

Can We Let Intelligence Officials Lie With Impunity?

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Lies have consequences. All those who helped President George W. Bush launch a war of aggression—termed by Nuremberg “the supreme international crime”—have blood on their hands and must be held accountable. This includes corrupt intelligence officials. Otherwise, look for them to perform the same service in facilitating war on Iran.

“They should have been shot,” said former State Department intelligence director, Carl Ford, referring to ex-CIA director George Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin, for their “fundamentally dishonest” cooking of intelligence to please the White House. Ford was alluding to “intelligence” on the menacing but non-existent mobile biological weapons laboratories in Iraq.

Ford was angry that Tenet and McLaughlin persisted in portraying the labs as real several months after they had been duly warned that they existed only in the imagination of intelligence analysts who, in their own eagerness to please, had glommed onto second-hand tales told by a con-man appropriately dubbed “Curveball.” In fact, Tenet and McLaughlin had been warned about Curveball long before they let then-Secretary of State Colin Powell shame himself, and the rest of us, by peddling Curveball’s wares at the U.N. Security Council on February 5, 2003.

After the war began, those same analysts, still “leaning forward,” misrepresented a tractor-trailer found in Iraq outfitted with industrial equipment as one of the mobile bio-labs. Former U.N. weapons inspector David Kay, then working for NBC News, obliged by pointing out the equipment “where the biological process took place... Literally, there is nothing else for which it could be used.”

George Tenet knows a good man when he sees him. A few weeks later he hired Kay to lead the Pentagon-created Iraq Survey Group in the famous search to find other (equally non-existent, it turned out) “weapons of mass destruction.” (Eventually Kay, a scientist given to empirical evidence more than faith-based intelligence, became the skunk at the picnic when, in January 2004, he insisted on telling senators the truth: “We were almost all wrong—and I certainly include myself here.” But that came later.)

On May 28, 2003, CIA’s intrepid analysts cooked up a fraudulent six-page report claiming that the trailer discovered earlier in May was proof they had been right about Iraq’s “bio-weapons labs.” They then performed what could be called a “night-time requisition,” getting the only Defense Intelligence Agency analyst sympathetic to their position to provide DIA “coordination,” (which was subsequently withdrawn by DIA). On May 29, President George W. Bush, visiting Poland, proudly announced on Polish TV, “We have found the weapons of mass destruction.”

When the State Department's Intelligence and Research (INR) analysts realized that this was not some kind of Polish joke, they "went ballistic," according to Ford, who immediately warned Colin Powell that there was a problem. Tenet must have learned of this quickly, for he called Ford on the carpet, literally, the following day. No shrinking violet, Ford held his ground. He told Tenet and McLaughlin, "That report is one of the worst intelligence assessments I've ever read."

This vignette—and several like it—are found in *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* by Michael Isikoff and David Corn, who say Ford is still angry over the fraudulent paper. Ford told the authors:

It was clear that they [Tenet and McLaughlin] had been personally involved in the preparation of the report... It wasn't just that it was wrong. They lied.

This, of course, was just one episode in the long drama of deliberate perversion of intelligence to grease the skids for justifying the invasion of Iraq—the most serious foreign policy blunder in our nation's 230-year history.

"Hubris," the overweening arrogance that brought down many a protagonist of the Greek tragedies, is an aptly-chosen title for the revealing Isikoff/Corn study. Some of the ground they cover is familiar to us Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), who well before the war started chronicling the Bush administration's lies. What makes the book different is its cumulative impact—the detailed, first-hand accounts of lie and cover-up, lie and cover-up, ad nauseam .

Protagonists need a supporting cast. And many of the dramatis personae were intelligence analysts—former colleagues of mine. The question lingers: How could they allow themselves to be seduced into enlisting in the meretricious march to mayhem in Iraq? Much of the answer (and much of the reason this misguided war is allowed to continue) lies in the fact that those planning and facilitating the war in Iraq are not fighting it. Unlike Vietnam, no one "important" is being asked to put life and limb at risk; nor, generally speaking, are their children. Interestingly, most of our troops come from towns with populations of less than 10,000.

Theirs Not To Reason Why

Into the valley of death rode the 3,000. "U.S. Toll in Iraq Reaches 3,000" screamed The Washington Post 's lead story on New Year's Day, which included the Pentagon's count of more than 22,000 troops injured. As is known, the Pentagon does not count dead Iraqis, but reputable estimates put that number at about 650,000. As we pass this sad milestone, it behooves us to pause and consider the enormity of what has been allowed to happen—and how to prevent it from happening again. The House and Senate Intelligence committees in the new Congress need to reinstitute genuine oversight, including a close look at why so many intelligence officers cooperated in the dishonesty leading to war. We owe that to the 25,000, not to mention the 650,000.

Start with Tenet and McLaughlin and include Alan Foley, the retired chief of CIA's Center for Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation and Arms Control (WINPAC) and devotee of imaginative intelligence on bio-labs, uranium from Niger, aluminum tubes and other artifices to justify an unnecessary war. Most of the suspects owe their meteoric careers in large measure to Defense Secretary Robert Gates who, as head of CIA analysis and later as CIA

director, institutionalized the politicization of CIA analysis more than 20 years ago, mostly by moving malleable managers up the pay scale.

Another beneficiary of Gates is George Tenet who, as staff director of the Senate Intelligence committee in 1991, helped Gates overcome strong opposition to his confirmation as director. It is a safe bet that Gates returned the favor by recommending that Tenet be kept on as director when George W. Bush became president in 2001.

Gates learned well at the knee of his original mentor, William Casey, President Ronald Reagan's CIA director. They and those that followed had remarkable success in perpetrating the dual crime of which, long ago, Socrates was accused: making the worse case appear the better and corrupting the youth. Thus, in September 2002 when Senate Intelligence committee Democrats Dick Durban and Bob Graham insisted on a National Intelligence Estimate on "weapons of mass destruction" before Congress voted for war, George Tenet found himself the ultimate beneficiary of Robert Gates' finely tuned Geiger counter for corruptibility. The pliant managers promoted originally by Gates were happy to conjure up a formal estimate written to the specifications of their frequent visitor, Vice President Dick Cheney.

Those who tell consequential lies need to be held accountable. That includes, of course, Colin Powell. Congress needs to ask the former Secretary of State why he decided to disregard the objections of his own intelligence analysts and turned instead to faith-based intelligence for war. He has expressed regret for his scandalous performance at the U.N., but only because it put "a blot on my record." I would like to see him try that out on Cindy Sheehan and 3,000 other bereaved mothers.

Powell and I grew up a mile from each other in the Bronx. There we had a word for his forte, which remains a ubiquitous scourge in Washington. It was both noun and verb: "brownnose." And it has nothing to do with skin color. It was a familiar word before I learned "sycophant." Webster's provides this meaning: "To ingratiate oneself with, to curry favor with; from the implication that servility is equivalent to kissing the hinder parts of the person from whom advancement is sought."

Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D, Texas, put the effects of all this most succinctly in a floor speech last year:

This war was launched without an immediate threat to our families... Radical "know-it-all" ideologues here in Washington bent facts, distorted intelligence and perpetrated lies designed to mislead the American people into believing a third-rate thug had a hand in the 9/11 tragedy and was soon to unleash a mushroom cloud.

Much is being said today about honoring the sacrifices of our fallen soldiers. Perhaps the best way to do that is to find out who did the misleading and hold them to account before they do it again.

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