



Published on Sunday, September 1, 2002 in the [Baltimore Sun](#)

Send Inspectors First

Is a Domestic Political Agenda Driving War With Iraq?

by Scott Ritter

WAR WITH IRAQ looms on the horizon.

But there is an increasing consensus that if there exists a case for war with Iraq, the Bush administration has, to date, failed to make it. Speculation regarding the possibility of Iraq continuing to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMD, which are chemical, biological, nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles), or seeking to reconstitute such a capability, does not suffice as evidence worthy of military intervention.

The consequences of war with Iraq are far-reaching and potentially disastrous. War should never be undertaken lightly, and any administration considering war should ensure that all available alternatives have been exhausted before committing our military to combat.

The justification for war hinges on the issue of Iraq's WMD. If Iraq possesses such weapons, more than a decade after the United Nations banned them, then clearly a case can be made that Saddam Hussein is a pariah leader at the head of a rogue state that threatens international peace and security and must be dealt with decisively, including the use of military force to remove him from power.

But until such time as this case can be made with substantive facts, the focus should be on ascertaining what, if any, WMD Iraq possesses today. Unfortunately, the White House seems intent on pursuing "regime removal" at the expense of a viable alternative to resolving the decade-long problem of Iraq's WMD programs.

The most viable of these alternatives would be to seek the return of U.N. weapons inspectors mandated by the Security Council to oversee the disarmament of Iraq's WMD programs. Such inspections have been absent from Iraq for nearly four years, and what Iraq may have done in the intervening period with regard to WMD is of great concern. U.N. inspection teams inside Iraq could go a long way toward determining the facts regarding the status and disposition of WMD programs.

From 1991 to 1998, U.N. weapons inspectors, among whom I played an integral part, were able to verifiably ascertain a 90 percent to 95 percent level of disarmament inside Iraq. This included all of the production facilities involved with WMD, together with their associated production equipment and the great majority of what was produced by these facilities.

The Security Council sought 100 percent disarmament, and that never was achieved. The potential for Iraq to reconstitute important aspects of its WMD programs, especially with inspectors out of the picture, should not be minimized.

The return of weapons inspectors to Iraq provides the best mechanism for bringing to closure many, if not all, of these concerns. Iraq has indicated its willingness to consider the return of such inspections.

Sadly, the Bush administration has done little to further the cause of getting inspectors back on the job. Instead, the administration has denigrated the efficacy of inspections and prevented any potential for diplomacy by insisting on an overall policy of regime change even if inspectors return to Iraq and find it in compliance with the U.N. ban.

Weapons inspections and regime change are inherently contradictory policies. The former focuses on multilateral diplomacy, the latter on unilateral military intervention.

For inspections to have a chance, the Bush administration will need to reformulate its policy on Iraq, placing disarmament ahead of regime change.

Given the amount of political capital that has been expended by the White House on removing Mr. Hussein, this seems unlikely to happen unless public opinion, as manifested by Congress and the news media, changes and radically transforms the political dynamic that seems to be propelling America toward war with Iraq.

The need for a national debate on U.S. policy toward Iraq is evident. If there is a case to be made that Iraq represents a real threat to the national security of America worthy of war, then it needs to be made as soon as possible.

But if a case cannot be made on national security grounds, then one must consider the real possibility that the administration's drive for war with Iraq is being pursued in support of a domestic political agenda, something that should concern all Americans, regardless of political affiliation.

The brave men and women in our armed forces have demonstrated their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice so that our democracy can be preserved. To ask them to do so in support of politically driven motives would not only disrespect those to whom we look for protection, but also dishonor American democracy as a whole. It is up to our nation as a whole to ensure that is not, and never will be, the case.

Scott Ritter, a former Marine and U.N. weapons inspector, is author of Endgame: Solving the Iraq Problem -- Once and For All (Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Copyright © 2002, The Baltimore Sun