

Real War—Virtual Weapons?

By Ian Williams | July 16, 2003

The Persian emperors used to have courtiers whose job was to whisper regularly in the rulers' ears the message that they were only mortal. Looking at the Persian Gulf today and the respective pitfalls of U.S. President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the Iraq war, it appears the courtiers' profession needs reviving. Someone should be telling modern heads of state to avoid decisions based on weak evidence, unsubstantiated statements, and false hope. Contemporary leaders, like those of yore, ought to heed warnings to discount heady advice brought by people with their own agendas, be they the likes of neoconservative counselors to Bush and Blair or Hussein's Baathist advisers.

Those advisers' remote dreams of developing an Iraqi nuclear arsenal of chemical and biological weaponry inspired Hussein's refusal for years to allow UN inspections of the non-existent weapons cache, eventually leading to his political suicide. Meanwhile, basing the invasion of Iraq on spurious claims about the arsenal and Hussein's ties to Al Qaeda, then trying to justify the post-invasion occupation on equally dubious allegations of Iraq's trade in uranium with Niger, have played directly into the hands of the political opposition to Blair and Bush.

Results of the investigation showing the absence of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq have damaged Blair's credibility, perhaps fatally, since his whole case to the British for the war was grounded in pursuance of UN resolutions on Iraqi disarmament.

At first, Bush seemed to have escaped the contumely that Blair received from his constituents, since the White House cast the war as a payback for Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The general equation that Hussein and Osama bin Laden are both evil, (and both Arabs) and therefore in essence the same, held up with much of the television-watching public. But this rationale for invasion eventually was recognized as is an even bigger untruth than the WMD allegations. While Iraq certainly had once had weapons programs that Hussein had lied about, no one outside the fever-ridden neoconservative think-tanks could maintain see-

ing any connection whatsoever between Al Qaeda and Iraq.

Now, the continuing embarrassment of the absence of any credible signs of missing weapons or imaginary links with Al Qaeda is exacerbated by the question of who knew, and when, that the documents about Iraq seeking uranium from Niger were fakes. The shame is going to mount, not least because visions of a quick victory in Iraq have turned into a nightmarish occupation with a visible daily toll on both occupiers and occupied. The outcome is that Democratic contenders for the U.S. presidency who may have been loath to cast aspersions on a successful war, have since come to consider it fair game to denounce an increasingly unpopular and unsuccessful occupation based upon an untruth.

Variations on Untruths

The question of whether Bush and Blair knew they were lying is difficult. They certainly voiced untruths, but did they believe what they said when they said it? Like Hussein, they have surrounded themselves with people who either filter out the truths that they think their masters would find unpalatable, or who are deliberately trying to shape their bosses' attitudes and decisions.

UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, while they tried to be totally objective and fair in their assessments, nonetheless tended to assume that there must be



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some weapons program, no matter how minimal. Even so, they totally discounted any nuclear program. This had left those in the U.S. and UK administrations who wanted a war with Iraq scrambling for legal and political cover. Enter the phantom uranium shipments argument: The public's biggest fear was a nuclear weapon in the hands of terrorists, so the White House had a political need for Iraq to have one—and any scrap of evidence has been seized upon to vindicate that political need.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell wisely upheld his reputation as part of the sane wing of the Bush administration by skipping the uranium charges while presenting evidence to the UN Security Council. But even his Niger-free case on the broader issues of weaponry could not stand up, either to the scrutiny of the UN inspectors then or to the highly motivated U.S. search teams now looking under every sand dune in occupied Iraq.

The one element of his argument that almost rang true was that if the Iraqis genuinely had nothing to hide, then their scientists ought to be lining up for interviews on the weapons program. But the argument failed to take into consideration the brutal reality created by the paranoia in the Baathist regime, which would hang unaccompanied interviewees from meat-hooks rather than allow them to let something slip to the foreigners.

In any case, the prospective interviewees would have little new to reveal if the numerous depositions that the weapons had been destroyed are to be taken at face value, which they presumably must be in the absence of any functioning weapons systems, let alone any sizzling test tubes. It seems highly likely that Hussein's son-in-law, who briefly defected to Amman, Jordan, and divulged the details of previous programs, was telling the truth when he said that the weapons and production lines were all destroyed.

Lure of WMDs

If Hussein did not have any weapons, then why didn't he cooperate completely with the UN inspectors totally and allow them interviews? Indeed, even earlier, why did he choose a course of action that would enhance suspicions already raised by previous

misconduct and that guaranteed continuing sanctions upon sanctions?

Increasingly, it seems likely that the WMDs were as much a figment of Washington's imagination as a twinkle in Saddam Hussein's eye—or rather a virtual program in the minds of Iraqi scientists. The recent discovery of nuclear centrifuge equipment, long buried and possibly even forgotten in nuclear scientist Mahdi Obeidi's Baghdad backyard, gives a clue to the nature of the program, at the same time that it may also explain the reluctance to allow the scientists to be interviewed and certainly the refusal to allow them abroad. The program was little more than a wish to keep expertise and know-how intact until such time as the sanctions were over, the spotlight moved on, and the labs could be reopened.

It is difficult to see how the UN, the U.S., or the UK administrations could counter such a program, which may have evaded the spirit of disarmament resolutions, but probably is close to compliance with their wording. A Baathist regime could conceivably just execute all Iraqi biological or nuclear scientists to meet foreign demands for avoiding war. But not even the war-favoring U.S. public, not even Texans who support their state's death penalty, would applaud mass executions of every Iraqi with a bachelor's degree in biology or physics. In the end, you cannot outlaw knowledge, no matter how pernicious. Besides, so many of the techniques used in weapons production are common to industrial processes that it would be impossible to ban them and still run a functional, modern economy.

The Iraqi refusal to allow in the inspectors all those years was in retrospect a fatal mistake of the kind that dictatorships often make. Among Hussein's motives for spending so many years under sanctions for refusing access to UN inspectors there is the sense of upholding honor and national sovereignty, as irrational as that held by the likes of U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton and others in the U.S. administration—and probably as genuine for many Iraqi officials.

The Baathists also had a problem when second-guessing U.S. intentions. Most of what Hussein has done is unforgivable, but anyone trying to determine

a clear U.S. foreign policy in Iraq over the past decade would have to forgive him this failing for wondering exactly what that policy was, for fearing the worst. Washington had used UN inspections before as a cover for spying, which certainly enhanced the Iraqi regime's strong predisposition to paranoia. At no point did a U.S. administration unequivocally declare that a successful inspection and a clean bill of disarmament would end sanctions. And by the time a clear line did emerge from the fog in Washington, it was the neoconservatives' Catonian invocation: Iraq must be destroyed.

The uncertainty about U.S. intentions and the virtual weapons program certainly explain the Iraqi regime's hypersensitivity about the interviews. Unfortunately, they do not meet Bush and Blair's political need for more tangible evidence to justify their invasion, so they will keep on looking for rationale. But they might well be a tad more circumspect about accepting what their minions tell them for the duration of whatever political future they have.

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