

Past the Point of Justifying

By John McCain

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Like many Americans, I am surprised that we have yet to locate the weapons of mass destruction that all of us, Republican and Democrat, expected to find immediately in Iraq. But do critics really believe that Saddam Hussein disposed of his weapons and dismantled weapons programs while fooling every major intelligence service on earth, generations of U.N. inspectors, three U.S. presidents and five secretaries of defense into believing he possessed them, in one of the most costly and irrational gambles in history?

After the first Persian Gulf War, the discovery of Hussein's advanced nuclear weapons program following years of international inspections surprised everyone. When U.N. inspectors left Iraq in 1998, they catalogued Iraq's continuing possession of, or proven failure to disclose, one of the biggest chemical and biological weapons arsenals in history.



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Critics today seem to imply that after seven years of elaborately deceiving the United Nations, Hussein precipitated the withdrawal of U.N. inspectors from his country in 1998, then decided to change course and disarmed himself over the next four years, but refused to provide any realistic proof that this disarmament occurred.

I am not convinced. Nor was chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix, who recently catalogued Iraq's failure to come clean on an array of weapons programs the United Nations believed were continuing. Nor were Congress and President Clinton, who advocated regime change in Iraq in 1998 -- before the U.N. inspectors left.

While war was never inevitable, it was, in retrospect, the most telegraphed military confrontation in history. Hussein had plenty of time to destroy or disperse weapons stocks and to further conceal weapons programs, which often rely more on human knowledge than physical infrastructure. If Hussein had the weapons destroyed or concealed, reconstituting them would have required primarily the skills of Iraqi scientists. Precious few Iraqis would have been involved in the actual destruction or concealment. That's why capturing and interrogating Iraqis involved in concealment -- as well as scientific personnel -- is essential. Despite highly intrusive inspections after the Gulf War, U.N. inspectors were shocked in 1995 when an Iraqi defector revealed the existence of Iraq's enormous biological weapons program.

Until we capture Hussein or prove him dead and eradicate the remnants of his apparatus of terror, which continues to coordinate daily attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, Iraqi scientists will not feel free to talk, and warped dreams of outlasting America will persist.

We went to war in part because Hussein failed to account for his weapons, had proven his willingness to use them and behaved in a way that encouraged governments around the world to believe he possessed them. Our intelligence about a hostile foreign government is never perfect. When it tends overwhelmingly toward one conclusion -- in Iraq's case, that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction -- should we give the benefit of the doubt to a dictator with a record of deceit and aggression?

It is certainly appropriate to examine the quality of the intelligence that influenced the administration's decision to go to war. It is appropriate to examine what went right and what went wrong in the prosecution of the war and in its aftermath. But I find it impossible to credit as serious the suggestion that this war shouldn't have been fought because, lacking better intelligence, we ought to have assumed Hussein's good faith.

We should not let legitimate debate about the search for weapons minimize the task now at hand: the reconstruction and democratization of Iraq. Discovering the truth about Iraqi weapons is important, securing Iraq's democratic future even more so. This will be the final measure of our victory, not how many gallons of anthrax we find. The United Nations found a lot, and we will either find more or find out where it went.

We fought this war to defend the security of the United States against the threat from Hussein's proven weapons programs and his refusal to come clean, his record of aggression against his neighbors, the utter collapse of containment, the possibility of his cooperation with terrorists, and his brutal oppression of the Iraqi people.

Does anyone believe that the United States, the Iraqi people or the Arab world would be better off if Hussein were still in power, if 8-year-old children were still held in Iraqi prisons, if Hussein were still threatening his neighbors? Hussein alone was responsible for this war, and we need make no apologies for supporting the use of U.S. military force to rid the world of his murderous regime.

It is too early to declare final victory in Iraq. But we're well past the point of knowing that our war to liberate Iraq was right and just. The discovery of mass graves filled with the bodies of murdered children should have convinced even the greatest skeptic. We made America more secure, liberated millions from a reign of terror and helped create the prospect for the establishment of the first Arab democracy. That should make Americans proud -- and critics of the administration's decision to go to war a little more circumspect.

The writer is a Republican senator from Arizona.