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The Washington Bureau THE MOUTH OF THE POTOMAC

How the FBI Broke Saddam - Part 3

June 29, 2009

Saddam Hussein loved to talk - and to b.s. his sole interrogator, FBI Supervisory Special Agent George Piro.

But Piro - backed up by a team of FBI agents and crack CIA analysts - knew Saddam's history too well. Where there were gaps, Piro was able to parry with the imprisoned leader to get credible answers. "High Value Detainee-1" was soon blabbing so freely it was hard for him to keep his lies intact.

As the weeks wore on, Saddam opened up more and more as the FBI-CIA team leveraged its strategy to "overwhelm" - and break - him by confronting the deposed dictator with evidence of his crimes against humanity.

He was soon boasting of terrible misdeeds against his own people - in order to set the historical record straight, which Piro had encouraged.

On Mar. 21, 2004, the FBI team in Baghdad reported they had conducted 16 interviews of Saddam and a dozen with his former henchmen, including ex-foreign minister Tariq Aziz and a death-dealing thug nicknamed "Chemical Ali." Noting Saddam's willingness to engage in "dialogue, not an interrogation," the FBI's Baghdad agents told Washington that Piro spent several sessions "discussing non-threatening topics," and that Saddam felt relaxed enough "to talk freely and to boast of past accomplishments."

But Saddam also quit eating in some unexplained protest, the FBI memo said - though he had grown so dependant on the G-man providing for all his needs that "Hussein announced he was ending his hunger strike for the benefit of SSA Piro."

"As the rapport and dependency between Hussein and SSA Piro continues to grow, more complex topics are being introduced into the interviews," such as detailed questions about gassing Kurds in northern Iraq and suppressing the 1991 Shi'a uprising, the once-secret memo reported.

"In the past, Hussein would have refused to discuss these topics. However, he has increasingly allowed himself to be drawn into discussions... [due] to the non-threatening manner in which they are being posed," the FBI file said.

More on how the FBI needed Saddam into confessing his crimes after the jump.

When quizzed about the use of chemical weapons in early March, Saddam found it "strange" anyone would assume the "unrealistic hypothetical" that Iraq would ever use WMD on coalition forces, since it did not "cross our mind," he said.

"We would have been called stupid," he added.

Saddam initially pleaded ignorance about the Shi'a uprising in southern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf war. Confronted with evidence of his brutality, he soon admitted targeting those involved: Iranian operatives and Iraqi Shi'a "outlaws" and "greedy thieves." He blamed Iran - not George H.W. Bush, who had encouraged the uprising - and cackled that his military's "blade got longer and longer." Iraq's ex-strongman confessed that his minions in southern Iraq were "given the authority and they carried it out."

Piro confronted Saddam with a Human Rights Watch report that Iraqi tanks stormed Basra with small children tied to them as human shields. The prisoner repeatedly said the allegation didn't deserve his reply, but that he would "answer for the benefit of the interviewer" by stating, "The lie is clear."

Despite his diet of Cuban cigars and a calming interrogation setting of plush chairs and carpets, Piro made Saddam increasingly uncomfortable. Together they watched a 1993 PBS documentary by Michael Wood on the Shi'a slaughter he inflicted, but he only made it through the first half before calling it quits to go pray. For the first time, though, he referred to himself as something other than the president of Iraq.

"Your army occupies my country. You are free. I am a prisoner," he said to Piro.

"The team will continue efforts to overwhelm Hussein with the volume of evidence against him and others regarding human rights violations, mass murders and the use of chemical weapons," the Mar. 21 FBI report concluded. "When he senses that his strategy of denial is no longer working, Hussein may decide to blame others, including former regime leaders, for these past abuses."

They finished the film in the next session on Mar. 23, while Saddam ranted about the Bushes and that it was "beneath him" to watch the film and its charges of atrocities. When a Marsh Arab woman told the filmmakers she lost everything, Saddam cracked up. "What did she have before? Reeds?"

Piro - who by then had interviewed other top regime figures at length - continued to demand answers about his crimes, angering Saddam.

"Do you think I would answer based upon who is in custody? I am afraid of no one. I am only afraid of God," Saddam thundered.

NEXT: Is that your final answer, Saddam? The WMD and Al Qaeda questions.

- James Gordon Meek

DOWNLOAD the FBI's Saddam Hussein interrogation reports:

[FBI-Baghdad 302 interrogation reports from Mar. 3 - May 1, 2004](#)

[FBI-Baghdad Mar. 21, 2004 progress report on interrogations](#)

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By James Gordon Meek on June 29, 2009 6:48 PM | [Comments \(1\)](#)



1 Comments

Mark78
June 30, 2009
8:24 AM

I find it interesting that he finally admitted meetings with al Qaeda though said HE denied their requests and yet al Qaeda has said the opposite. Saddam came to them and they rebuffed...

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