Bush White House in crisis over Iraq war lies

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The admission by the White House July 7 that Bush's State of the Union speech contained false allegations about Iraqi nuclear weapons programs has touched off a major political crisis for the Bush administration. CIA Director George Tenet is rumored to be on his way out, and there are indications that the damage will not stop there.

By week's end, Tenet had been compelled to issue an extraordinary statement taking full responsibility for the falsification, in what was widely understood to be an effort to protect National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Vice President Cheney and Bush himself.

After a week of conflicting claims from CIA and White House aides about the preparation of the State of the Union speech, Bush and Rice both categorically declared Friday that the CIA had approved every word of the text which Bush delivered on January 28. Two hours later, Tenet issued a carefully worded statement that had reportedly been discussed for several days with White House aides, accepting responsibility.

Bush declared that he had full confidence in Tenet and was prepared to "move on." There is an aspect of the bizarre in this transparently self-serving statement. The issue is not Tenet's standing with Bush, but Bush's role in flagrantly lying to the American people.

The exposure of lying in the State of the Union speech produced a wide public reaction, not because of the intrinsic significance of Bush's claim that Iraq had sought to buy uranium in Africa, but because this statement was part of an enormous web of lies used by the administration to drag the American people into war.

The entire Bush administration case for war with Iraq was based on serial falsifications of the most grotesque and flagrant character. The claim that Iraq possessed vast stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, the claim that Saddam Hussein's regime was a powerful military threat to his neighbors and even the United States, the claim that Iraq had close ties with Al Qaeda and would share weapons of mass destruction with the terrorists, all these are lies which have been exposed by the events of the war and its aftermath.

Even if one were to accept the convoluted White House account of how flagrant misinformation was incorporated into the State of the Union speech, it amounts to a devastating self-indictment of the US government.

The Bush administration has propounded a new and unprecedented strategy for US national security, under which the US government assumes the right to attack preemptively any other country which it believes might pose a military threat to the United States. Preemption necessarily requires the US government to rely on intelligence estimates to distinguish between real and purely hypothetical threats in selecting targets for military assault.

But the Bush administration has now admitted that in the State of the Union speech, the most important annual address delivered by the president, and the one which is most carefully prepared and reviewed, the White House highlighted "intelligence" reports that were based on a crude forgery. Not only that, but all indications are that the lies about Iraq uranium purchases were inserted into the speech over the objections of the CIA, which had informed officials, up to and including Rice and Cheney, that the charge was dubious.

On January 28, Bush appeared before a joint session of Congress and a national television audience to make his case for war. The central focus was the charge that Iraq was in possession of or seeking to build weapons of mass destruction, which it could share with terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda.

Bush cited two pieces of evidence of an Iraqi nuclear weapons program: Iraq's purchase of high-strength aluminum tubes, which he said was for the purpose of converting them into centrifuges which could purify uranium; and Iraq's attempts to buy uranium in Africa.

Subsequent analysis by UN and US military experts confirmed that the aluminum tubes were, as Iraq maintained, used as bazooka-type rocket launchers, which did not violate any UN restrictions on Iraq's military activities.

As for the uranium purchases, White House officials pointed to Niger, in the central Sahara, as the country where Iraqi agents had sought the materials. A little over a month later, the International Atomic Energy Agency exposed this allegation as a fraud, based on a crudely forged document which had been sold to the Italian intelligence service and then was passed on to the British and the US.

The Bush administration nonetheless stood by the charge for another three months. On Sunday, July 6, former ambassador Joseph Wilson IV revealed that he had traveled to Niger in February 2002, at the request of the CIA, to investigate the claim, and had found it had no credibility. Among other things, he discovered that Niger's uranium reserves were controlled by a four-power consortium. Germany, France and Japan, among others, would have been notified of any Iraqi attempted purchase.

Wilson, a 23-year career diplomat and former US envoy to Iraq before the Persian Gulf War, wrote an op-ed column in the *New York Times* in which he directly challenged the administration's case for the war. "A legitimate argument can be made that we went to war under false pretenses," he wrote, adding in an interview with the *Washington Post*, "It really comes down to the administration misrepresenting the facts on an issue that was a fundamental justification for going to war. It begs the question, what else are they lying about?"

On the face of it, the claim that Tenet's statement allows the administration to "move on" is absurd. The CIA had been the agency most cautious about making reference to alleged Iraqi attempts to purchase uranium in Africa. In the preparation of an October 7, 2002 speech in Cincinnati, in which Bush first elaborated to the American public his policy of a war to "disarm Iraq," Tenet personally intervened with the White House to remove a reference to seeking uranium in Niger from the text.

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So dubious was the claim that when Secretary of State Powell laid out the US case in his February 5, 2003 speech to the UN Security Council, only a week after the State of the Union speech, he refused to include the Niger allegation, even though he agreed to include several equally specious charges, such as the claims about Iraq's purchase of aluminum tubes and the suggestion that Iraq had close links to Al Qaeda.

In effect, Tenet's statement of responsibility for falsifications in the State of the Union speech amounts to a suggestion that the CIA chief should have protested more loudly and successfully against the inclusion of the Africa charge. Left unanswered is the question of who insisted on the allegation remaining in the speech—someone so powerful that they could prevail against foot-dragging by the CIA.

While names have not been named, as yet, there is really no mystery about what took place in the White House in the preparation of the speech. Top administration officials wanted to include the most sensational possible charges against Saddam Hussein in order to overcome growing public opposition to the prospective US war on Iraq.

When the CIA objected to the inclusion of the uranium-Africa charge, White House officials proposed that Bush cite the conclusions of British intelligence, rather than the doubts of US intelligence. Hence the formula that was placed in Bush's mouth January 28: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Even after admitting the falsification, National Security Adviser Rice was still maintaining—in television interviews July 13—that the Bush speech was literally true, because the British government did, in fact, make the allegation against Iraq, even though US intelligence had concluded that this allegation was false, and had so informed the White House.

Such verbal contortions demonstrate both the desperation of the Bush administration and the acquiescence of the media, which responded with full-throated roars of condemnation to Clinton's efforts to parse words about his private life, and reacts with meekness and sympathy as the Bush White House tries to explain away lies which led directly to the deaths of thousands of Iraqis (and hundreds of Americans).

Much of the back and forth of charges and counter-charges, as well as the media coverage, amount to little more than efforts to confuse the issue, which is not one of process—how speeches are vetted—but of substance, the deliberate fabrication of a *casus belli*.

It is always far more complicated to coordinate a series of lies than to tell the truth. Inevitably, at different stages of the campaign for war, different lies were emphasized depending upon their perceived usefulness at stampeding public opinion and browbeating opponents. What is developing now is the predictable collision between the complicated—and none too artfully constructed—edifice of lies, and the reality of events in Iraq.

No amount of lying can conceal two facts: no weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq, although Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons was the principal pretext for the war; and the US occupiers, far from being welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi people, face a combination of guerrilla attacks and widespread popular hostility.

The latest exposure of Bush's Iraq war lies is a crisis, not only for the administration, but for the entire US political establishment. Various Democratic presidential candidates are now seeking to profit from the exposure of Bush's State of the Union speech, but no Democrats challenged the speech when it was given, even though several top Democratic congressmen had been briefed by the CIA and knew, as early as October 2002, that the charges about uranium purchases in Africa were bogus.

Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, the ranking Democrat on the intelligence committee, declared, "The whole world knew it was a fraud. Who decided this was something they could work with?" The American people, however, did not know Bush's speech was based on fraud, although millions suspected it. And neither Senator Rockefeller nor any other Democratic congressional leader informed them.

The Democratic Party shares political responsibility for the war with the Bush administration. House and Senate Democrats joined in the vote to authorize the invasion of Iraq last October, and voted near-unanimously for the military budgets required to carry out the conquest of that country. The thrust of Democratic criticism of the White House in recent weeks has been that Bush is underestimating the number of troops and the amount of money required to maintain the occupation of Iraq.

Equally culpable is the American media, which has uncritically accepted one lie after another from the White House, Pentagon and CIA, and served as a propaganda arm of the government in attempting to mobilize political support for the war on Iraq.

The *New York Times*, in its latest editorial on the uranium fabrication, declared, "Now the American people need to know how the accusation got into the speech in the first place, and whether it was put there with an intent to deceive the nation." The timid posing of the question—whether the purpose of the lies was to deceive!—demonstrates the cowardice and complicity of the corporate-controlled press.

The Bush administration, from its inception in the stolen 2000 election, has been a government of political gangsterism, based upon lies, violence and provocation. This applies to its domestic policies as well as its overseas wars. It should be recalled that in Bush's "war on terror," the same president who flagrantly lied in his State of the Union speech can designate an American citizen as an "enemy combatant" and have him detained indefinitely, without a lawyer or any contact with the public, or tried before a military tribunal and sentenced to death, without any judicial appeal.

During the war in Vietnam, the phrase "credibility gap" came into popular usage in 1966, approximately a year before mass protests began to sweep the United States—and indeed, erupt throughout the world—against the US intervention in that country. Today, the gap between the Bush administration's rationale for an unprovoked war on the one hand, and the grim reality in Iraq combined with the unraveling of the administration's lies on the other, are creating the conditions for a far more explosive movement of mass opposition.

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