

Rumsfeld and his 'old friend' Saddam.

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At last in United States military captivity, ousted former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein will soon mark an important 20th anniversary, the kind of anniversary that brings with it an appreciation of the ironies of life, and politics.

His captor, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, might also recall long-forgotten memories - or memories best forgotten - of what he was doing exactly 20 years ago.

If so, he will remember that he was in Baghdad, as a special envoy from then-president Ronald Reagan, assuring his host that, to quote the secret National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) that served as his talking points: the US would regard "any major reversal of Iraq's fortunes as a strategic defeat for the West".

So began the effective resumption of close relations between Baghdad and Washington that had been cut off by Iraq during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Within a year, Washington would fully normalize ties with Saddam, and even suggest that the dictator had become a full-fledged "Arab moderate", ready to make peace with Israel.

Of course, the reason for this rapprochement - nay, avid courtship - was the bad turn that the war between Iraq and Iran had taken for Baghdad. A victory by Tehran, which seemed imminent, would pose a major threat to US interests in the Gulf, such as access to the region's oil.

It was a question of the lesser of two evils, as explained succinctly by Howard Teicher, who worked on Iraq as a member of Reagan's National Security Council. "You have to understand the geostrategic context, which was very different from where we are now," he told the Washington Post earlier this year. "Realpolitik dictated that we act to prevent the situation from getting worse."

It was presumably realpolitik that also persuaded Rumsfeld not to bring up Iraq's use of chemical weapons with Saddam in their first meeting of December 20, 1983, even though the administration knew about it. (After long insisting that he did raise the issue with Saddam, the recent release of State Department memoranda obtained by the National Security Archive has forced Rumsfeld to change his story. He did mention the issue, among many others, when he met with then-foreign minister Tariq Aziz separately.)

For the next five years, Washington would quietly ensure that Saddam received all the military equipment he needed to stave off defeat, even precursor chemicals that could be used against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish civilians. Not that Washington supported the use of chemical weapons, particularly against civilians. It was more that the Reagan administration was very reluctant to condemn their use by Iraq back then.

How much more of this intimate relationship Saddam will recall when he gets a public forum is undoubtedly a concern of many current and past administration figures. The situation echoes the worries of former US president George H W Bush over what Panamanian strongman General Manuel Antonio Noriega might say in open court about his long and intimate connections to US intelligence agencies when he surrendered to the US military after Washington's invasion of Panama in 1989. Of course, Noriega was recruited while he was still in the military academy, and his rise to power was facilitated tremendously by those ties.

He was a paid agent from the beginning, and, while a rogue who did not hesitate to intimidate and occasionally knock off a few dissidents to keep things quiet, he was never the mass murderer and serial invader of his neighbors that Saddam has been.

On the other hand, Saddam was also a beneficiary of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) help - even if he did not get the kind of sustained attention that Noriega received - and long before Rumsfeld's visit at that.

According to an investigative report by Richard Sale of United Press International (UPI) published in April, Saddam's first contacts date back to 1959, when the CIA backed an assassination attempt in which he took part against then Iraqi prime minister General Abd al-Karim Qasim, the man who overthrew the Western-backed monarchy the year before.

At the time, Iraq - as in 1982 - was seen as a key strategic asset, and Qasim's decision to withdraw from the Baghdad Pact and subsequently get cosy with Moscow was seen by Washington as a potentially disastrous setback.

Saddam, an aspiring young Ba'athist tough, was handled on behalf of the CIA by a local agent and an Egyptian military attache, who set him up in an apartment opposite Qasim's office, according to Adel Darwish, author of *Unholy Babylon: The Secret History of Saddam's War*, in an account backed up to UPI by US officials.

The specific hit, however, was botched when Saddam "lost his nerve", according to another UPI source.

When Qasim was finally overthrown in a Ba'ath Party coup - whether the CIA supported it is a matter of dispute, although the party's secretary general at the time said: "We came to power on a CIA train" - Saddam was back as head of the party's secret intelligence branch, and, according to Darwish, was leading execution squads of Iraqi National Guardsmen who were hunting down and killing suspected communists included on lists provided by ... the CIA.

In the early 1970s, then-president Richard Nixon tilted definitively toward the Shah of Iran as the main protector of US interests in the Gulf. It was not until 1979, when the Shah was overthrown and Saddam installed himself as president of Iraq, that Washington once again began taking an interest in Baghdad's internal affairs, although no evidence of any link between Washington and Saddam's elevation has come to light.

Washington's standoffishness changed when the incoming Reagan administration realized by late 1981 that Baghdad could lose the war with disastrous consequences for US interests in the region. In early 1982, it removed Iraq from the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, making Baghdad eligible for billions of dollars in agricultural credits and sales of "dual-use" equipment goods, such as chemical precursors, sophisticated communications equipment and technology that could be useful in weapons programs, with both civilian and military uses.

As the Iranians continued to shift the strategic balance, however, the situation became more urgent. On November 26, 1983, NSDD 114, which remains classified, was signed by Reagan, even as US intelligence had learned that Baghdad's forces were using chemical weapons to stop the Iranian offensive.

Rumsfeld was soon on his way to Baghdad in a trip that, by 1985, would result in Washington supplying Saddam with some US\$1.5 billion worth of weapons equipment and technology, including items applicable to Iraq's nuclear or biological-weapons program, such as anthrax strains and pesticides.

At the same time, the CIA was tasked to ensure that its former charge not run short of either weapons or vitally needed intelligence on the disposition of Iranian forces, a task, according to a 1995 affidavit by Teicher, that then CIA director William Casey took to with abandon. Casey, for example, used a Chilean arms company, Cardoen, to supply Iraq with cluster bombs that he thought would be particularly effective against Iranian "human wave" tactics.

In addition to the credit, equipment and covert military assistance, Saddam also received diplomatic help from Washington at the United Nations and elsewhere in fending off condemnations of his use of banned weapons during the war, as well as efforts in Congress to cut off US help.

The CIA was still providing intelligence and other help when Saddam used poison gas that killed some 5,000 Kurdish non-combatants in Halabja in March 1988. The attack was part of the infamous Anfal campaign, which wiped out dozens of northern Kurdish villages and that is certain to figure prominently, along with a number of other particularly egregious atrocities known to Washington at the time that they were committed, in any eventual trial against the former leader.

All US support for Iraq ended two-and-a-half years later when Saddam invaded Kuwait under circumstances that have suggested to some observers -including, perhaps, Saddam himself - that Washington might have encouraged him to do so.

It's certain that he remembered Rumsfeld's trip at that time, and it seems likely that he may reflect on it again on Saturday. Rumsfeld, however, may not be so inclined.

[Source: Asia Times, IPS, Hong Kong, 17 December 2003]