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We are Perplexed at the US Refusal to Permit the Return of UN Inspectors to Iraq

by the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

May 19, 2003

The Honorable Kofi Annan, Secretary General
The United Nations
(via fax)

Dear Mr. Secretary General,

We are former intelligence officials who have served many years at senior levels of the US intelligence community. As the role of intelligence on Iraq assumed critical importance over the past several months, we established Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) as a collegial body to monitor the unfolding of events. Our first analytic paper was a same-day commentary on Secretary of State Colin Powell's performance at the UN Security Council on February 5. Six papers on related subjects have now been issued, three of which have taken the form of Memoranda for the President. We have had no response from the White House.

We turn to you now because it has become inescapably clear that the issue of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq remains a most urgent one. We see no viable alternative to renewed UN involvement if this key issue is to be dealt with effectively. This letter is an appeal to you and Security Council members to pursue that objective with a renewed sense of urgency.

As we applied the rigorous evidentiary standards of professional intelligence analysis over recent months, we were inclined to place reports of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in the "unconfirmed" category. However, the assertions of President George W. Bush and his senior advisers were so categorical—and their assurances so insistent—that it seemed reasonable to assume that they were in possession of more compelling evidence than that which had been made public, and that prudence therefore dictated giving them the benefit of the doubt. In doing so we found ourselves in step with most Americans, including some who are highly experienced in these matters—former UN inspectors David Albright and

Jonathan Tucker, for example.

We find it deeply troubling, therefore, that two months after US and British forces invaded Iraq no weapons of mass destruction have been found. Statements by those close to the Bush administration have served to compound the confusion. On April 10, for example, Defense Policy Board member (and former Deputy US Representative to the UN), Kenneth Adelman, predicted that such weapons would be found “pretty soon, in the next five days.” He now concedes that the situation is “very strange,” and suggests that Saddam Hussein may have launched “a massive disinformation campaign to make the world think he was violating international norms, and he may not have been.”

US Gen. Tommy Franks has said the search for weapons of mass destruction may take a year. We assume that the international community will find this unacceptable.

It became painfully obvious in the weeks following the invasion of Iraq that the US did not know the location of any weapons of mass destruction. Nor, at the outset, was the US able to pinpoint and take into custody those Iraqis who do know. This has now changed. A former chief UN inspector for weapons in Iraq noted last week that the US now has in custody four top Iraqi officials who “know exactly what the facts are,” adding, “We need to know what they are saying.”

Intelligence analysts rarely confess to being perplexed. We confess. We are perplexed at the US refusal to permit the return of UN inspectors to Iraq.

From an intelligence point of view, Washington’s decision to bar the very people with the international mandate, the unique experience, and the credibility to undertake a serious search for weapons of mass destruction defies logic. UN inspectors know Iraq, know the weaponry in question, know the Iraqi scientists/engineers who have been involved, know how the necessary materials are procured and processed; in short, they have precisely the expertise required. Barton Gellman’s detailed account of the abortive two-month search by US forces in Iraq (“Odyssey of Frustration,” in yesterday’s Washington Post) should remove any lingering doubt that the US needs all the help it can get. We are particularly troubled by reports of looting and thefts at Iraqi nuclear facilities.

UN prerogatives regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq offer a way out of this mire. Security Council resolutions requiring that UN inspectors certify that Iraq is free of such weapons before economic sanctions can be lifted can continue to play an important role. Indeed, it would be folly to attempt to resume normal economic activity while weapons of mass destruction remain unaccounted for. Just last week the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers, warned that such weapons may still be in the hands of Iraqi “special units.”

The draft Security Council resolution being promoted by the US, however, makes no reference to the mandated UN role in weapons certification. Thus, at the Security Council deliberations this week, the stakes—for the UN, for the spread of weapons of mass destruction, for the international community as a whole, and for the Middle East in particular—could not be higher.

It is understandable that you and other senior UN officials are unwilling to take at face value the intelligence reporting offered by the US on Iraq, particularly since the detailed assertions by Secretary Powell on February 5, by and large, have not withstood close scrutiny. Particularly distressing to us as intelligence professionals has been the revelation that some of the most important evidence cited by Secretary Powell, and by the president himself, was based on forged documents.

You will agree, certainly, that this is a starkly different state of affairs than that which obtained during the Cuban missile crisis 41 years ago. Then war was averted through peaceful means partly because of widespread trust in the integrity of US intelligence collection and analysis. Trust is a fragile commodity. The success of diplomacy leans heavily on it. If trust is squandered, all suffer.

Today, as veteran intelligence officials, we cannot stand by in silence as US credibility is in danger of being frittered away. This will be the inevitable result if previous US government assertions based on "solid intelligence" concerning the existence of serviceable weapons of mass destruction in Iraq remain without credible substantiation.

Only the return of UN inspectors to Iraq can determine on behalf of the entire international community the credibility of the intelligence upon which the US/UK invasion of Iraq was based. Accordingly, we strongly encourage you to continue working toward that end. The restoration of an internationally sanctioned inspection and verification regime would be a giant step toward resolving lingering ambiguities. Equally important, it would ensure a stable foundation for the security of the next government in Iraq.

We have found it somewhat awkward to write you in this vein, but the urgency of the situation leaves us no alternative. We take no joy in sharing our confusion over our government's policies.

We appreciate your efforts and those of other member states to carry out the UN's mandate on Iraq and to assert UN prerogatives. The long-term credibility and role of the UN will be strengthened as you redouble your efforts to meet this formidable challenge.

We shall fax copies of this letter to the current members of the Security Council, including the US delegation.

Respectfully yours,

/s/

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Steering Group
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Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) is a coast-to-coast enterprise; mostly intelligence officers from analysis side of CIA. Ray McGovern (rmcgovern@skschool.org) worked as a CIA analyst for 27 years.

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