

The First Casualty

The selling of the Iraq war.

Spencer Ackerman, John B. Judis / June 29, 2003

Foreign policy is always difficult in a democracy. Democracy requires openness. Yet foreign policy requires a level of secrecy that frees it from oversight and exposes it to abuse. As a result, Republicans and Democrats have long held that the intelligence agencies--the most clandestine of foreign policy institutions--should be insulated from political interference in much the same way as the higher reaches of the judiciary. As the Tower Commission, established to investigate the Iran-Contra scandal, warned in November 1987, "The democratic processes ... are subverted when intelligence is manipulated to affect decisions by elected officials and the public."

If anything, this principle has grown even more important since September 11, 2001. The Iraq war presented the United States with a new defense paradigm: preemptive war, waged in response to a prediction of a forthcoming attack against the United States or its allies. This kind of security policy requires the public to base its support or opposition on expert intelligence to which it has no direct access. It is up to the president and his administration--with a deep interest in a given policy outcome--nonetheless to portray the intelligence community's findings honestly. If an administration represents the intelligence unfairly, it effectively forecloses an informed choice about the most important question a nation faces: whether or not to go to war. That is exactly what the Bush administration did when it sought to convince the public and Congress that the United States should go to war with Iraq.

From late August 2002 to mid-March of this year, the Bush administration made its case for war by focusing on the threat posed to the United States by Saddam Hussein's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and by his purported links to



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elevenths. In Nashville on August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney warned of a Saddam “armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror” who could “directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.” In Washington on September 26, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed he had “bulletproof” evidence of ties between Saddam and Al Qaeda. And, in Cincinnati on October 7, President George W. Bush warned, “The Iraqi dictator must not be permitted to threaten America and the world with horrible poisons and diseases and gases and atomic weapons.” Citing Saddam’s association with Al Qaeda, the president added that this “alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints.”

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Yet there was no consensus within the American intelligence community that Saddam represented such a grave and imminent threat. Rather, interviews with current and former intelligence officials and other experts reveal that the Bush administration culled from U.S. intelligence those assessments that supported its position and omitted those that did not. The administration ignored, and even suppressed, disagreement within the intelligence agencies and pressured the CIA to reaffirm its preferred version of the Iraqi threat. Similarly, it stonewalled, and sought to discredit, international weapons inspectors when their findings threatened to undermine the case for war.

Three months after the invasion, the United States may yet discover the chemical and biological weapons that various governments and the United Nations have long

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Whatever is found, what matters as far as American democracy is concerned is whether the administration gave Americans an honest and accurate account of what it knew. The evidence to date is that it did not, and the cost to U.S. democracy could be felt for years to come.

The Battle Over Intelligence--Fall 2001-Fall 2002

The Bush administration decided to go to war with Iraq in the late fall of 2001. At Camp David on the weekend after the September 11 attacks, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz floated the idea that Iraq, with more than 20 years of inclusion on the State Department's terror-sponsor list, be held immediately accountable. In his memoir, speechwriter David Frum recounts that, in December, after the Afghanistan campaign against bin Laden and his Taliban sponsors, he was told to come up with a justification for war with Iraq to include in Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002. But, in selling the war to the American public during the next year, the Bush administration faced significant obstacles.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, many Americans had automatically associated Saddam's regime with Al Qaeda and enthusiastically backed an invasion. But, as the immediate horror of September 11 faded and the war in Afghanistan concluded successfully (and the economy turned downward), American enthusiasm diminished. By midAugust 2002, a Gallup poll showed support for war with Saddam at a post-September 11 low, with 53 percent in favor and 41 percent opposed--down from 61 percent to 31 percent just two months before. Elite opinion was also turning against war, not only among liberal Democrats but among former Republican officials, such as Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger. In Congress, even conservative Republicans such as Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and House Majority Leader Dick Armey began to express doubts that war was justified. Armey declared on August 8, 2002, "If we try to act against Saddam Hussein, as obnoxious as he is, without proper provocation, we will not have the support of other nation-states who might do so."



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Unbeknownst to the public, the administration faced equally serious opposition within its own intelligence agencies. At the CIA, many analysts and officials were skeptical that Iraq posed an imminent threat. In particular, they rejected a connection between Saddam and Al Qaeda. According to a New York Times report in February 2002, the CIA found “no evidence that Iraq has engaged in terrorist operations against the United States in nearly a decade, and the agency is also convinced that President Saddam Hussein has not provided chemical or biological weapons to Al Qaeda or related terrorist groups.”

CIA analysts also generally endorsed the findings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which concluded that, while serious questions remained about Iraq’s nuclear program--many having to do with discrepancies in documentation--its present capabilities were virtually nil. The IAEA possessed no evidence that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program and, it seems, neither did U.S. intelligence. In CIA Director George Tenet’s January 2002 review of global weapons-technology proliferation, he did not even mention a nuclear threat from Iraq, though he did warn of one from North Korea. The review said only, “We believe that Iraq has probably continued at least low-level theoretical R&D [research and development] associated with its nuclear program.” This vague determination didn’t reflect any new evidence but merely the intelligence community’s assumption that the Iraqi dictator remained interested in building nuclear weapons. Greg Thielmann, the former director for strategic proliferation and military affairs at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), tells The New Republic, “During the time that I was office director, 2000 to 2002, we never assessed that there was good evidence that Iraq was reconstituting or getting really serious about its nuclear weapons program.”

The CIA and other intelligence agencies believed Iraq still possessed substantial



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community's uncertainty was articulated in a classified report from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in September 2002. "A substantial amount of Iraq's chemical warfare agents, precursors, munitions, and production equipment were destroyed between 1991 and 1998 as a result of Operation Desert Storm and UNSCOM [United Nations Special Commission] actions," the agency reported. "There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons, or where Iraq has--or will--establish its chemical warfare agent production facilities."

Had the administration accurately depicted the consensus within the intelligence community in 2002--that Iraq's ties with Al Qaeda were inconsequential; that its nuclear weapons program was minimal at best; and that its chemical and biological weapons programs, which had yielded significant stocks of dangerous weapons in the past, may or may not have been ongoing--it would have had a very difficult time convincing Congress and the American public to support a war to disarm Saddam. But the Bush administration painted a very different, and far more frightening, picture. Representative Rush Holt, a New Jersey Democrat who ultimately voted against the war, says of his discussions with constituents, "When someone spoke of the need to invade, [they] invariably brought up the example of what would happen if one of our cities was struck. They clearly were convinced by the administration that Saddam Hussein-- either directly or through terrorist connections--could unleash massive destruction on an American city. And I presume that most of my colleagues heard the same thing back in their districts." One way the administration convinced the public was by badgering CIA Director Tenet into endorsing key elements of its case for war even when it required ignoring the classified findings of his and other intelligence agencies.

As a result of its failure to anticipate the September 11 attacks, the CIA, and Tenet in particular, were under almost continual attack in the fall of 2001. Congressional leaders, including Richard Shelby, the ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, wanted Tenet to resign. But Bush kept Tenet in his job, and, within the administration, Tenet and the CIA came under an entirely different kind of pressure:

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pressure the CIA to take a harder line against Iraq--whether on its ties with Al Qaeda or on the status of its nuclear program.

A particular bone of contention was the CIA's analysis of the ties between Saddam and Al Qaeda. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, former CIA Director James Woolsey, a member of the Defense Policy Board who backed an invasion of Iraq, put forth the theory--in this magazine and elsewhere--that Saddam was connected to the World Trade Center attacks. In September 2001, the Bush administration flew Woolsey to London to gather evidence to back up his theory, which had the support of Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, then the Defense Policy Board chairman. While Wolfowitz and Perle had their own long-standing and complex reasons for wanting to go to war with Iraq, they and other administration officials believed that, if they could tie Saddam to Al Qaeda, they could justify the war to the American people. As a veteran aide to the Senate Intelligence Committee observes, "They knew that, if they could really show a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, then their objective, ... which was go in and get rid of Hussein, would have been a foregone conclusion."

But this theory immediately encountered resistance from the CIA and other intelligence agencies. Woolsey's main piece of evidence for a link between Saddam and Al Qaeda was a meeting that was supposed to have taken place in Prague in April 2001 between lead September 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official. But none of the intelligence agencies could place Atta in Prague on that date. (Indeed, receipts and other travel documents placed him in the United States.) An investigation by Czech officials dismissed the claim, which was based on a single unreliable witness. The CIA was also receiving other information that rebutted a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda. After top Al Qaeda leader Abu Zubaydah was captured in March 2002, he was debriefed by the CIA, and the results were widely circulated in the intelligence community. As The New York Times reported, Zubaydah told his captors that bin Laden himself rejected any alliance with Saddam. "I remember reading the Abu Zubaydah debriefing last year, while the administration was talking about all of these other reports [of a Saddam-Al Qaeda link], and thinking that they were only putting out what they wanted," a CIA official told the paper. Zubaydah's story, which intelligence analysts generally consider credible, has since been

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Facing resistance from the CIA, administration officials began a campaign to pressure the agency to toe the line. Perle and other members of the Defense Policy Board, who acted as quasi-independent surrogates for Wolfowitz, Cheney, and other administration advocates for war in Iraq, harshly criticized the CIA in the press. The CIA's analysis of Iraq, Perle said, "isn't worth the paper it is written on." In the summer of 2002, Vice President Cheney made several visits to the CIA's Langley headquarters, which were understood within the agency as an attempt to pressure the low-level specialists interpreting the raw intelligence. "That would freak people out," says one former CIA official. "It is supposed to be an ivory tower. And that kind of pressure would be enormous on these young guys."

But the Pentagon found an even more effective way to pressure the agency. In October 2001, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith set up a special intelligence operation in the Pentagon to "think through how the various terrorist organizations relate to each other and ... state sponsors," in Feith's description. Their approach echoed the "Team B" strategy that conservatives had used in the past: establishing a separate entity to offer alternative intelligence analyses to the CIA. Conservatives had done this in 1976, criticizing and intimidating the agency over its estimates of Soviet military strength, and again in 1998, arguing for the necessity of missile defense. (Wolfowitz had participated in both projects; the latter was run by Rumsfeld.) This time, the new entity--headed by Perle protege Abram Shulsky-- reassessed intelligence already collected by the CIA along with information from Iraqi defectors and, as Feith remarked coyly at a press conference earlier this month, "came up with some interesting observations about the linkages between Iraq and Al Qaeda." In August 2002, Feith brought the unit to Langley to brief the CIA about its findings. If the separate intelligence unit wasn't enough to challenge the CIA, Rumsfeld also began publicly discussing the creation of a new Pentagon position, an undersecretary for intelligence, who would rival the CIA director and diminish the authority of the agency.

In its classified reports, the CIA didn't diverge from its initial skepticism about the ties between Al Qaeda and Saddam. But, under pressure from his critics, Tenet began to make subtle concessions. In March 2002, Tenet told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Iraqi regime "had contacts with Al Qaeda" but declined to



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The intelligence community was also pressured to exaggerate Iraq's nuclear program. As Tenet's early 2002 threat assessments had indicated, U.S. intelligence showed precious little evidence to indicate a resumption of Iraq's nuclear program. And, while the absence of U.N. inspections had introduced greater uncertainty into intelligence collection on Iraq, according to one analyst, "We still knew enough, [and] we could watch pretty closely what was happening."

These judgments were tested in the spring of 2002, when intelligence reports began to indicate that Iraq was trying to procure a kind of high-strength aluminum tube. Some analysts from the CIA and DIA quickly came to the conclusion that the tubes were intended to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon through the kind of gas-centrifuge project Iraq had built before the first Gulf war. This interpretation seemed plausible enough at first, but over time analysts at the State Department's INR and the Department of Energy (DOE) grew troubled. The tubes' thick walls and particular diameter made them a poor fit for uranium enrichment, even after modification. That determination, according to the INR's Thielmann, came from weeks of interviews with "the nation's experts on the subject, ... they're the ones that have the labs, like Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where people really know the science and technology of enriching uranium." Such careful study led the INR and the DOE to an alternative analysis: that the specifications of the tubes made them far better suited for artillery rockets. British intelligence experts studying the issue concurred, as did some CIA analysts.

But top officials at the CIA and DIA did not. As the weeks dragged on, more and more high-level intelligence officials attended increasingly heated interagency bull sessions. And the CIA-DIA position became further and further entrenched. "They clung so tenaciously to this point of view about it being a nuclear weapons program when the evidence just became clearer and clearer over time that it wasn't the case," recalls a participant. David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, who had been asked to provide the administration with information on past Iraqi procurements, noticed an anomaly in how the intelligence community was handling the issue. "I was told that this dispute had not been mediated by a competent impartial technical committee as it should have been according to



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Estimate (NIE) on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, top CIA officials insisted their opinion prevail. Says Thielmann, "Because the CIA is also the head of the entire U.S. intelligence community, it becomes very hard not to have the ultimate judgment being the CIA's judgment, rather than who in the intelligence community is most expert on the issue."

By the fall of 2002, when public debate over the war really began, the administration had created consternation in the intelligence agencies. The press was filled for the next two months with quotes from CIA officials and analysts complaining of pressure from the administration to toe the line on Iraq. Says one former staff member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, "People [kept] telling you first that things weren't right, weird things going on, different people saying, 'There's so much pressure, you know, they keep telling us, go back and find the right answer,' things like that." For the most part, this pressure was not reflected in the CIA's classified reports, but it would become increasingly evident in the agency's declassified statements and in public statements by Tenet. The administration hadn't won an outright endorsement of its analysis of the Iraqi threat, but it had undermined and intimidated its potential critics in the intelligence community.

The Battle in Congress--Fall 2002

The administration used the anniversary of September 11, 2001, to launch its public campaign for a congressional resolution endorsing war, with or without U.N. support, against Saddam. The opening salvo came on the Sunday before the anniversary in the form of a leak to Judith Miller and Michael R. Gordon of The New York Times regarding the aluminum tubes. Miller and Gordon reported that, according to administration officials, Iraq had been trying to buy tubes specifically designed as "components of centrifuges to enrich uranium" for nuclear weapons. That same day, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice appeared on the political talk shows to trumpet the discovery of the tubes and the Iraqi nuclear threat. Explained Rice, "There will always be some uncertainty about how quickly [Saddam] can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." Rumsfeld added, "Imagine a September eleventh with



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Many of the intelligence analysts who had participated in the aluminum-tubes debate were appalled. One described the feeling to TNR: “You had senior American officials like Condoleezza Rice saying the only use of this aluminum really is uranium centrifuges. She said that on television. And that’s just a lie.” Albright, of the Institute for Science and International Security, recalled, “I became dismayed when a knowledgeable government scientist told me that the administration could say anything it wanted about the tubes while government scientists who disagreed were expected to remain quiet.” As Thielmann puts it, “There was a lot of evidence about the Iraqi chemical and biological weapons programs to be concerned about. Why couldn’t we just be honest about that without hyping the nuclear account? Making the case for active pursuit of nuclear weapons makes it look like the administration was trying to scare the American people about how dangerous Iraq was and how it posed an imminent security threat to the United States.”

In speeches and interviews, administration officials also warned of the connection between Saddam and Al Qaeda. On September 25, 2002, Rice insisted, “There clearly are contacts between Al Qaeda and Iraq. ... There clearly is testimony that some of the contacts have been important contacts and that there’s a relationship there.” On the same day, President Bush warned of the danger that “Al Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam’s madness.” Rice, like Rumsfeld--who the next day would call evidence of a Saddam-bin Laden link “bulletproof”--said she could not share the administration’s evidence with the public without endangering intelligence sources. But Bob Graham, the Florida Democrat who chaired the Senate Intelligence Committee, disagreed. On September 27, Paul Anderson, a spokesman for Graham, told USA Today that the senator had seen nothing in the CIA’s classified reports that established a link between Saddam and Al Qaeda.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, in fact, was the greatest congressional obstacle to the administration’s push for war. Under the lead of Graham and Illinois Senator Richard Durbin, the committee enjoyed respect and deference in the Senate and the House, and its members could speak authoritatively, based on their access to classified information, about whether Iraq was developing nuclear weapons or had ties to Al Qaeda. And, in this case, the classified information available to the committee did not support the public pronouncements being made by the CIA.



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response reflecting the balanced view that had prevailed earlier among the intelligence agencies--noting, for example, that evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program or a link to Al Qaeda was inconclusive. Early that September, the committee also received the DIA's classified analysis, which reflected the same cautious assessments. But committee members became worried when, midway through the month, they received a new CIA analysis of the threat that highlighted the Bush administration's claims and consigned skepticism to footnotes. According to one congressional staffer who read the document, it highlighted "extensive Iraqi chem-bio programs and nuclear programs and links to terrorism" but then included a footnote that read, "This information comes from a source known to fabricate in the past." The staffer concluded that "they didn't do analysis. What they did was they just amassed everything they could that said anything bad about Iraq and put it into a document."

Graham and Durbin had been demanding for more than a month that the CIA produce an NIE on the Iraqi threat--a summary of the available intelligence, reflecting the judgment of the entire intelligence community--and toward the end of September, it was delivered. Like Tenet's earlier letter, the classified NIE was balanced in its assessments. Graham called on Tenet to produce a declassified version of the report that could guide members in voting on the resolution. Graham and Durbin both hoped the declassified report would rebut the kinds of overheated claims they were hearing from administration spokespeople. As Durbin tells TNR, "The most frustrating thing I find is when you have credible evidence on the intelligence committee that is directly contradictory to statements made by the administration."

On October 1, 2002, Tenet produced a declassified NIE. But Graham and Durbin were outraged to find that it omitted the qualifications and countervailing evidence that had characterized the classified version and played up the claims that strengthened the administration's case for war. For instance, the intelligence report cited the much-disputed aluminum tubes as evidence that Saddam "remains intent on acquiring" nuclear weapons. And it claimed, "All intelligence experts agree that



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mentioning that the DOE's expert analysts had determined the tubes were not suitable for a nuclear weapons program. The NIE also said that Iraq had "begun renewed production of chemical warfare agents"--which the DIA report had left pointedly in doubt. Graham demanded that the CIA declassify dissenting portions.

In response, Tenet produced a single-page letter. It satisfied one of Graham's requests: It included a statement that there was a "low" likelihood of Iraq launching an unprovoked attack on the United States. But it also contained a sop to the administration, stating without qualification that the CIA had "solid reporting of senior-level contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda going back a decade." Graham demanded that Tenet declassify more of the report, and Tenet promised to fax over additional material. But, later that evening, Graham received a call from the CIA, informing him that the White House had ordered Tenet not to release anything more.

That same evening, October 7, 2002, Bush gave a major speech in Cincinnati defending the resolution now before Congress and laying out the case for war. Bush's speech brought together all the misinformation and exaggeration that the White House had been disseminating that fall. "The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program," the president declared. "Iraq has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and other equipment needed for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons." Bush also argued that, through its ties to Al Qaeda, Iraq would be able to use biological and chemical weapons against the United States. "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists," he warned. If Iraq had to deliver these weapons on its own, Bush said, Iraq could use the new unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that it was developing. "We have also discovered through intelligence that Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons across broad areas," he said. "We are concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the United States." This claim represented the height of absurdity. Iraq's UAVs had ranges of, at most, 300 miles. They could not make the flight from Baghdad to Tel Aviv, let alone to New York.



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there was “no inconsistency” between the president’s statement and his own and that he had personally fact-checked the president’s speech. He also issued a public statement that read, “There is no question that the likelihood of Saddam using weapons of mass destruction against the United States or our allies ... grows as his arsenal continues to build.”

Five of the nine Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee, including Graham and Durbin, ultimately voted against the resolution, but they were unable to convince other committee members or a majority in the Senate itself. This was at least in part because they were not allowed to divulge what they knew: While Graham and Durbin could complain that the administration’s and Tenet’s own statements contradicted the classified reports they had read, they could not say what was actually in those reports.

Bush, meanwhile, had no compunction about claiming that the “evidence indicates Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.” In the words of one former Intelligence Committee staffer, “He is the president of the United States. And, when the president of the United States says, ‘My advisers and I have sat down, and we’ve read the intelligence, and we believe there is a tie between Iraq and Al Qaeda,’ ... you take it seriously. It carries a huge amount of weight.” Public opinion bears the former staffer out. By November 2002, a Gallup poll showed 59 percent in favor of an invasion and only 35 percent against. In a December Los Angeles Times poll, Americans thought, by a 90 percent to 7 percent margin, that Saddam was “currently developing weapons of mass destruction.” And, in an ABC/Washington Post poll, 81 percent thought Iraq posed a threat to the United States. The Bush administration had won the domestic debate over Iraq--and it had done so by withholding from the public details that would have undermined its case for war.

The Battle With the Inspectors--Winter-Spring 2003

By January 2003, American troops were massing on Iraq’s borders, and the U.N. Security Council had unanimously approved Resolution 1441, which afforded Saddam a “final opportunity” to disarm verifiably. The return of U.N. inspectors to



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Dominique de Villepin launched a surprise attack on the administration's war plans, declaring bluntly, "Nothing today justifies envisaging military action." Nor was this sentiment exclusively French: By mid-January, Gallup showed that American support for the impending war had narrowed to 52 percent in favor of war and 43 percent opposed. Equally important, most of the nations that had backed Resolution 1441 were warning the United States not to rush into war, and Germany, which opposed military action, was to assume the chair of the Security Council in February, on the eve of the planned invasion.

In his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, Bush introduced a new piece of evidence to show that Iraq was developing a nuclear arms program: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. ... Saddam Hussein has not credibly explained these activities. He clearly has much to hide."

One year earlier, Cheney's office had received from the British, via the Italians, documents purporting to show Iraq's purchase of uranium from Niger. Cheney had given the information to the CIA, which in turn asked a prominent diplomat, who had served as ambassador to three African countries, to investigate. He returned after a visit to Niger in February 2002 and reported to the State Department and the CIA that the documents were forgeries. The CIA circulated the ambassador's report to the vice president's office, the ambassador confirms to TNR. But, after a British dossier was released in September detailing the purported uranium purchase, administration officials began citing it anyway, culminating in its inclusion in the State of the Union. "They knew the Niger story was a flat-out lie," the former ambassador tells TNR. "They were unpersuasive about aluminum tubes and added this to make their case more persuasive."

On February 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell took the administration's case to the Security Council. Powell's presentation was by far the most impressive the administration would make--according to U.S. News and World Report, he junked much of what the CIA had given him to read, calling it "bullshit"--but it was still based on a hyped and incomplete view of U.S. intelligence on Iraq. Much of what was new in Powell's speech was raw data that had come into the CIA's possession but had



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Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder.” But Powell’s evidence consisted of tenuous ties between Baghdad and an Al Qaeda leader, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, who had allegedly received medical treatment in Baghdad and who, according to Powell, operated a training camp in Iraq specializing in poisons. Unfortunately for Powell’s thesis, the camp was located in northern Iraq, an area controlled by the Kurds rather than Saddam and policed by U.S. and British warplanes. One Hill staffer familiar with the classified documents on Al Qaeda tells TNR, “So why would that be proof of some Iraqi government connection to Al Qaeda? [It] might as well be in Iran.”

But, by the time Powell made his speech, the administration had stopped worrying about possible rebukes from U.S. intelligence agencies. On the contrary, Tenet sat directly behind Powell as he gave his presentation. And, with the GOP takeover of the Senate, the Intelligence Committee had passed into the hands of a docile Republican chairman, Pat Roberts of Kansas.

As Powell cited U.S. intelligence supporting his claim of a reconstituted nuclear weapons program in Iraq, Jacques Baute listened intently. Baute, the head of the IAEA’s Iraq inspections unit, had been pestering the U.S. and British governments for months to share their intelligence with his office. Despite repeated assurances of cooperation, TNR has learned that Baute’s office received nothing until the day before Powell’s presentation, when the U.S. mission in Vienna provided the IAEA with an oral briefing while Baute was en route to New York, leaving no printed material with the nuclear inspectors. As IAEA officials recount, an astonished Baute told his aides, “That won’t do. I want the actual documentary evidence.” He had to register his complaints through a United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) channel before receiving the documents the day Powell spoke. It was an incident that would characterize America’s intelligence-sharing with the IAEA.

After a few weeks of traveling back and forth between Baghdad and Vienna, Baute sat down with the dozen or so pages of U.S. intelligence on Saddam’s supposed nuclear procurements, the aluminum tubes, the Niger uranium, and the magnets. In



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his powers under the constitution of 1965, Baute performed a quick Google search to learn that Niger's latest constitution was drafted in 1999. There were other obvious mistakes--improper letterhead, an obviously forged signature, a letter from a foreign minister who had not been in office for eleven years. Baute also made quick work of the aluminum tubes. He assembled a team of experts--two Americans, two Britons, and a German--with 120 years of collective experience with centrifuges. After reviewing tens of thousands of Iraqi transaction records and inspecting Iraqi front companies and military production facilities with the rest of the IAEA unit, they concluded, according to a senior IAEA official, that "all evidence points to that this is for the rockets"--the same conclusion reached by the State and Energy Departments. As for the magnets, the IAEA cross-referenced Iraq's declarations with intelligence from various member states and determined that nothing in Iraq's magnet procurements "pointed to centrifuge enrichment," in the words of an IAEA official with direct knowledge of the effort. Rather, the magnets were for projects as disparate as telephones and short-range missiles. Baute, who according to a senior IAEA official was in "almost daily" contact with the American diplomatic mission in Vienna, was surprised at the weakness of the U.S. evidence. In one instance, Baute contacted the mission after discovering the Niger document forgeries and asked, as this official described it, "Can your people help me understand if I'm wrong? I'm not ready to close the book on this file. If you've got any other evidence that might be authentic, I need to see it, and I'll follow up." Eventually, a response came: The Americans and the British were not disputing the IAEA's conclusions; no more evidence would be provided.

On March 7, IAEA Director-General Mohammed ElBaradei delivered Baute's conclusions to the Security Council. But, although the United States conceded most of the IAEA's inconvenient judgments behind closed doors, Vice President Cheney publicly assaulted the credibility of the organization and its director-general. "I think Mr. ElBaradei frankly is wrong," Cheney told Tim Russert on NBC's "Meet the Press" on March 16. "I think, if you look at the track record of the International Atomic Energy Agency and this kind of issue, especially where Iraq's concerned, they have consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing. I don't have any reason to believe they're any more valid this time than they've been in the past." Incredibly, Cheney added, "We believe [Saddam] has, in fact,



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Cheney was correct that the IAEA had failed to uncover Iraq's covert uranium-enrichment program prior to the Gulf war. But, before the war, the IAEA was not charged with playing the role of a nuclear Interpol. Rather, until the passage of Resolution 687 in 1991, the IAEA was merely supposed to review the disclosures of member states in the field of nuclear development to ensure compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. By contrast, in the '90s, the IAEA mounted more than 1,000 inspections in Iraq, mostly without advance warning; sealed, expropriated, or destroyed tons of nuclear material; and destroyed thousands of square feet of nuclear facilities. In fact, its activities formed the baseline for virtually every intelligence assessment regarding Iraq's nuclear weapons program.

UNMOVIC Chairman Hans Blix received similar treatment from American officials--even though he repeatedly told the Security Council that the Iraqis had yet to account for the chemical and biological weapons they had once possessed, a position that strengthened the U.S. case for war. According to The Washington Post, in early 2002 Wolfowitz ordered a CIA report on Blix. When the report didn't contain damning details, Wolfowitz reportedly "hit the ceiling." And, as the inspections were to begin, Perle said, "If it were up to me, on the strength of his previous record, I wouldn't have chosen Hans Blix." In his February presentation, Powell suggested that Blix had ignored evidence of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons production. After stalling for months, the United States finally shared some of its intelligence with UNMOVIC. But, according to UNMOVIC officials, none of the intelligence it received yielded any incriminating discoveries.

Aftermath

'What we must not do in the face of a mortal threat," Cheney instructed a Nashville gathering of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in August 2002, "is give in to wishful thinking or willful blindness." Cheney's admonition is resonant, but not for the reasons he intended. The Bush administration displayed an acute case of willful blindness in making its case for war. Much of its evidence for a reconstituted nuclear



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former official with the National Security Council, “It was a classic case of rumint, rumor-intelligence plugged into various speeches and accepted as gospel.”

In some cases, the administration may have deliberately lied. If Bush didn’t know the purported uranium deal between Iraq and Niger was a hoax, plenty of people in his administration did—including, possibly, Vice President Cheney, who would have seen the president’s State of the Union address before it was delivered. Rice and Rumsfeld also must have known that the aluminum tubes that they presented as proof of Iraq’s nuclear ambitions were discounted by prominent intelligence experts. And, while a few administration officials may have genuinely believed that there was a strong connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, most probably knew they were constructing castles out of sand.

The Bush administration took office pledging to restore “honor and dignity” to the White House. And it’s true: Bush has not gotten caught having sex with an intern or lying about it under oath. But he has engaged in a pattern of deception concerning the most fundamental decisions a government must make. The United States may have been justified in going to war in Iraq—there were, after all, other rationales for doing so—but it was not justified in doing so on the national security grounds that President Bush put forth throughout last fall and winter. He deceived Americans about what was known of the threat from Iraq and deprived Congress of its ability to make an informed decision about whether or not to take the country to war.

The most serious institutional casualty of the administration’s campaign may have been the intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA. Some of the CIA’s intelligence simply appears to have been defective, perhaps innocently so. Durbin says the CIA’s classified reports contained extensive maps where chemical or biological weapons could be found. Since the war, these sites have not yielded evidence of any such weapons. But the administration also turned the agency—and Tenet in particular—into an advocate for the war with Iraq at a time when the CIA’s own classified analyses contradicted the public statements of the agency and its director. Did Tenet really fact-check Bush’s warning that Iraq could threaten the United States with UAVs? Did he really endorse Powell’s musings on the links between Al Qaeda and Saddam? Or had Tenet and his agency by then lost any claim to the intellectual



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Democrats such as Durbin, Graham, and Senator Jay Rockefeller, who has become the ranking member of the Intelligence Committee, are now pressing for a full investigation into intelligence estimates of the Iraqi threat. This would entail public hearings with full disclosure of documents and guarantees of protection for witnesses who come forward to testify. But it is not likely to happen. Senator John Warner, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, initially called for public hearings but recanted after Cheney visited a GOP senators' lunch on June 4. Cheney, according to Capitol Hill staffers, told his fellow Republicans to block any investigation, and it looks likely they will comply. Under pressure from Democrats, Roberts, the new Intelligence Committee chairman, has finally agreed to a closed-door hearing but not to a public or private investigation. According to Durbin, the Republican plan is to stall in the hope that the United States finds sufficient weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to quiet the controversy.

The controversy might, indeed, go away. Democrats don't have the power to call hearings, and, apart from Graham and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, the leading Democratic presidential candidates are treating the issue delicately given the public's overwhelming support for the war. But there are worse things than losing an election by going too far out on a political limb--namely, failing to defend the integrity of the country's foreign policy and its democratic institutions. It may well be that, in the not-too-distant future, preemptive military action will become necessary--perhaps against a North Korea genuinely bent on incinerating Seoul or a nuclear Pakistan that has fallen into the hands of radical Islamists. In such a case, we the people will look to our leaders for an honest assessment of the threat. But, next time, thanks to George W. Bush, we may not believe them until it is too late.

By Spencer Ackerman and John B. Judis

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