

A Farewell to Arms Control

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The organization that was at the center of the maelstrom of the Iraqi weapons-of-mass-destruction fiasco, responsible for bringing the world to the brink of war on no fewer than a half-dozen occasions during the 1990s, and then unable to prevent a war in March 2003, has departed the global scene. It left not with a dramatic flair befitting its former status, but rather with barely a whimper, reduced to nothing more than a historical footnote in the grand tragedy that has become Iraq.



Pakistani ballistic missile

The United Nations Monitoring and Verification Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), successor to its more accomplished parent, the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), was found to be redundant by an act of the United Nations Security Council, which created its disarmament mandate over 16 years ago when it passed Security Council Resolution 1687 in April 1991. The United States and Great Britain had been trying to close down the weapons inspection operation since the invasion of Iraq, citing the demise of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq by coalition forces as evidence that the U.N.-mandated inspection process was now moot.

In a way, the U.S.-British position has merits, as I for one, having led numerous inspections inside Iraq from 1991 to 1998, would have a hard time imagining the inspection teams operating in a safe and effective manner inside the insurgent-ridden Iraq of today. But the issue of the ongoing relevance of U.N. weapons inspections goes far beyond a simple matter of inspector security. What really galled the U.S. and British officials were the inconvenient truths about Iraq's disarmed status, something a continued viable inspection operation would officially register in politically damaging fashion. The lies and distortions concerning the threat posed by Iraqi WMD promulgated by the governments of George W. Bush and Tony Blair have been blasted into the background of domestic discourse in both the United States and Britain by the ongoing cacophony of violence exploding from occupied Iraq today, more than four years after the invasion.

While the ongoing violence is widely seen by most rational humans as a tragedy of enormous proportions, for those who lied their way into this illegitimate war by fabricating a nonexistent threat the continued surge of violence in Iraq provides a welcome buffer from any probing into the corrupt foundation of fabrication and deceit upon which the precarious structure of this pre-emptive war of aggression continues to be constructed. With the U.S. Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, growing increasingly discontent with the status quo in Iraq, anything that prompted a renewed examination of why America and its few remaining allies are trapped in the quagmire would be most

unwelcome. This is the true reason behind the demise of UNMOVIC—politics, nothing more or less.

The reality was, and is, that nothing could have been done to save UNMOVIC once Bush decided to activate his unilateral dream of regional conquest in the Middle East. Having made international law, and by extension the Security Council of the United Nations, irrelevant to U.S. foreign policy objectives, there was no chance that an organ of the Security Council—the weapons inspection process—could continue to be seen as relevant. Truth be told, UNMOVIC was always a red-headed stepchild in the world of disarmament affairs. It was born of illegitimacy, derived from a political need on the part of the United States to be seen as promoting U.N.-mandated disarmament in Iraq even after orchestrating the demise of UNMOVIC's predecessor, UNSCOM. When a major candidate for national office in the United States, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, can claim that the reason the United States found itself in Iraq in 2003 was that the government of Saddam Hussein had barred the UNMOVIC inspectors from entering Iraq, and not be held accountable for his ignorance—willful or otherwise—it only underscores the continued denigration of the U.N. inspectors that has occurred throughout their long and labored tenure.

Republicans are not the only ones guilty of misrepresenting the truth regarding Iraq and weapons inspections; President Bill Clinton had the gall to claim that Saddam Hussein had refused to cooperate with weapons inspectors in December 1998, evicting the WMD sleuths from Iraq on the eve of the 72-hour bombing campaign known as Desert Fox. Clinton knew full well that his administration had deliberately created a provocation against the Iraqis, seeking to inspect a Baath Party headquarters, and once it became clear the Iraqis would accede to this outrageous demand, it was Clinton, not Saddam, who ordered the inspectors out of Iraq, seeking to cover his tracks with a bombing campaign that ostensibly targeted “WMD sites,” but which in reality was a thinly disguised assassination attempt against the Iraqi president. A leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for president, Hillary Clinton, continues to uphold the fiction of her husband's policy in Iraq, much to the detriment of truth.

Weapons inspectors have always found themselves aware of an all too inconvenient reality, one that postulated the possibility of a compliant Iraq, disarmed in accordance with the mandate set forth by the Security Council, and as such ready to rejoin the family of nations as intended by all Security Council resolutions passed on the subject. It was the unilateral policy objectives of the United States, centered as they were on regime change in Baghdad, which made the realization of Iraq's disarmed status undesirable. Truth, in the form of a verifiable report regarding the ultimate disposition of Iraqi WMD, was the enemy of a policy that hinged on the maintenance of the perception of Iraqi noncompliance regarding its disarmament obligations. UNSCOM was in a position to issue such a report by 1996, but American intransigence prevented that from happening. UNMOVIC could have pushed for a similar closure in early 2003, but it too found that the truth of Iraq's WMD was not a message anyone, least of all the United States, was prepared to receive.

In true, the weapons inspectors were more often than not their own worst enemy when it came to making a clear presentation of the facts. The successful infiltration of the weapons inspection process by American and British officials tasked with shaping a picture of Iraqi WMD that dovetailed with the notion of a recalcitrant and dangerous Saddam meant that even while UNSCOM inspectors on the ground were collecting and certifying the data that pointed toward the truth, the inspectors' leadership in New York was successful in navigating the inspection vehicle in a completely different direction: The establishment of fact would have little bearing on a process in which proving the negative had become the standard for any final judgment. It was all fine and dandy for the inspectors to document what they knew about Iraq's WMD programs; the problem came when they were called upon to bring to closure that which they did not know, and given the timely insertion of fabricated intelligence into the system by the United States and others, there was a considerable

body of unknowns from which to draw upon when making the case that the inspectors' work had not yet run its course. "Proving the negative" became a disease which infected the entire process, casting doubt where once there existed certainty and clouding over any logical interpretation of the available facts with shadows and whispers of conspiracy and subterfuge.

This disease consumed UNSCOM in its final days, and went on to infect UNMOVIC as well. Even now, with the nails all but hammered in place on UNMOVIC's coffin, the head of UNMOVIC, Demetrius Perricos, continues to point to a "residue of uncertainty" about Iraq's disarmed status, saying there are people, material and intellectual know-how which still need to be monitored. One would expect the Bush administration and its defenders to leap on any suggestion by a senior U.N. official that Iraq was somehow not disarmed. Yet not even Bush and his coterie of blood-stained warmongers will breathe credibility into the fanciful mental meanderings of a captain whose ship has already sunk.

History has certified the work of the inspectors as being technically brilliant, and politically disastrous. Two things can be said of the U.N. inspection experience in Iraq. First, international inspections, properly led and equipped, can achieve meaningful disarmament results even under the most arduous of conditions. The second is that multilateral inspection regimes will always fail if the entirety of the body mandating the inspections fails to come to a singular agreement on the scale and scope of the disarmament mission. American (and to a lesser extent British) embrace of regime-change policies which were not contained in the U.N. mandate regarding Iraq meant the political death of the inspections. These are pure truths which need to be recognized and acted upon if any future multilateral international approach to disarmament and arms control is ever to reach fruition. So long as the United States continues to behave as if it has sole authority to deviate from the framework of international law set forth by the United Nations, there can be no hope for any meaningful progression in the field of threat reduction born of arms control and disarmament. Indeed, the opposite will occur—a world grown wary of American treachery will seek to acquire the means to deter, and perhaps even push back, what it sees as an American unilateral domination of the globe.

While it is difficult to predict the future, what can be said with absolute certainty is that the passing of UNMOVIC represents far more than a political stain on those who claim to embrace global nonproliferation but in reality smother it. The political aspects of the aggregate of failure which combined to sink UNMOVIC have been underscored above. The true tragedy of UNMOVIC's demise rests not with bad policy, but rather with the loss of irreplaceable technical expertise. I do not refer to the library of inspection data derived from the 16-year disarmament saga in Iraq; this data is tainted by the political corruption of the inspection process. What I lament is the passing of potential, both realized and future, represented by the proactive work of some of the world's greatest nonproliferation minds.

For the past seven years, UNMOVIC, led by the intrepid Russian weapons inspector Nikita Smidovich, has built an unprecedented program of training of international weapons inspectors. The qualification standards certified through this comprehensive training process has led to the creation of a cadre of international experts in the field of nonproliferation. Smidovich created a network of training opportunities in facilities in Canada, Argentina, Switzerland, Germany, Russia and Britain, to name a few. The hundreds of inspectors who have completed this training stood ready to go anywhere in the world at a moment's notice to investigate whether a given manufacturing process was legitimately utilized or instead covertly diverted for illegitimate use. This inspection capability far exceeded anything the world would ever need in Iraq, and had great potential for pre-emptive application in any number of proliferation trouble spots, from Iran to North Korea and beyond. For an annual cost of a few million dollars, the inspection potential created by Smidovich and others,

operating under the umbrella of UNMOVIC, had the potential to prevent conflicts costing untold billions.

This capability is now forever lost with the demise of UNMOVIC, proof positive that the real problems confronting the world's collective peace and security continue to be undermined by an American administration willing to exact any price in order to win cheap political points. Americans rightly measure the cost of the Iraq war in terms of dead and wounded American service members. Some even spare a thought for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties. But scant few will reflect on the potential harm done to future generations of Americans, and others around the world, as we bid a silent farewell to meaningful arms control.

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Richard (psycho) Perle, 'why have nukes if you can't use them?'

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