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NEW YORK – Former chief U.N. nuclear inspector Mohamed ElBaradei suggests in a new memoir that Bush administration officials should face international criminal investigation for the "shame of a needless war" in Iraq.

Freer to speak now than he was as an international civil servant, the Nobel-winning Egyptian accuses U.S. leaders of "grotesque distortion" in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion, when then-President George W. Bush and his lieutenants claimed Iraq possessed doomsday weapons despite contrary evidence collected by ElBaradei's and other arms inspectors inside the country.

The Iraq war taught him that "deliberate deception was not limited to small countries ruled by ruthless dictators," ElBaradei writes in "The Age of Deception," being published Tuesday by Henry Holt and Company.

The 68-year-old legal scholar, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 1997 to 2009 and recently a rallying figure in Egypt's revolution, concludes his 321-page account of two decades of "tedious, wrenching" nuclear diplomacy with a plea for more of it, particularly in the efforts to rein in North Korean and Iranian nuclear ambitions.

"All parties must come to the negotiating table," writes ElBaradei, who won the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with the IAEA in 2005. He repeatedly chides Washington for reluctant or hardline approaches to negotiations with Tehran and Pyongyang.

He is harshest in addressing the Bush administration's 2002-2003 drive for war with Iraq, when ElBaradei and Hans Blix led teams of U.N. inspectors looking for signs Saddam Hussein's government had revived nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programs.

He tells of an October 2002 meeting he and Blix had with Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and others, at which the Americans sought to convert the U.N. mission into a "cover for what would be, in essence, a United States-directed inspection process."

The U.N. officials resisted, and their teams went on to conduct some 700 inspections of scores of potential weapons sites in Iraq, finding no evidence to support the U.S. claims of weapons of mass destruction.

In his own memoir, published last November, Bush still insisted it was right to invade to remove a "homicidal dictator pursuing WMD." But the ex-president also wrote of a "sickening feeling" when no arms turned up after the invasion, and blamed an "intelligence failure" for the baseless claim, a reference to a 2002 U.S. intelligence assessment contending WMD were being built.

But that assessment itself offered no concrete evidence, and Bush and his aides have never explained why the U.S. position was not changed as on-the-ground U.N. findings came in before the invasion.

ElBaradei cites examples, including the conclusion by his inspectors inside Iraq that certain aluminum tubes were designed for artillery rockets, not for uranium enrichment equipment to build nuclear bombs, as Washington asserted.

The IAEA chief reported this conclusion to the U.N. Security Council on Jan. 27, 2003, and yet on the next day Bush — in a "remarkable" response — delivered a State of the Union address in which he repeated the unfounded claim about aluminum tubes, ElBaradei notes.

Similar contradictions of expert findings occurred with the claim, based on a forgery, that Iraq had sought uranium from Niger, and an Iraqi exile's fabrication that "mobile labs" were producing biological weapons.

"I was aghast at what I was witnessing," ElBaradei writes of the official U.S. attitude before the March 2003 invasion, which he calls "aggression where there was no imminent threat," a war in which he accepts estimates that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed.

In such a case, he suggests, the World Court should be asked to rule on whether the war was illegal. And, if so, "should not the International Criminal Court investigate whether this constitutes a 'war crime' and determine who is accountable?"

Formidable political and legal barriers would seem to rule out such an investigation. But ElBaradei, citing the war-crimes prosecution of Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, sees double standards that should end.

"Do we, as a community of nations, have the wisdom and courage to take the corrective measures needed, to ensure that such a tragedy will never happen again?" he asks.