

Now We Know -- and What We Don't

by James K. Galbraith

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The great question about Iraq last year was whether the evil and dangers of Saddam Hussein justified the costs of invasion and the burdens of empire. We at ECAAR held that it did not, but for many people the decision was a close one. Saddam was a known evil, the battle was likely to be swift, and the perils of occupation were largely unknown. Many decided the issue on the powerful claim that Saddam was in pursuit of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and that this pursuit posed a dire threat to the national security of the United States.

In fact, it was never rational to believe that Iraqi possession of chemical or biological agents posed a very big threat to us. Such weapons are exceptionally difficult to deploy. They have been used on battlefields only rarely, and never in modern times with great effect in terror attacks. Iraq's sole use of them was in war with Iran and shortly afterward, in assaults on its own unarmed civilian population. These weapons are, if you will, the terror equivalent of the hydrogen car: still outclassed, dollar for dollar, by the old technology of high explosives. We know, therefore, that Team Bush's harping on "Weapons of Mass Destruction" was, in part, a political choice and a scare tactic.

Nuclear risks are different. A single atomic explosion in the United States or in the Middle East could (and may still) take more lives than all the atrocities in all the history of modern Iraq. Had Iraq built the bomb, the threat would have been serious. It is clear today - to me at least - that Israel was right back in 1981 to destroy the Osirak reactor (sold to the Iraqis by the French). In doing so, they stalled Saddam's bomb program at that time. Otherwise, Iraq would have built the weapon and probably it would have used it years ago. Not against us, mind you, and probably not against Israel, with its powerful deterrent. But against Iran - yes, Saddam might have done that.

Yet in 2003 we knew that there was no chance Iraq still had a viable nuclear weapons program. We knew this from the inspections and the reports of the IAEA. We knew it from UNMOVIC and its predecessor, UNSCOM. The administration knew it from the failure of the CIA and other intelligence agencies to find credible evidence to the contrary. The administration knew it from the conclusions of Ambassador Joseph Wilson's trip to Niger, which dismissed the possibility that Iraq could have acquired uranium ore from that country.

And so now it is all the more shocking that we learn that, all the while our attention focused on the imaginary threat posed by Saddam Hussein, nuclear proliferation was going on in the Islamic world. Not from our enemy Iraq, but from our ally Pakistan. Technology and plans - and maybe bomb fuel too, in some cases - flowed from the labs of Abdul Qadeer Khan to Libya, Iran and North Korea.

Here's what we also know. First, that the US government has been aware of Pakistani proliferation for years - and has been complaining about it, without effect. Second, that Abdul Qadeer Khan has had ties to Al Qaeda and the Taliban; by some credible reports he felt he was building the bomb for Islam, not for Pakistan. Third, that elements of Pakistan's military and intelligence knew of the proliferation, collaborated in it, and profited from it. Fourth, that those elements are strong enough to oblige President Pervez Musharraf to issue a pardon to Khan after just one day. Fifth, that this will preclude any full accounting of the proliferation.

The issue is being downplayed because, to some extent, the three cases we know about are coming under control. Libya has come in from the cold. Iran has made a deal with the Europeans on nuclear questions - and while compliance remains an issue, the country is not governed by madmen. And while the case of North Korea remains enigmatic, it at least seems that Kim Il-Jong's main interest is in blackmail for profit - a dangerous game,

but short of the actual provision of nuclear weapons to the world market.

The problem lies in what we don't yet know. We will not learn, soon, whether Saudi Arabia bought the bomb, in fact or in effect, from Pakistan. We will not learn whether and to what extent plans, or the makings of actual bombs, are in the hands from which Al Qaeda might acquire them, by purchase, theft, or coup d'etat. We will not learn, except following an attack, whether it might have already done so.

How close is the Pakistani nuclear team to Al Qaeda? For a bleak view read *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* by the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. The book has been a best-seller in France, and it appeared in English last September to controversial notices. It concentrates on the man who organized the kidnapping, Omar Sheikh, generally seen as a mid-level jihadi fighter preoccupied with Kashmir. Lévy argues that he was something else entirely. First, that he is by nationality not Pakistani, but English, a native of London. Second, that he is an officer of the ISI, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (and invisible government). Third, that he was a senior deputy of Osama bin Laden, possibly responsible for part of the Al Qaeda's financial operations.

Lévy speculates: perhaps Pearl was killed because he knew too much, perhaps about the nuclear problem. Is this right or wrong? I can't tell from here. So read the book. Make your own judgments.

It could turn out that the price of Pakistan's cooperation in the conquest of Afghanistan was our light hand on their nuclear program. If so, we may find out that when we got diverted into Iraq we were looking the wrong way. The lowest price we may pay is another extension of the war. Reports already are that U.S. forces are planning to strike at the tribal lands on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier this year. This is in the apparent hope that, two years after Afghanistan, Al Qaeda remains vulnerably deployed in the badlands - and that it is not safely ensconced in the untouchable cities, such as Karachi.

We're probably wrong about that. Let's only hope that we don't find out the hard way.

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