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**For Friday, January 31, 2003**

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## Not Our Finest Hour

President Bush's political dilemma — he wants to go to war with Iraq, while most of the world does not — is in large part a product of the administration's rhetoric, a mix of dogmatic statements and, on occasion, obvious falsehoods.

If the administration's line had been "We think Iraq might have weapons of mass destruction" or "We have reason to believe they have, etc.," it would have had some wiggle room. Instead, the administration insisted dogmatically that Iraq does have weapons of mass destruction. So, people are now asking: Where are they? Where's your proof? Where's the evidence? U.N. inspectors haven't found a shred of evidence.

Unfortunately for Bush's scheme, the answer is that there isn't any evidence. That does not mean such weapons don't exist; it simply means that the CIA and the British intelligence agencies don't know. What most U.S. officials have been relying on, in their contention about Iraq's weapons, are in fact statistical discrepancies.

In 1999, when the previous U.N. inspection outfit issued its final report, it said that so many tons of this or that were "missing." Now, for something to be missing, it must have previously existed and been known to have existed by the people who say it's missing. In fact, what was "missing" was the difference between U.N. estimates and guesses about the Iraqi inventory and what the Iraqis declared and U.N. inspectors found. But it is highly unlikely that the Iraqis could accurately have counted every shell fired in a desperate eight-year war with Iran. It is highly unlikely that any accurate inventory was possible of how many weapons were destroyed by the massive bombing in the first Gulf War.

So what all this argument is about is a difference in guesses

and estimates, not in actual physical weapons. Bush's rhetoric has painted him into a corner. He's trying to convince the world that Iraq, virtually toothless militarily and economically incapacitated, is an "imminent threat" to the whole world. It's hard to make the case when his own generals boast they can take Iraq in a three-week war.

As for Saddam developing some weapon and giving it to a terrorist, there are plenty of countries with such weapons, so terrorists have a lot more places to shop than Iraq. The former Soviet Union is awash still with biological and chemical weapons, even nuclear weapons, that by all accounts are poorly guarded.

I don't think Bush will be deterred by the facts. He will launch a war, because his purpose from Day One has been to establish a U.S. presence on top of the world's second-largest known oil reserves. You will notice there has been no talk about an "exit plan" for Iraq. That's because the United States doesn't plan to exit Iraq. Bush really is going to open the gates of hell by permanently involving us in this most dangerous area of the world.

Bush's ego seems to be growing much faster than the economy. Notice that he more and more uses the personal pronoun — "I" am sick and tired, he says, and "I" have no desire to watch the rerun of an old movie. This is an emperor talking, not the president of a republic. The relationship between two sovereign nations is not a matter of personalities. Bush's personal feelings and prejudices are not the basis on which U.S. government policy should be formulated.

Bush doesn't seem to take criticism very well, and he tends to resort to name-calling when world leaders disagree with him, as if mere disagreement were a mortal sin. Well, Saddam Hussein is no Hitler; George Bush is no Winston Churchill. And this war will definitely not be our finest hour.

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