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Finding the Truth

The Iraq Survey Group and the Search for WMD

Charles A. Duelfer

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 Bringing
 understanding to the
 reasons behind
 Saddam's decisions
 concerning WMD ...
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Previously a senior State Department officer and deputy chairman of the UN Special Commission on Iraq, **Charles A. Duelfer** was appointed Special Advisor for Iraq WMD by Director of Central Intelligence **George Tenet**.

Following Operation Iraqi Freedom and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Secretary of Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) commissioned a special team to search for and conduct an investigation of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Working from May 2003 to September 2004, the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) recorded its findings in the "Comprehensive Report of the DCI's Special Advisor on Iraq WMD," also called the Duelfer Report. This report not only accounts for the physical remnants of Iraq's WMD, but also highlights the dynamics underlying the Iraqi president's decisions concerning the program. At different times, Saddam opted to have or not have WMD. He chose to use WMD on some occasions but not use it on others. The report brings understanding to the reasons behind those decisions. It presents a dynamic analysis of an international security problem that vexed the world for three decades.

Characteristics of the ISG—including its organization, investigative approach, and access to information—were frequently unique and innovative. They evolved to meet the requirements of a developing situation. This article examines which approaches were successful and which were not.

The Duelfer Report came at a time of crisis of confidence in the Intelligence Community (IC) and in the administration of President George W. Bush because of its past firmly stated convictions about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction—which proved to be wrong. The report provides a basis for the reevaluation of WMD estimates. As such, its approach, the data it provides, and the openness of its presentation contribute to a rebuilding of confidence in intelligence projections of threat. There is still a long way to go, but perhaps some of the approaches used by the ISG and the Comprehensive Report can aid future tasks.

Background

Washington, having centered its arguments for war against Saddam on his non-compliance with the United Nation's WMD-related resolutions, prepared for hostilities believing that chemical and biological weapons existed in Iraq and could be used against coalition troops. This belief was based on IC analysis recorded in a National Intelligence Estimate quickly drafted in October 2002.¹

¹ "Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction," NIE 2002-16HC, October 2002 (classified SECRET)

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Even before war started, plans were being made for the confirmation of Iraq's possession of WMD. The Pentagon sponsored a conference in September 2002 for former inspectors from the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) to draw out lessons learned about hunting for WMD.² The clear recommendation of the inspectors was that the most productive way to find such weapons was through an investigative approach drawing on assistance from the Iraqis themselves. Nevertheless, war planners created a special unit, the 75th Expeditionary Task Force, and gave it responsibility for planning and executing a search for Iraq's WMD during the conflict and immediately afterwards. This unit followed the invasion force and hoppedscotched among locations identified by the IC as potentially related to WMD as the sites came under coalition control. No WMD stocks were found. []

² UNSCOM was created by UN Security Council Resolution 687, which ended the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It was charged with verifying the destruction of Iraq's WMD programs and monitoring to assure the programs were not restarted. UNSCOM operated in Iraq from May 1991 until December 1998, when, following a series of crises, President Clinton ordered four days of bombing (Operation DESERT FOX). Commission members were evacuated and Iraq never permitted their return. The UN Security Council was in disarray following DESERT FOX and, after a year's debate, voted to replace UNSCOM with another organization, called UNMOVIC, which was given the monitoring mission []

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The ISG received ample funding from DIA and drew upon experts from across the IC, Australia, and the UK.
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In the aftermath of the war, military and CIA teams independently sought out key Iraqis thought to have been connected with WMD programs. Washington rapidly saw that this uncoordinated approach was not working. Required was a new search mechanism that would focus less on protecting troops from WMD and more on carrying out an investigation in a post-conflict environment. []

Creation of the ISG []

In a decision blessed by the White House, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld agreed to provide funding and resources for a special WMD investigative unit that would follow the strategic

guidance of a senior civilian advisor to be named by the DCI. Thus, the Iraq Survey Group was created in May 2003. Army Maj. Gen. Keith Dayton was given the task of developing the organization, and DCI George Tenet recruited David Kay to be his special advisor for Iraq WMD. Kay had served as an International Atomic Energy Agency inspector in Iraq in 1991 and had led some of the confrontational nuclear inspections at the time. Charles Duelfer, past deputy chairman of the UN Special Commission on Iraq, later took over the role as senior civilian advisor. []

[] and attracted specialists from across the IC []

In organizing the ISG, Gen. Dayton worked out of the Ba'ath Party recreation area in the southeast quadrant of Baghdad International Airport. One of Saddam's palaces on the compound was turned into a secure facility, with computers and communications equipment. [redacted]

[redacted] All facets of intelligence collection and analysis were brought together at the airport site, and ISG headquarters was directly connected to its own small maneuver units. About 1,600 personnel were involved, including support staff and contractors to provide logistics, housing, and meals. [redacted]

The key components of the ISG were the following:

- Joint Interrogation/Debriefing Center (JIDC), which interrogated and debriefed high-value detainees. This pool also debriefed individuals not in detention and detainees held at other facilities.
- Combined Media Processing Center (CMPC) for translating and digitizing documents found in Iraq. Images of documents and gists of their contents were loaded into the national HARMONY database.
- Chemical and Biological Intelligence Support Teams (CBIST), which consisted of mobile teams of subject-matter experts for time-sensitive exploitation of sources with information on chemical-, biological-, radiologi-

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cal-, and nuclear-related programs.

- Mobile Collection Team (MCT), comprised of the necessary personnel and equipment to gather in the field any documents, media, and material of potential interest to the ISG mission.
- Survey Operations Center (SOC), which oversaw and managed DoD HUMINT and technical collection.
- Survey Analysis Center (SAC), for generating actionable and timely intelligence from ongoing exploitation activities. Initially located in Qatar with some personnel deployed in Iraq, over time the functions of the SAC migrated forward to personnel collocated with case officers in the SOC in Baghdad.

[redacted]
High-Level Attention [redacted]

The White House, heads of Washington agencies, the British government, and Canberra followed the ISG's progress on a weekly

basis. This level of attention facilitated obtaining resources and getting decisions made. It also guaranteed that the work of the ISG was subject to careful scrutiny. It is important to record, however, that such scrutiny did not translate into political guidance. The only direction that DCI Tenet gave Duelfer, for example, was to “find the truth”. It was broadly recognized that if ISG work were seen as politically tainted, the effort would be worse than doing nothing. [redacted]

The structure of the ISG reflected military intelligence practices and doctrine—essentially, it was a military organization with civilian elements laced through it. Although the group ultimately was a smoothly running machine, the machine and the task were not perfectly matched. Military intelligence tends to be geared and trained to address tactical intelligence requirements: Are there enemy soldiers on the other side of the hill and are they going to attack? Preparing for these mission

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requirements leads to such practices as having detainee debriefings run by professional interrogators who are not subject-matter experts ☐

The ISG mission—the hunt for Iraqi WMD—was more akin to a combination of a homicide investigation and the preparation of a doctoral dissertation. The task required understanding things that often happened years in the past. At the beginning, much of the investigation centered on checking the sites and facilities that prewar intelligence suggested were linked to WMD. When this did not lead to expected discoveries, tactics shifted to investigating the circumstances as they were found on the ground. The ISG continued to follow-up on reports that surfaced after the end of hostilities about hidden locations of WMD-related material, but these reports almost never panned out and frequently were outright scams aimed at deriving monetary rewards. The process of developing the ground truth on WMD came to depend on systematic exploitation of three major sources of information—sites, documents, and people. ☐



A UK chemical agent detection dog with handler ☐

Exploiting Sites and Documents ☐

Prior to the war, a list of over 500 potential WMD-related sites was compiled by the US military and intelligence agencies. These included known missile construction sites as well as all manner of industrial facilities and laboratories. Locations that had been monitored by UN inspectors were naturally on the list. ISG teams visited many places thought to contain WMD materials or programs. Because there was a complete breakdown of order following the fall of the Saddam's regime, many sites had been looted before they were visited. ISG teams found no stockpiles of weapons, although some activities and materials that should have been declared to the United Nations inspectors were discovered. Documents and personnel found at some sites did provide important information. ☐

During Operation Iraqi Freedom and the subsequent occupation of the country, many key government facilities were taken over and thousands of boxes of documents secured. Sometimes this was done in an organized fashion, but often not. Once the ISG was fully up and running, it operated a triage system to organize the captured documents. A limited capability for translating and scanning documents of immediate interest was located at ISG headquarters in Baghdad. A far larger facility was eventually set up in Qatar. This exploitation activity ultimately employed hundreds of linguists (most of them uncleared)

and a warehouse of documents. After reviewing documents, staff members would prepare short summaries to place with scanned images of the originals in an electronic database. Analysts then would review the gists and, if a document appeared to be of interest, request a full translation. ☐

Interviewing People ☐

It became clear very quickly that the Iraqis who participated or knew about WMD programs or the regime hierarchy would be the best sources for the ISG investigation. Many senior figures were tracked down and captured by coalition forces in the months immediately after Baghdad fell. Most of these were on the so-called Blacklist, which had been constructed by the US military and intelligence agencies before the war. These individuals, known as "high value targets," were held at Camp Cropper, a special detention facility on Baghdad airport property. ☐

While the Blacklist was an imperfect tool—founded on the same prewar intelligence that was demonstrated to be weak in other areas of inquiry about Iraq—many of these senior detainees provided extremely useful information and perspectives. Several who had responsibility for former WMD developments were technocrats with no particular love of Saddam or

² Some documents relating to Iraqi WMD that appeared to be of high interest were found to be forgeries. The provenance of these remains a mystery. ☐

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his regime. Over time, they filled out much of the picture that eventually was incorporated into the Comprehensive Report. ☐

Some Iraqi WMD participants were not detained if they could be called in for questioning as needed. Initially most of these individuals were amenable to helping. Subsequently, however, after some ill-advised public statements by the United States that WMD technicians might be put on trial, they sought to avoid contact with the ISG. Moreover, as the anti-coalition insurgency grew in Iraq, their reluctance increased out of fear of becoming targets for insurgent revenge. ☐

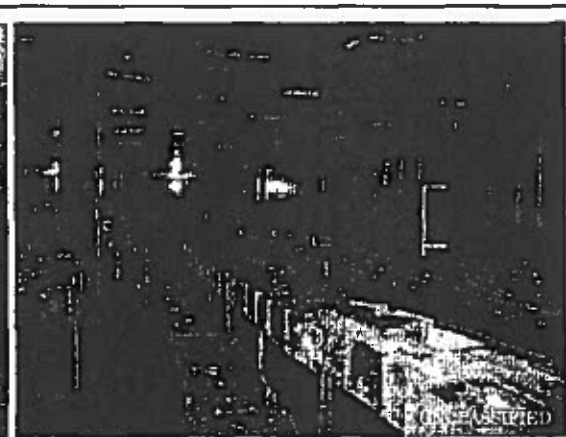
Altogether, the ISG interviewed hundreds of Iraqis about the WMD program and the Iraqi regime. Interviews provided the best way to elucidate and corroborate key aspects of the Iraqi programs, such as the regime's intentions regarding the use of WMD and the ultimate disposition of the programs. ☐

The ability to interview Saddam himself lent incalculable depth to the investigation. Captured on 13 December 2003, the former ruler was held separately from other Iraqis, and his debriefing was handled differently. Following initial questioning, the FBI decided that Saddam would have only one interlocutor, an Arab-American FBI agent with a background in homicide investigation, who was about the age of Saddam's sons. Anything the former ruler wanted or did was worked out through this individual. Saddam was very coy in his discussions of substance, but he did have one incentive to speak and that was to establish his legacy. If he did not speak, the picture of his leadership left for posterity would be drawn from the

accounts of his top lieutenants—individuals he knew would be shaping the story to serve their interests, not his. ☐

The technique of having a single individual spend several hours every day for several months with Saddam allowed the capture of small bits of candor on a range of topics. Ultimately, Saddam said he felt he knew the debriefer better than his own sons. The close relationship they developed yielded substantial data that might not otherwise have been obtained. ☐

The debriefer was excellent. He took a great deal of time to learn the intricacies of the WMD investigation so that he could channel his conversations with Saddam and could listen for revelations at the most casual of moments. For example, hints of Saddam's ambitions for Iraq and himself surfaced amidst discussions of what women found attractive in men. ☐



Iraqi documents as found in the wake of hostilities, and after organization by ISG staff. ☐

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Comparing and testing the descriptions of events and programs provided by Saddam and the regime's other top leaders was the most useful way to establish confidence in how the ruler viewed WMD and why he made the decisions he did. []

The Role of Analysts (U)

The ISG was fortunate to have some analysts who had long experience on Iraqi WMD issues, both through careers in intelligence organizations []

[] Some knew the Iraqis very well. The background that these analysts brought to bear helped in deriving a working hypothesis about the disposition of Iraqi WMD from Iraqi debriefing materials. A few of them were also quite familiar with the relevant sites in Iraq, which proved invaluable in judging the credibility of Iraqi claims concerning some facilities and the programs they hosted. For example, the head of the ISG's analytic team for delivery systems was a British former UN inspector with long experience in working on the Iraqi ballistic missile program. Without this background, it would have been far more difficult to build a credible picture of how the missile program had developed. Able to quickly determine if a detainee was dissembling, he could debrief the lead engineers and program managers in detail and assure that all major aspects of the program were understood. []

Unfortunately, few analysts had such strong credentials. The United States had not had relations with Iraq for over a decade and governmental expertise had atrophied. US "experts" tended to get all their data from intelligence reports or open source material, not from direct contact with Iraqis. Moreover, when the UN inspectors were active in Iraq in the 1990s, IC analysts became largely dependent upon their data, which were more detailed than what came in from other sources, rather than building independent channels that could be relied on after UN inspections ended. []

Due to the hazardous and unpleasant conditions in Iraq during the ISG's mission, many analysts were unwilling to stay for extended periods or come out at all. As a result, some staff members would just start to become familiar with whatever aspect they were assigned and then they would leave. This problem even extended to those sent out to lead the analytic teams.

[] While these individuals may not have had previous experience in Iraq, they at least had the advantage of staying for the duration of their contracts, which usually ran for at least several months. []

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When case officers and analysts worked together for extended periods, a symbiotic relationship developed.

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that there was no WMD stockpile and left Iraq in early December 2003. DCI Tenet named Charles Duelfer to replace Kay in January 2004. Duelfer adjusted the investigation to derive the reasons behind the decisions by the Saddam regime to build or destroy WMD. With the remarkable opportunity to debrief all the key participants, the ISG took a dynamic approach to its analysis of regime decision-making. This included investigating the strategy for the future

of Iraq regarding WMD. Ideally this could inform future policymakers concerned with controlling WMD proliferation. ☐

Within the ISG, a new task group was established to investigate the Iraqi regime's strategic intentions with respect to WMD. The world knew that Saddam had had chemical and biological weapons at least until 1991. His top ministers had described to UN inspectors how they had used WMD in the war against Iran in the 1980s; indeed, they credited the use of CW and ballistic missiles with forcing Iran to end the war. Senior Iraqis also believed that Baghdad's possession of WMD strongly contributed to the decision by the United States not to remove the regime in 1991, after Iraqi forces had been pushed back from Kuwait. Hence, Saddam had two experiences in which WMD had saved him. Why would he give up such weapons? For how long would he forego them? Under what conditions might he have recommenced the programs? These were important questions the ISG was uniquely positioned to address. With access to the key Iraqi decision-makers, including Saddam, answering these questions seemed achievable. ☐

The problem of understanding Iraqi WMD policies and intentions was simplified by the fact that the regime was really one person—Saddam. Unlike trying to fathom the intentions or predict the behavior of a pluralistic government, understanding Iraq was reduced to understanding



Redirecting the ISG ☐

The DCI's first special advisor for Iraq, David Kay, concluded



This ISG vehicle in which the authors had been riding was damaged in an attack and then destroyed by the US military to prevent capture of sensitive communication gear. ☐

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Saddam. This became one way of bounding the collection and analysis problem. []

Following the Money (U)

A second way of bounding the problem was to look at resource allocation. The fact that Iraq was under UN sanctions that included limitations on oil sales offered an opportunity to examine the regime's priorities for the use of its limited resources. With this objective, the ISG obtained [] oil ministry documentation, which remained in good order following Operation Iraqi Freedom. The ISG put together a team of analysts to examine oil sales records and especially the data on the UN Oil for Food (OFF) Program. This turned out to be a very productive effort. The data on the growth of resources available to Saddam after he accepted the OFF Program was a powerful tool for understanding the regime's objectives and how it was attempting to achieve them. (U)

The analysis showed that Saddam's highest priority was to free himself from sanctions; the strategy and tactics he used to achieve this became clear through his decisions on the export of Iraqi oil. Oil was allocated to individuals and countries supportive of his regime, especially those—such as France and Russia—who could influence the UN Security Council's vote on sanctions. In essence, he made these recipients stakeholders in the survival and development of his regime.

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Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan headed the system for deciding whom to favor. The small group that administered the allocation of Iraqi contracts and favors provided guidance to Oil Minister Amer Rasheed. []

[] discussed these tactics at length with Duelfer and others. If Saddam's top ministers felt they were not getting all they should from some favored countries or individuals, they adjusted contracts accordingly. The process was carefully monitored to judge results. (U)

Using this approach, the regime was making considerable strides toward eroding sanctions until the world changed on 11 September 2001. Before the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Baghdad had been increasingly flooded with international businessmen, and Security Council members were actively violating the UN sanctions on Iraq—with the knowledge of their governments. By the end of 2002, the impending military action against Baghdad had brought this activity to a halt. (U)

By following the money, the ISG was able to gain substantial understanding of the regime and

its WMD priorities. Saddam was directing resources to sustain the capacity to recommence producing WMD once UN sanctions and international scrutiny collapsed. The collection of the oil data allowed a very thorough analysis of Iraq's Military Industrial Commission. Saddam was replenishing and reinventing this state-run weapons complex as funding became available. (U)

Analytic Mindset (U)

In examining the data, it was vital for analysts to see the picture through Iraqi eyes, or, more critically, through Saddam's mindset. This was not easy, but it was vital. The ISG often had analysts who had never worked in the field before. They were dealing with real people, places, and objects, not imagery, SIGINT, and HUMINT reporting. Many analysts had difficulty adapting. Placed in a circumstance where they had the real Iraq stretching before them and virtually any idea for investigation was encouraged, they would nonetheless revert back to a pedantic testing of prewar IC assessments. Forceful assertion by ISG leaders that the prewar assessments were irrelevant and what was needed was an understanding of what had actually existed in Iraq was therapeutic and helped steer the analytic efforts. (U)

Analysts were reminded repeatedly that they must be aware of their own assumptions, as this would affect what they recognized as evidence. Like a comput-

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er operating system that is transparent to most users, analysts can be unaware of assumptions that shape their conclusions. A standard example is the implicit application of cost/benefit logic, which holds that the least expensive and most efficient method will always be pursued. That logic does not necessarily apply in Iraq. Moreover, if Iraqis are trying to deceive, they have the advantage: They have a far better sense of what we are looking for and how we perceive them, than the other way around. Most of the lead Iraqis had studied in the West. No one in the ISG had ever studied in Baghdad. ☐

A couple of points illustrate the importance of recognizing bias and assumptions. Under Saddam, Iraq was a country where one person's opinion was decisive. While Iraq had many governmental procedures that were like any other government, there were also many major decisions for which there was no record. Because of the nature of the regime, presidential decisions were not always documented, especially those on sensitive issues such as UN-prohibited WMD. Therefore, the absence of evidence was not the same as evidence of absence. Likewise, given the nature of Saddam's rule, and the cost to even high-ranking lieutenants of not satisfying the president, the potency of *implicit* presidential guidance was as great as, and in some cases greater than, *explicit* guidance. ☐

Analysts had to understand this way of operating and the tensions it placed on senior Iraqis.

Having a feel for the decision-making environment would allow a better understanding of debriefing results and of what evidence they should seek. ☐

Those around Saddam regularly survived by being able to respond favorably when Saddam asked for something. To be successful in that regime you had to be able to anticipate what he would want. This aspect of Saddam's rule makes it understandable that while senior officials around Saddam all were convinced WMD programs would be restarted once sanctions had collapsed, there is no documentation of this objective. And analysts should not expect to find any. ☐

The Timeline Tool ☐

To try to understand factors that Saddam evaluated in making WMD decisions, a timeline was created and significant events plotted. A number of inflection points were identified when discrete decisions were taken with respect to WMD. Concurrent events—such as Security Council decisions, funding shifts from the OFF Program, and significant political events—were also plotted on the timeline. This process and the chart itself were used to orient analysts and ultimately

readers of the Comprehensive Report to Saddam's point of view. Twice weekly meetings were held to review all areas with the goal of understanding the regime's strategic intentions. ☐

The mind shift was difficult for many analysts, but ultimately they produced a credible product. This portion of the report takes the reader into the regime's mindset and allows a sufficient understanding of its dynamics to provide a basis for predicting where the regime might have gone in the future. The techniques that the ISG used in identifying regime dynamics may have utility in other cases where predictions are demanded. ☐

Declassification of the Report ☐

Inaccurate prewar assessments about Iraq's WMD greatly damaged the credibility of IC work and, indeed, the credibility of the United States at a time when the country still needed to pursue preemptive actions against terrorist and other threats. It was the strong view of the DCI Special Advisor that the final report on the WMD investigation should be unclassified. Unless all interested readers, including Iraqis, could examine the data and analysis, there would be eternal doubt about the themes and conclusions. Support for declassifying the text was strong at the highest levels of the US government. ☐

Nonetheless, substantial objections were raised from various

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quarters and for various reasons. The wisdom of providing the public with information about how to evade sanctions was questioned. Concern was expressed about exposing information useful to those wishing to pursue denial and deception activities. And some parties—notably at the State Department—strongly wanted to avoid the international political fallout from the report's explicit description of the actions of countries on the UN Security Council that violated the very sanctions passed by the Council. ☐

In congressional hearings on the Comprehensive Report, however, many expressed deep satisfaction that the product was accessible to all. And the positive response since the report's publication has clearly demonstrated the value of making as much information as possible unclassified in similar reports. Classified assessments can be subjected to a great deal of public skepticism, whereas unclassified reports, with all the supporting data present, have the advantage of being defensible. Moreover, if readers do not like the way the author connects the dots, they are free to connect them some other way. ☐

Template for the Future? ☐

Three features of the ISG's investigation are not likely to be dupli-

⁴ In fact, a subsequent series of investigations into the corruption of the UN Oil-for-Food Program based on the data published in the Comprehensive Report created a major diplomatic stir. ☐

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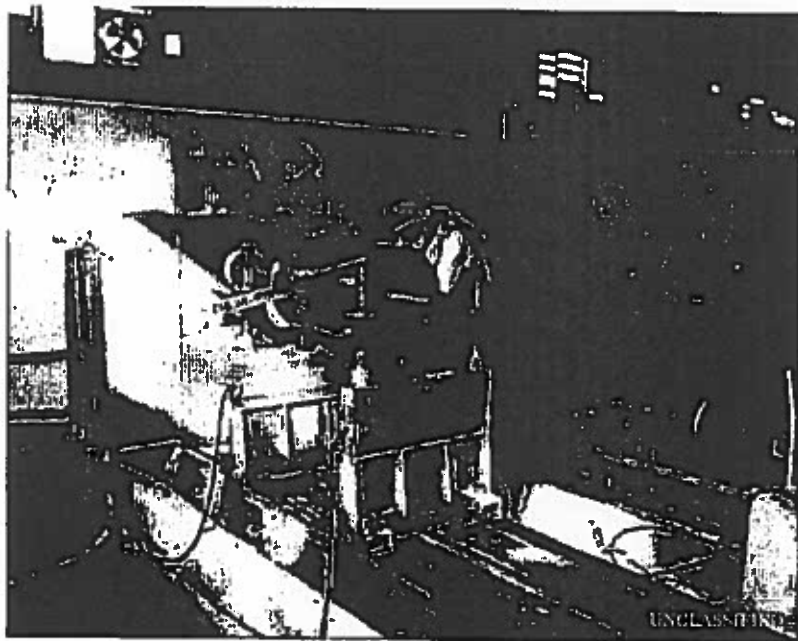
cated: First, its task was largely historical—i.e., its mission was to discover what happened to Iraq's WMD; second, the ISG received high-level attention over a sustained period; and third, the Special Advisor was given ultimate decisionmaking authority over the direction of the investigation and the resulting report. The last two features allowed the ISG to operate quickly and with independence. ☐

Other aspects of the ISG process, however, might serve as useful models for future investigations.

First, a forward-deployed, inter-agency—even international—task force organized to accomplish a defined mission is an effective way of applying intelligence resources. Bright, energetic analysts and collectors can think creatively about intelligence needs and how to satisfy them with available collection tools. Moreover, the ISG's direct links to ☐

☐ databases ☐ was a tremendous help to its work. Such access should be duplicated in support of similar missions. ☐

The ISG's dynamic ability to develop and implement intelligence collection in real time on the ground served the investigation



ISG nuclear team, accompanied by members of Iraq's National Monitoring Directorate, inspects condition of potential dual-use equipment. ☐

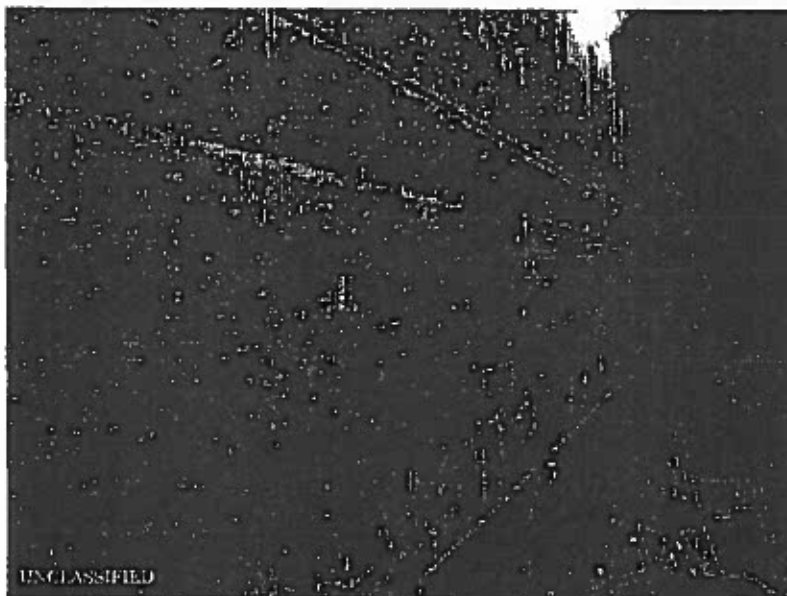
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well. This flexibility was demonstrated in a subset of the ISG's work having to do with determining the connection between the insurgents and the former regime's CW capabilities. Dubbed the Al Aboud investigation (after the location of a suspected Iraqi CW laboratory), team members swiftly reacted to information developed from raids, designed new targeting packages, conducted more raids, and progressed through a very thorough process that ran down the threat. In all likelihood,

it preempted a potential risk from evolving into a real CW threat. ☐

Although the ISG's configuration was geared more toward dealing with tactical threats than carrying out a long-term investigation, it did work—and for some tasks, it

worked very well. It offers a fine example of how a lean and agile team can collect, analyze, and, when connected to appropriate maneuver units, prosecute a campaign against appropriate targets. It also demonstrates ways analysis can be improved, in particular through close interaction between case officers and analysts. With proper management to prevent conflicts of interest, such close interaction of case officers and analysts can yield, perhaps, the biggest improvements growing out of the ISG experience. ☐



The ISG's timeline chart, which stretched 15 feet, helped in analyzing Saddam's WMD decisionmaking. ☐



Duelfer testifying before Congress in October 2004 on the ISG and the Comprehensive Report. ☐