

Prague meeting—one of many lies

Iraqi tie to September 11 hijacker debunked

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The much publicized allegation that the man named as the ringleader of the September 11 terrorist attacks met with an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague was a lie, and the Czech president told the Bush administration so, according to an article appearing in the *New York Times* October 21. Yet top administration officials have continued to insist upon this phony Iraqi-Al Qaeda connection in order to bolster their case for war.

According to the *Times* report, Czech President Vaclav Havel warned the Bush administration early this year that there existed no evidence that Mohamed Atta, who piloted one of the passenger airliners into the World Trade Center, met with Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, an official at Baghdad's embassy in Prague.

The conduit for the purported Czech intelligence report was the country's former Prime Minister Milos Zeman, a politician known more for bluster and demagoguery than intelligence. He provoked outrage earlier this year by comparing Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat to Adolph Hitler and urging the Israelis to deal with the Palestinians the way Czechoslovakia dealt with the Sudeten Germans after World War II, when 3 million of them were expelled.

Dubious reports of the alleged meeting first surfaced approximately one month after the terrorist attacks, with leading Czech political figures quickly relaying them to the Bush administration as fact. According to Czech intelligence, their source was a single Arab émigré, who came forward with the information only after photographs of Atta had appeared in the local press along with a report that he had previously been in Prague.

The claim was that Atta and the Iraqi official had met in Prague on April 9, 2001. The meeting was cast by the Bush administration as a final planning session before the September 11 attacks.

Problems with the story quickly emerged, however. US intelligence agencies pored over records of Atta's travels and concluded that during the period in question he was in Virginia Beach, not in Prague. An earlier trip that he had made to the Czech capital in 2000 was apparently for the purpose of obtaining a cheap airfare to the US.

"We ran down literally hundreds of thousands of leads and

checked every record we could get our hands on," FBI Director Robert Mueller said in a little reported speech in April. The conclusion: Atta was never in Prague on the day of the alleged meeting and there was no evidence that he ever met with Iraqi intelligence.

Czech intelligence officials attributed the report to a restaurant owner anxious to discredit a rival by claiming he catered to terrorists. They likewise found that the Iraqi diplomat in question regularly met with a friend, a used car dealer, who bore some physical resemblance to Atta.

None of this has dissuaded those who have played the most direct role in crafting the Bush administration's strategy of "preemptive war" as a means of asserting US world hegemony. Even after the Czech government warned Washington that the Prague meeting never happened, these officials continued to raise it as a justification for war.

Typical of the method employed by these officials were the lies and innuendo offered up by Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Defense Secretary and a key advocate of a war to establish US domination of Iraq. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in February, he was asked about allegations of a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda. Wolfowitz replied:

"We also know there are things that haven't been explained ... like the meeting of Mohammed Atta with Iraqi officials in Prague ..."

Q: "Which now is alleged, right? There is some doubt to that?"

Wolfowitz: "Now this gets you into classified areas again. I think the point which I do think is fundamental is that, the premise of your question seems to be, we wait for proof beyond a reasonable doubt. I think the premise of a policy has to be we can't afford to wait for proof beyond a reasonable doubt. That is a way in which any number of terrorist regimes have, over the last 20 years, gotten away with doing things that I think encourage more behavior of that kind."

What is perhaps most significant about Wolfowitz's comments was the way in which he upheld the veracity of a report that by then he and the entire administration knew to be a lie. First, he cited "classified" information that cannot be shared with the American people. One can rest assured that if such "classified areas" existed, they would quickly be

declassified and plastered onto every newspaper front page and television screen in the country. The claim that it is classified means simply that it does not exist.

Then Wolfowitz ridiculed those asking for such information as lawyerly pedants who want “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” when the nation is facing imminent danger of terrorist attack.

Precisely the same arguments and even phrases have been used by Vice President Richard Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and others in the administration when defending unsubstantiated charges that Iraq has developed “weapons of mass destruction,” the other major pretext for a US war against the Arab country.

A report in *Newsweek* cited a meeting in which Wolfowitz berated agents in charge of the Atta investigation over their failure to provide “evidence” substantiating the non-existent meeting in Prague. When one agent insisted that no such evidence existed, Wolfowitz continued pressing him until he would admit that such an encounter was “technically possible,” as the FBI could not provide a full account of Atta’s whereabouts on April 9.

“Evidence of a meeting in Prague between a senior Iraqi intelligence agent and Mohamed Atta, the Sept. 11 ringleader, is convincing,” wrote Richard Perle, the chairman of the Defense Policy Board and a key figure in the administration’s war planning, in an Op-Ed published by the *Times* last December.

Perle went even further last month, telling Italy’s business daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* that Atta had gone to Baghdad before September 11 and met with Saddam Hussein. “We have proof of that, and we are sure he wasn’t just there for a holiday,” declared the defense official, adding that, “the meeting is one of the motives for an American attack on Iraq.” Perle’s “proof,” like the “convincing evidence” of the meeting in Prague, has yet to be disclosed. Curiously, this “smoking gun” of a meeting between Atta and the Iraqi president has been mentioned nowhere else.

Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* on August 5 cited an unnamed “senior Bush administration official” as saying that evidence of the phantom meeting in Prague “holds up.” He added that the administration intended “to talk more about this case.”

Similarly, in May, William Safire, the right-wing *New York Times* columnist who has waged a relentless crusade to portray the fictional Prague meeting as fact, also cited an unnamed “senior Bush administration official.”

“You cannot say the Czech report about a meeting in 2001 between Atta and the Iraqi is discredited or disproven in any way,” the official told Safire. “The Czechs stand by it and we’re still in the process of pursuing it and sorting out the timing and venue.”

By the time this statement was made, the Czech president had

formally told Washington that the report was false. Czech intelligence officials had long before discounted it; and the FBI and CIA had concluded after an exhaustive investigation that there was no evidence whatsoever to back it up.

Safire improbably attributes the debunking of the alleged Prague meeting to a joint CIA-Justice Department plot aimed at covering up their own intelligence failures. He also explains why he and top administration officials continue to peddle the story, despite all the evidence that it is a fabrication: “If the report proves accurate, a connection would exist between Al Qaeda’s murder of 3,000 Americans and Iraq’s Saddam. That would clearly be a *casus belli*, calling for our immediate military response ...”

In other words, faced with mounting skepticism over its claims that the regime in Baghdad poses a grave threat to the US and growing popular opposition to an unprovoked war on Iraq, the administration has desperately sought to utilize the phony Atta-Iraqi connection as a means to stampede the American people into supporting military action. It is cynically attempting to exploit the grief, fear and anger engendered by the September 11 attacks in order to further long-standing strategic plans for a second US war in the Persian Gulf aimed at securing control of the region’s rich oil reserves.

The Prague story has now been publicly exposed as a fraudulent piece of war propaganda. It is, however, only one of many lies. Just as the tale of Mohamed Atta and the Iraqi diplomat was conclusively proven a fraud, it can be anticipated that other pretexts that are now being advanced for war on Iraq will be similarly debunked.

Should the US military, as now appears virtually inevitable, invade Iraq and subject its people to a bloody slaughter, one can predict that within a year or so it will emerge somewhere in the press that the imminent threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—now being cited by the White House and the US media to whip up popular fears and terrify the public into supporting war—is another cynical concoction by the Bush administration.



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