

# I surveyed the dark chamber of terror

*It's fascism with a touch of Don Corleone*

**T**he seat is covered in blue velvet and is soft, comfortable in an upright, sensible sort of way, with big gold armrests upon which his hands – for Saddam Hussein was obsessed with his hands – could rest, and with no door behind it through which assassins could enter.

There is no footstool, but the sofas and seats around the vast internal conference chamber of President Saddam's Jumhuriyah Palace placed every official on a slightly lower level than the Caliph himself.

Did I sit on President Saddam's throne? Of course I did. There is something dark in all our souls that demands an understanding of evil rather than good, because, I suppose, we are more fascinated by the machinery of cruelty and power than we are by angels.

So I sat on the blue throne and put my hands over the golden armrests and surveyed the darkened chamber in which men of great power sat in terror of the man who used to sit where I was now. Behind the throne is a vast canvas of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem – minus the Jewish settlements, of course – so the third holiest city of Islam hung above the head of the mightiest of Iraqi warriors.

Opposite the President's chair was a different work of Baathist art. The torchlight that illuminated the canvas produced a gasp of astonishment and horrible clarity. It depicted huge missiles, flames burning at their tails, soaring towards a cloud-fringed, sinister heaven, each rocket wreathed in an Iraqi flag and the words "God is Great".

The godly and the ungodly faced each other in this central edifice of Baathist power. The American 3rd Infantry Division, which is camped in the marble halls and the servants' bedrooms, have kept the looters at bay, though I found some of them thieving

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televisions and computers in the smaller villas of the palace grounds, because, they say, General Tommy Franks will probably set up his proconsulship here. If the Americans can create a compliant government, Ahmed Chalabi and his chums may be running the country from this pseudo-Sumerian complex within a few months.

They will find Saddam Hussein's swimming pool intact, with his vast palm groves and rose gardens. Indeed – how often are brutal men surrounded by beauty – the scent of roses drifts even now through the marble halls and chambers and underground corridors of the Jumhuriyah Palace. There are peonies and nasturtiums and the roses are red and pink and white and crimson and covered in white butterflies, and water, though the 3rd Infantry Division has not yet found the pumps, gurgles from taps into the flower beds.

In the pool-side washing room, piles of books have been tied up for removal – Iraqi poetry and, would you believe, volumes of Islamic jurisprudence – while exercise machines remain to keep the second Salahuddin in moderate physical shape.

His 68th birthday will fall – if he is alive – in just over a week. Over the door are the initials “S H”. Walking the miles of corridors, after the two-mile road leading to the palace, through more fields of roses and palms, piles of spent ammunition and the smell of something awful and dead beyond the flower beds, one is struck by the obsessive mixture of glory and banality.

The 15ft chandeliers inspire awe. But the solid gold bathroom fittings, a solid gold loo-roll holder, for God's sake, and a solid gold loo handle, create a kind of cultural aggression. If one was supposed to be intimidated by President Saddam's power, what was one to make of the narrow, unpolished marble staircases or the great marble walls of the ante-chamber with their gold-leaf ceilings, walls into which were cut quotations from the interminably dull speeches and thoughts of “His Excellency President Saddam Hussein”. Fascist is the word that springs to mind, but fascism with a bit of Don Corleone thrown in.

In that great conference room would sit the attendant lords, the senior masters of the Baath party, the security apparatchiks upon which the regime depended, desperately attempting to keep awake as their leader embarked on his four-hour explanations of the state of the world and of Iraq's place in it. As he talked of Zionism, they could admire the Al-Aqsa mosque. When he became angry, they could glance at the fiery missiles streaking towards that glowering sky with the clouds hanging oppressively low in the heavens.

His words are even cut into the stonework of the outer palace walls where four 20ft tall busts of the great warrior Hamurabi, in medieval helmet and neck-covering, stare at each other across the courtyard. Hamurabi, however, has a moustache and, amazing

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to perceive, bears an uncommon likeness to one Saddam Hussein. What on earth, one wondered, would General Franks make of this? Can the government of the “New Iraq” really hold its cabinet meetings here while these four monsters stare at their American-supplied Mercedes?

The gold leaf, the marble, the chandeliers, the sheer height and depth of the chambers take the breath away. In one hall, a Pantheon-like dome soars golden above the walls and when I shouted “Saddam”, I listened to the repeated echo of “Saddam” for almost a minute. And I have an absolute conviction that President Saddam did just that. If he could instruct his masons to carve his name upon the walls, surely he wanted to hear it repeated in the heights of his palace.

Outside stand the American Abrams tanks of the 3rd Infantry, their names expressing the banality and power of another nation. On their barrels the crews have nicknamed their armoured behemoths. Atomic Dog. Annihilator. Arsonist. Anthrax. Anguish. Agamemnon. Saddam would have approved. ♦