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**TIME**

N A T I O N

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## Weapons of Mass Disappearance

The war in Iraq was based largely on intelligence about banned arms that still haven't been found. Was America's spy craft wrong — or manipulated?

By MICHAEL DUFFY

How do you take your country to war when it doesn't really want to go? You could subcontract with another nation, fight on the sly and hope no one notices. But if you need a lot of troops to prevail and you would like to remind everyone in the neighborhood who's boss anyway, then what you need most is a good reason — something to stir up the folks back home.

As the U.S. prepared to go to war in Iraq last winter, the most compelling reason advanced by George W. Bush to justify a new kind of pre-emptive war was that Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear, chemical and biological arms — weapons of mass destruction (wmd). "There's no doubt in my mind but that they currently have chemical and biological weapons," said Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in January. "We believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons," said Vice President Dick Cheney in March. That Iraq might have WMD was never the only reason the Bush Administration wanted to topple Saddam. But it was the big reason, the *casus belli*, the public rationale peddled over and over to persuade a skeptical nation, suspicious allies and a hostile United Nations to get behind the controversial invasion. And while that sales pitch fell flat overseas, it worked better than expected at home: by late March, 77% of the public felt that invading U.S. troops would find WMD.

But eight weeks after the war's end, most of that confident intelligence has yet to pan out, and a growing number of experts think it never will. Current and former U.S. officials have begun to question whether the weapons will ever be found in anything like the quantities the U.S. suggested before the war — if found at all — and whether the U.S. gamed the intelligence to justify the invasion. For now, WMD seems to stand for weapons of mass disappearance. Smarting from the accusations that they had cooked the books, top U.S. officials fanned out late last week to say the hunt would go on and the weapons would eventually be found. CIA officials told *TIME* that they would produce a round of fresh evidence for increasingly wary lawmakers as early as next week. After dispatching dozens of G.I. patrols to some 300 suspected WMD sites in Iraq over the past two months, only to come up empty-handed, the Pentagon announced last week that it will shift from hunting for banned weapons to hunting for documents and people who might be able to say where banned weapons are — or were. But it is clear that the U.S. is running out of good leads. "We've been to virtually every ammunition supply point between the Kuwaiti border and Baghdad," Lieut. General James T. Conway, commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, said last week. "But they're simply not there."

Wherever they are, the missing weapons are beginning to cause trouble elsewhere. Overseas, British Prime Minister Tony Blair is under fire from critics for overstating the case for war. The accusations came at an awkward moment for Bush, as he began a seven-day diplomatic trip to smooth over relations in Europe and seek peace in the Middle East. Moreover, mistrust about the Iraqi intelligence was growing just as the Administration began to make a similar case against Iran. In order to defend the credibility of his agency, CIA Director George Tenet took the unusual step of issuing a statement last Friday dismissing suggestions that the CIA politicized its intelligence. "Our role is to call it like we see it, to tell policymakers what we know, what we don't know, what we think and what we base it on. That's the code we live by." Asked to translate, an intelligence official explained that if there was a breakdown on the Bush team, it wasn't at the agency. "There's one issue in terms of collecting and analyzing intelligence," he said. "Another issue is what policymakers do with that information. That's their prerogative."

One of the oldest secrets of the secret world is that intelligence work involves as much art as science. While it is difficult, dangerous and expensive to snoop on our enemies with satellite cameras, hidden bugs and old-fashioned dead drops, knowing what all that information really means is the true skill of intelligence work. The information is often so disparate and scattershot that it amounts to little without interpretation.

And interpretation has long been the speciality of the hard-liners who fill so many key foreign-policy posts in the Bush Administration. Unlike his father, who ran the CIA briefly in the

mid-'70s and prided himself on revitalizing an embattled spy corps, George W. Bush dotted his foreign-policy team with people who have waged a private war with the CIA for years, men who are disdainful of the way the agency gathers secrets — and what it makes of them. Working mainly out of the Pentagon, the hard-liners have long believed that America's spy agency was a complacent captive of the two parties' internationalist wings, too wary and risk averse, too reliant on gadgets and too slow to see enemies poised to strike.

Two Bush aides in particular, Rumsfeld and his Pentagon deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, have a long record of questioning the assumptions, methods and conclusions of the CIA. Wolfowitz was a member of the famous B Team, created in the mid-'70s by the CIA, then headed by Bush's father, to double-check the work of the CIA's line analysts about the military strength of the Soviet Union. Filled with many hard-liners who now work in the younger Bush's Administration, the B Team was spoiling back then for bigger defense budgets and a more aggressive foreign policy. It found many of the CIA's conclusions about the Soviet Union soft-headed and naive. Its final report helped launch the Reagan-era defense buildup of the 1980s. Rumsfeld also chaired a bipartisan commission in 1998 set up by Congress to assess the pace of rogue states' missile efforts, which concluded that the CIA wouldn't be able to gather intelligence quickly enough to meet the unseen threats posed by Iran, Iraq and North Korea. That dire prediction — reinforced by a North Korean missile launch a month later — turbocharged the nation's push to build a \$100 billion missile shield, now under construction.

The hard-liners' staunch beliefs were powerfully bolstered after 9/11; they quickly concluded that the CIA failed to anticipate the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. And they were not reassured by the CIA's performance after 9/11 either. By last fall, Rumsfeld had grown so impatient with the CIA's equivocal explanations of the Iraq problem that he set up his own mini-CIA at the Pentagon called the Office of Special Plans. It was hatched and designed, as a former U.S. official puts it, to get "the intelligence he wanted."

Several current and former military officers who saw all the relevant data through this spring charge that the Pentagon took the raw data from the CIA and consistently overinterpreted the threat posed by Iraq's stockpiles. "There was a predisposition in this Administration to assume the worst about Saddam," a senior military officer told Time. This official, recently retired, was deeply involved in planning the war with Iraq but left the service after concluding that the U.S. was going to war based on bum intelligence. "They were inclined to see and interpret evidence a particular way to support a very deeply held conviction," the officer says. "I just think they felt there needed to be some sort of rallying point for the American people. I think they said it sincerely, but I also think that at the end of the day, we'll find out their interpretations of the intelligence were wrong." Another official, an Army intelligence officer, singled out Rumsfeld for massaging the facts. "Rumsfeld was deeply, almost pathologically distorting the intelligence," says the officer. Rumsfeld told a radio audience last week that the "war was not waged under any false pretense." And an aide flat-out rejects the idea that intelligence was hyped to support the invasion. "We'd disagree very strongly with that," said Victoria Clarke, the chief Pentagon spokeswoman.

Over the past two weeks, TIME has interviewed several dozen current and former intelligence officials and experts at the Pentagon and CIA and on Capitol Hill to try to understand how the public version of the intelligence got so far ahead of the evidence. The reporting suggests that from the start the process was more deductive than empirical. According to these officials, three factors were at work:

- **TREATING THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO AS FACT.** One official said the process often went this way: the agency would send to the Pentagon three ways to interpret one piece of information, such as a new satellite photo or telephone intercept, and the Pentagon would always opt for the most dire explanation. This inclination accounts in part for the controversial conclusion by the Defense Department that Iraq's aluminum tubes were for the production of uranium for nuclear weapons. Seasoned experts at the Energy Department's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California disagreed, but their view — the most expert government interpretation available — was either ignored or overruled. "They made a decision to turn a blind eye to other explanations," says David Albright, a former International Atomic Energy Agency arms inspector who now heads the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington. "If the Pentagon said the worst-case assessment is that within a short period of time Iraq could build nuclear weapons, we'd agree with that. But we have trouble when they start portraying the worst-case scenario as fact. And I think that's the case here."

- **GLOSSING OVER AMBIGUITIES.** Before the war, one of the little-stated but central realities of U.S. intelligence gathering in Iraq was that it was never great in the first place. It often depended on defectors with personal agendas and tall tales that some U.S. officials were eager to believe. Saddam went to extreme lengths to hide and deceive, and while those habits can help make an argument for invasion, they made for poor intelligence on all kinds of weapons programs. That was one reason it took the U.S. so long to unveil its data in the first place: it was fuzzy and subjective. A civilian intelligence official who continues to see all the intelligence said, "It was always, on its face, ambiguous. There were lots of indications of WMD and some signs of deceptions and efforts to hide. But when you probed and asked tough questions, the body language and attitude of the analysts was always, 'We're not sure. We think, but we're not sure.' Now if you want to conclude that Saddam is a big problem, then you don't necessarily probe and ask all the tough questions."

● **FUDGING MISTAKES.** One of the most dramatic charges came from Bush in his State of the Union speech this year when he said Saddam had sought to buy uranium from an African nation, later identified as Niger. It wasn't long before the claim, lifted from a British intelligence report, was revealed to be bogus. The documents on which the charge was based were discovered to be forged and faked. But rather than withdraw the charge, the White House claimed instead that Bush omitted any reference to Niger because reports that Saddam had sought uranium had come, an official explained, "from more than one country and more than one source." The other nation, if it exists, has yet to be named. But the mystery has led the Senate Intelligence Committee to ask the CIA for an investigation.

But if the Bush team overreached, one nagging question is, Why? A defense expert who has spent 20 years watching Republicans argue about foreign policy from the inside believes the hard-liners' agenda isn't about Iraq or even oil. It's simply that the most zealous defenders of America's role in the world are congenitally disposed to overreact to every threat — which leads them to read too much into the intelligence. "They came in with a world view, and they looked for things to fit into it," says Lawrence Korb, who served in the Reagan Pentagon and now works at the Council on Foreign Relations. "If you hadn't had 9/11, they would be doing the same things to China."

The U.S. does appear to have one solid argument on its side: those mysterious mobile biowarfare labs. The cia shared its findings with reporters last week about two tractor-trailer trucks seized in Iraq that it claims were designed for the production of biological weapons. The agency published a nine-page white paper on its website about the mobile labs — allegations that are very similar to charges made by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his U.N. speech on Feb. 5. President Bush pointed to the trucks last week as the best evidence yet that the intelligence wasn't overheated. And en route to Europe, Powell ventured to the back of Air Force One and explained to reporters a bit more about how the U.S. learned of the vans' purpose. "We didn't just make them up one night. Those were eyewitness accounts of people who had worked in the program and knew it was going on, multiple accounts." Powell sarcastically dismissed alternative explanations: "Oh, it was a hydrogen-making thing for balloons." No. There's no question in my mind what it was designed for." But even Powell acknowledged that there were no signs of pathogens in the trucks. Top U.S. officials believe the missing weapons are so well hidden that it will take months or perhaps years to find them — an explanation that has the added virtue of giving them a lot more time. G.I.s have searched only about a third of the 900 suspected sites across the Iraqi countryside. Even the Administration's positions are in flux. Saddam, according to Rumsfeld, could have destroyed the weapons right before the war or even moved them out of the country. "I don't know the answer," Rumsfeld said last week, "and I suspect we'll find out a lot more information as we go along and keep interrogating people."

After a war, the victors always write the history, and that means they can rewrite the war's causes. Even without wmd, the mass graves discovered in Iraq prove that Saddam was a despot worthy of toppling. For many — including some in the Administration — that did not seem a sufficient reason to launch the last war. But until the missing weapons are found, it could be a long time before an American President will be able to rely on his interpretation of intelligence data to launch another war.