

No Iraqi weapons of mass destruction?—US media scoundrel shrugs his shoulders

David Walsh
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The pollution of the American body politic continues unabated. US media pundits, whose lies about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” have been exposed by events, are rapidly inventing new falsehoods to justify the old ones.

Michael Schrage, a “senior adviser to the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,” has penned a column, published in the May 11 edition of the *Washington Post*, headlined, “No Weapons, No Matter. We Called Saddam’s Bluff.”

As though it were hardly worth discussing, Schrage acknowledges that the rationale for the aggressive, pre-emptive war may have been false. Tens of thousands of Iraqi lives lost, the laying waste of the country? No matter.

Schrage, described in a previous *Washington Post* column as a “a pro bono consultant to various branches of the Defense Department,” has been a columnist for the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Fortune* magazine and various other publications. He has also written for the *Harvard Business Review* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

In his May 11 column, Schrage writes: “Top Iraqi scientists still swear that their country has no such weapons. ... Are they liars trying to cut a better deal for themselves? Or might they simply be telling the truth? It doesn’t matter. If Iraq has significant WMD [weapons of mass destruction] capabilities, they eventually will be discovered. But even if Iraq proves utterly free of WMD—or if it merely possesses a paltry two or three bio-weapons vans—the coalition’s military action was the most rational response to Saddam’s long-term policy of strategic deception.”

He continues: “The real story here is less about the failure of intelligence, inspections or diplomacy than about the end of America’s tolerance for state-sponsored ambiguities explicitly designed to threaten American lives. Does an American policy to deny unfriendly nation-states the policy option of creating ambiguity around WMD possession and the support of terrorism make the world a safer place?”

And finally: “Iraq provides the single most important and dramatic case study in the Bush administration’s efforts after Sept. 11, 2001, to eradicate ambiguity as a viable strategic deterrent for unfriendly regimes.”

The tortured, impossible language expresses the corrupt and dishonest outlook at work here. Let us recall that Bush officials claimed that Iraq definitely possessed chemical and biological weapons and was on the verge of developing nuclear weapons. On December 5 White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters: “The president of the United States and the secretary of defense would not assert as plainly and bluntly as they have that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction if it was not true, and if they did not have a solid

basis for saying it.”

Now Bush administration apologists such as Schrage speak rather of a “long-term policy of strategic deception,” of “state-sponsored ambiguities” that “threaten American lives” and of “ambiguity” as a “deterrent for unfriendly regimes.” Schrage has the distinction of introducing the phrase “WMD ambiguity” into the English language. It is one worthy of the CIA-police mentality.

Does Schrage think his readers are fools? The regime of Saddam Hussein practiced no “ambiguity” about its supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, it did not play a “does he or doesn’t he” game, as he claims. The Iraqi government, through official and unofficial statements issued by numerous officials and state bodies, resolutely *denied* that it possessed any such weapons.

A few examples:

On November 16, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein wrote a letter to that country’s parliament reiterating his government’s denial that it had any banned weapons programs. He explained his regime’s acceptance of UN Resolution 1441: “We hope that the method we have chosen will result in the truth coming out, which is that Iraq is free of weapons of mass destruction.”

On December 4 Gen. Hossan Mohammed Amin, the chief Iraqi liaison officer with UN weapons inspectors, told reporters: “Iraq is free of weapons of mass destruction.”

The following day Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz commented to ABC News, “We don’t have weapons of mass destruction. We don’t have chemical, biological or nuclear weaponry.”

Hussein told former British Labour Party MP Tony Benn, in an interview aired on BBC’s Channel Four on February 4: “I tell you, as I have said on many occasions before, that Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction whatsoever. We challenge anyone who claims that we have, to bring forward any evidence and present it to public opinion.”

In a 20-page letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, announced February 20, 2003, Iraqi ambassador to the UN Mohammed Aldouri refuted allegations that Iraq still had weapons of mass destruction or supported terrorism.

In an interview with Dan Rather of CBS News, aired on February 26, 2003, Hussein asserted that the aim of the US military build-up in the Middle East was “to cover up the big lie that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction such as biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.”

As late as March 8, only days before the US attack began, Iraq’s state-owned television broadcast a statement declaring that the facts presented to UN weapons inspectors “prove Iraq is free of weapons of mass destruction.”

As to its ties to terrorism, the Iraqi regime was equally unambiguous.

Tariq Aziz told ABC News on January 30, “Everybody in the region and in the world knows that Iraq has no connection with Al Qaeda.”

In the Benn interview, Saddam Hussein commented: “If we had a relationship with Al Qaeda and we believed in that relationship, we would not be ashamed to admit it. Therefore, I would like to tell you directly and also through you to anyone who is interested to know, that we have no relationship with Al Qaeda.”

Hussein told Dan Rather in the interview broadcast February 26: “Iraq has never had any relationship with Al Qaeda and I think that Mr. bin Laden himself has recently, in one of his speeches, given such an answer that we have no relation with him.”

Either the Iraqi regime was mendacious in making these statements, although the US government has provided no credible evidence to suggest that it was, or it was telling the truth (which even Schrage admits is a possibility). Wherein lies the ambiguity, the dark cloud of uncertainty hanging over the world and creating a threat to American lives? What is the substance of this ambiguity which, according to Schrage, had to be answered by invasion and occupation?

All of this is a clumsy and nonsensical attempt to justify a war of aggression based on lies and mass deception, and everyone at the *Washington Post*, including the columnist himself, knows it.

Schrage claims that “Hussein’s Iraq may or may not have had impressive caches of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. But his regime surely behaved *as if* it might. Iraq’s WMD threat remained credible for more than 20 years because that’s precisely what Hussein wanted the world to believe. After all, he had successfully deployed chemical weapons against both Kurds and Iranians.”

How did the Hussein regime behave in the recent period *as if* it might have such weapons? By resolutely and repeatedly denying on every possible occasion that it had them? By submitting to the most extensive and intrusive weapons inspections in modern history, allowing UN inspectors unfettered access to any venue they sought to examine?

Schrage’s argument works against him. When the Iraqi regime had biological and chemical weapons (either provided by the US or used with its tacit agreement), it employed them against Iran and Kurdish forces allied to Iran. When, in the run-up to the recent war, it did not have them, it did not pretend that it did, but protested loudly against the charge.

Schrage writes: “Inspections agreements—no matter how coercive—*never* could have worked because they *never* addressed the fundamental issue: Hussein’s desire to preserve WMD ambiguity in order to preserve Iraq’s perceived influence and power. Removing that ambiguity would have removed Hussein’s ability to bully, bluster and blackmail the world. ... The inspectors’ tortured attempts to appear evenhanded succeeded only in generating even greater ambiguities about both Iraq’s willingness to comply *and* the weapons in its possession.”

It takes a particular type of twisted mentality to invent this scenario. Schrage asserts that Iraq’s compliance with the inspections regime was “perfunctory,” in order to justify the contention that the Iraqi regime desired to preserve its “aura of menace.” But the UN inspectors themselves acknowledged that Iraq’s compliance was far from perfunctory, and they frankly admitted that they had, as of the US-British invasion, found no evidence of existing banned weapons or weapons systems.

As for Hussein’s “ability to bully, bluster and blackmail,” this is the

world turned upside down. At the time of the outbreak of war in March, Iraq had been under sustained attack by the US for nearly 15 years. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had died as a result, the country’s infrastructure had been devastated, its military severely compromised.

Bullying, bluster and blackmail comprised the modus operandi of Washington. Iraq’s supposed “aura of menace” was created and sustained by the White House and Pentagon and their media acolytes to provide a pretext for American aggression. People in neighboring countries were oblivious to the “menace.” The vast majority of the population of countries in the region, registered in numerous opinion polls, expressed no fear of the Hussein regime and opposed the US attack.

Schrage dismisses the public insistence by the Hussein regime that it did not possess weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqis were “signaling” something quite different. How? When? Where? Schrage provides not one serious scrap of evidence for this claim. Aside from asserting that Iraq “reluctantly and churlishly” acquiesced to UN inspections initiatives, Schrage’s only proof of “ambiguity” is that Gen. Amin at a January press conference, while disclosing that Iraq had destroyed various chemical weapons years ago, simultaneously revealed that it had also destroyed the associated records and “appeared to smile” as he did so!

If the Iraqis “really didn’t have any WMD,” the regime had an easy option, according to Schrage: “Several top Iraqi scientists could have left or ‘defected’ to the West and talked about how their standard of living collapsed after Hussein stopped building weapons. Saddam could have allowed his French friends and Russian suppliers relatively free access to all parts of the country to further signal that he had nothing to hide. Of course, none of this happened.”

What did happen is the Iraqi regime complied, notwithstanding the devastation caused by the UN-backed sanctions and the refusal of the UN to oppose US-British bombing or the infiltration of the inspections program by CIA spies, to the demands of the “international community.” The US, for its part, could have cleared up any supposed WMD “ambiguity” by presenting to the world its alleged proofs of Iraqi weapons violations. Of course, it could not do so because it had no proof. It was lying all along.



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