

The Failure to Find Iraqi Weapons

This page did not support the war in Iraq, but it never quarreled with one of its basic premises. Like President Bush, we believed that Saddam Hussein was hiding potentially large quantities of chemical and biological weapons and aggressively pursuing nuclear arms. Like the president, we thought those weapons posed a grave danger to the United States and the rest of the world. Now it appears that premise was wrong. We cannot in hindsight blame the administration for its original conclusions. They were based on the best intelligence available, which had led the Clinton administration before it and the governments of allied nations to reach the same conclusion. But even the best intelligence can turn out to be mistaken, and the likelihood that this was the case in Iraq shows why pre-emptive war, the Bush administration's strategy since 9/11, is so ill conceived as a foundation for security policy. If intelligence and risk assessment are sketchy — and when are they not? — using them as the basis for pre-emptive war poses enormous dangers.

A draft of an interim report by David Kay, the American leading the hunt for banned arms in Iraq, says the team has not found any such weapons after nearly four months of intensively searching and interviewing top Iraqi scientists. There is some evidence of chemicals and equipment that could have been put to illicit use. But, to the chagrin of Mr. Bush's top lieutenants, there is nothing more.

It remains remotely possible, of course, that something will be found. But Mr. Kay's draft suggests that the weapons are simply not there. Why Mr. Hussein did not prove that when the United Nations demanded an explanation remains a puzzle. His failure to come clean strengthened the conviction that he had a great deal to hide. His history as a vicious tyrant who had used chemical weapons in war and against his own people lent credence to the fear that he could not be trusted with whatever he was holding and would pose a significant threat.

Before the war, we objected not to the stated goal of disarming Iraq but to the fact that the United States was waging war essentially alone, in defiance of many important allies. We favored using international inspectors to keep Iraq's destructive programs in check while diplomats forged a United Nations effort to force Mr. Hussein to yield his weapons.

The policy of pre-emption that Mr. Bush pursued instead junked an approach that had served this country and the world well for half a century. That policy, simply stated, was that the United States would respond quickly to aggression but would not be the first to attack.

The world changed on Sept. 11, 2001. Terrorist groups like Al Qaeda are dedicated to inflicting maximum harm on this country. Since such groups rely on suicide bombers and are therefore immune to threats of retaliation, the United States is right to attack a terrorist group first in some circumstances. It was certainly justified in its war in Afghanistan, which had become little more than a government-sponsored training camp for Al Qaeda. It is quite another thing, however, to launch a pre-emptive military campaign against a nation that the United States suspects poses a threat.

Americans and others in the world are glad that Mr. Hussein has been removed from power. If Iraq can be turned into a freer and happier country in coming years, it could become a focal point for the evolution of a more peaceful and democratic Middle East. But it was the fear of weapons of mass destruction placed in the hands of enemy terrorists that made doing something about Iraq seem urgent. If it had seemed unlikely that Mr. Hussein had them, we doubt that Congress or the American people would have endorsed the war.

This is clearly an uncomfortable question for the Bush administration. Yesterday, Secretary of State Colin Powell met with Times editors. Asked whether Americans would have supported this war if weapons of mass destruction had not been at issue, Mr. Powell said the question was too hypothetical to answer. Asked if he, personally, would have supported it, he smiled, thrust his hand out and said, "It was good to meet you."