

## US rivals turn on each other as weapons search draws a blank

Guardian Weekly ( 2003/05/11 )

[ Document Starts on the Next Page. ]

**Key Words:** Iraq, Weapons

**Description:**

[Search the Card Catalog](#) for other titles.

Visit our **Home page:** [2Act.org](http://2Act.org)

This document is **referred to by** the following pages:

[Weapons of Mass Destruction](#)

<http://zfacts.com/metaPage/lib/030511-MGuard-WMP-Iraq.pdf>

In Netscape,  
**right-click**  
links for  
options.



## The Guardian Weekly

For more information, and to receive your free copy visit [guardianweekly.co.uk](http://guardianweekly.co.uk)



Go to:

### The Observer International

Home UK news **International** Politics Business Comment Leaders Focus  
Sport Review Magazine Screen Travel Cash Letters Food

#### International



[Click here](#)



Online  
For the latest  
internet news  
click here



Wheels  
For the latest news  
and views on cars  
click here

## US rivals turn on each other as weapons search draws a blank

One key argument for war was the peril from weapons of mass destruction. Now top officials are worried by repeated failures to find the proof - and US intelligence agencies are engaged in a struggle to avoid the blame

**Paul Harris and Martin Bright in London, Taji and Ed Helmore in New York**  
**Sunday May 11, 2003**

[The Observer](#)

The Iraqi military base at Taji does not look like a place of global importance. It is a desolate expanse of bunkers and hangars surrounded by barbed wire and battered look-out posts. It is deserted apart from American sentries at the gate.

Yet Taji, north of Baghdad, is the key to a furious debate. Where are Saddam's weapons of mass destruction? Was the war fought on a platform of lies? Taji was the only specific location singled out by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his address to the UN when he argued that evidence compiled by US intelligence proved the existence of an illegal weapons programme. 'This is one of 65 such facilities in Iraq,' Powell said. 'We know this one has housed chemical weapons.'

But The Observer has learnt that Taji has drawn a blank. US sources say no such weapons were found when a search party scoured the base in late April. By then it had already been looted by local villagers. If Taji ever had any secrets, they are long gone. That is bad news for Britain and the United States. The pressure is building to find Saddam's hidden arsenal and time is running out.

Last week the US flew 2,000 more experts into Iraq. The Iraq Survey Team will join 600 experts already there. Organisations in Iraq hunting for weapons now include teams from the US and British armies, the CIA, the FBI and the Defence Threat Reduction Agency. Yet at more than 110 sites checked so far they have found nothing

#### Tools

[Text-only version](#) ▶  
[Send it to a friend](#) ▶  
[Save story](#) ▶

#### The Observer

[Front page](#) ▶  
[Story index](#) ▶

**Recent articles**[The martyr who charmed children](#)[Shia mullahs take charge of hospitals to halt chaos](#)[US rivals turn on each other as weapons search draws a blank](#)[Mystery of Irish address at centre of fraud scandal](#)[World news in brief](#)[Congo casts out its 'child witches'](#)[Bush ally set to profit from the war on terror](#)[Iraq in danger of starvation, says UN](#)[Welcome to Dublin's meanest street](#)[Sex confessions of a senior citizen score literary hit](#)[Ukrainians want pro-Stalin writer stripped of Pulitzer](#)[Peace map unites families at war](#)[Moral voice of US gambles on his credibility](#)[Iraq: The Unrest](#)[Iraq: The Weapons](#)[The Guardian Front page Story index](#)

conclusive. It has been an exercise in false alarms. Suspect white powder at Latifiyah was only explosives. Barrels of what was thought to be sarin and tabun nerve agents were pesticides. When a dozen US soldiers checked a suspect site and fell ill, it was because they had inhaled fertiliser fumes. Each setback ratchets up the political pressure. Infighting between government departments and intelligence agencies is becoming vicious on both sides of the Atlantic. Having fought a war to disarm Iraq of its terrible weapons, neither the US nor Britain can admit that Iraq never had them in the first place. The search for weapons of mass destruction cannot be allowed to fail.

The search is especially vital for The Cabal. In the brave new world of post-11 September America, this tight group of analysts deep in the heart of the Pentagon has been the driving force behind the war in Iraq. Numbering no more than a dozen, The Cabal is part of the Office of Special Plans, a new intelligence agency which has taken on the CIA and won. Where the CIA dithered over Iraq, the OSP pressed on. Where the CIA doubted, the OSP was firm. It fought a battle royal over Iraq and George Bush came down on its side.

The OSP is the brainchild of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who set it up after the 2001 terrorist attacks. It was tasked with going over old ground on Iraq and showing that the CIA had overlooked the threat posed. But its rise has caused massive ructions in the normally secretive world of intelligence gathering.

The OSP reports directly to Paul Wolfowitz, a leading hawk in the administration. They bypassed the CIA and the Pentagon's own Defence Intelligence Agency when it came to whispering in the President's ear. They argued a forceful case for war against Saddam before his weapons programmes came to fruition. More moderate voices in the CIA and DIA were drowned out. The result has been a flurry of leaks to the US press. One CIA official described The Cabal's members as 'crazed', on a 'mission from God'.

But for the moment The Cabal and Rumsfeld's Pentagon have won and Powell's doveish State Department has lost. Tensions between the two are now in the open.

'Rumsfeld set up his own intelligence agency because he didn't like the intelligence he was getting,' said Larry Korb, director of national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. 'He doesn't like Powell's approach, a typical diplomat, too cautious.'

Former CIA officials are caustic about the OSP. Unreliable and politically motivated, they say it has undermined decades of work by the CIA's trained spies and ignored the truth when it has contradicted its world view.

'Their methods are vicious,' said Vince Cannistraro, former



CIA chief of counter-terrorism. 'The politicisation of intelligence is pandemic, and deliberate disinformation is being promoted. They choose the worst-case scenario on everything and so much of the information is fallacious.' But Cannistraro is retired. His attacks will not bother The Cabal, firmly 'in the loop' of Washington's movers and shakers. Yet, even among them, continued failure to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is a growing fear. The fallout from the war could bring them down.

The warning was there in black and white. Citing 'intelligence' sources, Tony Blair produced an official dossier that concluded Iraq could fire its chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so.

It was a terrifying prospect and ramped up the pro-war argument when the dossier was produced last September. But cold analysis after the war tells a different story.

Iraq was abandoned by the UN weapons inspectors, then bombed, invaded and finally brought under US and British military control. During that entire time the 'button' was never pressed on its weapons of mass destruction. Now both the pro-war party and the anti-war lobby want to know why. Can this mysterious lapse be explained or did the weapons never exist?

They could have been hidden. Iraq is the size of California with mountains and deserts in abundance. Ibrahim al-Marashi, an Iraqi expert whose work was heavily plagiarised in a now infamous Downing Street dossier published on the eve of war, has detailed a sophisticated concealment network set up in the 1990s and headed by Saddam's son Qusay. At the heart of the operation was Saddam's son-in-law and cousin, Hussein Kamil, who defected in 1995 to Jordan, where he revealed the concealment techniques to Western intelligence agencies.

But, according to al-Marashit, the main cache of weapons of mass destruction should have been found in Saddam's home city of Tikrit. But Tikrit has fallen and as yet nothing has been found, leaving US officials clutching at straws. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the weapons were hidden so well that the Iraqis themselves were unable to use them.

A more worrying possibility is that they were looted. Across Iraq - not just in Baghdad and Basra - practically every government and military facility was looted long before US or British troops were able to control them. It might be that the weapons are now on the black market. 'It means the weapons would now be proliferating, which is exactly what the war was meant to stop,' said Garth Whitty, a former weapons inspector in Iraq in the 1990s.

But there are problems with that argument. Barrels of nerve agent are not easy to sell. The war's critics point to a more obvious conclusion - in the run-up to the war the

Iraqis were simply telling the truth. They had no weapons of mass destruction.

A massive picture of intelligence misuse has emerged. Aside from Downing Street's plagiarised dossier, there are allegations that Iraq tried to buy uranium from Niger. The documents that the accusation were based on were shown to be false by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but that had not stopped Britain and America warning of Saddam's nuclear threat. In fact, the forgeries were obvious. One Niger Minister, whose signature was on a document, had been out of office for a decade when the forgeries were produced. A US envoy sent to investigate the claims reported to the CIA in February 2002 that they were fakes. But the OSP and the White House ignored him.

Other selective use of intelligence occurred. Much was made of the OSP's body of Iraqi defectors, but they chose which defectors they wanted to listen to. Kamil's terrifying description of Iraq's capabilities in the early 1990s and its efforts to conceal its arsenal was touted as killer proof. The fact that Kamil also told his interrogators the weapons had later been ordered destroyed was suppressed.

Other defectors may have had their own agendas. Kamil described one, Dr Khidhir Hamza, as a 'professional liar' - but told US intelligence what it wanted to hear and said Iraq was close to building a nuclear bomb. No one now believes that. But Hamza has now returned to Iraq as part of a Pentagon team to rebuild the country, in charge of atomic energy. Kamil also returned to Iraq - but when Saddam was in power. He was executed.

Perhaps the most damning evidence is the lack of intelligence emerging from captured Iraqi officials. The list is impressive: Huda Ammash, known as 'Mrs Anthrax'; General Hossam Amin, responsible for talks with weapons inspectors; General Amir Saadi, Saddam's science adviser; General Rashid al-Ubaidi, an arms adviser; and Abdul Hwaish, believed responsible for all Iraq's military capabilities. If anyone knows about the weapons, it is these people. They have powerful motivation to 'cut a deal' and tell what they know. 'Why is no one coughing?' said Whitty.

In a quiet corner of Baghdad International Airport sits a truck and trailer painted military green. Its canvas sides have been rolled up to reveal the pipes and vats of some form of biological fermentation machine. It was stolen in Mosul two weeks ago then handed over to Kurdish militia when the thieves realised it was no ordinary truck. The Kurds passed it on to the Americans.

It is the only concrete sign that any weapons of mass destruction may have existed. The firm which made it has said six others were similarly kitted out. It has a strong resemblance to the 'mobile bio-weapons labs' described by

Powell to the UN, but is it the smoking gun? Not even the most desperate Pentagon official goes that far. No trace of biological weapons residue has been found inside. The truck was apparently thoroughly cleaned out with bleach before it was stolen.

Yet many experts believe something will be found. Before the 1991 Gulf war, Iraq did have a massive chemical and biological weapons programme. Some is probably still lying around. If sufficient quantities can be uncovered, perhaps it will be enough for a public eager to feel the war was worth it. Finding nothing is unthinkable.

#### **More from The Observer**

[Iraq: Observer special](#)

[Iraq Comment](#)

[Iraq: the business of conflict](#)

#### **Breaking news from Guardian Unlimited**

[Special report: Iraq](#)

#### **Send us your views**

[Email us at debate@observer.co.uk](mailto:debate@observer.co.uk)

#### **More from Guardian Unlimited**

[More comment and analysis on Iraq](#)

[Special report: Iraq - the media war](#)

[Interactive guides to the Iraq crisis](#)

[Iraq diaries](#)

Observer sections



Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2003