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HEADLINE: Have we got the goods on Iraq?

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BODY:

WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration's reluctance to share with the public, let alone U.N. weapons inspectors, evidence that Saddam Hussein has continued his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction should give us all pause.

Our closest allies have now urged us to wait until the fall, allowing weapons inspectors in Iraq a chance to finish their jobs. Since we have nearly 150,000 troops in the vicinity, there is every reason to believe that the U.S. military is ready for a spring engagement, and it will be hard-pressed to keep hundreds of thousands of soldiers on standby for another half-year. Though we may win the war, we stand to lose the PR battle at home and abroad.

It seems unlikely that Saddam had much, if anything, to do with Sept. 11, 2001. However, aside from Saddam being a horrible human being who has committed egregious acts against his own people, there are strategic reasons to be worried. Given Saddam's failure to back down in the face of overwhelming force before the Persian Gulf war and his later attempt to assassinate then-President George H.W. Bush, it is unclear if he can be contained. A Saddam Hussein with nuclear weapons could throw his weight around the gulf and make American access to oil more difficult and uncertain. It is sad but true that our economy and those of our allies are so reliant upon that region of the world, but we are.

That said, the Bush administration has a penchant for secrecy that betrays our democratic foundations and ill-serves us here and in the court of world opinion. If it has the evidence, let us know.

While it appears the administration may be finally reversing course, the public presentation of the case for war to date has been clumsy. Administration officials have yet to explain why they have held back on helping the weapons inspectors. There is a reason: sharing evidence of suspected facilities with the inspectors might ultimately lead Saddam to move the evidence, making subsequent military intervention more difficult.

However, they need to make the case, the recent discovery of 12 warheads capable of chemical-warfare use notwithstanding. Tell us what defectors have said. Show us evidence from intelligence

sources.

The longer they wait, the greater the suspicion that they haven't got anything substantial. The more they hem and haw, the more we wonder if Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and others are solely trying to amend the way the Persian Gulf war ended. A reading of Bob Woodward's "Bush at War" shows Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld immediately encouraging action against Iraq in the wake of Sept. 11, despite the lack of evidence of Iraqi involvement.

The more the administration resists the opportunity to make the case, the greater the sense that our leaders merely used the tragedy to force a showdown with Iraq that they wanted for other reasons. The more secrecy, the greater likelihood of a spirited and potentially misinformed antiwar movement. As time passes without significant information-sharing, we will lose the support of allies like Turkey, where American use of bases puts that nation on the front line. Supporting war against fellow Muslims and a country with which Turkey shares a border is a big step with potentially huge political costs.

If the Bush administration is dead-set on a spring war, then time is running out. While Saddam may be wily and unpredictable, he probably is not going to give this administration an out that would avoid war. We, in the process, have a different obligation. We have to convince a skeptical, even hostile, bunch of allies that this fight is worth it. Without that effort, we will never gain the support of France and Germany at the U.N., we may potentially lose basing rights in Turkey, and, worse, we will lose the moral higher ground.

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