

Hussein a no-show at his birthday bash

By Howard Witt

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TIKRIT, Iraq—You know it's a special day in Iraq when the anti-aircraft guns are draped with colorful streamers.

Sunday was President Saddam Hussein's birthday—conventional sources make him 65, although the government is hush-hush on the matter—and tens of thousands of his ululating subjects converged on his bleak home village to wish him well, even though the man himself was nowhere to be found.

Jampacked buses snaked for miles along the main highway from Baghdad to Tikrit, convoys

of a much lighter nature than the tanks and heavy artillery for which the specially reinforced pavement was poured.

Storefronts and buildings throughout Tikrit, about 100 miles north of the capital, were plastered with portraits of the smiling president, as residents proudly displayed their freedom to choose which depiction they liked most.

The most popular image seemed to be Hussein as a religious penitent or a cigar-chomping chief executive, although the picture showing him dressed in a Tyrolean hunter

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costume and brandishing a shotgun also was beloved.

Esteemed guests were seated in the reviewing stands at the Saddam Parade Ground, including army generals, government ministers, the brother of Sudan's reigning dictator and the former Zambian tyrant, Kenneth Kaunda.

A dozen high-kicking praise-singers dressed like sheiks formed a chorus line followed by a thousand Iraqi girls who danced and sang in a variety of ethnic costumes.

Dressed in aquamarine and wearing black hoods, one group of schoolgirls drew particular applause: The wooden sword-brandishing children portrayed a suicide-bomber contingent.

An off-key army band played martial tunes as an endearingly out-of-step color guard raised the national flag. Except for the helicopter gunships' flybys, the moment could have come from a high school homecoming parade in Schaumburg, Ill.

Alas, when finally it came time to unveil the people's birthday gift to their leader, Hussein was not there to receive it. The president, owing presumably to fears of assassination or American cruise missiles, has not been seen in public in nearly two years.

So, he sent the vice president to accept the gift, a diorama inside a large fish tank featuring tanks, fighter jets, a castle and a mosque—of solid gold.

Also absent were the president's two sons and heirs-apparent, Qusai and Uday. Although Qusai keeps a more modest profile, Uday often can be spotted tooling around Baghdad in his new, fire-engine-red Rolls Royce. This, it is said, befits his role as head of Iraq's Olympic Committee, which has not produced many medal-winning athletes but has spawned many tough-looking men wearing

track suits and driving expensive cars.

Why is Hussein so adored by his people, who rallied Sunday not only in Tikrit but in other major cities? Foreigners are not permitted to ask them outside the presence of a government translator, but Iraqi officials happily provide an answer.

"The president is not only honorable, he's a human being: humble, clever, and he loves his country," explained A.K. al-Hashimi, a former Iraqi ambassador to France and the president of the Organization for Friendship, Peace and Solidarity with Iraq.

"You Americans don't understand the relationship between the man and his people," Hashimi continued. "They know him as an honest man working for the benefit of all Arabs. Everything he loves is here. He doesn't have any stocks or castles or islands somewhere else."

Hussein does have plenty of palaces in Iraq, about 70 by some estimates. Three gourmet meals are prepared for him daily at each one, just in case he stops by, according to former high-ranking Iraqi officials who

have defected to the West.

Despite such luxury, his is not an easy life. Hussein is reported to sleep in a different bed each night, sometimes abruptly commandeering private homes, to evade detection by spy satellites. He trusts no one around him except his two sons, and recently assembled yet another elite guard unit to protect him.

He has found time, however, to write two novels, both published anonymously but universally attributed to him. The epic love-story best seller "Zabibah and the King" was made into a play that premiered in Baghdad's National Theater over the weekend.

"Zabibah" tells of a king who falls in love with an unhappily married young woman who is then raped by a stranger on Jan. 17—the same day, in 1991, that U.S.-led forces launched the Persian Gulf war to drive Iraq's invading forces out of Kuwait.

Hussein did not attend the opening performances, which played to houses that were three-quarters empty. Government officials speculated it was because people were busy preparing for the birthday galas.

One group of citizens that couldn't make it to the play were at the Saddam Children's Hospital in Baghdad. They were the families on the cancer ward, tending to dozens of moaning children who are slowly dying because there are not enough chemotherapy medicines.

The regime has long claimed that these children are dying because of United Nations sanctions imposed on Iraq for refusing to permit inspections of suspected weapons sites. A visit to a children's hospital is a mandatory stop for every foreigner allowed to visit Iraq.

Western diplomats and a handful of brave Iraqis say the truth is otherwise. Some medicines are barred under the UN oil-for-food program, they note, but there is nothing stopping the regime from buying chemotherapy supplies.

"Why don't we have medicines, but we are importing a lot of cars?" asked an Iraqi university professor. "The man whose child dies for lack of medicine will never forgive the government. Only if the regime is asking for its downfall would it not recognize this."

In 2003, "you work really hard from the start," she said.

No immediate payoff is in sight, either, she noted, because her initial job prospects differ little from those of single-degree students. She's counting on an advantage in "that second and third job transition," she said, as her combined business and legal skills draw her into the vortex of hot financial deals.

"The real point of differentiation is the next job search," she said. "In the short run, the JD-MBA doesn't make sense."

Yet to an extent, NU could be showing the way. MBAs and JDs are mixing with traditional academic fields as well. And at the doctorate level, researchers are tearing down barriers between disciplines. So a genomics scholar might be breaking new ground in statistics as well as molecular biology.

That integration of research-oriented disciplines is an area of "the greatest growth," said Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. "This is actual knowledge gained, and perspective gained. The economy as a whole benefits when we have this expertise in the workforce."