

Statement Prepared for the House Armed Services Committee
Hearing on reports of weapons of mass destruction findings in Iraq

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It should not be surprising that chemical munitions produced by Iraq beginning in the early 1980's and continuing until 1991 have been found in Iraq during the course of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Such rounds continued to be found during the entire course of the United Nations inspection activities in Iraq between 1991 and 1998 and during the brief resumed activities of the UN prior to the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In the early days of inspections carried out by the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) such discoveries were made in the face of Iraqi intransigence and defiance of inspectors. These Iraq deception and denial efforts were designed to limit the inspectors understanding of the extent of Iraq's CW program, and particularly its efforts to produce advanced nerve agents and advanced delivery methods. A vast store of Iraqi chemical weapons were identified, collected and destroyed by UNSCOM. By the mid-1990's, discoveries of additional chemical rounds generally represented something else entirely – the chaos of warfare and the disorganization of many parts of Saddam's decaying arms regime.

Battlefields are inherently disorganized affairs particularly when your army is losing and very often retreating in chaos as Saddam's army found itself both in the Iran-Iraq war and as the Coalition forces routed Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Weapons stores were sometime abandoned with no attempt to record what went where. Many of Iraq's arm depots represented unsorted collections of munitions that the Iraqis themselves had little idea of their composition. Sometimes this had tragic consequences as it did in late 1991 when US forces destroyed a large bunker of weapons believing that it contained only HE rounds and thinking that this was an effective way of rendering them harmless. Unfortunately it also contained a small number – no one is really confident as to the number – of unmarked, and undetected, chemical rounds. The resulting controlled explosion exposed the US troops involved to a resulting release of Sarin.

On the Iran-Iraq front there was the additional problem of extensive use of chemical munitions, mostly mustard, with the result that the battlefield was littered with unexploded munitions, most HE, but some chemical, as well as extensive, but undocumented minefields. This is not an unknown problem in warfare. To this day, there are extensive areas around the French fort of Verdun that remain closed, but littered with HE and mustard rounds – from World War I. Even outside of these closed areas, every Spring a small number of French

farmers find themselves turning over either small pockets of trapped mustard or unexploded mustard rounds and suffer burns as a result.

Iraq in the 1980's acquired a huge armory of conventional and unconventional munitions. It is now estimated that on the conventional side alone, Iraq had two-thirds of the amount of conventional HE munitions of the much larger US military. As the Committee well knows, it is from these Ammunition Storage Points (ASP) where these munitions were stored that the insurgent forces have drawn the explosives for the bulk of their IEDs and suicide bombs.

The UN coped with the chaotic nature of the Iraqi weapons dispositions and the frustrating lack of full cooperation of Iraqi authorities. The results, while recognized as incomplete, resulted in the collection and destruction of what most believed were the vast bulk of Iraq's pre-1991 chemical munitions. There were important gaps, some real, such as where Iraq actually stood on understanding how to stabilize the chemical agents and how to weaponize advanced agents, some probably less real, such as material balance accounting of the exact amount of agent produced. But no one believed that every last chemical round had been found, and most were rather certain that it was inevitable that if you searched enough you could find additional pre-1991 chemical rounds that the Iraqis had lost track of.

When I took over the Iraq Survey Group in June 2003, my attention was not focused on pre-1991 munitions except for one limited case. I was very concerned that in the attempt to destroy the vast stockpile of conventional munitions before they fell into the hands of the insurgents the mistake of 1991 one would be repeated and US forces would unknowingly be subjected to exposure to chemical agent.

Why this lack of concern for what I freely acknowledged at the time in Congressional testimony was the high probability that small amounts of pre-1991 chemical munitions would continue to be found in Iraq. The reasons were two-fold. First, the general technical assessments that I was receiving from those most familiar with Iraq's pre-1991 chemical munitions were as follows: Sarin produced between 1984-88 was no longer a chemical weapons agent and would have very low level toxicity. Nerve agent produced after the end of the Iran-Iraq War and before the invasion of Kuwait (1988-91) was a very mixed bag, but was mostly small R&D runs and were limited in numbers and probably destroyed over the course of the 1990's. The mustard produced by Iraq was of reasonable quality but had been put into containers and munitions that were of such poor quality that, by the mid-1990's - they were generally leaking and very dangerous to handle. It was generally believed therefore that the chemical rounds that would be found would be of such low quality that they would not be effective weapons – self-policing in terms of the harm they could do to US forces and Iraqi civilians.

Second, I had a very high priority task, limited resources to achieve it and a rapidly deteriorating security environment in which to accomplish it. That priority task was to determine the state of Iraq's WMD programs – chemical, biological, nuclear and missiles – at the time the decision was made to go to war in 2003. In the chemical weapons area that meant we concentrated on trying to determine what chemical weapons Iraq had produced after the withdrawal of UN inspector in 1998, where they were and the details of its chemical weapons establishment. If you will remember, we entered this war with a National Intelligence Estimate that assured us there was an active and very threatening chemical weapons program ongoing in Iraq. We needed, therefore, to quickly identify the actual status of that program and find the weapons if they existed. I do not see how I, or anyone else, could have made any other decision as to the direction of ISG activities.

Let me conclude this brief statement, by again saying we should not be surprised if pre-1991 chemical munitions continue to show up in small numbers in the years ahead. Iraq used these weapons on the Iranians and its own citizens as well as deploying them for possible use against Coalition forces repulsing Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. All of the world's battlefields continue to yield old weapons many decades after conflicts are over. Iraq will be no different in this regard.

What of the risks from these old chemical weapons? We tragically know that American's and Iraqis continue to be killed every day by RPGs, mines, 155mm artillery shells, mortar rounds, HMX, RDX and other military-grade explosives and on and on that were not brought under control when the Saddam regime collapsed. These are real and very capable killers. In the sum of things, 1980-era chemical munitions have not killed a single American or Iraqi. We would all like every chemical canister and munition to be found and safely disposed. There is no disagreement on this. In this as in so much in Iraq, however, we are learning that not everything we might want can be done with the resources we have available. Equally important unless you have a clear plan as to what must be done and when in order to achieve your objectives, lives will be needlessly lost and you will end up no closer to the goal we all share of returning Iraq to an Iraqi government capable of governing in the interest of the nation as a whole and bringing American troops home to the honor they have earned in blood.