

New evidence of official lies on Iraq's "nuclear program"

Rick Kelly

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Further evidence has emerged about the fraudulent nature of the Bush administration's pre-invasion allegations about Iraq's so-called nuclear weapons program, as well as the eager part played by the Australian government in backing them. On October 27, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Four Corners* program "Spinning the Tubes" revealed that Australian intelligence agencies first alerted Washington to Iraq's attempted importation of aluminium tubes, which were later alleged to be a critical component in the building of nuclear weapons.

American scientific experts and former intelligence officers told the program that the US government was soon advised that the tubes were completely unsuitable for a centrifuge program. Yet, in the lead-up to the war, the Bush administration orchestrated reports, based on the tubes story, that Saddam Hussein was making progress toward the construction of a nuclear bomb.

Vice-President Richard Cheney launched the propaganda campaign in August 2002, claiming that "many of us are convinced that Saddam Hussein will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail".

It is now known that the sole basis for this claim was the attempted shipment of aluminium tubes to Iraq 18 months earlier. In May 2001, an Australian company was involved in exporting a container load of tubes from southern China to Jordan. After being tipped off by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the CIA intercepted the tubes in Jordan, alleging that they were en route to Iraq.

The CIA reported that Iraq was importing the tubes in order to produce the enriched uranium necessary for the construction of a nuclear bomb. It alleged that the tubes were to be used as rotors in a gas centrifuge program that would enrich Iraq's natural uranium. The agency rejected out of hand expert evidence that the tubes were designed—as the Iraqi government insisted—for use as artillery rocket casings.

Two weeks after Cheney first raised the spectre of an Iraqi nuclear arsenal, the Bush administration leaked the aluminium tube story to the *New York Times*. A front-page story quoted anonymous officials saying there was new information that Iraq had embarked on a worldwide hunt for material to make an

atomic bomb, and that the specifications of the tubes had persuaded American intelligence experts that they were for Iraq's nuclear program. The story gave no indication of the deep scepticism of many experts that the tubes could be used to enrich uranium.

National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice appeared on CNN the same day as the *New York Times* story and supported the allegations. "There have been shipments of high-quality aluminium tubes that are really only suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs... We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Later that night, Cheney went on NBC television, declaring that Saddam Hussein was now "trying, through his illicit procurement network, to acquire the equipment he needs to be able to enrich uranium... to make the bombs". Asked if he meant the aluminium tubes, Cheney replied: "Specifically, aluminium tubes. The story in the *New York Times*."

On September 12, 2002, when President Bush addressed the United Nations General Assembly to put the case for war, the tubes claim featured in his presentation. "Iraq has made several attempts to buy high-strength aluminium tubes used to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon," he stated. "Should Iraq acquire fissile material, it would be able to build a nuclear weapon within a year."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a similar claim in presenting his now notorious September 2002 dossier of evidence against Iraq. Confidential memos revealed at the British Hutton inquiry into the death of weapons scientist David Kelly showed that in the lead-up to the dossier's release, Blair's adviser, Alastair Campbell, asked John Scarlett, the head of Joint Intelligence, to highlight in the executive summary that 60,000 tubes had been sought. Scarlett replied that "there is no definitive intelligence" that they were "destined for a nuclear programme".

But Blair told parliament: "We know Saddam has attempted covertly to acquire 60,000 or more specialised aluminium tubes, which are subject to strict controls due to their potential use in the construction of gas centrifuges."

The aluminium tubes became the only piece of "evidence" of an Iraqi nuclear program when, in late 2002, the story of Iraq's attempted purchase of uranium in the African nation of Niger

was revealed to be based on crudely forged documents. In his address to the UN Security Council on February 5, seeking to justify war, Colin Powell did not raise the Niger uranium allegation. Instead, he relied on the tubes story to declare that Iraq had nuclear ambitions. “Most US experts think they [the tubes] are intended to serve as rotors in centrifuges used to enrich uranium,” he reported.

The *Four Corners* report made clear the extent to which the Australian government backed what it knew to be bogus allegations about the tubes. The day after the *New York Times* report, Prime Minister John Howard was asked about the issue.

“Well look, I can’t answer that,” Howard replied. “It’s material that’s come out in the United States. But I do know this—that it, if accurate, confirms the intelligence that we have been given to the effect that Iraq has not abandoned her aspiration for nuclear capacity. There’s no doubt, on the evidence, on the intelligence material available to us, that not only does Iraq possess chemical and biological weapons, but Iraq also has not abandoned her nuclear aspirations. And the question of how far she is from achieving that aspiration I can’t tell you, and perhaps nobody can. But nothing can alter the fact that she is seeking it.”

Howard’s response followed a familiar pattern on his part—deflect all specific intelligence queries, and instead issue sweeping assertions about Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction”. Howard’s claim that the tubes report originated from the United States is now known to be false.

Before the tubes left China, Australian intelligence had obtained a sample of the shipment. An Australian military official contacted Garry Cordukes, the director of the exporting company, International Aluminium Supply, who agreed to hand over a sample. The Australian agencies helped monitor the shipment before its interception and were subsequently rewarded with a special CIA briefing on the allegations in Canberra in late 2001.

Having been so intimately involved, the Australian authorities must have known that the probability of the tubes being used to enrich uranium was negligible. In the United States, with the important exception of the CIA, no other intelligence agencies were convinced that the tubes constituted evidence of Iraq’s nuclear program.

A leading American centrifuge expert, Professor Houston Wood of the University of Virginia, told the Department of Energy that the tubes’ walls were too thick and their mass too great to be used in a centrifuge. Greg Thielmann, who headed the strategic proliferation section at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, told *Four Corners* that by the middle of 2002, “there was a growing consensus within not only the US intelligence community, but also among our close allies with whom we shared a lot of the results. And the consensus was that this was not bound for the nuclear weapons program.”

This “consensus” was soon overturned, however, once it

became clear that the Bush administration was determined to go to war against Iraq. The preparation for war required a massive media campaign based on manipulated and falsified intelligence designed to raise fears of an Iraqi attack. The aluminium tube story was just one of many lies used for the purpose.

Responding to questions about the *Four Corners* report, the Howard government has attempted to distance itself from the tube allegations. Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer told the ABC: “There was some debate about that and that is why we were reasonably circumspect in how we articulated the information about the tubes.”

Yet, last September Downer was anything but circumspect. He declared: “Australian intelligence agencies believe there’s evidence of a pattern of acquisition of equipment that could be used in a uranium enrichment program. Iraq’s attempted acquisition of very specific types of aluminium tubes may be part of that pattern.”

Howard has since issued a press release in which he said: “Australian intelligence agencies were aware of the debate about the purpose of the tubes. I made no reference to aluminium tubes in my statement to Parliament of February 4th or subsequently.” This leaves unexplained the statements that both he and Downer made in September 2002.

The *Four Corners* program provided a rare media expose of the manipulation and outright lies used to justify joining the war against Iraq. The revelations underscore the criminal character of the war and the continuing military occupation of Iraq, an operation in which at least 900 Australian military personnel are still engaged. Every pretext given for invading Iraq has now collapsed, from the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, to the forecasts that coalition forces would be greeted as liberators to the supposed nuclear threat.

The government’s contemptuous efforts to rewrite the historical record are only possible because of the general complicity of the media and the lack of any significant opposition from the mainstream political parties. In response to the *Four Corners* program, Labor and the Greens merely issued perfunctory calls for Howard to apologise. None of the opposition parties has issued a call for what is long overdue: a full and open inquiry into all aspects of the government’s participation in the invasion of Iraq.



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