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Intelligence and WMDs

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One year ago, the United States reported to the United Nations that Iraq was maintaining a significant arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Despite the pre-war consensus of U.S., British and other intelligence services, nine months of U.S. searches in postwar Iraq have uncovered no evidence to back that assertion.

Was the pre-war intelligence inadequate, or was it intentionally misrepresented? When someone in the White House last summer exposed the identity of a CIA undercover operative to the media, was this disclosure merely careless or an intentional effort to discredit her husband's public charges that the administration had misused intelligence?

Consequently, the U.S. public and much of the world now question the accuracy and integrity of U.S. intelligence information. Many suspect that the administration used intelligence for ideological ends, to advocate and to intimidate rather than to understand and to inform. If this perception persists and deepens without remedy, the resulting "credibility gap" between what the United States says and what is believed will seriously undermine our national security.

Only an independent and objective investigation, followed by decisive corrective action, can span this widening credibility gap. There must be a no-holds-barred, nonpartisan inquiry into the character, quality and presentation of pre-war intelligence available to policy-makers. It must be completely unconnected to the Bush administration or Congress. The administration's newfound willingness to create an investigating commission, whose members would be selected by the president and whose report could be postponed for political ends, is unacceptable.

The perception that the United States twisted intelligence to political ends could easily undermine domestic and international support for the financial and military assistance that will be required for years to reconstruct Iraq and put it solidly on the path toward democracy. Other countries will not help us in the war on terrorism if they question our information and judgment, or convince themselves that we are simply crying "wolf," imagining terrorists beneath every rock to suit domestic political needs.

Here at home, if the U.S. public and its representatives in Congress doubt the accuracy and objectivity of intelligence regarding emerging threats, we as a nation will not be unified and effective in fighting terrorism. We will not know which threats are real, which imaginary; in an era of mounting deficits and irresponsible tax cuts, we do not have the resources to flail about on uncertain information. If the public loses faith in its leaders' judgment about gathering threats, it may become impossible to sustain necessary but lengthy military actions to defend U.S. security interests.

The belief that the United States will expose its own covert CIA operatives' identity for political expediency may make intelligence-gathering even more difficult. If foreign

governments worry that information they provide to us may be disclosed by our government for political purposes, possibly compromising the sources of that information, they may not provide us sensitive, critical intelligence.

I am a co-sponsor of legislation to establish an independent commission on Iraq and to provide the needed resources. I also supported a resolution of inquiry to ensure timely and complete executive branch cooperation with the investigation into the outing of a CIA operative.

This is the right action to take. An independent commission must report on these issues quickly, and not wait until after the November election. There can be no delay in determining why U.S. intelligence has been inadequate and whether the administration misused intelligence resources. Resolving these problems may take years, but it is critical to start now.

Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Francisco and San Mateo counties, is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee. He was one of 110 congressional Democrats who voted in favor of the joint resolution authorizing President Bush to use force against Iraq.

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