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NUCLEAR INSPECTIONS IN IRAQ: ARE THEY WORTH ANOTHER CHANCE?

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President Bushs ultimatum to Saddam Hussein---surrender your weapons of mass destruction or be removed by a U.S.-led military coalition---relies heavily on the Presidents belief that Iraq has continued its nuclear weapons program. Few dispute this, though no one knows for certain how close Iraq has come since inspections ended in 1998. It is well understood that if Iraq acquires smuggled fissile material, it is technically capable of quickly converting it into atomic bombs. According to CIA and British intelligence, Iraq is also attempting to procure components to construct centrifuges to enrich its own uranium to weapons grade.

The President appears to be convinced that renewed U.N. inspections have little value because they could never completely disarm Iraq. Such skepticism is understandable, but it ignores the value of information which could be acquired about Iraqi weapons programs through renewed and strengthened inspections, as well as the intelligence that could be gained throughout Iraq by U.S. long-distance surveillance of Saddams concealment activities in response to the resumed inspections.

If new inspections are to succeed, a strong dose of realism about what inspectors did and did not previously accomplish in Iraq is in order. This would permit a more rational assessment both in Washington and at the U.N. of how to make inspections more effective and of how to pursue options for disarming Iraq before facing a decision on military intervention.

A big part of the problem is the International Atomic Energy Agencys exaggerated claims about having eliminated Iraqi efforts to build nuclear weapons during inspections between 1991 and 1998. The Agencys own inspection reports show that significant issues about Iraqs nuclear program had remained unresolved. Iraq never surrendered its two complete nuclear bomb designs, bomb components it was known to have possessed, or

documentation of its program to enrich uranium using centrifuges---small devices which are readily concealed.

Yet the Agency now confidently states that by 1998, its inspections had effectively eliminated Iraqs ability to build nuclear bombs. Mohamed El Baradei, IAEAs director-general, recently claimed that prior to 1998, We neutralized Iraqs nuclear program. We confiscated its weapon-usable material. We destroyed, removed or rendered harmless all its facilities and equipment relevant to nuclear weapons production. And while we did not claim absolute certainty, we were confident that we had not missed any significant component of Iraqs nuclear program. Such overblown claims about the success of previous inspections undermine IAEAs credibility, and embolden those advising the President to strike militarily without giving renewed inspections a chance.

Another danger is inspection fatigue. If no smoking guns are discovered after months of new inspections, IAEA might declare Iraq to be in full compliance and throw the matter back to the Security Council, where Russia, France and China would exert enormous pressure to lift sanctions. This has happened before. As early as1991, Dr. Hans Blix---then IAEA director-general and now head of UNMOVIC, the U.N. agency responsible for conducting chemical, biological and missile weapons inspections---was prepared to certify Iraqs compliance after only one post-war nuclear inspection and a flagrantly incomplete Iraqi declaration of its nuclear technology. Senior IAEA inspectors objected, and soon enough, Saddams secret bomb program came to light when, tipped off by a defector, the inspectors uncovered an enormous uranium enrichment program.

Even after Iraqs bomb program was revealed, Blix still defended the efficacy of IAEAs pre-war safeguards on Iraqi research reactors, insisting that Iraq had never touched the nuclear highly enriched uraniumwhich was under our safeguards." This assessment proved wrong when, three years later, Hussein Kamel, Saddams son-in-law, defected and disclosed that he had ordered a "crash program" in late 1990 to remove weapons-grade uranium from IAEA-safeguarded fuel rods (supplied by France and the Soviet Union for use in civilian research reactors) to build a nuclear weapon---work which was interrupted by the Desert Storm air strikes.

In 1997, IAEA declared that inspections had reached a point of diminishing returns and said the issue of whether to switch to less intrusive monitoring and to lift sanctions was a political question for the Security Council. President Bush is unlikely to tolerate another such performance by the IAEA, even after extensive inspections. Therefore, the IAEA should affirm now that it will no longer accept Iraqs unsubstantiated claims that key nuclear technologies and documentation never existed or were unilaterally destroyed.