

The Missing Link: Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda

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Articles & Testimony

BOOK REVIEW *The Connection: How al Qaeda's Collaboration With Saddam Hussein Has Endangered America*
By Stephen F. Hayes HarperCollins. 194 pp. \$19.95

Proponents of the war in Iraq traditionally point to three primary justifications: the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Saddam Hussein's torturous regime and Iraq's ties to international terrorism. All are legitimate areas of concern, and all are equally vulnerable to one nagging question: Why now? Did any of these represent a threat so pressing that it warranted opening another front in the middle of the unfinished business of fighting the war on terror?

Most experts and pundits answer this question by highlighting the perceived threat of Iraq's WMD program. There is no question that Hussein's totalitarian regime maintained a WMD program that not only experimented in chemical and biological weapons but also employed them against his neighbors (Iran) and his own population (the Kurds). This prewar intelligence on Iraq's WMD program showed the most clear and present threat to the United States, its allies and Iraq's neighbors, but the cloud hanging over that body of intelligence has grown more ominous with each passing day. (Such an assessment, it should be noted, is only via 20/20 hindsight. Based on the information available at the time, many analysts, myself included, supported the war because U.S. intelligence indicated that Iraq in fact possessed WMD capabilities and intended to put them to use.)

That Hussein had expansionist regional intentions, tortured his political opponents and employed the most heinous of tactics to subjugate large segments of his population are painfully well documented. These, however, were always add-on issues, not the fundamental reason for going to war. After all, many regimes with similar regional ambitions and human rights records have not prompted us to go to war.

As doubts about these features of the case for war in Iraq continue to gather force, Stephen F. Hayes takes a different tack. In "The Connection," Hayes argues that Hussein's ties to al Qaeda presented just such a pressing threat -- and, moreover, that this threat was not an interruption of but a critical component of the war on terror. This argument is not just "the most controversial casus belli," as Hayes acknowledges in his introduction -- it is also, in view of the failure to uncover significant evidence of WMDs and the rapidly spreading jihadist resistance in U.S.-occupied Iraq,

the strongest remaining link in the chain of evidence for those who supported the war most vocally.

Not surprisingly, given his stand on the subject, Hayes gives the book a clearly partisan bent, including a chapter-long digression on "a skeptical press" that highlights the media's "bias" against such evidence as the purported meeting between Sept. 11, 2001, hijacker Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague (in fact, the media were echoing the assessments of the majority of the U.S. intelligence community, as Hayes later notes). Still, Hayes skillfully weaves old information with new revelations, and dutifully presents caveats about the veracity and verifiability of both. Much of the material he presents has been confirmed but, in large part because of the book's heavy reliance on a collection of possibilities, public statements and other circumstantial evidence, Hayes raises more questions than he answers.

Those facts that are confirmed -- e.g., meetings between senior Iraqi and al Qaeda envoys and Hussein's connections to the Kurdish al Qaeda affiliate Ansar al-Islam -- are pieces of a puzzle. On their own, and even together, they fall short of the certitude that the book's title leads readers to expect. The most explosive and damning material remains unconfirmed. Connecting these dots, one finds a disturbing outline of the former Iraqi regime's links to terrorists, but the picture still reveals no smoking gun.

Hayes does assemble an impressive collection of threatening statements by Iraqi officials and warnings by Democrats and Republicans alike of the threat posed by Hussein's regime. But his assessment of the intelligence information on which the book's argument rests -- for example, interrogations of detainees and the famed Feith Memorandum, in which Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith laid out the alleged links between al Qaeda and Iraq to the Senate Intelligence Committee -- rests on a series of questionable assumptions. Hayes acknowledges that detainees can offer misleading information but takes the CIA in particular to task for discounting much of the information contained in the Feith memo and other reports -- even though the CIA originally gathered a good portion of that information itself.

In reality, the intelligence process is larger than any one analyst. An assessment finding information to be questionable usually arises out of something more substantive than oversight, bias or an unwillingness to challenge "inherited assumptions." Writers coming to the subject outside the intelligence community need to proceed with special care if they are going to assume away the actions and assessments of intelligence analysts and operatives.

So even though "The Connection" points toward disturbing links between Iraq and al Qaeda, there was a far tighter connection between al Qaeda and, say, Sudan -- a point Hayes makes in the chapter on "A Home for Terror." Hayes offers several intriguing insights into possible links between Iraq and the Sept. 11 plot, though he also acknowledges "there is no proof that the Iraqi regime had any operational involvement in the September 11 attacks."

What evidence there is, Hayes notes, is "circumstantial and highly speculative." Instead, he points to the "unique threat" presented by the "potential collaboration" between Osama bin Laden and Hussein. "By the time the Iraq war began," he writes, "the evidence of Iraqi links to al Qaeda went well beyond a few dots. It was a veritable constellation." A constellation of suggestions, however, still is not a convincing argument. "The Connection" raises several important questions, but it left me unconvinced and still asking: Why now?

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