

# The Live Television Debate That Could Have Been: Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush or The “Mother” of All Live Television Debates

By Howard A. Myrick

**M**arshall McLuhan, the 1960s guru of global telecommunications-based interconnectedness, would surely have risen from the dead had this television event actually occurred. Unfortunately, the challenge offered by Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein to the U.S.’s President George W. Bush to engage in a live television debate was not accepted. Saddam Hussein’s challenge was made on February 24, 2003 during his historic face-to-face televised interview with the former CBS *Wunderkind* of television journalism, Dan Rather— the interview that garnered Mr. Rather as much criticism as praise (criticism from those who thought this was but another CBS- facilitated propaganda opportunity for the Iraqi President and praise from

those who marveled at his success in getting his second interview with this elusive and secretive Iraqi leader).

What was especially significant about this particular interview was the fact that it occurred just days before the launch of the preemptive military assault on Iraq by the U.S.-led “coalition of the willing.” What was – or should have been – even more noteworthy was the clear and unexpected challenge communicated by Mr. Hussein to President George W. Bush— a challenge to engage in a live televised debate on the subject that was at the core of the “will to war” being championed by the Bush White House at that very moment. So direct and unexpected was Mr. Hussein’s debate challenge that the unflappable Dan Rather appeared near-speechless and



*CBS News Anchor Dan Rather (left) conducting an exclusive interview with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (second from right). The interview was shown on 60 Minutes on February 26, 2003.*

so unsure of what he had heard that he probed for clarification and confirmation of his understanding of what he thought he had heard. (Perhaps Mr. Rather was recalling the adage “what you thought I said was not what I meant, etc.”).

The words uttered by Mr. Hussein and conveyed through his translator were: “If the American people would like to know the facts for what they are ... through a direct dialogue ... I am ready to conduct a direct dialogue with the President of the United States, President Bush, on television ... in front of all people – in a direct – uncensored manner.” Dan Rather, still appearing unsure of what he had heard (and, perhaps, striving also for a heightened level of journalistic theatrics), responded: “You are suggesting ... urging a debate with President Bush? On television?” Mr. Hussein responded: “Yes. That’s my proposal.” Dan Rather continued to probe: “... a satellite television debate. Live. ...a live international debate via satellite ...” Mr. Hussein continued to

clarify and reiterate, responding: “I do not mean that I ... make a speech at the United Nations. ...What I mean is that we sit – as we are sitting, you and I – I will address questions to him and he will address questions to me. ... Without make-up. ...Without editing – without prepared speeches ...”

Had this debate occurred, would it have been just so much political *Shauspiel* or reality-show-like palaver between two heads of state, engaged in a tragic-comic display of big boys behaving badly? Or, would it have been, indeed, “the ‘mother’ of all live TV debates”? Or, would it have been (to use Mr. Hussein’s words to Dan Rather) “...an opportunity for us to insure peace and safety ...”?

Why was Saddam Hussein’s challenge not accepted? Answers to President Saddam Hussein’s questions shall remain forever unknown, given his subsequent death by execution carried out by the U.S.-backed Iraqi provisional government – a penalty which, arguably, if it were to have been carried out at all,

should have been administered by an international tribunal. It is still not too late, however to ask: why was Saddam Hussein's challenge not accepted? Did CBS or any news organization consider the challenge serious enough or worthy enough to press even harder than reportedly they did to facilitate what could have been, potentially, an example of the highest level of public service--as well as a true demonstration of the power of the media to provide stimulus to the conduct of discourse in the international marketplace of ideas?

Now, so as not to appear to have lost sight of the reality that network news departments are profit centers and that the business of the business of news is profit, not public service, (except as posited in journalism classrooms and in broadcast license-renewal applications), the following assertion is offered as a viable example of the intersection of business considerations and serving the public good.

**S**uch a live international satellite debate between the two men at the center of the brewing storm that has now consumed both men's national treasure of money, physical and human capital and caused political instability throughout the whole Middle East would have – even before these cataclysmic events occurred – garnered such large audiences and, concomitantly, such large profits that it is still bewildering that the combined clout of the broadcast networks, the National Association of Broadcasters, the Radio and Television News Directors' Association and the legions of so-called political think tanks could not have made it happen! Without a doubt this would have been the kind of television opportunity for which any

television news executive (sans political or corporate fear from the "suits" upstairs) would walk through fire to get.

**T**he challenge, for whatever reasons, was not met. The media opportunity was missed. More importantly, the public was denied the benefit of seeing another side of Saddam Hussein and hearing an interpretation of world events as seen through another prism – however flawed these perceptions may have seemed through the filter of Western ideology. Theories and considerations of the impact of culture and ideology on the formation of different world views aside, the application of canonical techniques

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of content analysis reveals that many of Saddam Hussein's assertions and predictions concerning the pending war and its consequences were credible – some, even, prophetic. The following list contains just a few of the more salient and prescient points made in his far-ranging commentary, containing his expectations and suggestions, even pleadings – sometimes exceeding the face-saving boundaries observed by Middle Eastern rulers:

(1) An American-led preemptive military attack against Iraq was imminent, with or without the United Nations' endorsement or sanctions.

(2) There would be at the start of such military action a state of divided public opinion among American citizens and

politicians – an ideological chasm which would widen with the passage of time.

(3) An American-led military invasion of Iraq would incite worldwide Anti-American sentiments and heightened antagonisms, especially among Muslims throughout the Middle East.

(4) U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney will evolve or be revealed as the principal cheerleader for launching war against Iraq – and, as a prognosticator whose prophecies would prove false.

(5) Big business, multinational companies and war-profiteers will be revealed as being instigators, lobbyists and co-conspirators in the decision to go to war. They will also be major proponents of continuation of the war beyond the time limits and tolerance of the American people.

(6) The expectation that American and/or coalition military forces would be greeted as liberators and not as occupiers was a grossly false expectation.

(7) The expectation that Saddam Hussein would flee Iraq, seeking and/or accepting exile in another country, also, was an ill-founded expectation.

(8) The presumption that Iraqis would be compliant and grateful recipients of U.S. largess – and not defiant anti-westerners, too, was a misguided notion.

(9) The U.S. assertion that there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden – posing an imminent threat to the security of the U.S., forecasting a mushroom cloud over Manhattan – was either a figment of someone's overactive imagination or a diabolical construct of Administration Spinmeisters.

(10) There were no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or viable capability to produce such weapons.

The media-relevant implication

here is: Did the collective investigative journalism workforce fail to analyze and evaluate Hussein's assertions, predictions, and more importantly, his allegations of wrongdoings and misrepresentations by his Western adversaries? Or, did the media do a redux of Vietnam: play the role of "journalist as patriot" (to borrow a phrase from Kathleen Hall-Jamieson's book, *The Press Effect*) then, when the public got ahead of, especially, television – chose to follow the public's lead into the anti-war movement and, now, claim too much credit for helping to end the war?

**O**n the question of Saddam Hussein's anticipation of an impending attack by the U.S., there can be no doubt that he fully expected it to happen, sooner than later. On further analysis of his remarks, it now appears that he erred in his belief (or just could not imagine) that the American people and the U.S. Congress would accept the Administration's claim that it was his intent to engage in another war with the United States. It did not appear then, nor in retrospect, that Hussein was being disingenuous when he accepted Dan Rather's offer to him to speak directly to the American people about questions on their minds. Accepting the offer, Hussein responded: "The officials of the United States have themselves spoken about their intentions to commit aggression against Iraq. ... I say to the honest Americans that if such a thing happens, do not capitulate, do not give in. ... Do not commit aggression against us. ... We have not committed aggression against the United States."

Saddam Hussein's other remarks along these same lines are so pointed that to repeat them carries the risk, even now, of appearing to be too sympathetic to the former Iraqi dictator. Most pointedly

and with a degree of humility unexpected of the “butcher of Baghdad” (to use the moniker applied by his Western detractors), Hussein stated: “We hope that the attack will not take place. ... we pray to Him [Allah] that the Americans will refrain from such an eventuality – to spare the Americans from committing such a mistake – and also spare Iraq and the Iraqi people from being involved in such an experience.”

Was Saddam Hussein being obsequious or disarmingly coy in his choice of words – especially in his near-deprecating acknowledgement of America’s superior military power and the suffering it would cause his people? Reviewing the transcript of the Dan Rather-Saddam Hussein interview reveals a foresight that borders on the prophetic. Hussein stated: “The United States can destroy – but the question is, why should America destroy? And why should America generate hostility – the hostility of the world – towards the United States?”

Saddam could not have been more prescient regarding the U.S. public opinion fallout – indeed, political crisis – that would occur attributable to ballooning anti-war sentiments, the likes of which America had not experienced since its catastrophic Vietnam misadventure. It now appears that Hussein “... among the most insular of leaders... knows little of the outside world, especially the West.” (a characterization attributed to an unnamed foreign diplomat by Dan Rather in his book, *Deadlines and Datelines*) ...possessed a clearer understanding than

most American politicians of the uniquely American cultural and psychological attitudes regarding war. Saddam seemed to have known that Americans are by nature, force of environment and socioeconomic development, a practical people (and at the same time) curiously imbued with great idealism. His opinions, in this regard, coincides almost exactly with the assessments posited by the noted historian, Robert Endicott Osgood, who observed: “

War upsets the whole scale of social priorities of an individualistic and materialistic scheme of life, so that the daily round of getting and spending is subordinated to the collective welfare of the nation in a hundred grievous ways –from taxation to death.”

It is possible that Saddam Hussein may have mistaken the “American way in war” as a lack of

“stomach for war” – a simplification which overlooks America’s capacity for ferocity in war when the requisite set of conditions (psycho-socio-political) exists. If, on the other hand, he recognized that the American “will to fight” would be challenged by the American public becoming suspicious of the government’s stated reasons for going to war (e.g., that the reasons were ill-founded or deceptive), he had every reason to anticipate that the public would turn vehemently against the government that dared to impose the sacrifices of war upon them. This was the dynamic which in large measure explains the U.S.’s debacle in Vietnam–

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and which appears to be developing in Iraq.

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Would a live satellite television debate between President George W. Bush and President Saddam Hussein have provided information upon which all parties to the pending crisis could have made more informed decisions about alternative courses of action? Would the U.S.-led invasion have occurred and would the subsequent and current calamities in Iraq have been avoided? Would such a televised debate have provided (using Saddam Hussein's words) "an opportunity ... to insure peace and safety"?

**T**he big question for the U.S. television industry: Why was not Dan Rather's and CBS' pre-invasion "scoop" profiled so highly that President Bush (in true Texan fashion) would have felt obliged to accept President Hussein's challenge and why did not at least one of the network's "Special Investigative Units" find President Hussein's predictions and allegations too compelling and too time-sensitive to ignore? Was it because the mass media had participated so willingly in the demonization of Saddam Hussein, denigration of the "marginalized" United Nations, acceptance of the "righteousness of our cause" and caught up in the fervor of "somebody has got to pay for 9/11, whether that somebody was or was not the actual perpetrator"?

There is probably not a television journalist alive who has not heard

the adage: "The first casualty of war is truth." The lessons of this present episode in the annals of media history suggest that "the second casualty of war is the truth-sayer," especially, if he or she can be labeled unpatriotic or fails to heed Bill O'Reilly's edict as enunciated on the Fox Network: "If you can't support our military once the war begins, then SHUT UP!"

**W**hether or not, or to what degree, the U.S. television industry has played the Jeffersonian role of "the watchdog of government" or has earned the contemporary epithet of "the lap dog of government" are questions that deserve serious consideration. Perhaps such an analytical exercise might provide an answer to the question of why the public's perception of television's news credibility ranks about as low as the public's perception of the performance of the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch of Government. Television may not be rocket science, but it once enjoyed the reputation of being not only the most used source of news but also the most credible. What happened?

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