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## Better Alive Than Dead

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The killing of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, is a tactical victory for the American occupation of Iraq. But it is not a strategic one. By not capturing these odious symbols of the old regime alive and putting them on display, the American occupation authority has denied itself the chance to give absolute proof of their demise to a society that rejects authority and thrives on conspiracy theory. It has also lost an opportunity to give Iraqis a chance to purge their bitterness, and satisfy a deep-seated need for revenge, by confronting their tormentors in court.

Yesterday the United States presented evidence — dental records and identifications by officials of the Hussein regime — to prove that the brothers were indeed killed in a firefight with American forces. But many Iraqis seemed unpersuaded. Even more telling, others voiced disappointment over the two not being captured and subjected to the sort of treatment they meted out to their victims. By denying Iraqis their revenge on the sons of Saddam Hussein, the American authorities have overlooked the needs of a society dominated by the rural values of the diverse tribes that make up much of the country's population.

This background of revenge may put the lie to the optimistic declarations by United States officials that the corner has been turned in the pacification of Iraq. With the deaths of the two brothers, they predict, Saddam Hussein's followers will lose their will to resist. And while the officials concede that in the short run the deaths may result in increased guerrilla attacks on American troops, they also argue that soon those passions will be spent.

But another possible series of reactions cannot be ignored, however. Strikes against the American military in Iraq may decline immediately only to re-ignite later. For the Iraqis have long memories. Supporters of Saddam Hussein may lie low before seeking revenge for what the American invasion of Iraq has done to their status in the power structure. More significantly, tribal elements who opposed the regime may hold the United States responsible for not giving them the opportunity to extract their own vengeance on Uday and Qusay Hussein.

It is also uncertain whether the United States will be able to tell its story to the Iraqi people. The American military may control large parts of Iraq, but it does not control the flow of information. The Iraqi media is capable of devising its own narrative of the firefight, and there's a good chance that this narrative will not paint the United States in a

favorable light. (Even the American release of photographs may not confirm that the brothers were killed.)

The United States continues to forget it is dealing with a culture that is far older and far different from its own. Suspicion and distrust of authority is deeply rooted in Iraq. Through Iraq's long history, conqueror followed conqueror. As a result, the diverse groups of people who lived in what came to be designated as Iraq in 1921 found their only real security in family and tribe. Even though the elite that ran Iraq after independence in 1932 had urban attitudes, the ties of family and group remained enormously important.

In 1968, when the Baath Party came to power, the tribalism that had been a characteristic of Iraq since its inception intensified. The Baath Party itself was the purview of one tribe, the Bu Nasir, the tribe of Saddam Hussein. In 1991, in the service of survival after the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein gave tribalism a prominence it had not been accorded since the formation of Iraq. At the same time, repressive politics and economic hardship continued to drive out the old urban elite and much of the urban middle class that had risen during the oil boom of the 1970's. In the last decade of his regime, Saddam Hussein remade Iraq into a country governed by the rural values of the tribes. Operating according to the values of the tribe, the system sanctioned the age-old principle of revenge.

Saddam Hussein meted out revenge on those who defied the system. They went into the regime's torture chambers and prisons. Tribes visited revenge on the regime for slights to their honor and for punishment of their members by Saddam Hussein's security system. The imperative of revenge was no different in late-20th-century Iraq than it had been for the tribes living for generations on the land of Iraq. This is a fact that the Bush administration needs to realize.

In giving up on the attempted capture of the Hussein brothers as too risky, the American administration of Iraq has ignored the dictates of Iraqi culture. At the same time, it also runs counter to the kind of country we want Iraq to become — one built around the rule of law. Under Mr. Hussein's reign, justice, to the extent it existed, was consistently perverted. It was erratic, violent and retributive, a tool of Mr. Hussein and his Baath Party. By not doing more to allow Uday and Qusay Hussein to surrender, the United States lost an opportunity to show Iraqis that those who have committed the most heinous of crimes can still be brought to justice.

On trial in Baghdad, the Hussein brothers could have recounted the regime's crimes. Certainly, the effort would have been more drawn-out than a firefight — getting Balkan criminals to The Hague has not been easy — but the results would have been more lasting. An appearance by the brothers would not only have pinned them to their gruesome past, it would have also demonstrated the effectiveness of a sound system of justice.

The deaths of Uday and Qusay Hussein are being proclaimed a victory, but it is a temporary victory. And the manner in which they died is yet another long-term complication for the American occupation of Iraq.

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