

Caught by 9/11 panel in lie over Iraq-Al Qaeda ties, White House responds with more lies

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The Bush administration has responded with a mix of rage and brazen lying to the staff report from the 9/11 commission dismissing its claims that Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda were close allies. The report, released last week, undermines the last remaining pretext for the US invasion of Iraq—Bush’s claim that the war in Iraq is an integral part of the global “war on terror.”

Vice President Dick Cheney supplied most of the rage, denouncing media coverage of the 9/11 commission report as “irresponsible,” “lazy,” and “malicious,” and declaring that the “evidence is overwhelming” of cooperation between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. He focused his venom on the *New York Times*, which published a lead article on the commission staff report with a four-column headline on the finding that there was no evidence of collaboration between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Bush, for his part, mustered the following unassailable argument: “The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and Al Qaeda: because there was a relationship between Iraq and Al Qaeda.” He added, “There’s numerous contacts between the two,” but gave only one example—a series of exchanges in 1994 when bin Laden sought the use of facilities in Iraq and Saddam Hussein rebuffed him.

The 9/11 commission’s staff report is a political blow to a government that has already seen the collapse of the other major lie used to justify the war—the claim that Iraq possessed huge and dangerous stockpiles of chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons. As one unidentified Bush adviser told the *New York Times*, the administration’s credibility was directly threatened: “If you discount the relationship between Iraq and Al Qaeda, then you discount the proposition that it’s part of the war on terror. If it’s not part of the war on terror, then what is it—some cockeyed adventure on the part of George W. Bush?”

The administration has sought to minimize the damage with a barrage of doubletalk that even the subservient American media has been unable to swallow. At various points White House spokesmen have sought to treat the staff report as though it bolstered their claims of Iraq-Al Qaeda ties. At others they have sought to discredit the report by suggesting it downplayed the actual extent of such connections. Finally, they have denied ever suggesting that Iraq had any connection to the 9/11 attacks.

White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said the commission’s finding of no “collaborative relationship” did not contradict past Bush statements. “If you go back and look at what the September 11th commission said, they talked about how there had been high-level contacts between the regime in Iraq and Al Qaeda,” he said. The Bush administration’s position “is perfectly consistent with what the September 11th commission talked about in their report yesterday,” he declared.

An email from the White House to the leaders of Jewish organizations, obtained by Reuters, carried the headline: “9/11 Commission Staff Report Confirms Administration’s Views of Al Qaeda/Iraq Ties.”

Meanwhile, nearly every American daily newspaper, and all of the television networks except Fox, carried lead stories saying the direct opposite.

As for the claims that no one in the Bush ever suggested that Iraq and Saddam Hussein were linked to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, these are belied not merely by the voluminous press coverage of statements by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and other administration spokesmen over the past two years, but by the actual text of the war resolution that was adopted by the US Congress in October 2002, and of the letter sent by Bush to Congress in March 2003 invoking the war powers authorized by that resolution.

The resolution’s conclusion reads:

“The President shall, prior to such exercise or as soon thereafter as may be feasible, but no later than 48 hours after exercising such authority, make available to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate his determination that—

“(1) reliance by the United States on further diplomatic or other peaceful means alone either (A) will not adequately protect the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq or (B) is not likely to lead to enforcement of all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq; and

“(2) acting pursuant to this joint resolution is consistent with the United States and other countries continuing to take the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.”

Bush copied the last section of the war powers resolution in his letter of March 18, 2003 giving official notice to Congress that he was about to use force against Iraq, thereby explicitly tying the attack on Iraq to the September 11 terrorist attacks. The letter concludes with the declaration that the use of force against Iraq “is consistent with the United States and other countries continuing to take the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.”

Having directly linked the war to September 11 in its formal notification of Congress, the White House now pretends that nothing of the sort was intended. This crude lying has only further undermined the administration’s credibility.

An editorial in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* was typical of much of the press response. The newspaper observed, “Shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, fewer than 5 percent of Americans believed Iraq was somehow involved. When the war in Iraq started, that had grown to 70 percent. How did that mistaken notion take hold? The Bush administration carefully cultivated it.”

The *New York Times* published an editorial June 19, headlined “Show Us the Proof,” which expressed surprise at “the depth and ferocity of the administration’s capacity for denial.” The editorial continued: “President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have not only brushed aside the panel’s findings and questioned its expertise, but they are also trying to rewrite history.”

After citing details of the analysis in the 9/11 commission staff report, the newspaper concluded, “Mr. Cheney’s ‘longstanding ties’ amount to one confirmed meeting, after which the Iraq government did not help Al Qaeda. By those standards, the United States has longstanding ties to North Korea.”

The *Times* denounced Cheney for claiming that there was further evidence of an Iraqi connection to the September 11 hijackers, which could not be made public. “The message, if we hear it properly, is that when it comes to this critical issue, the vice president is not prepared to offer any evidence beyond the flimsy-to-nonexistent arguments he has used in the past, but he wants us to trust him when he says there’s more behind the screen. So far, when it comes to Iraq, blind faith in this administration has been a losing strategy.”

The *Times*, it must be noted, offered no explanation to its readers as to why it followed precisely the “losing strategy” of retailing for months on end, both before and after the US invasion, the administration’s claims, and never made any serious independent investigation or critical evaluation of lurid allegations of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda ties that were never substantiated by government spokesmen.

The *Cincinnati Post* noted the inherent duplicity in the administration’s approach to the 9/11 commission: “In recent days Vice President Dick Cheney has told reporters there were probably things about Iraq’s connection to Al Qaeda that commission members did not know. This took a fair amount of cheek, considering how hard the White House has resisted the commission’s requests for information.” The editorial concluded that the White House should present this alleged new evidence or stop talking about it. “Put up or shut up,” was its blunt injunction.

Even the conservative *Salt Lake City Tribune* criticized the White House response, writing, “No matter what the Bush administration did or did not say about it, it is now clear that Saddam Hussein was not involved in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and that any support for the Iraqi war based on the assumption that he was involved was misplaced. Misplaced, widely held and, most disturbingly, still given life by the president himself.”

The reaction of the leaders of the 9/11 commission has been to conciliate with the White House. Commission Chairman Thomas Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey, and Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman, appeared on television interview programs Sunday to minimize the differences between the staff report and the Bush administration.

Hamilton actually back-pedaled from the clear language of the staff report, saying that it had only dismissed any suggestion of Iraq-Al Qaeda collaboration in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Other instances of collaboration remained an open question, he claimed.

But other commission officials revealed that the White House had sent a letter on the eve of last week’s hearings demanding changes in the three staff reports that were to be released. None of the changes involved the section of the report that declares that there is no evidence of a “collaborative relationship” between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Kean and Hamilton both responded to Cheney’s response when the vice president was asked whether he knew things about Iraq’s links to terrorists that the commission did not know. “Probably,” Cheney said. Politely calling Cheney’s bluff, Hamilton told the press, “It sounds like the White House has evidence that we didn’t have. I would like to see the evidence that Mr. Cheney is talking about.”

At one point in his interview on the ABC *News* program Kean sought to dismiss the conflict with the White House as a verbal quibble. “All of us understand that when you begin to use words like ‘relationship’ and ‘ties’ and ‘connections’ and ‘contacts,’ everybody has a little different definition with regard to those statements,” he said.

If, however, one determines terrorist complicity on the basis of contacts with Al Qaeda, as the White House proposes, then the primary accomplices include, not Iraq, but rather two key US allies with whom Osama bin Laden had the closest relationships—Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both of which aided the Taliban regime and held repeated talks with bin Laden and his aides.

According to portions of the 9/11 staff reports released last week, Saudi Arabia held talks with bin Laden shortly after his arrival in Afghanistan in May 1996, seeking to deflect him from further attacks on Saudi soil following the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran in which 19 US soldiers were killed. An official Saudi delegation met with top Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, and delivered a message for “their guest”—i.e., bin Laden. Further discussions followed in 1998.

Pakistan’s military and intelligence service were the principal backers of the Taliban in the internecine fighting in Afghanistan that followed the ouster of the Soviet-backed regime of Najibullah. Pakistan repeatedly opened its airspace to bin Laden and other Al Qaeda operatives and its intelligence service, ISI, provided funding for both the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

There is one other country that had an even longer and more intimate relationship with Osama bin Laden—far more extensive than the episodic and fruitless contacts between bin Laden and Iraq. That country is the United States of America. It was the American CIA that recruited and financed the Islamic fundamentalist mujaheddin who traveled from throughout the Muslim world to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation.

Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists received their first lessons in bomb-making and guerrilla warfare from CIA instructors at camps which the former Saudi construction contractor helped build in the mountains on the Afghan-Pakistani border—the same region where US troops sought unsuccessfully to capture him in the winter of 2001-2002.

Bin Laden remained a US ally until at least 1989, and did not come out openly against Washington until 1993-1994, after the US reneged on promises to withdraw all its troops from Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of Washington’s first war against Iraq. Even after bin Laden issued his bloodcurdling threats in 1996, declaring it the duty of Muslims to murder American citizens anywhere in the world, there are unexplained and unaccounted-for reports of ongoing US contact and even collaboration with Al Qaeda in such regions as Bosnia and Chechnya, where Washington found the Islamic fundamentalists a useful tool to pressure the Serb nationalist regime of Milosevic as well as its nominal ally, Russia.

As recently as July 2001, according to a report in the conservative French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, CIA agents met with bin Laden at the American Hospital in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, where he was receiving treatment for a kidney disorder.

Such reports underscore a central fact of the September 11 tragedy: It is not the relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq, but the relationship between Al Qaeda and the American intelligence services, which is most in need of investigation.

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