

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

Part Two

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This is the second of a three-part article. Part one was posted Saturday, February 7.

Were this claim true, it would of itself be sufficient cause to remove Bush from office, on grounds of criminal negligence and incompetence. A chief of state who propels his country into war on the basis of false claims of an urgent threat is not fit to rule.

Moreover, the only serious response to such a debacle would be the initiation of an exhaustive criminal investigation into those people in high places who misled the president in order to foment war.

In fact, the "Bush was misled" ploy is just as threadbare as the "no pressure" lie. Bush brought into his administration precisely those extreme militarists such as Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz who had for the better part of a decade been campaigning for a new war to "finish the job" left undone by the Persian Gulf war of 1991—overthrowing the Baathist regime, occupying Iraq, and seizing control of its oil resources. Both he and Cheney had the closest ties to American oil and energy conglomerates that stood to benefit most immediately and directly from this imperialist enterprise.

The evidence is, by now, voluminous that Bush and his top advisers came to power with the determination to invade Iraq. What they lacked was a pretext. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided them with precisely the *casus belli* they had been seeking, and they eagerly seized on it, even though they knew Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with the hijack-bombings and had no links to Al Qaeda.

Far from being misled, Bush and his co-conspirators proceeded to concoct a case for waging an unprovoked war, relying on the complicity of the Democratic Party and the media. A central preoccupation of the administration became the fabrication of intelligence.

Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and their top aides set out to contrive a case for war by both bullying intelligence agents to produce the assessments they desired and bypassing normal intelligence channels altogether. Conditional findings of intelligence agencies were stripped of their qualifiers and presented as categorical statements of fact. The most extreme claims of Iraqi weapons programs—largely supplied by US stooges in Iraqi exile groups and either unexamined or rejected by the CIA and other intelligence agencies—were leaked to the media and funneled to the White House. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, et al. presented these claims in public speeches and statements as rock-solid intelligence on Iraqi WMDs.

Rumsfeld and his clique of neo-conservatives in the Pentagon set up their own intelligence operation, called the Office of Special Plans, shortly after the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. Its purpose was to bypass the traditional intelligence agencies, which they considered too "left-leaning," and cobble together, from even the most suspect intelligence claims, a case for invading Iraq.

Kenneth Pollack is a former CIA analyst and director for Persian Gulf Affairs on the National Security Council under Clinton. Far from an opponent of American militarism, he authored a book entitled *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. Nevertheless, in the current issue of the *Atlantic* magazine he has published an article that provides an insight into the means by which the Bush administration concocted intelligence to support its war plans. Pollack writes:

"The Administration gave greatest credence to accounts that presented the most lurid picture of Iraqi activities. In many cases intelligence analysts were distrustful of those sources, or knew unequivocally that they were wrong. But when they said so, they were not heeded....

"Requests were constantly made for detailed analyses of newspaper articles that conformed to the views of Administration officials—pieces by conservative columnists such as Jim Hoagland, William Safire, and George F. Will....

"They set up their own shop in the Pentagon, called the Office of Special Plans, in order to sift through the information on Iraq themselves. To a great extent OSP personnel 'cherry-picked' the intelligence they passed on, selecting reports that supported the Administration's pre-existing position and ignoring all the rest.

"Most problematic of all, the OSP often chose to believe reports that trained intelligence officers considered unreliable or downright false. In particular, it gave great credence to reports from the Iraqi National Congress, whose leader was the Administration-backed Ahmed Chalabi.... One of the reasons the OSP generally believed Chalabi and the INC was that they were telling it what it wanted to hear.... Thus intelligence analysts spent huge amounts of time fighting bad information and trying to persuade Administration officials not to make policy decisions based on it....

"The Bush officials who created the OSP gave its reports directly to those in the highest levels of government, often passing raw, unverified intelligence straight to the Cabinet level as gospel. Senior Administration officials made public statements based on these reports—reports that the larger intelligence community knew to be erroneous (for instance, that there was hard and fast evidence linking Iraq to al-Qaeda)."

In a now notorious interview that Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz gave to *Vanity Fair* magazine in May of 2003, he, apparently inadvertently, acknowledged that the claim of an imminent threat from Iraqi WMDs was decided upon by the Bush administration as the most effective pretext for invading Iraq. The key excerpts from the interview, which was subsequently published in the July 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair*, first appeared in American press reports on May 28, 2003.

Wolfowitz told his interviewer, Sam Tannenhaus, that three possible rationales were discussed: Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Iraqi support for terrorism, and the Baathist regime's internal repression. Here

is what Wolfowitz said:

“The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the US government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction....

“[T]here have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi people.... The third one by itself, as I think I said earlier, is a reason to help the Iraqis but it’s not a reason to put American kids’ lives at risk, certainly not on the scale that we did it. That second issue about links to terrorism is the one about which there’s the most disagreement within the bureaucracy....”

Does this read like the deliberations of objective policy makers who were being “misled” by faulty intelligence? To ask the question is to answer it.

In this interview—which is available on the US Department of Defense’s web site—Wolfowitz made the devastating admission that there was no consensus within the intelligence establishment of links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Yet Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and others in the administration routinely made precisely this claim, and the administration continues to do so up to the present day. Furthermore, in direct contradiction to subsequent statements of Bush spokesmen, including Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary told *Vanity Fair* that Saddam Hussein’s internal repression was “not a reason to put American kids’ lives at risk.”

These published statements from one of the key war planners confirm that the issue of WMDs was cynically chosen as the best means to “sell” the war to a skeptical and reluctant public.

One other by now well-known link in the chain of government lies is sufficient to expose the absurdity of the argument that Bush was “misled” by faulty intelligence. In his January 28, 2003, State of the Union Address, Bush asserted that Saddam Hussein “recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” This was the most spectacular and chilling of the WMD claims made in the speech. It was immediately picked up by the broadcast news media and splashed across the front pages of newspapers across the US.

With this statement, Bush presented to the American people as fact a claim that had been specifically rejected at least three months earlier by none other than CIA director George Tenet. The head of the CIA had personally telephoned the White House in advance of the president’s October 7 speech in Cincinnati, Ohio, to urge Bush to remove this allegation from the text of his address. The African uranium claim was, in fact, deleted from that speech.

Tenet intervened to stop Bush from using the African uranium claim for good reason. The previous February, Joseph Wilson IV, a 23-year career diplomat and US envoy to Iraq before the 1991 Gulf war, had been dispatched to Niger, at the behest of Cheney, to access the allegation that Iraq had purchased uranium from the central African country. The claim was based on a document that had been sold to the Italian intelligence service and passed on to Britain and the US.

Wilson reported back that the claim was “bogus and unrealistic.” A number of American and international intelligence agencies concluded that the document purporting to deal with the Iraqi uranium buy was a crude forgery. Two weeks before the start of the US-British invasion of Iraq, Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, in his report to the United Nations Security Council, declared the document to be “inauthentic” and dismissed the claim of Iraqi attempts to purchase African uranium as a fraud.

Yet even before Bush’s January 2003 State of the Union speech, the African uranium canard reappeared in administration propaganda. A December 19 fact sheet issued by the US State Department listed Iraq’s failure to declare “efforts to procure uranium from Niger” as one of the

omissions in Baghdad’s December 12 report to the UN on its compliance with UN resolutions. In a column published in the January 23 *New York Times* entitled “Why We Know Iraq is Lying,” Condoleezza Rice wrote: “[T]he [Iraqi] declaration fails to account for or explain Iraq’s efforts to get uranium from abroad....”

Neither these statements nor Bush’s citation in his State of the Union Address can credibly be attributed to mere accident or bureaucratic incompetence. That Bush’s use of the bogus claim was premeditated and calculated is underscored by the fact that he attributed it to “the British government”—a ploy intended to get around the fact that it had been discredited by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies.

Why was it so important for the Bush administration to revive this particular WMD lie, notwithstanding objections from the head of the CIA himself? The answer is to be found in the increasingly unfavorable political situation the war plotters faced at the end of 2002. By December, UN weapons inspectors had returned to Iraq and had found no evidence of chemical or biological weapons stockpiles or nuclear weapons programs. Anti-war demonstrations were gaining strength in Europe and elsewhere internationally, and ever-larger numbers were marching in the streets of American cities. Moreover, the US and Britain were confronting growing opposition from France, Russia, China and Germany in their efforts to ram a new resolution authorizing an attack on Iraq through the UN Security Council.

It therefore became all the more critical, from the standpoint of Bush and company, to play the nuclear card: that is, to insist on their previous warnings that Iraq was perhaps only a year away from building a nuclear bomb. The threat of terrorists launching attacks with nuclear weapons was the government’s most effective means of generating an atmosphere of fear and panic, and thereby facilitating its war plans. But even Bush, Cheney and the others had been obliged to acknowledge that the precondition for Iraq constructing a nuclear weapon was its ability to obtain fissile material. The Niger canard fit the bill, and so they used it.

One of the few reasonably frank statements to come from the US political establishment was this assessment given last July by Joseph Wilson IV to the *Washington Post*, after Wilson went public about his role in the Niger affair: “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?”

To be continued.



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