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SELECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

Donald Rumsfeld has his own special sources. Are they reliable?

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They call themselves, self-mockingly, the Cabal—a small cluster of policy advisers and analysts now based in the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans. In the past year, according to former and present Bush Administration officials, their operation, which was conceived by Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, has brought about a crucial change of direction in the American intelligence community. These advisers and analysts, who began their work in the days after September 11, 2001, have produced a skein of intelligence reviews that have helped to shape public opinion and American policy toward Iraq. They relied on data gathered by other intelligence agencies and also on information provided by the Iraqi National Congress, or I.N.C., the exile group headed by Ahmad Chalabi. By last fall, the operation rivalled both the C.I.A. and the Pentagon’s own Defense Intelligence Agency, the D.I.A., as President Bush’s main source of intelligence regarding Iraq’s possible possession of weapons of mass destruction and connection with Al Qaeda. As of last week, no such weapons had been found. And although many people, within the Administration and outside it, profess confidence that something will turn up, the integrity of much of that intelligence is now in question.

The director of the Special Plans operation is Abram Shulsky, a scholarly expert in the works of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Shulsky has been quietly working on intelligence and foreign-policy issues for three decades; he was on the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee in the early nineteen-eighties and served in the Pentagon under Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle during the Reagan Administration, after which he joined the Rand Corporation. The Office of Special Plans is overseen by Under-Secretary of Defense William Luti, a retired Navy captain. Luti was an early advocate of military action against Iraq, and, as the Administration moved toward war and policymaking power shifted toward the civilians in the Pentagon, he took on increasingly important responsibilities.

W. Patrick Lang, the former chief of Middle East intelligence at the D.I.A., said, “The Pentagon has banded together to dominate the government’s foreign policy, and they’ve pulled it off. They’re running Chalabi. The D.I.A.

has been intimidated and beaten to a pulp. And there's no guts at all in the C.I.A."

The hostility goes both ways. A Pentagon official who works for Luti told me, "I did a job when the intelligence community wasn't doing theirs. We recognized the fact that they hadn't done the analysis. We were providing information to Wolfowitz that he hadn't seen before. The intelligence community is still looking for a mission like they had in the Cold War, when they spoon-fed the policymakers."

A Pentagon adviser who has worked with Special Plans dismissed any criticism of the operation as little more than bureaucratic whining. "Shulsky and Luti won the policy debate," the adviser said. "They beat 'em—they cleaned up against State and the C.I.A. There's no mystery why they won—because they were more effective in making their argument. Luti is smarter than the opposition. Wolfowitz is smarter. They out-argued them. It was a fair fight. They persuaded the President of the need to make a new security policy. Those who lose are so good at trying to undercut those who won." He added, "I'd love to be the historian who writes the story of how this small group of eight or nine people made the case and won."

According to the Pentagon adviser, Special Plans was created in order to find evidence of what Wolfowitz and his boss, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, believed to be true—that Saddam Hussein had close ties to Al Qaeda, and that Iraq had an enormous arsenal of chemical, biological, and possibly even nuclear weapons that threatened the region and, potentially, the United States.

Iraq's possible possession of weapons of mass destruction had been a matter of concern to the international community since before the first Gulf War. Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons in the past. At some point, he assembled thousands of chemical warheads, along with biological weapons, and made a serious attempt to build a nuclear-weapons program. What has been in dispute is how much of that capacity, if any, survived the 1991 war and the years of United Nations inspections, no-fly zones, and sanctions that followed. In addition, since September 11th there have been recurring questions about Iraq's ties to terrorists. A February poll showed that seventy-two per cent of Americans believed it was likely that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th attacks, although no definitive evidence of such a connection has been presented.

Rumsfeld and his colleagues believed that the C.I.A. was unable to perceive the reality of the situation in Iraq. "The agency was out to *disprove* linkage between Iraq and terrorism," the Pentagon adviser told me. "That's what drove them. If you've ever worked with intelligence data, you can see the ingrained views at C.I.A. that color the way it sees data." The goal of Special Plans, he said, was "to put the data under the microscope to reveal what the intelligence community can't see. Shulsky's carrying the heaviest part."

Even before September 11th, Richard Perle, who was then the chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, was making a similar argument about the intelligence community's knowledge of Iraq's weapons. At a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing in March, 2001, he said, "Does Saddam now have weapons of mass destruction? Sure he does. We know he has chemical weapons. We know he has biological weapons. . . . How far he's gone on the nuclear-weapons side I don't think we really know. My guess is it's further than we think. It's always further than we think, because we limit ourselves, as we think about this, to what we're able to prove and demonstrate. . . . And, unless you believe that we have uncovered everything, you have to assume there is more than we're able to report."

Last October, an article in the *Times* reported that Rumsfeld had ordered up an intelligence operation "to search for information on Iraq's hostile intentions or links to terrorists" that might have been overlooked by the C.I.A. When Rumsfeld was asked about the story at a Pentagon briefing, he was initially vague. "I'm told that after September 11th a small group, I think two to start with, and maybe four now . . . were asked to begin poring over this mountain of information that we were receiving on intelligence-type things." He went on to say, "You don't know what you don't know. So in comes the daily briefer"—from the C.I.A.—"and she walks through the daily brief. And I ask questions. 'Gee, what about this?' or 'What about that? Has somebody thought of this?'" At the same briefing, Rumsfeld said that he had already been informed that there was "solid evidence of the presence in Iraq of Al Qaeda members."

If Special Plans was going to search for new intelligence on Iraq, the most obvious source was defectors with firsthand knowledge. The office inevitably turned to Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. The I.N.C., an umbrella organization for diverse groups opposed to Saddam, is constantly seeking out Iraqi defectors. The Special Plans Office developed a close working relationship with the I.N.C., and this strengthened its position in disputes with the C.I.A. and gave the Pentagon's pro-war leadership added leverage in its constant disputes with the State Department. Special Plans also became a conduit for intelligence reports from the I.N.C. to officials in the White

House.

There was a close personal bond, too, between Chalabi and Wolfowitz and Perle, dating back many years. Their relationship deepened after the Bush Administration took office, and Chalabi's ties extended to others in the Administration, including Rumsfeld; Douglas Feith, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy; and I. Lewis Libby, Vice-President Dick Cheney's chief of staff. For years, Chalabi has had the support of prominent members of the American Enterprise Institute and other conservatives. Chalabi had some Democratic supporters, too, including James Woolsey, the former head of the C.I.A.

There was another level to Chalabi's relationship with the United States: in the mid-nineteen-nineties, the C.I.A. was secretly funnelling millions of dollars annually to the I.N.C. Those payments ended around 1996, a former C.I.A. Middle East station chief told me, essentially because the agency had doubts about Chalabi's integrity. (In 1992, Chalabi was convicted in absentia of bank fraud in Jordan. He has always denied any wrongdoing.) "You had to treat them with suspicion," another former Middle East station chief said of Chalabi's people. "The I.N.C. has a track record of manipulating information because it has an agenda. It's a political unit—not an intelligence agency."

In August, 1995, General Hussein Kamel, who was in charge of Iraq's weapons program, defected to Jordan, with his brother, Colonel Saddam Kamel. They brought with them crates of documents containing detailed information about Iraqi efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction—much of which was unknown to the U.N. inspection teams that had been on the job since 1991—and were interviewed at length by the U.N. inspectors. In 1996, Saddam Hussein lured the brothers back with a promise of forgiveness, and then had them killed. The Kamels' information became a major element in the Bush Administration's campaign to convince the public of the failure of the U.N. inspections.

Last October, in a speech in Cincinnati, the President cited the Kamel defections as the moment when Saddam's regime "was forced to admit that it had produced more than thirty thousand liters of anthrax and other deadly biological agents. . . . This is a massive stockpile of biological weapons that has never been accounted for, and is capable of killing millions." A couple of weeks earlier, Vice-President Cheney had declared that Hussein Kamel's story "should serve as a reminder to all that we often learned more as the result of defections than we learned from the inspection regime itself."

The full record of Hussein Kamel's interview with the inspectors reveals, however, that he also said that Iraq's stockpile of chemical and biological warheads, which were manufactured before the 1991 Gulf War, had been destroyed, in many cases in response to ongoing inspections. The interview, on August 22, 1995, was conducted by Rolf Ekeus, then the executive chairman of the U.N. inspection teams, and two of his senior associates—Nikita Smidovich and Maurizio Zifferaro. "You have an important role in Iraq," Kamel said, according to the record, which was assembled from notes taken by Smidovich. "You should not underestimate yourself. You are very effective in Iraq." When Smidovich noted that the U.N. teams had not found "any traces of destruction," Kamel responded, "Yes, it was done before you came in." He also said that Iraq had destroyed its arsenal of warheads. "We gave instructions not to produce chemical weapons," Kamel explained later in the debriefing. "I don't remember resumption of chemical-weapons production before the Gulf War. Maybe it was only minimal production and filling. . . . All chemical weapons were destroyed. I ordered destruction of all chemical weapons. All weapons—biological, chemical, missile, nuclear—were destroyed."

Kamel also cast doubt on the testimony of Dr. Khidhir Hamza, an Iraqi nuclear scientist who defected in 1994. Hamza settled in the United States with the help of the I.N.C. and has been a highly vocal witness concerning Iraq's alleged nuclear ambitions. Kamel told the U.N. interviewers, however, that Hamza was "a professional liar." He went on, "He worked with us, but he was useless and always looking for promotions. He consulted with me but could not deliver anything. . . . He was even interrogated by a team before he left and was allowed to go."

After his defection, Hamza became a senior fellow at the Institute for Science and International Security, a Washington disarmament group, whose president, David Albright, was a former U.N. weapons inspector. In 1998, Albright told me, he and Hamza sent publishers a proposal for a book tentatively entitled "Fizz: Iraq and the Atomic Bomb," which described how Iraq had failed in its quest for a nuclear device. There were no takers, Albright said, and Hamza eventually "started exaggerating his experiences in Iraq." The two men broke off contact. In 2000, Hamza published "Saddam's Bombmaker," a vivid account claiming that by 1991, when the Gulf War began, Iraq was far closer than had been known to the production of a nuclear weapon. Jeff Stein, a Washington journalist who collaborated on the book, told me that Hamza's account was "absolutely on the level, allowing for the fact that any

memoir puts the author at the center of events, and therefore there is some exaggeration.” James Woolsey, the former head of the C.I.A., said of Hamza, “I think highly of him and I have no reason to disbelieve the claims that he’s made.” Hamza could not be reached for comment. On April 26th, according to the *Times*, he returned to Iraq as a member of a group of exiles designated by the Pentagon to help rebuild the country’s infrastructure. He is to be responsible for atomic energy.

The advantages and disadvantages of relying on defectors has been a perennial source of dispute within the American intelligence community—as Shulsky himself noted in a 1991 textbook on intelligence that he co-authored. Despite their importance, he wrote, “it is difficult to be certain that they are genuine. . . . The conflicting information provided by several major Soviet defectors to the United States . . . has never been completely sorted out; it bedeviled U.S. intelligence for a quarter of a century.” Defectors can provide unique insight into a repressive system. But such volunteer sources, as Shulsky writes, “may be greedy; they may also be somewhat unbalanced people who wish to bring some excitement into their lives; they may desire to avenge what they see as ill treatment by their government; or they may be subject to blackmail.” There is a strong incentive to tell interviewers what they want to hear.

With the Pentagon’s support, Chalabi’s group worked to put defectors with compelling stories in touch with reporters in the United States and Europe. The resulting articles had dramatic accounts of advances in weapons of mass destruction or told of ties to terrorist groups. In some cases, these stories were disputed in analyses by the C.I.A. Misstatements and inconsistencies in I.N.C. defector accounts were also discovered after the final series of U.N. weapons inspections, which ended a few days before the American assault. Dr. Glen Rangwala, a lecturer in political science at Cambridge University, compiled and examined the information that had been made public and concluded that the U.N. inspections had failed to find evidence to support the defectors’ claims.

For example, many newspapers published extensive interviews with Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, a civil engineer who, with the I.N.C.’s help, fled Iraq in 2001, and subsequently claimed that he had visited twenty hidden facilities that he believed were built for the production of biological and chemical weapons. One, he said, was underneath a hospital in Baghdad. Haideri was apparently a source for Secretary of State Colin Powell’s claim, in his presentation to the United Nations Security Council on February 5th, that the United States had “firsthand descriptions” of mobile factories capable of producing vast quantities of biological weapons. The U.N. teams that returned to Iraq last winter were unable to verify any of al-Haideri’s claims. In a statement to the Security Council in March, on the eve of war, Hans Blix, the U.N.’s chief weapons inspector, noted that his teams had physically examined the hospital and other sites with the help of ground-penetrating radar equipment. “No underground facilities for chemical or biological production or storage were found so far,” he said.

Almost immediately after September 11th, the I.N.C. began to publicize the stories of defectors who claimed that they had information connecting Iraq to the attacks. In an interview on October 14, 2001, conducted jointly by the *Times* and “Frontline,” the public-television program, Sabah Khodada, an Iraqi Army captain, said that the September 11th operation “was conducted by people who were trained by Saddam,” and that Iraq had a program to instruct terrorists in the art of hijacking. Another defector, who was identified only as a retired lieutenant general in the Iraqi intelligence service, said that in 2000 he witnessed Arab students being given lessons in hijacking on a Boeing 707 parked at an Iraqi training camp near the town of Salman Pak, south of Baghdad.

In separate interviews with me, however, a former C.I.A. station chief and a former military intelligence analyst said that the camp near Salman Pak had been built not for terrorism training but for counter-terrorism training. In the mid-eighties, Islamic terrorists were routinely hijacking aircraft. In 1986, an Iraqi airliner was seized by pro-Iranian extremists and crashed, after a hand grenade was triggered, killing at least sixty-five people. (At the time, Iran and Iraq were at war, and America favored Iraq.) Iraq then sought assistance from the West, and got what it wanted from Britain’s MI6. The C.I.A. offered similar training in counter-terrorism throughout the Middle East. “We were helping our allies everywhere we had a liaison,” the former station chief told me. Inspectors recalled seeing the body of an airplane—which appeared to be used for counter-terrorism training—when they visited a biological-weapons facility near Salman Pak in 1991, ten years before September 11th. It is, of course, possible for such a camp to be converted from one purpose to another. The former C.I.A. official noted, however, that terrorists would not practice on airplanes in the open. “That’s Hollywood rinky-dink stuff,” the former agent said. “They train in basements. You don’t need a real airplane to practice hijacking. The 9/11 terrorists went to gyms. But to take one back you have to practice on the

real thing.”

Salman Pak was overrun by American troops on April 6th. Apparently, neither the camp nor the former biological facility has yielded evidence to substantiate the claims made before the war.

A former Bush Administration intelligence official recalled a case in which Chalabi’s group, working with the Pentagon, produced a defector from Iraq who was interviewed overseas by an agent from the D.I.A. The agent relied on an interpreter supplied by Chalabi’s people. Last summer, the D.I.A. report, which was classified, was leaked. In a detailed account, the London *Times* described how the defector had trained with Al Qaeda terrorists in the late nineteen-nineties at secret camps in Iraq, how the Iraqis received instructions in the use of chemical and biological weapons, and how the defector was given a new identity and relocated. A month later, however, a team of C.I.A. agents went to interview the man with their own interpreter. “He says, ‘No, that’s not what I said,’ ” the former intelligence official told me. “He said, ‘I worked at a fedayeen camp; it wasn’t Al Qaeda.’ He never saw any chemical or biological training.” Afterward, the former official said, “the C.I.A. sent out a piece of paper saying that this information was incorrect. They put it in writing.” But the C.I.A. rebuttal, like the original report, was classified. “I remember wondering whether this one would leak and correct the earlier, invalid leak. Of course, it didn’t.”

The former intelligence official went on, “One of the reasons I left was my sense that they were using the intelligence from the C.I.A. and other agencies only when it fit their agenda. They didn’t like the intelligence they were getting, and so they brought in people to write the stuff. They were so crazed and so far out and so difficult to reason with—to the point of being bizarre. Dogmatic, as if they were on a mission from God.” He added, “If it doesn’t fit their theory, they don’t want to accept it.”

Shulsky’s work has deep theoretical underpinnings. In his academic and think-tank writings, Shulsky, the son of a newspaperman—his father, Sam, wrote a nationally syndicated business column—has long been a critic of the American intelligence community. During the Cold War, his area of expertise was Soviet disinformation techniques. Like Wolfowitz, he was a student of Leo Strauss’s, at the University of Chicago. Both men received their doctorates under Strauss in 1972. Strauss, a refugee from Nazi Germany who arrived in the United States in 1937, was trained in the history of political philosophy, and became one of the foremost conservative émigré scholars. He was widely known for his argument that the works of ancient philosophers contain deliberately concealed esoteric meanings whose truths can be comprehended only by a very few, and would be misunderstood by the masses. The Straussian movement has many adherents in and around the Bush Administration. In addition to Wolfowitz, they include William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and Stephen Cambone, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, who is particularly close to Rumsfeld. Strauss’s influence on foreign-policy decision-making (he never wrote explicitly about the subject himself) is usually discussed in terms of his tendency to view the world as a place where isolated liberal democracies live in constant danger from hostile elements abroad, and face threats that must be confronted vigorously and with strong leadership.

How Strauss’s views might be applied to the intelligence-gathering process is less immediately obvious. As it happens, Shulsky himself explored that question in a 1999 essay, written with Gary Schmitt, entitled “Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean *Nous*)”—in Greek philosophy the term *nous* denotes the highest form of rationality. In the essay, Shulsky and Schmitt write that Strauss’s “gentleness, his ability to concentrate on detail, his consequent success in looking below the surface and reading between the lines, and his seeming unworldliness . . . may even be said to resemble, however faintly, the George Smiley of John le Carré’s novels.” Echoing one of Strauss’s major themes, Shulsky and Schmitt criticize America’s intelligence community for its failure to appreciate the duplicitous nature of the regimes it deals with, its susceptibility to social-science notions of proof, and its inability to cope with deliberate concealment.

The agency’s analysts, Shulsky and Schmitt argue, “were generally reluctant throughout the Cold War to believe that they could be deceived about any critical question by the Soviet Union or other Communist states. History has shown this view to have been extremely naïve.” They suggested that political philosophy, with its emphasis on the variety of regimes, could provide an “antidote” to the C.I.A.’s failings, and would help in understanding Islamic leaders, “whose intellectual world was so different from our own.”

Strauss’s idea of hidden meaning, Shulsky and Schmitt added, “alerts one to the possibility that political life may be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm in political life, and the hope, to say nothing

of the expectation, of establishing a politics that can dispense with it is the exception.”

Robert Pippin, the chairman of the Committee on Social Thought at Chicago and a critic of Strauss, told me, “Strauss believed that good statesmen have powers of judgment and must rely on an inner circle. The person who whispers in the ear of the King is more important than the King. If you have that talent, what you do or say in public cannot be held accountable in the same way.” Another Strauss critic, Stephen Holmes, a law professor at New York University, put the Straussians’ position this way: “They believe that your enemy is deceiving you, and you have to pretend to agree, but secretly you follow your own views.” Holmes added, “The whole story is complicated by Strauss’s idea—actually Plato’s—that philosophers need to tell noble lies not only to the people at large but also to powerful politicians.”

When I asked one of Strauss’s staunchest defenders, Joseph Cropsey, professor emeritus of political science at Chicago, about the use of Strauss’s views in the area of policymaking, he told me that common sense alone suggested that a certain amount of deception is essential in government. “That people in government have to be discreet in what they say publicly is so obvious—‘If I tell you the truth I can’t but help the enemy.’ ” But there is nothing in Strauss’s work, he added, that “favors preëemptive action. What it favors is prudence and sound judgment. If you could have got rid of Hitler in the nineteen-thirties, who’s not going to be in favor of that? You don’t need Strauss to reach that conclusion.”

Some former intelligence officials believe that Shulsky and his superiors were captives of their own convictions, and were merely deceiving themselves. Vincent Cannistraro, the former chief of counter-terrorism operations and analysis at the C.I.A., worked with Shulsky at a Washington think tank after his retirement. He said, “Abe is very gentle and slow to anger, with a sense of irony. But his politics were typical for his group—the Straussian view.” The group’s members, Cannistraro said, “reinforce each other because they’re the only friends they have, and they all work together. This has been going on since the nineteen-eighties, but they’ve never been able to coalesce as they have now. September 11th gave them the opportunity, and now they’re in heaven. They believe the intelligence is there. They want to believe it. It *has* to be there.”

The rising influence of the Office of Special Plans has been accompanied by a decline in the influence of the C.I.A. and the D.I.A. One internal Pentagon memorandum went so far as to suggest that terrorism experts in the government and outside it had deliberately “downplayed or sought to disprove” the link between Al Qaeda and Iraq. “For many years, there has been a bias in the intelligence community” against defectors, the memorandum said. It urged that two analysts working with Shulsky be given the authority to “investigate linkages to Iraq” by having access to the “proper debriefing of key Iraqi defectors.”

A former C.I.A. task-force leader who is a consultant to the Bush Administration said that many analysts in the C.I.A. are convinced that the Chalabi group’s defector reports on weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda have produced little of value, but said that the agency “is not fighting it.” He said that the D.I.A. had studied the information as well. “Even the D.I.A. can’t find any value in it.” (The Pentagon, asked for comment, denied that there had been disputes between the C.I.A. and Special Plans over the validity of intelligence.)

In interviews, former C.I.A. officers and analysts described the agency as increasingly demoralized. “George knows he’s being beaten up,” one former officer said of George Tenet, the C.I.A. director. “And his analysts are terrified. George used to protect his people, but he’s been forced to do things *their* way.” Because the C.I.A.’s analysts are now on the defensive, “they write reports justifying their intelligence rather than saying what’s going on. The Defense Department and the Office of the Vice-President write their own pieces, based on their own ideology. We collect so much stuff that you can find anything you want.”

“They see themselves as outsiders,” a former C.I.A. expert who spent the past decade immersed in Iraqi-exile affairs said of the Special Plans people. He added, “There’s a high degree of paranoia. They’ve convinced themselves that they’re on the side of angels, and everybody else in the government is a fool.”

More than a year’s worth of increasingly bitter debate over the value and integrity of the Special Plans intelligence came to a halt in March, when President Bush authorized the war against Iraq. After a few weeks of fighting, Saddam Hussein’s regime collapsed, leaving American forces to declare victory against a backdrop of disorder and uncertainty about the country’s future. Ahmad Chalabi and the I.N.C. continued to provoke fights within the Bush Administration. The Pentagon flew Chalabi and hundreds of his supporters, heavily armed, into Iraq, amid tight

security, over angry objections from the State Department. Chalabi is now establishing himself in Baghdad. His advocates in the Pentagon point out that he is not only a Shiite, like the majority of Iraqis, but also, as one scholar put it, “a completely Westernized businessman” (he emigrated to England with his parents in 1958, when he was a boy), which is one reason the State Department doubts whether he can gain support among Iraqis.

Chalabi is not the only point of contention, however. The failure, as of last week, to find weapons of mass destruction in places where the Pentagon’s sources confidently predicted they would be found has reanimated the debate on the quality of the office’s intelligence. A former high-level intelligence official told me that American Special Forces units had been sent into Iraq in mid-March, before the start of the air and ground war, to investigate sites suspected of being missile or chemical- and biological-weapon storage depots. “They came up with nothing,” the official said. “Never found a single Scud.”

Since then, there have been a number of false alarms and a tip that weapons may have been destroyed in the last days before the war, but no solid evidence. On April 22nd, Hans Blix, hours before he asked the U.N. Security Council to send his team back to Iraq, told the BBC, “I think it’s been one of the disturbing elements that so much of the intelligence on which the capitals built their case seemed to have been so shaky.”

There is little self-doubt or second-guessing in the Pentagon over the failure to immediately find the weapons. The Pentagon adviser to Special Plans told me he believed that the delay “means nothing. We’ve got to wait to get all the answers from Iraqi scientists who will tell us where they are.” Similarly, the Pentagon official who works for Luti said last week, “I think they’re hidden in the mountains or transferred to some friendly countries. Saddam had enough time to move them.” There were suggestions from the Pentagon that Saddam might be shipping weapons over the border to Syria. “It’s bait and switch,” the former high-level intelligence official said. “Bait them into Iraq with weapons of mass destruction. And, when they aren’t found, there’s this whole bullshit about the weapons being in Syria.”

In Congress, a senior legislative aide said, “Some members are beginning to ask and to wonder, but cautiously.” For now, he told me, “the members don’t have the confidence to say that the Administration is off base.” He also commented, “For many, it makes little difference. We vanquished a bad guy and liberated the Iraqi people. Some are astute enough to recognize that the alleged imminent W.M.D. threat to the U.S. was a pretext. I sometimes have to pinch myself when friends or family ask with incredulity about the lack of W.M.D., and remind myself that the average person has the idea that there are mountains of the stuff over there, ready to be tripped over. The more time elapses, the more people are going to wonder about this, but I don’t think it will sway U.S. public opinion much. Everyone loves to be on the winning side.”

Weapons may yet be found. Iraq is a big country, as the Administration has repeatedly pointed out in recent weeks. In a speech last week, President Bush said, “We’ve begun the search for hidden chemical and biological weapons, and already know of hundreds of sites that will be investigated.” Meanwhile, if the American advance hasn’t uncovered stashes of weapons of mass destruction, it has turned up additional graphic evidence of the brutality of the regime. But Saddam Hussein’s cruelty was documented long before September 11th, and was not the principal reason the Bush Administration gave to the world for the necessity of war.

Former Senator Bob Kerrey, a Democrat who served on the Senate Intelligence Committee, has been a strong supporter of the President’s decision to overthrow Saddam. “I do think building a democratic secular state in Iraq justifies everything we’ve done,” Kerrey, who is now president of New School University, in New York, told me. “But they’ve taken the intelligence on weapons and expanded it beyond what was justified.” Speaking of the hawks, he said, “It appeared that they understood that to get the American people on their side they needed to come up with something more to say than ‘We’ve liberated Iraq and got rid of a tyrant.’ So they had to find some ties to weapons of mass destruction and were willing to allow a majority of Americans to incorrectly conclude that the invasion of Iraq had something to do with the World Trade Center. Overemphasizing the national-security threat made it more difficult to get the rest of the world on our side. It was the weakest and most misleading argument we could use.” Kerrey added, “It appears that they have the intelligence. The problem is, they didn’t like the conclusions.” ♦