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Lies About Iraq's Weapons Are Past Expiration Date

By [Cliff Montgomery](#), [AlterNet](#)

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For weeks, we have been hearing breathless media reports of possible discoveries of chemical and biological weapons by U.S. and British troops in Iraq. Within hours or days, if one scours the back pages of the newspaper, he finds that it was merely another false alarm. But what is never mentioned is that these weapons, made five, ten or fifteen years ago, are almost certainly unusable, having long since passed their stable shelf-life, according to the Department of Defense's own documents based on a decade of international inspections, electronic surveillance and information supplied by spies and defectors.

There was never any question Iraq once had weapons of mass destruction programs. Nor was the world naïve enough to trust Saddam Hussein not to try and hide such weapons from UN inspectors. The rationale for the U.S. invasion, however, was that after a decade of sanctions, war, U.S. bombing runs, and UN inspections, Iraq still possessed a viable nuclear, chemical or biological threat that could be deployed beyond Iraq's borders or which was in danger of being supplied to terrorist groups.

Unfortunately, there is absolutely no basis for this argument, made so forcefully by Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations, when he claimed to possess clear evidence that huge stocks of everything from sarin gas to anthrax to sanction-violating missiles were stored in Iraq, ready for use. Never mind that the same Iraqi defector who told Powell about the stores of chem and bio weapons also said they had been completely destroyed, which Powell neglected to tell the United Nations. It doesn't matter, because those stores would almost certainly have become useless by now.

Strangely, the U.S. media have, with almost no exceptions, failed to mention that most bio/chemical agents have a rather limited shelf life. The few who do usually quote Scott Ritter, former UN Iraqi weapons inspector and controversial opponent of Dubya's drive to Baghdad.

According to Ritter, the chemical weapons which Iraq has been known to possess – nerve agents like sarin and tabun – have a shelf life of five years, VX just a bit longer. Saddam's major bio weapons are hardly any better;

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botulinum toxin is potent for about three years, and liquid anthrax about the same (under the right conditions). And he adds that since all chemical weapons were made in Iraq's only chemical weapons complex – the Muthanna State establishment, which was blown up during the first Gulf War in 1991 – and all biological weapons plants and research papers were clearly destroyed by 1998, any remaining bio/chemical weapons stores are now “harmless, useless goo.”

However, others have questioned Ritter's veracity. A former hawk keen on an Iraq invasion after the first Gulf War, as recently as 1998 he wrote in an article for the New Republic that Saddam may have successfully hidden everything from potent biological and chemical agents to his "entire nuclear weapons infrastructure" from UN inspectors.

But the truth of the matter is that Iraq's WMD may have even less of a shelf life than Ritter now claims – and the U.S. government knows it.

The U.S. Defense Department's “Militarily Critical Technologies List” (MCTL) is “a detailed compendium of technologies” that the department advocates as “critical to maintaining superior US military capabilities. It applies to all mission areas, especially counter-proliferation.” Written in 1998, it was recently re-published with updates for 2002.

So what is the MCTL's opinion of Iraq's chemical weapons program? In making its chemical nerve agents, “The Iraqis . . . produce[d] a . . . mixture which was inherently unstable,” says the report. “When the Iraqis produced chemical munitions they appeared to adhere to a ‘make and use’ regimen. Judging by the information Iraq gave the United Nations, later verified by on-site inspections, Iraq had poor product quality for their nerve agents. This low quality was likely due to a lack of purification. They had to get the agent to the front promptly or have it degrade in the munition.”

Furthermore, says this Defense Department report, “The chemical munitions found in Iraq after the [first] Gulf War contained badly deteriorated agents and a significant proportion were visibly leaking.” The shelf life of these poorly made agents were said to be a few weeks at best – hardly the stuff of vast chemical weapons stores.

There was some talk shortly before the first Gulf War that the Iraqis had been creating binary chemical weapons, in which the relatively non-toxic ingredients of the agent remain unmixed until just before the weapon is used; this allows the user to bypass any worry about shelf life or toxicity. But according to the MCTL, “The Iraqis had a small number of bastardized binary munitions in which some unfortunate individual was to pour one ingredient into the other from a Jerry can prior to use” – an action few soldiers were willing to perform.

Iraq did produce mustard gas that was somewhat more stable than the nerve agents. It may have a longer shelf life; perhaps potent forms of this agent could still be found. But one must wonder how worried we should be about Iraq's poorly-made agents, several years after their production.

And, as Ritter now insists, any chemical weapons facilities operating in

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recent years could, like their nuclear counterpart, have given off vented gases; and any new biological weapons programs would have to start again from scratch. Both activities would have been easily detected by Western intelligence, and no such evidence has been produced.

The argument for Iraq as a nuclear threat was built on even shakier ground, but this didn't keep hawks from exploiting non-evidence to frighten any reticent politicians. As Congress was preparing to vote on the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq, Tony Blair's government picked that moment to publicly release an apparent bombshell: British intelligence had obtained documents showing that between 1999 and 2001, Iraq had attempted to buy "significant quantities of uranium" from an unnamed African country "despite having no active civil nuclear power programme that could require it."

The New Yorker's Seymour Hersh writes that the very same day Blair unveiled this alleged "smoking gun," CIA Director George Tenet discussed the documents between Iraq and Niger, the African country in question, during a closed-session Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the Iraq WMD issue. Blair had handed the papers over to American intelligence, and at just the right time; Tenet's evidence was instrumental in getting Congress to back the war resolution.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was to verify the authenticity of these important documents for the UN Security Council, but only obtained them from the U.S. government after months of pleading – a strange delay, considering the Bush White House was so eager to prove Saddam's nuclear intentions to a skeptical world.

As we now know, Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the IAEA, told the UN Security Council that the documents regarding the uranium sales were clear fakes. One senior IAEA official told Hersh, "These documents are so bad that I cannot imagine they came from a serious intelligence agency."

When asked about the forgeries at a later House hearing, Secretary of State Colin Powell said only, "It came from other sources. It was provided in good faith to the inspectors." Several fingers pointed to Britain's MI6 as the perpetrators; Arabs pointed to Israel's Mossad.

Indeed, this administration often obscured the fact that the UN destroyed all of Iraq's nuclear weapons program infrastructure and facilities by the time inspectors left in 1998. Even if Hussein had somehow secretly imported the materials necessary to rebuild them within the past five years, even as UN sanctions, no-fly zones and vigorous spying by Western forces remained firmly in place, Iraq could not hide the gases, heat, and gamma radiation which centrifuge facilities emit – and which our intelligence capacities would

have identified by now.

A week after the IAEA's bombshell, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), formally asked for an FBI investigation into the matter, stating that, "the fabrication of these documents may be part of a larger deception aimed at manipulating

public opinion . . . regarding Iraq.”

At this point, with even White House insiders and media boosters admitting they no longer expect to find much, if any, in the way of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, different unconvincing storylines are being floated: The weapons all went to Syria, they were efficiently destroyed just hours before the U.S. invasion, etc. The truth, however, appears to be that Iraq was a paper tiger, with little or no ability to threaten the United States or Israel.

Cliff Montgomery is a freelance reporter based in North Carolina.

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