

# Iraq Intel: Forgery, Hyperbole, Half-Truth

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: Forgery, Hyperbole, Half-Truth: A Problem

We last wrote you immediately after Secretary of State Powell's UN speech on February 5, in an attempt to convey our concerns that insufficient attention was being given to wider intelligence-related issues at stake in the conflict with Iraq. Your speech yesterday evening did nothing to allay those concerns. And the acerbic exchanges of the past few weeks have left the United States more isolated than at any time in the history of the republic and the American people more polarized.

Today we write with an increased sense of urgency and responsibility. Responsibility, because you appear to be genuinely puzzled at the widespread opposition to your policy on Iraq and because we have become convinced that those of your advisers who do understand what is happening are reluctant to be up front with you about it. As veterans of the CIA and other intelligence agencies, the posture we find ourselves in is as familiar as it is challenging. We feel a continuing responsibility to "tell it like it is", or at least as we see it, without fear or favor. Better to hear it from extended family than not at all; we hope you will take what follows in that vein.

We cannot escape the conclusion that you have been badly misinformed. It was reported yesterday that your generals in the Persian Gulf area have become increasingly concerned over sandstorms. To us this is a metaphor for the shifting sand-type "intelligence" upon which your policy has been built. Worse still, it has become increasingly clear that the sharp drop in US credibility abroad is largely a function of the rather transparent abuse of intelligence reporting and the dubious conclusions drawn from that reporting, the ones that underpin your decisions on Iraq.

## **Flashback to Vietnam**

Many of us cut our intelligence teeth during the sixties. We remember the arrogance and flawed thinking that sucked us into the quagmire of Vietnam. The French, it turned out, knew better. And they looked on with wonderment at Washington's misplaced confidence, its single-minded hubris, as it embarked on a venture the French knew from their own experience could only meet a dead end.

This was hardly a secret. It was widely known that the French general sent off to survey the possibility of regaining Vietnam for France after World War II reported that the operation would take a half-million troops, and even then it could not be successful.

Nevertheless, President Johnson, heeding the ill-informed advice of civilian leaders of the Pentagon with no experience in war, let himself get drawn in past the point of no return. In the process, he played fast and loose with intelligence to get the Tonkin Gulf resolution through Congress so that he could prosecute the war. To that misguided war he mortgaged his political future, which was in shambles when he found himself unable to extricate himself from the morass.

Quite apart from what happened to President Johnson, the Vietnam War was the most serious US foreign policy blunder in modern times, until now.

### **Forgery**

In your state-of-the-union address you spoke of Iraq's pre-1991 focus on how to "enrich uranium for a bomb" and added, "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." No doubt you have now been told that this information was based on bogus correspondence between Iraq and Niger. Answering a question on this last week, Secretary Powell conceded, with neither apology nor apparent embarrassment, that the documents in question, which the US and UK had provided to the UN to show that Iraq is still pursuing nuclear weapons, were forgeries. Powell was short: "If that information is inaccurate, fine."

But it is anything but fine. This kind of episode inflicts serious damage on US credibility abroad, the more so, as it appears neither you nor your advisers and political supporters are in hot pursuit of those responsible. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Pat Roberts has shown little enthusiasm for finding out what went awry. Committee Vice-Chairman, Jay Rockefeller, suggested that the FBI be enlisted to find the perpetrators of the forgeries, which US officials say contain "laughable and child-like errors," and to determine why the CIA did not recognize them as forgeries. But Roberts indicated through a committee spokeswoman that he believes it is "inappropriate for the FBI to investigate at this point." Foreign observers do not have to be paranoid to suspect some kind of cover-up.

### **Who Did It? Who Cares!**

Last week Wisconsin Congressman Dave Obey cited a recent press report suggesting that a foreign government might be behind the forgeries as part of an effort to

build support for military action against Iraq and asked Secretary Powell if he could identify that foreign government. Powell said he could not do so "with confidence." Nor did he appear in the slightest interested.

We think you should be. In the absence of hard evidence one looks for those with motive and capability. The fabrication of false documentation, particularly what purports to be official correspondence between the agencies of two governments, is a major undertaking requiring advanced technical skills normally available only in a sophisticated intelligence service. And yet the forgeries proved to be a sloppy piece of work.

Chalk it up to professional pride by (past) association, but unless the CIA's capabilities have drastically eroded over recent years, the legendary expertise of CIA technical specialists, combined with the crudeness of the forgeries, leave us persuaded that the CIA did not craft the bogus documents. Britain's MI-6 is equally adept at such things. Thus, except in the unlikely event that crafting forgery was left to second-stringers, it seems unlikely that the British were the original source.

We find ourselves wondering if amateur intelligence operatives in the Pentagon basement and/or at 10 Downing Street were involved and need to be called on the carpet. We would urge you strongly to determine the provenance. This is not trivial matter. As our VIPS colleague (and former CIA Chief of Station) Ray Close has noted, "If anyone in Washington deliberately practiced disinformation in this way against another element of our own government or wittingly passed fabricated information to the UN, this could do permanent damage to the commitment to competence and integrity on which the whole American foreign policy process depends."

The lack of any strong reaction from the White House feeds the suspicion that the US was somehow involved in, or at least condones, the forgery. It is important for you to know that, although credibility-destroying stories like this rarely find their way into the largely cowed US media, they do grab headlines abroad among those less disposed to give the US the benefit of the doubt. As you know better than anyone, a year and a half after 9/11 the still traumatized US public remains much more inclined toward unquestioning trust in the presidency. Over time that child-like trust can be expected to erode, if preventive maintenance is not performed, and hyperbole shunned.

### **Hyperbole**

The forgery aside, the administration's handling of the issue of whether Iraq is continuing to develop nuclear weapons has done particularly severe damage to US credibility. On October 7 your speechwriters had you claim that Iraq might be

able to produce a nuclear weapon in less than a year. Formal US intelligence estimates, sanitized versions of which have been made public, hold that Iraq will be unable to produce a nuclear weapon until the end of the decade, if then. In that same speech you claimed that "the evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program", a claim reiterated by Vice President Cheney on Meet the Press on March 16.

Reporting to the UN Security Council in recent months, UN chief nuclear inspector Mohammed ElBaradei has asserted that the inspectors have found no evidence that Iraq has reconstituted its nuclear weapons program. Some suspect that the US does have such evidence but has not shared it with the UN because Washington has been determined to avoid doing anything that could help the inspections process succeed. Others believe the "evidence" to be of a piece with the forgery, in all likelihood crafted by Richard Perle's Pentagon Plumbers. Either way, the US takes a large black eye in public opinion abroad.

Then there are those controversial aluminum tubes which you have cited in major speeches as evidence of a continuing effort on Iraq's part to produce nuclear weapons. Aside from one analyst in the CIA and the people reporting to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, there is virtually unanimous agreement within the intelligence, engineering, and scientific communities with ElBaradei's finding that "it was highly unlikely" that the tubes could have been used to produce nuclear material. It is not enough for Vice President Cheney to dismiss ElBaradei's findings. Those who have followed these issues closely are left wondering why, if the vice president has evidence to support his own view, he does not share it with the UN.

### **Intelligence Scant**

In your speech yesterday evening you stressed that intelligence "leaves no doubt that the Iraqi regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised." And yet even the Washington Post, whose editors have given unswerving support to your policy on Iraq, is awash with reports that congressional leaders, for example, have been given no specific intelligence on the number of banned weapons in Iraq or where they are hidden. One official, who is regularly briefed by the CIA, commented recently that such evidence as does exist is "only circumstantial." Another said he questioned whether the administration is shaping intelligence for political purposes. And, in a moment of unusual candor, one senior intelligence analyst suggested that one reason why UN inspectors have had such trouble finding weapons caches is that "there may not be much of a stockpile."

Having backed off suggestions early last year that Iraq may already have nuclear weapons, your administration continues to assert that Iraq has significant

quantities of other weapons of mass destruction. But by all indications, this is belief, not proven fact. This has led the likes of Thomas Powers, a very knowledgeable author on intelligence, to conclude that "the plain fact is that the Central Intelligence Agency doesn't know what Mr. Hussein has, if anything, or even who knows the answers, if anyone."

This does not inspire confidence. What is needed is candor, candor of the kind you used in one portion of your speech on October 7. Just two paragraphs before you claimed that Iraq is "reconstituting" its nuclear weapons program, you said, "Many people have asked how close Saddam Hussein is to developing a nuclear weapon. Well, we don't know exactly, and that's the problem."

True, candor can weaken a case that one is trying to build. We are reminded of a remarkable sentence that leapt out of FBI Director Mueller's testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee on February 11, a sentence that does actually parse, but nonetheless leaves one scratching one's head. Mueller: "The greatest threat is from al-Qaeda cells in the US that we have not yet identified."

This seems to be the tack that CIA Director Tenet is taking behind closed doors; i.e., the greatest threat from Iraq is the weapons we have not yet identified but believe are there.

It is not possible to end this section on hyperbole without giving Oscars to Secretaries Rumsfeld and Powell, who have outdone themselves in their zeal to establish a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda. You will recall that Rumsfeld described the evidence, widely recognized to be dubious, as "bulletproof," and Powell characterized the relationship as a "partnership!" Your assertion last evening that "the terrorist threat to America and the world will be diminished the moment that Saddam Hussein is disarmed" falls into the same category. We believe it far more likely that our country is in for long periods of red and orange color codes.

### **Half-Truth**

Here we shall limit ourselves to one example, although the number that could be adduced is legion.

You may recall that a Cambridge University analyst recently revealed that a major portion of a British intelligence document on Iraq had been plagiarized from a term paper by a graduate student in California, information described by Secretary Powell to the UN Security Council as "exquisite" intelligence. That same analyst has now acquired from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) the transcript of the debriefing of Iraqi Gen. Hussein Kamel, son-in-law of Saddam Hussein, who defected in 1995.

Kamel for ten years ran Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile development programs, and some of the information he provided has been highly touted by senior US policymakers, from the president on down. But the transcript reveals that Kamel also said that in 1991 Iraq destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them. This part of the debriefing was suppressed until Newsweek ran a story on it on February 24, 2003.

We do not for a minute take all of what Kamel said at face value. Rather we believe the Iraqis retain some chemical and biological warfare capability. What this episode suggests, though, is a preference on the part of US officials to release only that information that supports the case they wish to make against Iraq.

### **In Sum**

What conclusions can be drawn from the above? Simply that forgery, hyperbole, and half-truths provide a sandy foundation from which to launch a major war.

Equally important, there is danger in the temptation to let the conflict with Iraq determine our attitude toward the entire gamut of foreign threats with which you and your principal advisers need to be concerned. Threats to US security interests must be prioritized and judged on their own terms. In our judgment as intelligence professionals, there are two real and present dangers today.

1. The upsurge in terrorism in the US and against American facilities and personnel abroad that we believe would inevitably flow from a US invasion of Iraq. Concern over this is particularly well expressed in the February 26 letter from FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley to Director Mueller, a letter well worth your study.

2. North Korea poses a particular danger, although what form this might take is hard to predict. Pyongyang sees itself as the next target of your policy of preemption and, as its recent actions demonstrate, will take advantage of US pre-occupation with Iraq both to strengthen its defenses and to test US and South Korean responses. Although North Korea is economically weak, its armed forces are huge, well armed, and capable. It is entirely possible that the North will decide to mount a provocation to test the tripwire provided by the presence of US forces in South Korea. Given the closeness of Seoul to the border with the North and the reality that North Korean conventional forces far outnumber those of the South, a North Korean adventure could easily force you to face an abrupt, unwelcome decision regarding the use of nuclear weapons, a choice that your predecessors took great pains to avoid.

We suggest strongly that you order the Intelligence Community to undertake, on an expedited basis, a Special National Intelligence Estimate on North Korea, and that you defer any military action against Iraq until you have had a chance to give appropriate weight to the implications of the challenge the US might face on the Korean peninsula.

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