



Blowing a 'hinge moment' of history

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[Mark Steyn](#)

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The execution of Saddam Hussein provided a useful study in contrasting pathologies. In Europe, the dictator's hanging was deplored. "The death penalty," sniffed *The Guardian*, "is an unacceptably cruel and unusual punishment, even in Iraq." Really? Whether or not it was unacceptably cruel, under Saddam it certainly wasn't unusual.

By contrast, Tim Hames, of the *London Times*, supported toppling the butcher but not killing him. "Mainstream middle-class sentiment in Europe," he wrote, "now regards the death penalty as being as ethically tainted as the crimes that produced the sentence."

"Mainstream middle-class sentiment" translates into English as: "People I meet at dinner parties."

According to a poll published in *Le Monde*, the majority of Spaniards, Germans, French and British were all in favor of executing Saddam.

Indeed, Mr. Hames' fellow Britons aren't that far behind the Neanderthal Yanks in their enthusiasm for a good ol' ethically-tainted hanging: 69% of respondents in the United Kingdom supported the death penalty for the dictator versus 82% in America. Mr. Hames apparently defines "mainstream" opinion as the position held by under a third of his countrymen, not the 70% extremist fringe.

Whatever one's views on capital punishment, that's not what it's about. Hardcore dictatorships have to be not just politically but psychologically liberated. When one man is so murderously powerful, incarceration

tion cannot suffice - because as long as he lives there will always be the possibility that he will return. After all, we're talking about someone who by definition has never been bound by any of the other restraints - personal, moral, religious, constitutional: why should a court sentence prove any more effective? When a dictator has exercised the total control over his subjects that Saddam did, his hold on them can only end with his death.

I would venture that, at some level, even the European political class understands that. But it doesn't stop them preening on this issue. A couple of years back, Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Defense, Geoff Hoon, announced that in the event British troops captured Osama bin Laden they would not extradite him to America without assurances that he would not face the death penalty. The US Justice Department should have said: Fine, you keep him. Put him on trial at the Old Bailey and, assuming enough jurors survive to pass sentence, stick him in Brixton or Pentonville gaol for "life," and sit back and watch as British subjects are seized and beheaded from Palestine to Pakistan and British consulates, banks and factories are blown up in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Belgium. If you're determined to be that big a bunch of self-indulgent poseurs, you can explain it to the grieving loved ones of your own citizens.

But the moral posturing of Europeans is less a guide to practical policy on war and jihad than a glimpse of their own psychological isolation.

The German Web site Davids Medienkritik provided a useful round-up of local reports on Saddam's hanging: "Die Europäer verurteilten die Anwendung der Todesstrafe," declared *Die Zeit*. "The Europeans condemn the use of the death penalty."

What "Europeans"? Not the majority of Germans who approve of the execution. Not the 58% of French citizens. Not the seven out of 10 Britons. When *Die Zeit* and *The Times* and all the rest say that "Europe" condemns the death of Saddam, what they mean is that a narrow, remote, self-insulating politico-media elite condemns it.

Their assumption (in the face of all the evidence) that they speak for "Europe" is revealing because it helps explain why the Continent is having such difficulty coming to terms with every other issue, from its unaffordable social problems to its alienated Muslim populations.

So, at one level, this should be a great moment for the Bush administration. All over the world, genocidal thugs ought to be staring slack-jawed at the TV and thinking: "Wow! The cowboy did it. He went in, kicked the President-for-Life off his solid gold toilet, tossed him in jail and then had him tried and hanged like a common thief."

Unfortunately, when the US handed him over to the Iraqi authorities, the "authorities" did their best to look entirely unauthorized. Saddam was dispatched in some dingy low-ceilinged windowless room of one

of his old secret-police torture joints by a handful of goons in ski masks and black leather jackets. It looked less like the dawn of a new Iraq than a Russian mafia mob hit. A couple of guards gleefully yelled out, "Moqtada, Moqtada, Moqtada" - as in Moqtada al-Sadr - to which Saddam added a disbelieving echo: "Moqtada?"

As well he might. It's one thing to be done in by Bush but by forces loyal to the punk son of some nickel-and-dime cleric you had murdered years ago... Granted, it was more genteel than the, ah, change of government in Liberia in 1990, when Prince Johnson had President Doe's ears sliced off and stuffed them in His Excellency's mouth before cutting off the presidential genitals and eating them himself in the belief that the "powers" of the person whose parts you're chowing down on are transferred to the diner. But the general vibe was a bit too similar.

And the many Muslims around the world who see this video and hear the "Moqtada!" cries may agree with the pithy summation of the Powerline blog: The thug is dead. Long live the thug! Given that Saddam was transferred from coalition custody to the Iraqi government only a few hours before his demise, I'd be interested to know whether US authorities proffered any "advice" on the optics: Ixnay on the torture dungeon, maybe in the exercise yard with a couple of Iraqi flags; get the heavies out of the Quentin Tarantino get-up and into some neutral prison-warden garb or Baghdad Airport parking-garage-attendant

uniforms; if you have to have victims' loved ones present, go for the widows and photogenic orphans rather than Moqtada's boys. Meta-message: "Time to move on, says Government of Free Iraq", not "Payback's a bitch, says local enforcer."

And, if nobody in the US government came up with any such advice, why not? How come we have a political culture that can produce a content-free party convention down to the nano-second but gives not a thought to hinge moments of history?

The reality is that Saddam Hussein is dead because of George W. Bush and a fledgling Iraqi justice system, not Moqtada al-Sadr. But that's not the impression you'd get watching the final moments of this evil man's life. And to permit some pipsqueak warlord wannabe to snaffle the credit is a very foolish thing to do in a part of the world that already has great difficulty accepting reality.

My bottom line on Saddam? "Rejoice, rejoice," as Mrs. Thatcher advised after the liberation of South Georgia Island from Argentine forces. The posturing of the Europeans is decadent and self-indulgent, symptoms of a narcissist pseudo-power that has attitudes rather than policies. But Washington's carelessness over the final moments of Saddam's life is not encouraging either: if you needed it, this was a very vivid demonstration of how America's hands-off approach has encouraged too many meddling fingers. The king is dead. Moqtada al-Sadr should be, too.