. I spoke to one intelligence official who described footlockers



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full of such documents sitting untouched at a U.S. military base in Baghdad.

A similar set of documents was examined by the Pentagon and discussed in a long report called the “Iraqi Perspectives Project.” That book-length treatment of the former Iraqi regime, written by military historians led by Dr. Kevin Woods, reported that the Saddam Fedayeen—one of several domestic Iraqi terrorist groups—began training young recruits in 1994. That year, they turned out 7,200 would-be Iraqi terrorists.

Four years later, the program expanded: “Beginning in 1998, these camps began hosting Arab volunteers from Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, ‘the Gulf,’ and Syria.” It is not clear from available evidence where all of these non-Iraqi volunteers who were “sacrificing for the cause” went to ply their newfound skills. Before the summer of 2002, most volunteers went home upon the completion of training. But these camps were humming with frenzied activity in the months immediately prior to the war. As late as January 2003, the Arab volunteers participated in a special training event called the “Heroes Attack.”

Who are these Arab volunteers? Are they still working with former Iraqi regime officials? How

many of them are in Iraq, taking shots at our soldiers? And why doesn’t anybody care to find out?

I’d like to finish with another paragraph from the “Iraqi Perspectives Project,” this one also based on a captured Iraqi document. I hope you’ll bear with me as I quote verbatim. As I read, I’d like you to think about the conventional wisdom, as articulated by Representative John Murtha and others, that until the U.S. invasion, Iraq had nothing to do with terrorism.

The Saddam Fedayeen also took part in the regime’s domestic terrorism operations and planned for attacks throughout Europe and the Middle East. In a document dated May 1999, Saddam’s older son, Uday, ordered preparations for “special operations, assassinations, and bombings, for the centers and traitor symbols in London, Iran and the self-ruled areas [Kurdistan].” Preparations for “Blessed July,” a regime-directed wave of “martyrdom” operations against targets in the West, were well under way at the time of the coalition invasion.



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