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## Palace attack hit Saddam's 'center of gravity'

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

BAGHDAD — The Iraqi soldiers had fled by the time U.S. forces arrived Monday to take control of the old presidential palace in the heart of Baghdad.



A U.S. tank helps secure the Abu Ghurayb Presidential Palace compound, Monday.

By Jack Gruber, USA TODAY

The bedrolls the Iraqis used, perhaps as recently as the night before, had been abandoned beneath open windows. And the huge complex of ballrooms and receptions areas that make up the old palace, also known as the Republican Presidential Palace, remained almost unscathed by the heavy coalition bombing of the city. (**Related story:** [Plush palace is 'sickening'](#))

About three miles to the west, at the New Presidential Palace, also called Al-Sajoud, bombs had ravaged the compound believed to be an occasional home for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. There, U.S. tanks blasted the 15-foot-high oak doors at the entrance, and soldiers moved inside. By late morning, the soldiers finished clearing the building. Along the way, they discovered a lavish interior pool, damaged and drained of water.

The new palace is where some American troops slept Monday night, and where they began bringing Iraqi prisoners of war taken during a brazen assault on the center of the city that started at daybreak.

The thrust by U.S. forces was meant to show the Iraqi people — and the soldiers and militiamen still defending parts of Baghdad — that the reign of Saddam has ended. And as American soldiers settled in for the night, the message seemed obvious — at least to them.

"I do believe this city is freakin' ours," an elated Capt. Chris Carter said. By sundown, some troops had made themselves at home, using Saddam's toilets and plugging one of his television sets into a portable generator.

Even so, just miles away, Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf told reporters that invading "U.S. columns were slaughtered" and that Iraqi forces "will massacre them."

His comments came about the same time U.S. forces in downtown Baghdad blew up a statue of

Saddam on horseback.

"I'm hoping this makes it clear to the Iraqi people that this is over," said Col. David Perkins, commander of a brigade of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, which led the assault Monday.

The column of 70 tanks and 60 armored vehicles thundered into the city at sunrise and came under fire along Highway 8, on the way to the center of the city. There were exchanges of mortar and rocket-propelled grenade fire, and clouds of smoke hovered over the scene.

The attacks on the palaces — two of the dictator's estimated 78 throughout the country — were aimed at "the remainder of (Saddam's) center of gravity, his institutions of government, his center of the city and that which represents his ability to control the country," Perkins said.

The old palace compound, for instance, houses Saddam's personal office and a bunker designed to withstand nuclear war.

What U.S. forces found, especially in the new palace, underscored the opulence of Saddam — and the relative poverty of the rest of the country coalition forces had stormed through.

### Inside the palace

Inside the new palace, U.S. troops found gold-painted faux French furniture, a hot tub, a barbecue pit and a TV in every room, according to a report from the Associated Press. But it seemed less akin to a home from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* than it did to an executive conference center.



By Jack Gruber, USA TODAY  
U.S. soldiers seize and clear Iraq's presidential palace resorts near Saddam International Airport in Baghdad.

The palace, recently constructed near the ruling Baath Party's headquarters, apparently was built after the 1991 Persian Gulf War as a residence and for entertainment. By one U.S. government estimate, Saddam has spent more than \$2 billion since 1991 building 50 palaces and upgrading seven. That's in addition to the 21 palaces that predate the last Gulf War, the State Department says.

United Nations weapons inspectors visited the New Presidential Palace in the weeks before the war began, but how often Saddam stayed there is unclear.

Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said troops were looking for intelligence inside the palace. Instead, they found ashtrays, gold-painted Arab glassware and other expensive trinkets. Coalition bombings have taken their toll on the

compound. The main building, made of sand-colored brick, is topped with a dome of blue-and-gold ceramic tile, now covered with cement dust. There are two huge holes in the roof and the front of the building, likely from U.S. cruise missiles or laser-guided bombs. The blasts knocked off the facade, collapsed floors and scorched walls.

Where fire had not destroyed the interior, plaster trimming and false ceilings had collapsed. Shards of glass chandeliers and mirrors lay on the ground, crunching under the boots of soldiers.

On the top floor, there once was a pool in a room with windows looking out on three sides of the building. What was left of an elaborate, mosaic ceiling littered the bottom of the pool.

Much of the main building seemed like an empty hotel, never occupied. The bedrooms, all large, each had bathroom with a Jacuzzi-like tub. There were hotel-quality beds and tables; most of the

shelves and drawers were empty. A lone children's room had four beds.

In the industrial kitchen, everything had been put away and carefully cleaned. The refrigerators and pantries had no food.

The building boasted a sophisticated audio-video system that has music channels and a closed-circuit TV channel. In one cabinet, AP reported, were pirated movies. Saddam or his guests had a choice of movies such as *The Hanoi Hilton*, *The Assassination of Trotsky* and *Les Miserables* from the many Arabic titles in the collection.

Outside, curtains from the building were strewn across the lawn, along with decorative, wrought-iron gates that had covered bulletproof glass. Occasionally, some Iraqis would approach the walls of the compound. The Americans would fire warning shots; the Iraqis would run away.

Behind the building, by the Tigris River, stood a grill and a water garden with man-made pools and babbling brooks.

"This used to be a nice place," Spc. Robert Blake told AP. "They should make it like a Six Flags, or something."

### **'The big battle'**

On Sunday night, hours before U.S. forces reached the palace, Col. Perkins tried to rally his troops. "Guys, this is the big battle tomorrow," he told his brigade commanders. And from the leaders to those in the field, a sense of excitement and enthusiasm permeated the unit.

The plan to move full force into Baghdad was a departure from the street-by-street fighting that some war strategists had said early on might be necessary to capture the capital and topple Saddam.

By sending a column into Baghdad's center, the 2nd Brigade hoped to convince Iraqis that the war was essentially over. That way, U.S. forces might avoid a drawn-out slugfest through city streets.

But the risks of this strategy were also well known. When coalition forces moved quickly from Kuwait and up through the Iraqi countryside, their flanks were attacked time and again. This push into Baghdad would test the ability of U.S. forces to protect their supply lines against pockets of resistance on either side of the unit.

Just hours before the battle would start, chaplains conducted services.

Maj. Patrick Ratigan, a Roman Catholic priest, met with a dozen or more soldiers in a captured office building outside Baghdad. Instead of hearing individual confessions, he gave the group a general absolution because of the dangers they would face the next day.

Then he offered communion. "Protect us from men of violence," Ratigan said in his prayer, "and keep us safe from weapons of war."

The next morning, after the attack was well underway and key targets had been seized, Iraqi missiles landed near where the service had been held. Four people were killed in the attack.

As the tank column began rolling up Highway 8 toward the Iraqi capital early Monday, dusty winds began blowing from the southwest. Trees swayed and the gusts sent up clouds of dust.

"I'm nervous " said Sgt Matthew Deckard 27 the driver of a Bradley fighting vehicle "But I

know that God's with us and we're doing the right thing. So I have no doubt we'll return victorious."

The brigade suffered eight casualties inside Baghdad — two dead and six wounded.

The deaths happened when two soldiers driving a fuel truck to resupply the forces were hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Touring downtown, Perkins stopped at the Hands of Victory Parade Grounds, north of the palaces, near a reviewing stand where Iraqi troops have marched. Here, two arches made of crossed swords rise 150 feet above the avenue. Saddam's hands are said to have been the models for those parts of the arches.

In the center of the pavilion, directly across from the reviewing stand, stood the statue of Saddam on horseback. Perkins ordered the statue destroyed with a single shot from an Abrams tank. "A good shot," Perkins said with a smile. "I think the point got across."

### 'Go down in the books'

Spc. Shawn Sullivan, 24, a medic from Jacksonville, watched the statue tumble. He had treated two wounded U.S. soldiers shot almost simultaneously in the attack. The moment seemed especially satisfying to him. "I can get home now," he said, adding that he was "happy that we liberated these people from this bad person."

He also repeated a familiar theme expressed by many of the soldiers in this assault on Baghdad: that they had made history Monday. "I can actually say that I did something that will go down in the books," Sullivan said.

Despite the victories Monday, U.S. forces remain troubled by one question they couldn't help asking each other.


As Maj. Mark Rasins put it, "Where the hell's Saddam?"

*Contributing: Vivienne Walt in Amman, Jordan, and Associated Press writer Chris Tomlinson in Baghdad.*

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