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Cheney's Warped Perspective on the Need to Attack Iraq by Scott Ritter

It was a tour de force in terms of storytelling--the vice president of the United States speaking before an enthralled audience at the Veterans for Foreign Wars national convention last month in Nashville. Vice President Dick Cheney took full advantage of his bully pulpit to reinforce the case for war against Iraq, which hinged on Saddam Hussein's alleged continued possession of weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, all outlawed since 1991 by a United Nations Security Council resolution).

"The Iraqi regime has in fact been very busy enhancing its capabilities in the field of chemical and biological agents," Cheney told the audience. "And they continue to pursue the nuclear program they began so many years ago."

On what basis did Cheney substantiate his assertion?

"We've gotten this from the firsthand testimony of defectors," he grimly noted, "including Saddam's own son-in-law, who was subsequently murdered at Saddam's direction."

And so the tale began. "During the spring of 1995, the weapons inspectors were actually on the verge of declaring that Hussein's programs to develop chemical weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles had been fully accounted for and shut down," Cheney told the veterans. "Then Saddam's son-in-law [Hussein Kamal] suddenly defected and began sharing information. Within days the inspectors were led to an Iraqi chicken farm. Hidden there were boxes of documents and lots of evidence regarding Iraq's most secret weapons programs."

All of this would be valid, if it were only true. I have spoken with the CIA and British intelligence officials who debriefed Hussein Kamal after his defection and reviewed the complete transcript of UNSCOM's own session with Saddam's prodigal son-in-law.

Contrary to the myth propagated by Cheney, there were no "smoking gun" revelations made by Hussein Kamal regarding hidden Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Throughout his interview with UNSCOM, a UN special commission, Hussein Kamal reiterated his main point--that nothing was left. "All chemical weapons were destroyed," he said. "I ordered destruction of all chemical weapons. All weapons--biological, chemical, missile, nuclear--were destroyed. There is not a single missile left ... they [Iraq] had kept blueprints and molds for production, but all the missiles were destroyed."

Everything Hussein Kamal said about Iraq's undeclared weapons programs was confirmed, in parallel, through the ongoing analysis by UNSCOM experts of the chicken farm documentation alluded to by Cheney.

There was nothing unique, nothing that differed from the documentary evidence. The bottom line from this high-profile defector--there was nothing left, that all proscribed weapons and their programs had been eliminated, and that the worst fears of a retained Iraqi capability--a nuclear device, for instance--were without substance.

Up until the Cheney's speech, the Bush administration had been vague about its objections to the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq.

However, in speaking of the defection of Hussein Kamal, Cheney revealed some of the thinking behind the rhetoric, and in doing so exposed fundamental flaws in the factual basis supporting the reasoning of the White House. The vice president's speech was intended to help solidify the case for war against Iraq. But if the evidence cited is representative of the level of knowledge possessed by those promoting regime change in Iraq, then it is high time we as a nation demand a halt to this rush toward war.

Unfortunately, as far as the Bush administration is concerned, it seems that when it comes to Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, truth is more often than not the first casualty. Consider Cheney's emphasis during his speech that " ... we often learned more as the result of defections than we learned from the inspection regime itself."

I would ask Cheney to review the transcript of the debriefing of Hussein's son-in-law, and heed carefully the words he spoke to the weapons inspectors that day in August 1995. "You should not underestimate yourself." Hussein Kamal said. "You are very effective in Iraq."

Inspectors were very effective in Iraq, and would be again if given a chance to carry out their tasks. Some in the Bush administration are waking up to this fact. "The president has been clear that he believes weapons inspectors should return," Secretary of State Colin Powell said recently. "And so, as a first step, let's see what the inspectors find. Send them back in."

That, Mr. Vice President, is advise worth heeding.

Scott Ritter is the former UN weapons inspector in Iraq and the author of "Endgame: Solving the Iraq Problem-- Once and For All."

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