

Ex-CIA director Tenet admits lies told on war

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With the publication of his new memoir, *At the Center of the Storm*, released Monday, and in an appearance on the CBS television new program “60 Minutes” the night before, former CIA director George Tenet has become the latest former official to admit publicly that the Bush administration launched its war against Iraq based upon false pretenses and manipulated intelligence.

Tenet’s CBS interview was a display of moral cowardice and self-righteousness. The former CIA director hailed the day-to-day work of the organization of spies, torturers and assassins that he headed for seven years, passed over the horrific death toll in the Iraq war with mild tut-tutting, and reserved his real passion for complaints about backstabbing against himself by former partners in crime like Vice President Cheney and Condoleezza Rice.

It made for a degrading spectacle, with Tenet sounding like nothing so much as third-rate Mafia hitman whining about how the big shots had sold him out after all his loyal service. Nonetheless, the former CIA director’s comments have an objective significance. One of the inner circle of war conspirators has now testified publicly that the Bush administration had decided on war with Iraq from its inception, and seized on the 9/11 attacks as a pretext for the action.

“There was never a serious debate that I know of within the administration about the imminence of the Iraqi threat,” Tenet writes in his memoir, according to advance press reports.

Rather than discussing whether or not to invade Iraq, Tenet says, the highest circles in the Bush administration were preoccupied with how to sell the war to the American public, using the deaths of 3,000 people at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to justify killing tens and hundreds of thousands more people in Iraq who had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

The marketing strategy adopted by the administration had two components: claiming that Saddam Hussein had vast stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, and claiming that Hussein had active, ongoing ties to Al Qaeda, to make its convoluted and preposterous argument that there was a real danger that the Iraqi leader would supply WMD for a terrorist attack on the United States.

Both legs of this construct were false, as Tenet now admits, although he claimed that only the second, the Iraq-Al Qaeda “connection” was deliberately fabricated. He writes in the memoir, “Let me say it again. CIA found absolutely no linkage between Saddam and 9/11.”

As for the Saddam WMD claim, Tenet clings to the “we were all mistaken” mantra that the Bush administration has employed ever since its failure to find any shred of such weapons in post-invasion

Iraq. But he confirms the role of Cheney and other officials in deliberately exaggerating the WMD issue and seizing on it as a pretext for war.

Tenet’s main complaint in his “60 Minutes” interview, as well as in the book, was over the supposed distortion of his use of the words “slam dunk” in relation to evidence of the existence of Iraqi WMD. The ex-CIA director admits that he used the basketball metaphor, but claims it was not an affirmation that Iraq actually had such weapons, but rather expressed his certainty that the administration could use WMD as an effective argument to stampede the American people into war.

“We can put a better case together for a public case. That’s what I meant,” Tenet told “60 Minutes.” Afterwards, the ex-CIA director complained, administration officials, including Vice President Cheney, falsely twisted his words into a supposed confirmation by the CIA that the Iraqi threat was real, and therefore going to war justified.

“The hardest part of all this has been just listening to this for almost three years, listening to the vice president go on ‘Meet the Press’ on the fifth year of 9/11 and say, ‘Well, George Tenet said slam dunk,’ as if he needed me to say ‘slam dunk’ to go to war with Iraq,” said Tenet.

Tenet claims that what was merely a passing comment on his part became turned into a main line of defense for the administration’s decision to go to war. He casts himself as a scapegoat, claiming that the false allegations had injured his “reputation” and “personal honor.”

Tenet refers to the December 2002 Oval Office session in which he made his “slam dunk” remark as “essentially a marketing meeting.” This cynical language was typical of the administration in the run-up to the war of aggression against Iraq. In September 2002, then-White House chief of staff Andrew Card told the *New York Times* in relation to the war buildup, “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.”

Tenet writes in his book: “I told the president that strengthening the public presentation was a ‘slam dunk,’ a phrase that was later taken completely out of context. If I had simply said, ‘I’m sure we can do better,’ I wouldn’t be writing this chapter—or maybe even this book.”

In other words, if only he had avoided trying to impress the president with sports jargon and his name had not been bandied about on television talk shows, Tenet would presumably be enjoying his retirement. What can one say? This, after playing a central role in promoting a war that has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and more than 3,300 American troops.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who as former national

security adviser is one of the main targets of Tenet's ire, appeared on talk shows Sunday morning to counter Tenet's charges. She called his claim in the memoir that the administration had plans for war on Iraq pre-dating 9/11, "Flat out wrong."

Probed on the question of whether there was a debate on the "imminence of the Iraqi threat," Rice responded with a reaffirmation of the administration's doctrine of preventive war of aggression.

Imminence, she proclaimed is not a question of "if somebody is going to strike tomorrow." Rather, she insisted, "It's whether you believe you're in a stronger position today to deal with the threat, or whether you're going to be in a stronger position tomorrow." Based upon this same logic, the US could launch unprovoked wars against Iran, Russia, China or any other perceived current or future enemy.

For all of his claims that he has been made a scapegoat, Tenet's own memoir confirms the indisputable fact that he shares major culpability for preparing the criminal war against Iraq. He accepts blame for the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued in 2002, which sought to make the case for war with Iraq by deliberately exaggerating and even falsifying Iraq's alleged WMD capabilities.

Tenet describes the 2002 NIE as "one of the lowest moments of my seven-year tenure," and expressed regrets that the document was not "more nuanced." But it was this document—far more than any "slam dunk" comment at the White House—that served as the foundation for the drumbeat of warnings from Bush, Cheney and Rice about the imminent threat of Iraqi attacks and even "mushroom clouds" if Iraq was not invaded. It likewise was the justification given by congressional Democrats for voting for the resolution authorizing Bush to launch a war of aggression.

As for the lack of "nuance," this is precisely what Tenet himself had demanded. As *USA Today* reported in February 2004, the CIA director "pushed [those who drafted the NIE] to avoid wishy-washy conclusions."

Thrown into the document were false charges that Iraq had resumed its nuclear program, had imported aluminum tubes for uranium enrichment and was seeking "yellowcake" in Africa.

Tenet then had a declassified version of the NIE issued, which eliminated all dissenting views from intelligence professionals who challenged the phony charges against Iraq.

Yet, while he was director of the CIA, Tenet repeatedly went to Capitol Hill to make the Bush administration's fabricated case of an Iraqi-Al-Qaeda connection.

And in his book, he acknowledges that in October 2002, at Rice's request, he called up a *New York Times* reporter covering the congressional debate on impending war to falsely claim that nothing that the CIA had learned contradicted the Bush administration's claims. "In retrospect," he writes. "I shouldn't have talked to...the reporter at Condi's request. By making public comments in the middle of a contentious public debate, I gave the impression that I was a partisan player."

This is precisely what he was, and a valuable one at that, given both his supposedly "above politics" post as CIA director and his personal past as a Democrat.

In another significant statement, Tenet confirms that the administration essentially looked the other way during the summer

of 2001, when intelligence reports about impending Al Qaeda terrorist attacks within the United States should have set off alarm bells.

He describes a meeting on July 10, 2001 at the White House, where he gave Rice a briefing in which he warned of "multiple, spectacular attacks against the United States." He said he told her: "We believe these attacks are imminent. Mass casualties are likely." He also claims he urged preemptive strikes inside Afghanistan. In his book, he states that Rice essentially discounted the warning, delegating it to lower-ranking functionaries.

Rice responded on CBS "Face the Nation" Sunday, declaring, "Well, it's very interesting because that's not what George told the 9/11 Commission at the time. He said that he felt that we had gotten it."

It is true that Tenet told a different story to the 9/11 Commission, but it is his current version that rings true. The shift only underscores the whitewash character of the 9/11 report, which portrayed the Bush administration as giving sporadic and insufficient attention to terrorism, rather than deliberately turning its back on the probable Al Qaeda strike, in order to obtain the necessary pretext for military action.

Tenet's book only provides more grounds for suspicion that elements within the US government deliberately prevented the foiling of the terrorist plot, because such an attack was needed to provide a pretext for long-planned military interventions in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

One other aspect of Tenet's book and TV appearance has been less noted in the media, but clearly bears examination. That is his vigorous defense of "enhanced interrogation techniques"—i.e., torture—which he claimed was more effective than any other terrorism-related intelligence activities. "I know that this program alone is worth more than the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency put together, have been able to tell us," he said on "60 Minutes."

Here is an apt yardstick for measuring the moral stature of the advocates of "freedom" and "democracy" in the White House, Pentagon, State Department and CIA. Tenet adamantly defends the systematic use of kidnapping, illegal detention and torture—as well as systematic lying to the American people to engineer an illegal war. His outrage is sparked only when his fellow war criminals turned on him and threw him to the wolves, in order to buy time to continue and deepen the military aggression in Iraq.



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