

## Truth and Consequences

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**Truth and consequences**

New questions about U.S. intelligence regarding Iraq's weapons of mass terror

**By Bruce B. Auster, Mark Mazzetti and Edward T. Pound**

On the evening of February 1, two dozen American officials gathered in a spacious conference room at the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Va. The time had come to make the public case for war against Iraq. For six hours that Saturday, the men and women of the Bush administration argued about what Secretary of State Colin Powell should--and should not--say at the United Nations Security Council four days later. Not all the secret intelligence about Saddam Hussein's misdeeds, they found, stood up to close scrutiny. At one point during the rehearsal, Powell tossed several pages in the air. "I'm not reading this," he declared. "This is bulls- -."

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Just how good was America's intelligence on Iraq? Seven weeks after the end of the war, no hard evidence has been turned up on the ground to support the charge that Iraq posed an imminent threat to U.S. national security--no chemical weapons in the field, no Scud missiles in the western desert, no biological agents. At least not yet. As a result, questions are being raised about whether the Bush administration overstated the case against Saddam Hussein. History shows that the Iraqi regime used weapons of mass terror against Iraqi Kurds and during the war against Iran in the 1980s. But it now appears that American intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs was sometimes sketchy, occasionally politicized, and frequently the subject of passionate disputes inside the government. Today, the CIA is conducting a review of its prewar intelligence, at the request of the House Intelligence Committee, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has conceded that Iraq may have destroyed its chemical weapons months before the war.

**The dossier.** The question remains: What did the Bush administration

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know-- or think it knew--on the eve of war? In the six days before Powell went to the U.N., an intense, closed-door battle raged over the U.S. intelligence dossier that had been compiled on Baghdad's weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorists. Holed up at the CIA night and day, a team of officials vetted volumes of intelligence purporting to show that Iraq posed a grave threat. Powell, CIA Director George Tenet, and Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, were among those who participated in some sessions. What follows is an account of the struggle to find common ground on a bill of particulars against Saddam. Interviews with more than a dozen officials reveal that many pieces of intelligence--including information the administration had already cited publicly--did not stand up to scrutiny and had to be dropped from the text of Powell's U.N. speech.

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Vice President Cheney's office played a major role in the secret debates and pressed for the toughest critique of Saddam's regime, administration officials say. The first draft of Powell's speech was written by Cheney's staff and the National Security Council. Days before the team first gathered at the CIA, a group of officials assembled in the White House Situation Room to hear Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, lay out an indictment of the Iraqi regime--"a Chinese menu" of charges, one participant recalls, that Powell might use in his U.N. speech. Not everyone in the administration was impressed, however. "It was over the top and ran the gamut from al Qaeda to human rights to weapons of mass destruction," says a senior official. "They were unsubstantiated assertions, in my view."

Powell, apparently, agreed. So one week before he was to address the U.N. Security Council, he created a team, which set up shop at the CIA, and directed it to provide him with an intelligence report based on more solid information. "Powell was acutely aware of the need to be completely accurate," says the senior official, "and that our national reputation was on the line."

The team, at first, tried to follow a 45-page White House script, taken from Libby's earlier presentation. But there were too many problems--some assertions, for instance, were not supported by solid or adequate sourcing, several officials say. Indeed, some of the damning information simply could not be proved.

One example, included in the script, focused on intelligence indicating that an Iraqi official had approved the acquisition of sensitive software from an Australian company. The concern was that the software would allow the regime to understand the topography of the United States. That knowledge, coupled with unmanned aerial vehicles, might one day enable Iraq to attack America with biological or chemical weapons. That was the allegation. Tenet had briefed Cheney and others. Cheney, says a senior official, embraced the intelligence.

The White House instructed Powell to include the charge in his presentation. When the Powell team at the CIA examined the matter, however, it became clear that the information was not ironclad. CIA analysts, it turns out, couldn't determine after further review whether the software had, in fact, been delivered to Iraq or whether the Iraqis intended to use it for nefarious purposes. One senior official, briefed on the allegation, says the software wasn't sophisticated enough to pose a threat to the United States. Powell omitted the allegation from his U.N. speech.

It had taken just one day for the team assembled at the CIA to trip over the fault line dividing the Bush administration. For months, the vice president's office and the Pentagon had been more aggressive than

either State or the CIA when it came to making the case against Iraq.

Veteran intelligence officers were dismayed. "The policy decisions weren't matching the reports we were reading every day," says an intelligence official. In September 2002, *U.S. News* has learned, the Defense Intelligence Agency issued a classified assessment of Iraq's chemical weapons. It concluded: "There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons . . ." At about the same time, Rumsfeld told Congress that Saddam's "regime has amassed large, clandestine stockpiles of chemical weapons, including VX, sarin, cyclosarin and mustard gas." Rumsfeld's critics say that the secretary tended to assert things as fact even when intelligence was murky. "What we have here is advocacy, not intelligence work," says Patrick Lang, a former top DIA and CIA analyst on Iraq. "I don't think [administration officials] were lying; I just think they did a poor job. It's not the intelligence community. It's these guys in the Office of the Secretary of Defense who were playing the intelligence community."

Douglas Feith, Rumsfeld's top policy adviser, defended the intelligence analysis used in making the case for war and says it was inevitable that the "least developed" intelligence would be dropped from Powell's speech. "With intelligence, you get a snippet of information here, a glimpse of something there," he said. "It is inherently sketchy in most cases."

In a written statement provided to *U.S. News*, the CIA's Tenet says: "Our role is to call it like we see it--to tell policymakers what we know, what we don't know, what we think, and what we base it on. . . . The integrity of our process was maintained throughout, and any suggestion to the contrary is simply wrong."

In those first days of February, the disputed material was put under the microscope. The marathon meetings, which included five rehearsals of the Powell presentation, lasted six days. According to a senior official, Powell would read an item. Then he would ask CIA officers there--including Tenet and his deputy, John McLaughlin--for the source of the information. "The secretary of state insisted that every piece of evidence be solid. Some others felt you could put circumstantial evidence in, and what matters is the totality of it," says one participant. "So you had material that ended up on the cutting-room floor."

And plenty was cut. Sometimes it was because information wasn't credible, sometimes because Powell didn't want his speech to get too long, sometimes because Tenet insisted on protecting sources and methods. At the last minute, for instance, the officials agreed to drop an electronic intercept of Iraqis describing the torture of a donkey. On the tape, the men laughed as they described what happened when a drop of a lethal substance touched the animal's skin.

**Thin gruel.** The back and forth between the team at the CIA and the White House intensified. The script from the White House was whittled down, then discarded. Finally, according to several participants, the National Security Council offered up three more papers: one on Iraq's ties to terrorism, one on weapons of mass destruction, one on human-rights violations. The document on terrorism was 38 pages, double spaced. By the time the team at the CIA was done with it, half a dozen pages remained. Powell was so unimpressed with the information on al Qaeda that he decided to bury it at the end of his speech, according to officials. Even so, NSC officials kept pushing for Powell to include the charge that 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta had met with an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague. He refused.

By Monday night, February 3, the presentation was taking final shape. Powell wanted no doubts that the CIA stood behind the intelligence, so, according to one official, he told Tenet: "George, you're coming with me." On Tuesday, some members of the team decamped to New York, where Powell took a room at the Waldorf-Astoria. Participants ran two full dress rehearsals complete with place cards indicating where other members of the Security Council would be sitting. The next morning, Powell delivered his speech, as scheduled. Tenet was sitting right behind him.

Today, the mystery is what happened to Iraq's terror weapons. "Everyone believed they would find it," says a senior official. "I have never seen intelligence agencies in this government and other governments so united on one subject."

**Mirages.** Were they right? Powell and Tenet were convinced that chemical agents had been deployed to field units. None have been found. War planners used the intelligence when targeting suspected weapons of mass destruction sites. Yet bomb-damage assessments found that none of the targets contained chemical or biological weapons. "What we don't know at this point," says an Air Force war planner, "is what was bad intelligence, what was bad timing, what was bad luck."

As for the al Qaeda tie, defense officials told *U.S. News* last week they had learned of a potentially significant link between Saddam's regime and Osama bin Laden's organization. A captured senior member of the Mukhabarat, Iraq's intelligence service, has told interrogators about meetings between Iraqi intelligence officials and top members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a group that merged with al Qaeda in the 1990s. The prisoner also described \$300,000 in Iraqi transfers to the organization to pay for attacks in Egypt. The transfers were said to have been authorized by Saddam Hussein. "It's a single-source report," says one defense official. "But is this the first time anyone has told us something like this? Yeah."

Senior administration officials say they remain convinced that weapons of mass destruction will turn up. The CIA and the Pentagon reported last week that two trucks seized in Iraq were apparently used as mobile biological weapons labs, though no biological agents were found. A senior counterterrorism official says the administration also believes that biological and chemical weapons have been hidden in vast underground complexes. "You can find it out in the open, but if you put this stuff underground or underwater," he says, "there is no signature and it doesn't show up." He added that the Pentagon is using small robots, outfitted with sensors and night-vision equipment, to get into and explore "heavily booby-trapped" underground complexes, some larger than football fields. "People are getting discouraged that they haven't found it," he says. "They are looking for a master source, a person who can say where the stuff is located."

Some 300 sites have been inspected so far; there are an additional 600 to go, and the list is growing, as captured Iraqis provide new leads. But what if those leads turn up nothing? "It would be," says a senior administration official, "a colossal intelligence failure."



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