

'Even if Iraq managed to hide these weapons, what they are now hiding is harmless goo'

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UN weapons inspectors are poised to return to Iraq, but does Saddam Hussein have any weapons of mass destruction for them to find? The Bush administration insists he still has chemical and biological stockpiles and is well on the way to building a nuclear bomb. Scott Ritter, a former marine officer who spent seven years hunting and destroying Saddam's arsenal, is better placed than most to know the truth. Here, in an exclusive extract from his new book, he tells William Rivers Pitt why he believes the threat posed by the Iraqi dictator has been overstated.

Pitt: Does Iraq have weapons of mass destruction?

Ritter: It's not black-and-white, as some in the Bush administration make it appear. There's no doubt that Iraq hasn't fully complied with its disarmament obligations as set forth by the UN security council in its resolution. But on the other hand, since 1998 Iraq has been fundamentally disarmed: 90-95% of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability has been verifiably eliminated. This includes all of the factories used to produce chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and long-range ballistic missiles; the associated equipment of these factories; and the vast majority of the products coming out of these factories.

Iraq was supposed to turn everything over to the UN, which would supervise its destruction and removal. Iraq instead chose to destroy - unilaterally, without UN supervision - a great deal of this equipment. We were later able to verify this. But the problem is that this destruction took place without documentation, which means the question of verification gets messy very quickly.

P: Why did Iraq destroy the weapons instead of turning them over?

R: In many cases, the Iraqis were trying to conceal the weapons' existence. And the unilateral destruction could have been a ruse to maintain a cache of weapons of mass destruction by claiming they had been destroyed.

It is important to not give Iraq the benefit of the doubt. Iraq has lied to the international community. It has lied to inspectors. There are many people who believe Iraq still seeks to retain the capability to produce these weapons.

That said, we have no evidence that Iraq retains either the capability or material. In fact, a considerable amount of evidence suggests Iraq doesn't retain the necessary material.

I believe the primary problem at this point is one of accounting. Iraq has destroyed 90 to 95% of its weapons of mass destruction. Okay. We have to remember that this missing 5 to 10% doesn't necessarily constitute a threat. It doesn't even constitute a weapons programme. It constitutes bits and pieces of a weapons programme which, in its totality, doesn't amount to much, but which is still prohibited. Likewise, just because we can't account for it, doesn't mean Iraq retains it. There is no evidence that Iraq retains this material. That is the quandary we are in. We can't give Iraq a clean bill of health, therefore we can't close the book on its weapons of mass destruction. But simultaneously we can't reasonably talk about Iraqi non-compliance as representing a de facto retention of a prohibited capability worthy of war.

Nuclear weapons

R: When I left Iraq in 1998, when the UN inspection programme ended, the infrastructure and facilities had been 100% eliminated. There's no debate about that. All of their instruments and facilities had been destroyed. The weapons design facility had been destroyed. The production equipment had been hunted down and destroyed. And we had in place means to monitor - both from vehicles and from the air - the gamma rays that accompany attempts to enrich uranium or plutonium. We never found anything. We can say unequivocally that the industrial infrastructure needed by Iraq to produce nuclear weapons had been eliminated.

Even this, however, is not simple, because Iraq still had thousands of scientists who had been dedicated to this nuclear weaponisation effort. The scientists were organised in a very specific manner, with different sub-elements focused on different technologies of interest. Even though the physical infrastructure had been eliminated, the Iraqis chose to retain the organisational structure of the scientists. This means that Iraq has thousands of nuclear scientists - along with their knowledge and expertise - still organised in the same manner as when Iraq had a nuclear weapons programme and its infrastructure. Those scientists are today involved in legitimate tasks. These jobs aren't illegal per se, but they do allow these scientists to work in fields similar to those in which they had work where they were, in fact, carrying out a nuclear weapons programme.

There is concern, then, that the Iraqis might intend in the long run to re-establish or reconstitute a nuclear weapons programme. But this concern must be tempered by reality. That is not something that could happen overnight. For Iraq to reacquire nuclear weapons capability, they would have to build enrichment and weaponisation capabilities that would cost tens of billions of dollars. Nuclear weapons cannot be created in a basement or cave. They require modern industrial infrastructures that in turn require massive amounts of electricity and highly controlled technologies not readily available on the open market.

P: Like neutron reflectors, tampers...

R: Iraq could design and build these itself. I'm talking more about flash cameras and the centrifuges needed to enrich uranium. There are also specific chemicals required. None of this can be done on the cheap. It's very expensive, and readily detectable.

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THE vice-president has been saying that Iraq might be two years away from building a nuclear bomb. Unless he knows something we don't, that's nonsense. And it doesn't appear that he does, because whenever you press the vice-president or other Bush administration officials on these claims, they fall back on testimony by Richard Butler, my former boss, an Australian diplomat, and Khidir Hamza, an Iraqi defector who claims to be Saddam's bomb-maker. And of course, that's not good enough, especially when we have the UN record of Iraqi disarmament from 1991 to 1998. That record is without dispute. It is well documented. We eliminated the nuclear programme, and for Iraq to have reconstituted it would require undertaking activities eminently detectable by intelligence services.

P: Are you saying that Iraq could not hide, for example, gas centrifuge facilities, because of the energy the facilities would require and the heat they would emit?

R: It is not just heat. Centrifuge facilities emit gamma radiation, as well as many other frequencies. It is detectable. Iraq could not get around this.

Chemical weapons

R: Iraq manufactured three nerve agents: sarin, tabun, and VX. Some people who want war with Iraq describe 20,000 munitions filled with sarin and tabun nerve agents that could be used against Americans. The facts, however, don't support this. Sarin and tabun have a shelf-life of five years. Even if Iraq had somehow managed to hide this vast number of weapons from inspectors, what they are now storing is nothing more than useless, harmless goo.

Chemical weapons were produced in the Muthanna state establishment: a massive chemical weapons factory. It was bombed during the Gulf war, and then weapons inspectors came and completed the task of eliminating the facility. That means Iraq lost its sarin and tabun manufacturing base.

We destroyed thousands of tons of chemical agent. It is not as though we said, "Oh we destroyed a factory, now we are going to wait for everything else to expire." We had an incineration plant operating full-time for years, burning tons of the stuff every day. We went out and blew up bombs, missiles and warheads filled with this agent. We emptied Scud missile warheads filled with this agent. We hunted down this stuff and destroyed it.

P: Couldn't the Iraqis have hidden some?

R: That's a very real possibility. The problem is that whatever they diverted would have had to have been produced in the Muthanna state establishment, which means that once we blew it up, the Iraqis no longer had the ability to produce new agent, and in five years the sarin and tabun would have degraded and become useless sludge. All this talk about Iraq having chemical weapons is no longer valid.

P: Isn't VX gas a greater concern?

R: VX is different, for a couple of reasons. First, unlike sarin and tabun, which the Iraqis admitted to, for the longest time the Iraqis denied they had a programme to manufacture

VX. Only through the hard work of inspectors were we able to uncover the existence of the programme. We knew the Iraqis wanted to build a full-scale VX nerve agent plant, and we had information that they had actually acquired equipment to do this. We hunted and hunted, and finally, in 1996, were able to track down 200 crates of glass-lined production equipment Iraq had procured specifically for a VX nerve agent factory. They had been hiding it from the inspectors. We destroyed it. With that, Iraq lost its ability to produce VX.

All of this highlights the complexity of these issues. We clearly still have an unresolved VX issue in Iraq. But when you step away from the emotion of the lie and look at the evidence, you see a destroyed research and development plant, destroyed precursors, destroyed agent, destroyed weapons and a destroyed factory.

That is pretty darned good. Even if Iraq had held on to stabilised VX agent, it is likely it would have degraded by today. Real questions exist as to whether Iraq perfected the stabilisation process. Even a minor deviation in the formula creates proteins that destroy the VX within months. The real question is: is there a VX nerve agent factory in Iraq today? Not on your life.

P: Could those facilities have been rebuilt?

R: No weapons inspection team has set foot in Iraq since 1998. I think Iraq was technically capable of restarting its weapons manufacturing capabilities within six months of our departure. That leaves three-and-a-half years for Iraq to have manufactured and weaponised all the horrors the Bush administration claims as motivations for the attack. The important phrase here, however, is "technically capable". If no one were watching, Iraq could do this. But just as with the nuclear weapons programme, they would have to start from scratch, having been deprived of all equipment, facilities and research. They would have to procure the complicated tools and technology required through front companies. This would be detected. The manufacture of chemical weapons emits vented gases that would have been detected by now if they existed. We have been watching, via satellite and other means, and have seen none of this. If Iraq was producing weapons today, we would have definitive proof, plain and simple.

Biological weapons

R: If you listen to Richard Butler, biological weapons are a "black hole" about which we know nothing. But a review of the record reveals we actually know quite a bit. We monitored more biological facilities than any other category, inspecting more than 1,000 sites and repeatedly monitoring several hundred. We found the same problem with biological weapons programmes that we found with VX: it took Iraq four years even to admit to having such a programme. They denied it from 1991 to 1995, finally admitting it that summer.

P: What did they try to make?

R: They didn't just try. They actually made it, primarily anthrax in liquid bulk agent form. They also produced a significant quantity of liquid botulinum toxin. They were able to weaponise both of these, put them in warheads and bombs. They lied about this capability

for some time. When they finally admitted it in 1995, we got to work on destroying the factories and equipment that produced it.

Contrary to popular mythology, there is no evidence that Iraq worked on smallpox, Ebola, or any other horrific nightmare weapons the media likes to talk about today.

The Al Hakum factory provides a case study of the difficulties we faced, and how we dealt with them. We had known of this plant since 1991, and had inspectors there who were very suspicious. Iraq declared it to be a single-cell protein manufacturing plant used to produce animal feed. That was ridiculous. No one produces animal feed that way. It would be the most expensive animal feed in the world. The place had high-quality fermentation and other processing units. We knew it was a weapons plant. The Iraqis denied it. Finally they admitted it, and we blew up the plant.

Iraq was able to produce liquid bulk anthrax. That is without dispute. Liquid bulk anthrax, even under ideal storage conditions, germinates in three years, becoming useless. So, even if Iraq lied to us and held on to anthrax - and there's no evidence to substantiate this - it is pure theoretical speculation on the part of certain inspectors. Iraq has no biological weapons today, because both the anthrax and botulinum toxin are useless. For Iraq to have biological weapons today, they would have to reconstitute a biological manufacturing base. And again, biological research and development was one of the things most heavily inspected. We blanketed Iraq - every research and development facility, every university, every school, every hospital, every beer factory: anything with a potential fermentation capability was inspected - and we never found any evidence of ongoing research and development or retention.

Delivery systems

R: Iraq is prohibited from having ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometres, but permitted to have missile systems with a lesser range. Iraq was working on two designs. One was a solid rocket motor design, and the other, the Al Samoud, uses liquid propulsion. We monitored this project very closely, and found that the Iraqis have severe limitations on what they can produce within the country. Prior to the Gulf war, Iraq acquired a lot of technology, as well as parts, from Germany, which has a record of precision machinery. After the war, the Iraqis tried to replicate that, but with very little success. We watched them assemble their rockets, and because many of the members of our team were rocket scientists, we would notice their mistakes. They had to show us their designs and, of course, we didn't comment on them. But it quickly became apparent that the programme was run by intelligent, energetic amateurs who were just not getting it right. They would manufacture rockets that would spin and cartwheel, that would go north instead of south, that would blow up. Eventually they would figure it out. But as of 1998 they were, according to optimistic estimates, five years away, even if sanctions were lifted and Iraq gained access to necessary technologies.

I often hear people talk about Iraq having multi-staging rockets. But Iraq doesn't have multi-staging capability. They tried that once in 1989, when the country had full access to this technology, and the rocket blew up in midair. I hear people talk about clustering, but

Iraq tried that, too, and it didn't work. Iraq doesn't have the capability to do long-range ballistic missiles. There's a lot of testing that has to take place, and this testing is all carried out outdoors. They can't avoid detection.

Of course, now the inspectors have left Iraq, we don't know what happens inside factories. But that doesn't really matter, since you have to bring rockets out and, fire them on test stands. This is detectable. No one has detected any evidence of Iraq doing this. Iraq continues to declare its missile tests, normally around eight to 12 per year. Our radar detects the tests, we know what the characteristics are, and we know there's nothing to be worried about.

Ritter - the man

Scott Ritter was once the all-American hero. Now, at the age of 42, he is regarded by Washington as an apologist for Iraq, branded in the New York Times as "the most famous renegade marine officer since Oliver North".

A Republican-voting major in the Marine corps, he earned a reputation as an expert intelligence officer and arms inspector in the late 80s, performing arms control inspections in the former Soviet Union. During the Gulf war he was assigned to an intelligence unit of General Norman Schwarzkopf's staff responsible for tracking Scud missiles.

Leaving in 1991, he was then recruited by Unscm, the UN special commission authorised to find and destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Seven years later, after frustrating attempts to get behind Saddam's lies and concealments, he resigned accusing the American government of trying to engineer an unnecessary confrontation with Iraq and using Unscm to spy on Iraq. But his conversion to full-time critic of American policy was not instantaneous. Just after his resignation he said: "I think the danger right now is that without effective inspections, without effective monitoring, Iraq can, in a very short period of time, reconstitute chemical biological weapons, long-range ballistic missiles to deliver these weapons, and even certain aspects of their nuclear weaponisation programme." Only 100% disarmament would do, he insisted.

A year later, however, he was saying: "As of December 1998 we had accounted for 90 to 95% of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability. We destroyed all the factories, all of the means of production. We couldn't account for some of the weaponry, but chemical weapons have a shelf-life of five years. Biological weapons have a shelf-life of three. To have weapons today, they would have had to rebuild the factories and start producing these weapons since December 1998."

In an interview this week, days after appealing to the Iraqi national assembly to readmit the inspectors, he appears to have hardened his position again. "The problem is the last time Iraq chose to cheat and retreat, the UN did nothing about it. The US was not a fair and honest broker in this game. We were pushing a policy of regime removal that took precedent over disarmament.

"So this time around, let us not play that game. Let us focus on weapons of mass destruction, let us focus on doing what the international community has said and, if Iraq chooses to play cat and mouse and cheat, we don't play that game. We back off and the

security council takes decisive action."

David Pallister

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