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Oct. Report Said Defeated Hussein Would Be Threat

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Last fall, the administration repeatedly warned in public of the danger that an unprovoked Iraqi President Saddam Hussein might give chemical or biological weapons to terrorists.

"Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists," President Bush said in Cincinnati on Oct. 7. "Alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints."

But declassified portions of a still-secret National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released Friday by the White House show that at the time of the president's speech the U.S. intelligence community judged that possibility to be unlikely. In fact, the NIE, which began circulating Oct. 2, shows the intelligence services were much more worried that Hussein might give weapons to al Qaeda terrorists if he were facing death or capture and his government was collapsing after a military attack by the United States.

"Saddam, if sufficiently desperate, might decide that only an organization such as al Qaeda, . . . already engaged in a life-or-death struggle against the United States, could perpetrate the type of terrorist attack that he would hope to conduct," one key judgment of the estimate said.

It went on to say that Hussein might decide to take the "extreme step" of assisting al Qaeda in a terrorist attack against the United States if it "would be his last chance to exact vengeance by taking a large number of victims with him."

The declassified sections of the NIE were offered by the White House to rebut allegations that the administration had twisted prewar intelligence on Iraq's nuclear weapons program. The result, however, could be to raise more questions about whether the administration misrepresented the judgments of the intelligence services on another basis for going to war: the threat posed by Hussein as a source of weapons for terrorists.

The NIE's findings also raise concerns about the dangers posed by Hussein, who is believed to be in hiding, and the failure to find any of his alleged stocks of chemical and biological weapons. If such stocks exist, a hotly debated proposition, this is precisely the kind of dangerous situation the CIA and other intelligence services warned about last fall, administration officials said. A senior administration official said yesterday that the U.S. intelligence community does not know either "the extent to which Saddam Hussein has access or control" over the groups that are attacking U.S. forces, or the location of any possible hidden chemical or biological agents or weapons. Asked whether the former Iraqi leader would today use any chemical or biological weapons if he controlled them, the senior official said, "We would not put that past him to do whatever makes our lives miserable."

The official said the judgment of last fall's intelligence estimate -- that a desperate Hussein, in hiding and with U.S. troops searching for him in Iraq, could turn to al Qaeda -- "had not been supplanted."

L. Paul Bremer, the U.S. civil administrator in Iraq, said yesterday on NBC's "Meet the Press" he believes Hussein is alive. "I think he is in Iraq, and the sooner we can either kill him or capture him, the

better."

On "Fox News Sunday," Bremer also said Hussein appeared to have pre-positioned weapons and made plans to carry out an insurgency should his forces, as expected, lose a war with the United States. "There has been some evidence of planning for the possibility of losing the war militarily and going into some kind of insurgency or organized resistance," Bremer said, without explaining what the evidence is.

Bremer said he does not believe Hussein could make a comeback: "Dead or alive, this guy is finished in Iraq. There is no public support for him."

Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) said in an interview that despite what Bush has said, the war is not over until Hussein is captured or killed. "He could come back like Napoleon if we don't watch out," said Markey, who added that the former Iraqi leader remains a threat because he, if anybody, knows where any chemical or biological weapons might be.

Last fall, as Congress began debating a resolution giving Bush authority to go to war against Iraq, CIA Director George J. Tenet ordered six intelligence services to develop over a 10-day period a common assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs and the threat they posed. A few days after the NIE began circulating, at the request of members of Congress who wanted material they could use in public debate, the administration released a 25-page unclassified summary of the 90-page classified report.

Two days later, in response to pressure from Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), then chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, Tenet released three pages of additional information from the NIE and a classified hearing that for the first time suggested that Hussein might only use chemical or biological weapons when under threat of attack.

Friday's declassified material from the NIE gave a much more complete picture of the intelligence in the form of all the key judgments of the intelligence community.

One of the judgments was that Hussein "appears to be drawing a line short of conducting terrorist attacks with conventional or [chemical or biological weapons] against the United States fearing that exposure of Iraqi involvement would provide Washington a stronger case for making war."

Another judgment was that Iraq would "probably" attempt a clandestine attack against the United States, as mentioned by Bush -- not on "any given day" as the president said Oct. 7, but only "if Baghdad feared an attack that threatened the survival of the regime were imminent or unavoidable."

Today the situation is changed. Hussein is alive but in hiding, and his alleged stocks of chemical or biological weapons or agents have not been found. Meanwhile, the president and other leaders have yet to mention publicly the intelligence assessment that Hussein may be a potentially bigger threat now than before the United States attacked.

In fact, Bush, in his May 1 speech from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, appeared to take just the opposite position. "We have removed an ally of al Qaeda," Bush said. "No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime."

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