

The Washington Post

No Weapons, No Matter. We Called Saddam's Bluff

Michael Schrage

May 11, 2003; Page B2

Russian President Vladimir Putin openly mocks America's failed efforts to find chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in Iraq. The Euroleft proclaims the coalition's rationale for invading the country -- the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) -- a fraud. Top Iraqi scientists still swear that their country has no such weapons. No nukes, no anthrax, no VX gas. Are they liars trying to cut a better deal for themselves? Or might they simply be telling the truth?

It doesn't matter. If Iraq has significant WMD capabilities, they eventually will be discovered. But even if Iraq proves utterly free of WMD -- or if it merely possesses a paltry two or three bio-weapons vans -- the coalition's military action was the most rational response to Saddam's long-term policy of strategic deception. Saddam Hussein bet that he could get away with playing a "does he or doesn't he?" shell game with a skeptical superpower. He bet wrong.

The real story here is less about the failure of intelligence, inspections or diplomacy than about the end of America's tolerance for state-sponsored ambiguities explicitly designed to threaten American lives. Does an American policy to deny unfriendly nation-states the policy option of creating ambiguity around WMD possession and the support of terrorism make the world a safer place? The Bush administration has made a game-theory-like calculation that it does. That's a calculation that could prove as important and enduring to global security as the Cold War's deterrence doctrine of "mutually assured destruction."

Iraq provides the single most important and dramatic case study in the Bush administration's efforts after Sept. 11, 2001, to eradicate ambiguity as a viable strategic deterrent for unfriendly regimes. Hussein's Iraq may or may not have had impressive caches of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. But his regime surely behaved as if it might. Iraq's WMD threat remained credible for more than 20 years

because that's precisely what Hussein wanted the world to believe. After all, he had successfully deployed chemical weapons against both Kurds and Iranians. He'd earned his credibility.

Since his first Gulf War defeat, Hussein deliberately created uncertainty regarding the true nature of his regime's weapons programs. Iraq would alternately cheat and retreat and then concede and mislead. At great cost, it defiantly chose sanctions over inspections. To guarantee that the perennially volatile region remained on edge, Hussein regularly threatened to engulf his enemies in a "sea of fire." No one knew what he was really trying to do. That was precisely his point.

Even after Sept. 11, the Afghanistan campaign and the controversial "axis of evil" address, Iraq took no public actions to reduce the level of ambiguity surrounding its WMD programs. To the contrary, it fought every U.N. initiative for inspections before reluctantly and churlishly acquiescing. Practically every demonstration of purported compliance seemed balanced by a calibrated act of defiance. When (recently captured) Iraqi Gen. Hossam Mohammed Amin, who coordinated with the U.N. inspectors, declared in a January news conference that Iraq had destroyed various chemical weapons years ago, he simultaneously disclosed that Iraq had also destroyed all the records associated with destroying these weapons. This may even have been true. But it did nothing substantive to remove any WMD ambiguity. That Amin appeared to smile as he discussed the missing records didn't help.

This behavior by Iraq's regime was completely rational. Hussein's calculated cultivation of WMD ambiguity is a tactic torn directly from the tough-minded Cold War game-theory scenarios of nuclear deterrence. Brilliantly crafted by defense analysts such as former Harvard economist Thomas Schelling and the Rand Corp.'s Herman Kahn, this literature stresses the strategic importance of "signaling" -- that is, the critical behaviors potential combatants choose to display to either clarify or obscure their ultimate intentions. For years, "strategic ambiguity" worked very well for Hussein. His WMD ambiguity enhanced his survivability.

In fact, WMD ambiguity was at the core of Iraq's strategy. Why? Because if it ever became unambiguously clear that Iraq had major initiatives underway in nuclear or bio-weapons, America, Israel and even Europe might intervene militarily. If, however, it ever became obvious that Iraq lacked the unconventional weaponry essential to inspiring fear and inflicting horrific damage, then the Kurds, Iranians

and Saudis might lack appropriate respect for Hussein's imperial ambitions. Ambiguity thus kept the West at bay while keeping Hussein's neighbors and his people in line. A little rumor of anthrax or VX goes a long way.

Inspections agreements -- no matter how coercive -- never could have worked because they never addressed the fundamental issue: Hussein's desire to preserve WMD ambiguity in order to preserve Iraq's perceived influence and power. Removing that ambiguity would have removed Hussein's ability to bully, bluster and blackmail the world. Perversely, U.N. Resolution 1441's poorly implemented inspection protocols fed the worst fears of both sides. Iraq's perfunctory compliance and deceitful history guaranteed that the United States would distrust the U.N.'s lackluster assurances of compliance. By contrast, Iraq's desire to be feared guaranteed that it would always manufacture just enough ambiguity to preserve its aura of menace. The inspectors' tortured attempts to appear evenhanded succeeded only in generating even greater ambiguities about both Iraq's willingness to comply and the weapons in its possession. And Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's dramatic yet desperate presentation before the U.N. Security Council was harshly attacked by critics who maintained that, yes, America's WMD evidence was inconclusively ambiguous.

Similarly, inspection proposals calling for "thousands" of intrusive inspectors, declaring all of Iraq a "no-fly" zone, and immediately bombing any sites that Iraq refused or delayed access to -- acts of war in everything but name -- seemed designed to ferret out WMD deceptions without in any way undermining the sovereignty or the totalitarian rule of the deliberate deceivers. Talk about a truly perverse outcome!

To the very end of his brutal regime, Saddam Hussein behaved as if preserving WMD ambiguity and preserving his power were one and the same. Even when he was directly threatened by the United States, his policy of WMD ambiguity remained unchanged. If he did have active WMD programs, he could at any time have quietly invited in French, Russian and German technicians to help dispose of them. Word would have gotten around. Or, after Sept.11, he could have preemptively invited in U.N. inspectors as a prelude to lifting sanctions. Could he have done this without appearing weak? Yes. He could easily have preserved internal credibility by killing a few thousand more Kurds or chopping the ears off suspected dissidents. And regional balance-of-

power issues could have been handled by a particularly brutal political assassination in Kuwait, for instance.

If Iraq really didn't have any WMD, Hussein's challenge would have been even easier. Several top Iraqi scientists could have left or "defected" to the West and talked about how their standard of living collapsed after Hussein stopped building weapons. Saddam could have allowed his French friends and Russian suppliers relatively free access to all parts of the country to further signal that he had nothing to hide. Of course, none of this happened. To the contrary, France unwittingly revealed just how effective Hussein's strategic ambiguity program was when its U.S. ambassador announced shortly after the war began that his country would support the coalition if the Iraqi leader used any weapons of mass destruction.

But suppose Hussein was bluffing. Suppose Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction of any significance. That shouldn't matter at all. To the contrary, why should the international community respect totalitarian brinkmanship based on a bluff? A brutal despot who bets his regime on a bluff deserves to lose everything.

America's diplomatic failure to reduce strategic ambiguity inevitably led to a military success that did. Those nation-states and regimes invested in bluff and "double games" to manage their relationships with the United States would be wise to learn from Iraq's experience that "preemptive ambiguity removal" is probably their optimal strategy for self-preservation. Syria's Bashar Assad may understand this in a way that North Korea's Kim Jong Il does not.

The Bush administration, appropriately interpreting Iraq's refusal to remove WMD ambiguity in violation of numerous international agreements as an overtly hostile act, has sent an unambiguous signal that it will take all steps necessary to eliminate such ambiguity. To be sure, this sort of policy may not inherently make the world a safer place. But policies that permit rogue states to wield greater influence by creating greater uncertainty about their weapons of mass destruction are guaranteed to make the world an even more dangerous place. Making every effort to increase the risks and reduce the rewards for regimes dependent on WMD ambiguity for their legitimacy should be a global responsibility -- not just an American one.

Michael Schrage is a senior adviser to the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.