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# The Great WMD Hunt

## The media knew they were there--but where are they?

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By the time the war against Iraq began, much of the media had been conditioned to believe, almost as an article of faith, that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was bulging with chemical and biological weapons, despite years of United Nations inspections. Reporters dispensed with the formality of applying modifiers like "alleged" or "suspected" to Iraq's supposed unconventional weapon stocks. Instead, they asked "what precise threat Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction pose to America" (**NBC Nightly News**, 1/27/03). They wrote matter-of-factly of Washington's plans for a confrontation "over Iraq's banned weapons programs" (**Washington Post**, 1/27/03). And they referred to debates over whether Saddam Hussein was "making a good-faith effort to disarm Iraq's weapons of mass destruction" (**Time**, 2/3/03).

All of this came despite repeated reminders from the chief U.N. weapons inspector that it was his job to determine if Iraq was hiding weapons, and that it should not simply be assumed that Iraq was doing so.

So with much of southern Iraq in the hands of coalition forces by the weekend after the opening of hostilities, reporters naturally started asking where the weapons were: "Bush administration officials were peppered yesterday with questions about why allied forces in Iraq have not found any of the chemical or biological weapons that were President Bush's central justification for forcibly disarming Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's government," the **Washington Post** reported (3/23/03).

Miraculously, the answer seemed to come that Sunday night (3/23/03), when military officials told the media of a "chemical facility" found in the southern town of Najaf. "Bob, as you know, there's a lot of talk right now about a chemical cache that has been found at a chemical facility," **MSNBC** anchor Forrest Sawyer told White House correspondent Bob Kur. "I underscore, we do not know what the chemicals are, but it sure has gotten spread around fast."

It sure had. Over on **Fox News Channel** (3/23/03), the headline banners were already rolling: "HUGE CHEMICAL WEAPONS FACTORY FOUND IN SO IRAQ.... REPORTS: 30 IRAQIS SURRENDER AT CHEM WEAPONS PLANT.... COAL TROOPS HOLDING IRAQI IN CHARGE OF CHEM WEAPONS." The **Jerusalem Post**, whose embedded reporter helped break the story along with a **Fox** correspondent, announced in a front-page headline (3/24/03), "U.S. Troops Capture First Chemical Plant."

The next day (10/24/03), a **Fox** correspondent in Qatar quietly issued an update to the story: The "chemical weapons facility discovered by coalition forces did not appear to be an active chemical weapons facility." Further testing was required. In fact, U.S. officials had admitted that morning that the site

contained no chemicals at all and had been abandoned long ago (**Dow Jones wire**, 3/24/03).

## “First solid confirmed existence”

So went the weapons hunt. On numerous occasions, the discovery of a stash of illegal Iraqi arms was loudly announced—often accompanied by an orgy of triumphalist off-the-cuff punditry—only to be deflated inconspicuously, and in a lower tone of voice, until the next false alarm was sounded. In one episode, embedded **NPR** reporter John Burnett (4/7/03) recounted the big news he’d learned from a “top military official”: “the first solid confirmed existence of chemical weapons by the Iraqi army.” According to Burnett, an army unit near Baghdad had discovered “20 BM-21 medium-range rockets with warheads containing sarin nerve gas and mustard gas.”

When **NPR Morning Edition** anchor Susan Stamberg asked Burnett, “So this is really a major discovery, isn’t it?” he assented: “If it turns out to be true, the commander told us this morning this would be a smoking gun. This would vindicate the administration’s claims that the Iraqis had chemicals all along.” Of course, it turned out not to be true. A Pentagon official, Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, told reporters the next day (4/8/03) that he had “seen nothing in official reports that would corroborate that.”

On April 26, **ABC World News Tonight** blared an “exclusive” report: “U.S. troops discover chemical agents, missiles and what could be a mobile laboratory in Iraq.” Correspondent David Wright explained that the Army soldiers had found “14 55-gallon drums, at least a dozen missiles and 150 gas masks” testing positive for chemical weapons, including a nerve agent and a blistering agent. He added that an Army lieutenant “says the tests have an accuracy of 98 percent.”

Perhaps somewhat self-consciously, **ABC** followed Wright’s report with a short segment about previous weapons claims that turned out to be false alarms. But the network continued to pump the story the next day, with anchor Carole Simpson introducing it as the lead segment on **World News Sunday** (4/27/03): “For the second day in a row, some of the preliminary tests have come back positive for chemical agents.”

But when the U.S. Mobile Exploration Team (MET Bravo) arrived on the scene to conduct its own tests, it “tentatively concluded that there are no chemical weapons at a site where American troops said they had found chemical agents and mobile labs,” the **New York Times** reported the next day (4/28/03). A member of the team told the **Times** simply: “The earlier reports were wrong.”

## True believers

Some of the more gung-ho media weren’t discouraged at all by the constant false alarms. According to Rush Limbaugh’s website (4/7/03):

We’re discovering WMDs all over Iraq.... You know it killed **NPR** to report that the 101st Airborne found a stockpile of up to 20 rockets tipped with sarin and mustard gas.... Our troops have found dozens of barrels of chemicals in an agricultural facility 30 miles northwest of Baghdad.

“The discovery of these weapons of mass destruction doesn’t surprise me,” Limbaugh explained on his radio show (4/7/03). “The only part of it that surprises me is that we discovered them in Iraq.” If U.S. forces were to look in

Syria, he proposed, they would probably find an additional “huge cache” of smuggled weaponry.

On April 11, a **Fox News** report, still posted to the network’s website as late as July, announced: “Weapons-Grade Plutonium Possibly Found at Iraqi Nuke Complex.” Sourced to an embedded reporter from the right-wing **Pittsburgh Tribune-Review**, the story was soon debunked by U.S. officials (**AP**, 4/15/03).

**Fox** didn’t mention that the “massive” underground facility “discovered” beneath a military compound had actually been subject to continuous on-site U.N. monitoring for years. Instead, the network featured a soundbite from “former Iraqi scientist” George Gazi, who declared: “I think this demonstrates the failure of the U.N. weapons inspections and demonstrates that our guys are going to find the weapons of mass destruction.”

But by the beginning of May, the administration gave up the ghost—apparently deciding that the day-by-day coverage of the weapons search, a slow drip of constant negative findings, was eroding the credibility of their prewar claims. In a series of interviews and off-the-record conversations, officials tried to talk down expectations, letting it be known that they now predicted no weapons would be found at all: An anonymous leak from a “senior Bush administration official” yielded a front-page article in the **Financial Times** (5/2/03): “The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said he would be ‘amazed if we found weapons-grade plutonium or uranium’ and it was unlikely large volumes of biological or chemical material would be discovered.” Condoleezza Rice speculated that Iraq’s weapons programs might only exist “in bits and pieces” (**Sydney Morning Herald**, 5/1/03).

So how had the media come to be so convinced of the weapons’ existence? And could they have seen past the White House spin had they chosen to?

## “Parroting the so-called experts”

In part, journalists absorbed their aura of certainty from a battery of “independent” weapons experts who repeated the mantra of Iraq concealment over and over. Journalists used these experts as outside sources who could independently evaluate the administration’s claims. Yet often these “experts” were simply repeating what they heard from U.S. officials, forming an endless loop of self-reinforcing scare mongering.

Take the ubiquitous David Albright, a former U.N. inspector in Iraq. Over the years, Albright had been cited in hundreds of news articles and made scores of television appearances as an authority on Iraqi weapons. A sample prewar quote from Albright (**CNN**, 10/5/02): “In terms of the chemical and biological weapons, Iraq has those now. How many, how could they deliver them? I mean, these are the big questions.”

But when the postwar weapons hunt started turning up empty, Albright made a rather candid admission (**L.A. Times**, 4/20/03):

If there are no weapons of mass destruction, I’ll be mad as hell. I certainly accepted the administration claims on chemical and biological weapons. I figured they were telling the truth. If there is no [unconventional weapons program], I will feel taken, because they asserted these things with such assurance.

(Recently, Albright has become a prominent critic of the government’s handling

of prewar intelligence on Iraq.)

A similar case was Kenneth Pollack, the influential and heavily cited war advocate at the Brookings Institution. Before the war, Pollack had absolutely no doubt Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons. “Does he have the ability to attack us here in the United States?” Oprah Winfrey asked him on her talkshow (10/9/02). “He certainly does,” Pollack explained.

He has biological and chemical agents that he could employ, but he'd have to use terrorist means to do so, which he's done in the past.... Right now, his capabilities to do so are fairly limited. The problem is that we know that he is building new capabilities as fast as he can.

As Pollack is a former CIA analyst who specialized in Persian Gulf military issues, many reporters no doubt took these as first-hand assessments. Yet in a post-war interview, when asked to defend his claims about Iraq's arsenal, Pollack demurred (**NPR Weekend All Things Considered**, 5/24/03):

That was the consensus of opinion among the intelligence community. It was hearing things like that that brought me to the conclusion that, you know, “Boy, if this is the case, we've got to do something about this guy.” That was not me making that claim; that was me parroting the claims of so-called experts.

Some “experts” had a political axe to grind. Charles Duelfer, another former inspector, had been a State Department functionary for years before joining the UNSCOM inspection team. At the U.N. Security Council, critics of U.S. policy viewed him with suspicion as a Trojan horse. Once his U.N. tour of duty was over, he became a “resident scholar” at the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, appearing on TV news shows as an impartial authority. He answered technical questions on subjects like liquid bulk anthrax and aerial satellite photos, offering his considered judgment that Iraq unquestionably was hiding a huge arsenal.

But off-camera, Duelfer admitted he was a committed proponent of regime change whether Saddam was harboring illegal weapons or not (Endgame, Scott Ritter):

I think it would be a mistake to focus on the issue of weapons of mass destruction. To do so ignores the larger issue of whether or not we want this dictator to have control over a nation capable of producing 6 million barrels of oil per day.... If you focus on the weapons issue, the first thing you know, Iraq will be given a clean bill of health.

## “Inactionable intelligence”

The U.S. and British governments were proactive in managing the media on the weapons issue. Beginning in the fall of 1997, the British intelligence agency MI6 ran a disinformation campaign to promote the idea that Iraq was still hiding banned arms, according to sources cited by Seymour Hersh (**New Yorker**, 3/31/03). MI6 secretly arranged for an unidentified UNSCOM official sympathetic to Anglo-American policy to funnel false or unverifiable information—so-called “inactionable intelligence”—to the spy agency, which then planted the stories in newspapers in Britain and abroad.

"It was intelligence that was crap, and that we couldn't move on, but the Brits wanted to plant stories," a former U.S. intelligence official told Hersh. An unnamed former Clinton administration official said the U.S. approved the operation: "I knew that was going on," he told Hersh. "We were getting ready for action in Iraq, and we wanted the Brits to prepare."

Within the press, perhaps the most energetic disseminator of "inactionable intelligence" on Iraq's putative weapons has been the **New York Times'** Judith Miller. A veteran of the Iraqi WMD beat, Miller has accumulated a bulging clippings file over the years full of splashy, yet often maddeningly unverifiable, exposés alleging various Iraqi arms shenanigans: "Secret Arsenal: The Hunt for Germs of War" (2/26/98); "Defector Describes Iraq's Atom Bomb Push" (8/15/98); "Iraqi Tells of Renovations at Sites For Chemical and Nuclear Arms" (12/20/01); "Defectors Bolster U.S. Case Against Iraq, Officials Say" (1/24/03).

In May, an internal **Times** email written by Miller found its way to the **Washington Post's** media columnist (5/26/03). In the message, Miller casually revealed her source for many of these stories: Ahmed Chalabi, the former Iraqi exile leader (and convicted embezzler) who for over a decade had been lobbying Washington to support the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime: "I've been covering Chalabi for about 10 years," Miller wrote. "He has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD to our paper." Chalabi, with his network of defectors and exiles, is known in Washington foreign-policy circles as a primary source for many of the weapons allegations that career CIA analysts greeted with skepticism, but that Pentagon hawks promoted eagerly (**UPI**, 3/12/03).

Miller's most noted contribution to the postwar media weapons hunt was a widely criticized article (4/21/03) about an Iraqi scientist in U.S. custody who led soldiers to a batch of buried chemicals that he claimed had been part of an illegal weapons program. (He also testified that materials had been smuggled into Syria and that the Iraqi government was liaising with Al Qaeda.) Despite having been written under a bizarre set of military-imposed ground rules—barring Miller from talking to the scientist, visiting his home or naming the chemicals in question, and establishing a three-day embargo on the article's publication—the **Times** chose to run the piece on the paper's front page.

"While this reporter could not interview the scientist," Miller reported, "she was permitted to see him from a distance." She confirmed that he was "clad in nondescript clothes and a baseball cap" as he "pointed to several spots in the sand where he said chemical precursors and other weapons material were buried." The story quickly fizzled out as senior Pentagon officials told reporters they were "highly skeptical" of the scientist's claims about Al Qaeda (**AP**, 4/22/03) and analysts pointed out that most chemical weapons precursors also have widespread civilian uses. In subsequent weeks, the administration has let the matter drop, and never made public the types of chemicals that had been found.

## A question of accounting

In short, the longstanding "consensus" in official circles that Iraq must have been harboring illegal arms has always had somewhat murky origins. Behind the thundering allegations issued at heavily publicized official press conferences, a careful observer might have noticed quiet signs of dissent: the "senior intelligence analyst" who anonymously told the **Washington Post** four days before the war started (3/16/03) that one reason U.N. inspectors didn't find any weapons stockpiles "is because there may not be much of a stockpile." Or Rolf Ekeus, the former head of UNSCOM, who told a Harvard gathering three

years ago (**AP**, 8/16/00) that “we felt that in all areas we have eliminated Iraq’s [WMD] capabilities fundamentally.” Or, for that matter, UNSCOM alum Scott Ritter, whose publicly aired doubts about the alleged weapons led a raft of scornful newspaper profiles to scoff that he must be some kind of crank (**New York Times Magazine**, 11/24/02; **Washington Post**, 10/21/02).

Ultimately, the claims and counterclaims about Iraq’s weapons boiled down to a question of accounting. In the early 1990s, Iraq had handed over thousands of tons of chemical weapons to the U.N. inspectors for disposal. But it hid the existence of other pre-Gulf War weapons programs, such as VX and anthrax, and the inspectors only learned the full details of these programs after the 1995 defection of Lt. Gen. Hussein Kamel, Iraq’s weapons chief. By 1996, the U.N. teams had destroyed Iraq’s last remaining dual-use production equipment and facilities, rendering the regime incapable of making new weapons. All that was left unaccounted for were old quantities of biological and chemical arms that Iraq produced in the late 1980’s but could not prove it had eliminated.

The regime claimed these materials had been hurriedly destroyed in secret in the summer of 1991 as part of an ultimately failed effort to conceal how far their weapons programs had gotten. Using forensic techniques, the inspectors confirmed that Iraq indeed “undertook extensive, unilateral and secret destruction of large quantities of proscribed weapons” (UNSCOM report, 1/29/99), but they were never able to measure exactly how much had been destroyed—leaving open the possibility that some remained hidden. This was the famous “26,000 liters of anthrax, 38,000 liters of botulin, one-and-a-half tons of nerve agent VX, [and] 6,500 aerial chemical bombs” that administration officials spent the prewar period crowing about (Ari Fleischer press conference, 3/3/03).

With remarkable unanimity, former Iraqi scientists interviewed since the war about the status of the weapons programs—including VX specialist Emad Ani, presidential science advisor Lt. Gen. Amer al-Saadi, nuclear scientist Jafar Jafar and chief U.N. liaison Brigadier-Gen. Ala Saeed—have all maintained that the regime did, in fact, destroy these stockpiles in the early 1990s, as it claimed. “According to a U.S. intelligence official, the top scientists are all ‘sticking to the party line, that Saddam destroyed all his WMD long ago,’” the **Los Angeles Times** reported (4/27/03).

But journalists looking for clues should not have had to wait for the end of the war to find evidence of this. “In my view, there are no large quantities of weapons,” former UNSCOM chief Rolf Ekeus told **Arms Control Today** in March 2000.

I don’t think that Iraq is especially eager in the biological and chemical area to produce such weapons for storage. Iraq views those weapons as tactical assets instead of strategic assets, which would require long-term storage of those elements, which is difficult. Rather, Iraq has been aiming to keep the capability to start up production immediately should it need to.

Given that no serious evidence of ongoing Iraqi production capability ever turned up—especially after inspectors returned last year and were given unfettered, no-notice access to suspected sites—there were few grounds for assuming that Iraqi retained a significant WMD capability.

Another clue reporters missed: Weeks before the war began, the transcript of Hussein Kamel’s 1995 private briefing to U.N. inspectors was leaked and posted to the Internet (**Newsweek**, 3/3/03). The interview revealed a crucial fact that

the Clinton and Bush administrations, which both promoted the defector's story as evidence of an ongoing Iraqi WMD threat, had long neglected to mention: Kamel told the inspectors that all the weapons had been destroyed. Coming from the head of Iraq's secret weapons industries, a source the Pentagon, CIA and U.N. had all praised for his intelligence value, the revelation should have been front-page news. Instead, it was barely covered (**Extra!**, 5-6/03).

## Centerpiece or hot air?

Having suffered a series of public humiliations from the conspicuous absence of unconventional weapons, the administration made it known that it was pinning its hopes on two trailers found in northern Iraq, which they termed mobile biological weapons labs. On May 12, NBC News correspondent Jim Avila, reporting from Baghdad, declared that the labs "may be the most significant WMD findings of the war." Joining him was hawkish former U.N. nuclear inspector David Kay (now an "**NBC News** analyst"), who was flown to Iraq to perform an impromptu inspection for the cameras. Armed with a pointer, he rattled off the trailer's parts: "This is a compressor. You want to keep the fermentation process under pressure so it goes faster. This vessel is the fermenter...." In his report, Avila didn't explain how and why Kay and the **NBC** crew obtained access to the trailers while the legally mandated U.N. inspection team, UNMOVIC, had been barred from looking at them.

The trailers quickly became the "centerpiece" (**New York Times**, 5/21/03) of the administration's argument that Iraq was indeed hiding a biowarfare program, and Bush himself used them to proclaim (5/31/03) that "for those who say we haven't found the banned manufacturing devices or banned weapons, they're wrong. We found them." No actual biological agents were found on the trucks, though; nor were any ingredients for biological weapons. In fact, no direct evidence linked the trailers to biological production at all.

U.S. officials said the trailers' equipment was capable of making such agents. Even then, the unconcentrated slurry that resulted could not have been put into a weapon: "Other units that we have not yet found would be needed to prepare and sterilize the media and to concentrate and possibly dry the agent, before the agent is ready for introduction into a delivery system," the CIA's report admitted (5/28/03).

Iraqi scientists who worked at the institute where one of the trailers was found offered a different explanation: They told interrogators that the labs were used to produce hydrogen for military weather balloons. "Even while conceding that the equipment could, in fact, have been used occasionally to make hydrogen" (**New York Times**, 5/21/03), the CIA report dismissed that explanation, reasoning that such a production technique "would be inefficient." (Yet the weapon-making technique imputed to the trailers was also "inefficient," an intelligence official admitted—**New York Times**, 5/29/03.) In fact, a technical analysis alone, they said, "would not lead you intuitively and logically to biological warfare" (**New York Times**, 5/29/03).

On the other hand, the trailer's equipment "appeared to contain traces of aluminum, a metal that can be used to create hydrogen." Yet that was discounted by U.S. officials, who said the aluminum "might have been planted by Iraqis to create the illusion that the units had made gas for weather balloons" (**New York Times**, 5/21/03).

A few weeks later, a front-page **New York Times** article by Judith Miller and William Broad (6/7/03) quoted senior intelligence analysts who doubted the

trailers were used for biological weapons. “I have no great confidence that it’s a fermenter,” one WMD specialist said of a key piece of equipment on the trailer. (In his TV performance on **NBC**, David Kay had evinced total confidence that it was.) The CIA report, he said, “was a rushed job and looks political.”

Analysts noted that the trailers “lacked gear for steam sterilization, normally a prerequisite for any kind of biological production.” “That’s a huge minus,” said a U.S. government biological expert who had been quoted in an earlier Judith Miller article endorsing the administration’s theory. “I don’t see how you can clean those tanks chemically.” A senior administration official was quoted admitting that “some analysts give the hydrogen claim more credence.”

It’s worth noting that in the 1980s, the British defense contractor Marconi received a government-backed loan to sell the Iraqi army an Artillery Meteorological System, an artillery radar system that uses weather balloons to track wind patterns (London **Guardian**, 2/28/03).

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