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## White House 'distorted' Iraq threat

By Stephen Fidler in London

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Bush administration officials "systematically misrepresented" the threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to war, according to a new report to be published on Thursday by a respected Washington think-tank.

These distortions, combined with intelligence failures, exaggerated the risks posed by a country that presented no immediate threat to the US, Middle East or global security, the report says.

The study from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concludes that, though the long-term threat from Iraq could not be ignored, it was being effectively contained by a combination of UN weapons inspections, international sanctions and limited US-led military action.

It says the evidence shows that although Iraq retained ambitions to develop weapons of mass destruction, almost all of what had been built had been destroyed long before the war.

Inspectors from the US-led coalition are still seeking evidence of the programmes in Iraq. But Joseph Cirincione, director of Carnegie's non-proliferation project, said: "We think it's highly unlikely that there will be any significant finds from now on."

Carnegie is regarded as a moderately left-of-centre think-tank. It opposed the war, saying Iraq's disarmament could be achieved via inspectors, if necessary backed up by force. Mr Cirincione said the report, which took more than six months to compile, was based on hundreds of documents and dozens of interviews with specialists, former weapons inspectors and current and former US officials.

It concludes that before 2002 the US intelligence community appears to have accurately perceived Iraq's nuclear and missile programmes, but overestimated the threat from chemical and biological weapons. But it also says that during 2002, published intelligence became excessively politicised. A "dramatic shift" in intelligence assessments during the year was one sign that "the intelligence community began to be unduly influenced by policymakers' views sometime in 2002".

The report says administration officials misrepresented the threat in three ways.

They presented nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as a single WMD threat, lumping together the high likelihood that Iraq had chemical weapons with the possibility that it had nuclear weapons, a claim for which there was no serious evidence. The administration also insisted without evidence that Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi leader, would give WMD to terrorists.

Finally, officials misused intelligence in many ways. "These include the wholesale dropping of caveats, probabilities and expressions of uncertainty present in intelligence assessments from public statements," it says.

The Carnegie assessment concluded: "There is no evidence of any Iraqi nuclear programme", contrary to assertions by Dick Cheney, vice-president, and others in 2002. It notes that since the war the US-led coalition has found no chemical weapons or programmes and no biological weapons or agents.

The report says the White House approach to the war was based on what it called "worse case reasoning", assuming that what intelligence agencies did not know was worse than what they did know. "Worst-case planning is valid . . . [But] acting on worst-case assumptions is an entirely different matter."

The picture of an Iraqi arsenal existing only on paper is reinforced by an article in Wednesday's Washington Post, based partly on interviews with Iraqi scientists. It said that none of Iraq's weapons programmes had got past the planning stage since the 1991 Gulf war.

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