

*by St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Here is the price of the Bush administration having played fast and loose with the facts in the run-up to the war in Iraq: On Sunday, senior U.S. military officials in Baghdad gathered together about two dozen members of the press and showed them two tables full of nasty weapons of the kind blamed for the deaths of 170 U.S. troops in Iraq. The weapons, they asserted, had come from Iran.

Douglas Feith - Defense Dept. Photo

And the first reaction was not outrage at Iran, but skepticism about the U.S. motives for this bizarre game of show-and-tell. This skepticism makes us uncomfortable. We would like to believe that when senior U.S. officials stand before the world's press and make serious charges against another nation, they have no ulterior motives. We would like to believe that there is specific and credible evidence that what they say is true, that we're not being sold a bill of goods.

But six years of experience with President George W. Bush have undermined that hope. Given all that has gone before -- just last week, the Pentagon's inspector general reported that Douglas Feith, one of the war's chief architects, had created made-to-order intelligence to help justify the invasion of Iraq -- let's just say that caution is in order.

Certainly the weapons displayed Sunday were horrific. They included grenades, mortar shells and second-generation improvised explosive devices called explosively formed penetrators. Hidden along roadsides, these carefully shaped bombs can blow molten metal charges through heavy armor plating at incredible speed. It takes sophisticated tooling and knowledge to make an EFP, and it would not be surprising if they came from Iran.

The Iranian government is known to have close ties with some of Iraq's Shiite leaders, most notably Moqtada al Sadr, head of the largest Shiite militia. And to the extent that it can sow chaos in Iraq, Iran comes out ahead in its regional ambitions. But there was no direct evidence of Iranian government involvement in the armaments.

Curious, too, was the insistence of the U.S. officials present on anonymity. The timing seems odd, as well; the shaped charges have been used in Iraq since 2004, although they've been showing up more frequently in recent months. But one of the unnamed Cassandras assured reporters that American forces "are not trying to hype this up to be more than it is."

That's a relief, if it's true. For a moment there we were worried that it might be part of an effort to justify broadening the Iraq war into Iran. There are two U.S. battle groups in the Persian Gulf, and there are no high-value military targets left in Iraq. And some of the neoconservative ideologues who pushed for invading Iraq four years ago are now sounding alarms about Tehran's intentions.

In 2002, Douglas Feith was prominent among the neocons who called themselves "the Vulcans." As the Pentagon's No. 3 man behind Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Feith headed the Office of Defense Policy, which did its own analyses of intelligence. "It was good government," he told interviewers last week after the release of the inspector general's report.

His good government initiative claimed to have found a "mature, symbiotic relationship" between Saddam Hussein's government and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida organization and sold the idea to a credulous and incurious president. The inspector general's report reaffirms -- surprise -- that there was no credible evidence to support such a conclusion.

U.S. forces should spare no effort in finding and eliminating the people who are building and supplying the weapons that are killing U.S. troops. But they need to be careful that their claims stand up in the court of world opinion, lest there come a day when no one believes the United States any more. The book on this was written 2,500 years ago by a Greek named Aesop. It was called "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

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*Articles of Feith by St. Louis Post-Dispatch*