No let-up in Iraq lies

Bush, Cheney ignore Senate report debunking Iraq-Al Qaeda ties

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The Senate Intelligence Committee issued a new report last week that further refutes one of the central lies used by the Bush administration to justify the war in Iraq: the claim that Iraq had ties to Al Qaeda.

The report concludes, “Saddam Hussien was distrustful of al-Qa’ida and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime, refusing all requests from al-Qa’ida to provide material or operational support.”

The report is part of the second phase of the committee’s investigation into the justifications given for the invasion of Iraq. In the first phase, the committee examined pre-war claims made by US intelligence agencies regarding Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction programs. This report was completed in 2004 and concluded that the claims made of Iraqi nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs were false.

Throughout its work, the committee has been walking a tightrope. There has been pressure from within the political establishment to make some acknowledgment of the fact that the reasons given for invading Iraq were not valid. At the same time, the committee, and particularly its chairman, Republican Senator Pat Roberts, have sought assiduously to avoid dealing with the main question: Did the Bush administration knowingly lie and manipulate intelligence about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda?

The second phase of the committee’s investigation is supposed to include a section dealing with this question. However, it has been put off for years. It was first delayed until after the 2004 elections, and the committee has since engaged in further stalling tactics. In November 2005, the Democratic Party leadership staged a maneuver to force the Senate into closed session to discuss the stalled investigation. Now, however, this section of the report has again been put off until after the 2006 mid-term elections.

The report issued last week, therefore, does not examine directly the question of intelligence manipulation and lies. Nevertheless, it exposes all of the administration’s claims as falsehoods. The evidence against these claims is so overwhelming that even the panel’s Republican majority voted overwhelmingly in favor of the conclusions, with only one Republican, Senator Trent Lott, dissenting.

This has not prevented Bush and other leading administration spokesmen from continuing to peddle some of their lies in their attempt to justify a continuation of the war in Iraq. Sections of the report directly contradict statements made by administration officials since its release.

On September 10, two days after the report was released, Vice President Dick Cheney stated in an interview on NBC’s “Meet the Press” program that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was “running a terrorist camp in Afghanistan prior to 9/11” and “then fled and went to Baghdad and set up operations in Baghdad,” suggesting that he was there with the approval of the Iraqi regime.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in an interview on Fox News on Monday, “There were ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda. We know that Zarqawi was running a poison network in Iraq.” President Bush declared on August 21 that Saddam Hussein “had relations with Zarqawi.”

Yet the Senate report concluded, “Postwar information indicates that Saddam Hussein attempted, unsuccessfully, to locate and capture al-Zarqawi and that the regime did not have a relationship with, harbor, or turn a blind eye toward Zarqawi... Postwar information from an al-Qa’ida detainee indicated that Saddam’s regime ‘considered al-Zarqawi an outlaw’ and blamed his network, operating in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, for two bombings in Baghdad.” This conclusion is based on a CIA analysis from October 2005.

Cheney further declared, “You had the facility up at Kermal, poisons facility, ran by Ansar Islam, an affiliate of Al Qaeda.” Yet the committee concluded, “Baghdad viewed Ansar al-Islam as a threat to the regime and the [Iraqi Intelligence Service] attempted to collect intelligence on the

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group." The Kurdish areas of the north were entirely outside the control of Baghdad at the time, since they were part of a US-imposed "no fly zone."

The information provided in the Senate report also debunks other claims that were made both before and after the invasion of Iraq. In late 2001, Cheney declared that it was "pretty well confirmed" that Mohamed Atta, who is believed to be one of the September 11 hijackers, met with Iraqi intelligence officials. The Senate report reaffirmed what had been documented before—that the reports of such meetings were unfounded.

In 2003, Bush declared that Hussein was "an ally of Al Qaeda." However, the report notes that Iraq viewed Al Qaeda with extreme suspicion and cites a 2002 Defense Intelligence Agency report that found, "Saddam's regime is intensely secular and is wary of Islamic revolutionary movements."

In February 2003, Bush declared, "Iraq has... provided Al Qaeda with chemical and biological weapons programs training," a claim that has been repeated by the Bush administration many times since. However, the Senate committee rejected this claim.

The Senate report provides some sense of the methods used to create "evidence" of ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda. It recounts the "debriefing" of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, an Al Qaeda member who was captured in early 2002. Al-Libi was the main source for claims that Iraq provided chemical weapons training to Al Qaeda members. He later recanted these statements, saying they were made under the threat of torture and rendition.

After first being questioned by the US, al-Libi was transferred to a foreign government, the identity of which is redacted from the report. There his interrogators demanded that he furnish details of Al Qaeda's ties with Iraq.

The report states, "After his transfer to a foreign government, [redacted], al-Libi claimed that during his initial debriefings 'he lied to the [foreign government service] [redacted] about future operations to avoid torture.' Al-Libi told the CIA that the foreign government service [redacted] explained to him that a 'long list of methods could be used against him which were extreme' and that 'he would confess because three thousand individuals had been in the chair before him and that each had confessed.'"

Though the section of the investigation released so far specifically avoids the question of pressure from the administration to "uncover" ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda, it does give one hint of this pressure. It notes that a June 2002 CIA report, "Iraq and al-Qa'ida: Interpreting a Murky Relationship," was drawn up under a charge from the CIA deputy director of intelligence that analysts "lean far forward and do a speculative piece... If you were going to stretch to the maximum the evidence you had, what could you come up with?"

In addition to surveying the evidence of ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the Senate report reviews the postwar evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs. The committee reiterates that claims of Iraqi chemical, nuclear and biological weapons programs were uniformly false. Most of this material is based on previously released information—particularly the conclusions of the Iraq Survey Group, which published a report in October 2004. (See "Iraq WMD report proves Bush, Democrats lied to justify Iraq war")

A second report also released last week by the Senate Intelligence Committee criticized the administration's reliance on the Iraqi National Congress (INC), headed by Ahmad Chalabi. The INC, then a US-financed exile group, was a principal conduit for feeding false reports of Iraqi weapons programs and helping the administration manufacture justifications for the invasion.

The Senate report provides, once again, prima facie evidence of a systematic campaign of lies told to the American people, with the help of the mass media, to sell a war launched for entirely different reasons. These lies were necessary, and continue to be necessary, because they allow the government to claim that the occupation of Iraq is part of a "war on terror."

Yet what is most remarkable is the minimal media coverage given the report and its negligible impact—and, more generally, the massive evidence of government lying—within the political establishment. The Democratic Party—which supports the occupation of Iraq and, as part of its 2006 election campaign, is attempting to criticize the administration from the right for not waging the "war on terror" successfully—has no interest in raising the fraudulent character of the whole enterprise.

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