

# Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq: Bush's “big lie” and the crisis of American imperialism

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More than two months after the US occupation of Baghdad, and three months after the onset of the American invasion, the Bush administration has been unable to produce any evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. It is increasingly obvious that the entire basis on which the White House and the American media “sold” the war was a lie.

In the months leading up to the war, Bush warned repeatedly that unless the United States invaded Iraq and “disarmed Saddam Hussein,” the Iraqi leader would supply terrorists with chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons to use against the American people. He cited this allegedly imminent threat as the reason for rejecting international law and unleashing the US war machine against a half-starved, impoverished country that has been under economic blockade for more than a decade.

That these claims have proven to be lies hardly comes as a surprise. Even before the conquest of Iraq, the US charges were widely rejected around the world. No government in Europe or the Middle East regarded Iraq as a serious military threat. The UN weapons inspectors had been unable to locate any WMD after months of highly intrusive inspections. Tens of millions of people—the supposed targets of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—marched in the streets of cities on every continent to denounce the US decision to launch an unprovoked war of aggression.

While US war propagandists presented the attack on Iraq as an extension of the “war on terrorism,” it is well known that the Bush administration had drawn up plans to use military force to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein long before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. September 11 was seized on as a pretext for stampeding public opinion to accept US military intervention.

The charge that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction was selected, as Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz later admitted, for “bureaucratic reasons”—i.e., it was the one allegation that the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA all agreed could provide a serviceable cover for the real motives: seizing vast oil resources and establishing US dominance of the Middle East.

Since the war began, however, every element of the Bush administration campaign on weapons of mass destruction has been shown to be false.

- The claim that Iraq has sought uranium from Niger, in west Africa—this proved to be based on forged documents and was exposed as a lie nearly a year before Bush included the charge in his 2003 State of the Union address.

- The claim that thousands of aluminum tubes imported by Iraq could be used in centrifuges to create enriched uranium—debunked by the International Atomic Energy Agency as well as by American nuclear scientists.

- The claim that Iraq had up to 20 long-range Scud missiles, prohibited under UN sanctions—no such rockets have been found, nor were any fired during the military conflict.

- The claim that Iraq had massive stockpiles of chemical and biological agents, including nerve gas, anthrax and botulinum toxin—nothing has been found, despite searches at hundreds of sites targeted before the war by US intelligence reports.

- The claim that Saddam Hussein had issued chemical weapons to front-line troops who would use them when US forces crossed into Iraq—no such weapons were used and none were found when the Iraqi military collapsed under the weight of the US assault.

- The Bush administration was reduced to citing the discovery of two tractor trailers near Mosul as proof that Iraq possessed mobile biological weapons labs—a charge that featured prominently in Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5. But no trace of a biological agent was found on the trucks, and the White House has been compelled to backtrack even on this threadbare claim, suggesting that the trucks may be evidence of a weapons “program,” not of weapons themselves.

## A pretext for aggression

It is necessary to reiterate, in the face of ongoing attempts by the Bush administration and its media apologists to rewrite history, that Iraq’s supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction was the principal reason given for the US drive to war. The congressional resolution last October which gave Bush the authority to launch the war, UN Security Council Resolution 1441, and the war resolution adopted by the British Parliament at the behest of Prime Minister Tony Blair, all centered on the dangers of Iraq’s alleged arsenal of biological and chemical weapons, and its active efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

There were repeated, explicit claims by US government officials, not only that Iraq was in possession of huge quantities of chemical and biological weapons, in violation of UN resolutions, but that US intelligence agencies had pinpointed the precise locations where these weapons were stored, the identities of those involved in their production, even the military orders issued by Saddam Hussein for their use in the event of war.

There were dozens of such statements, of which only a few need be cited here:

**August 26, 2002**—Vice President Dick Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars, “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies and against us.”

**September 18, 2002**—Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told the

House Armed Services Committee, “We do know that the Iraqi regime has chemical and biological weapons. His regime has amassed large, clandestine stockpiles of chemical weapons—including VX, sarin, cyclosarin and mustard gas.”

**October 7, 2002**—President Bush declared in a nationally televised speech in Cincinnati that Iraq “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons.”

**January 7, 2003**—Rumsfeld told a Pentagon news briefing, “There’s no doubt in my mind but that they currently have chemical and biological weapons.” This certainty was based on contemporary intelligence, he said, not the fact that Iraq had used chemical weapons in the 1980s.

**January 9, 2003**—White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, “We know for a fact that there are weapons there.”

**February 8, 2003**—Bush said in his weekly radio address: “We have sources that tell us that Saddam Hussein recently authorized Iraqi field commanders to use chemical weapons—the very weapons the dictator tells us he does not have.”

**March 16, 2003**—Cheney declared on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” referring to Saddam Hussein, “We believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

**March 17, 2003**—In his final prewar ultimatum, Bush declared, “Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.”

**March 30, 2003**—On ABC’s “This Week” program, 10 days into the war, Rumsfeld reiterated the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, adding, “We know where they are.”

## The politics of the lie

Democratic and Republican congressmen and media commentators have described the Bush administration’s actions as exaggeration, hype or embellishment, or at most undue pressure on the CIA and other intelligence agencies to produce a compelling “case” against Iraq. All such descriptions are an evasion of the real issue: the Bush administration deliberately lied to the American people and to the world, concocting reasons for war in order to justify aggression against a sovereign state. Not since Hitler and the Nazis dressed up storm troopers as Polish soldiers and staged “attacks” on German positions in 1939 has there been such a flagrant and cynical effort to manufacture a *casus belli*.

It is important to recall the context in which the “weapons of mass destruction” campaign unfolded. Mass protests throughout the world had demonstrated as the *New York Times* admitted at the time, that there were “two superpowers—the United States government and world public opinion,” which were diametrically opposed to one another.

The Bush administration faced unprecedented opposition on the UN Security Council, and threats of veto by France, Russia and China, while UN weapons inspectors, in a series of reports to the Security Council, found no evidence that Iraq possessed either banned weapons or the production facilities to make them.

The campaign of lies about weapons of mass destruction was required to overcome the impact this worldwide opposition was having on US public opinion. This campaign was aided by the complicity of the American media and Democratic Party politicians, who knew that administration spokesmen were lying, but refused to say so publicly.

The Bush administration employs a definite methodology: truth is what you say it is, and events have no objective consequences. So long as it can deploy the resources of the federal government and the corporate-controlled media to reinforce its version of events, bombarding masses of

people with propaganda images and drowning out any alternative explanation, the right-wing clique that dominates in Washington believes it can get away with the most Orwellian of deceptions.

This method, saturated with contempt for the American people and their democratic right to control public policy, goes back to the origins of this administration. Bush claimed an electoral mandate for an ultra-right agenda, despite running as a “compassionate conservative”—the advertising slogan employed to cloak his real program in moderate garb—and despite losing the popular vote and entering the White House thanks to the intervention of the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court.

In his domestic policies, Bush lies on a monumental scale: tax cuts for the rich are a “jobs program”; cuts in Medicare and Medicaid are “reforms”; slashing spending on public education is repackaged as “no child left behind”; the establishment of the legal framework of a police state is the defense of “freedom” against terrorism.

There is another gross deception: the claim that the Bush administration and US intelligence agencies had no information that would have enabled them to prevent the September 11 terrorist attacks, or respond to the hijackings once they were under way.

The administration blocked any serious investigation of September 11, despite a mass of evidence that US intelligence agencies were warned in advance of the coming terrorist attacks and had many of those involved under surveillance, but did not take elementary measures that could have prevented the murder of nearly 3,000 people.

At the same time, it used the tragedy as a pretext for setting into motion a far-right agenda of political repression and war—an agenda that had been prepared well in advance.

The preferred methods of the Bush administration are to suppress and censor information, smear its critics as traitors and accomplices of terrorism, and, when all else fails, brazen things out by piling new lies upon the old. Thus the exposure of the WMD fabrication against Iraq has been followed by the concoction of similar but even more far-fetched charges against Iran.

There is no precedent in American history for the sheer scale of falsification engaged in by the Bush administration, the Republican Party and their media chorus. The “credibility gap” of the Vietnam War era is nothing compared to the lie machine of the current government.

Lying on such a scale has a definite impact on the body politic. It contributes to the destruction of any political connection between the working people, the vast majority, and the ruling clique. The masses become alienated from the regime, while the regime loses any ability to understand the intensifying social antagonisms building up underneath its feet. Contradiction is piled upon contradiction, and the conditions created for social and political eruptions.

Despite the delusions of the White House, events do have consequences. It has taken only a few weeks for the conquest and occupation of Iraq to reveal itself as a bloody colonial enterprise. Here again, the administration responds with lies—pretending the mass opposition of the Iraqi people to American occupation is nothing more than isolated “pockets of resistance” or the work of “Saddam Hussein loyalists.”

The unprecedented international antiwar movement in advance of the invasion is another objective event with vast consequences, although Bush sneered at the protests, saying he would not decide policy based on a “focus group.” Mass opposition to the US occupation of Iraq will revive within the United States and internationally and millions will raise the demand for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and all of the Middle East and Central Asia.

## The role of the Democrats

One argument recently advanced by media and political apologists is that the Bush administration could not be lying about weapons of mass destruction because that would require a vast conspiracy, including the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, the Congress and the previous Clinton administration, directed against the American people.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair put this case most crudely, declaring that no one could believe that he and Bush had deliberately fabricated a pretext for war because that would be “too gross.” Republican Senator John McCain asked whether critics of the war disbelieved “every major intelligence service on earth, generations of UN inspectors, three US presidents and five secretaries of defense.”

That is a fair description of the international campaign against Iraq spearheaded by the United States, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, throughout the 1990s. The specter of weapons of mass destruction was used for an entire decade as an all-purpose excuse for maintaining the blockade of Iraq, preserving the no-fly zones and otherwise subverting Iraqi sovereignty.

During the Clinton years, Iraq was repeatedly required to prove a negative—to demonstrate the absence of such weapons throughout its territory—and every failure to achieve this inherently impossible task was used to continue the starvation of the Iraqi people, at the cost of more than a million lives. Now the Bush administration makes use of the crimes of the Clinton administration against the Iraqi people to justify even greater crimes.

None of the Democratic congressional leaders or presidential candidates dares to indict the Bush administration for dragging the American people into war on the basis of lies. In some cases (Congressman Richard Gephardt, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Senator Hillary Clinton) they are directly complicit in the lies. In others, sheer political cowardice in the face of attack from the extreme right plays a major role (Senator Tom Daschle).

Still others (Senators Robert Graham and Carl Levin) criticize the White House out of concern that the exposure of Bush’s lies over Iraq will make it more difficult to win public support for the next American war, against Iran, North Korea or some other target. But whatever their criticisms of White House tactics, on the fundamental issue of the defense of American imperialism, both big business parties are united.

## The media and the war

The American media parroted uncritically the claims by the Bush administration that Iraq possessed large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam Hussein had close ties to the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists and that US military action in the Middle East was in retaliation for the September 11 attacks.

The media has always served as an instrument of big business, but there has been a qualitative deterioration over the past 30 years. During the Vietnam War, there was considerable critical reporting—at least in the war’s later stages—as the credibility of government claims of impending victory were called into question by events. Leading US media outlets published the Pentagon Papers and exposed the Watergate scandal.

Over the last decade, in particular, the media has prostrated itself before every provocation by the right wing, portraying the Whitewater investigation and Lewinsky affair as a legitimate exposure of wrongdoing in the Clinton White House, legitimizing the theft of the 2000 presidential election, accepting without question the portrayal of September 11 as a bolt from the blue that could not have been anticipated by the Bush administration, and now endorsing the conquest of Iraq.

Such formerly liberal organs as the *New York Times* may whip

themselves over such peccadilloes as the Jayson Blair affair—in which a junior *Times* reporter fabricated quotes and incidental details of many stories—but they have no qualms in collaborating with the Pentagon and CIA to fabricate the pretext for a war in which tens of thousands have died.

A remarkable opinion poll was published recently, conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. It found that one third of the American public believed that American military forces had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Some 22 percent said that Iraq had actually used chemical or biological weapons in the war. Other polls have reported that some 50 percent of those questioned believed Iraqi citizens participated in the September 11 attacks, while 40 percent believed that Saddam Hussein directly assisted the hijack-bombers.

Such findings are an indictment of the role of the American media in systematically misinforming and confusing the American people. But they also demonstrate that the supposedly widespread public support for the war in Iraq rests on sand.

The process of media manipulation has definite limits. Like the Bush administration, the media has discredited itself in the eyes of tens of millions of people, who recognize that both government spokesmen and their media counterparts lie without scruple or limit.

## The coming reckoning

The supreme role of the lie in US politics reflects not simply the cynicism of the media, but rather the enormity of the social contradictions within America. The United States is the most deeply class-divided of all the industrial nations. It is a country whose social relations—dominated by vast disparities of wealth—are increasingly antithetical to any form of democracy, and instead conform to rule by a financial oligarchy.

It is impossible for the ruling class to give an honest accounting for a system that heaps up riches for the privileged few, while driving down the living standards of the vast majority of the population. These social tensions are leading inexorably to major political upheavals.

The exposure of the Bush administration’s claims about weapons of mass destruction has already had a colossal impact overseas, where British Prime Minister Tony Blair is being openly accused of lying to Parliament and the British people. The reaction in the United States is less visible, in large measure because of the collapse of liberalism and the absence of any even remotely critical stance either in the media or the Democratic Party. There is mass popular opposition to the Bush administration’s policies, and genuine outrage over the war in Iraq, but this finds no expression in any section of the mass media or political establishment.

Sooner rather than later, however, the contradictions of American imperialism must find a political outlet. As the situation in Iraq deteriorates, the other basic lie of the war, the claim that the US would replace Saddam Hussein with a democratic regime, is being thoroughly exposed.

The US occupation regime has already begun to engage in measures—provocative searches of Iraqi neighborhoods, shooting down unarmed demonstrators, suppression of planned elections—characteristic of a military dictatorship. The number one priority of the occupiers is to restart Iraq’s oil industry and carry out its privatization, so that the country’s oil wealth can be looted by American corporations.

The claims of “weapons of mass destruction” and “war for democracy” will come back to haunt the Bush administration and the entire US political establishment that embraced the war. The political impact is already being seen among the troops on the ground in Iraq, who have

begun to express disillusionment with the invasion and opposition to continued occupation of a country whose people clearly want them to leave.

All of the institutions of the American ruling elite are implicated in crimes of staggering dimensions—the White House, the Congress, the judiciary, the military, the media, the corporate aristocracy. Any significant movement from below will produce a crisis not only of a president or administration, but of an entire social order.



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