

Iraq's Nuclear Program: A Cautionary Tale

During the 1980s, Iraq was one of the nations whose nuclear weapons program was closely watched by U.S. experts. The existence of a program was not in question; its status was.

On the eve of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the considered analytical judgment, according to subsequent accounts, was that Iraq was at least five years away from a nuclear capability. After Iraq's defeat in the war, analysts learned that Iraq had been much closer to success, even though Israel had attacked and destroyed some of its facilities some years earlier.

What had gone wrong with U.S. estimates?

Iraq was a closed target, one of the most repressive and heavily policed states in the world. The state's nature makes collection more difficult, but that is not the answer to the question.

The answer lies in an analytical flaw, namely, mirror imaging. To manufacture the fissionable material it required, Iraq chose a method abandoned by the United States in the early days of its own nuclear program after World War II. The method works, but it is a very slow and tedious way to produce fissionable material.