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Intentions Versus Reality in Iraq

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For months, President Bush has been playing down the findings of David Kay, the first American arms inspector, who debunked the claim that Saddam Hussein had possessed a hoard of weapons of mass destruction ready to use at any moment. He urged Americans to wait for the verdict of Mr. Kay's successor, Charles Duelfer. That verdict is now at hand, and it only strengthens the case against Mr. Bush's main reason for waging preventive war against Iraq. Iraq was not an imminent or urgent threat, and Mr. Duelfer's report undermines the idea that it was even a "gathering threat," as Mr. Bush now routinely describes it. It more likely was a diminished power, hit hard by two wars and a decade of sanctions, that may have still harbored ambitions to develop new weaponry if the opportunity arose.

Full details of what Mr. Duelfer and his Iraq Survey Group have found will not be known until their report, almost 1,500 pages long in draft form, is approved and an unclassified version is released. But the general thrust was made clear in an article in The Times yesterday by Douglas Jehl, based on descriptions by government officials who have read all or part of the report or been briefed on it.

The central finding is the continuing lack of evidence that Iraq had any large-scale programs to make illicit weapons. We have known that, of course, ever since Mr. Kay said so late last year. He said it again when he stepped down in January. But Mr. Duelfer cited the many obstacles impeding the search and expressed a determination to dig harder to be sure. Now he, too, has apparently come up mostly dry. He has found facilities that might be converted someday from civilian production to make biological or chemical weapons, but no conclusive evidence, officials say, that they were actually being used to make weapons.

The most specific evidence of an illicit program was apparently a network of clandestine laboratories operated by the Iraqi intelligence service. Those laboratories, first mentioned by Mr. Kay, have now been thoroughly inspected. They look small-bore indeed, capable of producing only small quantities of chemical or biological agents that might be useful in assassinations or perhaps in research far removed from weapons production. That is hardly justification for preventive war.

The one place where Mr. Bush's team will find some small comfort- and it's certain to seize on it - is on the issue of Iraq's intentions. Analysts have long assumed that Mr. Hussein wanted to build nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and would have done so when sanctions were lifted and international inspectors left his country. The American survey team seems to have concluded, based on documents and interviews with Iraqis that have not been made public, that this was not just a vague desire but rather a clear intent.

It's hard to see what difference those clear intentions could have made in a country whose industrial structure had been devastated, whose weapons programs had been eviscerated and whose leader may not have had a clear idea of what was going on in his own military forces - and a country that was also under the microscopes of United Nations inspectors.

But Mr. Bush will no doubt highlight this aspect of the report to justify the invasion. Republicans argue that the international consensus to keep Mr. Hussein boxed in with sanctions and inspections was eroding, making the invasion necessary to forestall the graver threat of a rearmed Iraq. But with no evidence emerging that Mr. Hussein posed an urgent threat, and with the situation


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