

Bush-appointed intelligence commission whitewashes war based on lies

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The report released Thursday by the White House-appointed Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction was entirely predictable. It follows the same pattern as the whitewashes performed last year for the Bush administration by the 9/11 Commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Like those earlier investigations, the WMD panel's document serves up recommendations promoting an intensification of militarism abroad and police-state measures at home.

This so-called "independent" commission was handpicked by Bush and directed to concern itself solely with "intelligence failures" concerning the war in Iraq. It was constituted a little over a year ago for the political purpose of countering incontrovertible evidence that the Bush administration went to war against Iraq on the basis of lies.

Presenting the report at a White House press conference Thursday, Bush read out a prepared statement praising the very intelligence community that, according to the document, had been "dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction." After completing his statement, Bush turned on his heels and walked through a door that shut behind him.

The gesture was unmistakable: as far as the administration was concerned, the controversy over non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was now closed.

Bush concluded his remarks by declaring, "...in an age in which we are at war, the consequences of underestimating a threat could be tens of thousands of innocent lives." He continued: "And my administration will continue to make intelligence reforms that will allow us to identify threats before they fully emerge so we can take effective action to protect the American people."

Yet, if one were to take the report at face value, the lesson would be that the consequences of *overestimating* a threat have already included the destruction of the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqis and over 1,700 US, British and other foreign troops. For both the Iraqi and American people, moreover, the result of acting on unfounded threats "before they fully emerged"—the policy of preventive war—has proven an unmitigated disaster.

The issue in the Iraq war, however, was not one of false estimations in either direction, but rather the deliberate deception of the American people on a massive scale for the purpose of executing plans for conquering Iraq that had been drawn up well before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and even before the Bush administration took office.

"Scathing" is the adjective that the media has invariably used in describing the assessment in the 618-page public version of the report of the performance of the Central Intelligence Agency and other US intelligence organizations in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. What has drawn less attention is how the panel's slavish defense of the Bush administration has left the US president and all of his senior advisors unscathed.

Over a dozen times in the document, the commission dismisses charges that the false intelligence used to justify the war on Iraq was the product of political pressure or outright fabrication on the part of the White House and the Pentagon's civilian leadership. Yet the charges themselves are referred to only in a footnote that lists a series of news stories detailing instances in which such pressure was more than evident.

These includes the attempts by Vice President Dick Cheney to extort damning evidence against Iraq by browbeating CIA analysts, and the retaliation against Joseph Wilson—who blew the whistle on the phony intelligence concerning alleged Iraqi uranium purchases in Niger—by exposing his wife as a covert CIA agent. Also listed are articles that quoted CIA and State Department officials saying that they were coerced into producing intelligence that indicted Iraq on weapons violations.

Dismissing all of the evidence, the report states baldly: "The Commission found no evidence of political pressure to influence the Intelligence Community's pre-war assessments of Iraq's weapons programs...We conclude that it was the paucity of intelligence and poor analytical tradecraft, rather than political pressure, that produced the inaccurate pre-war intelligence assessments."

Cheney, who by all accounts led the administration's drive to fabricate and disseminate such information, is mentioned precisely two times in the report, one of them in a footnote. In presenting the document, the panel's co-chairs Laurence Silberman and Charles Robb acknowledged that they had spoken to him only twice—together with President Bush.

Silberman stressed that the panel "had discussions with the president," and then added, "We didn't interview the president, nor did we interview the vice president."

In other words, they only discussed the commission's goals. Neither Bush nor Cheney were questioned about their responsibility for generating the phony intelligence that was used as the pretext for an unprovoked and illegal war.

None of this can come as a surprise given the commission's makeup. It was constituted in February 2004, shortly after David Kay, who for the previous eight months had headed the US search in Iraq for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, resigned as head of the Iraq Survey Group. He admitted that no WMD had been found and that, in his opinion, there had been none in Iraq when the US invaded.

The alleged existence of such weapons, and the supposed threat that they would be handed off to terrorists and used against the US, constituted the principal rationale advanced by the Bush administration for launching the war.

Heading the commission was Silberman, a senior US Appeals Court Judge and a veteran of dirty jobs on behalf of the Republican right going back to the Nixon administration. In 1980, he was one of the Republican political operatives who participated in talks with representatives of the Iranian government, which was then holding 55 American hostages. It has been widely charged that the aim of these talks was to preclude the release of the hostages until after that year's presidential election—a political dirty

trick aimed at undermining the reelection campaign of the incumbent president, Democrat Jimmy Carter, and ensuring the victory of his opponent, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan rewarded Silberman with an appointment to the US Appeals Court, where he acted to overturn the convictions of Lt. Col. Oliver North and Adm. John Pointdexter for their criminal roles in the Iran-Contra conspiracy. He also intervened from the bench to squelch the investigation into Iran-Contra.

According to David Brock, former right-wing publicist and author of the political exposé *Blinded by the Right*, during the drive to impeach President Bill Clinton, Silberman was working behind the scenes to encourage attacks on the president, while ruling against him from the bench.

When Silberman was tapped to head Bush's WMD panel, author and former Nixon staff member Kevin Phillips commented, "In the past, Silberman has been more involved with cover-ups in the Middle East than with any attempts to unravel them."

Co-chair Charles Robb, a prominent member of the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, was an early advocate of "regime change" in Iraq and a supporter of the war launched by the Bush administration.

Serving as executive director of the panel was retired vice admiral John Redd, who took up his post after returning from Baghdad, where he had worked as a senior deputy to L. Paul Bremer, the head of the US occupation authority in Iraq.

The commission's 14-month investigation, carried out entirely in secret, has revealed nothing new, at least in the unclassified version of the report. In some instances where it delves in detail into the so-called intelligence failures, the level of argumentation approaches the ludicrous. Such is the case in its treatment of "Curveball," the code name given to an Iraqi defector who fabricated a story that was the source, the report says, "of virtually all of the Intelligence Community's information about Iraq's alleged mobile biological weapons facilities."

The inventions of "Curveball" featured prominently in the speech delivered by then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003, on the eve of the Iraq invasion.

The report states: "It is at bottom a story of how Defense Department collectors abdicated their responsibility to vet a critical source; of Central Intelligence Agency analysts who placed undue emphasis on the source's reporting because the tales he told were consistent with what they already believed; and, ultimately, of Intelligence Community leaders who failed to tell policymakers about Curveball's flaws in the weeks before the war."

This account's distortions and omissions make it every bit as lying as Curveball's tale about mobile weapons labs. The Pentagon "collectors" did not "abdicate their responsibility." They were directed to produce just such material to make the case for war.

Nowhere does the panel's report refer to the creation of the Office of Special Plans by the war's architects in the Defense Department's civilian leadership. This office was a separate in-house intelligence agency tasked with spreading the most lurid possible accounts of Iraqi weapons and supposed terrorist ties. The purpose of the unit was precisely to circumvent the vetting carried out at the CIA.

According to multiple accounts, those in the CIA who objected to such "intelligence" were subjected to immense pressure by the administration.

As for Curveball's own motives, the panel merely brands him a "fabricator." That he was also the brother of a senior aide to Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the exile Iraqi National Congress (INC), goes unmentioned. The report does acknowledge that the sole corroboration of his claims came from another source within the INC. But it then states, incredibly, that not only was "Curveball's reporting not influenced by, controlled by, or connected to the INC," but that "INC sources had a

minimal impact on pre-war assessments."

The real relationship was that the INC functioned as a paid agent of the US government, providing the false intelligence that the administration wanted to justify the war. The Pentagon's Office of Special Plans served as a conduit for this material, funneling it to the administration and the media in the period leading up to the war.

To the extent that the report issues recommendations, none are aimed at holding anyone accountable for the so-called "intelligence failure." Rather, they are designed to further centralize the vast US intelligence apparatus, creating a more ominous instrument for militarism and repression.

The report calls for granting greater powers to Bush's nominee for director of national intelligence, John Negroponte, one of the former organizers of the illegal CIA war against Nicaragua. It further advocates the formation of a National Security Service within the Federal Bureau of Investigation, merging the FBI's counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence and intelligence arms, and placing the new unit under the direction of the director of national intelligence. It also proposes the consolidation of the agency's Office of Intelligence Policy Review with its counterterrorism and counterespionage sections, under the direction of a new assistant attorney general for national security.

Like the 9/11 commission, the panel calls for closer coordination between the FBI and the CIA.

Together, these proposals amount to the framework for an American secret police, overturning restraints and protections against domestic spying and state provocation that were instituted after revelations of FBI and CIA abuses in the 1960s and 1970s.

Several sections of the report submitted to the Bush administration were censored from the declassified version. These include assessments of US intelligence capabilities in relation to the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran. Even the most general conclusions in this area were classified.

Finally, the report includes a single paragraph printed in a shaded blue box on the subject of "covert action." It notes that "when the threats of proliferation and terrorism loom large, covert action may play an increasingly important role."

It continues: "The Commission conducted a careful study of US covert action capabilities, with attention to the changing security landscape and the special category of missions that involve both CIA and Special Operations Forces. Because even the most general statements about the Intelligence Communities' capabilities in this area are classified, the Commission's assessments and four specific findings cannot be discussed in this report."

The classification of these sections of the report serves as a warning of new acts of military aggression that are already in an advanced state of preparation. "The changing security landscape and special category of missions" conducted by the CIA and Special Forces have already been exposed before the world in the form of assassinations, kidnappings and "rendition" of detainees to regimes that practice torture.

That the administration was able to issue a report so packed with crude falsifications and howling contradictions testifies to the lack of any serious opposition to its policies in general, and the war in Iraq in particular, on the part of the Democratic Party. The positions of Robb, the panel's co-chair, predominate within the Democratic Party leadership. They, like Bush, are prepared to close the door on the WMD question and on any attempt to hold accountable those who, in planning and launching an unprovoked war based on lies, committed war crimes.



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