

In Strict Confidence

WMD

Thirteen years after Iraq implemented the biggest ever peacetime biological and chemical warfare programme (next to the old Soviet Union) questions are now being asked that suggest that programme ended with the expulsion of the UNSCOM inspectors in 1998, and has remained dormant, or even dead since. The argument is based on the paucity of WMD material that has been uncovered since the coalition swept through Iraq earlier this year. Fuel has been added to the debate by the ferocious row between the BBC and Number 10 based on the allegation that the Corporation's defence reporter Andrew Gilligan publicly claimed that one important 'fact' in the government's dossier warning the nation of the potential perils of Saddam's WMD programme had been effectively dreamed up by Alistair Campbell. This is the famous warning that Iraq's WMD could be deployed within 45 minutes. Campbell, famously and dramatically has wholly denied the allegation. House of Commons Committees, writs, nasty letters and table thumping have followed. Both sides, at the time of writing seem prepared to go the mat on the issue.

What is the probable truth?

I understand that British intelligence have consistently warned not that Saddam could launch or deploy WMD at 45 minutes notice (that is risible to anyone who knows how the weaponry works) but, more accurately, that Saddam's command and control and communications systems (C3) had been sufficiently refined to allow him to authorise the use of WMD to his regional and often far flung outposts.

At first the spooks were uneasy about allowing this fact to be publicised. Its true there was only one source, but he happened to be an Iraqi Army officer of Brigadier rank – an MI6 agent in place, a hen's tooth in the body of coalition.

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human intelligence gathering from Iraq. (This source bravely stayed throughout the war, and has since been re-located by the British).

So why has so little evidence of Iraq's WMD programme been uncovered ?

In one sense the question itself is the wrong one. The hardware of WMD includes such pedestrian military items as empty artillery shells, 122mm rockets, scuds and Al Hussein warheads. Hundreds of these have indeed been found.

No-one would expect to find the bacteria or chemical warheads without a very hard search in a huge country, or without talking to the very people who would surely have buried the incriminating evidence once it became clear by Day 3 of the war that Saddam's C3 had collapsed. Which regional commander would wish to be found holding stocks of anthrax, botulinum, Sarin or VX nerve gas in his refrigerators. Incidentally, as the electrical grids began to falter throughout Iraq, the bacteria would have died anyway and would surely have been disposed of.

Why weren't the weapons used against coalition forces ? Intelligence from a second Iraqi source, given after the end of the war was that whatever there was to the WMD programme that needed hiding from UNMOVIC's Hans Blix in his pre-war forays was so widely dispersed that it would have been difficult or impossible to reconstitute the disparate elements into a coherent weapons system especially give the suddenness of the decision to invade. If this not unreasonable theory is true, then it follows that much of the gunk remains carefully and deliberately hidden in a country with terrain from hell, insecure and verging on lawlessness.

Western intelligence know there was a WMD programme for several reasons. There were signals intelligence intercepts from 1998 onwards that confirmed the point, it would have been wholly illogical for Saddam to kick out the UNSCOM inspectors (with all the horrendous political implications that were almost bound to ensue) and NOT run a covert WMD programme.

But finally, there are some even more powerful reasons for assuming the programme was up and running. From 1998 right through to the beginning (and even during) the last gulf war, Syria was used as a transit point for a succession of sanctions-busting imports by Iraq, including items that were almost certainly destined to power-up their secret CW/BW programme. Machine tools to make centrifuges and lathes with very high tolerances were sent from India via Syria (where Western intelligence seized them). The originating company Hindustan Machine Tools of Bombay and Bangalore were ordered by the Al Bashir Company in Baghdad, a known front for the Iraqi Ministry of Defence. Although some of these machine tools could be used for civilian purposes, the discovery of a military manual for use as ordnance in one shipment tends to suggest the purpose of the shipments was not benign.

Western intelligence also discovered that enquiries had been made by Iraqi agents for engines and engine spare parts for their Aero L-29 Delfin basic flight trainers. Some of these flight trainers had already been converted to produce the most credible chemical and biological weapons delivery system. Special tanks with British-made valves had been added to the wings to spray death on the enemy. Although not capable of long range attacks, they would have been formidable weapons against Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Enquiries for spare engines or parts for the trainers had been made as far away as Bulgaria, Ukraine and the Czech Republic.

If all this evidence is taken together it points inescapably in one direction only.

The irony is it never needed 'sexing up'.