

TV TOTALITARIANISM

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about Saddam Hussein and the history of his dictatorship.
- Students will explore the role of media in a totalitarian government.
- Students will decode messages in a music video.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

Baath Party	Halabja	Iran-Iraq war	Saddam Hussein
chemical weapons	human rights	<i>keffiyeh</i>	Shiah
dictatorship	invasion of Kuwait	Kurds	totalitarianism
Gulf War	Iranian Revolution	Marsh Arabs	

MEDIUM

Video clip from “Saddam Our Father” music video (Total running time: 44 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 3, Lesson 2 video clip from DVD or Web site
- *Student Handout* (pg. 5) with lyrics

TIME

30 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Background Information* for the lesson (pg. 2).
2. Distribute *Student Handout* with video lyrics.
3. Play the video clip and lead a discussion using the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* (pg. 3) as a guide.
4. Present *Additional Information* (pg. 3) (optional).
5. Lead a discussion about government and media using *Further Questions* (pg. 3).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Dictators have often begun their rise to power by heading the secret police of a political party. Saddam Hussein, as head of the Baath Party security forces, used this model by expelling his enemies from the Party, imprisoning them and sometimes taking their lives with his own hand.

Saddam Hussein's 25-year rule as dictator of Iraq officially began in July 1979 when he placed his relative and Baath party leader, General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, under arrest. One month later he put 68 Baath Party leaders on trial, jailing 33 and executing 21. Saddam Hussein ruled by violence throughout his dictatorship, killing those whom he perceived as enemies. He ordered chemical weapons to be used against the Kurds of northern Iraq, killing thousands of people, mostly women and children, in a horrific attack on the town of Halabja in March 1988. He drained the wetlands of the south where army deserters and Shiah rebels had found sanctuary, turning the fertile homeland of the Marsh Arabs into desert. He put down with brutal force any opposition movements, such as those mounted by the Shiah, who represented more than half of the Iraqi population.

In 1979 an Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran placed a Shiah religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, in power. Fearing that the revolution might spread to the oppressed Shiah of Iraq, Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, hoping to gain territory and power in the region. The Iran-Iraq war bogged down for eight years and killed one million people. During the war, Saddam Hussein used poison gas against Iranians, as he would later do against his own people. The war ended with a stale mate in 1988. During the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein, fearing that the anti-American Iranian revolution could spread to Iraq. However, U.S. policy towards Saddam Hussein changed abruptly in 1990.

In August of 1990, Saddam Hussein launched an invasion of Kuwait. President George H. W. Bush led a coalition of countries in a decisive military defeat of Iraq in what became known as the first Gulf War. Kurdish and Shiite resistance leaders hoped that the Coalition would bring freedom from the dictatorship but the U.S.-led troops stopped short of removing Saddam Hussein from power at that time.

Saddam Hussein used his absolute control over Iraqi media to keep his image constantly before the people. Huge painted cutout figures of Saddam Hussein rose over the entrance to every village. Saddam Hussein's name was mentioned dozens of times each hour on the radio, and his image was on TV screens for hours every day. One joke told of a Kurd walking into a repair shop with a broken TV in northern Iraq. The repairman takes a photo of Saddam off the wall, glues it onto the screen and says, "There, now it works" (Braude 147).

Despite Saddam Hussein's totalitarian control, there were occasional, but dangerous, ways for people to get news of the outside world. Those with shortwave radios could listen to U.S. "Radio Liberty" or the BBC Arabic Service. Illegal satellite dishes, if kept out of sight, could tune in to CNN or the Arab TV network, al-Jazeera.

The following music video clip is from [Saddam Our Father](#) and was used to open the Iraqi news each day ([Frontline](#)). As you watch, notice what messages are being offered about Saddam Hussein and how the creators of the video use visual images to convey the message.

- **Distribute** *Student Handouts* with video lyrics.
- **Project** the clip. Use the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* to focus the decoding.
- **Use** the *Additional Information and Further Questions* to discuss government and media.

QUESTION	What are the messages about Saddam Hussein given by the video and how are they communicated?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is a strong protector.
EVIDENCE	Saddam Hussein is shown in military clothing, raising a sword, surrounded by loyal soldiers, “Saddam is our father, with him at home there is no fear.”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is a man of faith, respected by the people.
EVIDENCE	He is shown on his knees in prayer, he waves and smiles to people who dance and clap for him, he is shown listening to a family in their home, “He spreads his love equally among all of us”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is a leader of Arab nations.
EVIDENCE	He is shown in a <i>keffiyeh</i> , a cotton headdress commonly worn by Arab men, his face is shown over the map and flag of Iraq

ADDITIONAL INFO

Saddam Hussein was well aware of the power of media to control the population. Some of his most powerful advisors came from media backgrounds. His son, Uday, controlled Al-Shabab, the only entertainment channel available on Iraqi TV (Mahdi 51). This channel had a program with amateur music videos by young Iraqis trying to become famous singers. It also showed pirated films, such as Saddam’s favorites, The Godfather and The Old Man and the Sea (Purdum 26). One TV program showed Saddam Hussein visiting an ordinary Iraqi family, sometimes arriving in disguise, to explore their views about his leadership and policies (Karsh and Rautsi 122).

Saddam Hussein liked to represent himself as an Arab nationalist, the one strong leader who would stand up for the Palestinians against Israel and the U.S. He likened himself to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who occupied Jerusalem in 587 BC and enslaved the Jews. “I am reminded that any human being with broad horizons, faith and feeling can act wisely but practically, attain his goals and become a great man who makes his country into a great state. And what is most important to me about Nebuchadnezzar is the link between the Arab’s ability and the liberation of Palestine” (Karsh and Rautsi 153).

FURTHER QUESTIONS

What might happen to freedom of thought within a society where there is only one source of news and information?

Does the government control the U.S. media?

Why is an independent press considered essential for democracy?

How might the Internet affect a government’s ability to control access to information?

CONNECTIONS

Compare Saddam Hussein’s video with those of recent U.S. presidents, such as these from Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: George W Bush, “The Sky’s the Limit;” Bill Clinton, “Journey;” and Ronald Reagan, “Morning in America.”

Compare this video with the January 7, 1991 Newsweek cover of Saddam Hussein titled “More than Just a Madman” and teach students the history of the Gulf War (and the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan) through media decoding of Newsweek covers using Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of War.

REFERENCES

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Mahdi, Ali Akbar. Teen Life in the Middle East. Westport: Greenwood, 2003.

Purdum, Todd, A Time of Our Choosing, New York: Times Books, 2003.

Lyrics from “Saddam Our Father”

Our father, indeed Saddam is our father
With him at home there is no fear
Our father, the kind Saddam, is our father
With him at home there is no fear
He spreads his love equally among all of us
Has the world ever seen anyone like our father?