

Pretext for war exposed

CIA-backed exile was source for Times “scoops” on Iraqi arms program

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A report in the *Washington Post* has cast devastating new light on claims by the *New York Times* correspondent Judith Miller that the US military had uncovered the “smoking gun” of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD). *Post* media correspondent Howard Kurtz revealed May 26 the contents of an e-mail exchange between Miller and *Times* Baghdad chief John Burns in which the former acknowledges that long-time US government asset Ahmad Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress “provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD” to the *Times*.

The failure of the US military to discover chemical and biological weapons in Iraq, the chief pretext for the “pre-emptive” invasion and overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, has been an ongoing political embarrassment for the Bush administration.

Various clumsy efforts have been made since the end of the war, most prominently by Miller, to provide proof, even the slimmest, of these weapons’ existence. In a series of lurid articles in late April and early May, picked up by other news sources and widely distributed, the *Times*’s reporter claimed essentially that American forces had discovered the much-looked-for evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

In an April 21 piece, for example, headlined, “Illicit Arms Kept Till Eve of War, An Iraqi Scientist Is Said to Assert,” Miller claimed that an unnamed Iraqi scientist had been found who asserted that the Hussein regime had 1) destroyed its stocks of chemical weapons only days before the US invaded; 2) shared its weapons technology with Syria; and 3) collaborated with Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda. All three claims conveniently dovetailed with Bush administration positions. Miller’s article, however, provided nothing to substantiate these charges other than anonymous sources in the US military’s Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha (MET Alpha), the unit hunting for WMD.

Miller added this extraordinary disclaimer: “Under the terms of her accreditation to report on the activities of MET Alpha, this reporter was not permitted to interview the scientist or visit his home. Nor was she permitted to write about the discovery of the scientist for three days, and the copy was then submitted for a check by military officials.

“Those officials asked that details of what chemicals were uncovered be deleted. They said they feared that such information could jeopardize the scientist’s safety by identifying the part of the weapons program where he worked.”

In other words, Miller was asking her readers to take the Pentagon’s word for it that the man even existed. Nothing more has been heard of this “Iraqi scientist” in the intervening four weeks (after one more appearance April 23), and MET Alpha was apparently reassigned to searching for Jewish antiquities. The *Washington Post* reported on May 11 that the “group directing all known U.S. search efforts for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is winding down operations without finding proof that President Saddam Hussein kept clandestine stocks of outlawed arms,

according to participants.” MET Alpha is preparing to leave the country without having found any chemical or biological weapons.

On May 13, at a press conference, Maj. Gen. David H. Petraeus, commanding general, 101st Airborne Division, was asked by a reporter “why no technical weapons of mass destruction have been found, much less any facilities or labs, given the ground that your units have covered.”

Petraeus replied: “Well, one of the speculations, of course, is that the individual who, in fact, passed the note to our soldiers around Karbala and who was subsequently interviewed at some length by the 75th Exploitation Brigade—and I think that Judith Miller wrote some articles about him in the *New York Times*—he claims that whatever they had left was destroyed shortly before the war. So that again is one theory.” Miller’s “smoking gun” was now, according to the US military command, merely a “claim” and a “theory.”

Kurtz, in his May 26 piece in the *Washington Post*, published portions of the exchange between Miller and Burns that began when the Baghdad bureau chief complained about a May 1 *Times* feature on Iraqi National Congress chief Ahmad Chalabi. Miller had written the piece without consulting Burns, who had another correspondent in mind for the article.

Miller replied: “I’ve been covering Chalabi for about 10 years, and have done most of the stories about him for our paper, including the long takeout we recently did on him. He has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD to our paper.” According to Kurtz, she apologized for any confusion, but explained that the MET Alpha “is using Chalabi’s intell [intelligence] and document network for its own WMD work... Since I’m there every day, talking to him...I thought I might have been included on a decision by you” as to who should write the piece on Chalabi.

This is a remarkable admission. Both Miller and Andrew Rosenthal of the *Times* were understandably reluctant to speak to Kurtz about the e-mail exchange. It essentially acknowledges that a convicted embezzler and right-wing Iraqi exile, with whom Miller speaks on a daily basis, “provided most” of the *Times* front-page “scoops” on alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Chalabi has a long history of dealings with the CIA and US military, as well as with key members of the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. A member of a wealthy family that fled Iraq when the monarch was overthrown by a group of army officers in 1958, Chalabi amassed a fortune as a banker in Jordan. Various allegations have been made concerning Chalabi’s political activities, including collaboration with Mossad, the Israeli secret service, in the 1980s and with Col. Oliver North during what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal in the same decade.

Chalabi is often referred to as an “embezzler,” but it should be noted

that he was not convicted of passing bad checks. His Petra Bank, the second largest in Jordan, collapsed in 1989 (Chalabi allegedly fled the country in the trunk of a car), owing hundreds of millions of dollars to depositors. The former chief of Jordan's Central Bank, Mohammed Said Nabulsi, calls Chalabi "a crook who absolutely cooked the books" ("Recalling Ahmad Chalabi," Kareem Fahim, *Village Voice*). He was alleged to have stashed \$70 million in secret Swiss bank accounts. Nabulsi claims that the impact of the Petra collapse "was much, much greater than the Enron case." Half a billion dollars was lost, 10 percent of the Jordanian gross domestic product.

This individual, with the greatest possible motive for having Iraqi weapons found, is apparently the chief source for Miller's WMD exclusives!

The claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are unraveling, although Bush administration and US military officials still promise that finding them "is a matter of time" (Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Air Force Gen. Richard Myers on NBC's "Today" show, May 26).

One of the American media's new tactics, in the face of the failure of the search for WMD, is to raise the possibility that prewar US intelligence on Iraqi weapons programs was "flawed" or "inaccurate" and argue that efforts should be made to "improve" intelligence-gathering so that such mistakes are not repeated. The obvious purpose here is to block anyone from drawing the conclusion that the Pentagon and the Bush administration were deliberately and consciously lying in order to provide a pretext for a war of imperialist conquest.

The *Times* ran a piece May 22, "Prewar Views of Iraq Threat Are Under Review by CIA," that reveals both the unraveling of the administration's claims and this new tactic. The article reports on a CIA review aimed at determining "whether the American intelligence community erred in its prewar assessments of Saddam Hussein's government and Iraq's weapons programs."

The article, by James Risen, claims that the review is something quite routine, planned last October by Rumsfeld and CIA director George Tenet (at a time when the US government was claiming that it had no definite plans to go to war against Iraq) as a means of gauging the accuracy of prewar intelligence against the reality "discovered on the ground after the war." The article notes, however, that "The failure so far of American forces to find conclusive evidence either of Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda or unconventional weapons has added urgency to the study's outcome."

The review will focus, among other things, on "whether the United States overstated the threat that Iraq was trying to develop biological, chemical and nuclear weapons." Why it should have done so is never raised. The article refers to the well-known conflict between the Pentagon and the CIA over the alleged threat posed by the Hussein regime, noting that several CIA analysts had complained about pressure from Bush government officials to produce reports "that supported the administration's positions on Iraq."

Unhappy that the spy agency was not confirming its claims about the Iraqi threat, Rumsfeld's Defense Department created a special unit to review intelligence reports. "In some cases, Pentagon officials came to believe that the CIA was too dismissive of information provided by Iraqi exiles and other sources warning of the threat posed by reported Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda and by suspected efforts to develop illegal weapons." The establishment of this unit apparently set off a furor within the US intelligence community.

The article complacently concludes that "it is becoming increasingly clear that the CIA, Pentagon and other agencies did not know as much about the status of Iraq's weapons programs and its ties to terrorists before the war as was previously believed."

In their inimitable and cynical fashion, the *Times* editors several days later weighed in along the same lines ("Reviewing the Intelligence in Iraq," May 26, 2003), reporting themselves "glad to see that the Central

Intelligence Agency has begun a review of the spy assessments." After all, they reason, the failure so far to find any WMD "has raised serious questions about the quality of American intelligence and even dark hints that the data may have been manipulated to support a pre-emptive war." The latter possibility is set aside, never to be mentioned again.

"Given the scant findings in Iraq so far, it is disturbing to recall how gravely the administration portrayed the dangers of Iraq's unconventional weapons. High officials said Iraq had reconstituted its program to develop nuclear weapons, was continuing to make biological weapons and possessed a large stockpile of chemical agents, some ready to be used against American troops or made available to terrorists." Not "disturbing" enough, however, to revive those "dark hints" that the entire WMD campaign was a pack of lies aimed at justifying a military invasion of a sovereign nation.

The *Times* editors are more than willing to give the Bush administration and the Pentagon the benefit of the doubt, observing that "Intelligence estimates about weapons are notoriously difficult to get right." Nonetheless, they remain disturbed, particularly by the "critical question" of "what information was presented to the president in the run-up to war." They conclude: "When President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell repeatedly assured the world that Iraq's unconventional weapons were a threat to international security, they relied on America's intelligence agencies. The country needs to know if the spy organizations were right or wrong." Excluded from this editorial is another possibility, that the "spy organizations," the Pentagon and the Bush administration knew the true state of affairs about Iraqi WMD perfectly well and combined to deceive the American public.

Also left out of the *Times* assessment is the role that the newspaper itself played in the "run-up to war" and afterward, as exemplified by the conduct of its own Judith Miller. Involved here, however, is not the case of one journalist with her own political agenda. The newspaper has been at the center of the propaganda effort to justify US aggression in the Middle East. While urging the Bush administration to gather UN and European support for its attack on Iraq, the *Times* never cast doubt on the claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

A January 26, 2003, editorial ("The Race to War"), for example, pontificated, "Saddam Hussein is obviously a brutal dictator who deserves toppling. No one who knows his history can doubt that he is secretly trying to develop weapons of mass destruction." Following Colin Powell's presentation at the UN, all of whose allegations have proven to be false, the *Times* ("The Case Against Iraq," February 6, 2003) described the performance as "the most powerful case to date" and "a sober, factual case." Now that this all threatens to go up in smoke, the *Times* is both seeking to cover its own tracks and deflect attention from the Bush administration's criminality.



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