

JUNE 6

The urbanity of evil

I've been thinking about Tariq Aziz a lot since the New York Times printed a front-page story on the former Iraqi deputy prime minister in late May. A color photograph showed him decked out in what the article described as "an open-necked hospital gown, with a patient's plastic identification tag on his wrist." He looked gaunt.

The last time I saw Aziz, at a Baghdad meeting two months before the U.S.-led invasion began, he was still portly in one of his well-tailored business suits. If Aziz was worried, he didn't show it.

Now, he's playing a part that U.S. media seem to relish. The Times headline said "Hussein's Former Envoy Gushes With Adulation on Witness Stand," but to sum up the coverage it might have just as aptly declared: "How the Mighty Have Fallen."

The Times reported that Aziz defended Saddam Hussein in his May 24 testimony – after he was not able to cut a deal with Baghdad's current legal powers-that-be. "At an earlier stage of the trial, American officials said Mr. Aziz had offered to testify against Mr. Hussein on the condition that he be released early, a proposition the Iraqi court and its American advisers say they eventually rejected."

If prisoner Aziz was initially angling for better treatment in exchange for ratting on Saddam, that would be consistent with how he first behaved in the dock.

On July 1, 2004, appearing before an Iraqi judge in a courtroom located on a U.S. military base near Baghdad airport, Aziz said: "What I want to know is, are these charges personal? Is it Tariq Aziz carrying out these killings? If I am a member of a government that makes the mistake of killing someone, then there can't justifiably be an accusation against me personally. Where there is a crime committed by the leadership, the moral responsibility rests there, and there shouldn't be a personal case just because somebody belongs to the leadership."

Trying to extract some positive meaning from the horrors set off by the U.S. war on Iraq, journalists are inclined to return to the well of sorrows recounted in the dragged-out trial of Saddam Hussein and key subordinates in Baghdad. Along the way, the pathetic efforts by Tariq Aziz to disclaim any responsibility for the actions of the regime

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he served are fodder for big American media guns – journalistic arsenals much more trained on the deadly crimes of top officials in the Hussein regime than the deadly crimes of top officials in the Bush administration.

As Iraq's most visible diplomat, Aziz was a smooth talker who epitomized the urbanity of evil. Up close, in late 2002 and early the following year, when I was among American visitors to his office in Baghdad, he seemed equally comfortable in a military uniform or a business suit. Serving a tyrannical dictator, Aziz used his skills with language the way a cosmetician might apply makeup to a corpse.

Aziz glibly represented Saddam Hussein's regime as it tortured and murdered Iraqi people. Yet after the invasion, news reports told us, a search of his home near the Tigris River turned up tapes of such Western cultural treasures as "The Sound of Music" and "Sleepless in Seattle."

The likelihood that he enjoyed this entertainment may be a bit jarring. We might prefer to think that a bright line separates the truly civilized from the barbaric, the decent from the depraved.

But the man could exhibit a range of human qualities. Reserved yet personable, he could banter with ease. His arguments, while larded with propaganda, did not lack nuance. Whether speaking with a member of the U.S. Congress, an acclaimed American movie actor or a former top U.N. official, Aziz seemed acutely aware of his audience. He would have made a deft politician in the United States.

We like to believe that American leaders are cut from entirely different cloth. But I don't think so. In some respects, the terrible compromises made by Tariq Aziz are more explainable than ones that are routine in U.S. politics.

Aziz had good reason to fear for his life – and the lives of loved ones – if he ran afoul of Saddam. In contrast, many politicians and appointed officials in Washington have gone along with lethal policies because of fear that dissent might cost them re-election, prestige, money or power.

Norman Solomon's book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death" is being published this month in paperback

