



About Those Iraqi WMD

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The great mystery of the 2003 war in Iraq - "What about the WMD?" has finally been resolved. The short answer is: Saddam Hussein's persistent record of lying meant no one believed him when he at the last moment actually removed the weapons of mass destruction.

In a riveting book-length report issued by the Pentagon's Joint Forces Command, [Iraqi Perspectives Project](#), American researchers have produced the results of a systematic two-year study of the forces and motivations shaping Saddam and his regime. Well written, historically contexted, and replete with revealing details, it ranks with [Kanan Makiya's Republic of Fear](#) as the masterly description of that regime. (For a condensed version, see the [May-June issue of Foreign Affairs](#).)

It shows how, like Hitler's Germany

or Stalin's Soviet Union, Saddam's Iraq was a place of unpredictably distorted reality. In particular, Saddam underwent a change in the mid-1990s, developing a delusional sense of his own military genius, indeed his infallibility. In this fantasyland, soldiers' faith and bravura count far more than technology or matériel. Disdaining the U.S. military performance from Vietnam to Desert Storm, and from Somalia to the Balkans, the tyrant deemed Americans a cowardly and unworthy enemy.

Also about this same time, Saddam began insisting on only good news, isolating himself further from often harsh realities. As ever-fewer underlings dared to contradict the boss's perceptions, his determined self-deception wreaked havoc outward from the presidential palace to the entire Iraqi government and be-

yond. The lead author of *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, Kevin M. Woods, and his four co-authors note, "By the mid-1990s, most of those near the regime inner circle recognized that everyone was lying to everyone else." Deceits were reinforced and elaborated. In the words of an air defense officer, "One [officer] lied to another from the first lieutenant up, until it reached Saddam."

That no one really knew what was going on was symbolized by the widespread credence in the wartime nonsense spouted by the Iraqi minister of information (mockingly dubbed Baghdad Bob by Western reporters) as he regaled the world with glowing accounts of Iraqi victories; "from the point of view of Iraq's leaders, Baghdad Bob was largely reporting what they were hearing from the front." A militia commander confessed to being "absolutely astonished" on encountering an American tank in Baghdad.

The same situation extended to the military-industrial infrastructure. First, the report states, for Saddam, "the mere issuing of a decree was sufficient to make the plan work." Second, fearful for their lives, everyone involved provided glowing progress bulletins. In particular, "scientists always reported the next wonder weapon was right around the corner." In such an environment, who knew the actual state of the WMD? Even for Saddam, "when it came to WMD there was always some element of doubt about the truth."

Iraq's strategic dilemma compli-

cated matters further. Realizing that perceptions of Iraqi weakness could invite attack, from Iran in particular, Saddam wanted the world to think he possessed WMD. But eventually he realized that to fend off the coalition, he needed to convince Western states that his regime no longer possessed those very weapons. As coalition forces geared up for war in late 2002, Saddam decided to cooperate with the United Nations to establish that his country was clean of WMD, as he put it, so as "not to give President Bush any excuses to start a war."

This lucid moment, ironically, fell victim to his long history of deceiving the United Nations; Iraqi steps to comply with the inspections regime had the paradoxical effect of confirming Western doubts that the cooperation was a ruse. For example, intercepted orders "to remove all traces of previous WMD programs" were misinterpreted as yet another ploy, and not the genuine effort they really were.

Saddam's belated attempts at transparency backfired, leading to what the report authors call "a diplomatic and propaganda Catch-22." Monumental confusion followed. Captured senior Iraqi officials continued for many months after the 2003 war "to believe it possible ... that Iraq still possessed a WMD capability hidden away somewhere." Coalition intelligence agencies, not surprisingly, missed the final and unexpected twist in a long-running drama. Neither those agencies nor Western politicians lied; Saddam was the evil impostor whose decep-

tions in the end confused and endangered everyone, including himself.

Apr. 25, 2006 update: I have received many questions about the disposal of the WMD - Syria? Belarus? - and wish to clarify that I purposefully did not deal with this

question in the above article (just as the *Iraqi Perspectives Project* did not). The topic here is exclusively the functioning of the Saddam Hussein regime in relation to the WMD mystery. Any thesis of what was done with the WMD is compatible with the above background explanation.