



Our Basic Instincts Were Sound

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If David Kay is right about what his weapons inspection teams have found -- or rather not found -- in Iraq, it's clear the Bush administration was wrong about Iraq's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. Kay, the former chief U.S. weapons inspector in Iraq, says there are no large chemical and biological stockpiles likely to be found, and that Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons program had been literally buried. While he also concluded that Iraq had been aggressively moving to develop longer-range ballistic missiles, had kept its biological-weapons research program alive and tried to restart its nuclear program in 2001, the overall picture is far from the robust set of WMD programs suggested by one senior administration official after

another in the year leading up to the war.

Critics of the war and the administration have been quick to use Kay's statements as evidence that the White House jury-rigged intelligence estimates to support its policy of getting rid of Hussein, and hyped what intelligence there was on Iraq's programs. But the Bush administration relied on virtually the same intelligence estimates that the Clinton administration used during the U.N.-inspection crisis in late 1997. As far as hype goes, it would be hard for anyone to beat then-Defense Secretary William S. Cohen's appearance on national television, holding up a five-pound sack of sugar and announcing that a similar amount of Iraqi produced anthrax

was enough to kill half the population of Washington.

So, who is at fault? Right now, it looks like U.S. intelligence simply didn't do its job. Not that the job was easy; Iraq was a virtual police state, and Hussein was adept at uncovering plots against him and hiding his own plans. Remember, after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, we were surprised to discover that Iraq's nuclear weapons program was just months from producing a bomb -- not the five to 10 years that U.S. intelligence had thought. The reality is we had no high-level Iraqi spies who could tell us what was going on; moreover, Hussein appears to have been good at feeding false information through double agents and our high-tech collection systems. With no new information of note, it is no surprise that the analytic side of the intelligence community -- a bureaucracy like any bureaucracy, with its own inertia -- didn't change what it thought about these programs from what it had learned in the early 1990s.

It now appears that Hussein believed that by destroying his chemical and biological stockpiles and not rebuilding major weapons-production sites, he could keep U.N. weapons inspectors from finding anything significant and ease out of sanctions. Once the inspectors were gone and the sanctions eliminated, he could then use the smaller seed programs he had covertly maintained to rebuild and restock his WMD arsenal. Meanwhile, he hoped to deter the U.S. from a military invasion by feeding us disinformation that he still retained a deadly chemical-weapons capability. Obviously, it was a strategy that was too clever by half. And it was a strat-

egy about which we had too few clues.

One result of this missed estimate of the Iraqi threat has been calls for the administration to rethink not only its assessment of the threat posed by the combination of weapons proliferation, rogue states and global terrorism but also the possibility of taking preemptive military action to address this threat. Can the U.S. employ such an option, with all the political and strategic risks it entails, when the intelligence it rests on seems so shaky?

The answer is not so clear. Although it appears the intelligence community overestimated the WMD threat posed by Hussein's Iraq, it is equally true that U.S. intelligence recently underestimated the nuclear weapons programs of two other rogue states, Iran and Libya. Both countries had programs further along and more sophisticated than either the U.S. or its allies knew. Based on these three cases -- and a history of previously underestimating WMD programs in Pakistan, India, North Korea and, yes, Iraq -- the lack of solid intelligence may mean we have more to worry about in the future, not less. What is becoming clear as we unravel both the Iranian and Libyan programs, with their webs of covert foreign suppliers, is how difficult it is to contain proliferation. It is premature to think that military preemption can be taken off the table completely.

So, what should be done? The most obvious goal should be to improve intelligence. Central Intelligence has too few spies who have access to these weapons programs, too few analysts with experience in the field and it lacks the capability to crack the

deception and denial that surround the programs. That said, we shouldn't expect intelligence ever to improve to the point that a president will be relieved of having to make hard judgments. The fact remains that the programs on which we are collecting intelligence are readily hidden in a sea of normal commercial endeavors and a global trading system.

Our next goal, however, should be to understand that what we lack in detailed intelligence about weapons programs is more than offset by our strategic intelligence about particular countries' intent. We knew, for example, that North Korea had every intention of using its "peaceful" nuclear program to get a nuclear weapon as far back as the first Bush administration. We had similar insights into Pakistan's nuclear program, Iran's, South Africa's, South Korea's, Taiwan's and a host of other countries' ballistic missile and WMD programs. In some cases, we had the will to head off these efforts; in other cases, we didn't. Yet the decision not to act was rarely, if ever, because we didn't understand a country's intentions.

The real issue is whether we have the political will to use what we know to design policies for unfriendly countries far enough in advance so that we don't have to rely on the more difficult and risky military option. As the history outlined above suggests, we have had a sketchy record in this regard. As for the future, it's anybody's guess. On the one hand, Sept. 11, 2001 -- and the administration's reaction to

it -- has made America and its allies more acutely aware of the dangers we face. Even countries that strongly disagreed with us over Iraq, such as France and Germany, have joined in the administration's Proliferation Security Initiative to help stop international trafficking in WMD technologies. And it would be hard to imagine Berlin, Paris and London taking the lead in addressing the Iranian nuclear program in the absence of President Bush having made the issue of terrorist-sponsoring states getting their hands on WMD a global security priority. However, the danger is that the apparent intelligence failure on Iraq's WMD programs will instill a new caution both here and abroad in how we tackle these issues.

But that would be missing the forest for the trees. Whatever the shortcomings in our intelligence on the particulars of Iraq's programs, the basic intelligence assessment that Hussein had never given up his desire to reconstitute his WMD programs was correct. While we should not avoid a debate over how the intelligence community came to misjudge the state of Hussein's programs, this should not distract us from what has always been the core issue for both defenders and critics of the war: To wit, given Hussein's intentions and history, would a policy of containment and deterrence have been sustainable and sufficient to prevent him from becoming a dangerous threat to the U.S. and our interests in the region?



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