

INTELLIGENCE, IRAQ, AND WMD Candid Estimates, Distance From “Worst Case Scenarios” Would Boost Intelligence

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29, 2004 — To successfully combat threats from nations and terrorist organizations, the United States and Western powers must be frank about the limitations of intelligence assessments, unlike they were in the lead-up to the Iraq war, according to a new report by **Anthony Cordesman**, CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy.

“Despite all of the advances in their intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, the

United States and Britain went to war with Iraq without the level of evidence needed to provide a clear strategic rationale for the war, and without the ability to fully understand the threat that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction posed to U.S., British, and Australian forces,” states the report, “Intelligence, Iraq, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” (http://www.csis.org/features/040126_WMDIntellLesAnnex.pdf). **“This uncertainty is not a definitive argument against carrying out a war that responded to grave potential threats. It is a definitive warning that this intelligence and targeting are not yet adequate to support grand strategy, strategy, and tactical operations against proliferating powers or to make accurate assessments of the need to preempt.”** The report explores the current proliferation status of Iran, North Korea and the Sudan, and outlines scenarios of chemical and biological attacks in the Middle East to emphasize the ways in which intelligence collection must evolve to better prevent “superterroris**m.”

In his report, Cordesman attributes the lack of accurate intelligence prior to the Iraq war to assessments that have to be made in the face of grave problems in both intelligence collection and analysis that the intelligence community cannot quickly overcome – if ever – and which are just as serious for arms control and inspection. He also notes that some intelligence did, however, focus on “worst case scenarios.” There does seem to have been some pressure to make such assessment by the Office of the Vice President and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. “U.S. policymakers seem to have pushed for the interpretation that would best justify military action and to have focused on this as if it were a reality rather than a possibility. Postwar reports and interviews make it clear that the United States and Britain presented worst-case estimates to the public and the UN without sufficient qualification.”

Although the report touches on the Bush administration’s efforts to “politicize intelligence,” it notes that all efforts to shape government policy on any issue assemble the best case to support that policy. This is legitimate unless data are invented or deliberately used in misleading ways. He also argues that the Iraq case should be viewed primarily as a warning that both the intelligence and policy communities need to pay far more attention to accurately portraying and understanding the inevitable uncertainties in intelligence collection. Moreover, what are often described as intelligence failures are actual policy and user failures, where “complex intelligence analysis – filled with alternative cases, probability estimates, and qualifications about uncertainty – generally go unused or make policy makers and commanders impatient with the entire intelligence process... users inevitably either force the intelligence process to reach something approaching a definitive set of conclusions, or else they make such estimates themselves.”

Proliferators themselves often harbor large uncertainties about the lethality or widespread effectiveness of their weapons and often fool inspectors and intelligence agencies because they understand the limitations of modern intelligence.

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Intelligence, Iraq, and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Main Report With Annexes:

http://www.csis.org/features/040126_WMDIntellLesAnnex.pdf

Main Report:

http://www.csis.org/features/040126_WMDIntellLesMainRpt.pdf

Executive Summary:

http://www.csis.org/features/040126_WMDIntellLesExecSum.pdf

Anthony Cordesman

CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy