

Understanding Saddam

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Articles & Testimony

The recent reports of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Iraq Survey Group, and the Presidential WMD Commission regarding intelligence and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq offer many useful insights into Iraq's weapons program and the challenges that the intelligence community faced in assessing them. But the reports offer no conclusive answer to a key question: How did Saddam Hussein plan to fight the war and avert defeat at the hands of the world's sole superpower without WMD? This is a troubling omission. After all, Saddam believed WMD to be the key to averting defeat during the Iran-Iraq War and to deterring the United States from "going on to Baghdad" after liberating Kuwait in 1991. If there was a time that Saddam needed WMD to fend off a threat to the very survival of his regime, it was in March 2003. The question must be answered if future WMD intelligence failures -- in Iran, North Korea or elsewhere -- are to be avoided.

It can now be said with confidence that on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq did not possess militarily significant quantities of WMD. Moreover, there is no evidence that prior to the war Saddam Hussein gave any orders to resume production of chemical and biological weapons (CBW). One possible explanation for this is that Saddam feared the consequences of getting caught by United Nations weapons inspectors -- who returned to Iraq in November 2002 and left Iraq the day before the war began on March 19, 2003 -- lest he undermine diplomatic efforts to avert war. An alternative explanation is that Saddam -- worn down by more than a decade of sanctions and intermittent but wearying military confrontations with the United States -- realized that the military balance did not favor Iraq and that his best chance for survival hinged on the organization of a postwar insurgency that would return him to power. He therefore chose to focus his efforts in this direction, rather than resume Iraq's WMD programs. Support for such an explanation can be found in hints of fatalistic resignation discernible in some pre-war interviews with Saddam. Beyond this, evidence for such an explanation is rather thin.

Conversely, Saddam may have believed that he did not need CBW because the impending war did not threaten his grip on power. According to postwar debriefings of senior Iraqi military officers, Saddam believed that the United States planned a brief, punitive air campaign ...

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