



Office of Representative Jim McDermott

The Nuclear Threat from Iraq
Frank von Hippel
Princeton University
Program on Science and Global Security
Woodrow Wilson School

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Thank you, Congressman, for organizing this briefing. It is important that our checks and balances system be made to work and that Congress not be stampeded.

My name is Frank von Hippel. I am a Professor of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and co-direct Princeton's nuclear nonproliferation program. During 1993 and 1994, I was Assistant Director for National Security in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. One of my major efforts was to launch programs to help Russia secure its nuclear weapons materials to make it more difficult for countries like Iraq to get hold of them.

So, like everyone else, I am against Iraq acquiring nuclear weapons. Furthermore, I am for the U.N. Security Council forcing Iraq to comply fully with its commitments to eliminate all of its chemical and biological weapons and ballistic missiles. I hope that the current crisis leads to that result.

The issue before Congress, however, is whether Iraq poses such an imminent threat that Congress needs to decide for an invasion of Iraq before the election. To give my perspective on this question, I will address three others:

1. Is Saddam about to acquire nuclear weapons?
2. Would he use them if he did?
3. If he wouldn't use them, why does he want them so much?

Is Saddam about to acquire nuclear weapons?

The Administration suggests that Iraq is about to get nuclear weapons. When pressed, they remind us that we didn't know the full extent of Iraq's nuclear program before the Gulf War. Their urgency seems to stem more from what they don't know rather than about what they do know.

Thanks to the UN's inspections, we do know a lot about what Iraq had accomplished by 1991. The UN also destroyed virtually all the huge nuclear infrastructure that Saddam spent billions to create. What was left in 1998, when the inspectors departed, was the know-how that the Iraqi scientists and engineers developed in that surprisingly ineffective project.

Saddam has had four years to rebuild -- but has also been subject to much more stringent import controls than he faced prior to 1991. I would guess that Iraq is therefore today much further from being able to make weapon-grade uranium than it was in 1991.

There is one other possibility, however: Iraq might possibly have acquired some nuclear-weapons-useable fissile material from another country. That is a real danger. That is why the Turner-Nunn Nuclear Threat Initiative bankrolled the removal of the weapon-useable uranium from Yugoslavia three weeks ago. I hope that the Administration will pay more attention to this danger so that we don't need to rely on Ted Turner to do the Government's job of protecting us from nuclear proliferation.

In any case, if Iraq obtained such material, it would have a shortcut to the bomb. So this brings us to the second question.

Would Saddam use nuclear weapons if he had them?

Saddam did not have a nuclear weapon in 1991 but he did have biological and chemical weapons. Yet he didn't use them, even when much of his Army was being annihilated. Why not?

The obvious answer is that the Alliance would have conquered his country and tried him as an international war criminal. So, in my view, he kept his weapons of mass destruction in reserve as a deterrent to our invading Iraq.

There is no reason why Saddam's calculus should have changed since then. There is no indication that he wants to commit suicide by attacking one of his neighbors with a weapon of mass destruction -- or give one to a terrorist group to attack us with. He knows that we might figure out where it came from -- or, if we didn't, we might blame it on him anyway.

Saddam did attack both the Iraqi Kurds and Iran with chemical weapons in the 1980s but we were supporting him against Iran then and we didn't object much. Since 1991, he has known that he can't do it again and survive. So we come to the third question.

Why does Saddam want weapons of mass destruction so much that he is willing to endure more than a decade of punitive international sanctions?

I think that the answer is obvious: Just as we used nuclear threats as a deterrent to the Soviet Union invading Western Europe, Saddam sees his weapons of mass

destruction as a deterrent to the U.S. invading his Country.

The most likely trigger for Saddam's use of these weapons therefore would be for us to invade Iraq.

Of course, on the other side, the argument will be made that Saddam could well eventually acquire nuclear weapons. That is true, but the likelihood that he will do so in the next three months is not obviously greater than it was in any of the 60 3-month periods in the past 15 years. So my advice is that is more important for the country and Congress to make the right decision on what to do about Iraq than to make a quick one.

In the meantime, if you want to think about a real nuclear threat that the Administration is ignoring, think about the more than one thousand nuclear warheads that Russian has ready to launch at us within minutes.

During the campaign and after he was elected President Bush gave speeches saying that this is a dangerous situation and that he planned to talk to Russia about taking both their and our missiles off alert. However, as we learned from the leaked Nuclear Posture Review, the Department of Defense rejected that thinking and asserted instead that its proposed National Missile Defense would someday reduce the danger from an mistaken or unauthorized Russian launch.

I hope that we live that long!