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Pentagon cools on finding weapons

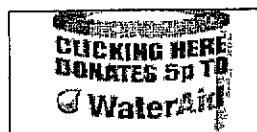
Two 'clean' trucks is only evidence that Saddam was hiding arsenal

Julian Borger in Washington
Thursday May 29, 2003
[The Guardian](#)

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The Bush administration has conceded for the first time that Iraq's alleged arsenal of banned weapons, the principal justification for the US-led invasion, might never be found, after seven weeks of intensive searches and interrogations have failed to produce any substantial evidence

A report by the CIA and Defence Intelligence Agency yesterday concluded that two trucks found in northern Iraq with laboratory equipment represented the "strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological warfare programme", but it conceded that no traces of biological agents had been found, nor was there any indication that the trucks had been used for that purpose

The US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, had predicted that the questioning of Iraqi scientists would lead to the discovery of biological and chemical weapons, but he has now raised the possibility that that might not happen

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"It's hard to find things in a country that's determined not to have you find them," Mr Rumsfeld told a meeting of foreign affairs experts on Tuesday. "It's also possible that they decided to destroy them prior to the conflict "

The abrupt scaling down of expectations over the prospect of finding a significant arsenal suggests that even the Pentagon is beginning to lose hope of proving its case against the Iraqi regime it has just ousted

"It's becoming painfully obvious that these programmes didn't exist on the scale they said," said Joseph Cirincione, an expert on weapons proliferation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The apparent unreliability of the case that the US and Britain made against Iraq in the run-up to the invasion is the subject of a CIA review by a panel of retired intelligence analysts. That review, part of which has already been drafted, is likely to raise questions over Mr Rumsfeld's role

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The most inflated pre-war claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were produced by an intelligence unit established in the Pentagon after September 11, which became a channel for claims, made by Iraqi defectors, to reach the White House

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The Pentagon's faith in the Iraqi exiles' assurances that US troops would be embraced by the population - an assumption now widely blamed for grossly inadequate preparations for postwar security - is also under scrutiny

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"Everyone wants to give the administration more time, but as the weeks go by, there is a growing sense of being lied to," Mr Cirincione said

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For the past few weeks US officials have been questioning several prominent Iraqi scientists alleged to have been involved in secret weapons programmes, including Rihab Taha, known as Dr Germ and Huda Ammash. But according to one US intelligence source "they're all saying everything had been destroyed".

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The Iraqi detainees have reportedly told their interrogators that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were disposed of, not just before the war as Mr Rumsfeld implied, but several years earlier

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The failure to find anything conclusive suggests that if Saddam Hussein had been developing chemical and biological weapons, the programme was not on the scale that the US and Britain alleged in the run-up to the March invasion

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US officials are increasingly convinced that Iraq may not have weaponised chemical and biological agents, but maintained a capacity to do so

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