

September 10, 2003

IRAQ IN TRANSITION

Air Force Doubts Drone Threat Report Says Bush Exaggerated Perils of Unmanned Iraqi Aircraft By DAVID ROGERS

WASHINGTON -- In making its case for war with Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration painted a much more threatening picture of Iraqi drones than was justified, according to Air Force intelligence estimates now coming to light.

As President Bush goes back to Congress for more funding for his Iraq policy, the discrepancy has raised new questions about the White House's selective use of intelligence.

The Air Force, which has expertise in designing such unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, was never convinced Baghdad had developed drones capable of effectively distributing chemical and biological weapons as the White House claimed. But the Air Force dissent, attached to a classified report last October on the Iraqi threat, was kept secret even as the president publicly made the opposite case last fall before a congressional vote on the war resolution.

In fact, U.S. forces have recovered abandoned Iraqi drones -- including the al-Musayara-30 -- that fit the smaller, less sophisticated UAV prototype envisioned by the Air Force.

The greatest political consequence is with moderates whose support is crucial for Mr. Bush at this difficult juncture. "We have to prevail," says Rep. John Murtha (D., Pa.), a Vietnam veteran and senior member of the House Appropriations Committee. "But the thing that is so upsetting is ... the misleading of the imminent danger to the U.S. We have been discredited internationally. I'm embarrassed that our intelligence was so exaggerated."

Overshadowed by the debate over Mr. Hussein's nuclear program, Iraq's inventory of about 75 UAVs nonetheless held a fascination for the intelligence community as a potential means to disperse chemical or biological weapons. Iraq had tried to convert the L-29 Czech trainer, a small airplane, into such a platform in the mid-1990s. But as early as 2001, the Air Force had concluded that design problems, including guidance-system failings, made the program unworkable.

"We were pretty sure this thing was dead," says Bob Boyd, the Air Force's senior intelligence analyst. Baghdad continued to work on UAVs and tried to acquire a type of U.S. commercial route-planning software, but the Air Force concluded the newer drones -- with shorter wingspans -- could carry such small payloads that they were designed primarily for reconnaissance missions, not spreading toxins.

"If you want to design something to do that, it would probably look pretty different than what we felt we had," Mr. Boyd says. "UAVs are our core business."

The intelligence dispute only became public when the Air Force dissent was released July 18 as part of a larger declassification of prewar intelligence estimates of the Iraqi threat. It was first outlined by AP last month. The White House argues that it was only expressing the majority opinion of intelligence agencies. The Central Intelligence Agency, in fact, still rejects the Air Force position and says details were kept secret not to hide dissent but to protect sensitive information.

But there isn't any question that the frightening image of toxin-carrying drones was one the administration publicly invoked repeatedly -- and forcefully -- in the run-up to the war.

When it was discovered that Iraq was seeking a type of U.S. route-planning software that included U.S. topographic data, CIA Director George Tenet early last year cited the evidence before congressional intelligence committees to underscore the potential Iraqi threat. By September, Vice President Dick Cheney was urgently warning top lawmakers in private conversations that Iraqi UAVs could be used against the U.S. homeland.

President Bush went public in an Oct. 7 speech in Cincinnati before House and Senate votes on the war. "We're concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the U.S.," the president said. And Secretary of State Colin Powell came back to the UAV issue again in a last appeal to the United Nations in February before the conflict.

In this same period, top policy makers would have known the Air Force disagreed with this assessment, since a major review had begun late last summer to compile a national intelligence estimate on the threat posed by Iraq. The process involved weeks of interagency coordination and comments on drafts circulated within the intelligence community. When Air Force analysts saw the draft, they felt compelled to file what became a dissent to the final report in October.

"The drafter's position seemed very much at odds with what we believed," Mr. Boyd says. "We just didn't see anything we regarded as credible evidence."

Three factors appear to have influenced the split in the community: the fate of the earlier L-29 program; testimony from Iraqi expatriates; and Iraq's pursuit of sophisticated route-planning software that included U.S. topographic data.

In each case, the Air Force's judgments appear to reflect its special expertise with UAVs, beginning with the decision that the L-29 program was doomed. "This is really where the essence of the controversy is," says Mr. Boyd. "The Air Force had concluded that the L-29 wouldn't work and they had stopped the program."

The Air Force -- more than some in the administration -- was wary of information from Iraqi expatriates. "I don't know that I can say much more than that the defectors didn't always strike us as credible and in many cases their information was dated," Mr. Boyd says.

Finally, Iraq's pursuit of software did more to pique the interest of other intelligence agencies, which strictly guarded the discovery for a period in case the U.S. might tamper with the software to disrupt the Iraqi program. The Air Force was less impressed that the same software came bundled with U.S. topographic data. "We didn't see anything all that sinister," Mr. Boyd says. "It was commonplace that that would happen when you were getting that software."

From his standpoint, the process was fair and gave the Air Force a chance to state its views. "Were the exact words of our view negotiated? Almost certainly," Mr. Boyd says. "But there was no pressure exerted to change or modify that view."

"I don't want to be casting stones at my intell-community colleagues, nor do I want to be crowing that we were right. I'm sure I have taken many positions over the years that have been wrong," Mr. Boyd says. Nonetheless, leafing through Air Force photographs of the estimated 25 to 30 drones found so far in Iraq, there is a certain satisfaction. One shows glass viewing ports and brackets to mount a camera. Another shows very little extra space beyond the flight controls.

"It would be possible but kind of a stretch to make it a good [biological weapons] delivery vehicle," Mr. Boyd says.