

Experts described the debate as intense despite the American intelligence agencies' release last week of the nuanced, carefully qualified white paper concluding that the mobile units were most likely part of Iraq's biowarfare program. It was posted May 28 on the Internet at www.cia.gov.

"We are in full agreement on it," an official said of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency at a briefing on the white paper.

The six-page report, "Iraqi Mobile Biological Warfare Agent Production Plants," called discovery of the trailers "the strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological warfare program."

A senior administration official said the White House had not put pressure on the intelligence community in any way on the content of its white paper, or on the timing of its release.

In interviews, the intelligence analysts disputing its conclusions focused on the lack of steam sterilization gear for the central processing tank, which the white paper calls a fermenter for germ multiplication.

In theory, the dissenting analysts added, the Iraqis could have sterilized the tank with harsh chemicals rather than steam. But they said that would require a heavy wash afterward with sterile water to remove any chemical residue - a feat judged difficult for a mobile unit presumably situated somewhere in the Iraqi desert.

William C. Patrick III, a senior official in the germ warfare program that Washington renounced in 1969, said the lack of steam sterilization had caused him to question the germ-plant theory that he had once tentatively endorsed. "That's a huge minus," he said. "I don't see how you can clean those tanks chemically."

Three senior intelligence officials in Washington, responding to the criticisms during a group interview on Tuesday, said the Iraqis could have used a separate mobile unit to supply steam to the trailer. Some Iraqi decontamination units, they said, have such steam generators.

The officials also said some types of chemical sterilization were feasible without drastic follow-up actions.

Finally, they proposed that the Iraqis might have engineered anthrax or other killer germs for immunity to antibiotics, and then riddled germ food in the trailers with such potent drugs. That, they said, would be a clever way to grow lethal bacteria and selectively decontaminate the equipment at the same time - though the officials conceded that they had no evidence the Iraqis had used such advanced techniques.

On the second issue, the officials disputed the claim that the mobile units could make only small amounts of germ-laden liquids. If the trailers brewed up germs in high concentrations, they said, every month one truck could make enough raw material to fill five R-400 bombs.

Finally, the officials countered the claim that the trailers had no easy way for technicians to drain germ concoctions from the processing tank. The fluids could go down a pipe at its bottom, they said. While the pipe is small in diameter - too small to work effectively, some analysts hold - the officials said high pressure from an air compressor on the trailer could force the tank to drain in 10 or 20 minutes.

A senior official said "we've considered these objections" and dismissed them as having no bearing on the

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