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How Saddam Hussein Predicted America's Failure in Iraq

By Mark Perry
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In early 1917, during World War I, British general Sir Frederick Stanley Maude led an army of sixty thousand British and Indian soldiers from Basra up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to Baghdad. His enemy was a Turkish army, some twenty-five-thousand strong, defending a province of what was then a part of the decrepit Ottoman Empire. Maude was hardly a creative campaigner (his troops called him "systematic Joe"), but then his conquest of Mesopotamia wasn't much of a fight. "The Turkish Army that was recently before us," he reported to his superiors, "has ceased to exist as a fighting force owing to its casualties, prisoners, demoralization and the loss of a large proportion of its artillery and stores." Maude led his army into Baghdad on a prancing horse on March 11 and then, in the finest British tradition, issued a proclamation: "We come as liberators, not occupiers," it said. The Iraqis thought otherwise.

In 1917, Iraq's tribes began an insurrection that lasted until October 1920. The British responded with a troop surge, then put the war in the hands of its air force, which debated whether to use poison gas on Iraq's restive villages. Winston Churchill, then his country's colonial secretary, thought this just the thing. "I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas," he said. "I am strongly in favor of using gas against uncivilized tribes." The revolt failed (and without the help of poison gas) but the British had learned their lesson, turning administration of the country over to their chosen Arab quisling, Faisal I bin Hussein, and then getting out. Faisal was followed by a succession of relatives, but the country's real power was Nuri al-Said, a murderer in a three-piece suit. In 1958, a group of Iraqi officers shot the Faisals in the courtyard of their

Baghdad Palace, then hunted down Nuri (who'd escaped the capital disguised as a woman) and executed him. Maude's statue, in Baghdad, was burned.

Thus, Iraq.

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In the late summer of 2002, as American Gen. Tommy Franks's staff was in the midst of drafting its plan for the invasion of Iraq (what would become known as Operation Iraqi Freedom), Major General Raad al-Hamdani was summoned from his headquarters by Saddam Hussein. Hamdani, an urbane Iraqi Sunni, was the commander of one of Saddam's elite Republican Guard divisions and among the few military officers the dictator believed he could trust. Hamdani had earned that trust, serving for over twenty-five years in the Iraqi military, fighting in six of his country's wars, and becoming acknowledged as one of the regime's most loyal soldiers. He was the Iraqi military's leading strategist and intellectual. Which is why Saddam enjoyed talking to him. Hamdani was a student of military history, and he would often tell the dictator what he was reading and what it meant.

In the summer of 2002, Hamdani was focused on the World War II battle for the Ludendorff Bridge, which spanned the Rhine River at the town of Remagen. In March 1945, the bridge was the last standing structure across the Rhine, and the Allies were intent on capturing it intact. If the Germans blew the bridge, the Allies knew, it might take weeks to breach Germany's borders. The Germans knew this too, and so guarded the approaches to the bridge, fighting tenaciously to deny U.S. units positions on the opposite bank. As the Americans approached the bridge, they got a taste of German artillery, ranged in on their positions that now crowded the Rhine's western bank. At worst, the Germans calculated, they would destroy the bridge at the last minute. The Americans would then be caught on the river's opposite shore, and would get a taste of more German artillery. In early March, German army engineers had planted explosives on the bridge pillars, stringing the wires leading from the charges into the water and along the bridge's structure.

Hamdani told this story now to Saddam. And so, he said, the Americans came and the Germans set off their explosives. But the charges failed to detonate and the Americans stormed the bridge. At that moment, Hamdani concluded, Germany was doomed. Saddam heard all of this, then shrugged. So Hamdani explained what he meant. The Americans are coming up those highways from the Kuwait border to Nasiriyah, he said, and they're going to be aiming for the bridges over the Euphrates River. Or they will come from the southwest. But however they come, he said, they will have to take the bridges over the Euphrates and we will fight for the bridges and push the Americans west, into the desert, where it was harder to maneuver. "When they come," he said, "we've got to blow those bridges." Saddam waved him off. The Americans aren't coming, he said. "They don't like to shed blood, they've had their fill of it," he said. Saddam was confident, certain. Don't worry, he said, there's not going to be a war. He was wrong.

Operation Iraqi Freedom started March 19, 2003, with a bombing campaign that targeted Iraq's political leadership. The bombing was followed at dawn, on March 20, with the ground invasion.

On the right, the I Marine Expeditionary Force aimed for the southern oil fields, with the British 1st Armored Division securing the Faw Peninsula, on the far southeastern part of Iraq, in the IMEF's rear. On the left, the 3rd Infantry Division (a part of General William Wallace's powerful V Corps) swung slightly west, then pivoted north. But its key aim point were the bridges across the Euphrates River, just as Hamdani had predicted.

On April 2, Hamdani received word that Saddam wanted to see him in Baghdad. Hamdani was annoyed; his soldiers were fighting and needed him. But he was a good officer and loyal, and Saddam was his commander in chief. When he saw him, Hamdani noticed that Saddam had changed little from the previous summer. But now he had his son, Qusay, at his side, and next to him the head of the army, who was Hamdani's boss. Saddam asked him to report, so Hamdani summarized the fighting so far. Then he went through his battle plans. The Americans were coming fast from the south, he said, with larger units to the west. Tough fighters. He was going to contest their thrust, then blow the bridges across the river and pummel them with artillery from the other side. The key to his defenses was the al-Qaed Bridge over the Euphrates River, just to the northwest of Nasiriyah. Hamdani was emphatic. We have to blow that bridge, he said.

Saddam heard him out, then shook his head, turning to his son and to the head of the army. The Americans are going to make their major thrust from Jordan and from Turkey in the north, he said, and that's how they plan to capture Baghdad. You need to redeploy your troops, Saddam said. Pull them out of the line and defend Baghdad from the north. Hamdani looked at the head of the army, but he said nothing. The Americans are right next to me, Hamdani protested, we are fighting them now. Saddam shook his head. Don't blow those bridges, he said, we're going to need them. Qusay then spoke. We have plans for the Americans, he said. Three hours later, Hamdani returned to oversee his command, which stretched from Nasiriyah 130 miles to the south.

Later, during his first years in exile in Amman, Jordan, Hamdani would remember this conversation in Baghdad, telling it over and over to the Americans who visited him. He had never liked Qusay, he would contend, because he was bloodthirsty and influenced his father. Not blowing those bridges was his idea, he would say, and it led to the fall of Baghdad. But over the years, and as Hamdani thought about it, he added his own reflections to the story. He thought about the war a lot. There was a reason why Qusay ("God bless his soul," Hamdani would always add) was at that meeting, and there was a reason why, even in the face of defeat, Saddam still appeared confident. "I think now that Saddam certainly understood the Americans would have their victory," he said, speaking in Arabic. "He wasn't a fool. And while he predicted we would win and said this often and convinced many people of it, he knew the truth. The Americans would ride into Baghdad and celebrate their victory. But succeed? They would never succeed. In the end they would do as so many others have done" and as British general Sir Frederick Stanley Maude had done – they would win, and then they would fail. "And he was right," Hamdani concluded. "You got your victory, and then you failed."