

How Cheney Outfoxed His Foes on Iran and EFPs

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2 June 2008

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

For many months, the propaganda line that explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that could penetrate U.S. armoured vehicles were coming straight from Iran has been embraced publicly by the entire George W. Bush administration. But when that argument was proposed internally by military officials in January 2007, it was attacked by key administration officials as unsupported by the facts.

Vice President Dick Cheney was able to get around those objections and get his Iranian EFP line accepted only because of arrangements he and Bush made with Gen. David Petraeus before he took command of U.S. forces in Iraq.

The initial draft of the proposed military briefing on the issue of EFPs, which asserted flatly that EFPs were being manufactured and smuggled to Iraqi Shiite groups directly by the Iranian regime, was met with unanimous objection from the State Department, Defence Department and National Security Council staff, as administration officials themselves stated publicly.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley tried to push back against Cheney's proposed line because they recognised it as an effort to go well beyond the compromise policy toward Iran that had been worked out in December and early January. The compromise policy had been to focus on networks working on procuring EFPs within Iraq and not to target Iran as directly responsible.

At his regular press briefing on Jan. 24, 2007, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Department spokesman Sean McCormack revealed the primary basis for the State, Defence and NSC opposition to the Cheney line on EFPs.

Asked whether the U.S. government had any evidence that EFPs were manufactured in Iran, McCormack did not answer directly but said, "You don't necessarily have to construct something in Iran in order for it to be a threat to the U.S. or British troops from the Iranian regime. There are lots of different ways you can do that. You can bring the know-how. You can train other people in Iraq to do that."

McCormack thus revealed that the State Department wasn't buying the accusation that Iran was manufacturing EFPs and sending them to the Shiite forces of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army fighting against U.S. forces.

On Feb. 2, while briefing the news media on the new National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, Hadley asserted bluntly that the draft military briefing that had been circulated in Washington had not been based on evidence.

“The truth is, quite frankly, we thought the briefing was overstated,” said Hadley. “We sent it back to get it narrowed and focused on the facts.”

Hadley did not tell reporters which points in the draft briefing paper had not been based on the evidence, but the remarks by McCormack and Gates were clear indications that the briefing had made claims of Iranian manufacturing of weapons and smuggling them into Iraq that could not be supported.

Hadley further revealed that he, Gates and Rice had tried to use the imminence of a National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq to force the issue of the briefing’s exaggerated claims. The briefing, he said was “an attempt to...address some of the issues in the NIE in a briefing on intelligence of Iranian activity in Iraq. And we thought, hey, why are we doing this?”

He said he and his associates wanted a briefing that “we’re confident everyone can stand behind”. The national security adviser was implying that the proposed briefing was not supported by the NIE on Iraq, and that the drafters would therefore have to redraft it so that the intelligence community could support it.

Hadley didn’t say who he meant by “we”, but Gates told reporters the same day that he and Rice had joined Hadley in ensuring that the planned briefing “is dominated by facts”.

The declassified version of the NIE’s main conclusions indicated that it did not support the claim that Iran was exporting EFPs to the Mahdi Army. The only sentence that related to the issue was, “Iranian lethal support for select groups of Iraqi Shia militants clearly intensifies the conflict in Iraq.” But in the absence of any language alleging Iranian EFP manufacture and export to Iraq, that phrase appears to be a reference to training of Mahdi Army officers.

Hadley, Rice and Gates thus appeared to believe that the briefing would have to reflect the NIE, and that they would be able to review the revised version before it was presented to the press. On Feb. 9, State Department spokesman McCormack said, “[W]hen the working-level folks at the deputies level...produce a presentation that they are comfortable with, I am sure that they’ll share it with Secretary Rice, Secretary Gates and Steve Hadley over at the NSC just for review.”

But Cheney had a surprise for the opponents of his hard line on Iran. When White House spokeswoman Dana Perino was asked on Feb. 9 about when the briefing would be held, she replied, “Decisions on that are being made out in Baghdad.”

That announcement came just as Gen. George W. Casey was to be replaced by Gen. Petraeus as the new commander. Petraeus had only arrived in Iraq the day before and the changeover ceremony came on Feb. 10.

The day after the ceremony, three military officers presented a briefing to the press which not only asserted that the EFPs could only have been manufactured in Iran but that Iran’s Qods Force was behind the smuggling of those weapons into Iraq. They strongly suggested, moreover, that the Iranian government knew about the smuggling.

Cheney had used the compliant Petraeus to do an end-run around the national security bureaucracy. Petraeus had already reached agreement with the White House to take Cheney’s line on the EFPs issue and to present the briefing immediately without consulting State or Defence.

State and Defence tried to counter this manoeuvre. McCormack argued, rather lamely, that the briefing had really been about “a threat to our troops from these devices and from the networks that supply them”. And the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace, responded by saying that he could not “from his own knowledge” confirm the assertion that the Qods Force was providing bomb-making kits to Shiite insurgents.

The U.S. command in Baghdad temporarily backed away from the briefers’ charge against Iran. The command spokesman, Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell, who had been one of the three military briefers, was forced to tell reporters on Feb. 14 that the purpose of the briefing had been to talk only about the threat to U.S. troops, implying that briefers had gone beyond their brief in making statements about Iranian complicity.

But the hardline position on EFP was the one that dominated press coverage. Instead of the more cautious line focusing on the EFP networks inside Iraq, which was what State, Defence and NSC and agreed to in January, Cheney now had a potential casus belli against Iran.

And Cheney would continue to use his alliance with Petraeus to advance his proposal for an attack on Qods Force bases in Iran. The very first episode in the Cheney-Petraeus alliance sheds additional light on the nomination of Petraeus to become the new CENTCOM commander later this year.

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