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Desperately Seeking WMDs

by Sheldon Richman

The Bush administration wants \$600 million to continue looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It's already spent \$300 million in search of the elusive weapons.

This is beginning to look like an obsession.

With chief weapons searcher David Kay now confirming to Congress that his massive team has found no weapons, this new request is slightly ridiculous. The Bush administration has gone from claiming that the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, definitely had weapons in known locations, to claiming that he had programs to develop weapons, to claiming that he had plans to develop programs to develop weapons, to claiming that he had ambitions to develop programs. The latest position is that Iraq had dual-use materials and facilities, and scientists capable of making weapons. By that standard, the Bush administration could start bombing lots of countries.

The story has also been leaked that Hussein was bluffing about having weapons. The problem with that is that he let the UN conduct inspections and he even invited the CIA to look around.

Is there any part of the administration's case for war that is not now in disarray? It's been reported lately that the CIA doubted the intelligence of MI6 (Britain's CIA) and MI6 doubted the intelligence of the CIA. When the Americans claimed that the Iraqis had aluminum tubes suitable for making nuclear weapons, British analysts chortled. When the British claimed that the Iraqis tried to buy uranium in Niger, American analysts guffawed.

On top of that, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee has concluded from government documents that the administration based its case against Iraq on dated and fragmentary evidence. Then there is the Defense Intelligence Agency's own assessment that the administration was essentially sold a bill of goods by Iraqi defectors, particularly those connected with Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi is a member of the U.S.-anointed governing council and a favorite of the Bush administration. In a leaked letter to a defense department official, it was noted that the intelligence report claimed that most of the information furnished by the defectors was worthless.

But the administration persists, as if ignoring all this damaging evidence will make it go away. There was something surreal about President Bush's standing before the UN General Assembly and reciting boilerplate about WMDs and Iraqi links to international terrorism, when, just a day or two earlier, officials, including the president himself, had distanced themselves from those claims.

Signs of desperation abound. We were told to wait for David Kay's interim reports. But then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said we shouldn't expect interim reports. That was after word had leaked out that Kay's classified report to Congress would contain no evidence of WMDs.

The administration's fans continue to repeat the canard that everyone knows that Hussein had WMDs and used them against the Kurds. This is Clintonesque in its manipulation of language. Yes, he had weapons in the late 1980s — thanks to American help. But weapons and facilities were destroyed, first in the 1991 Gulf War and then by UN inspectors from 1991 to 1998. The assertion that in recent years “everyone” agreed Iraq had WMDs is patently false. Broadcast journalist John Pilger has found statements made by Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell before September 11, 2001, pointing out that Hussein had not re-armed. For example, Powell said in Cairo in February 2001, “He [Saddam Hussein] has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors.”

The spin will go on. But one thing can't be spun: the weapons are nowhere to be found.

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