

Measure for Measure

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There was mayhem at the gallows, and there was justice at the gallows. Saddam Hussein had divided Iraqis and Arabs-and others-while he lived, and he was to do so again on the day of his execution. In the best of worlds, Saddam's executioners would have been "clinical" about the thing and subdued, and they would have given the event the dignity it deserved. But this was a despot who had cut a swath of terror through the land, and the prime minister who had come to power from the Shiite underground was determined to bring the matter of Saddam Hussein to a fitting end. It wasn't pretty, that spectacle of execution, and there should have been no cellphone video recording of the deed, but the truth at the heart of what played out in Saddam's old military intelligence headquarters was plain and simple justice and retribution. Men are not angels, and the dictator reaped what he had sown.

Aides to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki say that the pen with which he signed Saddam Hussein's death warrant had been in his possession for well over a quarter century. He had carried this pen with him to a long exile in Syria and Iran after he had fled the terrors of Saddam Hussein. He had waited for that moment, and truth be told there was perhaps relish in the way the death sentence was signed, before the cameras, a message to Maliki's Shiite kinsmen. The American regency in Baghdad had underestimated Maliki. There is more steel in the man than our commanders and diplomats on the scene had suspected. An unlikely choice for prime minister, he is through and through a man of the Shiite traditional classes; unlike his peers in the political class, he speaks not a word of English. He had never really taken to the Americans or fully trusted them. His predecessor, Ibrahim Jaafari, had been removed from office through American pressure in the spring of last year. Though he benefited, there lingers in Maliki a suspicion that he could suffer the same fate. It did not help that a memo by White House National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, made public last November, questioned Maliki's ability to rule and to rein in the Shiite militias. American power had bet heavily on reconciling the Sunni insurgents, and Maliki had read the diplomacy of the last year as a steady effort to court the Sunni Arabs. The man led to the gallows may have been a shadow of his old self, but he still haunted the imagination of his fervent supporters. For Maliki it was important that all these doubts be stilled.

Sunni reaction. It was said in the Sunni strongholds of Iraq, and in the Arab capitals, that it had been bad form that the dictator had been dispatched at dawn, on the first day of Id al-Adha, the feast of sacrifice that marks the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. But those protests came from people who had never shed a tear for Saddam's victims. Their loyalties are atavistic: They are motivated by a dread of the Shiites, and by a reflexive, unthinking anti-Americanism.

A big thing happened, it has to be conceded, when Maliki affixed his signature to that death sentence. Sunni rulers had been hounding Shiite rebels for centuries in Arab lands; Saddam himself had put to death some great men of standing in the Shiite religious establishment. In April 1980, in a deed that is still recalled with terror by the vast majority of Shiites, a great figure of the Shiite seminaries, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, was put to death by the Hussein regime-along with his immensely talented sister, Bint al-Huda, a poet and a writer of exquisite sensibility. Sadr had become the great martyr of Iraqi Shiites; he is said to have been the intellectual inspiration behind the Dawa Party to which Maliki belongs. Saddam's execution was an act of fealty to that beloved man. For the Shiite faithful, justice had been slow in coming.

It had taken a foreign war to decapitate that tyrannical regime in Baghdad, it is true. But the judgment that mattered was an affair of the Iraqis. We have been asking them to claim responsibility for their country, bemoaning their political abdication. On that morning in Baghdad, three years after he had been flushed out of his spider hole, Saddam Hussein came face to face with the wrath and hurt he had bequeathed Iraqis. Those vengeful men taunting him as he fell through the gallows' trapdoor were in the most direct way the children of his cruel reign of terror.