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# The World; Stalin to Saddam: So Much for the Madman Theory

By ERICA GOODE

"BY his word he could kill them, have them tortured, have them rescued again, have them rewarded. Life and death depended on his whim."

The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm used these words to describe the "refined sadism" of Josef Stalin, who took delight in playing with the minds of his victims before he ordered the destruction of their bodies.

But the revelations of recent weeks suggest that they might as easily be applied to another former dictator, Saddam Hussein.

The objects unearthed at Iraqi prisons, palaces and safe houses speak of brutality and indulgence. A gold machine gun. A cable used to deliver electric shocks to ears and genitals. Fantasy paintings of snakes, monsters and unclad women. A red wire cage with a cement channel in the floor for human excrement.

The stories behind the objects tell of paranoia and caprice -- arbitrary imprisonment and equally arbitrary release, opulently furnished rooms never inhabited. And behind it all is a man who acted out his fantasies of omnipotence using a nation as his theater and its citizens as his props.

Psychoanalyzing political leaders is a dicey business, and psychiatrists are quick to caution that without extensive research or personal contact with Mr. Hussein, nothing can be said with certainty about his psychological makeup. But what is already known about Mr. Hussein is suggestive, the psychiatrists say.

Like Stalin and Hitler, Mr. Hussein has sometimes been referred to as a madman, in part because people are reluctant to accept such ruthlessness and cruelty as the product of anything but insanity.

But bad does not equal mad. Most historical analysts have rejected the notion that mental illness could explain the actions of either Stalin or Hitler. Experts familiar with Mr. Hussein's upbringing and years in power said that there was no evidence that he suffered from psychosis or any severe mental illness. The very fact that he was able to stay in charge for so long and exert such complete control argues against insanity, the experts said.

Two researchers, Jerrold M. Post and Amatzia Baram, concluded in a psychological profile of Mr. Hussein that he was more accurately described as a malignant narcissist, a label that has also been applied to Stalin and Hitler. Dr. Post, a psychiatrist at George Washington University, and Dr. Baram, an expert on Iraq at the University of Haifa in Israel, wrote the profile for the United

States Air Force Counterproliferation Center. Dr. Post was also the founding director of the Central Intelligence Agency's political profiling program.

Malignant narcissism, as defined by psychiatrists, is a severe form of narcissistic personality disorder. Like classic narcissists, malignant narcissists are grandiose, self-centered, oversensitive to criticism and unable to feel empathy for others. They cover over deep insecurities with an inflated self-image.

But malignant narcissists also tend to paranoia and aggression, and share some features of the antisocial personality, including the absence of moral or ethical judgment, said Dr. Otto Kernberg, a psychiatry professor at Cornell University and an expert on personality disorders.

Far from being psychotic, malignant narcissists are adept at charming and manipulating those around them. Political leaders with this personality, Dr. Kernberg said, are able to take control "because their inordinate narcissism is expressed in grandiosity, a confidence in themselves and the assurance that they know what the world needs."

At the same time, he said, "They express their aggression in cruel and sadistic behavior against their enemies: whoever does not submit to them or love them."

Dr. Kernberg added that while he had studied Hitler and Stalin, and would categorize them as malignant narcissists, he knew little about Mr. Hussein and could not comment directly about him.

Dr. Post, however, said that the concept of malignant narcissism fit Mr. Hussein quite nicely.

"The overarching theme is the centrality of the self -- that he is Iraq," Dr. Post said. This self-glorification, he said, was combined with "a deep-seated need to reassure himself through public adulation of how magnificent he is."

Dr. Post added that the bunker built beneath one of Mr. Hussein's palaces was a perfect metaphor for his personality. "Here, under this grandiose palace with its inlaid woods and fine marbles, is this underground bunker with reinforced concrete and steel," Dr. Post said. "That's his psychology: a grandiose facade and under it a siege state, ready to be betrayed, to be attacked, to strike back."

In their profile of Mr. Hussein, compiled from news accounts and interviews, Dr. Post and Dr. Baram attributed much of the Iraqi leader's psychopathology to his early childhood.

They described how Mr. Hussein's mother suffered the death of both her husband and an elder son while she was pregnant with him. She tried to commit suicide and to abort her son, but was prevented in each case by members of a Jewish family who became her benefactors. When Saddam Hussein was born, the researchers wrote, his mother refused to look at him or take him in her arms.

Saddam went to live with a maternal uncle, Khairallah Tulfah, who imbued him with dreams of becoming a great Arab leader, like Saladin and Gamal Abdel Nasser. At 3, he returned to live with his mother for several years, but was psychologically and physically abused by her new husband, according to the profile.

"One course in the face of such traumatizing experiences is to sink into despair, passivity and hopelessness," Dr. Post and Dr. Baram wrote. "But another is to etch a psychological template of compensatory grandiosity, as if to vow, 'Never again, never again shall I submit to superior force.' This was the developmental path Saddam followed."

Other psychiatrists, however, cautioned that it was difficult to draw conclusions about psychological development from sketchy information about a leader's childhood, particularly when another culture was involved. "Certainly, childhood experiences are very important," Dr. Kernberg said, "but very often that's what we know least about, and what is most easily distorted by fancy speculation."

What is not speculative is the adult that Mr. Hussein became, a man obsessed with molding the world into a reflection of his own power.

Malignant narcissism is not the exclusive province of dictators. In another country, at another time, with a different set of dice, some psychiatrists say, Mr. Hussein might instead have become a corporate executive, a lawyer, a cult leader or a politician. His ambition, paranoia and violence might then have been modulated by legal codes and tempered by the checks and balances of a free society.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. "The best way to understand this," said Dr. Kerry J. Sulkowicz, a psychoanalyst in private practice in Manhattan, "is that occasionally in history there is a confluence of events, in which the severe psychopathology of a leader is allowed to flourish."