

WMD: A primer

Let's be clear on what is - and isn't - a weapon of mass destruction

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NEW YORK -- "Weapons of mass destruction." No term has been more abused, or less understood. George Bush has made it his personal mantra, and the slogan of his presidency.

An administration that may have concocted fake evidence to launch war on Iraq may yet conveniently "discover" unconventional weapons there -- before November's U.S. elections. So let's define what such weapons are -- and are not.

Three types of unconventional arms are called WMD: nuclear, chemical and biological.

Of those, the only true weapons of mass destruction are nuclear. The U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, alone possess them. Japan could make nuclear weapons within 90 days.

Without specialized medium and long-range delivery systems (aircraft or missiles), nuclear weapons are useless, even suicidal.

Last week, Bush warned of nuclear proliferation and called for a worldwide ban on the trade of nuclear material. This when U.S. ally Pakistan has been exposed as a major proliferator, Israel is covertly helping build India's nuclear capabilities and the U.S. plans to deploy a new generation of nuclear weapons designed to attack Third World targets.

Chemical weapons, which are not WMD, are blistering, choking, or toxic agents. Mustard gas possessed by Iraq, Libya, Syria, Egypt and other nations is World War I technology. Horrible as they are, these are strictly battlefield weapons, requiring large, clumsy holding tanks, and depend on favourable winds. Winston Churchill authorized using poison gas against "primitive tribesmen" -- Kurds in Iraq and Afghans -- when he was British home secretary. Benito Mussolini's Italy used mustard gas in Ethiopia and Libya.

Choking gas, like chlorine, is also a tactical battlefield agent. French troops without gas masks defending a 4-km front at Verdun in 1916 were hit by 60,000 chlorine gas shells, yet held their lines. So did Canadian troops in Flanders, also without masks, who heroically fought off superior German forces.

World War II vintage

Nerve gases, like Sarin and VX, are World War II vintage. Though deadly, they, too, are tactical agents designed for area denial and neutralizing high value targets. Using nerve gas requires specialized vehicles or aircraft with highly complex dispensing systems. Gas is dependent on temperature, humidity and wind. The Soviets tried various nerve agents in Afghanistan, but found them ineffective and dangerous to their own troops.

Nerve agents would be extremely lethal if released by terrorists in a large building, mall or airport but, again, they are weapons of localized destruction, not mass destruction. In 1995, a Japanese cult released nerve gas in Tokyo's subway, killing 12 people.

Nerve gas was not used during WW II because of its unreliability and lack of wide area lethality. Many gases are unstable and have limited shelf lives. Iraq and Iran used poison gas during the 1980-88 Gulf War -- killing or maiming many soldiers but achieving no strategic breakthroughs.

Biological agents, like anthrax, botulism, Q-fever, tularemia and plague, are the most feared, yet least understood weapons. They are difficult to produce, store, transport and deliver. Germ weapons have never been successfully used in warfare. The USSR was secretly working on mutated, drug-resistant forms of anthrax and plague when it collapsed.

In the 1930s and '40s, Japan used anthrax in bombs, and also released plague-infected rats against Chinese civilian and military targets. These attempts produced some localized casualties. The Japanese military ruled their biological warfare campaign a failure.

Biowarfare agents are weapons of uncertain, limited destructiveness.

Conventional weapons can be as destructive as nuclear weapons. The two atomic bombs the U.S. dropped on Japan in 1945 killed 103,000 people. In one night alone, U.S. firebombs incinerated 100,000 civilians in Tokyo.

Japanese sources say one million civilians were killed by U.S. bombing raids. More than 100,000 German civilians were burned to death by the Allied fire-bombings of Dresden and Hamburg.

Fuel-air explosives, or thermobaric weapons, used by Russia in Chechnya and by the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq, can be as destructive as small, tactical nuclear weapons. So can America's recently deployed 21,500-lb. MOAB bomb. Larger versions are planned.

Given these facts, it's important to dissipate the hysteria and confusion over WMD. Even if Iraq had chemical or biological weapons in 1993 -- which it did not -- they were not true WMD. Iraq had no means of delivering them to the U.S., and they could never have posed the threat Bush claimed.

No terrorist group is likely to sneak enough chemical or biological material into the U.S. to cause more than localized damage. Attacks like those on the World Trade Center may be horrible, but they are not mass destruction. Even a small nuclear device would cause only limited destruction.

Ironically, the most lethal, yet most ignored, WMD faced by Americans happens to be their beloved cars, trucks and SUVs in which some 43,000 die each year in traffic accidents.

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