Wednesday, 28-Jul-04 13:16:17 EDT

THE ONLINE OFFICE OF
Senator
DICK DURBIN

About Senator Durbin

Issues & Legislation

Constituent Services

Newsroom

About Illinois

En Español

Contact Senator Durbin

Quick Search

Home   >   Senate Intelligence Committee Report

SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE U.S. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY'S PREWAR INTELLIGENCE ASSESMENTS ON IRAQ

**Additional Views
of Vice Chairman John D. Rockefeller IV,
Senator Carl Levin
and Senator Richard Durbin**

During a critical time in our Nation's history -- an 18-month period spanning the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003 -- the credibility of the United States Intelligence Community was significantly compromised.

A capable, independent Intelligence Community is an essential to our national security. For it to be compromised at a time when America must decide whether to commit the lives of our servicemen and women to combat created a dangerous gap in the information we desperately needed. The shaping of intelligence analysis over these eighteen months has not only called into question the basis for America's military action in Iraq but it has damaged our standing in the eyes of the world and raised questions about the credibility of future intelligence assessments.

Phase one of the Committee's report on U.S. pre-war intelligence on Iraq details how the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Intelligence Community as a whole often failed to produce accurate intelligence analysis on alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorist organizations.

Regrettably, the report paints an incomplete picture of what occurred during this period of time. The Committee set out to examine ten areas of investigation relating to pre-war intelligence on Iraq and we completed only five in this report. The scope of our investigation was divided in a way so as to prevent a complete examination of all the matters within the Committee's jurisdiction at one time.

The central issue of how intelligence on Iraq was used or misused by Administration officials in public statements and reports was relegated to the second phase of the Committee's investigation, along with other issues related to the intelligence activities of Pentagon policy officials, pre-war intelligence assessments about post-war Iraq, and the role played by the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmad Chalabi, which claims to have passed "raw intelligence" and defector information directly to the Pentagon and the Office of the Vice President.

As a result, the Committee's phase one report fails to fully explain the

Quick Links

Senate Intelligence Committee Report (declassified version)

Additional Views: U.S. Senator Dick Durbin

Additional Views: Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) and Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL)

environment of intense pressure in which Intelligence Community officials were asked to render judgments on matters relating to Iraq when policy officials had already forcefully stated their own conclusions in public.

* * *

Despite clear indications throughout 2002 that the Bush Administration intended to take military action against Iraq that would bring about a regime change in Baghdad, including quite probably the pre-emptive use of force, the Intelligence Community was caught flat-footed. Inexplicably, it took requests by members of the Senate Intelligence Committee to the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet in September 2002 calling for production of a National Intelligence Estimate on alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction -- the cornerstone of the Administration's case for invading Iraq -- for the Intelligence Community to be roused from its analytical slumber.

The resulting classified National Intelligence Estimate, prepared in just three weeks time, was a rushed and sloppy product forwarded to members of Congress mere days before votes would be taken to authorize the use of military force against Iraq. As the Committee's report highlights, the October 2002 Estimate was hastily cobbled together using stale, fragmentary, and speculative intelligence reports and was replete with factual errors and unsupported judgments.

In preparing for a decision on whether this Nation should go to war, Congress needs the very best effort from our Intelligence Community. Tragically, in this case, their work did not rise to that level.

* * *

When United Nations inspectors departed from Iraq in 1998, the Intelligence Community lost a major source of information on the ground and failed to take remedial actions to replace it with a human intelligence collection program essential for understanding the clandestine nature of proliferation activities and Saddam Hussein's intentions. As a result, the intelligence collected in the intervening period was primarily through overhead imagery and signals intercepts of limited value and from Iraqi defectors, often single sources of unknown credibility that were provided by the now suspect Iraqi National Congress, a group promoting the use of U.S military force to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

The Intelligence Community's failure to collect accurate intelligence against Iraq after 1998 and how this failure deprived its analytical experts of the information needed to draw supportable conclusions tells only part of what went awry in the fall of 2002. The story at the heart of the October Estimate is how the Intelligence Community, using this paucity of timely intelligence, prepared a new set of analytical judgments about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs, judgments that were more declarative and certain about the existence of these weapons than was justified given how little the Intelligence Community really knew at the time.

* * *

As the Bush Administration prepared for war against Iraq in the fall of 2002, the Intelligence Community judgments on Iraq shifted significantly from many of the corresponding assessments contained in earlier

analytical products.

The Committee's report deconstructs the October 2002 Estimate and demonstrates how many of its key judgments were not substantiated by the underlying intelligence. The Estimate contains numerous instances where intelligence was stretched and manipulated to serve an analytical bias that Iraq's mass destruction programs were stockpiled and weaponized.

Each of the key pillars in the Intelligence Community's Estimate – assessments of Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological, and delivery programs – was built upon a weak foundation of intelligence and analytical assumptions, unable to support the collective weight of the document's key judgments.

As the Committee report meticulously documents, the overall bias that permeates the October Estimate is toward greater certainty than warranted about Iraq possessing and producing weapons of mass destruction. As a result, the policymakers reading the Estimate were given an exaggerated picture of the threat posed by the Iraqi weapons programs during a crucial period of national and international debate on whether a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq was necessary.

It is no coincidence that the analytical errors in the Estimate all broke in one direction. The Estimate and related analytical papers assessing Iraqi links to terrorism were produced by the Intelligence Community in a highly-pressurized climate wherein senior Administration officials were making the case for military action against Iraq through public and often definitive pronouncements.

* * *

The fixation of the Bush Administration in the aftermath of the September 11 th attacks to use the war against al-Qaeda and other terrorists as a justification for overthrowing Saddam Hussein has been widely reported.

On the afternoon of September 11 th, mere hours after al-Qaeda terrorists flew a plane into the Pentagon killing 184 people and leaving the building aflame, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld turned his focus to using the cataclysmic tragedy as an opportunity to move against the Iraq regime. According to the notes of his staff, Secretary Rumsfeld wondered whether the attack allowed the United States to "hit S.H. @ same time – not only UBL," – the initials "S.H." and "UBL" representing shorthand for Saddam Hussein and Usama Bin Laden, respectively.

In his book Plan of Attack, Bob Woodward extensively documents how Secretary Rumsfeld's peculiar musing at a time when smoke billowed from the Pentagon was not an anomaly but a linkage brought up repeatedly by the Secretary at Administration war-planning sessions in the days that followed. Soon thereafter, according to Woodward, Vice President Dick Cheney asked the CIA to brief him on what the CIA could do in Iraq. On January 3, 2002, Director Tenet and other CIA officials briefed the Vice President and his staff on the limitations of covert operations in bringing down Saddam Hussein and explained that only a military operation and invasion would succeed. The CIA then gave the same briefing to the President. Later that month, in his State of the Union Address, President Bush identified Iraq as one of the three countries comprising the "an axis of evil":

"States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil…By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger…I will not wait on events while dangers gather."

The President's message to the Joint Session of Congress and the over 50 million Americans watching the speech was clear and sobering: Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its alliance with terrorists, together, represented a danger to United States security and that the President would take action to remove this growing threat. Four months after al-Qaeda killed 3,000 people on American soil, the President had placed Iraq in the cross-hairs for military invasion.

* * *

In order to make the public case for war against Iraq, the Bush Administration had to speak to two issues heavily cloaked in national security classification: what the Intelligence Community knew about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism.

In the months before the production of the Intelligence Community's October 2002 Estimate, Administration officials undertook a relentless public campaign which repeatedly characterized the Iraq weapons of mass destruction program in more ominous and threatening terms than the Intelligence Community analysis substantiated. Similarly, public statements of senior officials on Iraqi links to terrorism generally, and al-Qaeda specifically, were often based on a selective release of intelligence information that implied a cooperative, operational relationship that the Intelligence Community did not believe existed.

The Bush Administration's case against Iraq was largely based on the argument that we knew with certainty that Iraq possessed large quantities of chemical and biological weapons, was aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons, and that an established relationship between Baghdad and al-Qaeda would allow for the transfer of these weapons for use against the United States. This national security rationale being put forth publicly by senior Administration officials in support of regime change in Iraq was simple, direct and often fundamentally misleading.

The rhetorical drumbeat for war in the months leading up to the Intelligence Community's October estimate, sounded from the highest levels of the government, repeatedly overstated what the Intelligence Community assessed at the time. Here are some examples of the exaggerations:

"… it's been pretty well confirmed that [9/11 al-Qaeda hijacker Mohammed Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in Czechoslovakia last April, several months before the attack." (Vice President Cheney, Meet the Press, December 9, 2001)

"[Saddam Hussein] is a dangerous man who possesses the world's most dangerous weapons." (President Bush, Press Conference, March 22, 2002)

"But we know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons…Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon." (Vice President Cheney, Speech to the VFW's 103 rd National Convention, August 26, 2002)

"We do know that there have been shipments going… into Iraq, for

instance, of aluminum tubes that really are only suited to – high-quality aluminum tools that are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs." (National Security Advisor Rice, Late Edition, September 8, 2002)

"I think if you asked, do we know that he had a role in 9/11, no, we do not know that [Saddam Hussein] had a role in 9/11. But I think that this is the test that sets a bar that is far too high." (National Security Advisor Rice, Late Edition, September 8, 2002)

"Very likely all they need to complete a weapon is fissile material – and they are, at this moment, seeking that material – both from foreign sources and the capability to produce it indigenously." (Secretary Rumsfeld, Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 19, 2002)

"[Saddam Hussein] has said, in no uncertain terms, that he would use weapons of mass destruction against the United States. He has, at this moment, stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, and is pursuing nuclear weapons." (Secretary Rumsfeld, Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 19, 2002)

"[Iraq] has weapons of mass destruction. And the battlefield has now shifted to America…" (President Bush, Remarks at OHS Complex, September 19, 2002)

"Well, I think there was new information in there, particularly about the 45-minute threshold by which Saddam Hussein has got his biological and chemical weapons triggered to be launched. There was new information in there about Saddam Hussein's efforts to obtain uranium from African nations. That was new information." (Press Secretary Fleischer, Press Briefing, September 24, 2002)

"[Y]ou can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror." (President Bush, Photo Opportunity, September 25, 2002)

"We have what we consider to be credible evidence that al Qaeda leaders have sought contacts in Iraq who could help them acquire weapon of – weapons of mass destruction capabilities." (Secretary Rumsfeld, DoD News Briefing, September 26, 2002)

"We know they have weapons of mass destruction. We know they have active programs. There isn't any debate about it." (Secretary Rumsfeld, DoD News Briefing, September 26, 2002)

"The Iraqi regime possesses biological and chemical weapons…and, according to the British government, could launch a biological or chemical attack in as little as 45 minutes after the order is given." (President Bush, Radio Address, September 28, 2002)

"The dangers we face only worsen from month to month and year to year…and each passing day could be the one on which the Iraqi regime gives anthrax or VX nerve gas or someday a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group." (President Bush, Radio Address, September 28, 2002)

These high-profile statements in support of the Administration's policy of regime change were made in advance of any meaningful intelligence analysis and created pressure on the Intelligence Community to conform

to the certainty contained in the pronouncements.

* * *

Another form of pressure on the Intelligence Community during 2002 came from policymakers repetitively tasking analysts to review, reconsider, and revise their analytical judgments. Evidence of this pressure comes from a number of reputable sources.

The CIA's independent review on U.S. intelligence on Iraq, conducted by a panel of former senior agency analysts and led by Richard Kerr, former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, reported that:

"Requests for reporting and analysis of [Iraq's links to al Qaeda] were steady and heavy in the period leading up to the war, creating significant pressure on the Intelligence Community to find evidence that supported a connection." (Kerr Report, July 2003)

Earlier this year, Mr. Kerr publicly elaborated on how the relentless, repetitive questioning and tasking from senior policymakers in the Bush Administration pressured Intelligence Community analysts:

"There was a lot of pressure, no question," says Kerr. "The White House, State, Defense, were raising questions, heavily on W.M.D. and the issue of terrorism. Why did you select this information rather than that? Why have you downplayed this particular thing?... Sure, I heard that some of the analysts felt pressure. We heard about it from friends. There are always some people in the agency who will say, 'We've been pushed too hard,' Analysts will say, 'You're trying to politicize it.' There were people who felt there was too much pressure. Not that they were being asked to change their judgments, but they were being asked again and again to restate their judgments – do another paper on this, repetitive pressures. Do it again."

Was it a case, then, of officials repeatedly asking for another paper until they got the answer they wanted? "There may have been some of that," Kerr concedes. The requests came from "primarily people outside asking for the same paper again and again. There was a lot of repetitive tasking. Some of the analysts felt this was unnecessary pressure." The repetitive requests, Kerr made clear, came from the C.I.A.'s "senior customers," including "the White House, the vice president, State, Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff." (Vanity Fair, May 2004)

The Kerr report findings were confirmed to the Committee by a second independent investigation: the CIA Ombudsman. According to the Ombudsman's charter, this individual serves as an "independent, informal, and confidential counselor for those who have complaints about politicization, biased reporting, or the lack of objective analysis."

The CIA Ombudsman interviewed about two dozen analysts and managers involved in the preparation of the CIA's June 2002, document entitled "Iraq and al-Qaida: Interpreting a Murky Relationship." It was in the scope note of this document that the CIA stated its approach as being "purposefully aggressive" in seeking to draw connections between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

The Ombudsman told the Committee that he felt the "hammering" by the Bush Administration on Iraq intelligence was harder than he had previously witnessed in his 32-year career with the agency. Several

analysts he spoke with mentioned pressure and gave the sense that they felt the constant questions and pressure to reexamine issues were unreasonable.

In his interview with the Committee, Director Tenet confirmed that some agency officials raised with him personally the matter of the repetitive tasking and the pressure it created during this time period. The Director's counsel to those who raised the issue was to "relieve the pressure" by refusing to respond to repeated questions where no additional information existed.

* * *

The October weapons of mass destruction estimate, with its numerous errors and exaggerated key judgments, reached Congress days before the hurried vote authorizing the President to order an invasion of Iraq.

As the Committee report describes, the unclassified version of the Estimate, the so-called "white paper," that was released concurrently by the Intelligence Community to aid in the public debate further compounded the errors in the underlying classified analysis.

For reasons that have not been convincingly explained, the Intelligence Community eliminated many of the analytical caveats that were contained in the classified estimate when releasing the white paper to the public. Dissenting opinions among agencies on key judgments were dropped from the unclassified document as well. Perhaps most astonishingly, a key judgment in the white paper on Iraq's potential to deliver biological weapons added a meaningful phrase – "including potentially against the US Homeland" – that was not part of the corresponding key judgment in the classified estimate. This addition, which the Intelligence Community has been unable to explain to the Committee, communicated to the American public a level of threat against the United States homeland that was inconsistent with the Intelligence Community's judgment.

Not only did the Intelligence Community produce a white paper that failed to accurately state its own analytical beliefs, and, in turn, misled the public, it selectively declassified information in a way that kept from the public important judgments central to the debate at the time, namely the likelihood that Baghdad would launch a terrorist attack against the United States or assist Islamic terrorists in launching such an attack, especially using weapons of mass destruction.

Only after members of the Committee requested further declassification of the key judgments contained in the October Estimate did the CIA agree to release its assessment that, given what was understood at the time, the likelihood of Iraq initiating a weapon of mass destruction attack in the foreseeable future was low. The likelihood of an attack was assessed to be high, however, under the scenario that Saddam Hussein feared a military attack against Iraq threatened the survival of his regime. This judgment was not in keeping with statements by Administration officials at the time describing Iraq as a looming threat to America.

* * *

When the analytical judgments of the Intelligence Community did not conform to the more conclusive and dire Administration view on Iraqi links to al-Qaeda and specifically the notion that Iraq may have been involved in the September 11 th terrorist plot, policymakers within the

Pentagon denigrated the Intelligence Community's analysis and sought to trump it by circumventing the CIA and briefing their own analysis directly to the White House.

Beginning in early 2002, a group of individuals under the direction of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith were tasked by him to look at intelligence information related to all terrorist groups, the links between them, and the roles of state sponsors. This effort eventually focused on al-Qaeda's ties to Iraq and the CIA's reporting on the subject, including its June 2002 report, "Iraq and al-Qaida: Interpreting a Murky Relationship."

Even though the CIA's June 2002 report was "purposefully aggressive" in seeking to draw connections between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the intelligence analysis did not find the relationship sought by Pentagon policy officials. One of the individuals working for the self-named "Iraqi intelligence cell" at the Pentagon stated the June report, "…should be read for content only – and CIA's interpretation ought to be ignored." This criticism of the CIA's analysis was sent by Under Secretary for Policy Feith to Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Secretary Rumsfeld.

This critique turned into an alternative analysis of the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda. The analysis was briefed to Secretary Rumsfeld and the Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz in early August 2002. Prominent in the briefing was a slide entitled "Fundamental Problems with How Intelligence Community is Assessing Information." It faulted the Intelligence Community for requiring "juridical evidence" for findings. It also criticized the Intelligence Community for "consistent underestimation" of efforts by Iraq and al-Qaeda to hide their relationship, contending that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

On August 15, 2002, Pentagon analysts presented the alternative analysis to Director Tenet. In attendance at the briefing were Under Secretary Feith and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. But the briefing given to Director Tenet was different than the one presented to Secretary Rumsfeld days earlier. Gone from the terrorism briefing was the highly-critical slide, "Fundamental Problems with How Intelligence Community is Assessing Information." The Pentagon wanted to avoid challenging directly the Intelligence Community while it sought to shape the Iraq terrorism analysis nearing completion.

When asked about his reactions about the Pentagon's alternative terrorism analysis, Director Tenet told the Committee that he "didn't think much of it" and that he "…didn't see anything that broke any new ground for me." Still, according to one staffer's account of the briefing, Director Tenet took the unusual action of agreeing to postpone the publication of the CIA's assessment of Iraq's links to terrorism, entitled "Iraqi Support for Terrorism," until Intelligence Community analysts could meet with Pentagon policy officials and "attempt to come to some consensus."

The meeting between analysts and the Pentagon briefers took place on August 20, 2002. In a memorandum submitted to the Committee by the two Pentagon staffers who attended the meeting, they stated "We raised numerous objections to the paper." One was that the draft "makes no reference to the key issue of Atta."

The August 20 th meeting is clear evidence of the Administration politicizing an analytical process that should be protected from the meddlesome reach of policy officials. The Pentagon's policy office had

delayed the publication of an important Intelligence Community assessment on Iraq and terrorism and insinuated themselves into a coordination meeting in the hopes of molding the judgments to establish a link between Iraq and the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda terrorists on September 11 th. The Pentagon officials "raised numerous objections to the paper" as if they believed it was the policy office's role to object to an Intelligence Community assessment prior to its publication. The "key issue of Atta" was at the center of the Pentagon's case. The problem is that the Intelligence Community did not find the report alleging a meeting between al-Qaeda hijacker Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official in the Czech Republic to be credible, a meeting Vice President Cheney had already said publicly was "pretty well confirmed."

The Intelligence Community's findings did not support the link between Iraq and the 9/11 plot Administration policy officials wanted to help galvanize public support for military action in Iraq. As a result, officials under the direction of Under Secretary Feith took it upon themselves to push for a change in the intelligence analysis so that it bolstered Administration policy statements and goals.

But the Intelligence Community analysts did not buckle under the pressure brought to bear by Pentagon policy officials on August 20 th. While some changes were made to the "Iraq Support for Terrorism" report, published in September 2002, the efforts of the Pentagon staffers did not convince the analysts to change their analytical judgments.

This did not dissuade the Pentagon policy shop, however. They simply took their case directly to the White House. On September 16, 2002, two days before the Intelligence Community disseminated its terrorism assessment, Pentagon policy officials presented their alternative analysis to the Deputy National Security Advisor and the Vice President's Chief of Staff. This time the staffers re-inserted the slide critical of the Intelligence Community's analytical approach to the issue and included additional information on the alleged meeting in Prague between Atta and the Iraqi intelligence service not in the version briefed to Director Tenet. Furthermore, the CIA was kept in the dark about the Pentagon's intentions. Director Tenet was not told by the Pentagon that this alternative analysis would be subsequently briefed to the White House and remained ignorant of that fact until March 4, 2004, when it was revealed to him at an Intelligence Committee hearing.

* * *

Following the publication of the Intelligence Community's terrorism and weapons of mass destruction analytical estimates and the subsequent congressional vote authorizing the use of force in Iraq, Administration public statements leading up to the war became increasingly hyperbolic and urgent.

The qualifications the Intelligence Community placed on what it assessed about Iraq's links to terrorism and alleged weapons of mass destruction programs were spurned by top Bush Administration officials, early casualties in the war with Iraq:

"The danger to America for the Iraqi regime is grave and growing… Delay, indecision and inaction are not options for America, because they could leave to massive and sudden horror." (President Bush, Radio Address, October 5, 2002)

"Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud." (President Bush, Speech in Cincinnati, October 7, 2002)

"After September 11 th, we've entered into a new era and a new war. This is a man that we know has had connections with al Qaeda. This is a man who, in my judgment, would like to use al Qaeda as a forward army." (President Bush, Remarks in Dearborn, MI, October 14, 2002)

"We cannot afford to wait until Saddam Hussein or some terrorist supplied by him attacks us with a chemical or biological or, worst of all, a nuclear weapon, to recognize the danger we face…The dots are there for all to see. We must not wait for some terrible event that connects the dot for us." (Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz, Remarks at Fletcher Conference, October 16, 2002)

"Saddam Hussein was close to having a nuclear weapon. We don't know whether or not he has a nuclear weapon." (President Bush, Q&A in Crawford, TX, December 31, 2002)

"[Saddam Hussein] could decide secretly to provide weapons of mass destruction to terrorists for use against us. And as the President said on Tuesday night, it would take just one vial, one canister, one crate to bring a day of horror to our nation unlike any we have known." (Vice President Cheney, Remarks to the Conservative PAC, January 30, 2003)

"And as I have said repeatedly, Saddam Hussein would like nothing more than to use a terrorist network to attack and to kill and leave no fingerprints behind." (President Bush, Remarks with Prime Minister Blair, January 31, 2003)

"We also know that Iraq is harboring a terrorist network, headed by a senior al Qaeda terrorist planner…The danger Saddam Hussein poses reaches across the world." (President Bush, Statement in the Roosevelt Room, February 6, 2003)

"[Saddam Hussein] provides funding and training and safe haven to terrorists, terrorists who would willingly use weapons of mass destruction against America and other peace-loving countries." (President Bush, News Conference, March 6, 2003)

"The strongest link of – of Saddam Hussein to al-Qaida – we've never said that he somehow masterminded 9/11 or was even involved in 9/11. But the strongest – although there are a lot of tantalizing meetings that – with people who were involved in 9/11." (Dr. Rice, Face the Nation, March 9, 2003)

"[Saddam Hussein] claims to have no chemical or biological weapons, yet we know he continues to hide biological and chemical weapons, moving them to different locations as often as every 12 to 24 hours, and placing them in residential neighborhoods." (Secretary Rumsfeld, Press Briefing, March 11, 2003)

"…we know he has, in fact, developed these kinds of capabilities, chemical and biological weapons…We know he's reconstituted these programs since the Gulf War. We know he's out trying once again to produce nuclear weapons and we know that he has a long-standing relationship with various terrorist groups, including the al-Qaeda organization." (Vice President Cheney, Meet the Press, March 16, 2003)

"And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons." (Vice President Cheney, Meet the Press, March 16, 2003)

* * *

By the time American troops had been deployed overseas and were poised to attack Iraq, the Administration had skillfully manipulated and cowed the Intelligence Community into approving public statements that conveyed a level of conviction and certainty that was not supported by an objective reading of the underlying intelligence reporting. The charge levied in the President's State of the Union Address in late January 2003 that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa is the most notable example of how the Intelligence Community's agreed to let the Administration be a fact witness to an intelligence report the CIA considered "weak" and "not credible."

Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his speech before the United Nations eight days later with Director Tenet seated directly behind him. The content of his speech was approved by the CIA and laid out the Intelligence Community's case against Iraq in a high degree of certainty that was unencumbered by the limitations of the underlying intelligence and corresponding analytical judgments. It was in this speech that Secretary Powell assured the United Nations General Assembly – and the world at large – that "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we are giving you are fact and conclusion based on solid intelligence."

The day before the February 5 th United Nations speech, a CIA official involved with intelligence reporting on Iraq sent an email to another agency official responding to concerns about the use of one particular source at the center of the assertion that Iraq had constructed numerous mobile biological weapons laboratories:

"As I said last night, let's keep in mind the fact that this war's going to happen regardless of what [the source] said or didn't say, and the Powers That Be probably aren't terribly interested in whether [the source] knows what he's talking about. However, in the interest of Truth, we owe somebody a sentence or two of warning, if you honestly have reservations."

Despite these and other misgivings at the time about the information received from this all-important source, the Intelligence Community only recently officially declared him to be a fabricator.

The Committee's report examines both the State of the Union and United Nations speeches in detail and explains how statements used in them were inaccurate or misleading.

* * *

The week following Secretary Powell's February 5 th speech at the United Nations, Director Tenet testified in open session before the Senate Intelligence and Armed Services Committees on successive days. At the time, teams of United Nations inspectors had been in Iraq for about eight weeks trying to locate evidence of weapons of mass destruction. With the weather conditions in Iraq expected to become more inhospitable in the upcoming weeks, the Bush Administration began questioning the efficacy of international diplomacy and continued inspections in bringing Saddam

Hussein into compliance with international mandates.

The Intelligence Community had been sharing intelligence with the United Nations inspectors since late 2002 on what it considered the top 148 suspect sites, including the 105 Iraqi sites it considered "high" and "medium" priority sites where the Intelligence Community believed the likelihood of finding proscribed weapons activity was the greatest.

Director Tenet testified in mid-February 2003 that the Intelligence Community had shared with the United Nations inspectors all information it had on these high and medium priority sites, even though data provided by the CIA to the Committee indicated otherwise. In fact, at the time of the Director's testimony, the CIA's own classified information showed that no information had been shared on 29 of the Intelligence Community's 105 high and medium priority sites. Repeated attempts by a Committee member over the next few weeks to have the Director correct his public assurances failed.

Three weeks later, on March 6, 2003, both Director Tenet and National Security Advisor Rice wrote unclassified letters to Senators on the Committee repeating the same false claim. The war was two weeks away and the message was obvious: the Administration had decided the time for international inspections was over.

Over a year later, after much prodding, the CIA declassified the fact that by the time inspections were halted in early March it still had not shared information with United Nations inspectors on 21 of the Intelligence Community's 105 high and medium priority suspect sites.

* * *

As invasion plans were readied and finalized, the Administration had succeeded in painting a stark and sobering picture of an imminent threat to American security based on fragmentary intelligence and overheated rhetoric. The Vice President had told a nationwide television audience that Iraq not only had a nuclear weapons development program but had "in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons." The President spoke of a "mushroom cloud" and "massive and sudden horror," while top officials continued to link Iraq and al-Qaeda terrorism in vivid terms that went well beyond what the Intelligence Community assessed. As Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz stated on January 23, 2003:

"Iraq's weapons of mass terror and the terror networks to which the Iraqi regime are linked are not two separate themes – not two separate threats. They are part of the same threat."

It is no wonder that by the time the bombing campaign of "shock and awe" had begun, a majority of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda. By selectively releasing and mischaracterizing intelligence information that supported an Iraq – al-Qaeda collaboration while continuing to keep information classified and out of the public realm that did not, the Administration distorted intelligence to persuade Americans into believing the actions of al-Qaeda and Iraq were indistinguishable, "part of the same threat," as Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz asserted.

Not until September 2003, a half-year after the start of the Iraq War, did the President state in clear, unequivocal terms the Intelligence Community position that was no evidence supporting such a link between Iraq and the

murderous acts of al-Qaeda on September 11 th.

* * *

The predicate for reforming the Intelligence Community can be found in the thorough evaluation of pre-war intelligence set forth in the phase one of the Committee's Iraq investigation. We believe our Nation is afforded a rare opportunity to forge a bipartisan consensus between Congress and the Executive Branch on a legislative package of reforms that will address the lessons learned from this and other recent and ongoing Intelligence Community inquiries. It is important that we not squander this opportunity to bring about reform that will strengthen the Intelligence Community, improve accountability, and foster cooperation and the sharing of intelligence information among agencies.

While the Committee considers reform legislation, we believe that it is important that the work remaining in phase two of our investigation be completed by the year-end.

Legislative fixes that improve collection, analysis, and sharing of intelligence are powerless, however, in preventing intelligence from being slanted or exaggerated in support of policy objectives. The long-standing wall separating the worlds of Policy and Intelligence was first weakened and then crumbled under the pressure from Administration officials in the year and a half preceding the Iraq War. Restoring the Intelligence Community's damaged credibility requires patience and leadership.

© 2004 Senator Richard J. Durbin | privacy information | site accessibility