Two weeks into the Iraq war

Where are the weapons of mass destruction?

Henry Michaels
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Among the many official lies exposed in the first two weeks of the invasion of Iraq is the claim that the US was motivated by the need to cleanse Iraq of "weapons of mass destruction."

Days of intensive search operations by US, British and Australian special forces, which began before President Bush formally launched the war on March 19, have failed to produce any stockpiles or other evidence of Iraqi chemical or biological weapons.

And despite Iraqi troops and civilians being pounded remorselessly by bombs and missiles, including cluster bombs and, according to reliable media reports, napalm bombs, the Iraqi regime has not used a biological or chemical weapon.

Around the world, journalists, media commentators, governments and UN officials (including chief weapons inspector Hans Blix), as well as ordinary people, are increasingly asking: where is the evidence to justify this war of aggression?

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was asked on Sunday morning television news programs why US forces had not found any of the copious stores of biological and chemical weapons whose existence, the administration had declared, was proven by specific American intelligence. While boasting that US and British forces controlled vast tracts of Iraq, Rumsfeld said they had not yet reached the parts of the country where the weapons were being concealed—"around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south and north somewhat."

Interviewed on other Sunday programs, General Richard Myers, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that "the bulk of it is in the area south of Baghdad," but added that US forces were too engaged in "fighting a war" to look for it. "They're not in there looking for weapons of mass destruction," he said. "That will come after the war is over."

These statements were soon proven to be still more fabrications. The *Washington Post* and British newspapers reported Monday that shortly before the first bombs fell on Baghdad, special operations teams from the US, Britain and Australia flew into Iraq's western desert to capture four targets of highest priority to the US central command.

They were camouflaged structures believed to house chemical warheads, scud missiles and eight-wheeled transporter-erector launchers, known as TELs. After short firefights, the teams secured the sites, according to military sources, but found nothing. There were "no missiles, no TELs and no chemicals" where blueprints and maps had directed the teams to look, one official said.

Altogether, US forces have now tested at least 10 sites, said to be "their best intelligence leads"—four that first day and another half a dozen since—without result. These may be the very sites Secretary of State Colin Powell cited in his failed attempt to push through a UN Security Council resolution to legitimize the invasion.

According to unnamed US officials, the Defense Intelligence Agency has a list of nearly 300 "top tier" sites for seizure, with the 10 sites reached by last weekend among the most urgent. "All the searches have turned up negative," a Joint Staff officer told the *Washington Post*. "The munitions that have been found have all been conventional."

The Bush administration is now saying no weapons of mass destruction may be discovered until well after the war is over, while insisting it will conduct the weapons hunt without the UN agencies that hold Security Council mandates for the job.

US officials have indicated they will not agree to any role for the UN inspections agencies, UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency, both of which contradicted Washington's pre-war claims. UN inspectors left Baghdad on the eve of war, after three months of inspections failed to find such weapons.

Administration officials are already negotiating contracts with private companies for some of the work. They have also begun to poach selected inspectors from UNMOVIC, enticing them to break their contracts with the UN agency.

Not surprisingly, a company with close links to US Vice President Dick Cheney may profit from the US search for banned weapons. A subsidiary of Halliburton, of which Cheney was the chairman until he joined the Bush administration, is in the running for the contract to find and destroy them.

Two White House officials have predicted that the "near term" of the weapons hunt could last eight months or more. They would consider "a role for an international entity" to verify US discoveries only after the fact. Blix has dismissed this suggestion, saying UNMOVIC would not accept "being led, as a dog" to sites that allied forces chose to display.

Various governments, including those of France, Russia, Indonesia and New Zealand, have rejected the US proposal. "Evaluations [of any WMD finds] must be made by UN inspectors," a French official close to the prime minister's office told Reuters.

Another French official recalled that documents offered to the UN Security Council by the US and Britain as evidence Iraq tried to buy uranium from Niger had proven to be crude and obvious forgeries. This, he said, underscored the need for UN verification of any American claims.

Clearly concerned about the possibility of the US or Britain planting evidence of Iraqi chemical, biological or nuclear weapons activity, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told the upper house of parliament last week: "If there are claims by coalition forces about discovering weapons of mass destruction ... only international inspectors can make a conclusive assessment of the origin of these weapons."

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An Indonesian Foreign Ministry representative said the "sole party that can confirm the existence of WMD in Iraq ... is the UN inspection team." New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff made a similar statement, but hastened to add that he did not think the US and Britain would stoop to planting evidence.

US officials admit they are facing intense pressure to prove the Anglo-American claims. John Wolf, the assistant secretary of state for nonproliferation, said Powell was desperate to find a "smoking gun." Wolf added: "Very clearly, we need to find this stuff or people are going to be asking questions."

Some US media outlets are warning that the administration must find weapons to sustain American domestic support for the war, as well as to answer international criticisms. According to a Gallup poll, 87 percent of Americans think it is likely that Iraq has "weapons of mass destruction." Yet only 38 percent believe the war is justified if the United States finds no conclusive evidence the weapons exist.

The cover story in this week's edition of the magazine *US News and World Report* states: "This is one expectation that must be met: Coalition forces need to uncover weapons of mass destruction. The United States went into Iraq to disarm Iraq, and it needs to do so. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but as soon as the troops are in control of the terrain. If we don't find the goods, says Michael O'Hanlon, an Iraq policy expert, it would 'make the whole case for war fall apart'."

Unable to produce any evidence, the Pentagon has already resorted to disseminating false reports. Last week it claimed to have unearthed a possible chemical weapons plant in southern Iraq, and to have intelligence reports that Saddam Hussein had drawn a "red line" around Baghdad beyond which US troops would be attacked with chemical weapons. Both reports soon proved to be unfounded.

In recent days, Washington has seized upon the capture of several large Iraqi weapons stores containing chemical protection suits with masks and nerve agent antidotes. Tons of ammunition were discovered in the buildings, but not a single chemical or biological weapon. Nevertheless, the presence of equipment to defend troops against chemical warfare was presented as proof of Iraqi plans for such warfare.

A brief examination of the historical record suggests the opposite conclusion: that the Iraqi military has good reason to fear that the US and British forces could resort to chemical and biological weapons.

The British seized and colonized Iraq during World War I and suppressed a revolt against British rule in 1920, using mustard gas against the population. London treated Iraq as a testing ground for new methods of warfare, involving ferocious aerial bombardment, a forerunner of the present campaign [*See* "How the British bombed Iraq in the 1920s"]. During the same period, British forces used mustard gas in the failed military campaign to overthrow the Bolshevik government in Soviet Russia.

During World War II, the US military unleashed chemical weapons on the people of Japan before dropping two atomic bombs. On March 9, 1945, more than 300 B-29 Superfortresses attacked Tokyo, their napalm bombs and magnesium incendiaries turning 16 densely populated square miles into an inferno. An estimated 84,000 people, mostly civilians, were killed, making this one of the deadliest days of warfare ever.

More recently, the United States carpet-bombed Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia with napalm and other chemical agents, including defoliants such as Agent Orange, indiscriminately killing hundreds of thousands of people and poisoning Indochina's soil and water for decades.

In the 1991 Gulf War, the Allied forces used "anti-personnel" cluster bombs and napalm munitions to horrible effect, most notoriously in the final massacre of up to 20,000 retreating Iraqi troops on the road to Basra. British soldiers sent in afterwards found hideous carbonized cadavers sitting upright in the blackened steel skeletons of the vehicles. In addition, the US-led forces blasted depleted uranium missiles and ammunition throughout Kuwait and Iraq, leaving some 320 tons of radioactive ordnance in the soil.

Western journalists, as well as the Arab media and the Iraqi government, have reported that such weapons have been used from the opening days of the current war.

On March 22, "embedded" reporters for both CNN and the *Sydney Morning Herald* / *Melbourne Age*, citing two marine officers in the field, reported that US Naval aircraft forces dropped napalm to end Iraqi resistance to the taking of Safwan Hill near Basra. The Australian report was filed by *Age* correspondent Lindsay Murdoch, an experienced and respected journalist who is attached to units of the First US Marine Division. When the *Age* foreign editor asked Murdoch to confirm the story, one of the marine officers repeated it.

A navy spokesman in Washington, Lieutenant Commander Danny Hernandez, adamantly denied the use of napalm, which was banned by a UN convention in 1980. He admitted that the US navy used napalm as late as 1993 in training exercises on the island of Vieques in Puerto Rico, but insisted that the last canister of a vast US naval stockpile was destroyed at a public ceremony in April 2001.

But many Arab journalists have repeatedly charged that the US is using napalm and cluster bombs. Reporting for the Saudi daily *Al-Hayat*, Abdelwahhab Badrakhan wrote: "Fifty people killed by cluster bombs in Basra. Over 600 dead in Najaf. Tens of bodies in the Baghdad market yesterday, scores more in Nasseriya the day before. And we're still at the beginning of the war, meaning we've yet to see all its American and British filth."

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