

Behind the resignation of CIA Director George Tenet: The Bush administration begins to break up

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The sudden but by no means surprising resignation of CIA Director George Tenet is an unmistakable sign of the intensifying crisis of the Bush administration, which is beginning to shed the leading personnel responsible for the US debacle in Iraq. The resignation of Tenet was followed within hours by the CIA's public acknowledgement that Director of Operations James Pavitt, who has headed the section of the agency responsible for covert action, was retiring. Tenet named Pavitt's deputy, Stephen Kappes, to succeed him.

Tenet's own departure was hastily announced by President Bush only minutes before he began a trip to Europe for a long-scheduled series of public events around the 60th anniversary of the Allied landings in Normandy. The resignation takes effect July 11.

There was little disguising the fact that the parting between Tenet and Bush was acrimonious. The CIA director turned in his resignation Wednesday night, June 2, by some accounts after a stormy session with Bush. The president did not inform his own staff until the next morning, then made the resignation public that afternoon.

Bush issued a perfunctory four-paragraph statement noting that the deputy director of the CIA, John McLaughlin, would serve as acting director until the Senate confirms a successor to Tenet. Vice President Richard Cheney, who has long been in conflict with Tenet, issued a statement only three sentences long, saying that the CIA director had done "a superb job."

Congressional insiders, both Republican and Democrat, agreed that Tenet had been forced out. Republican Senator Richard Shelby, a frequent critic of Tenet, said of the White House, "I don't think there are any tears over there. I suspect there was some push out of the office." Democratic Senator Robert Graham, former chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Bush had removed Tenet to secure his own political position, "under circumstances where he is at the crime scene as short as possible."

Whatever the immediate circumstances of Tenet's dismissal, however, there is no question that the administration has suffered a blow. As the *Boston Globe* commented: "Now, with five months until the presidential election, President Bush must confront looming challenges in Iraq and homeland security with a temporary CIA director, a defense secretary fending off calls for his own departure, a secretary of state who has distanced himself from key administration policies, and several departments riled up over ongoing criminal investigations."

Tenet cited his desire to spend more time with his teen-age son, although the boy is a high school senior and will soon go away to college. Such an explanation is an insult to the intelligence, and only Bush's most slavish ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has embraced it. In an interview with the BBC, Blair declared, "I would just say that the head of the CIA left for personal reasons. He said that very, very clearly. As far as I understand it, the decision of the CIA director has got absolutely nothing to do with Iraq, 9/11 or anything else."

Suppose for the moment, however farfetched, that this is true: it makes

nonsense of the Bush administration's claims that the United States is engaged in a global "war on terror," on which the fate of the world supposedly depends. This war is the equivalent, according to Bush's most recent speeches, of the US mobilization in World War II. Can one imagine Eisenhower, on the eve of D-Day, stepping down from his responsible position to "spend more time with his family"?

Tenet resigned only a few days after Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller held a nationally televised press conference to issue a sensationalized warning that devastating new terrorist attacks on the United States by al Qaeda were expected. His announcement came barely three weeks before the formal transfer of authority in Baghdad to a US-appointed "sovereign" Iraqi government, which will leave American military, diplomatic and intelligence officials still holding the real power in the occupied country.

Under such circumstances, Tenet's quitting could easily have been depicted as a desertion under fire. Yet, there were no such comments in the US media. The *Globe & Mail* in Canada, however, quoted Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat on the intelligence committee, pointing to the obvious: "We're within a few months of a presidential election. We're in the middle of a major alert with respect to the anticipation that there might be another attack on our own country. And to have the head of the intelligence community resign at this particular point in time is very unusual."

There is another incongruity in the official cover story. Tenet cited family considerations as his reason for leaving his post. Only two days earlier, the Pentagon issued a stop-loss order affecting soldiers either in Iraq and Afghanistan or bound for service in those war zones. This order cites military necessity as the reason for forbidding tens of thousands of soldiers to leave the Army on their scheduled exit dates, extending their service for up to 18 months. Rank-and-file soldiers must put their lives on hold. They will have to postpone weddings, miss the birth of children, abandon plans to go back to college, and forego taking civilian jobs. No such penalties will apply to Tenet, one of the principal architects of the US war drive in which the lower-level soldiers are involuntary participants. In every sphere of life, the Bush administration offers the same double standard: one rule for the masses, quite another for those at the top.

Tenet's departure comes after a series of political, military and intelligence fiascos for the Bush administration. The CIA sat on information about members of al Qaeda entering the United States, including two of those who participated in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington. Tenet himself had been informed of the arrest in August 2001 of Zacarias Moussaoui, an al Qaeda supporter seeking flight training on a Boeing 747 jet, but failed to raise it at a White House counterterrorism discussion.

CIA agents on the ground played a key role in the rapid conquest of Afghanistan, bribing tribal warlords and collaborating tactically with the US military to direct air strikes on key targets. Tenet's stock rose

accordingly within the administration. But the agency proved unable to find, capture or kill either Osama bin Laden or Taliban leader Mullah Omar, both of whom remain at large nearly three years later.

The CIA's National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, issued in October 2002, was a transparently political document. It downplayed the concerns of analysts who felt that there was little evidence of current Iraqi possession of chemical and biological weapons, or progress in developing nuclear weapons, in order to satisfy demands from the Bush White House for "evidence" to back its war drive. Dissatisfied with CIA reports that he felt were too equivocal, Vice President Dick Cheney visited CIA headquarters to demand a more satisfactory case for a preemptive strike against Iraq.

Tenet had warned Bush's speechwriters not to include a questionable reference to Iraq's search for nuclear material in Africa, in a speech Bush gave that month in Cincinnati urging passage of a congressional resolution authorizing war. But the same claim was resurrected in Bush's State of the Union speech three months later.

It was during this same period that, according to the recent book by Bob Woodward, Tenet told Bush and other White House officials, following a CIA presentation on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction stockpiles, that the case for Iraq's possession of banned weapons was "a slam dunk."

In February 2003, Tenet was seated immediately behind Secretary of State Colin Powell when he made his notorious presentation to the UN Security Council summing up what he called the strongest case that could be made against Iraq. Tenet's presence was intended as a signal that the US intelligence apparatus had irrefutable and convincing evidence that Iraq possessed WMD, had ties to terrorism, and was a threat to US national security.

The rapid US military conquest of Iraq marks, in retrospect, the beginning of the end for Tenet. US investigators, despite having unrestricted access to the entire land surface of the country, have not been able to find a single chemical or biological weapon, or any evidence of an active chemical, biological or nuclear program. Iraqi scientists have been detained by the score, but all have denied the existence of such programs.

Likewise, there has been no evidence of any connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. On the contrary, the destruction of the Baathist regime made it possible for al Qaeda to mount operations within Iraq on a large scale, for the first time.

The most serious blunder, however, from the standpoint of American imperialism, was the CIA's complete misjudgment of the political situation in Iraq. Far from welcoming the American invaders as liberators, as the Bush administration had predicted, the Iraq people responded with indifference, hostility and, ultimately, armed resistance. Few Iraqis were willing to fight to defend Hussein's dictatorship. But many have rallied to the struggle against the American occupation.

In June 2003, Bush's State of the Union claim about Iraq's search for uranium in Africa was exposed as false, based on fabricated documents peddled to a European government. Former ambassador Joseph Wilson, who had visited Niger as an unofficial envoy for the CIA to investigate the uranium allegations, declared that the claim was known to be false when it was included in the State of the Union speech. This led to the first public clash between Tenet and the White House, as the CIA director confirmed that the uranium story was bogus and that he had warned Bush aides against using it.

Together with the deteriorating security conditions in Iraq, the Bush administration has faced an unwelcome examination of its record before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks, most recently by the national commission whose appointment Bush initially opposed. Tenet and other top national security officials have been harshly criticized during televised commission hearings.

The 9/11 commission's final report, due July 26, will cover up the

deeper connections between the US government and the terrorists—al Qaeda is itself an offshoot of the US-backed guerrilla forces that fought the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s—but it is certain to include a scathing assessment of the CIA's failures in the period immediately before September 11.

The last straw for Tenet, according to some press reports, may have been the arrival at his office in Langley, Virginia, of the draft of a report by the Senate Intelligence Committee on US intelligence collection and analysis in prewar Iraq. This report is expected to charge that the CIA distorted evidence on Iraqi WMD in order to tell the White House what it wanted to hear and help make the case for war.

Richard J. Kerr, the former deputy director of central intelligence who has headed the CIA's internal review of its prewar performance, said that he believed the Senate report had been a factor in pushing Tenet to step down. Tenet had been scheduled to appear before the Senate panel in closed session Thursday in his final opportunity to rebut the report, which is to be made public June 17, but he canceled that appearance before his resignation was announced.

Tenet, who is 51, has an extremely unusual background for a CIA director. He is not an intelligence agent, having spent most of his career not in the CIA or the military, but as a congressional staffer. Nor is he the offspring of the New England aristocracy like so many of his predecessors—Dulles, Helms, the senior Bush—but rather the son of an immigrant Greek restaurant owner from Queens, New York.

In the mid-1980s, he went to work as an aide to the late Republican senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania, then for the Senate Intelligence Committee under Democrat Patrick Leahy of Vermont. In 1987, he was named staff director for the committee by its then-chairman, conservative Oklahoma Democrat David Boren, who became his main Senate sponsor. He played a key role in winning bipartisan support in 1991 for the nomination of Robert Gates as director of the CIA—a nomination submitted by President George H.W. Bush, the current president's father.

The incoming Clinton administration in 1993 elevated Tenet to a position on the National Security Council, where he was responsible for monitoring intelligence operations and drafted PDD-35, the document that formed the basis for counterterrorism policy throughout the 1990s. Early in 1995, he was named to the position of deputy director of the CIA, entering the agency for the first time, in the number-two slot, under Director John Deutch.

With ties to both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate, newly under Republican control, Tenet was easily confirmed despite his lack of experience in either covert operations or intelligence analysis. This meteoric rise has no parallel in the history of the US intelligence apparatus. It raises many unanswered questions about whom he knows, or what he knows, that has made such a development possible.

Tenet entered an agency that was focused on efforts to engineer an anti-Saddam coup in Iraq, and had employed a series of Iraqi exiles as its front men. The first was Ahmed Chalabi, the son of a wealthy aristocrat in monarchist Iraq, before the Baath Party seized control, later convicted of bank swindling in Jordan. Chalabi founded the Iraqi National Congress (INC) with US backing, but subsequently came into conflict with the Clinton administration, which refused to back his plans for a military coup in March 1995.

The CIA abruptly dumped Chalabi, shifting its support to Iyad Allawi, a former member of the Baath Party who subsequently fled Iraq and broke with Saddam Hussein, while maintaining contact with a circle of military officers. The CIA positioned Allawi to lead a military coup, but in 1996 the conspiracy was uncovered by the Baath regime's secret police, and its Baghdad participants were rounded up and shot. Chalabi publicized the failed coup in order to discredit his rival Allawi—and his erstwhile CIA backers.

In January 1997, Deutch stepped down, in part because of the series of

debacles in Iraq. Tenet became acting director, while the Clinton White House nominated outgoing National Security Advisor Anthony Lake as CIA chief. When Republican opposition in the Senate stalled Lake's nomination for months—in part because of his role in vetoing the Chalabi-led coup in 1995—the administration backed down. Lake withdrew his name, and Tenet was hastily selected as a replacement who could win approval quickly. He took office on July 11, 1997.

Under Clinton, Tenet was associated with two particular crimes. In August 1998, the CIA targeted a factory in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, claiming it was a chemical weapons plant owned by Osama bin Laden. Clinton ordered it destroyed in a US cruise missile strike after the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The factory turned out to be Sudan's largest pharmaceutical plant and had nothing to do with terrorism or chemical weapons.

Nine months later, the CIA supplied the coordinates for a US bombing raid during the air war against Yugoslavia, and the resulting strike destroyed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The CIA claimed the attack on the embassy—the only target selected by the CIA during the entire war—was a “mistake.” Postwar reports suggest that the Chinese embassy was deliberately struck as a warning to Beijing, which had been supplying tactical military information to the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

In 1999, Tenet dedicated the new CIA headquarters building in Langley as the George H.W. Bush Building, with the former president in attendance. This piece of flattery proved prescient—when George W. Bush became president, Tenet was the only holdover from the Clinton cabinet, an appointment reportedly backed by the senior Bush.

The growing insurgency in Iraq and the collapse of all the pretexts used to justify the war have sparked a series of vicious conflicts within the US national security apparatus. Tenet found himself under attack by Secretary of State Colin Powell for supplying false information in prewar intelligence estimates; at odds with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld over responsibility for the torture at Abu Ghraib, where CIA and military interrogators abused prisoners; and in conflict with Vice President Cheney and an array of Pentagon civilian officials over the murky affair of Ahmed Chalabi.

Three weeks ago, Iraqi police, led by US security consultants from DynCorp and escorted by heavily armed US soldiers, carried out a raid against Chalabi's home and office, allegedly searching for information linking some INC members to theft, embezzlement, kidnapping and murder. At the same time, intelligence officials in Washington revealed that Chalabi was under investigation for apparently revealing top-secret information to the fundamentalist regime in Iran, with which he has long had friendly relations.

Last week, the charges became more specific—and the atmosphere in Washington even more poisonous—as CIA officials detailed their allegations against Chalabi. The Iraqi leader had told the Iranians that the US government had broken the code for secret transmissions from Iranian agents in Baghdad to Tehran, they said. Moreover, the source of this leak was believed to be the Pentagon, and FBI counterespionage agents were interviewing the small number of Pentagon officials who had access to this highly compartmentalized information.

Chalabi and his defenders, such as Richard Perle, former chairman of the Pentagon's advisory board and a leading neoconservative, charged that the CIA was seeking to destroy Chalabi because of the conflicts dating back to the mid-1990s. Now, in the Baghdad of 2004, old scores are being settled. Allawi, the CIA's favorite, has just been named the prime minister of the new Iraqi government to which the US occupation authority will supposedly hand over sovereignty on June 30. Chalabi has been sent packing, as the Iraqi Governing Council, where he was installed by the US, has been dissolved, and he was given no post in the new regime.

If the nomination of Allawi and the disgrace of Chalabi were a victory

for the CIA, Tenet's departure shortly afterward suggests that the victory may have been pyrrhic—or that even more complex intrigues are underway in a Washington that more resembles the court of the Borgias or the Romanovs than the capital of a democratic republic.



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