

US withdraws Iraq weapon-hunters as WMD lies crumble

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The Pentagon has carried out the furtive withdrawal from Iraq of a 400-member military unit assigned to hunt for stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) just as a series of reports have surfaced definitively exposing the Bush administration's claims about alleged Iraqi WMD.

A 107-page report issued Thursday by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington-based establishment think tank, presented a documented case that "Administration officials systematically misrepresented the threat from Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and ballistic missile programs."

The *Washington Post*, meanwhile, published a January 7 article resulting from an exhaustive investigation by its reporter Barton Gellman concluding that "investigators have found no support for the two main fears expressed in London and Washington before the war: that Iraq had a hidden arsenal of old weapons and built advanced programs for new ones."

Finally, questioned at a news conference on Thursday about whether he regretted making his fraudulent claims about WMD and Baghdad-terrorist ties before the United Nations Security Council last February, Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged: "I have not seen a smoking gun, concrete evidence about the connection," between Al-Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime that he and others in the administration claimed in the run-up to the war.

Taken together, these developments constitute a damning indictment of the administration's claims that the invasion and US occupation of the Middle Eastern country was necessary to "disarm" the regime of Saddam Hussein and defend the US from attack. They confirm once again that the Bush White House lied in order to drag the American people into an illegal war whose real aim was to impose US hegemony over the strategic oil-producing region.

News of the withdrawal of the military's Joint Captured Materiel Exploitation Group was leaked to the *New York Times* and only later confirmed by the White House. The *Times* reported: "The step was described by some military officials as a sign that the administration might have lowered its sights and no longer expected to uncover the caches of chemical and biological weapons that the White House cited as a principal reason for going to war last March."

The article quoted Pentagon officials as saying that the unit was withdrawn "because its work was essentially done."

It added that, while another 1,400-member unit, the Iraq Survey Group, remained in Iraq with the mission of disposing of chemical and biological weapons, a member of the group had confirmed that it is "still waiting for something to dispose of."

Having spent over nine months and hundreds of millions of dollars in a farcical search for non-existent weapons, the unit is increasingly turning its attention to intelligence operations against the growing Iraqi resistance to the US occupation. Moreover, the official tapped by the Bush administration to head the survey group, David Kay, revealed last month that he is preparing to quit his position and return to the private sector.

Kay, a right-wing Republican and former Reagan-era Pentagon official, was a veteran of CIA provocations against Iraq and one of the most enthusiastic proponents of the Bush administration's program of "regime change." If there existed any possibility whatsoever that weapons caches were to be found, he would not be quitting his post.

Former deputy chairman of the UN weapons inspection agency Charles Duelfer told NBC news Thursday: "I think Mr. Kay and his team have looked very hard. I think the reason they haven't found it is it's probably not there."

Significantly, the *Times* buried its article on the withdrawal of the weapons-hunting unit on the bottom of page 14, while it virtually ignored the Carnegie report. The disinterest in these developments stood in sharp contrast to the newspaper's sensationalizing of false claims of existing weapons in Iraq in the months leading up to the invasion as well as phony stories about alleged discovery of weapons materials in its immediate aftermath.

The newspaper's senior reporter, Judith Miller, was herself "embedded" with one of the Pentagon's weapons-hunting teams, both serving as a conduit for administration propaganda over alleged WMD and, according to published reports, even manipulating the operations of the unit itself to promote a pro-war political agenda.

The *Times* treatment of these exposures was typical of the media as a whole. With tens of thousands of Iraqis killed and maimed and nearly 500 US military personnel having lost their lives in the Bush administration's criminal enterprise, the collective reaction of the US political establishment and the major news outlets was the equivalent of a bored shrug.

The fact that the Bush administration lied to the American public and manufactured a non-existent threat in a bid to suppress mass opposition to war is certainly not a surprise to anyone who has

followed political developments over the past year. Before the war, Washington's WMD claims were rejected by most governments as well as the tens of millions of people who demonstrated in cities across the globe against the impending US invasion.

Yet, the information that is now emerging is so conclusive that it ends any debate on the administration's phony WMD claims.

Based on extensive interviews with both US investigators and Iraqi scientists, the *Washington Post*, which pursued an editorial policy in clear support of the war, found that Iraq not only did not possess any of the claimed weapons, but also lacked the material conditions to even create them. Its scientific institutions and factories had been "thoroughly beaten down by 12 years of conflict, arms embargo and strangling economic sanctions," the *Post* found.

"[I]nvestigators said they have discovered no work on former germ-warfare agents...that led US scientists on a highly classified hunt for several months... And they found the former nuclear weapons program, described as a 'grave and gathering danger' by President Bush and a 'mortal threat' by Vice President Cheney, in much the same shattered state left by UN inspectors in the 1990s," the *Post* reported.

The article further described US occupation officials rounding up and interrogating Iraqi scientists engaged in civilian research without turning up any new evidence of weapons programs.

The *Post* also cited an internal Iraqi government memo establishing that Iraq had destroyed all of its biological weapons in 1991, in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War.

Finally, putting to rest the false claims made by the CIA and other government agencies last May that two trucks found by US troops in northern Iraq were "mobile germ-weapon factories," the article included an interview with an engineer who managed the government contract for maintaining the vehicles. He confirmed that they were used to manufacture hydrogen used in weather balloons, an explanation US officials had dismissed as a "cover story." A former senior manager at the firm that held the contract—now the US-appointed director of the same company—gave the same account.

The Carnegie Endowment report (<http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/IraqReport3.asp?from=pub> ate) consists of an exhaustive examination of the administration's claims and intelligence reports about alleged Iraqi weapons capabilities in the period preceding the war.

It establishes that beginning in mid-2002, US government "statements of the [Iraqi] threat shifted dramatically toward greater alarm regarding certainty of the threat and greater certainty as to the evidence. This shift does not appear to have been supported by new, concrete evidence from intelligence community reports... These statements were picked up and amplified by congressional leaders, major media and some experts."

The report also confirms that Vice President Richard Cheney and other administration officials exerted "unusually intense" pressure on intelligence agencies to include "evidence" to justify a war in the production of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in October 2002.

"This is indicated by the Vice President's repeated visits to CIA

headquarters and demands for access to the raw intelligence from which analysts were working," the report states. "Also notable is the unusual speed with which the NIE was written and the high number of dissents in what is designed to be a consensus document. Finally, there is the fact that the political appointees in the Department of Defense set up their own intelligence operation reportedly out of dissatisfaction with the caveated judgments being reached by intelligence professionals."

Reviewing the administration's claims—that Iraq was building a nuclear weapon, had large stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, missiles capable of delivering them against Israel or even the US itself, and was linked to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network—the report concludes that every one of them was demonstrably false.

The conclusion of the Carnegie report poses the question: "Did administration officials misrepresent what was known and not known based on intelligence? If so, what were the sources and reasons for these misrepresentations?"

It answers the first question in the affirmative: "Administration officials systematically misrepresented the threat from Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapon programs and ballistic missile programs."

Yet, the report delicately describes this wholesale lying to the American people as a "source of misunderstanding" and leaves its second question as to the reasons for these lies unanswered.

In the end, the Carnegie document reflects misgivings within the US establishment over some of the tactics and methods used by the Bush administration—the public embrace of preventive war as an international policy, contempt for multilateral institutions like the UN, etc.—rather than any fundamental difference with the pursuit of a foreign policy aimed at asserting US hegemony over the world's vital resources. Significantly, the word "oil" does not appear once in the document.

No section of the political establishment—including all of the candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination—is prepared to draw the stark political conclusions that flow from these recent exposures: top government officials deliberately lied to the American people about the reasons for war and launched an unjustified and unprovoked act of aggression that continues to claim the lives of both Iraqis and Americans on a daily basis.

These are not "misunderstandings," but war crimes in which not only Bush, but every major institution of the US ruling elite—Congress, the corporations, the media and both major political parties—are implicated.

The demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq must be joined with the call for a genuinely independent inquiry into the official deception that preceded the war, leading to the impeachment and criminal prosecution of those responsible.



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