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Follow-up needed after Iraqi weapons story

You gotta hand it to America's mass media: When war hangs in the balance, they sure know how to bury a story. After devoting thousands of network hours and oceans of ink to stories about "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq, major U.S. news outlets did little but yawn in the days after the latest Newsweek published an exclusive report on the subject — a piece headlined "The Defector's Secrets."

It's hard to imagine how any journalist on the war beat could read the article's lead without doing a double take: "Hussein Kamel, the highest-ranking Iraqi official ever to defect from Saddam Hussein's inner circle, told CIA and British intelligence officers and U.N. inspectors in the summer of 1995 that after the Gulf War, Iraq destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons stocks and the missiles to deliver them."

The article was written by Newsweek national security correspondent John Barry, who has been with the magazine since 1985. After following the Iraq weapons story for a dozen years, he draws on in-depth knowledge — in stark contrast to the stenographic approach taken by most journalists on the beat, who seem content to relay the pronouncements coming out of Washington and the United Nations.

"I think the whole issue of Iraq's weaponry has become steadily more impacted and complicated over the years," Barry told me in a February 26 interview. People often have trouble making sense out of the "twists and turns of the arguments." And, Barry added, what's reported as "fact" provided by the U.S. government or the U.N. is in many cases mere "supposition."

Now, it's time for us to ask some loud questions about the U.S. media echo chamber. Such as: Is there anybody awake in there? Barry's potentially explosive story, appearing in the March 3 edition of Newsweek, notes that "Kamel was Saddam Hussein's son-in-law and had direct knowledge of what he claimed: for 10 years he had run Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological and missile programs."

Making use of written documentation that Newsweek has verified as authentic, the article reports: "Kamel's revelations about the destruction of Iraq's WMD stocks were hushed up by the U.N. inspectors, sources say, for two reasons. Saddam did not

know how much Kamel had revealed, and the inspectors hoped to bluff Saddam into disclosing still more. And Iraq has never shown the documentation to support Kamel's story. Still, the defector's tale raises questions about whether the WMD stockpiles attributed to Iraq still exist."

The Newsweek story came off the press on Sunday, February 23. The next day, a would-be authoritative source — the Central Intelligence Agency — explained that it just wasn't so. "It is incorrect, bogus, wrong, untrue," declared CIA spokesman Bill Harlow. For good measure, on the same day, a Reuters article quoted an unnamed "British government source" eager to contradict Newsweek's documented account of what Kamel had said. "We've checked back and he didn't say this," the source contended. "He said just the opposite, that the WMD program was alive and kicking."

Under the unwritten rules of American media coverage, such denials tend to end the matter when the president and Congress have already decided that war is necessary.

It's not as if Kamel ranks as a nobody in media circles. Journalists and U.S. officials are fond of recounting that Saddam Hussein made sure he was quickly killed after the defector returned to Iraq following six months of voluntary exile.

"Until now, Kamel has best been known for exposing Iraq's deceptions about how far its pre-Gulf War biological weapons programs had advanced," media analyst Seth Ackerman points out. He adds that Newsweek's story "is particularly noteworthy because hawks in the Bush administration have frequently referred to the Kamel episode as evidence that U.N. inspectors are incapable of disarming Iraq on their own."

Ackerman cites a speech Dick Cheney made last August, when the vice president said that what occurred with Kamel "should serve as a reminder to all that we often learned more as the result of defections than we learned from the inspection regime itself."

Accounts of Kamel's debriefing as a defector and his subsequent demise have often served to illustrate the dishonesty and brutality of Iraq's government. But now that other information has emerged about what he had to say, the fellow seems to be quite a bit less newsworthy. ■