

Iraqi “bioweapons” trailers: another “smoking gun” goes up in smoke

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During his recent trip to Europe, President Bush rebuffed charges that his administration launched the war against Iraq under false pretenses. “We found the weapons of mass destruction,” he insisted.

The claim was based on the discovery in northern Iraq’s Kurdish region of two trailers bearing laboratory equipment. On May 28, the CIA issued a “white paper” describing the vehicles as “Iraqi Mobile Biological Warfare Agent Production Plants.” The paper proclaimed that their discovery constituted “the strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological warfare program.”

This assertion itself represented a damning admission. In his State of the Union address at the end of last January, Bush had warned the American public that the Saddam Hussein regime had as many as “30,000 munitions capable of delivering chemical weapons” and facilities to produce “over 25,000 liters of anthrax” and “38,000 liters of botulinum toxin.” Iraq, he continued, could be in possession of “500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent.”

Similarly, in his February 5 speech to the United Nations Security Council, Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke of an Iraqi stockpile of “between 100 and 500 tons of chemical weapons agents.”

Two months after the fall of Baghdad, none of the alleged chemical weapons shells nor a single ounce of the arsenal described by the administration has been found. With growing demands that the Bush administration in the US and the Blair government in Britain account for this discrepancy, Washington seized upon the two trailers as the sole evidence supposedly substantiating its allegations.

The trucks, administration officials said, matched the description given by Powell at the UN of “mobile biological weapons labs” that had in turn been described to US intelligence by a single Iraq defector. Information given by defectors, most of them funneled to US officials via the Iraqi National Congress, which was agitating for a US invasion, had repeatedly proven false. Moreover, UN weapons inspectors checked out some of the vehicles referred to and found that they were used for testing food or preparing chemicals used in agriculture.

Nevertheless, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher cited the two trailers discovered in the north of Iraq at a May 28 press briefing and declared, “It is very important to recognize that programs that we had said existed do exist; that the kind of equipment that we had said existed does exist.” In line with this

political mandate, the CIA white paper set out to make a square peg fit into a round hole.

Now, a number of intelligence officials and scientists on both sides of the Atlantic have come forward to dispute Washington’s claims about the trailers and accuse the Bush administration of falsifying evidence to provide itself with political cover.

Last weekend both the *New York Times* and the London *Observer* published articles reporting challenges by US and British investigators familiar with the vehicles to the claims made about them by the Bush and Blair administrations.

The CIA’s own report claiming that the vehicles were mobile bioweapons labs acknowledged that no trace of biological agents that would be used in weapons production were found in the trucks. Moreover, it recounted that Iraqi scientists, who are presumably cooperating with American investigators, were shown pictures of the trailers and immediately identified them as equipment used to produce hydrogen for artillery weather balloons. The balloons are sent aloft to monitor and direct artillery fire, and the equipment used to fill them must be mobile.

The CIA report dismissed the Iraqi scientists’ testimony on the grounds that other Iraqis “have used sophisticated denial and deception methods that include the use of cover stories that are designed to work.” It acknowledged—presumably confirming that this was just such a “workable” story—that the equipment “could be used to produce hydrogen using a chemical reaction.”

The report discounted the possibility the vehicles could have been used for hydrogen production on the grounds that they would have been “inefficient” compared to newer and more compact hydrogen generation systems. The fact that such equipment would have been denied Iraq by United Nations sanctions apparently escaped the agency’s notice.

According to scientists who are familiar with the trailers, the vehicles, if used as biological labs, would have been even more inefficient—and indeed, deadly—to their operators.

As one CIA official told the *New York Times*, the most persuasive evidence that the trucks were bioweapons labs was the fact that they looked like the drawings Powell presented to the UN last February based upon the claims of a single defector!

The *Times*, which originally joined the administration in hailing the trailers’ discovery as a breakthrough in the hunt for Iraqi WMDs, reported on June 6 that three teams had examined the vehicles. The first two, the paper said, strongly supported the claim that they were used for producing biological weapons. However, a

third team, composed of more skilled and senior experts, was sharply divided. Several of those involved charged that the CIA report was falsified to serve the political needs of the Bush White House.

“Everyone has wanted to find the ‘smoking gun’ so much that they may have wanted to have reached this conclusion,” one intelligence expert told the newspaper, describing himself as “very upset with the process.”

Another WMD expert charged that the CIA white paper on the trailers “was a rushed job and looks political.”

A number of the experts, who spoke to the *Times* on the condition of anonymity, challenged the report on technical grounds, stating that the design of the equipment on the trailers made the claims of the Iraqi scientists far more credible than those of the CIA. They questioned whether a central tank found on the trailers was a fermenter used to produce large quantities of deadly germs. “It is not built and designed as a standard fermenter,” said one. “Certainly, if you modify it enough you could use it. But that’s true of any tin can.”

They pointed out that the trailers lacked essential equipment for sterilizing, growing and drying bacteria, without which no weapons materials could have been produced. The CIA’s response was to hypothesize a Rube Goldberg-type system in which these trailers would work in tandem with other vehicles containing the missing equipment. However, there is no evidence to support the existence of these other trailers, which presumably would have been traveling together with the ones captured by the US military.

The experts also noted that, while there was no suitable means of removing germ fluids from the vehicles’ processing tanks, they were equipped in a manner that would easily allow the extraction of gas, a feature consistent with the Iraqi scientists’ claim that they were used to produce hydrogen for balloons.

The *Observer* newspaper reported that the British military, the MI6 intelligence agency and Porton Down, Britain’s biochemical weapons center, have been ordered to perform their own investigation of the trailers in light of the growing skepticism among US experts.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is facing a growing political firestorm over charges that he backed the US war in Iraq based on phony evidence of Iraqi WMDs, had also touted the discovery of the trailers as proof of the US-British allegations.

“But chemical weapons experts, engineers, chemists and military systems experts contacted by the *Observer* over the past week say the layout and equipment found on the trailers is entirely inconsistent with the vehicles being mobile labs,” the newspaper reported.

The *Observer* article noted a number of facts contradicting the claims that the vehicles had been used to make biological weapons material. These included the absence of pumps needed to create vacuum conditions essential for working with germ cultures, and the lack of steam sterilization equipment required to prevent contamination that would render bacterial weapons materials harmless. It also pointed to the canvass sides on the vehicles, which would have made them extremely dangerous to operate as bioweapons labs. Normally, such labs are airtight.

The British newspaper quoted scientists who said the failure to

detect any trace of pathogens on the equipment rendered the claims of their use as bioweapons labs highly suspect. Weapons inspectors who had checked other tanks that were used in weapons production pointed out that traces were normally detectable, even if they had been scoured with chemicals.

Finally, the *Observer* revealed that the Iraqi military possessed precisely the kind of hydrogen-producing equipment for balloons described by the scientists who were questioned by US intelligence. A British arms manufacturer sold the system, known as Amets, or Artillery Meteorological System, to Baghdad in 1987, when both Washington and London were supporting Saddam Hussein’s regime.

If Washington were interested in the truth, it would invite independent experts, such as the UN weapons inspectors who worked in Iraq before the US invasion, to examine the trailers. US officials have made it clear, however, that the Bush administration has no intention of allowing the UN inspectors to conduct any such investigation. While these inspectors have the greatest knowledge of Iraqi weapons programs, they cannot be relied upon to produce the “evidence” that the administration demands.

The story of the bioweapons trailers follows a familiar pattern. Ever since the fall of Baghdad, the US occupation forces have repeatedly announced the discovery of “smoking guns” proving the existence of the alleged Iraqi WMDs, only to end up retracting the claims after a cursory investigation.

On April 7, the Pentagon announced that the 101st Airborne had discovered a major cache of missiles fitted with chemical warheads outside of Baghdad. It was also reported that buried “bioweapons labs” had been unearthed.

A week later, on April 13, the *Washington Post* disclosed that the chemical weapons found by the 101st were in reality a pesticide, probably used to control Iraq’s mosquito population. The Pentagon, meanwhile, backed off from its original announcement concerning the missiles, telling the newspaper it “denies any knowledge of this alleged discovery.” Two days later CNN revealed that the “bioweapons labs” had proven to be nothing more than unopened crates of standard laboratory equipment, such as test tubes.

Similarly, an announcement that troops had discovered 55-gallon drums filled with a “blister agent” was followed by a correction—the substance was actually rocket fuel. Last month, the *Washington Post* reported that US military teams searching for weapons pursued one of their hottest leads, breaking into a locked storeroom inside the headquarters of Iraq’s “Special Security Organization Al Hayat,” only to find vacuum cleaners.

These farcical episodes, capped by the exposure of the trailers fraud, underscore the fact that the US government plotted and carried out a war of aggression that it justified to the American public and the world through a systematic campaign of lies.



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