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Was a Tyrant Prefigured by Baby Saddam?

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

WASHINGTON, May 14 — It is no surprise to Jerrold M. Post, the founder of the Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior at the C.I.A., that Saddam Hussein grew up to be one of the world's most dangerous dictators and a member of President Bush's axis of evil.

"Of all of the leaders I've profiled, his background is assuredly the most traumatic," Dr. Post said in an interview this week in his wood-paneled, African-artifact-filled office in Bethesda, Md., where he is a psychiatrist for patients whose personal struggles have typically not led to two American wars in the Middle East. "His troubles can really be traced back to the womb."

As Dr. Post recounts in his new book, "Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World" (Cornell University Press, \$29.95), Mr. Hussein's father died, probably of cancer, in the fourth month of his mother's pregnancy with Saddam. Mr. Hussein's 12-year-old brother died, also of cancer, a few months later. The trauma left Saddam's mother, Sabha, so desperately depressed that she tried and failed to abort Saddam and kill herself. When Saddam was born, she would have nothing to do with him and sent him away to an uncle.

At 3 Mr. Hussein was reunited with his mother after she had married a distant relative, but he was then physically and psychologically abused by his new stepfather. Mr. Hussein left home and returned to live with the uncle when he was 8 or 9.

"So that would produce in psychoanalytic terms what we call 'the wounded self,'" Dr. Post said. "Most people with that kind of background would be highly ineffective as adults and be faltering, insecure human beings." But there is, Dr. Post said, an alternative path that a minority of wounded selves take: "malignant narcissism," the personality disorder that Dr. Post believes fueled Mr. Hussein's rise in Iraq. Perhaps most important, Dr. Post says, is that Mr. Hussein is a "judicious political calculator," not a madman.

Not everyone, of course, subscribes to the view that psychiatric profiles of dictators are predictive, useful or even accurate. "The study of human behavior is a very complex thing," said Walter Russell Mead, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of "Power, Terror, Peace and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk." "Sometimes I get up in the morning and I don't know why I do what I do." Studies like Dr. Post's can help, Mr. Mead said, "but you really do have to use this kind of information cautiously."

Although Dr. Post has spent 30 years creating hundreds of political profiles of American foes (among them, Fidel Castro), he also developed the profiles of Anwar el-Sadat and Menachem Begin for Jimmy Carter's use at the Camp David talks that led to peace

between Egypt and Israel in 1979. Since 9/11 his work has taken on new urgency. Understanding the minds of rogue leaders, he says, is essential to developing policies that can counteract them.

"Someone who rises through a democratic process in Great Britain and the United States is really quite different from someone who has seized power," he said.

Dr. Post, 70, the director of George Washington University's political psychology program, consults privately for the Department of Homeland Security and for Pentagon counterterrorism officials. In his view, the world's most dangerous leaders are often malignant narcissists, a category that he says he thinks includes Osama bin Laden, Kim Jong Il of North Korea and Hitler.

These leaders share four qualities, Dr. Post said: extreme self-absorption, paranoia, no constraints of conscience and a willingness to use whatever means necessary to accomplish goals. They have little empathy for the pain and suffering of their own people, Dr. Post said, but they also can't empathize with their enemies, a critical vulnerability in that "it's very important as an effective leader to get into the mind of your adversaries."

Mr. bin Laden in particular has little empathy for others, Dr. Post said, "and is really consumed with being God's prophet on earth." Mr. Kim, who Dr. Post says is consumed by self-doubt because he lives in the enormous shadow of his father, the founding leader of North Korea, once punished a subordinate who displeased him by sending him home naked. As for Mr. Hussein, Dr. Post says that he is not irrational and is in fact entirely predictable and over three decades in power "worked the international system to a fare-thee-well."

While Dr. Post carefully shied away from any criticism of Mr. Bush, he did say that the president's failure to amass a large international coalition in the Iraq war — in contrast to the large one his father assembled against Mr. Hussein in the first Persian Gulf war — played to Mr. Hussein's strengths.

"Saddam desperately wants to be seen as a major world leader," Dr. Post said. "And having both a large majority of the Arab world as well as the very broad coalition arrayed against him in 1990 had a very powerful negative impact on him." But in the Iraq war of 2003, Dr. Post said, he was "able to say defiantly to his radical Arab and moderate Arab supporters, 'I have the courage to stand up to the mightiest nation on earth and its president.'"

Dr. Post said he was not privy to the interrogation techniques used on Mr. Hussein, who was captured by American forces in December and is being held by the F.B.I. in Iraq. But he said standard interrogation techniques — at least those consistent with the Geneva Conventions — would probably not work on as strong a personality as Mr. Hussein. Although counterterrorism officials said this week that the C.I.A. had used coercive interrogation methods against a select group of high-level Al Qaeda operatives, American

and British officials said this year that they were taking a gentle approach in their questioning of Mr. Hussein.

Dr. Post said the best technique would be to play to Mr. Hussein's ego and tell him with admiration that he had managed to convince the government of the United States and much of the Western world that he had weapons of mass destruction. But if he still had some, where might they be? "Interrogation is part psychological karate," Dr. Post said, "which is going with the strengths of the individual rather than attempting to pressure him."

Dr. Post got into the business of analyzing the world's leading bad guys more or less by accident. In 1965 as he was planning a career in academic medicine at Harvard, he was approached by an acquaintance who took him on a drive, pulled into an overlook and asked if he would sign a secrecy agreement to help start a pilot program at the C.I.A. to study the world's leaders from a distance. The information would be used to prepare for international summit meetings and crises. Dr. Post thought it would be an interesting thing to do for a few years, but he remained for more than two decades.

"I spent the next 21 years in what I will only describe as an absolutely remarkable intellectual adventure because I was crafting a new form of intelligence," he said.

Dr. Post develops his profiles from biographies, speeches and interviews with people who know the leaders. He said he did not think it would be particularly helpful to meet the subjects. "Actually, I think that can obscure," he said. "A number of these leaders are intensely charming and the facade they present can be misleading."

Over the years Dr. Post has met only one of his subjects, Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, who Dr. Post said "looked terrible." But "then he got up to speak, and it was very powerful, and you could sort of see some of that charismatic appeal."

Dr. Post is working on another book, "The Mind of the Terrorist," about different kinds of terrorist groups and why they attract followers. "We've got a lot of people pontificating on what makes terrorists tick, and one of my strange notions is the best way to find out is to ask them," he said. Dr. Post has interviewed 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists, and his conclusion was that "they are really quite normal psychologically."

Just like teenagers in the United States, he said, the terrorists were captivated by the celebrities of their culture. "But instead of it being N.F.L. or N.B.A. stars," Dr. Post said, "it's the latest shaheed." Shaheed is the Arabic word for holy martyrs and is also used to describe suicide bombers.