Iraq and Al Qaeda: another lie unravels

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According to press reports, some US soldiers in Iraq carry pictures of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers inside their Kevlar vests to convince themselves that the killing of Iraqi civilians and the continued military occupation the country are justified by the slaughter of thousands of civilians in New York City on September 11, 2001.

Opinion polls indicate that fully half the American population believe that Iraqi citizens participated in the hijacking of the four aircraft utilized in the September 11 attacks, while 40 percent think that Saddam Hussein was behind the terrorist actions of that day.

Both these phenomena are the product of a systematic disinformation campaign waged by the Bush administration with the complicity of the mass media.

Washington launched its illegal war against Iraq based on a two-pronged lie. It claimed Iraq had amassed vast stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons that posed an imminent threat to the American people. It simultaneously claimed to have "bullet-proof" evidence that the regime of Saddam Hussein had forged close ties with the Al Qaeda movement and was prepared to place "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD) in the hands of the Islamist terrorists to carry out an attack even more terrible than that of September 11, 2001.

The aim was to terrorize the American people into supporting a war of aggression and intimidate the widespread opposition to the US launching a "preventive" attack on an impoverished nation.

With the occupation of Iraq now more than two months old, special US military teams have scoured the country and failed to discover any trace of the massive WMD stockpiles that the Bush administration insisted were being hidden by Saddam Hussein. The obvious fact that the administration lied about Iraq's capabilities has even provoked timid protests from some Democrats and scattered calls for congressional hearings.

The second prong of the administration's deception has received less attention, although it was just as crucial and has proved every bit as false. Not a trace of evidence substantiating an Al Qaeda presence in Baghdad has emerged. Not one of the thousands of individuals taken prisoner and interrogated by the US military has been identified as a member of the Islamist group. Not a single "terrorist training camp" which the administration claimed existed in Iraq has been discovered.

As with the claims about WMD, ample evidence has surfaced indicating that the administration fabricated "intelligence" pointing to Iraqi-Al Qaeda ties, while it suppressed the substantial—indeed, overwhelming—evidence that no such relations existed.

The *New York Times* revealed earlier this month that US interrogations of captured Al Qaeda leaders had produced evidence that the Islamist group had ruled out any ties with Baghdad. The administration, however, kept the evidence secret as it promoted a war based precisely on the claim that such ties existed.

According to the *Times* report of June 9 ("Captives Deny Qaeda Worked With Baghdad," by James Risen), Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who were captured in separate operations, gave similar accounts. An official who had read the classified CIA report on the interrogation of Abu Zubaydah, captured in March 2002, spoke to the newspaper. He said the Al Qaeda operative told his American captors that

a suggestion had been raised that the group seek cooperation from Saddam Hussein, but had been quickly overruled by its leader, Osama bin Laden. (It is well known that bin Laden considered the secular Ba'athist regime anathema to Al Qaeda's goal of creating Islamic states.)

US intelligence officials also told the *Times* that Khalid Sheik Mohammed, captured March 1 of this year, told interrogators that Al Qaeda had not cooperated in any way with Iraq.

"The Bush administration has not made these statements public, though it has frequently highlighted intelligence reports that supported its assertions of links between Iraq and Al Qaeda as it made its case for war against Iraq," the *Times* noted.

The newspaper quoted an unnamed official as saying: "I remember reading the Abu Zubaydah briefing last year, while the administration was talking about all of these other reports, and thinking that they were only putting out what they wanted." The official added: "This gets to the serious question of to what extent did they try to align the facts with the conclusions that they wanted. Things pointing in one direction were given a lot of weight, and other things were discounted."

On June 22, the *Washington Post* published an article based on a classified "National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq," reflecting the consensus view of US intelligence agencies at a time when top administration officials were making their case that Baghdad's collaboration with Al Qaeda represented a clear and present danger to US security.

The report, according to the *Post*, warned that allegations given by Iraqi exiles of a supposed connection were unreliable. It also stated that the sole known contact between the Baghdad government and Osama bin Laden took place in the early 1990s, when the Al Qaeda group had just been founded, and concluded that "those early contacts had not led to any known continuing high-level relationships between the Iraqi government and Al Qaeda."

In a nationally televised speech on October 7, 2002 in Cincinnati, Bush ignored the warnings in the intelligence report, insisting that links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda "go back a decade," and that Iraq had trained the Islamist group's members "in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases," a charge that the National Intelligence Estimate specifically said was not supported by the evidence.

"Iraq," Bush declared, "could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists. Alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints." He described Saddam Hussein as "a man who, in my judgment, would like to use Al Qaeda as a forward army."

This was not a judgment shared by the country's intelligence agencies, which stated that the only situation in which they could see the Iraqi regime resorting to such a drastic step was in the face of an inevitable invasion. As it happened, the invasion came, and neither the weapons nor the terrorists were present.

Just days before Bush's speech, the White House released to Congress a "White Paper" on Iraq that consisted of excerpts from the National Intelligence Estimate. Omitted from this document were the warnings

debunking the credibility of claims of an Iraqi Al Qaeda connection.

The *Post* quoted an aide to Senator Bob Graham, then chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee: "Senator Graham felt that they declassified only things that supported their position and left classified what did not support that policy." Graham's request for the CIA to release additional material from the intelligence report was rejected, the *Post* reported.

Willing to be duped, the House of Representatives and Senate united to pass a resolution authorizing the Bush administration to launch military action in Iraq. As justification, the resolution stated that "members of Al Qaeda, an organization bearing responsibility for ... the attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 are known to be in Iraq" and that Iraq could provide weapons of mass destruction to "international terrorists."

Throughout the buildup to war, the manipulation of phony intelligence concerning Al Qaeda and Iraq played a pivotal role.

A recently retired intelligence analyst directly involved in assessing the Iraqi threat, Greg Thielmann, flatly told *Newsweek* that inside the government "there is a lot of sorrow and anger at the way intelligence was misused. You get a strong impression that the administration didn't think the public would be enthusiastic about the idea of war if you attached all those qualifiers."

The *Newsweek* report, published June 9, noted that to counter the skepticism of the CIA about the administration's claims, "top officials in the Bush Defense Department set up their own team of intelligence analysts, a small but powerful shop now called the Office of Special Plans—and, half-jokingly, by its members, 'the Cabal.'"

These Pentagon advocates of an Iraq war, the magazine noted, "seized on a report that Muhammad Atta, the chief [September 11] hijacker, met in Prague in early April 2001 with an Iraqi intelligence official. Only one problem with that story, the FBI pointed out. Atta was traveling at the time between Florida and Virginia Beach, Va. (The bureau had his rental car and hotel receipts).... No matter. The hawks at Defense and in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney continued to push the idea..."

US News & World Report stated that in preparing his February 5 speech to the United Nations Security Council laying out the US case for war: "[Secretary of State] Powell was so unimpressed with the information on al Qaeda that he decided to bury it at the end of his speech, according to officials. Even so, NSC [National Security Council] officials kept pushing for Powell to include the charge that 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta had met an Iraqi official in Prague. He refused."

On March 16, just before the war started, Vice President Cheney said, "[W]e know that [Saddam Hussein] has a long-standing relationship with various terrorist groups, including the Al Qaeda organization."

Cheney and his top aide, according to a *Washington Post* article published June 5 ("Some Iraq Analysts Felt Pressure from Cheney Visits"), "made multiple trips to the CIA over the past year to question analysts studying Iraq's weapons programs and alleged links to al Qaeda, creating an environment in which some analysts felt they were being pressured to make their assessments fit with the Bush administration's policy objectives."

Citing senior intelligence officials, the article continued: "With Cheney taking the lead in the administration last August in advocating military action against Iraq by claiming it had weapons of mass destruction, the visits by the vice president and his chief of staff, I. Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, 'sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here,' one senior agency official said yesterday...

"Former and current intelligence officials said they felt a continual drumbeat, not only from Cheney and Libby, but also from Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, [Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas] Feith and less so from CIA Director George J. Tenet, to find information or write reports in a way that would help the administration make the case that going into Iraq was urgent.

"'They were the browbeaters,' said a former defense intelligence official who attended some of the meetings in which Wolfowitz and others pressed for a different approach to the assessments they were receiving. 'In interagency meetings,' he said, 'Wolfowitz treated the analysts' work with contempt.'... A major focus for Wolfowitz and others in the Pentagon was finding intelligence to prove a connection between Hussein and Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network."

This campaign for phony "evidence" linking Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda did not begin in the months leading up to the war on Iraq, the *Post* noted: "On the day of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Wolfowitz told senior officials at the Pentagon that he believed Iraq might have been responsible. 'I was scratching my head because everyone else thought of Al Qaeda,' said a former senior defense official who was in one such meeting. Over the following year, 'we got taskers to review the link between al Qaeda and Iraq. There was a very aggressive search.'"

Similarly, the *New York Times* reported, also in an article published June 5 ("Aide Denies Shaping Data to Justify War"), that "Douglas J. Feith, the under secretary of defense for policy, acknowledged that he created a small intelligence team inside his office shortly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, to search for terrorist links with Iraq and other countries that he suggested the nation's spy agencies may have overlooked..."

Pentagon officials told the *Times* that the group used "powerful computers and new software" to scan through documents and reports from every US intelligence agency with the aim of "gleaning details that may have collectively pointed to Iraq's wider connections to terrorism."

"Among the team's most prominent findings were suspected linkages between Iraq and Al Qaeda, a conclusion doubted by the CIA and DIA," according to the *Times* report.

In fact, the drive by those in the top echelons of the Pentagon and the Bush White House to uncover ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda substantially predated September 11 itself. The *Wall Street Journal*, a newspaper that provided the strongest editorial backing to Bush's drive to war against Iraq, reported last October: "When the Bush administration took office in 2001, officials at the Pentagon immediately began peppering intelligence agencies with requests for studies on Baghdad's links to terrorism."

The *Journal* added: "At a meeting of senior administration officials in April 2001 to discuss Al Qaeda, a top Defense Department official asked Mr. Clarke [Richard Clarke, the National Security Council's counterterrorism coordinator] about whether Iraq had connections to Mr. bin Laden's group. Mr. Clarke said no, according to two people in the room."

The article added that the administration made a concerted attempt to link Iraq to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, but that its efforts "have come up empty."

This manipulation of intelligence beginning well before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon gives the lie to the justification for the war on Iraq as "payback" for September 11. The Bush administration came to power with a plan for invading Iraq that had nothing to do with either weapons of mass destruction or terrorism. Its aim was to appropriate Iraq's vast oil reserves and thereby secure a strategic advantage over all conceivable economic and geopolitical rivals. From the beginning, it plotted a war of aggression and set about to find, or create, the pretext for carrying out such a war.

September 11 provided the pretext that the administration sought. The conspiracy to exploit the shock and grief of the American people over the loss of innocent lives in order to prepare a war against Iraq began within hours of the terrorist attack. And the media was recruited from the start to further this campaign.

Among the most interesting revelations in this regard is the testimony of

retired general Wesley Clark, the former NATO commander, who appeared June 15 on "Meet the Press."

"There was a concerted effort during the fall of 2001 starting immediately after 9/11 to pin 9/11 on Saddam Hussein," Clark stated. The remark prompted the following exchange with the program's host, Tim Russert:

Russert: "By whom? Who did that?"

Clark: "Well, it came from the White House, it came from people around the White House. It came from all over. I got a call on 9/11. I was on CNN, and I got a call at my home saying, 'You got to say this is connected. This is state-sponsored terrorism. This has to be connected to Saddam Hussein.' I said, 'But—I'm willing to say it, but what's your evidence?' And I never got any evidence."

With fires still raging in Lower Manhattan, before the hijackers had even been identified, the administration set out to coordinate a media campaign blaming the attack on Iraq. Media commentators, "experts," etc., were called and told to implicate Iraq as a sponsor of the attacks, without the slightest shred of proof being provided. For the most part, they obliged, acting as a propaganda arm of the war cabal within the Bush administration.

Vice President Cheney, by all accounts a principal architect of the Iraq war, last week reiterated the administration's discredited thesis before a friendly audience—one that aims to become one of the war's principal beneficiaries—the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

Noting that he saw "a lot of old friends and customers in the audience," Cheney declared that Bush had "ushered in a new era in foreign policy by rejecting the artificial distinctions that used to exist before 9/11 between terrorist groups and those states that support terror organizations." He continued: "The Bush doctrine makes clear that states that support terrorists, that provide sanctuary to terrorists will be deemed just as guilty as the terrorists themselves of the acts they commit. If there is anyone in the world today that doubts the seriousness of the Bush doctrine, I'd urge that person to consider the fate of ... Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq."

As is now abundantly clear, it was not the distinction between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda that was "artificial," but the connection manufactured by the Bush administration to justify a criminal war of aggression.

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