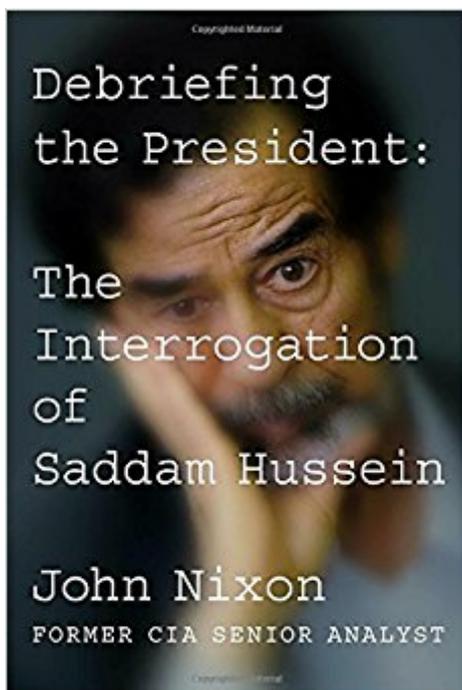


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# Debriefing The President: The Interrogation Of Saddam Hussein



## Synopsis

A riveting, revealing and newsmaking account of the CIA's interrogation of Saddam Hussein, written by the CIA agent who conducted the questioning. "Mr. Nixon, the first C.I.A. officer to interrogate Hussein after his capture in December 2003, reveals gobsmacking facts about that deposed Iraqi leader that raise new questions about why the United States bothered to invade Iraq to oust him from power. These details will likely appall Americans who have watched their nation's blood and treasure wasted in Iraq ever since. More broadly, Mr. Nixon offers a stinging indictment of the C.I.A. and what he sees as the agency's dysfunctional process for providing intelligence to the president and other policy makers. Mr. Nixon's book comes at an extraordinary moment, when President-elect Donald J. Trump is already at war with the C.I.A. "Debriefing the President" will add fuel to the fire of the Trump-led criticism. It will also send a chilling warning to anyone counting on the C.I.A. to stand up to Mr. Trump once he is in office.

James Risen, *The New York Times* "Gripping Nixon's book, *Debriefing the President*, gives more ammunition to the skeptics; indeed, some of its contents can only be described as sensational." John Cassidy, *The New Yorker* "Nixon captures the psychological give-and-take of these exchanges [with Saddam Hussein] with gripping readability...and he describes the resultant verbal sparring with a sharp ear for nuance." Steve Donoghue, *The Christian Science Monitor* "A damning indictment of the perversion of a major intelligence service by little minds inside and above it." *The Times of London*

*Debriefing the President* presents an astounding, candid portrait of one of our era's most notorious strongmen. Nixon, the first man to conduct a prolonged interrogation of Hussein after his capture, offers expert insight into the history and mind of America's most enigmatic enemy. After years of parsing Hussein's leadership from afar, Nixon faithfully recounts his debriefing sessions and subsequently strips away the mythology surrounding an equally brutal and complex man. His account is not an apology, but a sobering examination of how preconceived ideas led Washington policymakers and the Bush White House astray. Unflinching and unprecedented, *Debriefing the President* exposes a fundamental misreading of one of the modern world's most central figures and presents a new narrative that boldly counters the received account.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A damning indictment of the perversion of a major intelligence service by little minds inside and above it." — The Times of London "That a CIA officer should hold power to account in a memoir is unusual, and patriotic. John Nixon has done so with insight and style. Debriefing The President is a page turner of historical consequence — excellent news for the republic in treacherous times." — Nick McDonell, author of Twelve and The End of Major Combat Operations "Nixon captures the psychological give-and-take of these exchanges [with Saddam Hussein] with gripping readability...and he describes the resultant verbal sparring with a sharp ear for nuance." — Steve Donoghue, The Christian Science Monitor "Mr. Nixon, the first C.I.A. officer to interrogate Hussein after his capture in December 2003, reveals gobsnacking facts about that deposed Iraqi leader that raise new questions about why the United States bothered to invade Iraq to oust him from power. These details will likely appall Americans who have watched their nation's blood and treasure wasted in Iraq ever since. More broadly, Mr. Nixon offers a stinging indictment of the C.I.A. and what he sees as the agency's dysfunctional process for providing intelligence to the president and other policy makers. Mr. Nixon's book comes at an extraordinary moment, when President-elect Donald J. Trump is already at war with the C.I.A. "Debriefing the President" will add fuel to the fire of the Trump-led criticism. It will also send a chilling warning to anyone counting on the C.I.A. to stand up to Mr. Trump once he is in office." — James Risen, The New York Times

“Gripping”|Nixon’s book, *Debriefing the President*, gives more ammunition to the skeptics; indeed, some of its contents can only be described as sensational. John Cassidy, *The New Yorker* “A fascinating glimpse of the “tough, shrewd, manipulative” leader and his views on the U.S. invasion, Iraqi history, and his own role in the Middle East...An intelligent and readable postscript to the Iraq War that will be valuable for future historians.” --Kirkus (starred review)

John Nixon was a senior leadership analyst with the CIA from 1998 to 2011. He did several tours in Iraq and was recognized by a number of federal agencies for his contribution to the war effort. During his time with the CIA, Nixon regularly wrote for, and briefed, the most senior levels of the US government. He also taught leadership analysis to the new generation of analysts coming into the CIA at the Sherman Kent School, the Agency’s in-house analytic training center. Since leaving the Agency in 2011, Nixon has worked as an international risk consultant in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia. This is his first book. From the Trade Paperback edition.

*DEBRIEFING THE PRESIDENT* is an informative look into the life of a senior CIA analyst, John Nixon, who happens to also be the one who debriefed Saddam Hussein. When he was first confronted with the dictator, Nixon was amazed. Nixon was introduced as “Mr. Steve.” Although he spoke cordially with Hussein, the author makes it clear that he wasn’t fooled; he knew exactly what this man stood for: “He was a ruthless dictator who, at times, made decisions that plunged his region into chaos and bloodshed.” And, “Saddam was tough, shrewd, and manipulative.” The author explains that for interrogating Hussein, he was given a \$75 gift certificate to a local Italian restaurant! Nixon believes, like many others, that the U.S. effort to capture the dictator was misguided, and came at too high a price. Looking back, it just seemed not worth it: “In hindsight, the thought of having Saddam Hussein in power seems almost comforting in comparison with the awful events and wasted effort of America’s brave young men and women in uniform, not to mention the \$ 3 trillion and still counting we have spent to build a new Iraq.” Nixon’s offers withering criticism of the Bush administration; they just didn’t understand Iraq, and especially Saddam: “The United States had vastly misunderstood both him and his role as a determined foe of radical currents in the Islamic world, including Sunni extremism.” Nixon sees Saddam’s removal as a tragic mistake, with lots of unintended consequences: “Saddam’s removal created a power vacuum that turned religious differences in Iraq into a sectarian bloodbath.” *DEBRIEFING THE PRESIDENT* is a deadly serious book, but it does have a few light

moments. Describing the CIA staff living in Iraq, Nixon recalls their poor conditions: "We lived in trailers, and often four or five of us were packed into each one." Longing for American food was common, and there was a single "Burger King" restaurant not too far away--they just had to make sure they weren't blown up on the way there: "Like other service personnel, CIA officers made special trips to the airport, braving the gauntlet of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for a Whopper and fries." Mr. Nixon expresses frustration with the marginal competence of his superiors, as well as the inexperience of his fellow analysts. The agency is not what people might think: "The CIA, like most large bureaucracies, was plagued with competing fiefdoms." After the Iraq invasion, tons of newbie analysts were brought in, and the CIA thought they could be brought up to speed quickly. Nixon says they were simply not up to the job: "Few of them had analytic skills, and most were content to cut and paste material from previously published intelligence reports. . .

“The agency foolishly thought that a good analyst could be developed quickly: "The Agency still thought it could take anyone and make him or her a first-rate analyst within a few months. I can say from hard experience that this approach simply doesn't work." Nixon relates his frustration with the Bush administration and their pre-conceived ideas of the situation in Iraq. As a senior analyst, he was frustrated that they stuck to their options, "No matter what the intelligence showed." The author also has harsh words for CIA management, complaining of the "CYA" culture and just telling higher-ups what they wanted to hear. "Expertise is not valued, indeed not trusted, because experts can be wrong." Nixon had a handful of visits to the Oval Office, to brief the president and vice-president. I thought these accounts were perhaps the most fascinating part of the book. The author's final meeting with President Bush was tense. He was asked a lot of off-subject questions by the president, who was rude to the author when he didn't quickly respond. In this last briefing, Nixon answered the questions as best as he could, but his opinions conflicted with senior officials. Word got around about Nixon's turbulent briefing, and others in the agency seemed to avoid him: "When I walked around headquarters during the next few weeks, it was if I were radioactive." The author has critical words, of a different sort, for President Obama. The analysts at the CIA had high hopes for Obama, and thought he would be more interested in truly understanding foreign affairs, but they were disappointed: "The new president could not understand why the government spent so much on intelligence but, in his view, got so little in return." All in all, I found DEBRIEFING THE PRESIDENT to be an interesting, informative book. The author seems to me to be a dedicated, intelligent man, who gave his job 100%, under some difficult circumstances. I thought the book was well written, and I found his narrative easy to follow. I appreciate the author's expertise on Iraq--and especially his "insider view" on the life of Saddam

Hussein and his last days. I especially appreciated the author's arguments for the need to have highly experienced analysts in the field, as opposed to "yes men" who simply tell higher-ups what they want to hear. It will be interesting to hear the reaction from those who were the object of this book's criticism. Advance Review Copy courtesy of the publisher.

John Nixon's *Debriefing the president* offers a must read tell all about Saddam Hussein and the war in Iraq from the perspective of a CIA analyst. This book is written as an autobiography in the first person, discussing the author's career up to and beyond the war in Iraq. Into this frame, the author inserts his discussion of Saddam Hussein and what he was really like. As a leadership analyst at the CIA, Saddam and his personality were long studied by the author. His debriefing of Saddam offered him as a historian the rare opportunity to encounter his subject of study in the flesh. The book is broken into three parts. The first part of the book discusses the author's early life and his early career as an analyst. I found this a fascinating account of all that goes into making a professional spy. The author describes the run up to the Iraq War and how the CIA provided faulty intelligence for the Bush administration who did not want to hear truth, but evidence that confirmed their own preconceived notions about Iraq. However, the narrative was somewhat tedious at times, becoming overly bogged down with data on the author's personal life. While this goes a long way to humanize the author, I bought this book to read about Saddam, not the author's wedding. The second part of the book is the real meat of the book, as you get a front row view of the interrogation of Saddam Hussein. Saddam comes across as a very traditional man devoted to Arab nationalism and secularism. With the modern decline into sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunnis, it is often very easy to forget that this was not always the case. Saddam was proud that his predominately Sunni Ba'athist party contained Shiites, Kurds, and Christians, at least when it began. Respect and loyalty appear to have been gold under his administration, as they earned you fabulous western consumer good. However, disloyalty and disrespect were harshly punished with death. Saddam like many dictators was intensely suspicious of his inferiors, always on the look out for coups. In many ways, Saddam reminded me of Julius Caesar. Like the Roman dictator, the Iraqi dictator also seized control of a republic, replacing it with semi-monarchic rule. Both heavily emphasized their name not unlike Donald J. Trump today. Throughout the interview, Saddam appears to have talked about himself in the third person. Saddam will not tolerate this. Would Saddam do that? Both were also eager to give themselves all the glory for military accomplishments, minimizing the successes of their subordinates. At one point, Saddam even talked about how his dignity would not allow him to perform some action. Caesar famously said his

dignity would not allow him to back down from the Roman civil war that ended in his dictatorship. However, we should be careful about labeling Saddam a dictator and laying on all the negative connotations this word implies. As the author notes, Saddam did not admire Hitler and Mussolini, as many have suggested in an attempt to blacken his name by associating himself with the worst of the worst of human history. He admired George Washington, Mao Zedong, Lenin, and others for founding a political system. His chief model was Saladin who destroyed the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem. Intriguingly, the author also undercuts the traditional narrative that Saddam Hussein was abused as a child by his stepfather. Modern psychology has a way of looking for childhood abuse to explain violence as an adult. For example, this is often used as a vector to understand dictators such as Hitler and serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. But as the author shows, Saddam had a positive, loving relationship with his stepfather, to whom he believed he owed his later success because he encouraged the young Saddam to go to Bagdad to pursue his career. The book is full of revelations such as these. The third and final part of the book returns to the US and CIA, detailing the author's subsequent career at the CIA. The author had the rare privilege to meet and clash with President Bush on a few occasions. Nixon is heavily critical of G. W. B., whom he sees as incapable of understanding Iraq and unwilling to change his long held views of Saddam and the region. Bush and his administration seem unwilling to drop any pretense that this was a freedom mission and something of a personal vendetta. Apparently, Bush was looking for connections between Saddam and 9/11 immediately after the terrorist attacks. The CIA was only too willing to oblige the president with fictions rather than the cold truth. Saddam himself thought 9/11 should have brought the US and his regime closer together in the fight against sectarian violence. Saddam was right that this is what should have happened, but he could not understand that the president and his advisers genuinely believed that toppling Iraq would result in vibrant, American democracies throughout the Middle East. As time has proved, this vision is grossly out of touch with the realities of the Arab world. Saddam is intriguing in this regard because he had a real grasp of the Iraqi mind that Westerners lack. For example, even the author struggles with Saddam's belief that he was the leader of the Arab world, fending off the threat of Iran. Nothing could be further from the truth, but this belief is instructive. There are some in this part of the world who still for a leader of all the Arabs like the caliph once occupied. We are now witnessing the fulfillment of that mentality with ISIS and the restoration of the caliphate. The book ends with an intriguing comparison of Saddam and Bush Junior, highlighting their similarities as militarily inexperienced ideologues at the reins of government. I found the book's conclusion compelling, as the author condemns the modern western tendency to demonize dictators and view them as all

powerful despots. Essentially by viewing them through the lenses of evil Hitleresque dictator, we miss important insights into them as people. As the author suggests, by the end of his regime Saddam was a non-threat who had given up on WMD and simply wanted to finish writing his book. The author also cautions against the confirmation bias of American politicians such as G.W.B. who was unwilling to listen to news that did not confirm his view of the world. This is sadly a trait inherent to politicians in our two party political system. I suspect that many a president whether democrat or republican will continue to suffer from this flaw. On the whole, I enjoyed this book and would recommend it to friends interested in this subject. But I would caution readers. This is not history. Sections of the book are regrettably blacked out. The author also does not cite official documents or other testimonies in his assessment of Saddam, which could undercut his image of the Iraqi dictator. The author suggests that perhaps one day he will write a critical biography of Saddam based on testimony about his regime and official documents. I sincerely hope he does.

In "Debriefing the President," former CIA Analyst John Nixon recalls his time debriefing Saddam Hussein, the former leader of Iraq. While the book discusses the various interrogation sessions and the information gleaned from those discussions, there are much larger underlying themes that run throughout the narrative. First, Nixon discusses America's choice and justification for entering Iraq based on intelligence that Nixon finds opaque and exceedingly difficult to accurately verify. Second, Nixon discusses Saddam Hussein's contentious tactics and techniques for maintaining relative stability in Iraq and hints that if Saddam were left to continue his reign of power in Iraq, it may have resulted in a much different situation than the one that is currently being faced by citizens throughout the Middle East. Lastly, Nixon discusses the role of the intelligence community in advising the President and the various shortfalls that come with defending your analysis rather than toeing the party line. Overall, the book was well written and a good read. It should be noted, however, that "Debriefing the President" is less about the interrogation of Saddam Hussein and more about the political nature of the United States. I would highly suggest this work for anyone interested in Middle Eastern affairs or matters that effect the American decision making process.

Incredible information. A must read. But the last four chapters are very very informative. He explains not only George Bush, but also Hillary Clinton and the Obama administration. None of them had the capacity, or took the time to understand Iraq properly. It is hard to imagine that he does not understand the reality of the CIA past, present and future extremely objectively.

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