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NEWS ANALYSIS

For Bush, Joy of Capture Muted at the End

By **JEFF ZELENY**

CRAWFORD, Tex., Dec. 29 — The capture of [Saddam Hussein](#) three years ago was a jubilant moment for the White House, hailed by President Bush in a televised address from the Cabinet Room. The execution of Mr. Hussein, though, seemed hardly to inspire the same sentiment.

Before the hanging was carried out in Baghdad, Mr. Bush went to sleep here at his ranch and was not roused when the news came. In a statement written in advance, the president said the execution would not end the violence in [Iraq](#).

After Mr. Hussein was arrested Dec. 13, 2003, he gradually faded from view, save for his courtroom outbursts and writings from prison. The growing chaos and violence in Iraq has steadily overshadowed the torturous rule of Mr. Hussein, who for more than two decades held a unique place in the politics and psyche of the United States, a symbol of the manifestation of evil in the Middle East.

Now, what could have been a triumphal bookend to the American invasion of Iraq has instead been dampened by the grim reality of conditions on the ground there. Mr. Hussein's hanging means that the ousted leader has been held accountable for his misdeeds, fulfilling the American war aim most cited by the White House after Iraq's weapons of mass destruction proved nonexistent.

But that war is now edging toward its fifth year, and the sectarian violence that has surged independent of any old Sunni or Baathist allegiances to Mr. Hussein has raised questions about what change, if any, his death might bring.

"Saddam's face has been on this process from the beginning and here goes that face," said Bruce Buchanan, a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin. "But in many respects, he's a bit player now."

Even as a bit player, though, the specter of Mr. Hussein remained intimately entwined with Mr. Bush and his father, [George H. W. Bush](#). Two years after the Persian Gulf war, Mr. Hussein ordered an assassination attempt on the elder Bush, an act of spite that the 43rd president would never forget.

Video

“There’s no doubt his hatred is mainly directed at us,” the current president said, speaking to [a Republican](#) fund-raising crowd in Houston on Sept. 26, 2002. “This is the man who tried to kill my dad.”

For his part, Mr. Hussein referred to the younger Mr. Bush as “son of the viper.” He delivered a famous snub of the 41st president, constructing a mosaic of the elder Bush’s face on the floor of the Rashid Hotel, perfectly positioned to be repeatedly stepped on. After the American troops reached Baghdad, they crushed the mosaic.

When Mr. Hussein was captured, the president said: “Good riddance, the world is better off without you.” But he dismissed suggestions that a family grudge played a role in shaping his Iraq policy or influenced his decision to go to war. “My personal views,” he said, “aren’t important in this matter.”

But Mr. Buchanan, a longtime observer of the Bush political family in Texas, said that these were no ordinary archenemies and that setting aside personal views entirely seemed impossible.

“I think the president will see this as justice done and may well feel some sense of vindication, in part because of the attempt on his father’s life,” he said. “It’s definitely part of the drama.”

Here in Crawford, where the president is spending the week between Christmas and New Year’s, aides planned for how the White House would respond to Mr. Hussein’s execution. They quickly ruled out the idea of putting the president in front of television cameras, fearful of sending a message that Mr. Bush was crowing or that the United States was orchestrating the execution, which officially was carried out by the Iraqi government. “We are reminded today of how far the Iraqi people have come since the end of Saddam Hussein’s rule and that the progress they have made would not have been possible without the continued service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform,” Mr. Bush said in his statement.

A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal strategy, also acknowledged that the challenges in Iraq contributed to the president’s decision to simply issue the statement. The White House concluded that even a development as dramatic as Mr. Hussein’s hanging could not be used to

renew support for the war.

“Americans have already taken that into account.” said Frank Newport, the editor in chief of the Gallup Poll. “The benefits of deposing Saddam Hussein are far exceeded by the cost of the war.”

Indeed, a Gallup poll taken Dec. 8 to 10 showed that 64 percent of Americans said the costs of the war outweighed the benefits. Only 33 percent disagreed, saying the benefits — including the ouster of Mr. Hussein — outweighed the costs.

It is a striking change in thinking, Mr. Newport said, considering that since the first Gulf war a wide majority of Americans have supported the removal of Mr. Hussein. It was a chief reason, he said, that polls showed that more than 60 percent of Americans initially supported the war in Iraq.

In June 1993, after the failed attempt by Iraqi government agents on the life of the elder Bush, 53 percent of Americans said of Mr. Hussein in a Gallup Poll that they supported “the extreme action of having him assassinated to remove him from power,” while 37 percent said they did not.

Those sentiments, of course, were expressed a full decade before the invasion that began the current war.

David Schmitz, a professor of history at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., who has written about parallels between the Iraq and Vietnam wars, said the execution of Mr. Hussein may offer a brief reprieve to the Bush administration as it works to create a revised Iraq policy.

“I don’t think it will have a long-term impact on changing the public’s increasing disillusion with the war,” Mr. Schmitz said. “If you looked at Vietnam, there were short-term bumps back up — rallying around the flag — but it never stopped the continual downward support for the war.”

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