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AFTER THE WAR: INTELLIGENCE; Agency Disputes C.I.A. View On Trailers as Weapons Labs

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The State Department's intelligence division is disputing the Central Intelligence Agency's conclusion that mysterious trailers found in Iraq were for making biological weapons, United States government officials said today.

In a classified June 2 memorandum, the officials said, the department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research said it was premature to conclude that the trailers were evidence of an Iraqi biological weapons program, as President Bush has done. The disclosure of the memorandum is the clearest sign yet of disagreement between intelligence agencies over the assertion, which was produced jointly by the C.I.A. and the Defense Intelligence Agency and made public on May 28 on the C.I.A. Web site. Officials said the C.I.A. and D.I.A. did not consult with other intelligence agencies before issuing the report.

The report on the trailers was initially prepared for the White House, and Mr. Bush has cited it as proof that Iraq indeed had a biological weapons program, as the United States has repeatedly alleged, although it has yet to produce any other conclusive evidence.

In an interview with Polish television on May 30, Mr. Bush cited the trailers as evidence that the United States had "found the weapons of mass destruction" it was looking for. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell echoed that assessment in a public statement the next day, saying that the accuracy of prewar assessments linking Iraqi trailers to a biological weapons program had been borne out by the discovery.

Some intelligence analysts had previously disputed the C.I.A. report, but it had not been known that the C.I.A. report did not reflect an interagency consensus or that any intelligence agency had later objected to its finding.

The State Department bureau raised its objections in a memorandum to Mr. Powell, according to Congressional officials. They said the memorandum was cast as a dissent to the C.I.A. report, and that it said that the evidence found to date did not justify the conclusion that the trailers could have had no other purpose than for use as mobile weapons laboratories.

The State Department spokesman, Richard A. Boucher, said tonight: "I'm not in a position to comment on reports of classified memorandum from our intelligence folks." But a State Department official who spoke on condition of anonymity said: "We do rely on I&R for their best judgment on things, but when you weigh in all the factors, the C.I.A. and D.I.A. folks are the ones who have been out there, and their conclusion was that these trailers were mobile labs."

An administration official sympathetic to Mr. Powell said the memo put him in an uncomfortable position, but would not characterize Mr. Powell's view of its findings.

The reasons cited in the State Department memorandum to justify its dissent could not be learned. But in interviews earlier this month in Washington and the Middle East, American and British analysts with direct access to the evidence also disputed the C.I.A.'s claims, saying that the mobile units were more likely intended for other purposes and that the evaluation process had been damaged by a rush to judgment.

Administration officials said one argument made in the State Department report was that each of the two trailers and one laboratory discovered by the United States in Iraq could constitute only part of what the C.I.A. report said it believed had been two- or three-trailer systems necessary for the manufacture of chemical weapons. The missing trailers have not been found.

Among the alternative purposes for the trailers that the State Department report described as plausible were that they had been intended for the refueling of Iraqi missiles, one administration official said.

The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research is a small but important agency in the intelligence community. Its principal purpose is to provide the Secretary of State and his top advisers with intelligence analysis independent of other agencies, but it also has a voice in the drafting of national intelligence estimates and other documents that are supposed to reflect the consensus of the intelligence community.

The fact that the C.I.A. and the D.I.A. did not consult with other agencies in producing the so-called white paper reflects a rare but not unknown approach, officials from the intelligence agencies and Congress said. The government's intelligence apparatus spans more than a dozen agencies, and officials usually try to reach consensus before making their findings public.

The exclusion of the State Department's intelligence bureau and other agencies seemed unusual, several government officials said, because of the high-profile subject.

Administration officials said the State Department agency was given no warning that the C.I.A. report was being produced, or made public.

A C.I.A. official defended the process by which the agency reached its conclusion, saying that the C.I.A. and the D.I.A. were most intimately familiar with the physical evidence and human intelligence related to the trailers, and were thus most qualified to issue public findings. But a Defense Department official acknowledged today that some analysts in the D.I.A. in Iraq had also objected to the conclusions.

The C.I.A. has said that its initial information about the use of mobile trailers as biological weapons laboratories came from a former Iraqi scientist, and that the discovery of the trailers appeared to have confirmed intelligence that he provided.

"We didn't shop that paper around because we were the ones who were most knowledgeable about it," the C.I.A. official said. "We were the ones who knew from a former Iraqi scientist what to expect, and we didn't have to ask a handful of people in small agencies."

But administration officials sympathetic to the State Department said that the department's intelligence bureau felt it had been deliberately shut out of the process. The intelligence bureau has been more skeptical than the C.I.A. and D.I.A. on matters related to Iraq's suspected illicit weapons program and its ties to terrorism.

An intelligence official sympathetic to the C.I.A. view said the State Department intelligence bureau's skepticism had been well known and that seeking its input on the report would have served no useful purpose.

The C.I.A. official said the State Department document was an internal memorandum and that it had not been read by George Tenet, the director of central intelligence, or other officials at the agency.