

What happened to Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction"?

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Tens of thousands of liters of anthrax. Thousands of liters of botulinum toxin. Hundreds of tons of mustard gas. Tons of nerve gas. Illegally extended missiles and hundreds of bombs and artillery shells to deliver these deadly toxins. Mobile bio-weapons labs. Even secret facilities for the development of nuclear weapons. All these and more were alleged by the Bush administration during the months of diplomatic posturing leading up to its attack on Iraq.

US troops went into battle heavily laden with defensive gear to protect them from attacks using chemical and biological weapons. The Bush administration and the US media harped on the likelihood that Iraq's military would use weapons of mass destruction. There were repeated claims that Saddam Hussein had issued orders to his commanders, authorizing them to use chemical weapons once US forces neared Baghdad. The Pentagon even invented a name—the “red line,” dutifully parroted by the media—to signify the location 50 miles south of the Iraqi capital where such attacks could be expected. The invasion force crossed the “red line,” but no such attacks took place.

Every few days, as the conquest of Iraq progressed, there were new reports in the US media, breathlessly announcing new discoveries of “suspected Iraqi chemical and biological weapons” at various locations, including claims that initial tests by military patrols had found nerve agents like sarin and tabun, as well as mustard gas. None of these discoveries could be confirmed in follow-up tests at US laboratories. It later emerged that the military patrols do not have the necessary equipment to distinguish nerve gases from pesticides that would be commonplace in the high-intensity agriculture of the Mesopotamian flood plain.

There have been occasional discoveries of stockpiles of gas masks and other protective gear, which the Pentagon and the US media have sought to utilize as “proof”—for

lack of anything else—that Iraqi forces were preparing to use chemical weapons against the US invasion. This argument assumes, of course, that this equipment was not in readiness against a possible US use of chemical weapons.

Moreover, in most cases the protective gear dates back to the mid-1980s, the period when both Iraq and Iran were employing chemical weapons in the course of their eight-year-long war. One huge bunker in downtown Baghdad, for instance, discovered April 11 underneath the grounds of the Presidential Palace, included stockpiles of equipment dating from 1987 and 1988, the last two years of the Iran-Iraq War.

It is now more than a month since the US assault began, and American military forces have gained control of virtually every square mile of Iraq's territory. Not a single biological or chemical weapon has been found, nor any site which shows signs of recent manufacture, use or even disposal. Despite intensive searches, and despite incessant Bush administration claims before the war that thousands of suspected weapons sites were under surveillance by US intelligence agencies, the results are, in round figures, zero.

The political implications are clear: the claim of chemical and biological weapons was a hoax, deliberately concocted by the Bush administration to conceal its predatory aims in the invasion of a country with the world's second largest oil reserves. Especially in Europe, critics of the US invasion have already begun to make this argument, both against the US government and against British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Compounding the failure to find any weapons stockpile are declarations by leading Iraqi weapons scientists, now in US custody, that Iraq's previous chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs were dismantled after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, during the regime of UNSCOM inspections.

In the run-up to war, President Bush and other US officials had demanded that Iraqi scientists be removed from their country and interrogated by UN officials in secret, claiming that otherwise they would be too frightened of retaliation by Saddam Hussein to speak freely. Now that the Hussein regime is gone, however, these scientists have continued to declare that the US claims of weapons of mass destruction are lies.

The top science adviser to Saddam Hussein, Lt. Gen. Amir Saadi, turned himself over to US forces in Baghdad April 12, after negotiating his own surrender through the German television network ZDF, which filmed the event. Saadi was the principal liaison with UN weapons inspectors after the resumption of inspections last November. He told ZDF that Iraq no longer possessed any weapons of mass destruction, declaring, "I was telling the truth, always telling the truth, never told anything but the truth, and time will bear me out, you will see."

Saadi made no attempt to flee Baghdad after US military forces occupied the Iraqi capital. He turned himself in as soon as the US Central Command announced publicly that he had been placed on a detention list. A US intelligence official crowed over Saadi's surrender, telling the *Los Angeles Times* April 14, "He knows where the stuff is, and he knows the names of the major players connected with the program." But Saadi has apparently maintained his denials despite being a US prisoner.

Shortly after Saadi's detention, the principal architect of Iraq's nuclear weapons program, Jafar Jafar, surrendered to the government of a Mideast country which made him available to US officials. Press reports again cited US intelligence sources declaring that Jafar would have detailed knowledge of the location of stockpiles of banned weapons, as well as how they had been produced.

Former UN weapons inspector David Albright, now president of the Institute for Science and International Security, told the *Washington Post* that Saadi and Jafar "know, between the two of them, everything about the country's nuclear, biological, chemical and missile programs." But no such revelations emerged, and Albright himself told the press that he was now skeptical of US claims of a huge Iraqi arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. "I will feel taken," he said, "because they asserted these things with such assurance."

A third top scientist, Emad Husayn Abdullah Ani, formerly in charge of Iraqi efforts to manufacture VX nerve gas, turned himself in to American authorities on April 18. Again, there have been no revelations of secret

programs or huge stockpiles.

Concerned over the potential political backlash, both at home and abroad, if the claim of weapons of mass destruction is exposed as a fraud, the Bush administration is moving both to manage public expectations and manufacture evidence.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared in television interviews, and in an appearance before Pentagon employees April 17, that the former regime in Iraq had hidden or destroyed the evidence of its illegal weapons programs. "I don't think we'll discover anything, myself," he said. "I think what will happen is we'll discover people who will tell us where to go find it. It is not like a treasure hunt, where you just run around looking everywhere, hoping you find something. I just don't think that's going to happen."

The administration has openly rebuffed suggestions that it readmit UN weapons inspectors into Iraqi territory. A 1,000-strong US inspection force, consisting of military and intelligence personnel, is being mobilized, but the Bush administration wants nothing to do with UN inspectors who could not be depended on to "find" exactly what Washington demands, even though these inspectors presumably have the greatest experience in searching Iraqi sites.

Rumsfeld also announced last week that the US would pay rewards to those Iraqi scientists providing information about weapons of mass destruction, while threatening dire consequences for those who continue to defy the Bush administration. The *Los Angeles Times* reported April 20, "Iraqi scientists who don't cooperate may be taken to a detention facility for interrogation and ultimately could be charged with war crimes."

In other words, the Bush administration, which in search of a pretext for war claimed to want to protect Iraqi scientists from repression and retaliation, is now using threats of imprisonment, trial and even execution to browbeat these same scientists into parroting a script composed in Washington.



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