

The CIA Just Declassified the “WMD Document” of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) That Supposedly Justified the Iraq Invasion

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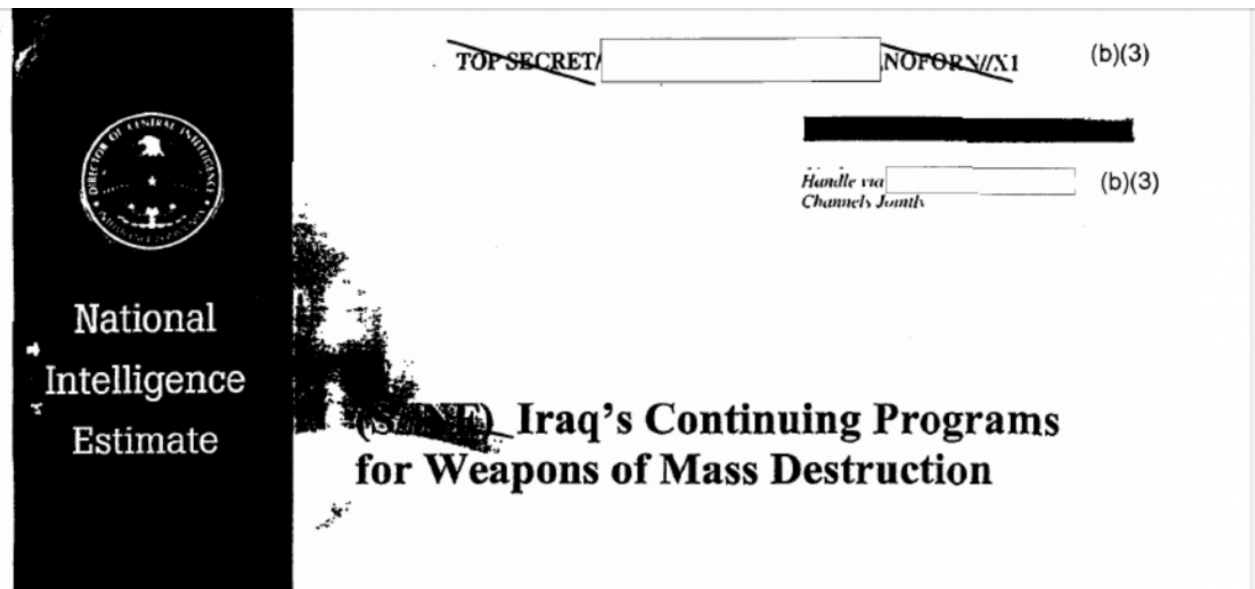
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Thirteen years ago, the intelligence community concluded in a 93-page classified document used to justify the invasion of Iraq that it lacked “specific information” on “many key aspects” of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

But that’s not what top Bush administration officials said during their campaign to sell the war to the American public. Those officials, citing the same classified document, asserted with no uncertainty that Iraq was actively pursuing nuclear weapons, concealing a vast chemical and biological weapons arsenal, and posing an immediate and grave threat to US national security.

Congress [eventually concluded](#) that the Bush administration had “overstated” its dire warnings about the Iraqi threat, and that the administration’s claims about Iraq’s WMD program were “not supported by the underlying intelligence reporting.” But that underlying intelligence reporting — contained in the so-called National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that was used to justify the invasion — has remained shrouded in mystery until now.

The CIA released a copy of the NIE in 2004 [in response to a Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\) request](#), but redacted virtually all of it, citing a threat to national security. Then last year, John Greenwald, who operates [The Black Vault](#), a clearinghouse for declassified government documents, asked the CIA to take another look at the October 2002 NIE to determine whether any additional portions of it could be declassified.



The agency responded to Greenwald this past January and provided him with a new version of the NIE, which he shared exclusively with VICE News, that restores the majority of the prewar Iraq intelligence that has eluded historians, journalists, and war critics for more than a decade. (Some previously redacted portions of the NIE had previously been disclosed in congressional reports.)

The fact that the NIE concluded that there was no operational tie between Saddam and al Qaeda did not offset this alarming assessment.

For the first time, the public can now read the hastily drafted CIA document [pdf below] that led Congress to pass a joint resolution authorizing the use of military force in Iraq, a costly war launched March 20, 2003 that was predicated on “disarming” Iraq of its (non-existent) WMD, overthrowing Saddam Hussein, and “freeing” the Iraqi people.

A [report](#) issued by the government funded think-tank RAND Corporation last December titled “Blinders, Blunders and Wars” said the NIE “contained several qualifiers that were dropped.... As the draft NIE went up the intelligence chain of command, the conclusions were treated increasingly definitively.”

An example of that: According to the newly declassified NIE, the intelligence community concluded that Iraq “probably has renovated a [vaccine] production plant” to manufacture biological weapons “but we are unable to determine whether [biological weapons] agent research has resumed.” The NIE also said Hussein did not have “sufficient material” to manufacture any nuclear weapons and “the information we have on Iraqi nuclear personnel does not appear consistent with a coherent effort to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program.”

But in an October 7, 2002 [speech](#) in Cincinnati, Ohio, then-President George W. Bush simply said Iraq, “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons” and “the evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.”

One of the most significant parts of the NIE revealed for the first time is the section pertaining to Iraq’s alleged links to al Qaeda. In September 2002, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed the US had “[bulletproof](#)” evidence linking Hussein’s regime to the

terrorist group.

“We do have solid evidence of the presence in Iraq of al Qaeda members, including some that have been in Baghdad,” Rumsfeld said. “We have what we consider to be very reliable reporting of senior-level contacts going back a decade, and of possible chemical- and biological-agent training.”

But the NIE said its information about a working relationship between al Qaeda and Iraq was based on “sources of varying reliability” — like Iraqi defectors — and it was not at all clear that Hussein had even been aware of a relationship, if in fact there were one.

“As with much of the information on the overall relationship, details on training and support are second-hand,” the NIE said. “The presence of al-Qa’ida militants in Iraq poses many questions. We do not know to what extent Baghdad may be actively complicit in this use of its territory for safehaven and transit.”

The declassified NIE provides details about the sources of some of the suspect intelligence concerning allegations Iraq trained al Qaeda operatives on chemical and biological weapons deployment — sources like War on Terror detainees who were rendered to secret CIA black site prisons, and others who were turned over to foreign intelligence services and tortured. Congress’s later investigation into prewar Iraq intelligence concluded that the intelligence community based its claims about Iraq’s chemical and biological training provided to al Qaeda on a single source.

“Detainee Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi — who had significant responsibility for training — has told us that Iraq provided unspecified chemical or biological weapons training for two al-Qa’ida members beginning in December 2000,” the NIE says. “He has claimed, however, that Iraq never sent any chemical, biological, or nuclear substances — or any trainers — to al-Qa’ida in Afghanistan.”

Al-Libi was the emir of the Khaldan training camp in Afghanistan, which the Taliban closed prior to 9/11 because al-Libi refused to turn over control to Osama bin Laden.

Last December, the Senate Intelligence Committee released a declassified summary of [its so-called Torture Report](#) on the CIA’s “enhanced interrogation” program. A footnote stated that al-Libi, a Libyan national, “reported while in [redacted] custody that Iraq was supporting al-Qa’ida and providing assistance with chemical and biological weapons.”

“Some of this information was cited by Secretary [of State Colin] Powell in his speech to the United Nations, and was used as a justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq,” the Senate torture report said. “Ibn Shaykh al-Libi recanted the claim after he was rendered to CIA custody on February [redacted] 2003, claiming that he had been tortured by the [redacted], and only told them what he assessed they wanted to hear.”

Al-Libi reportedly [committed suicide](#) in a Libyan prison in 2009, about a month after human rights investigators met with him.

The NIE goes on to say that “none of the [redacted] al-Qa’ida members captured during [the Afghanistan war] report having been trained in Iraq or by Iraqi trainers elsewhere, but given al-Qa’ida’s interest over the years in training and expertise from outside sources, we cannot

discount reports of such training entirely.”

All told, this is the most damning language in the NIE about Hussein’s links to al Qaeda: While the Iraqi president “has not endorsed al-Qa’ida’s overall agenda and has been suspicious of Islamist movements in general, apparently he has not been averse to some contacts with the organization.”

The NIE suggests that the CIA had sources within the media to substantiate details about meetings between al Qaeda and top Iraqi government officials held during the 1990s and 2002 — but some were not very reliable. “Several dozen additional direct or indirect meetings are attested to by less reliable clandestine and press sources over the same period,” the NIE says.

The RAND report noted, “The fact that the NIE concluded that there was no operational tie between Saddam and al Qaeda did not offset this alarming assessment.”

The NIE also restores another previously unknown piece of “intelligence”: a suggestion that Iraq was possibly behind the letters laced with anthrax sent to news organizations and senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy a week after the 9/11 attacks. The attacks killed five people and sickened 17 others.

“We have no intelligence information linking Iraq to the fall 2001 attacks in the United States, but Iraq has the capability to produce spores of *Bacillus anthracis* — the causative agent of anthrax — similar to the dry spores used in the letters,” the NIE said. “The spores found in the Daschle and Leahy letters are highly purified, probably requiring a high level of skill and expertise in working with bacterial spores. Iraqi scientists could have such expertise,” although samples of a biological agent Iraq was known to have used as an anthrax simulant “were not as pure as the anthrax spores in the letters.”

Paul Pillar, a former veteran CIA analyst for the Middle East who was in charge of coordinating the intelligence community’s assessments on Iraq, told VICE news that “the NIE’s bio weapons claims” was based on unreliable sources such as Ahmad Chalabi, the former head of the Iraqi National Congress, an opposition group supported by the US.

“There was an insufficient critical skepticism about some of the source material,” he now says about the unredacted NIE. “I think there should have been agnosticism expressed in the main judgments. It would have been a better paper if it were more carefully drafted in that sort of direction.”

But Pillar, now a visiting professor at Georgetown University, added that the Bush administration had already made the decision to go to war in Iraq, so the NIE “didn’t influence [their] decision.” Pillar added that he was told by congressional aides that only a half-dozen senators and a few House members read past the NIE’s five-page summary.

David Kay, a former Iraq weapons inspector who also headed the Iraq Survey Group, [told Frontline](#) that the intelligence community did a “poor job” on the NIE, “probably the worst of the modern NIE’s, partly explained by the pressure, but more importantly explained by the lack of information they had. And it was trying to drive towards a policy conclusion where the information just simply didn’t support it.”

The most controversial part of the NIE, which has been picked apart hundreds of times over

the past decade and has been thoroughly debunked, pertained to a section about Iraq's attempts to acquire aluminum tubes. The Bush administration claimed that this was evidence that Iraq was pursuing a nuclear weapon.

National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated at the time on CNN that the tubes "are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs," and that "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

The version of the NIE released in 2004 redacted the aluminum tubes section in its entirety. But the newly declassified assessment unredacts a majority of it and shows that the intelligence community was unsure why "Saddam is personally interested in the procurement of aluminum tubes." The US Department of Energy concluded that the dimensions of the aluminum tubes were "consistent with applications to rocket motors" and "this is the more likely end use." The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research also disagreed with the intelligence community's assertions that Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear weapons program.

The CIA's [25-page unclassified summary](#) of the NIE released in 2002 did not contain the State or Energy Departments' dissent.

"Apart from being influenced by policymakers' desires, there were several other reasons that the NIE was flawed," the RAND study concluded. "Evidence on mobile biological labs, uranium ore purchases from Niger, and unmanned-aerial-vehicle delivery systems for WMDs all proved to be false. It was produced in a hurry. Human intelligence was scarce and unreliable. While many pieces of evidence were questionable, the magnitude of the questionable evidence had the effect of making the NIE more convincing and ominous. The basic case that Saddam had WMDs seemed more plausible to analysts than the alternative case that he had destroyed them. And analysts knew that Saddam had a history of deception, so evidence against Saddam's possession of WMDs was often seen as deception."

According to the latest figures compiled by Iraq Body Count, to date more than 200,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed, although other sources say the casualties are twice as high. More than 4,000 US soldiers have been killed in Iraq, and tens of thousands more have been injured and maimed. The war has [cost](#) US taxpayers more than \$800 billion.

In an [interview with VICE founder Shane Smith](#), Obama said the rise of the Islamic State was a direct result of the disastrous invasion.

"ISIL is a direct outgrowth of al Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion," Obama said. "Which is an example of unintended consequences. Which is why we should generally aim before we shoot."

[Iraq October 2002 NIE on WMDs \(unedacted version\)](#)

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