

Is Iraq a True Threat to the U.S.?

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Recent press reports indicate that planning for war against Iraq has advanced significantly. When combined with revelations about the granting of presidential authority to the CIA for covert operations aimed at eliminating Saddam Hussein, it appears that the United States is firmly committed to a path that will lead toward war with Iraq.

Prior to this occurring, we would do well to reflect on the words of President Abraham Lincoln who, in his Gettysburg Address, defined the essence of why democracies like ours go to war: so ``... that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Does Iraq truly threaten the existence of our nation? If one takes at face value the rhetoric emanating from the Bush administration, it would seem so. According to President Bush and his advisers, Iraq is known to possess weapons of mass destruction and is actively seeking to reconstitute the weapons production capabilities that had been eliminated by UN weapons inspectors from 1991 to 1998, while at the same time barring the resumption of such inspections.

I bear personal witness through seven years as a chief weapons inspector in Iraq for the United Nations to both the scope of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs and the effectiveness of the UN weapons inspectors in ultimately eliminating them.

While we were never able to provide 100 percent certainty regarding the disposition of Iraq's proscribed weaponry, we did ascertain a 90-95 percent level of verified disarmament. This figure takes into account the destruction or dismantling of every major factory associated with prohibited weapons manufacture, all significant items of production equipment, and the majority of the weapons and agent produced by Iraq.

With the exception of mustard agent, all chemical agent produced by Iraq prior to 1990 would have degraded within five years (the jury is still out regarding Iraq's VX nerve agent program - while inspectors have accounted for the laboratories, production equipment and most of the agent produced from 1990-91, major discrepancies in the Iraqi accounting preclude any final disposition at this time.)

The same holds true for biological agent, which would have been neutralized through natural processes within three years of manufacture. Effective monitoring inspections, fully implemented from 1994-1998 without any significant obstruction from Iraq, never once detected any evidence of retained proscribed activity or effort by Iraq to reconstitute that capability which had been eliminated through inspections.

In direct contrast to these findings, the Bush administration provides only speculation, failing to detail any factually based information to bolster its claims concerning Iraq's continued possession of or ongoing efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. To date no one has held the Bush administration accountable for its unwillingness - or inability - to provide such evidence.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld notes that ``the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." This only reinforces the fact that the case for war against Iraq fails to meet the litmus test for the defense of our national existence so eloquently phrased by President Lincoln.

War should never be undertaken lightly. Our nation's founders recognized this when they penned our Constitution, giving the authority to declare war to Congress and not to the president. Yet on the issue of war with Iraq, Congress remains disturbingly mute.

Critical hearings should be convened by Congress that will ask the Bush administration tough questions about the true nature of the threat posed to the United States by Iraq. Congress should reject speculation and demand substantive answers. The logical forum for such a hearing would be the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee.

Unfortunately, the senators entrusted with such critical oversight responsibilities shy away from this task. This includes Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, a Vietnam War veteran who should understand the realities and consequences of war and the absolute requirement for certainty before committing to a course of conflict.

The apparent unwillingness of Congress to exercise its constitutional mandate of oversight, especially with regard to matters of war, represents a serious blow to American democracy. By allowing the Bush administration, in its rush toward conflict with Iraq, to circumvent the concepts of democratic accountability, Congress is failing those to whom they are ultimately responsible - the American people.

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