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Bush's war doctrine questioned

News analysis by John Diamond and Bill Nichols, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration's policy of taking pre-emptive military action against dangerous nations faces growing scrutiny from members of Congress who voted for war in Iraq but now wonder why Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction have not been found.

Because pre-emption means striking an enemy before the enemy can attack, intelligence would be a key ingredient in any future pre-emptive action the president might propose. For example, Iran and North Korea are both said by U.S. intelligence to have active nuclear weapons programs that could be a threat to the United States. While the administration has said it has no plans to invade, those countries could be high on any list of pre-emption targets.

The inability to find banned weapons in Iraq has put U.S. intelligence under a cloud. Congress is beginning inquiries into whether intelligence claims about Iraq were accurate or exaggerated by the White House to smooth the way to war.

A failure by the Bush administration to prove its prewar allegations could undermine the pre-emption doctrine. The next time the president comes to Capitol Hill warning of an emerging threat, one that requires military action to pre-empt and defeat, some lawmakers of both parties say they will be skeptical.

"If you're going to have a doctrine of pre-emption," said Jay Rockefeller, the senior Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, "then you sure as heck better have pluperfect intelligence."

A Republican senator who spoke on condition of anonymity said that if President Bush went to Congress with another plan to strike an enemy state, "It would have to be very clear and convincing intelligence for it not to cause a dispute."

Sen. Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he worries that Bush administration officials may come to Congress with a valid warning but fail to win support because of lingering doubts about Iraq.

"They're damaged, period," Biden said. "I think it undercuts our credibility. In that sense, I think it weakens us."

Three committees in the Republican-controlled Congress have demanded that the CIA produce documents backing up the judgments it made before the war.

Bush administration officials say failure to find the weapons doesn't mean they aren't there. "We haven't found Saddam Hussein, and I don't know anybody who's running around saying he didn't exist," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Thursday.

But the administration is clearly alarmed by the level of skepticism and has scrambled to get Republican members of Congress to delay formal inquiries. The effort has had mixed results.

Two weeks ago, Pat Roberts, Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, was asked on NBC's *Meet the Press* what would happen if Bush went to Capitol Hill with another proposal for a pre-emptive war. "Well, basically you have a real credibility problem," he replied.

This week, Roberts said he was in no hurry to hold hearings on U.S. intelligence on Iraq. A 1,400-person U.S. inspection team, newly arrived in Iraq, should be given time to search for hidden weapons, he said.

Nonetheless, even Roberts wants to review documents being assembled by the CIA under pressure from Congress to back up its prewar warnings.

Sen. John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, meanwhile, has stuck with his call for hearings into the accuracy of intelligence on Iraq.

"It is a basic concern that has to be answered," Warner said.

Bush told U.S. troops in Qatar on Thursday that the hunt for weapons will take time. "This is a man who spent decades hiding tools of mass murder," Bush said. "He knew the inspectors were looking for them."

Robert Byrd, one of the few Senate Democrats to oppose the October resolution authorizing war on Iraq, took after Bush again in a Senate floor speech Thursday.

"What amazes me is that the president himself is not clamoring for an investigation," Byrd said. "It is his integrity that is on the line."

Much of the concern about pre-emptive wars comes from Democrats who were unenthusiastic about the doctrine to begin with but who supported the war in Iraq and now have doubts about their own votes. "I don't buy the pre-emption doctrine, but they will never be able to sell it if they can't sell the accuracy and objectivity of their intelligence," said Rep. Jane Harman, ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

The pre-emption doctrine represents a major shift in U.S. foreign policy. Bush first outlined it in a speech at West Point a year ago, breaking with decades of U.S. policy that sought to contain adversaries without conflict.

"If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long," the president said in the June 2002 speech. "We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge."


The controversy could evaporate in a single afternoon if U.S. forces find a cache of chemical or biological weapons, or equipment that Iraq used to make them. Until then, questions about the U.S. intelligence on Iraq linger even as the Bush administration ups the pressure on North Korea and Iran, which, along with Iraq, form what Bush called the "axis of evil."

U.S. intelligence believes North Korea has one or two nuclear weapons and an active program to produce more. Intelligence indicates that Iran is likely several years away from making a nuclear weapon but is building facilities that could produce weapons material.

Intelligence professionals caution that the CIA rarely collects perfect information on adversaries and that waiting for it could be dangerous. "We must act, even if intelligence is imperfect," said George Robertson, a former U.S. military intelligence analyst and Iraq weapons inspector.

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