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Steve Chapman

## Something else is still missing in Iraq

Published August 3, 2003

The missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq have embarrassed the Bush administration, which had assured the world they would be about as hard to find as moisture in Seattle. But the controversy has had one clear benefit to the president: distracting the American people from an even bigger fraud.

Iraq was billed as Act II of the war on terrorism, and still is. In the months before the invasion, the American people were endlessly browbeaten with warnings about the connection between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the administration and its allies tried to trace the atrocities to Baghdad. Even after abandoning that fool's errand, they continued insisting that our two enemies were branches of the same vile tree.

The administration took every opportunity to invoke Sept. 11 as evidence of the need for war. The chief cause for worry about unconventional armaments was that even if Hussein didn't use them against us, he might give them to bin Laden, who certainly would.

"Using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country," Bush asserted.

The campaign of guilt by association succeeded beyond his fondest hopes. Last fall, a majority of Americans said Saddam Hussein was personally involved in Sept. 11, something even the administration didn't dare to claim.

But three months after victory was declared, the proof of a meaningful Iraq-Al Qaeda link is even more elusive than before. And, with the furor over weapons of mass destruction providing cover, the administration has quietly slunk away from its prewar charges.

When Dick Cheney came out of hiding the other day to make a speech defending the invasion, he conspicuously avoided accusing Iraq of working with Al Qaeda. Instead, the vice president was reduced to saying Hussein "cultivated ties to terrorist groups," about as weaselly a formulation as you could devise.

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"Were those links exaggerated to justify war?" Bush was asked at his Thursday news conference. "It's going to take time to analyze the documents of evidence," he replied, sounding like he wasn't holding his breath. "There is no doubt in my mind. . . that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the United States security and a threat to peace in the region." The president could have simply said "no," but for some mysterious reason, he didn't.

By now, U.S. troops have had plenty of time to examine Iraqi government files and interview captured officials to get incriminating evidence. But there has been complete silence on the subject. Given the administration's penchant for puffing up the tiniest clues, we can safely assume nothing has been found.

Meanwhile, new evidence has emerged debunking the myth. In June, The New York Times reported that two high officials of Al Qaeda now in U.S. custody have told interrogators--told them before the war, in fact--that the organization didn't work with Saddam Hussein. Several intelligence officials said no evidence of cooperation had been found in Iraq.

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A review panel appointed by CIA Director George Tenet to consider "lessons learned" from the war apparently takes the same view. "It was not at all clear there was any coordination or joint activities," a CIA source recently told The Washington Post.

The charges about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were at least arguable hypotheses, based on known facts about Hussein's history and inferences from his suspicious behavior.

Not so with the Al Qaeda-Iraq nexus. It always brought to mind the movie "Twins," with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito playing long-lost brothers. The idea that a secular Baathist dictator would turn over his most deadly weapons to religious zealots bent on creating Islamic theocracies throughout the Muslim world could be believed only by those who desperately wanted to believe.

Last fall, in a classified assessment of Iraq, the CIA said the only thing that might induce Saddam Hussein to give weapons to terrorists was an American invasion. But month after month, unconstrained by mere facts, the president trumpeted a danger that his own intelligence officials dismissed.

Maybe the claim was just premature. Today, American troops in Iraq are fighting stalwarts of the old regime as well as foreign insurgents that, according to our top general there, probably include Al Qaeda. Meanwhile, if the missing weapons exist, there is no telling who has them or how they may be used.

A deadly alliance between Hussein and bin Laden was once only a nightmare. Bush has done his best to make it come true.

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E-mail: [schapman@tribune.com](mailto:schapman@tribune.com)

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