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Ex-U.N. Inspector Has Harsh Words for Bush

By WARREN HOGE

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 — Hans Blix, the former chief United Nations weapons inspector, said Monday that the Bush administration convinced itself of the existence of banned weapons based on dubious findings before invading Iraq and was not interested in hearing evidence to the contrary.

"I think they had a set mind," Mr. Blix said on the NBC News program "Today" as he began a ten-day American book tour in the week marking the first anniversary of the United States-led invasion of Iraq.

"They wanted to come to the conclusion that there were weapons," he said. "Like the former days of the witch hunt, they are convinced that they exist, and if you see a black cat, well, that's evidence of the witch."

In a talk to a crowd of 1,200 people on Monday night at New York University, Mr. Blix said he did not share the Bush administrations' view that the war had made the world a safer place.

"Sorry to say it doesn't look that way," he said. "If the aim was to send a signal to terrorists that we are determined to take you on, that has not succeeded. In Iraq, it has bred a lot of terrorism and a lot of hatred to the Western world."

Speaking more assertively on "Today" about the Iraq war than he does in "Disarming Iraq," his new book, Mr. Blix charged the Bush administration with invading Iraq as retaliation for the terrorism strikes on the United States, even though there was no evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the attackers.

"So in a way, you could say that Iraq was perhaps as much punitive as it was pre-emptive," he said. "It was a reaction to 9/11 that we have to strike some theoretical, hypothetical links between Saddam Hussein and the terrorists. That was wrong. There wasn't anything."

Mr. Blix said the Americans and British depended too much on defectors and exercised too little critical judgment in assessing their information. "The C.I.A. certainly is very used to debriefing defectors, so they must have had a critical mind," he said, "but they also knew what they wanted to hear at the top."

Mr. Blix, 75, a Swedish constitutional lawyer and the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency from 1981 to 1997, came out of retirement three years ago to head up the United Nations inspection team in Iraq.

In the book, written in the same judicious and patient style that Bush administration officials disparaged when they criticized his approach to inspections, Mr. Blix concedes that as late as a month before the war, he still thought the Iraqis were concealing banned weapons.

He limits his judgment on whether the Americans and British manipulated intelligence to saying only that it was "probable that the governments were conscious that they were exaggerating the risks they saw in order to get the political support they would not otherwise have had."

Speaking of Mr. Bush and his principal ally, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, he writes, "I am not suggesting that Blair and Bush spoke in bad faith, but I am suggesting that it would not have taken much critical thinking on their own part or the part of their close advisers to prevent statements that misled the public."

In more pointed passages, he identifies Vice President Dick Cheney as his chief tormentor in the White House, saying he was "disdainful" of the inspection process.

In a meeting with Mr. Cheney in October 2002, Mr. Blix writes, "He stated his position that inspections, if they do not give results, cannot go on forever and said the U.S. was 'ready to discredit inspections in favor of disarmament.'

"A pretty straight way, I thought, of saying that if we did not soon find the weapons of mass destruction that the U.S. was convinced Iraq possessed (though they did not know where), the U.S. would be ready to say that the inspectors were useless and embark on disarmament by other means."

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