

Why So Many Were So Wrong For So Long

By Col. Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | February 5, 2004

It may have been fortuitous that David Kay's testimony about U.S. intelligence failures in Iraq came just before the Super Bowl. Watching the game—and the “flash dance” finale of the halftime show—the everyday observer could begin to understand the truth in the caution: “Don't believe everything you think you see.” Or in the case of instant replays, “re-see”—as in, “Did the Patriots really get those few inches and a first down?”

David Kay has flatly stated that U.S. and other national intelligence agencies with which the U.S. has close ties essentially got it wrong on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Kay traced the main failure to December 1998. Then the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) looking for weapons, toxic stockpiles, and missile delivery systems since 1991 was forced to withdraw because of the U.S.-UK Operation Desert Fox bombing campaign. Suddenly, the on-the-ground eyes and ears on which the U.S. intelligence community had relied since Operation Desert Storm vanished, leaving only easily spoofed optical and communications “spies in the skies.”

Why were so many so wrong for so long? Essentially, because no one could fathom the wheels within wheels that existed within Saddam's inner circle, beginning with Saddam himself. In short, the most basic rule of intelligence—know your opponent—wasn't observed. George Tenet conceded as much in his speech at Georgetown on February 5, 2004, in which he defended the pre-war performance of U.S. intelligence. And he specifically contradicted David Kay on individual points, leaving the public wondering where the truth lies.

The baseline the intelligence agencies seemed to work from rested on two “irrefutable” premises. First, Saddam had produced, stockpiled, and used chemical weapons, had been working on developing a nuclear weapon capability, had produced biological agents, and had surface-to-surface missiles. Second, Saddam knew everything that happened in Iraq and was ruthless when someone crossed him.

Flowing from the first premise was the assumption that Iraqis would not adjust to post-1991 realities.

These included sanctions and the intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency and UNSCOM—and the latter's 2002-2003 successor inspection agency. The second premise carried an implicit assumption that in a rigid, highly centralized society like Iraq, everything would be documented. Thus, the absence of documents detailing destruction of weapons and agents “proved” that large stockpiles still existed somewhere.

Exactly opposite information was emphatically provided to the UN and western intelligence in 1995 when Hussein Kamel, Saddam's son-in-law and the head of Iraq's weapons programs, defected to Jordan. Hussein told his questioners: “I ordered destruction of all chemical weapons. All weapons—biological, chemical, missile, nuclear were destroyed...nothing remained.” Based on information in the public domain, it appears that Hussein's statements were never refuted; nonetheless, they were also apparently discounted, perhaps because they went against the grain.

Kay believes that post-1998 corruption and deception was so endemic in Iraq's ruling circles and scientific community that Iraq constituted a major, growing danger. But the real danger was to Iraq itself. Saddam, according to Kay, was being massively deceived. Scientists would relate their progress in developing weapons and toxins, outline next steps, and ask for (and receive) money. Saddam, meanwhile, in what could be described as reverse psychology, was telling the UN he had no weapons or stockpiles. But since everyone—his subjects and his neighbors—“knew” he had weapons, he could cow the former and face down the latter who might consider his



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overthrow. Moreover, he could count on the UN inspectors not finding anything no matter how long they looked—because there was nothing to find. And he probably figured that, unlike in 1998, when his refusal to cooperate with inspectors led to Desert Fox, his procedural and substantive cooperation would be enough to keep the UN on the ground and the U.S. out. What he didn't count on was the single-mindedness of George W. Bush when it came to Iraq.

David Kay said he could find no evidence that the assessments of analysts were influenced by or changed in response to pressure from any official. Given that Vice President Cheney paid multiple visits to CIA headquarters to speak to analysts and that an independent intelligence “unit” created in the Office of the Secretary of Defense fed raw information and its “analysis” directly to the White House, a red flag should have gone up the highest flagpole. Because of these and quite possibly other, unknown, visits and pressures, analysts would be prone to weave into assessments any information supporting their long-held suspicions as a “defense” against the extremist positions (e.g., Saddam is an imminent threat) of

Bush administration officials. Similarly, analysts may have omitted the usual caveats to make their case more convincing. But the price of defending a “rational” position resting on old premises was to be so wedded to history that the actual situation, which occasionally was glimpsed, was not even considered to be possible.

If Kay is right about the corruption in Iraq and the extent of the deception practiced on Saddam and others in the Baathist and military elites, in effect Iraq was on the verge of becoming a failed state ready to disintegrate at the slightest push. That push came in March 2003, and the resulting and continuing inter-ethnic, inter-confessional, and jihadist carnage attest to the danger Iraq has become to its neighbors as a result of the U.S.-led invasion.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Dan Smith, “Why So Many Were So Wrong For So Long,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, February 5, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0402wrong.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Dan Smith

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

