

Fixing Intel Around the Syria Policy

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President Barack Obama speaking to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013. (UN photo)

Senior U.S. intelligence analysts disagreed with the Obama administration's certainty that the Syrian government was behind the Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack, but that dissent was suppressed amid the rush to a near war.

After the Aug. 21 chemical weapons incident in Syria, a number of senior U.S. intelligence analysts disagreed with the Obama administration's rush to judgment blaming the Syrian government, but their dissent on this question of war or peace was concealed from the American people.

The administration kept the dissent secret by circumventing the normal intelligence process and issuing on Aug. 30 something called a "Government Assessment," posted at the White House press office's Web site and fingering the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad as the guilty party.

Normally, such an important issue – a possible U.S. military engagement – would be the focus of a National Intelligence Estimate, but that would also cite the disagreements expressed within the intelligence community. By avoiding an NIE, the Obama administration was able to keep the lid on how much dissent there was over the Assad-did-it conclusion.

Once the "Government Assessment" was issued, Secretary of State John Kerry was put forward to present the case for launching a military strike against Syria, an attack that was only averted because President Barack Obama abruptly decided to ask congressional approval and then reached a diplomatic agreement, with the help of the Russian government, in which the Syrian government agreed to dispose of its chemical weapons arsenal (while still denying that it was responsible for the Aug. 21 attack).

Although war was averted, the Obama administration's deception of the American public – by pretending that there was a government-wide consensus regarding Syrian government guilt when there wasn't – was reminiscent of the lies and distortions used by President George W. Bush to trick the nation into war with Iraq over bogus WMD claims in 2003.

The behavior of the rest of Official Washington and the mainstream U.S. news media also shows that little has changed from a decade ago. Obvious indications of a deception were ignored and the few voices who raised the alarm were treated with the same mocking contempt that greeted skeptics of Bush's case for invading Iraq.

Writers for Consortiumnews.com were among the few in the American media who noted the glaring flaws in the Obama administration's case, including its refusal to release any of its supposed proof to support its conclusions and the curious absence of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper from the public presentation of the administration's *casus belli*.

The reason for keeping the DNI on the sidelines was that he otherwise might have been asked if there was a consensus in the intelligence community supporting the administration's certitude that Assad's regime was responsible. At that point, Clapper would have had to acknowledge the disagreement from rank-and-file analysts.

Inspectors' Doubts

Similarly, it appears that on-the-ground inspectors for the United Nations had their own doubts about the Syrian government's responsibility, especially since Assad's regime had allowed a UN team into Damascus on Aug. 18 to investigate what the regime claimed was evidence of rebels using chemical weapons.

It never made sense to some of these inspectors that Assad – just three days later – would launch a chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus just a few miles from the hotel where the UN inspectors were staying. Assad would have known that the Aug. 21 incident would mean serious trouble for his government, very possibly drawing the U.S. military into the Syrian civil war on the side of the rebels.

The UN inspectors also failed to find Sarin or other chemical agents at one of the two sites that they subsequently examined near Damascus, and they inserted a qualification in their report about apparent tampering at the one area where Sarin was found.

However, instead of noting the many holes in the U.S. "Government Assessment" and the UN report, the mainstream U.S. news media simply joined the rush to judgment, hyping dubious claims from both U.S. government officials and non-governmental organizations favoring U.S. military intervention in Syria.

The New York Times and other major news outlets that swallowed Bush's false claims about Iraq WMD a decade ago also began reporting Obama's dubious assertions about Syria as flat fact, not as issues in serious dispute. As I [wrote](#) on Oct. 25, one typically credulous Times story accepted "as indisputable fact that the Syrian government was behind the Aug. 21 attack on a suburb of Damascus despite significant doubts among independent analysts, UN inspectors and, I'm told, U.S. intelligence analysts."

New details of the rebellion among the intelligence analysts have just been [reported](#) by former CIA officer Philip Giraldi for the American Conservative magazine. According to Giraldi's account, a "mass resignation of a significant number of analysts" was threatened if the Obama administration issued an NIE without acknowledging their dissent.

A "hurriedly updated" NIE had reflected the Syrian government's suspected use of chemical weapons against rebels and civilians, "while conceding that there was no conclusive proof," Giraldi wrote, adding:

"There was considerable dissent from even that equivocation, including by many analysts who felt that the evidence for a Syrian government role was subject to interpretation and possibly even fabricated. Some believed the complete absence of U.S. satellite intelligence

on the extensive preparations that the government would have needed to make in order to mix its binary chemical system and deliver it on target was particularly disturbing.

“These concerns were reinforced by subsequent UN reports suggesting that the rebels might have access to their own chemical weapons. The White House, meanwhile, considered the somewhat ambiguous conclusion of the NIE to be unsatisfactory, resulting in considerable pushback against the senior analysts who had authored the report.”

Demands from Above

When Obama’s National Security Council demanded more corroborative evidence to establish Syrian government guilt, “Israel obligingly provided what was reported to be interceptions of telephone conversations implicating the Syrian army in the attack, but it was widely believed that the information might have been fabricated by Tel Aviv, meaning that bad intelligence was being used to confirm other suspect information, a phenomenon known to analysts as ‘circular reporting,’” Giraldi wrote.

“Other intelligence cited in passing by the White House on the trajectories and telemetry of rockets that may have been used in the attack was also somewhat conjectural and involved weapons that were not, in fact, in the Syrian arsenal, suggesting that they were actually fired by the rebels.

“Also, traces of Sarin were not found in most of the areas being investigated, nor on one of the two rockets identified. Whether the victims of the attack suffered symptoms of Sarin was also disputed, and no autopsies were performed to confirm the presence of the chemical.

“With all evidence considered, the intelligence community found itself with numerous skeptics in the ranks, leading to sharp exchanges with the Director of Central Intelligence John Brennan and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. A number of analysts threatened to resign as a group if their strong dissent was not noted in any report released to the public, forcing both Brennan and Clapper to back down.”

The Obama administration’s “solution” to this analyst revolt was to circumvent the normal intelligence process and issue a white paper that would be called a “Government Assessment,” declaring the Syrian government’s guilt as indisputable fact and leaving out the doubts of the intelligence community.

While this subterfuge may have satisfied the institutional concerns of the intelligence community – which didn’t want another Iraq-War-style violation of its procedural protocols on how NIEs are handled – it still left the American people vulnerable to a government deception on a question of war or peace.

Yes, there was no scene comparable to the positioning of CIA Director George Tenet behind Secretary of State Colin Powell as he delivered his deceptive Iraq War speech to the UN Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003. Both Clapper and Brennan were absent from the administration’s testimony to Congress, leaving Secretary Kerry to do most of the talking with Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey bracketing Kerry as mostly silent wing men.

And, yes, one could argue that the Obama administration’s hyping of its case against the Assad regime had a happy ending, the Syrian government’s agreement to eliminate its

entire CW arsenal. Indeed, most of the grousing about the Syrian outcome has come from neocons who wanted to ride the rush to judgment all the way to another regime-changing war.

Dogs Not Barking

But Americans should be alarmed that a decade after they were deceived into a disastrous war in Iraq based on bogus intelligence – and the complete breakdown of Official Washington’s checks and balances – a very similar process could unfold that brought the country to the brink of another war.

Besides the disturbing fact that the Obama administration refused to release any actual evidence to support its case for war, there was the gullibility (or complicity) of leading news outlets in failing to show even a modicum of skepticism.

The New York Times and other major news organizations failed to note the dogs not barking. Why, for instance, was there no NIE? Why were the U.S. government’s top intelligence officials absent from public presentations of what amounted to an intelligence issue? It shouldn’t have required a Sherlock Holmes to sniff out the silenced intelligence analysts.

When a government leader refuses to reveal any of his supposed proof for a claim and conceals the professionals who don’t agree with his claim, any reasonably savvy person should draw the conclusion that the government leader doesn’t really have a case.

Though some Americans may cite the work of a few Web sites, like our own Consortiumnews.com, as having challenged the misguided conventional wisdom on Syria as we did on Iraq, they should not draw too much comfort from this. After all, our readership is tiny when compared to the many sources of misinformation being disseminated to the broad American public.

The dangerous reality is that the United States remains vulnerable to the kinds of stampedes in judgment that can end up crushing people around the world.

[Here is some of our earlier reporting on the Syrian crisis: “[A Dodgy Dossier on Syrian War](#)”; “[Murky Clues From UN’s Syria Report](#)”; “[Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence](#)”; “[How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies](#).”]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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