

Iraq: Manipulating the Evidence to Start a War

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Last November, the US Senate Intelligence Committee was pressured by the Democrats to commence the long-delayed investigation of whether the Bush administration had deliberately distorted the intelligence to justify the Iraq war.

A growing body of evidence, however, is already showing that the Bush administration manipulated the evidence to bolster support for its planned war.

The Bush administration claimed that Saddam Hussein tried to acquire uranium in Niger to use for the production of Iraqi nuclear weapons.

US ambassador Joseph Wilson was sent by the CIA to Niger in February 2002 to investigate. He found that the accusation was baseless. He reported to the CIA and to the State Department that the documents on which the allegation was based were forgeries.

Jacques Baute, head of the International Atomic Agency's Iraq Inspection unit, reached the same conclusion: the Niger documents were fraudulent.

But the Bush administration ignored the findings of its own envoy, corroborated by other American officials, and continued to use the false claim. Ambassador Wilson later told the New Republic the Bush administration "knew the Niger story was a flat-out lie." (June 30,03)

The Bush administration also alleged that aluminium tubes purchased by Iraq were destined for the production of Iraqi nuclear weapons fuel.

Both the US Department of Energy and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), however, rejected the allegation.

Yet, Bush continued to warn against Iraqi nuclear threat. Secretary of State Colin Powell repeated the same warning before the United Nations in February 2003.

The bogus claim that the tubes were destined to help produce nuclear weapons was put forward by a certain Joe, a low level CIA agent "who got his facts, even the size of the tubes, wrong." (NYT. Oct 5.04).

The Senate Intelligence Committee's report repeatedly "questioned Joe's competence and integrity. It portrayed him as so determined to prove his theory that he twisted test results, ignored factual discrepancies and excluded dissenting views." (NYT, Oct 3, 04).

Yet, the Bush administration went on to advertise the highly disputed claim as a positively verified fact. On August 26, 2002, Vice-President Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention in Nashville: "We now know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to

acquire nuclear weapons.'

As a source, Cheney cited Hussein Kamel al-Majid, Saddam Hussein's son-in-law who had defected in 1994. In fact, al- Majid had told the Americans, in 1995, exactly the opposite, namely that Iraq's nuclear program had been dismantled. Moreover, al- Majid could not have offered any new information since he was assassinated upon being lured back to Iraq in 1996. (NYT. Oct 3, 04)

The deception campaign received a boost when the New York Times devoted the lead article on the first page of its September 8, 2002 edition, to a detailed account of the aluminium tubes, citing only the Bush administration's claims. Cheney and others in the administration went on to refer to the Times' article as "evidence".

On Sept. 13, The Times made another contribution to the deception campaign. It belittled the opposition of American scientists and officials to the tubes for bombs allegation. In a six-paragraph article buried on Page A 13, it claimed: ""the best technical experts and nuclear scientists at laboratories like Oak Ridge supported the C.I.A. assessments.'

After the war, the Times admitted that the claim was unfounded and blamed the Bush administration for its manipulative use of intelligence: "The Bush administration", its editors wrote: "had plenty of evidence that the claim was baseless; it was a long-discounted theory that had to be resurrected from the intelligence community's wastebasket when the administration needed justification for invading Iraq." (October 5, 04)

On Oct. 2, 2002 the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was delivered to the Senate Intelligence Committee. It contained the following falsehood: "All intelligence experts agree that Iraq is seeking nuclear weapons and that these tubes could be used in a centrifuge enrichment program".

This NIE is now considered as "one of the most flawed documents in the history of American intelligence."

But the deception worked. A majority of Americans believed that Iraq posed a threat to the USA. A Los Angeles Times poll showed striking evidence of the success of the deception campaign: 90 percent of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction.

When, at the end of 2002, United Nations arms inspectors returned to Iraq. They focused on the aluminium tubes. They found them to be destined for rocket production, as the Iraqis had said, not nuclear weapons. They found no evidence of nuclear program production.

On January 27, 2003 the IAEA officially told the UN Security Council that it had found no evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program.

As American troops amassed on Iraq's borders, Bush, in his January 28 speech before Congress, ignored the Atomic Agency's report the previous day, and focussed on the false claim: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Aghast by Bush's use of forgery to start a war, ambassador Wilson went public. He wrote in the New York Times (July 6, 2003): "I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi

threat”.

There are now suggestions that the forgery was deliberately put together to get the USA into war with Iraq (Pat Buchanan, the McLaughlin Group, July 12,03). This is supported by the testimony of a former senior CIA official who told Seymour Hersh: “Somebody deliberately let something false get in there.” (New Yorker, Oct 27.03).

Links to Al Qaeda

To make the case for war, the Bush administration knowingly used unfounded allegations of Iraqi nuclear weapons production programs. It also claimed that Iraq had links to al-Qaeda. Current and former government officials recently told the New York Times that the Bush administration had based this claim on a confession made by a Libyan prisoner, Ibn al Shaykh Al Libi. Al Libi was captured in Pakistan and sent by US authorities to Egypt in January 2002.

Al Libi later said that he had fabricated the claim of Iraq-Al Qaeda link to escape harsh treatment in Egypt. The CIA withdrew the intelligence based on Al Libi’s confession in March 2004.

In November Democratic Senator Carl Levin made public information showing that a February 2002 government document had concluded that that it was probable that al-Libi “was intentionally misleading” his interrogators. The document also showed that the Defence Intelligence Agency had concluded that Al Libi was probably a liar.

Yet, months later, Bush used al-Libi’s allegations as solid foundation for his claim of an Iraq-Al Qaeda link.

In a major speech in Cincinnati in October 2002 he said: “we’ve learned that Iraq has trained Al Qaeda members in bomb making and poisons and gases.”

Another evidence presented by the Bush administration for an Iraq-al Qaeda link was a meeting that allegedly took place in Prague in April 2001 between September 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official.

An investigation by American and Czech officials proved that at the time of the alleged meeting in Prague Atta was in fact in the United States.

Biological and Nuclear Weapons

Another leading source of dubious claim manipulatively used by the Bush administration was Iraqi engineer Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri. Al-Haideri claimed that he had helped Saddam Hussein’s government to secretly bury tons of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons in private villas and beneath the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad.

The CIA officer who gave al-Haideri a polygraph test, however, concluded that al Haideri was lying. (Rolling Stone, November 17,05)

Yet, the al Haideri’s lies would find their way to the American public masquerading as serious information.

Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi, who enjoyed close collaborative relations with the CIA, and later with the Pentagon, contacted Judith Miller at the New York Times. Miller had served as a loyal conduit of the Iraqi National Congress's anti-Saddam Hussein's propaganda and enjoyed close relationships with influential members of the Bush administration.

She went to Thailand where she interviewed al-Haideri. Given Miller's contacts in the Bush administration, she probably knew that the CIA had dismissed al-Haideri as a fake. Yet, after interviewing him, Miller published a front page story in the Times (AN IRAQI DEFECTOR TELLS OF WORK ON AT LEAST 20 HIDDEN WEAPONS SITES , December 20, 2001) claiming that "government officials" had described al-Haideri's allegations as "reliable and significant."

The Miller story, repeated by newspapers and television stations around the world, would be used by the Bush administration as "proof" of the existence of illegal weapons.

White House documents continued to refer to al-Haideri and his allegations up-till October 29, 2003, even though the CIA had already concluded that al-Haideri's claims were lies.

In 2004, al-Haideri was taken back to Iraq by the CIA's team looking for weapons of mass destruction, The Iraq Survey Group. The CIA team took al-Haideri to the locations where he had claimed the weapons of mass destruction were hidden. Al-Haideri was not able to identify a single site of illegal weapons in Iraq. (Rolling Stone, November 17,05)

War of Disinformation

The manipulative use of information to advance the case for war does not seem to have been the result of mistakes or negligence. Rather, it seems to have been part of a careful campaign of deception and manipulation aimed at engineering support for the war, and silencing the war critics.

Recently, the Pentagon admitted that it had hired contractors who bribed Iraqi and Arab journalists to print positive stories about the USA occupation of Iraq, written by American officers. The White House disavowed any knowledge and expressed concern.

In fact, according to documents revealed to and interviews of former and present government officials with the New York Times, the Bush administration launched a major secretive propaganda war: "The campaign was begun by the White House, which set up a secret panel soon after the Sept. 11 attacks to coordinate information operations by the Pentagon, other government agencies and private contractors." (NYT, December 10, 05)

Two public relations firms received contracts from the Pentagon to help in this propaganda operation. The Lincoln Group, according to Pentagon documents, planted more than a 10,000 pro-American articles in Iraqi and Arab press.

The Pentagon also awarded multi-million dollar contracts to the Rendon Group, which helped the CIA in the 1990s to set up the Iraqi National Congress and to disseminate its anti-Saddam Hussein propaganda.

The Pentagon assigned to the Randon Group the mission of targeting foreign news organisations critical of US policies in the war against terror. The top target on the list was Al-Jazeera Television network.

According to Pentagon documents recently obtained by Rolling Stone, Pentagon officials set up, in late 2001, a secret organisation called The Office of Strategic Influence whose mission it was to conduct “covert disinformation and deception operations — planting false news items in the media and hiding their origins.” (November 27).

The Pentagon’s Office of Strategic Influence was also expected to “ “coerce” foreign journalists and plant false information overseas.” Secret documents also showed that the Office was expected to “find ways to “punish” those who convey the “wrong message.” (Rolling Stone, November 27,05)

In a major investigation, the Los Angeles Times recently documented how another source of dubious information was seized upon by the Bush administration and presented as reliable justification for war. (November 25, 05)

Code-named Curveball, the source was an Iraqi engineer who applied for political asylum in Germany. He told German intelligence officials that he knew the location of biological warfare vehicles in Iraq.

The CIA Berlin station chief wrote that the German intelligence officials handling Curveball had “not been able to verify” Curveball’s claims. A CIA official who met Curveball in Germany in early 2003 wrote to his supervisor questioning the validity of the Curveball’s information.

The supervisor, the deputy chief of the CIA’s Iraq task force, wrote back pointing out: “This war’s going to happen regardless of what Curve Ball said or didn’t say, and . . . the Powers That Be probably aren’t terribly interested in whether Curve Ball knows what he’s talking about”. (Washington Post, July 10, 04)

A few days later, in his February 2003 presentation at the UN, then Secretary of State Collin Powell presented Curveball’s claims as ‘solid evidence.’

Curveball’s German handlers were appalled when Powell “misstated” Curveball’s claims. “We were shocked,” said a German official, “We had always told them it was not proven.” All of Curveball’s three sources “turned out to be frauds.”

Yet, the CIA still wanted to believe the Curveball’s story, and “punished in-house critics who provided proof that [Curveball] had lied.”

The now discredited National Intelligence Estimate of October 2002, warned with “high confidence” that Iraq “has now established large-scale,” biological weapons production capabilities. This warning, sent to Congress days before it voted to support the invasion of Iraq, was based “largely on information from a single source — Curveball.”

The Bush White House similarly ignored evidence to the contrary. For instance, Scott Ritter, former chief UN weapons inspectors from 1991 to 1998, repeatedly affirmed that the weapons inspection regime had eliminated Iraq’s banned weapons (The Boston Globe, July 20,02).

Ritter later became convinced that Bush “was lying to the American people to get them to go to war.” (Time. September 13, 2002.)

On March 7, 2003, the chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix, reported to the Security

Council that his team had raided the sites named by Curveball, but had found “no evidence” of mobile biological production facilities in Iraq. This too was ignored. The war would be launched two weeks later.

After the invasion of Iraq, the CIA created, in June 2003, the Iraq Survey Group to conduct an extensive search for illegal weapons. It also created a special unit to investigate Curveball himself. The Curveball unit found Curveball’s personnel file in Iraqi government storeroom.

The file confirmed that Curveball had been lying all along. He was a trainee engineer, not a project chief or site manager, as the CIA had claimed. At the time Curveball claimed he had begun working on bio-warfare trucks, he had in fact been fired and was eventually jailed for a sex crime. He ended up driving a Baghdad taxi.

In his memoir, former Bush speechwriter David Frum recounts that, in December 2001, after the Afghanistan war, he was told to come up with a justification for war with Iraq to include in Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002. (The New Republic, June 30, 03).

In his book, *A Pretext for War*, investigative journalist James Bamford analysed the various allegations about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. He concluded they were but a pretext for a war planned by a small group of neo-conservatives supportive of Israeli designs in the region and of the extension of American military power to the Middle East.

Chief among this group are Richard Perl, former Chairman of the Policy Board at the Pentagon, Scooter Libby, Vice-President Cheney’s former chief of Staff, the former US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and his assistant Douglas Feith.

Perl resigned after being accused of illegal activities on behalf of an Israeli arms manufacturer.

Scooter Libby has been indicted for making false statements to a federal prosecutor in connection with the disclosure of the identity of Ambassador Wilson’s wife as a CIA agent, reportedly to punish Wilson’s opposition to the war.

Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid said: “The Libby indictment provides a window into what this is really all about, how this administration manufactured and manipulated intelligence in order to sell the war in Iraq and attempted to destroy those who dared to challenge its actions,” (Associated Press, Nov 1.05)

Wolfowitz, now President of the World Bank, reportedly candidly told *Vanity Fair* magazine: “We settled on weapons of mass destruction because that was something that we could sell.” (Democracy Now, June 17, 05)

Douglas Feith was singled out in the Senator Karl Levin’s Report (Oct 2004) for his particularly active role in the deception campaign. The report showed that: “on the question of an Iraqi-Qaeda axis, Mr. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and others offered an indictment that was essentially fabricated in the office of Douglas Feith...” (NYT, Oct 23, 04)

On November 17, the Pentagon’s inspector general, under pressure from Democratic leaders, decided to begin an “investigation into allegations that an office run by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld’s former policy chief, Douglas J. Feith, engaged in illegal or inappropriate intelligence activities before the Iraq war.” (Associated Press, November 18. 05)

On February 10, 2006, the senior CIA officer in charge of the Middle East from 2000 to 2005, Paul R. Pillar, accused the Bush administration of deliberately to distorting the evidence to start a pre-planned war. It has become clear, he wrote, that: "intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions that had already been made," namely to invade Iraq, remove Saddam Hussein in order to "shake up the sclerotic power structures of the Middle East," (NYT, Feb 11,06)

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