

The Iraq war and the debate on phony intelligence

The Editorial Board
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The debate touched off by the admission that Bush's State of the Union address included a false report of an Iraqi attempt to buy uranium has something of a surreal character. There is an intense effort on the part of the media and the political establishment to frame the controversy within absurdly narrow and superficial parameters.

Bush's lie about Iraq and African uranium is one of scores the Bush administration told to the American people about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction in order to terrorize the population and concoct a *casus belli*. But the official debate seeks to ignore the web of lies and instead focus on this one speech, with the emphasis on a supposed intelligence "breakdown" or lapse in communications that led to the insertion of the by now infamous 16 words into last January's address to Congress.

"Was the president misled? How could it happen, and who is responsible?" Such is the general tenor of the debate. The public is to believe that the politicians and media pundits are in a state of shock and bewilderment over the acknowledgement that the president made a misleading assertion in the course of his drumbeat for war.

There is a degree of hypocrisy at work here that is remarkable, even by the standards of American politics. The pose of disbelief is all the more threadbare given the facts on the ground in Iraq after more than three months of US military occupation. Every one of the government's lies has been exposed. There are no significant weapons of mass destruction; instead of crowds of grateful Iraqis, there is a population deeply hostile to the occupation and the initial stages of a guerrilla war to drive out the Americans; and there is no sign of any links between the toppled regime and Al Qaeda.

Bush himself unwittingly exposed the pretense that the lie in his State of the Union address was an isolated case when, in the course of fending off criticisms of that speech, he made a statement so glaringly false as to startle even the poodles of the Washington press corps. Last Monday he declared that the invasion of Iraq was justified because he had given Saddam Hussein "a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in." Bush continued, "And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power."

The *Washington Post* reported this remark—delivered in the presence of a stunned UN Secretary General Kofi Annan—and added the following delicate comment: "The president's assertion that the war began because Iraq did not admit inspectors appeared to contradict the events leading up to war this spring: Hussein had, in fact, admitted the inspectors and Bush had opposed extending their work because he did not believe them effective." For its part, the *New York Times* simply excised the president's bizarre statement from its report on the media appearance.

The remark suggests that the president is so ignorant of the policies pursued by his own administration that he cannot even remember the official pretexts for going to war. Alternatively, it is a case of a man whose head has been stuffed with so many lies that even he can't keep them straight.

The response of the two newspapers that play the preeminent role in

molding the media's approach to major political events—the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*—is to present the matter as an "intelligence failure" or a regrettable lapse by unidentified members of the administration. It is an effort to hide the forest with one tree—using the controversy over a single episode to obscure the fact that the entire case for war was a lie.

Thus, the *Post* writes in an editorial entitled "Wait for the Facts" published July 16: "In the absence of evidence, there has been an extraordinary amount of attention paid to marginal issues—most recently those 16 words in President Bush's State of the Union speech that said, accurately, that British intelligence believed Iraq had been seeking to obtain uranium in Africa."

In its editorial published the same day, the *Times* characterizes the inclusion of the uranium charge in the speech as a "mistake," while criticizing the Bush administration for trying to justify it. "The honorable response at this point would be to concede the error and apologize to the American people," the *Times* declares.

This is the same newspaper that spearheaded the vilification of Clinton over the spurious charges related to the Whitewater real estate deal, and sought to legitimize a constitutional coup whose rallying cry was that the president had lied about an extramarital sexual encounter. But when it comes to Bush lying to the American people in order to justify an unprovoked war—a mere apology will suffice.

As for the president's Democratic critics, the claims that they are shocked to learn that the White House manipulated intelligence can only inspire contempt.

There is a real and extremely heated debate going on within ruling circles over the manipulation of intelligence, but it is not over the phony claims about African uranium—they all knew that was a lie. Rather, it is over the portrayal of the war as a "cakewalk," the predictions that US troops would be greeted as "liberators" and the assurances that the US-anointed Iraqi oppositionist—bank embezzler Ahmad Chalabi—would be welcomed as Iraq's new leader. It is being fueled by the growing prospect of a military and political debacle in Iraq.

Bitter conflicts have broken out within the state itself. Those in the CIA and the State Department forced to take the blame for the administration's lies and false intelligence are not happy about having to do so. There is also the deeper concern that the credibility of these agencies and of the US government as a whole is being fundamentally undermined.

Within the military establishment there is enormous resentment against such civilian figures as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, who led the charge for an invasion and occupation of Iraq, without any serious consideration of the implications, military as well as political, of a colonial-style occupation of the country.

This debate is concealed from the public, as its implications are too explosive. None of Bush's prominent Democratic critics have demanded the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq—something the American soldiers themselves have begun to advocate. Rather, some have urged the

deployment of even greater numbers. Both major parties are preparing for a protracted counterinsurgency campaign aimed at subjugating the Iraqi people to the profit interests of the US corporations and banks.

There is likewise no rush by the Democrats to probe a question far more important than how 16 words were inserted into Bush's speech and who was responsible for their insertion. The deeper question is: If the stated rationale for the war—that US intelligence revealed the Iraqi regime to constitute an imminent danger to the American people—was false, then what were the real reasons for the invasion?

Nor has there been a demand for an investigation into the Bush administration's most important lie—that the attack on Iraq was a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The administration was compelled to lie about its motives for invading Iraq because the real reasons would have provoked overwhelming popular opposition. These reasons had been laid out by the principal figures in the Bush administration—most of them veterans of the earlier administration of Bush Sr.—months before the 2000 election.

Written in September 2000, a document issued by the Project for a New Century, the Republican think tank that served as a sort of administration-in-waiting during the Clinton years, spelled out the genuine rationale for a war on Iraq. Titled, "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategies, Forces and Resources for a New Century," the document declared that the US would have to assume military control of the Persian Gulf region, whether or not the Iraqi regime posed a threat.

It stated: "The United States has for decades sought to play a more permanent role in Gulf regional security. While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."

Control of the Gulf and its oil resources, the document added, was necessary "for maintaining global US pre-eminence, precluding the rise of a great power rival, and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests."

The document largely recycled conceptions put forward in a 1992 Pentagon strategy document drafted by Paul Wolfowitz, currently deputy secretary of defense, and I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, when the two were aides to then-defense secretary Cheney. It envisioned the control of Persian Gulf oil as part of an "American grand strategy" that would "discourage advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."

Thus the war was planned and executed to further the designs of a section of the US ruling class for global hegemony. It was aimed not just against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, but at Europe, China, Japan and any other power that could conceivably challenge US world domination.

Further evidence that the war was planned well in advance with objectives that had nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction or terrorism emerged this week. It surfaced in connection with a lawsuit challenging the administration's refusal to divulge information on the deliberations of an energy task force convened by Vice President Cheney in March 2001.

While Cheney, who for several years in the 1990s served as the CEO of the oil construction firm Halliburton, has resisted all efforts to obtain details—even the identity of the participants—of the months of meetings he and his staffers held with energy industry executives and lobbyists, other government agencies that participated in the process have been compelled to give up documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Material from the energy task force turned over by the Commerce Department includes detailed maps of Iraqi oilfields, pipelines and refineries, as well as charts outlining Iraqi oil and gas projects and detailing the contracts of foreign companies for oilfield development.

This material indicates that six months before the terrorist attacks of September 11, the administration was crafting an energy policy based on plans to seize control of Iraq's oil resources.

The implementation of such a far-reaching policy of military aggression and imperialist conquest, long advocated by the most right-wing sections of the US ruling elite—and instinctively opposed by the vast majority of the American people—was conceivable only under extraordinary conditions of mass trauma, fear and patriotic fervor. September 11 provided these conditions. The events of that day were seized upon by the Bush administration as the pretext for setting its neocolonial plans into motion.

Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice spelled out the significance of the September 11 attacks for the administration. Its response was not the sorrow and horror felt by the American people over the loss of more than 3,000 lives. Rather, the tragedy was seen as an opening to advance its already formulated imperialist agenda.

In an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine published in April of last year, Rice commented that the attacks had "started shifting the tectonic plates in international politics." She continued: "And it's important to try to seize on that and position American interests and institutions and all of that before they harden again."

The immediate response of the administration was to exploit the attacks as a pretext for invading Iraq. According to a report by CBS News national security correspondent David Martin, "barely five hours after American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld was telling his aides to come up with plans for striking Iraq—even though there was no evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the attacks."

The planning was accompanied by an intensive propaganda campaign designed to blame Iraq for the attacks. Retired General Wesley Clark, the former NATO commander, recounted last month on "Meet the Press" how he was called by the White House on September 11 prior to an appearance on the CNN cable network and told, "You got to say this is connected.... This has to be connected to Saddam Hussein."

The lack of evidence of any such connection did not stop Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice and others in the administration from repeatedly asserting a link between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda. Those in the intelligence agencies who challenged such assertions, like those who questioned the spurious claims about weapons of mass destruction, were dismissed or intimidated.

Given the critical role assigned by the administration to 9/11 in justifying a policy of global hegemony and two wars in the space of 16 months, the most significant and damning political fact is the lack of any serious investigation into the terrorist attacks of that day. The cover-up of September 11 and the events leading up to it is the most sinister of all the official deceptions under Bush—and one that no figure in either the Democratic or Republican party is willing to challenge.

As the second anniversary of 9/11 approaches, the Bush administration remains actively engaged in the suppression of information concerning the terrorist attacks. So blatant is this stonewalling that even the national commission formed to investigate the events—comprised of trusted establishment figures led by former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean (a Republican)—felt compelled to protest. Access to documents has been denied the panel and potential witnesses intimidated. Information revealed in previous congressional hearings has been reclassified and kept out of the hands even of those commission members who heard it while serving in Congress.

Underfunded and limited in duration—"the White House has made it known they don't want to go into the election period," Kean told the *Wall Street Journal* last week—the very formation of the panel was staunchly opposed by the administration, which blocked its creation for more than a year on the grounds that it would "distract from the war on terrorism."

The Democratic Party and the media are direct accomplices in this cover-up. There has been no outcry from the Democrats in Congress, or from the candidates for the party's presidential nomination, over the attempt to sabotage an investigation into the worst mass killing of civilians in the country's history.

The media has largely ignored the protest from the commission, and buried what little coverage it has given to the panel's deliberations. The event that supposedly "changed everything," that served as the justification for military aggression abroad and an unprecedented assault on democratic rights at home, has become a taboo subject.

What is it that they are all so anxious to hide? Nearly two years since the attacks, there has still been no public explanation for a whole series of questions about September 11, questions that strongly suggest that those in power knew more about the plans for the attacks than has ever been acknowledged. Among these questions are:

* How is it that the massive US intelligence network failed to anticipate, let alone prevent, the simultaneous hijacking of four commercial jets?

* Why did the air defense system fail to scramble fighters in time to intercept any of the hijacked planes before they crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?

* Why did FBI headquarters dismiss warnings from agents in Arizona and Minneapolis about the threat of hijackings by Islamist groups, and why did it block any serious investigation into Zacarias Moussaoui—now branded the "20th hijacker"—who was arrested over a month before the attacks?

* Why were hijackers Mohammed Atta, Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf al Hazmi, who were on watch lists or already under surveillance by US intelligence agencies as suspected terrorists, allowed to freely enter the country and openly conduct business under their own names, without triggering any law-enforcement response?

* What connections, if any, were maintained between the CIA and Osama bin Laden after the agency sponsored his and other Islamic fundamentalist groups in the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s?

* Why were warnings made in the summer of 2001 from at least five countries that a massive terrorist attack appeared imminent ignored and never shared with the public?

There is another question raised by the revelations concerning Bush's State of the Union address. If the White House was prepared to override and falsify CIA intelligence estimates about Iraq and African uranium to further its plans for war, did it do the same thing—with the same motivation—in relation to intelligence warnings about an imminent terrorist attack?

These unanswered questions, together with the evidence that has emerged, point to a decision within government circles to deliberately ignore the signs of an impending attack on US soil. It is possible, even likely, that those involved did not anticipate the scale of the attack, but the most rational explanation for the complete failure of US intelligence is that it was not an accident. By allowing a terrorist event to take place, the administration could create the political conditions to stampede public opinion behind a far-reaching agenda of global militarism and internal reaction that it otherwise could not impose.

The present debate in Washington over falsification of intelligence and presidential lying cannot get to the heart of these issues. All of those involved—the Congress, the Democratic Party, the media—are far too implicated in the efforts over the past 20 months to permit any critical examination of the events leading up to September 11 and the subsequent war against Iraq.

Only the most searching public inquiry can get to the heart of these matters. An exposure of the truth of these events is vital from the standpoint of calling to account those responsible for failing to prevent a monstrous crime that took thousands of lives. It is even more necessary for the prevention of new wars and other acts of plunder and repression

that threaten the peoples of the US and the world.

But how can such an investigation be organized? It will not come from any section of the existing political establishment. The full exposure of the political conspiracies that underlay both September 11 and the Iraq war can be carried out only in the context of an independent political mobilization of the broad masses of working people in defense of their democratic rights and social conditions and against the existing social and political system.



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