Introduction

> Having a whole generation of Iraqi and Americans grow up without understanding each other [can have] negative implications and could lead to mix-ups.[1]
>
> – Saddam Hussein, 1983

> Why do you think we trusted the Prophets? It is because they recorded every incident.[2]
>
> – Saddam Hussein, circa 1991

OVERVIEW

Sir Michael Howard, the great British military historian, once warned that "the past is a foreign country; there is very little we can say about it until we have learned the language and understood its assumptions."[3] A recurring insight when reviewing transcripts of discussions between Saddam and members of his inner circle is the extent to which the West's failure to

[1] This quote is from a 21 December 1983 cable from the U.S. embassy in London to the secretary of state. Interestingly, Saddam borrows this language from a statement delivered by Donald Rumsfeld during his discussion with the Iraqi foreign minister in Baghdad the previous day. See "Rumsfeld Mission: December 20 Meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein," London 27572, accessed 6 June 2009 at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/iraq31.pdf.

[2] *SH-SHTP-A-001-203, "Saddam and His Senior Advisers Discussing UN Security Council Efforts to Create a Ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq War," undated (1987). Asterisk marks preceding CRRC citations indicate that these records are not yet available at the CRRC. Approximately two-thirds of the records cited in this study, along with full English translations, were available in the CRRC when *The Saddam Tapes* manuscript went to press. Efforts are under way at the CRRC to make the remainder available.

[3] Michael Howard, "The Lessons of History," *History Teacher*, 15 August 1982, 494. Howard is paraphrasing Leslie Hartley, who wrote, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: New York Review Book, 1953), 1.

Saddam in a meeting with Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti. The date of the picture is unknown, but the picture appears to have been taken in the late 1980s or 1990. An electronic device, apparently an audio recorder, is on the table between the two men. (*Source*: *SH-MISC-D-001-271, "Collection of Saddam's Personal and Family Pictures Including Uday's Wedding," undated).

understand this opaque regime were as much a failure of Westerners to understand their own assumptions as they were a deficit of fact.[4] Extrapolating from Howard's quote, one could say that to Western policy makers, totalitarian regimes may be the most exotic of all foreign countries. The inglorious demise of Saddam Hussein's totalitarian regime might provide insights to the kind of thinking that emerges from the innermost regions of totalitarianism and a guidebook to improving assumptions of the "other." Saddam recorded many important meetings with his generals, Iraq's

[4] The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence noted that many faulty estimates of Iraq's WMD programs stemmed more from analysts' assumptions than from specific evidence or reports. See Robert Jervis, "Bridges, Barriers, and Gaps: Research and Policy," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 4 (2008): 585.

political leaders, and foreign dignitaries. These tapes, on which the present volume rests, promise to become a resource that academic and governmental researchers will draw on for decades.

The rapid collapse of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 resulted in the U.S. government's capture of an extensive collection of "state records" comprising media files and documents.[5] A tiny percentage of these have already been made public in whole or in part.[6] A handful of studies, based on captured documents, are also available.[7] New reports, drawing on captured documents and, in one case, interviews with former Iraqi officials, are also under way. These new studies will provide additional context for several of the chapters in this book.[8]

Collecting, analyzing, and publicly releasing documents from previously closed regimes occurred at the end of World War II and more recently the collapse of communist regimes at the end of the Cold War.[9] Although this is not unusual at the end of wars or revolutions, unedited recordings of people at the heart of power remain rare. Only eleven minutes of audio recording exist of Adolf Hitler in private meetings.[10] A handful of brief,

[5] See Trudy Peterson, "Archives in Service to the State: The Law of War and Records Seizure," in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Procter et al. (Society of American Archivists, 2006; rpt. in *Lligall* in 2004), accessed 12 June 2009 at www.trudypeterson.com/publications.html.

[6] The director of National Intelligence released a collection of approximately eleven thousand records to the Internet in 2006. In November 2006, the U.S. government removed the collection from the Internet following concerns that some of the documents contained scientific data relating to nuclear research. In 2008, the Department of Defense released a five-volume collection of terrorism-related documents. For the terrorism documents, see Kevin M. Woods with James Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project – Primary Source Materials for Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents*, vols. 1–5, accessed 9 February 2009 at www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2008/pa032008.html.

[7] Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of Desert Storm," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 5–41; Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008); Kevin M. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Operational Analyses, 2006), accessed 2 February 2009 at www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2006/ipp.pdf; Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, 30 September 2004, vols. 1–3, referred to hereafter as the *Duelfer Report*.

[8] Studies are under way at IDA on Iraq's nonuse of chemical and biological weapons during the Gulf War, Iraq's tribes under Saddam, the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam's perceptions of Irangate, and how Saddam's image of the United States affected his decision to invade Kuwait.

[9] Robert Wolfe, ed., *Captured German and Related Records: A National Archives Conference* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974); Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project.

[10] Matti Huuhtanen, "Historic, Secret Recording of Hitler's 1942 Visit to Finland Aired on Radio," *Associated Press*, 18 October 2004. Unlike Saddam's recordings, Hitler was unaware this conversation was being taped.

clandestinely taped conversations with Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung of North Korea have also entered the public sphere.[11] By contrast, several thousand hours of audio and video recordings of Saddam meeting with members of his inner circle have emerged from Iraq. These recordings uniquely illuminate the regime's decisions, decision-making processes, perspectives, and personalities.

The present volume provides a brief introduction to the vast collection of audio (and a few video) recordings of Saddam Hussein from formal and informal meetings.[12] The U.S. military captured the original tapes, along with other Iraqi state records, from government buildings and associated facilities in and around Baghdad during the early phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom. To create this volume, the editors screened written summaries and digital copies of the original recordings for material that provides a sense of the wider collection. The focus of this screen was to identify broad national security topics.

The collection has implications for a range of historical questions. How did Saddam react to the pressures of his wars? How did he manage the Machiavellian world he created? How did he react to the signals and actions of the international community on matters of war and peace? Was there a difference between the public and the private Saddam on critical matters of state? A close examination of this material in the context of events and other available evidence will go a long way to address these and other questions.

Beyond their utility for the historian and policy maker, these recordings provide a wealth of material for other disciplines. Fields such as international relations, political psychology, and Middle Eastern studies seem particularly likely to benefit. The editors hope that such historical evidence, previously unavailable, will fuel new studies and reassessments of existing theories and historical understandings. Before reviewing the content of this volume, however, it is worth considering the collection's inherent strengths and limitations.

[11] Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000), 77, 92.

[12] This study was derived from a summary review of more than 2,300 hours of conversations in which Saddam was a participant. Selections from eighty-seven recordings are included in the text, and another forty recordings are cited as additional references in the footnotes. The closest parallel to the material here is probably available only in the most sensitive communications intercepts by intelligence agencies (rarely made available to the public). In terms of capturing unguarded comments from a totalitarian leader, the musings of Hitler, recorded by two stenographers during World War II, are also noteworthy. First published in German just after the war, several English editions date to the early 1950s – most recently H. R. Trevor-Roper's *Hitler's Table Talk 1941–1944: Secret Conversations* (New York: Enigma Books, 2007).

BACKGROUND: RECORDING THE "TABLE TALK" OF SENIOR LEADERS

For most historians, the opportunity to listen in on the unguarded speech of senior political leaders on policy or in reaction to unfolding events is the equivalent of a unicorn sighting. Compared with materials on which historians normally depend – official documents, contemporary news accounts, letters, diaries, and memoirs – tapes provide an unparalleled window into the past. As Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, editors of *The Kennedy Tapes*, have noted, such recordings have the virtue of "being almost totally unfiltered" and "give eavesdroppers the experience of high-level decision making probably not obtainable by other means."[13] In the American experience this unicorn has made an occasional appearance. In addition to the small collections from the Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations, there are substantial holdings of President Lyndon Johnson's secret tapes, and perhaps most famously, President Richard Nixon's – the so-called Watergate Tapes.[14] The Nixon tapes not only helped to end a presidency but also in all likelihood ended the practice of American presidential recordings.

The very existence of such tapes has always been a point of fascination and dread. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., upon learning that President Johnson was routinely taping his Oval Office phone conversations, recorded in his diary that such tapes would be "a treasure trove for the historian!" but then went on to add that such recordings would also become "a threat to the rational and uninhibited conduct of government!"[15] That is, the very access the recordings would give future historians to Oval Office discussions would one day discourage officials from engaging in the private deliberations necessary for good policy making. Of course, Schlesinger was speaking of the reactions of men and women in an open society who at some level must have suspected that their actions would eventually be made known. How might secret or even routine recording of government deliberations affect a totalitarian leader and his inner circle?

It is unclear whether the participants in Saddam's meetings knew he was recording them, although given the nature of the regime they almost certainly

[13] Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, "White House Tapes: Extraordinary Treasures for Historical Research," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 November 1997.

[14] Major works in this area include the following: Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1997); Michael R. Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); Stanley I. Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The Nixon Tapes* (New York: Free Press, 1997). Transcripts of some of the more than five thousand hours of released presidential tapes can be reviewed at the University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs, Presidential Recordings Program, at http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/.

[15] Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., diary entry for 25 March 1964, cited on the Miller Center's Presidential Recordings Program Web site, at http://tapes.millercenter.virginia.edu/.

would have been surprised if he were not.[16] Interviews with senior members of the Ba'ath regime make clear that eavesdropping was the norm. There may have been many reasons for his advisers to withhold their "rational and uninhibited" advice, fear of arbitrary execution no doubt among them, but secret recordings were probably not high on that list. At the least, the sensitive and candid nature of many of the conversations contained in this study suggests that the participants, including Saddam, did not expect the raw tapes or unedited transcripts to become part of a non-Ba'ath controlled historical record.

All of this leaves unresolved the question of why Saddam made these tapes. A simple or single answer does not emerge from this volume, but there are at least three plausible explanations. The reality is likely a combination of all of them to varying degrees. On the one hand, Saddam governed an authoritarian state in which, to protect themselves against charges of disloyalty, officials meticulously documented every piece of bureaucratic minutia. Fear of making mistakes, well justified in a culture of suspicion, provided a strong incentive to record (the ultimate documentation) as much as possible. Recording events also provided a measure of insurance, and a weapon, against one's peers.[17]

Routine recordings may have also been the surest way for the presidential staff to track decisions and manage requests for further information. Saddam and his personal staff oversaw a stunning array of issues ranging from grand strategy to the collar style on new uniforms for the Republican Guard. Accurate records and recordings would clearly enhance the tracking of such an idiosyncratic decision-making process. Saddam used the recordings to track the vast amount of information he needed to master. Toward the end of a long and often confusing series of telephone calls with commanders and intervening discussions with his general staff on 7 January 1981, Saddam instructed his staff, "From now on let us record all telephone

[16] For evidence that Saddam's subordinates and even foreign diplomats were aware that he recorded his meetings with them, see Charles Cullimore interview of Sir Terence Clark, 8 November 2002, British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, p. 30, accessed 6 June 2009 at www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Clark.pdf; "Reaction to King Husayn's Speech: Husayn Kamil Says Atmosphere in Saddam Husayn's Family Is 'Troubled,'" Radio Monte Carlo – Middle East, Paris (in Arabic), 25 August 1995, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 28 August 1995; Saïd K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 327.

[17] In several instances, Iraqi leaders apparently used recordings to undermine domestic rivals. According to Barzan al-Tikriti, Hussein Kamil taped a 1988 phone call in which Uday Hussein, a key rival and Saddam's son, told the U.S. embassy in Switzerland that he wished to defect. Hussein Kamil reportedly shared this tape with Saddam, which led to Uday's arrest. Years later, in an attempt to discredit Hussein Kamil after he had defected, Saddam released a recording in which Hussein Kamil appears to call on Iraq to invade Kuwait. See *SH-MISC-D-001-204, "Diary of Barzan al-Tikriti," undated (circa 2000); "Reaction to King Husayn's Speech," 25 August 1995.

conversations."[18] Although this guidance clearly does not account for all of the Iraqi recordings, the volume of tapes, especially on military topics, does take off from this point forward. It is possible that once Saddam issued this directive, recording phone calls and meetings became a standard operating procedure.

Finally, Saddam may have wanted these recordings to help document his greatness and thereby secure his legacy well into the future. Although not as permanent as Saddam's order to have his initials inscribed into the bricks used to rebuild the ruins of Babylon, a detailed documentary record was the intellectual equivalent. For Saddam, history was nothing if not instrumental – his purpose was to "affirm the facts of the past and the linear trajectory of the future."[19] Using the royal *we*, Saddam addressed army officers on the eve of the Iran-Iraq War and reminded them that "it is essential that we wrest the historical opportunity [to play] the historical role performed by our grandfathers in the service of the nation and humanity."[20]

Of course, just playing the role was no guarantee of good reviews. The only way Saddam could guarantee his historical role was to become one of Iraq's greatest historians. In 1979, while vice president of Iraq (but de facto ruler), Saddam led a Ba'ath Party effort called the Project for the Rewriting of History, in which he argued that any Iraqi analysis of historical events must "apply our specifically Ba'athist perspective in building the Arab nation."[21] Much like Churchill's famous quip about assuring himself a favorable judgment of history by writing it, Saddam understood that some legacies are earned, some are myth, but truly great legacies are a mix of both.

On the eve of his 2006 execution, Saddam declared that he was prepared to be judged "after our current situation becomes a glorious history" and that his role provided "the foundation upon which the success of the future phases of history can be built."[22] These tapes may in fact leave an important historical legacy for Saddam, although not necessarily the one he envisioned.

[18] See SH-AFGC-D-000-393, "Transcript of a Meeting of the General Command of the Armed Forces during the Iran-Iraq War and Telephone Conversations," 7 January 1981.

[19] Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 148, 172. The project resulted in a book credited to Saddam titled *On the Rewriting of History*.

[20] Quoted in Jerry M. Long, *Saddam's War of Words: Politics, Religion, and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 74.

[21] Quoted in Davis, *Memories of State*, 148. For an overview of government efforts to remove perceived colonial influences by rewriting history in six Arab states (Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Kuwait), see Ulrike Freitag, "Writing Arab History: The Search for the Nation," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1994): 19–37.

[22] Translation of a letter released by Saddam's legal team printed in the *Daily Telegraph*, 30 December 2006.

THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

The transcripts in this volume come from a large collection of state records captured in Iraq during the early phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The original tapes, primarily audio cassettes, were subsequently copied as digital media files as a part of a U.S. Department of Defense postwar documentation project. This project and related efforts are similar to the post–World War II efforts to understand events from the enemy's perspective.[23]

In 1945, captured document exploitation operations in both the European and Pacific theaters transitioned from focusing primarily on intelligence to a broad range of research and public documentation activities. The most notable efforts included the U.S. Army's use of the German perspective in its official histories ("Green Books") of the war; the chilling documents revealed in the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals; and the publication of the Department of State's "Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939–1941" collection of documents, an early salvo in the battle of ideas during the Cold War.

After a few years of extensive government research, private scholars began exploring a deeper set of political, military, and cultural questions. Notable efforts include Columbia University's War Documentation Project; the American Historical Association's American Committee for the Study of War Documents; and Harvard University's Russian Research Center, where Merle Fainsod produced his seminal work, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*. Although it remains to be seen if this latest generation of captured records contains the potential to expand our knowledge as much as those from World War II, it is hard to argue that the need to better understand the closed regimes of the Middle East is any less acute than that which drove these earlier efforts.

CHALLENGES

The majority of transcripts included in this volume appear to have been recorded during meetings of the Revolutionary Command Council (officially Iraq's senior decision-making body), the Council of Ministers (Iraq's cabinet), or one of several national security–related working groups. Still others appear to have been made in relatively informal gatherings of Saddam's inner circle or, on occasion, in meetings with less senior members of the regime, including various military officers.

[23] See Robert Wolfe, ed., *Captured German and Related Records*; Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *The Pacific War Papers: Japanese Documents of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006); Kevin M. Woods, "Captured Records – Lessons from the Civil War through World War II," paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, 29 March 2008.

Some of the conversations begin and end within the confines of a single recording. Often, however, the recordings are incomplete. Reasons for this vary. Some recordings capture only part of what were clearly longer conversations on the same topic, or they capture single parts of wider ranging conversations. For this reason, analysts should be wary of drawing definitive conclusions about any topic based on this material.

Much about the recording procedures remains unclear. However, on the basis of a review of related presidential material, a few characteristics of the program are inferable. The Iraqi Intelligence Services provided at least some of the recording equipment for cabinet meetings and meetings involving foreign officials, after testing it for explosives; bugs; and chemical, biological, and radiological contaminants. We know that the Iraqis prepared transcripts based on some of the recordings, thus revealing at least a minimal level of staff knowledge of, and involvement in, the recording process. Saddam's press secretary was responsible for the transcripts of Iraq's cabinet meetings and Saddam's meetings with foreign dignitaries. The presidential secretary appears to have overseen the press secretary's transcriptions.[24] Saddam's phone clearly included a recording device, although it is unclear where else the recording machinery was located. The mechanics of the recording process remain obscure, yet at least one tape indicates that Saddam wanted some conversations to remain strictly private. When a conversation with senior advisers ventured into the subject of "the missing Iraqis, Saudis, and Kuwaitis" from the 1991 war, Saddam ordered his staff to "turn off the recording" before he told them something that was not "for the report."[25]

A second challenge – how to account for the totality of recordings made compared to the number now on hand – is more difficult to overcome. There will probably never be a clear accounting; the editors have not found an Iraqi government index or catalog of presidential recordings, desk calendars, or a schedule of meetings that provide a sense of what was and was not recorded. Coalition troops acquired these recordings during or immediately following combat operations. Collecting and processing captured documents is a standard but inexact battlefield activity. The procedures used do not necessarily preserve the kind of archival details that researchers might want and expect for such a collection. Regime records were found in conditions ranging from pristine (in their original place) to trashed (rooms piled with

[24] Additional background and anlysis of the recording program is found in United Kingdom, House of Commons, Committee on Standards and Privileges, Annex of the Sixth Report, "Combined Media Processing Centre-Qatar/UK CI Report: Authenticity of Harmony File ISGP-2003-00014623," 17 July 2007, accessed 19 January 2010 at www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk.

[25] *SH-SHTP-A-001-269, "Saddam and His Advisors Discuss Iraq's Compliance with UN Inspectors, UN Sanctions on Iraq, Iraqi Tribes, and Other Issues," undated (circa 1991–1992). The recording resumed after a few minutes and did not return to the missing-persons subject.

material awaiting destruction) to hidden (bags of documents buried in a garden). Although documentation is abundant on many issues, the regime's efforts to destroy records dealing with sensitive topics, such as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ethnic cleansing in the Kurdish north, have in all likelihood left major gaps.[26] Fortunately, most of the records do come with some information about the date and general location of their capture. On the basis of this data, the editors conclude that most of the materials quoted in this volume were captured in and around facilities associated with the office of the presidency or the presidential secretary's office.[27]

Third, it is reasonable to assume that not all surviving records are equally reliable. On occasion, Saddam's regime appears to have distributed heavily edited transcripts, even recordings, of private conversations. According to Richard Butler, a former head of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspectors in Iraq, Baghdad provided international media outlets with heavily edited video recordings of meetings with him and other inspectors in an attempt to cast them in a poor light.[28] Hussein Kamil, after defecting to Jordan, accused Iraqi television of doctoring a recording to give a false impression that he wanted Iraq to invade Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.[29] Documents and recordings that the regime publicly released, or intended for public release, are certainly among the least trustworthy. Only a miniscule portion of the recordings in the collection appear to fit this category.

Despite the occasionally spotty provenance of the original recordings, one can gain a sense of the authenticity of the recordings from the voices and conversations themselves. With minor exceptions, the Ba'ath leadership maintained a degree of formality in their conversations. Deference to Saddam by use of an honorific title is a consistent attribute. Saddam often responded in kind before reverting to a more informal style. Except on rare, formal occasions, he spoke in the colloquial. His tone changed when he was angry, yet Saddam seldom raised his voice. Almost invariably, his voice and word choice evinced determination. Iraqi textual records as well as other reporting and analyses developed over the course of Operation Iraqi Freedom also

[26] A few weeks before the U.S. invasion, Saddam's government reportedly ordered the destruction of all documents related to its ethnic-cleansing program. Outside the municipal building in Kirkuk, an enormous bonfire of these documents burned for nearly twenty-four hours. See George Packer, "The Next Iraqi War: What Kirkuk's Struggle to Reverse Saddam's Ethnic Cleansing Signals for the Future of Iraq," *New Yorker*, 4 October 2004.

[27] For a detailed description of the Presidential Diwan and supporting offices, see *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, vol. 1, December 2004.

[28] Richard Butler and James Charles Roy, *The Greatest Threat: Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Crisis of Global Security* (Cambridge: Public Affairs, 2000), 113; Cameron Stewart, "Butler Smeared in Iraqi Talks Video," *Weekend Australian*, 15 August 1998.

[29] "Reaction to King Husayn's Speech," 25 August 1995.