

Make the case: The evidence against Saddam Hussein

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The evidence that Saddam Hussein has an aggressive weapons program can be found in the reports made by United Nations arms inspectors and by Iraq itself. So say the experts who have examined Iraq's recent 12,000-page declaration to the UN. They point, for example, to supplies of anthrax and biological toxins that are unaccounted for. They observe that Iraq admits manufacturing missile fuel but omits mentioning how it is being used. They note Iraq's silence about its disposal of weapons material discovered years ago by U.S. intelligence. These details add up to clear evidence of Saddam's dangerous intentions and his brazen attempt to hide them—at least they do for the defense experts.

But such a conclusion is evident only to those who have read the documents carefully, compared various accounts, noted gaps and omissions over time, and drawn on U.S. surveillance data and on technical knowledge of the ingredients used in weapons manufacturing. The public has neither the patience nor the technical knowledge for such analysis.

Of course, Saddam Hussein's well-founded hope is that the discussion of his weapons program can be bogged down in a thousand technical details. He relies on public indifference in the West to forestall a decisive response.

President Bush faces, then, a thus-far-neglected explanatory task. If Saddam is as dangerous as the experts say, then the Bush administration must do a much better job of laying out that case in a clear way. It needs to present the evidence in terms the public can grasp. It especially needs to present the evidence of his nuclear program—the most threatening aspect of his agenda—and explain why a nuclear-armed Saddam is an unacceptable prospect, and why the policy of containing Saddam's nuclear ambition must now be replaced by a policy of eliminating his regime. “Unresolved issues” or “material omissions” in the fine print of a UN document are not persuasive reasons for launching a costly war.

Many Americans and apparently most of the rest of the world are unconvinced that Iraq presents a real and present danger. The Bush administration's determination to disarm Saddam Hussein by force therefore appears extreme and unfounded. Why go to war when Saddam has done nothing? Why take the unusual step of launching a preventive war without an immediate pretext? And where is the evidence of Saddam's dangerous arsenal? After six months of focusing attention on Iraq, the Bush administration still needs to offer convincing answers to these fundamental questions.