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Rumsfeld and Iraq

Editorial

For the past year or so, a lot of Americans were concerned that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida terrorist network might have helped Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein develop weapons of mass destruction.

With the release of previously classified U.S. government documents, however, we now know that Saddam's accomplice was not Osama. It was Donald Rumsfeld. Along with other members of the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, the man who now serves as defense secretary for another Bush administration aided and abetted Iraq at the time when it was developing and using weapons of mass destruction.

A review by the Washington Post of thousands of declassified government documents and interviews with former policy-makers shows, according to the Post, "that U.S. intelligence and logistical support played a crucial role in shoring up Iraqi defenses" during the 1980s.

Indeed, the Post reports, "The administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items that had both military and civilian applications, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses, such as anthrax and bubonic plague."

Even after the State Department informed the Reagan administration in November 1983 that Iraqis were using chemical weapons on an "almost daily" basis in a war with Iran that was then taking place, the United States continued to provide diplomatic and material support to Iraq. Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East, Rumsfeld, traveled to Baghdad on Dec. 20, 1983, to tell Saddam that the United States was ready for a resumption of full diplomatic relations with Iraq.

In interviews this year, Rumsfeld claimed that he had "nothing to do" with helping Iraq fight Iran in the 1980s, and that he "cautioned" Saddam about the use of chemical weapons. But State Department records suggest otherwise.

According to recently declassified State Department documents, Saddam and other Iraqi leaders pronounced themselves to be "extremely pleased" with Rumsfeld's visit, which they said had "elevated U.S.-Iraqi relations to a new level."

Iraq was removed by the Reagan administration from the State Department terrorism list and, with a license from Reagan's Commerce Department, Saddam's government began doing business with U.S. firms - such as Union Carbide and Honeywell - that provided chemicals, missile components, and computers used for military purposes.

After Rumsfeld paved the way for normalized relations, the Commerce Department also approved the export of insecticides to Iraq. Iraq imported dozens of biological agents, including strains of anthrax that were identified by the Pentagon as a key component of the Iraqi biological warfare program.

Luckily, Iraq's capacity to threaten its own people or its neighbors has been dramatically reduced. Scott Ritter, who served as a chief weapons inspector in Iraq for the United Nations during the 1990s, says, "While we were never able to provide 100 percent certainty regarding the disposition of Iraq's proscribed weaponry, we did ascertain a 90-95 percent level of verified disarmament. This figure takes into account the destruction or dismantling of every major factory associated with prohibited weapons manufacture, all significant items of production equipment, and the majority of the weapons and agents produced by Iraq."

So why is Rumsfeld now spending billions of U.S. tax dollars to prepare for a war with Iraq? That's a question members of Congress should ask him. And, while they're at it, they should inquire as to why U.S. citizens should now trust the judgment of a man who played such an integral role in strengthening Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi military.

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