

**THE BLOG**

And Now, The Saddam Snuff Show

By Marty Kaplan

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Usage Nazis, *en garde!* “Hung” is what pictures are, and drapes, and — by his own account — what Howard Stern is not. “Hanged” is what Saddam Hussein will be, says Aref Shahin, chief judge of the Iraqi appeals court, and just in time to be the warm-up act for W’s State of the Union. From media boardrooms to television newsrooms, the self-defining question of the month now becomes, Should we show it?

“Some Shia elements have called for the hanging to be televised,” reports the Guardian. Public executions are not rare in the Islamic world. Besides meting out punishment, they are intended to remind the witnesses of the authority of Quaranic justice. Ali Haidiri, a 38-year-old Iraqi journalist, told the Los Angeles Times that “when Hussein hangs, ...he wants to be there. ‘It’s not revenge,’ he said. ‘This is someone who killed seven of my brothers.’”

It’s not hard to imagine the Iraqi authorities allowing cameras at the gallows. Even if they don’t, it’s not unlikely that a cellphone or two will somehow manage to video the execution. In either case, thanks to the ‘Net, footage of the hanging will conceivably be globally available. What will the networks do?

On one side of the ledger, there’s the issue of taste, and of the possibility that children are watching, plus that pesky what-kind-of-society-are-we? question, none of which has so far prevented the mass media from depicting the most barbaric violence in their entertainment programming, or from covering car chases or hostage situations with the never-to-be-admitted hope of capturing a fatal money shot on tape.

On the other side, there’s the this-is-news argument, and the deterrence rationale, and the fear that they’ll be eating the Nielsen exhaust of a competitor who isn’t so Emily Post about broadcasting judicial porn. Those who do air it may prefer to cloak their reasoning in public interest terms, but the lurid truth is that there’s a centuries-old tradition of the public being extremely interested in watching executions.

In Britain, public hangings were for a long time a huge source of popular entertainment. Crowds of twenty thousand and more would turn out to see them, including plenty of kids and families who had traveled a great distance to be part of the excitement. Sure, the hangman’s lesson was supposed to be a great “moral teacher,” and ministers milked the moment from their pulpits, but here’s a contemporary [description](#) of one fine morning in 1857:

“Suddenly the street was filled with the most villainous-looking characters I ever saw in a single crowd. They were laughing and shouting and jostling each other as they hurried along... Whence had they come? Enquiries elicited the information that they had just been enjoying an execution — fresh from the teaching of the gallows.”

What’s more, these hanging days meant terrific business for the media. Newspapers, handbills and broadsheets carrying the criminal’s alleged last dying words, along with woodcuts of the dangling body, were snapped up on the spot by spectators like fans buying papers trumpeting the winner in the parking lot after the SuperBowl. An Act of Parliament ended public hangings in Britain in 1868, but it took America nearly seventy more years to follow suit. In colonial times, says [one account](#),

“Crowds of thirty thousand or more were expected to be at high profile hangings; viewing stands had to be erected to contain the throngs. Often chaos erupted out of these bloodthirsty crowds — a viewing stand collapsed at an execution in Cooperstown, New York, and killed two people.”

That image is a nice counterpoint to the paintings of our bewigged Founders debating clauses in the Constitution (and a plausible element of their misgivings about direct democracy). [The Last Public Execution in America](#), says a book with that name, took place in Owensboro, Kentucky, on August 14, 1936, “when some 20,000 men, women, and children witnessed it.”

So why did we Anglo-Americans stop turning hangings into circuses? More than anything else, it was probably embarrassment. Our societies were shamed into drawing a line between executions and entertainment. But when Saddam hangs, especially if there’s a live feed, will shame be enough to prevent media from attempting to assemble what could be Oscar-sized global audiences?

Imagine the opportunities for cross-talk from Baghdad.

“They’re using the ‘short drop’ method today, Katie, which is employed by most Middle Eastern countries, except for Iran, where suspension hanging is more common. It’s a far cry from the ‘long drop’ method used in Britain, and the ‘standard drop’ — around four to six feet — common in America.”

“No, Wolf, unlike a firing squad, death by hanging isn’t instantaneous. Typically, the condemned struggle for one to three minutes because of the physical pain caused by the noose, though it’s possible that pressure on the carotid arteries could cause his heart to stop before he’s actually asphyxiated.”

“Yes, that’s right, Brit, rippling movements of the body and limbs may occur for some time after death. If his heart gives out first, his face will be pale. But if strangulation gets him ahead of heart failure, his face’ll engorge, and turn blue, with little blood marks from burst capillaries, and his tongue may stick out.”

“Actually, Diane, it’s anyone’s guess whether a particular hanging will cause an erection, let alone an ejaculation.”

Saddam Hussein killed tens of thousands of people, ruthlessly and mercilessly. If you follow Sharia, which Islamic countries do; if you believe he had a fair trial (which, despite Ramsey Clark, it’s arguable that he did); and if you favor capital punishment — which Iraq’s Kurdish President, Jalal Talabani, does not, nor does Tony Blair, but which former Texas governor George W. Bush of course does — then there’s no reason not to execute Hussein for his crimes.

But I wonder whether YouTube's corporate minders at Google will think it's a no-brainer to enable a bazillion downloads of the hanging video. And I'll be curious to see what arguments the mainstream media mount in defense of their decisions, whatever they are. In the end, I won't be surprised if they air it, or maybe just an audio feed, with whispered golf-coverage color. On the other hand, even if the snuff stuff is out there, it's pretty much up to us whether we choose to watch or listen to it. The most moral of Saint Augustine's friends turned out to be the biggest fan of gladiatorial carnage; his animal hard-wiring overruled the promptings of his soul. Is there any reason to think we're any different?

(crossposted at www.learcenter.org)

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