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The Washington Bureau
THE MOUTH OF THE POTOMAC



How the FBI Broke Saddam - Part 1

June 26, 2009

Where were Iraq's WMD? How close was Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda, really?

These were vital - but still unanswered - questions when the Iraqi despot was yanked out of a spider hole in December 2003 and placed in U.S. military detention. Lives were at stake - along with the entire political rationale for the U.S.-led coalition invading Iraq.

Only one man could say for sure, and now that the U.S. finally had him in custody, they had to find out.

There was only one way: Break Saddam.

The FBI's newly-declassified [interrogation files on Saddam Hussein](#), reported exclusively in yesterday's Daily News, stand in contrast to the dark view espoused by Team Bush: only extreme interrogation techniques extract confessions from "high-value" detainees who resist questioning.

The CIA and FBI were intent on getting Saddam to explain what happened to the missing weapons of mass destruction, his operational ties - if any - to Al Qaeda and admit his own crimes against humanity by gassing and slaughtering his own people. CIA WMD hunter David Kay had resigned in frustration in late January 2004, and the missing arsenal was vexing Team Bush just as special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald was beginning his probe of the White House over leaks in retaliation against Iraq war critic Joe Wilson.

The pressure was intense.

A young, Arabic-speaking, Lebanese-American FBI agent named George Piro was picked to get Saddam to confess. Detailed interrogation plans were drawn up, and Piro sat down with one of the most brutally ruthless world leaders of the late 20th century, prepared to play mental chess with a master of manipulation, whose intelligence ranged from cunning street smarts to quirky political intuition.

Learn about the intense first meetings between Saddam and the G-man who broke him after the jump.

The first FBI interrogation of Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti - in a program codenamed "Desert Spider" - took place Feb. 7, 2004, in a dingy cell at Baghdad International Airport. Memos obtained by The News through a 2006 Freedom of Information Act request for Saddam's file show that [top FBI and Justice Department officials had decided Feb. 6 not to read high-value detainees Miranda rights](#) or to identify interrogators to detainees in any way other than as "representatives of the United States Government" or "U.S. Government agents." Saddam assumed Piro was a top Bush aide - not a low-ranking street agent.

Sizing up the G-man, Saddam observed that Piro (an FBI supervisory special agent) was "smart," and predicted, "Perhaps a conversation between two such educated people will not be useful or successful." He decreed that it was only important to him what people say or think about him "in the future, 500 or 1,000 years from now."

The ex-leader ranted about all he had done for Iraq, which "barely had anything" when he came to power in a bloodbath 40 years ago. Piro asked if he had ever failed in his decades as Iraq's leader, but Saddam countered, "Do you think I would tell my enemy if I made a mistake?"

His ego as yet undiminished by captivity, Saddam gloated that "the only political parties existing in Iraq are the ones with the weapons" - a reference to the growing lethality of the Sunni insurgency - and said it made no difference what anybody thought about him. "Hussein believes people will love him more after he passes away than they do now," Piro wrote in his first FBI "302" report back to Washington.

Piro wasted no time in asking about Saddam's crimes against humanity, testing the captive dictator's emotions and pride. The next day, he brought up the ghastly chemical weapons Saddam's army used against its neighbor Iran in the 1980s war.

"I am not going to answer," he said defiantly. Asked again, Saddam lectured the FBI agent that he would "not be cornered or caught on some technicality - it will not do you any good." But Piro persisted, pointing out that the UN had documented chemical attacks. "History is written and will not change," Saddam said, smugly. "I am not going to answer, no matter how you put the question."

This Feb. 8 report by Piro - in effect - framed the challenge facing the FBI to higher-ups back in Washington, including the President: Flipping Saddam into turning witness against himself would not be easy.



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In his third meeting with Saddam on Feb. 10, Piro asked about Iraq's aid and hospitality to Palestinian terrorists. Saddam boasted: "We accepted them as guests."

While indirectly denying helping the Palestine Liberation Organization or Palestine Liberation Front leader Abu Abbas, which maintained Baghdad offices, Saddam reasoned that, "At any time, we have the ability and the right to help in the struggle" of Palestinians against Israel. When pushed about reports he gave cash to Abbas - the mastermind of the Achille Lauro boatjacking, who killed passenger Leon Klinghoffer - Saddam grew testy. "I didn't say I helped Abbas. Don't put words in my mouth," he barked, insisting it "was not wrong" if his intelligence services helped the terrorist.

Saddam, still assuming he was in the driver's seat, advised Piro, "I think the questions should be in the context of a dialogue, not an interrogation."

What would come next would be a case study in how to extract a confession from a tyrant, resonating five years later as the debate over torture - which Saddam mastered, and which Dick Cheney and George W. Bush now, arguably, defend - rages anew. Piro's team decided to simply have a conversation.

More to come from the FBI's Saddam files on The Mouth of the Potomac Blog. Watch this space.

- James Gordon Meek

DOWNLOAD the interrogation reports filed by FBI Agent George Piro:

[FBI-Baghdad - Desert Spider 302 report, Feb. 7, 2004](#)

[FBI-Baghdad - Desert Spider 302 report, Feb. 8, 2004](#)

[FBI-Baghdad - Desert Spider 302 report, Feb. 10, 2004](#)

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By James Gordon Meek on June 26, 2009 11:07 AM | [Comments \(6\)](#)



6 Comments

- Mark78**
June 26, 2009
12:10 PM

Thanks for posting these James. Nice work.
- Mark78**
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12:10 PM

For the record Saddam's Baath party is still denying links to al Qaeda on their site though its pretty widely reported that at least some members of the former regime have been assisting al Qaeda.
- msfreeh**
June 26, 2009
2:07 PM

to view a partial list of crimes committed by FBI agents over 1500 pages long see <http://www.forums.signonsandiego.com/showthread.php?t=59139>

to view a partial list of FBI agents arrested for pedophilia see <http://www.dallasnews.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=3574>
- david wayne osedach**
June 26, 2009
8:49 PM

I guess Sadaam wasn't that hard to break. He knew he had come to the end.
- tunghoy**
June 27, 2009
8:46 AM

Thanks for posting this. When Saddam talked about his soldiers not being given supplies by Syria's military and said "Perhaps the Syrians did not have maps" all I could think of was Miss Teen South Carolina.
- plasmon**
June 27, 2009
1:13 PM

See CBS's "60 Minutes" for an interview with George Piro from about a year-and-a-half ago. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/24/60minutes/main3749494.shtml>

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