

Edited excerpts from “Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked,”

George A. Lopez and David Cotright, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2004

The Bush administration's primary justification for going to war against Iraq last year was the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. But almost as soon as U.S. forces took Baghdad, it became clear that this fear was based on bad intelligence and faulty assumptions. The failure to find WMD in Iraq caused a furor.

Public debate focused on the question of what went wrong with U.S. intelligence. Given the deteriorated state of Iraq's unconventional weapons programs and conventional military capabilities, this was only appropriate. But missing from the discussion is an equally important question: What went right with U.S. policy toward Iraq between 1990 and 2003? On the way to their misjudgments, intelligence agencies and policymakers disregarded considerable evidence of the destruction and deterioration of Iraq's weapons programs, the result of a successful strategy of containment in place for a dozen years. They consistently ignored volumes of data about the impact of sanctions and inspections on Iraq's military strength.

The United Nations sanctions that began in August 1990 were the longest running, most comprehensive, and most controversial in the history of the world body. Most analysts argued prior to the Iraq war -- and, in many cases, continue to argue -- that sanctions were a failure. In reality, however, the system of containment that sanctions cemented did much to erode Iraqi military capabilities. Sanctions compelled Iraq to accept inspections and monitoring and won concessions from Baghdad on political issues such as the border dispute with Kuwait. They also drastically reduced the revenue available to Saddam, prevented the rebuilding of Iraqi defenses after the Persian Gulf War, and blocked the import of vital materials and technologies for producing WMD.

The unique synergy of sanctions and inspections thus eroded Iraq's weapons programs and constrained its military capabilities. The renewed UN resolve demonstrated by the Security Council's approval of a "smart" sanctions package in May 2002 showed that the system could have continued to contain and deter Saddam. Unfortunately, only when U.S. troops invaded in March 2003 did these successes become clear: the Iraqi military that confronted them had, in the previous twelve years, been decimated by the strategy of containment that the Bush administration had called a failure in order to justify war in the first place.

Evidence of absence

Most coverage of the weapons inspections that began after the Gulf War focused on Baghdad's efforts to stall, evade, and obstruct UN monitors. But despite Saddam's recalcitrance, the record shows that the UN disarmament program -- which Vice President Dick Cheney dubbed "the most intrusive system of arms control in history" -- decapitated Iraq's banned weapons programs and destroyed the infrastructure that would have allowed it to restart clandestine programs. From 1991 to 1998, the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) identified and dismantled almost all of Iraq's prohibited weapons. In conjunction with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it conducted hundreds of inspection missions at weapons sites and documentation centers, systematically uncovering and eliminating Iraq's nuclear weapons program and most of its chemical, biological, and ballistic missile systems. After four months of inspections from November 2002 until March 2003 -- which included 237 missions to 148 sites -- the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) confirmed the depleted state of Iraq's capabilities.

Of course, the political assessments of these accomplishments were muted. Especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the achievements of UN disarmament were ignored, and Saddam's defiance was taken as confirmation that deadly stockpiles remained. Despite these suspicions, however, progress was being made. As former chief UN weapons inspector

Hans Blix wrote in his book *Disarming Iraq*, "the UN and the world had succeeded in disarming Iraq without knowing it."

The greatest success of the UN disarmament mission was in the nuclear realm. IAEA inspectors found an alarmingly extensive nuclear weapons program when they entered Iraq in 1991, and they set out to destroy all known facilities related to the nuclear program and to account for Iraq's entire inventory of nuclear fuel. In 1997, the IAEA and UNSCOM concluded that there were no "indications that any weapon-useable nuclear material remain[ed] in Iraq" or "evidence in Iraq of prohibited materials, equipment or activities."

When inspections resumed in 2002-3, IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei confirmed that, according to all evidence, Iraq had no nuclear weapons and no program to redevelop them. ElBaradei reported to the UN Security Council in March 2003 that inspectors had found "no indication of resumed nuclear activities ... nor any indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities at any inspected sites." The IAEA's report noted, "During the past four years, at the majority of Iraqi sites, industrial capacity has deteriorated substantially."

UN weapons inspectors also catalogued and destroyed Iraq's once-substantial ballistic missile capability. All but two of the 819 banned Scud missiles known to have existed in Iraq prior to 1990 were accounted for. Although inspectors discovered that Iraq had failed to declare some dual-use equipment and attempted to import Russian ballistic-missile guidance systems, they found no evidence that Iraq had actually developed or flight-tested any prohibited missiles. Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in July 2002, "Iraq has not fired any Scud variants in nearly twelve years."

UNSCOM achieved similar success eliminating Iraq's chemical and biological weapons programs. After the Gulf War, inspectors discovered stockpiles of chemical weapons. They disposed of 480,000 liters of live chemical agent and more than 3,000 tons of precursor chemicals. As a panel of Security Council

experts reported, "the prime [chemical weapons] development and production complex in Iraq was dismantled and closed under UNSCOM supervision and other identified facilities have been put under monitoring." Inspectors also supervised the destruction of Iraq's biological weapons program. In 1996, UNSCOM demolished the main biological production facility at Al Hakam. When UNMOVIC inspectors entered Iraq in 2002, they found no evidence of renewed chemical or biological weapons programs.

The considerable deterrent value of weapons monitoring went unacknowledged by Washington. The presence in Iraq of more than 100 highly trained weapons inspectors equipped with the world's most advanced monitoring technology provided an unprecedented ability to discover any clandestine efforts by Baghdad to redevelop WMD. The Ongoing Monitoring and Verification (OMV) system mandated by the Security Council in 1991 installed an elaborate network of radiological and chemical sensors, cameras, ground-penetrating radar, and other detection systems, bolstered by aerial surveillance and no-notice visits to weapons facilities by inspectors.

The sanctions era

The success of UN weapons monitoring and disarmament was largely due to the UN-enforced sanctions regime. Dismissed by hawks as weak and ineffective and reviled by the left for its humanitarian costs, the sanctions regime has had few defenders. The evidence shows that sanctions forced Baghdad to comply with the inspections and disarmament process and prevented Iraqi rearmament by blocking critical imports. And the "smart" sanctions reform of 2001 and 2002 laid the foundation for a technically feasible and politically sustainable long-term embargo that could have furthered the goal of containing Saddam Hussein.

The story of the nearly thirteen years of UN sanctions on Iraq is long and tortuous. For the first six years, comprehensive sanctions cut Iraq off from all world trade and shut down its oil exports, devastating its economy and society. Coupled with the damage caused by Gulf War bombing, sanctions helped spur a severe humanitarian crisis that resulted in hundreds of

thousands of preventable deaths among children during the 1990s. When the oil-for-food program took effect in 1996 -- allowing Baghdad to sell oil and use the revenue, under UN supervision, to purchase approved civilian goods -- the hardships of Iraqi civilians began to ease.

Washington viewed sanctions as a punitive instrument and refused to consider even a partial lifting of sanctions in exchange for partial Iraqi compliance. That position contradicted Security Council Resolution 687, which stated that sanctions would be lifted once Iraq lived up to UN disarmament obligations. Meanwhile, Baghdad exploited the humanitarian crisis in Iraq to win international support for the lifting of sanctions.

Once the ongoing monitoring system was in place, sanctions continued to help force the regime to disarm. There were numerous disputes between UN officials and the Iraqi government, ranging from David Kay's famous 1991 standoff with Iraqi officials in a Baghdad parking lot to the confrontations in 1998 that prompted UNSCOM to withdraw. UNSCOM chair Rolf Ekeus had to cajole Iraqi leaders several times to end their obstructionism -- using the pressure of sanctions, and dangling the prospect that they might some day be lifted, to assure compliance.

Ekeus described the critical importance of sanctions to the disarmament process -- a "combined carrot-and-stick approach" -- in a 2000 interview: "Keeping the sanctions was the stick, and the carrot was that if Iraq cooperated with the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction, the Security Council would lift the sanctions. Sanctions were the backing for the inspections, and they were what sustained my operation almost for the whole time." And according to former UNSCOM adviser Tim Trevan, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz told UN inspectors that "the only reason Iraq was cooperating with UNSCOM was that it wanted to be reintegrated into the international community. Chief among the benefits was the lifting of the economic sanctions."

France, Russia and other countries on the Security Council urged an acknowledgement that the UN disarmament mandate was achieving

progress. They called for a partial lifting of sanctions as a means of encouraging further cooperation from Baghdad. The United States flatly refused any and all suggestions for easing sanctions. It became clear very early in the debate that Washington wanted the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and would not yield on sanctions until he was gone. This stance had no standing in international law or in the resolutions adopted by the Council, but it became the unwritten rule blocking UN action. Iraqi officials were fully aware of this and accordingly had less incentive to cooperate with UN demands.

Destroying the war machine

In addition to driving the disarmament process, sanctions undermined Iraqi military capabilities and prevented rearmament by keeping Iraq's oil wealth and imports -- which could be used to produce WMD -- out of the hands of Saddam Hussein. Contrary to the Bush administration's assertion that Iraq was a "gathering" threat, the Iraqi military and weapons programs had, in fact, steadily eroded under the weight of sanctions.

Estimates of the total amount of oil revenue denied the Iraqi government range as high as \$250 billion. For the first six years of sanctions, Iraq sold no oil except for a small allowance to Jordan. After the oil-for-food program began, oil sales generated, according to UN figures, \$64.2 billion in revenue. But the proceeds from these sales went straight into a UN escrow account, not the Central Bank of Iraq. Sanctions also blocked foreign investment and oil development, which could have increased Iraq's oil output to as much as seven million barrels a day by the late 1990s (compared to a peak of around three million barrels a day prior to the Gulf War).

Of course, no sanctions regime can be 100 percent effective; smuggling and black marketeering inevitably develop. Baghdad labored mightily to evade sanctions, mounting elaborate oil-smuggling and kickback schemes to siphon hard currency out of the oil-for-food program. Investigations by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) and The Wall Street Journal put Iraq's illicit earnings at \$1.5 billion to \$2.5 billion a year. An updated GAO report estimated

that illegal Iraqi revenues from 1997 through 2002 amounted to \$10.1 billion, about 15 percent of total oil-for-food revenues during that period.

Still, the sanctions worked remarkably well in Iraq -- far better than any past sanctions effort -- and only a fraction of total oil revenue ever reached the Iraqi government. The funds that Baghdad obtained illicitly were grossly insufficient to finance a large-scale military development program. The government had no other major source of income, in part thanks to the economic impact of sanctions. Revenues from smuggling and kickbacks went mostly toward maintaining Saddam's massive army and internal security apparatus (as well as to building palaces and paying bribes to political loyalists). As a result, almost no money was available for the development of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons systems, however much Saddam might have wished to rebuild his arsenal. A regime that had previously spent lavishly on its war machine was thus denied the means to rebuild its war-ravaged military.

Indeed, U.S. government figures show a precipitous drop in Iraqi military spending and arms imports after 1990. State Department estimates suggest that spending levels plummeted from over \$15 billion in 1989 to less than \$1.4 billion a year through the 1990s. The estimated cumulative arms import deficit -- the amount that Iraq would have spent had it continued to import arms at the same pace as it did in the 1980s -- through 1998 was more than \$47 billion, a deficit that Baghdad's various weapons-smuggling efforts and black-market schemes could hardly diminish. The Iraqi army thus found itself with, in the words of a 1998 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "decaying, obsolete, or obsolescent major weapons."

The sanctions system also prevented the import of specific items that could be used for the development of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. The United States especially, but other major powers as well, made a major investment in sanctions enforcement; the Security Council remained united in its resolve to deny Iraq the means to rebuild its weapons programs; and the dragnet was highly effective in denying Iraq the means to redevelop WMD.

Led by Washington, intelligence, military, and police officials in many countries mounted a massive effort to block shipments of prohibited weapons to Iraq. State Department nonproliferation specialists vetted oil-for-food contracts to screen for possible weapons imports. The U.S. Navy established the Maritime Interception Force, a multinational operation that over a ten-year period searched more than 12,000 vessels in the northern Persian Gulf. Such measures led to a series of high-profile successes.

Ironically, rather than bolstering the case for sanctions, the interdiction of prohibited items was often seen as a sign of their failure. Those skeptical of sanctions focused on Iraq's attempts to smuggle material in the first place, not on their having been thwarted. Inflated intelligence assumptions mistook Iraq's nefarious intentions for real capabilities, even in the face of evidence showing how deteriorated the latter were. In reality, sanctions had left Saddam's once-vaunted war machine in a state of utter disrepair.

A stronger net

In 2001-2002 Secretary of State Colin Powell launched a concerted diplomatic effort to build support for reformulating sanctions. The United States agreed to release holds that had placed on oil-for-food contracts, enabling civilian trade contracts to flow to Russia, China, and France. Restrictions on civilian imports were lifted while a strict arms embargo remained in place, and a new system was created for monitoring potential dual-use items. As the purpose of sanctions narrowed to preventing weapons imports without blocking civilian trade, international support for them increased considerably: "smart" sanctions removed the controversial humanitarian issue from the debate, focusing coercive pressure in a way that everyone could agree on. The divisions within the Security Council that had surfaced in the late 1990s gave way to a new consensus in 2002. The pieces were in place for a long-term military containment system. The new sanctions resolution restored political consensus in the Security Council and created an arms-denial system that could have been sustained indefinitely.

The acceptance of "smart" sanctions in Iraq was a diplomatic success for the Bush administration. It was followed a few months later by Iraq's acceptance of renewed inspections and Security Council approval of a tougher monitoring regime in Resolution 1441. Indeed, the Bush administration spent its first two years methodically and effectively rebuilding an international consensus behind containment. By the fall of 2002, it had constructed the core elements of an effective long-term containment system -- only to discard this achievement in favor of war. Effective UN inspections and sanctions were discarded in favor of an ill-fated war.