



The White House may have had a reason to go to war with Iraq that had nothing to do with whether or not Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. (Larry Downing/Reuters)

Reason for War?

White House Officials Say Privately the Sept. 11 Attacks Changed Everything

By John Cochran

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— To build its case for war with Iraq, the Bush administration argued that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, but some officials now privately acknowledge the White House had another reason for war — a global show of American power and democracy.



Officials inside government and advisers outside told ABCNEWS the administration emphasized the danger of Saddam's weapons to gain the legal justification for war from the United Nations and to stress the danger at home to Americans.

"We were not lying," said one official. "But it was just a matter of emphasis."

Officials now say they may not find hundreds of tons of mustard and nerve agents and maybe not thousands of liters of anthrax and other toxins. But U.S. forces will find some, they say. On Thursday, President Bush raised the possibility for the first time that any such Iraqi weapons were destroyed before or during the war.

If weapons of mass destruction were not the primary reason for war, what was? Here's the answer officials and advisers gave ABCNEWS.

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks changed everything, including the Bush administration's thinking about the Middle East — and not just Saddam Hussein.

Senior officials decided that unless action was taken, the Middle East would continue to be a breeding ground for terrorists. Officials feared that young Arabs, angry about their lives and without hope, would always looking for someone to hate — and that someone would always be Israel and the United States.

Europeans thought the solution was to get a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. But American officials felt a Middle East peace agreement would only be part of the solution.

The Bush administration felt that a new start was needed in the Middle East and that Iraq was the place to show that it is democracy — not terrorism — that offers hope.

Sending a Message

Beyond that, the Bush administration decided it must flex muscle to show it would fight terrorism, not just here at home and not just in Afghanistan against the Taliban, but in the Middle East, where it was thriving.

Officials deny that Bush was captured by the aggressive views of neo-conservatives. But Bush did agree with some of their thinking.

"We made it very public that we thought that one consequence the president should draw from 9/11 is that it was unacceptable to sit back and let either terrorist groups or dictators developing weapons of mass destruction strike first at us," conservative commentator Bill Kristol said on ABCNEWS' Nightline in March.

The Bush administration wanted to make a statement about its determination to fight terrorism. And officials acknowledge that Saddam had all the requirements to make him, from their standpoint, the perfect target.

Other countries have such weapons, yet the United States did not go to war with them. And though Saddam oppressed and tortured his own people, other tyrants have done the same without incurring U.S. military action. Finally, Saddam had ties to terrorists — but so have several countries that the United States did not fight.

But Saddam was guilty of all these things and he met another requirement as well — a prime location, in the heart of the Middle East, between Syria and Iran, two countries the United States wanted to send a message to.

That message: If you collaborate with terrorists, you do so at your own peril.

Officials said that even if Saddam had backed down and avoided war by admitting to having weapons of mass destruction, the world would have received the same message; Don't mess with the United States.

Former CIA Director James Woolsey said on *Nightline* this week that although he believed Saddam was a serious threat and had dangerous weapons, going to war to prove a point was wrong.

"I don't think you should go to war to set examples or send messages," Woolsey said. [Get the transcript of the Woolsey interview.](#)

Sept. 11, 2001

But what if Sept. 11 had never happened? Would the United States have gone to war with Iraq? Administration officials and others say no, at least not now.

The Bush administration could probably have lived with the threat of Saddam and might have gone after him eventually if, for example, the Iraqi leader had become more aggressive in pursuing a nuclear program or in sponsoring terrorism.

But again, Sept. 11 changed all that.

Listen closely, officials said, to what Bush was really saying to the American people before the war.

"I hope they understand the lesson of September the 11th," Bush said on March 6. "The lesson is, is that we're vulnerable to attack, wherever it may occur, and we must take threats which gather overseas very seriously. We don't have to deal with them all militarily, but we have to deal with them."

Has the war done what the officials ABCNEWS talked to wanted?

It seems to have improved the behavior of the Syrians and maybe the Iranians, they said, although there is still concern that Iran will meddle in Iraq. And it may have even put some fear in the North Koreans, they added. Plus, they said it probably has helped the Middle East peace process.

But will Iraq be the model that can persuade young Arabs there is more to life than hatred? Too early to know, they said.

Their point: We are deeply worried about the Shiites. It will be a tragedy if radical, anti-American elements gain control in post-Saddam Iraq.

One official said that in the end, history and the American people will judge the United States not by whether U.S. officials find canisters of poison gas or vials of some biological agent.

History will judge the United States, the official said, by whether this war marked the beginning of the end for the terrorists who hate America. ■

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