

# Bush's claims on Iraqi weapons--lies in pursuit of war

Patrick Martin  
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In his State of the Union speech last Tuesday George W. Bush resorted to the “big lie” technique in an attempt to terrify the American people with the prospect of a September 11-style attack, this time employing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, attributing that danger to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Bush presented no evidence, simply asserting a wholly invented connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda that contradicts everything known about the politics of both the Islamic fundamentalists and the secular Ba'ath Party dictatorship in Baghdad. (The *Los Angeles Times*, citing “a senior US intelligence official who asked not to be identified,” reported January 30 that there was no evidence linking Iraq to Mohammed Atta or the September 11 attacks, and that claims of other Iraqi connections to Al Qaeda were “wildly overstated” and lacked a “factual basis.”)

It was the world turned upside down. Bush is commander in chief of the most powerful military force in the world, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, cruise missiles, smart bombs and all the other paraphernalia of high-tech warfare. Saddam Hussein heads a ruined and impoverished state that no longer completely controls its own national territory, let alone possesses the capability to inflict damage on the United States. Yet when Bush turned to the subject of Iraq in his speech, he began by declaring that Saddam Hussein “will not be permitted to dominate a vital region and threaten the United States.”

Bush sought to boost the credibility of his case for war with a series of allegations about Iraqi possession of “weapons of mass destruction.” These allegations are based on gross distortions or outright lies, which deserve examination. However, it is necessary first to establish two basic facts.

First, the real reason for the imminent war against Iraq is the US drive to seize oil resources and establish a position of unchallenged hegemony in the Middle East. It has nothing to do with Iraq's supposed possession of chemical and biological weapons or its capability to produce them. Dozens of nations possess such a capability, which is inherent in modern chemical and food processing industries. To enforce a global ban on such technology would require returning the entire planet, outside of the US and a few favored client states, to nineteenth or even eighteenth century levels of economic life.

Second, given the military threat from the United States and Israel, both nuclear-armed, it would be perfectly natural for Iraq to seek to acquire or build such weapons. Bush declared, towards the conclusion of his speech, that the only possible reason for Iraq to possess weapons of mass destruction “is to dominate, intimidate or attack.” These words sum up the manner in which Bush seeks to employ the US military arsenal, including its nuclear forces. Other countries, potential targets of American military action, might advance another reason for the possession of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons: self-defense against the most powerful imperialist nation.

In his litany of allegations of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Bush began by dismissing the fact that UN weapons inspectors have found

nothing since their return to Iraq, claiming that it was not their job to “conduct a scavenger hunt.” Rather, he said, “It is up to Iraq to show exactly where it is hiding its banned weapons, lay those weapons out for the world to see and destroy them as directed. Nothing like this has happened.”

This is an example of asserting a conclusion and making it the premise of the argument. The starting point is the unsupported claim that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction. Its failure to turn over these weapons is then cited as proof of concealment and non-cooperation. Of course, if Iraq had turned over a stockpile of banned weapons, that would have been cited by the White House as proof of Iraqi violations. The war drive would continue, with US officials demanding: “What else is Saddam Hussein hiding?”

Much of the rest of Bush's indictment consisted of similarly unsupported claims, such as the assertion that Iraq has built mobile germ-warfare laboratories, or that Iraq is blocking U-2 spy flights over its territory. (The UN refuses to conduct such flights as long as Iraq continues to fire anti-aircraft weapons at US and British warplanes, which repeatedly invade Iraqi airspace, enforcing the “no-fly” zones that were established by Washington, not by the UN Security Council.)

Bush went on to charge Iraq with possession of chemical and biological toxins, citing reports by UN weapons inspectors. He said: “The United Nations concluded in 1999 that Saddam Hussein had biological weapons materials sufficient to produce over 25,000 liters of anthrax; enough doses to kill several million people. He hasn't accounted for that material. He has given no evidence that he has destroyed it.”

Note the carefully worded formulation: the UN inspectors allege “biological weapons material sufficient to produce” anthrax, not that Iraq either produced the anthrax or succeeded in weaponizing it. There were similar formulations in relation to botulinum toxin, VX and sarin nerve gas.

Much of this “weapons material” is commonplace in facilities making vaccines, insecticides and other biological and chemical products for agriculture and industry. Chlorine and phenol, for instance, are “raw materials for the synthesis of precursor chemicals used to produce blister and nerve agents,” as one CIA report put it. The two chemicals are also used in common disinfectants and in water treatment plants, vital for a modern society.

The projected death tolls—Bush spoke of a stockpile of weapons sufficient “to subject millions of people to death by respiratory failure”—are extrapolated by assuming that, for example, every ounce of available chlorine in the country was consumed in the production of chlorine gas for warheads, not used in everyday industrial processes. One might as well claim that Iraq was planning to build a tunnel to the United States—through which terrorists would presumably march—because the total length of all the structural steel in the country, placed end to end, would reach from Baghdad to Washington.

Bush deliberately distorted both the content and the context of the UN

reports. Virtually all of the work of the inspectors during the 1991-1998 period—to the extent that CIA and Mossad agents within UNSCOM (the previous UN inspections agency) were not engaged in spying on the Iraqi regime and trying to target Saddam Hussein for assassination—was devoted to inventorying and destroying the chemical and biological weapons that Iraq had built in the 1980s and used during the Iran-Iraq War.

The US government was well informed about these weapons because it assisted Iraq in building them. Washington supported their use against Iranian conscripts, since the US strategic priority was to forestall victory by Iran in the bloody eight-year war. (The top US emissary to Saddam Hussein under the Reagan administration, who discussed such criminal methods with Iraqi officials in Baghdad, was none other than the current secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld.)

The vast bulk of these biological and chemical weapons were expended by the Iraqi military against Iran, or destroyed by US bombing during the Persian Gulf War. The remainder were seized by UNSCOM and destroyed. For instance, of the approximately 13,000 artillery shells filled with mustard gas that Iraq had on hand in 1991, 12,792 were accounted for by UNSCOM. The balance of a few hundred are unlikely to have been stockpiled secretly, since the number is too small to have any significant military value. (Thousands are required per square mile of battlefield.)

Even the US and Britain never claimed that Iraq continued production of chemical and biological weapons during the inspection regime of 1991 to 1998. If there had been a considerable secret store of such weapons remaining from those manufactured during the Iran-Iraq War, the material would have degraded over time.

An UNSCOM paper from 1998, cited by former inspector Scott Ritter, declared: “Taking into consideration the conditions and the quality of CW-agents and munitions produced by Iraq at that time, there is no possibility of weapons remaining from the mid-1980s.” The same is true of biological toxins produced in the 1980s. Botulinum has a shelf life of about a year, while wet anthrax, the principal form produced by Iraq, has a relatively short lifespan as well.

The Pentagon’s own studies on Gulf War illness—conducted, of course, by a government determined to deny veterans of that conflict any benefits—downplayed the likelihood that Iraqi chemical and biological warfare stocks could have caused damage in 1991, let alone in 2003, noting that Iraqi production techniques were poor and the resulting toxins too diluted to be militarily effective. One Pentagon report declared: “We believe Iraq was largely cooperative in its latest declarations because many of its residual munitions were of little use—other than bolstering the credibility of Iraq’s declaration—because of chemical agent degradation and leakage problems” (“Chemical Warfare Agent Issues During the Persian Gulf War,” Persian Gulf War Illnesses Task Force, April 2002).

What about weapons made from 1998 to November 2002, during the four-year absence of UN inspectors? Last fall, before the resumption of UN inspections, the US and British governments repeatedly claimed that Iraq had restarted production of chemical and biological weapons at a number of facilities. Since November, however, UN inspectors have visited the most important of these locations and found nothing. The plants in question are being used in manufacturing the wide range of chemical and biological substances needed in a country whose two main economic activities are intensive agriculture and petroleum processing.

As for the quantities cited by Bush—25,000 liters of anthrax, 38,000 liters of botulinum, 500 tons of nerve agents, etc.—these are UN projections of how much Iraq *could* have produced by 1991 if all its facilities had been working full-blast and all necessary raw materials had been in plentiful supply. They are not estimates of how much Iraq *actually* produced, how much was left after the Iran-Iraq War, or how much might remain in Baghdad’s possession.

Yet these numbers have been translated by US government officials and

by the American media into a secret Iraqi “stockpile,” supposedly validated by the UN inspectors.

Even more grotesque is Bush’s arithmetic on shells capable of carrying chemical agents. He cited CIA claims that Iraq had once had 30,000 such munitions. “Inspectors recently turned up 16 of them, despite Iraq’s recent declaration denying their existence,” Bush said. “Saddam Hussein has not accounted for the remaining 29,984 of these prohibited munitions.”

Bush cited no timeframe for his figures, but other accounts say that Iraq produced or imported the 30,000 shells—with a range of only six miles—for use during the Iran-Iraq War, when most of them were fired. Iraq could not provide an accurate count of the number actually used, not surprising given the chaotic conditions of an eight-year war in which the battle lines shifted back and forth within the territory of both countries. The 16 shells were found empty of any chemicals, packed in an unmarked box in an Iraqi army munitions depot, alongside several million conventional shells.

Even more brazen were the lies about Iraq’s nuclear weapons program. Bush declared, “The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed in the 1990s that Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons development program, had a design for a nuclear weapon and was working on five different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb.”

This, of course, refers to Iraq’s pre-1991 program, which was completely dismantled by US bombing and UNSCOM inspections. There is no evidence that this program was ever reestablished. Iraq, as a huge oil producer, has never needed a significant nuclear power system for generating electricity. As a result, the principal obstacle to Iraq’s development of a nuclear weapon is the lack of fissile material—uranium 235 or plutonium. Production of fissile material is an enormously complex enterprise requiring huge resources that cannot be concealed from an inspection program, or even from external satellite surveillance.

Bush cited a British government report that “Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” Britain has not identified the country in Africa and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that without such information it cannot investigate the claim. The only such Iraqi inquiry that is documented, however, took place in 1981-82, and was rebuffed by Niger, which needed the permission of France, Spain and Japan to export uranium. This failed attempt, more than 20 years old, was presented by Bush as though it were new.

The head of the IAEA, Mohammed ElBaradei of Egypt, in his report last week to the UN Security Council, praised Iraqi cooperation with nuclear inspectors and said they had found no evidence of Iraqi concealment or restarting of the nuclear program that was under way before the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Bush also recycled the most publicized—and most discredited—allegation against Iraq, saying, “Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production.” US officials repeated this charge throughout the fall campaign to obtain Security Council resolution 1441. Iraqi officials maintained that the aluminum tubes were bought for use in short-range battlefield rocket launchers, similar to bazookas. Such weapons are not proscribed by UN resolutions.

ElBaradei’s report to the Security Council January 27 vindicates the Iraqi statements. He said, “[T]he IAEA’s analysis to date indicates that the specifications of the aluminum tubes sought by Iraq in 2001 and 2002 appear to be consistent with reverse engineering of rockets.”

The use of such transparent fabrications is itself a measure of both the cynicism and the desperation of the Bush administration. This is a government that adheres to the precept: the bigger the lie, the better. War, however, is the most unforgiving environment for such a method. The US administration is embarked on a course of action that will, once the lies and fear-mongering are exploded by events, produce political convulsions

at home and abroad.



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