

Bush's Iraq commission and the "intelligence failure" fraud

Part One

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This is the first of a three-part article.

With the collapse of the edifice of lies used to justify the war in Iraq, the entire US political establishment has rallied around a new lie concocted to conceal the old ones—namely, the assertion that an “intelligence failure” is to blame for the false pre-war claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

President Bush on Friday named the members of his hand-picked—yet, somehow, “independent”—commission to look into this problem. Every one of the seven members of the panel is a trusted defender of US imperialism and the American ruling elite. The appointment of retired federal judge Laurence Silberman as co-chairman, in particular, exposes the utterly fraudulent character of the investigation (i.e., whitewash) that the commission will conduct.

Silberman, a long-time operative for the Republican right, is an old hand at covering up the crimes of Republican administrations. Appointed by Reagan to the Court of Appeals for Washington, D.C., Silberman and fellow right-wing Republican judge David Sentelle in 1990 voided the convictions of Lt. Col. Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter for crimes related to the Iran-Contra affair. At the heart of Iran-Contra was a secret operation sanctioned by Reagan to finance and arm, in violation of US law, the contra death squads that killed tens of thousands of people in Nicaragua. Silberman's intervention played a key role in sabotaging the investigation by Iran-Contra independent counsel Lawrence Walsh.

The newly appointed commission, to which Bush's handlers reluctantly agreed after Washington's chief weapons inspector in Iraq, David Kay, resigned and declared there were no weapons of mass destruction in the country, is a transparent fraud that will have no credibility with the majority of people in America and the rest of the world. To insure that the panel will serve the purpose for which it was set up—to conceal the truth and smother any serious discussion of Washington's real war aims—it will issue no report until well after the November 2004 presidential election. This alone establishes the utterly anti-democratic essence of the exercise.

Three points should be emphasized about the Bush commission. First: Its premise and framework are themselves arbitrary and politically motivated. Prior to any investigation, it is declared that the reason for the total discrepancy between the claims of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Powell, Rice, etc., about Iraqi WMDs and the true situation is a “failure of intelligence.” The commission's premise already assumes a conclusion tailor-made to whitewash the Bush government and exonerate its leading figures of the political crime of deliberately dragging the country into an unprovoked war based on false and misleading claims.

Second: The subjective mental state of Bush and company—to what extent they knowingly lied or were themselves “misled”—is an entirely secondary question. One could just as well exonerate Enron boss Kenneth Lay or, for that matter, any other corporate criminal, because he really

believed the fraudulent data he was giving out to the public.

Third: The political responsibility for bombarding the people of the US and the world with false stories of an imminent threat of chemical, biological and even nuclear attack at the hands of Saddam Hussein rests not with CIA analysts, or even with CIA director George Tenet—whatever their culpability. It rests with Bush and his cohorts in the administration. They are the political leaders who chose to make these claims, and use them as the pretext for an aggressive war—one that has already cost the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqis and well over 500 American soldiers, and consumed more than \$160 billion.

The claim of a failure of intelligence emerged as a prominent theme within the political establishment and the media only in the course of the past month, when a series of developments completely demolished the government's claims that at the time of the invasion, Saddam Hussein was concealing massive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

* In early January, press reports emerged that the Pentagon had quietly withdrawn a 400-man military unit, the Joint Captured Materiel Exploitation Group, which had been sent into Iraq after the war to locate the alleged WMD stockpiles. This followed the earlier announcement that David Kay, a Reagan-era Pentagon official and former United Nations weapons inspector appointed by the CIA last spring to head up the 1,400-strong Iraq Survey Group, the main WMD-hunting unit, was about to resign without even issuing a final report.

* On January 7, the *Washington Post* published a long investigative report concluding that “investigators have found no support for the two main fears expressed in London and Washington before the war: that Iraq had a hidden arsenal of old weapons and built advanced programs for new ones.”

* On January 8, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington-based think tank with longstanding credentials as an organ of the foreign policy establishment, published an extensive report documenting the case that “Administration officials systematically misrepresented the threat from Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and ballistic missile programs.”

* In an interview January 10 on the CBS news program “60 Minutes” and another published by *Time* magazine, former treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, who was forced out of office a year ago, revealed that the Bush administration began top-level discussions of invading and occupying Iraq as soon as Bush entered the White House in January 2001. He stated in these interviews and in a newly published book that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was “Topic A” at the first National Security Council meeting of the new administration. He cited memoranda from the first days of the administration outlining plans for governing Iraq under US military occupation and parceling out its oil reserves.

"In the 23 months I was there," he told *Time*, "I never would characterize as evidence of weapons of mass destruction."

By this point, hundreds of US inspectors had been scouring Iraq for nine months, and had failed to turn up a single banned weapon. The military command was growing impatient with the futile search for non-existent WMDs and, facing a stubborn and growing guerilla insurgency and widespread popular unrest in Iraq, had begun to divert forces from Kay's Iraq Survey Group to more pressing concerns, such as "force protection" and the hunt for resistance leaders.

Within the US, sections of the political and media establishment were growing increasingly concerned that the stonewalling tactics of the Bush administration were only making an untenable situation worse. The refusal of the government to acknowledge in some manner that its pre-war claims had been disproved was not only fueling anti-war and anti-Bush sentiment at home, it was destroying whatever remained of Washington's credibility abroad.

It was necessary to mount a damage-control operation and formulate a fall-back position that would acknowledge the undeniable absence of WMDs while continuing to conceal the political conspiracy and government disinformation campaign at the center of the drive to war in Iraq. This sordid task was undertaken by the *New York Times*, which published a cynical editorial on January 11 under the headline "The Faulty Weapons Estimates."

Throughout the course of the Bush administration, the *Times* has epitomized the duplicitous and bankrupt position of what passes for liberalism in the US—attempting to shore up the authority of Bush and supporting his military actions, while carping at tactical issues and posturing as a critic. The January 11 editorial was a case in point. It berated the Bush administration for its "reckless rush to invade Iraq" and its "obsession with the Iraqi dictator," and took note of the reports exposing the falsity of the pre-war WMD claims, but concluded that the administration was itself the victim of intelligence agencies that were "tragically unable to provide accurate information on Iraq."

The editorial concluded with a call for a "nonpartisan" investigation into the "faulty weapons estimates."

Here was the new formula for a cover-up. The more Bush administration spokesmen tried to finesse the issue, backtracking from their previous WMD claims by substituting "weapons programs" for "weapons," and similar verbal gimmicks, the more the contrivance proposed by the *Times* gained traction within the political elite. By the time of Bush's State of the Union Address on January 20, the verbal gymnastics had reached the point of absurdity. In that speech, Bush employed the tortured phrase "weapons of mass destruction-related program activities."

Leading Democrats, including two of the then-contenders for the presidential nomination, senators Joseph Lieberman and John Edwards, both supporters of the war who had voted to give Bush congressional authorization to use force in Iraq, took up the demand for an investigation into the supposed intelligence failure.

On January 23, Kay resigned as head of the Iraq Survey Group and began a whirlwind series of media interviews, in which he announced his conclusion that Saddam Hussein had destroyed his WMD programs well before the US invasion of March 2003 and, in fact, had no weapons of mass destruction at the time of the war. A right-wing Republican, Kay had been an avid proponent of the invasion, serving as the media's hand-picked spokesman for the Clinton-era UN inspectors, in which capacity he deprecated the resumed UN inspections in late 2002 and echoed the administration's claims that Iraq was concealing massive WMD stockpiles and represented an imminent threat.

Even as Kay declared, following his resignation from the Iraq Survey Group, that "We were all wrong," he defended the war and alibied for the administration, denying it had pressured the intelligence agencies to produce skewed estimates and claiming that Bush and company had been

misled. anything that

With remarkable speed, the Senate (which had stalled for more than a year before holding a public hearing on the 9/11 attacks) organized a January 28 hearing for Kay before the Armed Services Committee. The clear purpose of the hearing was to accelerate the process of mounting a cover-up on the WMD issue. Politicians from both parties, including Democrats Edward Kennedy and Hillary Clinton, effusively praised Kay, whose own pronouncements on Iraqi WMDs had played a significant role in the administration's drive to war. The furthest any Democrat went was to suggest (Kennedy) that the Bush administration had "manipulated" intelligence to justify its policy of war, and none called for a probe of the conduct of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld or other high-level officials.

Republican senator John McCain raised the proposal for an "independent" inquiry into the alleged intelligence failure, and Kay avidly embraced it. Five days later, after initial hesitation and internal wrangling within his administration, Bush announced he would appoint such a commission, defining its task as a "broad" probe into US WMD intelligence not only in Iraq, but also in other proscribed countries such as Iran, Libya and North Korea.

The following day, on February 3, the *New York Times* published an editorial bestowing its blessings on the commission and specifically supporting the decision to withhold any findings until after the November elections.

Several major lies form the basis for the cover story of a failure of intelligence in Iraq. The first is the claim that the Bush administration exerted no untoward pressure on intelligence agencies and their personnel to extract estimates supporting its policy of war.

This claim is a crude attempt to rewrite history. It was well known and widely reported in the media that, in the months preceding the invasion of Iraq, Vice President Dick Cheney and his fellow war hawks in and around the Pentagon—Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld; Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; Douglas Feith, the number-three man at the Defense Department; Pentagon adviser Richard Perle—were waging a bitter struggle against the CIA and the State Department, denouncing them for their "soft" intelligence estimates on Iraqi WMDs and their skepticism regarding the administration's assertions of a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. They were particularly incensed over the refusal of CIA and State Department intelligence analysts to lend credibility to outlandish reports of Iraqi nuclear programs supplied by the Iraqi National Congress, the anti-Hussein exile group promoted and funded by the US government.

Last year, Laurie Mylroie—a close associate of Wolfowitz and Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby—published a book entitled *Bush vs. the Beltway: How the CIA and the State Department Tried to Stop the War on Terror*. The book carried an enthusiastic endorsement from Perle. The book jacket contained the following blurb: "Mylroie describes how the CIA and the State Department have systematically discredited critical intelligence about Saddam's regime, including indisputable evidence of its possession of weapons of mass destruction."

The "no pressure" line is further contradicted by statements reported in the press from current and former intelligence operatives.

The administration's public campaign for an invasion and occupation of Iraq began in earnest in late August of 2002, when Vice President Dick Cheney delivered well-publicized speeches before two war veterans groups. Speaking before the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention on August 26, Cheney declared categorically that Iraq possessed substantial stores of chemical and biological weapons and was actively pursuing a program to build nuclear weapons. "Simply stated," he said, "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us."

The media immediately picked up on Cheney's statements and took

them as the signal for a non-stop campaign to convince the American people that Iraqi weapons represented an ominous and imminent threat to their own safety and security.

Cheney's speech was intended as a preemptive strike against those both inside and outside the administration who were pushing Bush to seek authorization from the United Nations and accede to demands from France, Russia and other countries, including Britain, to allow a resumption of UN weapons inspections prior to launching an invasion. "A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his [Hussein's] compliance with UN resolutions," he declared.

The vice president's dire warnings marked a sharp departure from previous intelligence estimates, which were far less categorical and conclusive on the issue of Iraqi WMDs, and generally skeptical on the question of Iraqi nuclear capabilities. As the Carnegie Endowment and other studies have documented, his assertions were backed by no new intelligence findings of any significance.

This, however, was not for any lack of trying on the part of Cheney and his co-conspirators in the Pentagon. Numerous articles have appeared over the past eight months reporting that Cheney and his chief of staff Libby had made multiple visits to the CIA to pressure Iraq analysts into producing more categorical and blood-curdling assessments of Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons capacities. An article published June 5, 2003, by the *Washington Post* quoted a "senior agency official" as saying the visits by Cheney and Libby "sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here."

The same article went on to say: "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, 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.'"

Cheney's visits created a "chill factor" to "get the analysts on the same page," former CIA analyst Pat Edwards told the *New Republic* magazine ("The Operator, George Tenet Undermines the CIA," by Spencer Ackerman and John B. Judis, September 22, 2003). Edwards continued: "I will tell you that, in my time there, I never saw anything in the way of the kind of radical pressure that clearly existed in 2001 and 2002 and on into 2003."

Another testimonial appeared in a *New Yorker* article by Seymour Hersh published October 27, 2003: "The Administration eventually got its way, a former CIA official said. 'The analysts at the CIA were beaten down defending their assertions. And, they blame George Tenet for not protecting them. I've never seen a government like this.'"

To be continued.



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