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Front Page

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Powell's battle cry fails test of time

Six months after his case swung opinion toward attacking Iraq, his intelligence file looks thin.

By Charles J. Hanley
Associated Press

One evening in February, in a stifling Baghdad conference room, Iraqi bureaucrats, European envoys and foreign reporters crowded before television screens to hear the reading of an indictment.

Half a world away, in the hushed U.N. Security Council chamber in New York, U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell was unleashing an avalanche of allegations, speaking of "the gravity of the threat that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction pose to the world."



AP photo

Powell has said he still stands by his speech to the United Nations.

Powell marshaled what were described as intercepted Iraqi conversations, reconnaissance photos of sites, defectors' accounts, and other intelligence sources.

In the United States, his intelligence file swung opinion toward war.

But in Baghdad, when the satellite broadcast ended, Lt. Gen. Amer al-Saadi, science adviser to Saddam Hussein, appeared before the audience and dismissed the U.S. case as "stunts" aimed at swaying the uninformed.

How does Powell's Feb. 5 indictment look today? He has said several

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times since then that he stands by it, the State Department said last week. Here is an Associated Press review of major elements, based both on what was known in February and what has been learned since:

Satellite photos. Powell presented satellite photos of industrial buildings, bunkers and trucks, and suggested they showed Iraqis moving prohibited missiles and weapons to hide them. At two sites, he said trucks were "decontamination vehicles" associated with chemical weapons.

These and other sites had undergone 500 recent inspections. Chief U.N. inspector Hans Blix had said a day earlier that his experts found no contraband and no sign that items had been moved. Nothing has been reported found since.

Addressing the Security Council a week after Powell, Blix used one photo scenario as an example and said it could be showing routine as easily as illicit activity. Inspector Jorn Siljeholm told the Associated Press on March 19 that "decontamination vehicles" that U.N. teams were led to turned out to be water or fire trucks.

Audiotapes. Powell played three audiotapes of men speaking in Arabic of a "modified vehicle," "forbidden ammo," and "the expression 'nerve agents' " - said to be intercepts of Iraqi army officers discussing concealment.

Two of the brief, anonymous tapes, otherwise not authenticated, provided little context. It couldn't be known whether the vehicle, however "modified," was even banned. A listener could only speculate about the cryptic mention of nerve agents. The third tape seemed natural, an order to inspect scrap areas for "forbidden ammo." The Iraqis had just told inspectors they would search ammunition dumps for stray, empty chemical warheads left over from years earlier. They later turned over four.

Powell's rendering of that third conversation made it more incriminating by saying an officer ordered the area "cleared out." In fact, according to the official U.S. translation, the taped voice said only that the area be "inspected."

Anthrax. Powell noted that Iraq had said it produced 8,500 liters of the biological agent anthrax before 1991, but U.N. inspectors estimated it could have made up to 25,000 liters. None, he said, has been "verifiably accounted for."

No anthrax has been reported found. The Defense Intelligence Agency, in a recently disclosed confidential report, said last September that although it believed Iraq had biological weapons, it did not know their nature, amounts or condition. Three weeks before the invasion, an Iraqi report of scientific soil sampling supported its contention that it

destroyed its anthrax at a known site, the U.N. inspection agency said May 30.

Bioweapons trailers. Powell said defectors told of "biological weapons factories" on trucks and in train cars. He displayed artists' conceptions of such vehicles.

After the invasion, U.S. authorities said they found two such truck trailers, and the CIA said it concluded they were part of a bioweapons production line. But they bore no trace of biological agents, Iraqis said the equipment made hydrogen for weather balloons, and State Department intelligence rejected the CIA's conclusion.

The trailers have not been submitted for U.N. verification. No "bioweapons railcars" have been reported found.

"Four tons" of VX. Powell said Iraq produced four tons of the nerve agent VX. "A single drop of VX on the skin will kill in minutes. Four tons," he said.

Powell did not note that most of that four tons was destroyed in the 1990s under U.N. supervision. Before the invasion, the Iraqis made a "considerable effort" to prove they had destroyed the rest, doing chemical analysis of the ground where inspectors confirmed VX had been dumped, the U.N. inspection agency reported May 30.

Experts at Britain's International Institute of Strategic Studies said any pre-1991 VX most likely would have degraded anyway. No VX has been reported found since the invasion.

"Embedded" capability. "We know that Iraq has embedded key portions of its illicit chemical weapons infrastructure within its legitimate civilian industry," Powell said.

No "chemical weapons infrastructure" has been reported found. The newly disclosed Defense Intelligence Agency report of last September said there was "no reliable information" on "where Iraq has - or will - establish its chemical warfare agent-production facilities."

Chemical agent. "Our conservative estimate is that Iraq today has... between 100 and 500 tons of chemical-weapons agent," Powell said.

Powell gave no basis for the assertion, and no such agents have been reported found. An unclassified CIA report in October made a similar assertion without citing concrete evidence. The Defense Intelligence Agency reported confidentially last September that there "is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons."

Chemical warheads. Powell said 122-mm chemical warheads found by

U.N. inspectors in January might be the "tip of an iceberg."

The warheads were empty, which Powell did not note. Blix said June 16 that the dozen stray rocket warheads, never uncrated, were apparently "debris from the past," the 1980s. No others have been reported found.

Deployed weapons. "Saddam Hussein has chemical weapons... . And we have sources who tell us that he recently has authorized his field commanders to use them," Powell said.

No such weapons were used and none was reported found after the United States and allied military units overran Iraqi field commands and ammunition dumps.

Nuclear program. "We have no indication that Saddam Hussein has ever abandoned his nuclear weapons program," Powell said.

Chief U.N. nuclear inspector Mohamed ElBaradei told the council two weeks before the invasion, "We have to date found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear-weapons program in Iraq." On July 24, Foreign Minister Ana Palacio of Spain, a U.S. ally on Iraq, said there were "no evidences, no proof" of a nuclear-bomb program before the war. No such evidence has been reported found since the invasion.

Scuds, new missiles. Powell said "intelligence sources" indicated Iraq had a secret force of up to a few dozen prohibited Scud-type missiles. He said it also had a program to build 600-mile-range missiles, and had roofed a test facility to block the view of spy satellites.

No Scud-type missiles have been reported found. In the 1990s, U.N. inspectors had reported accounting for all but two. No program for long-range missiles has been uncovered. Powell did not note that U.N. teams were repeatedly inspecting missile facilities, including looking under that roof, and reporting no violations.



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