Hal Brands and David Palkki. “‘Conspiring Bastards’: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic View of the United States.” *Diplomatic History* 36:3 (June 2012): 625-660. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01045.x. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01045.x](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01045.x)

URL: [http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR368b.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR368b.pdf)

[N.B. This Article Review should have been paired with Ibrahim Al-Marashi’s review, which was published on H-Diplo on 3 October and is available at [http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR368.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR368.pdf). We regret the error –eds.]

Review by Judith S. Yaphe, National Defense University

“The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or any U.S. government agency.”

Since the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003, more than one million documents seized by the U.S. military have been available to a few American researchers in a data base maintained by the Department of Defense. These captured documents are now housed with the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) located at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, and a growing number are being made available to scholars. Hal Brands and David Palkki are among the few scholars who have had access to the small number of translated documents and along with Kevin Woods from the Institute for Defense Analysis, have been able to singularly exploit the available documents in publications that have informed devotees of Iraq’s recent history and Saddam Husayn’s style of leadership on the not-so-private political philosophy and practices of one of the twentieth century’s most ruthless dictators.¹

Brands and Palkki note in the introduction to their article that the United States “was never far from [Saddam’s] mind” but “until recently, the paucity of internal, primary-source documentation on Saddam’s regime forced scholars to resort to a sort of

Kremlinology to divine the strategic calculus that drove his decision making” (626). This began to change, they claim, with the capture in 2003 of millions of documents, including state records from ministries and government offices and twenty years of paper documents and tapes recording Saddam’s utterances in private and public meetings with Revolutionary Command Council officials, advisers, party stalwarts, and civilian and military leaders. They admit there are gaps in coverage but believe that the captured records shed considerable light on Iraqi decision making and national security policy under Saddam. They also make it seem as if most of the million plus documents are or will soon be available to scholars.

While it is true that the captured records ‘shed light’ on decisionmaking and security policy made by and under Saddam, they are not and have not been the only source able to do this. Nor is it likely that the vast number of documents will be available to scholars or the curious public anytime soon. As was noted by another reviewer, “the recordings and documents reflect considerable consistency between Saddam’s public and private utterances.” All told, they provide a rich if uneven collection of primary source documentation revealing Saddam’s world view and his understanding and misunderstanding of world events, allies and adversaries. They also describe the high level of sycophancy and total obedience necessary to survive and serve the Great Leader. But for anyone who has followed Iraq’s history under Saddam and his words and deeds, there is little that is new here. The revelations that shock and awe readers are in the excellence of the translations and the clarity of Saddam’s thinking. As with his speeches and public interviews, there is little hidden from view. His anger with fellow Arabs (especially Syrian rival Hafiz al-Assad, Egyptian leaders Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak, and the Saudis) can be tasted, his fears of American and Israeli conspiracies, Islamic extremism and Persians are palpable, his respect for weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear ones, self-evident.

Saddam’s mistrust of the United States was life-long and has been well-documented. He was raised by an uncle, Khayrallah Talfah, a colonel in the Iraqi army who was involved in the 1941 Coup of the Golden Square. Coup leaders wanted to overthrow the monarchy, throw out the British and align Iraq with Nazi Germany. Talfah was imprisoned, lost his commission and pension but left a lasting legacy in shaping his nephew’s political views and in writing a pamphlet that expressed his prejudices clearly—“Three Things G-d Should Not Have Given Iraq: Persians, Jews, and Flies.” Allegations have been made that while the teen-age Saddam was in exile in Egypt after the assassination attempt on Abd al-Karim Qassim, he was recruited by the CIA as part of a Cold War recruitment effort to place friends in power and isolate the Soviet Union. No evidence to support this claim has ever surfaced and it is doubtful that a young idealistic thug like Saddam would have succumbed to American blandishments for a few dollars. Certainly, U.S. and Israeli

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2 Review of The Saddam Tapes by Heinrich Matthee in Middle East Policy, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (Fall 2012), p. 172.
support for the Shah and his efforts to supply the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq confirmed any lingering doubts Saddam may have had about U.S. intentions towards him and Iraq.

This antagonism temporarily abated in the early 1980s when Baghdad and Washington began a mutual dance of reconciliation. Who began the dance is not clear. Saddam was getting richer and stronger and was unhappy with his alliance with Moscow. The United States was not enamored of Saddam and not pleased with his invasion of Iran in 1980, but Washington had its own problems with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Reagan Administration decided to take steps to rehabilitate Iraq legally and publicly. Support for Iraq in the 1980s was not tacit, as Brands and Palkki suggest. It began with a multi-year campaign in the early 1980s to remove Iraq from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, which was accomplished by 1982, a necessary step if the United States wanted to sell arms to Iraq. Diplomatic relations were restored two years later, followed by years of guaranteed agricultural loans, export-import bank credits, purchases of dual-use goods and military intelligence. Brands and Palkki describe the thaw in U.S.-Iraqi relations as “purely circumstantial and largely superficial.” They are correct. The rapprochement reflected desperation on both sides—for the Americans, it was failure to obtain release of hostages held in Lebanon and end Iranian threats to Gulf shipping and Arab allies; for Saddam, it was failure to defeat decisively Iran on the battlefield. For both, short-term necessity outweighed long-term suspicions. The Iraqis believed the U.S. was using its military advantage to spy on them rather than providing information to defeat Iran. The intelligence provided to Iraq was never good enough, but then how could anyone, least of all America, meet Saddam’s expectations. We were, after all, “conspiring bastards.”

The tilt to Iran, which came in 1985, angered Saddam, according to the tapes. He clearly felt betrayed by Washington’s provision of weapons and intelligence to Tehran but I doubt he was surprised or shocked. The Americans were, after all, “conspiring bastards”—always were and always would be. Saddam could ill-afford to break with the United States and the Reagan Administration was soon caught trading for hostages, something it claimed it would never do. I do not think that Saddam saw the U.S. and Israel as his “primary foreign threat,” however (647). Even by the late 1980s, this was still Iran, even after the 1988 defeat. For Saddam, the United States was still a source of loan guarantees, weapons, and much needed equipment for post-war reconstruction. Saddam viewed not just the U.S. with suspicion and hostility; he viewed his neighbors and trading partners in Europe and the Middle East with similar suspicion and hostility.

Policy analysts in the U.S. and the Middle East make the claim that U.S. intervention in the Iraq-Iran war set the scene for Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and ultimately the 2003 war. That may be. Brands and Palkki are correct in saying that Washington’s support in the 1980s encouraged Saddam to think he could manipulate the international community into accepting his annexation of his smaller, weaker neighbor. After all, he must have calculated, why would risk-averse Washington or the feckless Europeans care about an intra-Arab dispute so long as the oil kept flowing. I do not think Saddam was haunted by “a specter of a U.S.-Israeli-Kuwaiti conspiracy to strangle Iraq” and topple his
regime (654). He may have talked about this in his Cabinet meetings but that does not prove that he believed this would justify his attack on his wealthy neighbor. Brands and Palkki argue that the evidence is only “suggestive” and that the captured records “strongly hint” that Saddam saw the invasion as “an advantageous stroke in what he perceived to be an intensifying and potentially mortal confrontation with the United States” (632). This, in my opinion, is an overstatement. Saddam’s focus was local, and his justification was local.

‘Hinting’ becomes the basis for judgments regarding Saddam’s pragmatism. Brands and Palkki use a statement by Saddam who imagined he was at war with Israel, stopped fighting when Israel threatened him with a nuclear bomb, but warned that “we have stopped [attacking Israel] but we have not given up” (632). The authors suggest that this imagined conversation “hints at Saddam’s pragmatism—Iraq would stop and bide its time when confronted by American threats” (632). This is not the stuff by which one measures Saddam’s pragmatism. History provides the evidence—Saddam’s willingness to cut a deal with the Shah in 1975 to end Iranian (and Israeli and American) assistance to rebelling Kurds in exchange for his concessions on the Shatt al-Arab waterway which demarcated the border between the two countries. This agreement—the famous Algiers Accord—lasted less than five years. Signed when Baghdad was weak militarily and Iran strong, it was abrogated in 1980 when a strong Iraq invaded a weakened Iran after the Islamic Revolution and the fall of the Shah. That is pragmatism.

Some other points: Saddam did not seize power in 1979; he had been running the country and consolidated his power long before that fateful July when he announced what everyone knew—he was the leader of Iraq and second to no one. Saddam’s sense of personal empowerment, legitimacy and destiny were also well-established by then in the public eye.

Brands and Palkki give much credence to the now mythic stories about Saddam’s depraved and deprived childhood. I accept the influences that an impoverished childhood with an abusive step-father and a harsh upbringing in a harsh environment shaped by tribal culture and occupation politics had on the young Saddam, but he also believed that he and his culture were unique, exceptional, and superior to all others. I have more trouble with the pseudo-psychological terms used to describe him and which Brands and Palkki blithely assume as truth. What does it mean to say Saddam was “delusional, paranoid, parochial, narcissistic, anti-Semitic and a megalomaniac” (628-629). That’s a lot, even for Saddam, who also showed himself capable of rational thought, the ability to weigh risks and opportunities, and the patience to wait for revenge. By the late 1970’s Saddam was unhappy with Soviet support and worried about the Islamic Republic’s efforts to woo Iraqi Shi’a, but he still adhered to the standard denunciations of American support for Israel and the Camp David Accords and held an anti-Egyptian, pro-rejectionist summit in Baghdad. Saddam appeared unmoved but he may also have been pragmatic. And, while Saddam saw an American hand behind the Iranian revolution, other Arabs later claimed that Washington gave Saddam ‘the green light’ to attack Iran.
President Reagan’s decision to sell arms to Iran in 1985 not only confirmed to Saddam the extent of American perfidy. It also failed miserably if its intention was to free all American hostages and gain influence over Iran, which Brands and Palkki assume was an Administration goal. I doubt that anyone in Washington believed either of these goals was achievable. Yet, disappointed as Reagan may have been at the disclosure and failure of his Iran initiative, he probably paid little thought to Saddam’s reaction. Again, the authors quote Saddam’s “outrage” and the “jarring impact” that the U.S. willingness to sell Iran advanced weapons it denied to Baghdad had on the Iraqi leader (641). “This level of bad and immoral behavior is a new thing,” he is reported to have told his advisers (641.). And herein lies one of the problems in relying primarily on archival documents of this type. Considering Saddam’s dramatic deal with the Shah in 1975, why was he so shocked by Reagan’s hopes for a deal with Iran? His audience was comprised of loyalists, and thus he could posture and fume all he wanted. I do not think Saddam exaggerated the potential significance that an American shift to Iran and away from Iraq would have had for Iraq. In this case, he overestimated the reaction and underestimated Iranian guile in pretending to negotiate with the United States.

With the end of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, Saddam appears to have returned to strident accusations at least in his private circles that the United States and Israel were plotting his destruction and that only he, Saddam, stood in the way of American domination of the Middle East. The authors cite as evidence advice sent to Saddam from his half-brother Barzan, who was then located in Geneva. Always a sycophant, Barzan said that the U.S. intended to “invade us from the inside and out” and to assassinate Saddam (648). Barzan was in no position to give Saddam advice on anything, much less on U.S. attitudes towards Iraq. It would have been far more interesting if the authors had been able to find in the archived records advice to Saddam from his popular and influential ambassador in Washington, Nizar Hamdun. For its part, the administration of George H.W. Bush continued to follow an engagement policy towards Iraq, providing it with new loans, export credits, and dual-use technology, even when it was confronted with evidence of Iraqi corruption and money laundering. For Iraq, the main enemy may have become the United States once again, but for the United States the primary enemy remained Iran. The authors correctly note a 1988 CIA Estimate that described Iraq as too exhausted from the war to provoke its neighbors, a judgment not accepted by all in the Intelligence Community. The belief persisted in the Bush I Administration, however, that an engagement strategy would ‘mellow’ Saddam, moderate his behavior, and draw Iraq into a more stable set of relationships with his neighbors and the international community.

With all the rich dialogue the captured documents provide, a key question is left unanswered: What role did Saddam’s perception of U.S. policy play in his decision to attack and occupy Kuwait? The authors found no ‘smoking gun’ in the captured records that lay out Saddam’s thinking and they suggest standard reasons for the attack—Iraq’s precarious financial situation, Saddam’s desire to assert Iraqi hegemony and his personal leadership, Kuwait’s unpopularity and the likelihood that no one would come to its rescue.
(in this he was almost correct). And they add that Saddam’s temper may also have been involved. The answer, however, lies in geopolitical realities, and not in archival rumblings. Kuwait was isolated, unloved by its neighbors because of prior experiments with democratic practices and its temerity to ask Iraq to pay for old loans before if sought new ones. Notwithstanding the movement of Iraqi forces south towards the border with Kuwait, the Saudis on the week-end before the attack urged Kuwait to stand down its military alert and avoid provoking Baghdad. And, finally, many Iraqis then—and now too—believed that Kuwait was an integral part of Iraq historically that had been stripped away by the British in 1920. I am much less certain than the authors that Saddam saw the invasion of Kuwait as “a way of seizing the initiative in his intensifying confrontation with the United States” (654). Saddam was in need of large amounts of money to fund civilian and military reconstruction and keep his population supplied and happy after the costly war with Iran. Kuwait was close, rich, and with few friends in the region. It had been cheating on its OPEC quotas and stealing oil from shared fields with Iraq. In other words, in Saddam’s eyes, Kuwait’s actions were robbing Iraq of its wealth and preventing it from recovery from the war. And, it was doing so in collusion with the U.S. Saddam did not believe the U.S. or anyone else would interfere with his plan to absorb Kuwait, least of all the United States which was still in the shadow of its loss in Viet Nam and afraid to fight. Did Saddam know he would have a lightning strike victory and occupy all of Kuwait within twelve hours? I don’t think so. I believe Saddam was as surprised as the United States that Kuwait was defeated within two hours of the initial attack.

Brands and Palkki have done an excellent job of mining the documents available in the CRRC. They are scrupulous in detailing their sources. The text is amply footnoted, providing serious readers with a wealth of references as well as a review of the literature available in other scholarly works and archives. Reading the documents and listening to the tapes is like hearing Saddam whisper in your ear. You read the anger, the conspiracy theories, the wounded self-view and you hear the voices praising him for his far-sightedness and his heroism in defending the Iraqi and Arab peoples against their enemies. But you also need to remind yourself that this is one man’s view of his country’s enemies and his destiny. It is not a comprehensive chronicle of his years in power nor does it contain an admission of errors.

The analysis of Saddam’s motives and intentions is weak in many places. The authors rely on unrealistic assessments of Saddam, depending on psychological assessments drawn from textbooks and second-hand accounts of behaviors not witnessed. They overlook the time line of developments, especially in relation to the brief period of attempted rapprochement between Iran and the U.S. and the impact of the shoot-down of the Iranian civilian airliner in the last days of the war. Was the Iraqi shoot down of the USS Stark so unremarkable? A U.S. Justice Department official who interviewed Saddam in 2004 said that when Saddam was discovered in his bolt-hole near Tikrit in late 2003, he had in his briefcase a list of the citations awarded to Iraqi pilots for the shoot-down of the Stark. Brands’ work has been primarily on German military history, which may account for his fondness for comparing Saddam to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin; Palkki’s
previous academic work was also on German history and nuclear deterrence. To this reviewer's knowledge, neither had any experience of Iraqi history, politics or Arabic language before their work on the captured records. They make mistakes. For example, Barzan al-Tikriti is incorrectly identified as Saddam’s brother-in-law (648); he was his half-brother, exiled to Geneva in the 1980s after serving as Saddam’s Interior Minister and chief thug because his loyalty was suspect. Saddam saw Syrian President Hafez al-Assad as a major rival for power and prestige in the Arab world and probably intended his bullying of Kuwait and the small Arab states as a way to challenge Assad’s dominance of Arab politics. Documents in the Archive reveal Saddam’s scorn for Assad as well as Egyptian President Mubarak and King Fahd. The attack on Kuwait came despite promises alleged by Mubarak, Fahd, and King Hussein of Jordan that he would not attack. The idea in popular discourse (which I have heard many times during visits in the Gulf) and in some academic literature that Iraq was an American proxy in the 1980s and that the U.S. either encouraged Saddam to attack Iran or that its support for Iraq in the war with Iran led Saddam to conclude that it would tolerate his invasion of Kuwait—these are all red herrings. Saddam needed no such encouragement and would not have taken advice from anyone, not his generals and least of all the despised United States. I would also not underestimate the value of U.S. support to Iraq during the 1980s. It was not the value that mattered, which the authors describe as “more limited and ambivalent than has often been suggested” (658). It was the thought that counted. Saddam’s Iraq was given legitimacy when it was removed from the State Sponsor of Terrorism List; American willingness to do business with Baghdad conveyed approval of its actions, including war against Iran. Silence in the U.S. and the West could have been interpreted as condoning use of chemical weapons and the systematic oppression of large segments of the Iraqi people. No wonder Saddam doubted anyone would care if he invaded and occupied Kuwait.

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