

Rise of Another CIA Yes Man

Exclusive: The gross manipulation of CIA analysis under George W. Bush pushed a new generation of “yes men” into the agency’s top ranks. Now one of those aspiring bureaucrats will be Gen. David Petraeus’s right-hand man, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern. **(Also, at end of article, see special comments from several CIA insiders.)**

By Ray McGovern

As Gen. David Petraeus prepares to take the helm at CIA in September, he can expect unswerving loyalty from his likely deputy, Michael Morell, who has been acting director since July when Leon Panetta left to become Secretary of Defense.

Like many senior CIA officials in recent years, Morell’s record is checkered, at best. He held key jobs in intelligence analysis over the past decade as the CIA often served as a handmaiden to the war propagandists.

As for Michael Morell, as with many other successful CIA careerists, his strongest suit seemed to be pleasing his boss and not antagonizing the White House. If past is precedent, his loyalty will be to Petraeus, not necessarily to the truth.

Forgive me if my thinking about loyalty to the facts seems “obsolete” or “quaint” or if it seems unfair to expect CIA analysts to put their careers on the line when politicians and ideologues are misleading the nation to war but those were the principles that analysts of my generation tried to uphold.

The recent tendency at CIA to give politicians what they want to hear rather than the hard truth is not healthy for the Republic that we were all sworn to serve.

And, if Petraeus’s own past is precedent, loyalty to the four-star general will not always be synonymous with loyalty to the truth.

Burnishing an Image

However, you will get no indication of this troubling reality from the flattering, but thin, feature about Michael Morell, “Mr. Insider Will Guide Petraeus at the CIA,” by Siobhan Gorman in the *Wall Street Journal* on Aug. 26.

Gorman is normally a solid reporter; but either she did not perform due diligence and let herself be snookered, or her editors stepped in to ensure her story was consonant with the image Petraeus and the Establishment wish to create for Morell.

Before her “rare” interview with Morell, Gorman should have taken a close look at former CIA Director George Tenet’s memoir, *At the Center of the*

Storm, to learn what Tenet says about Morell's record during the last decade's dark days of misleading and dishonest intelligence.

In Tenet's personal account of the CIA's failures around 9/11 and the Iraq War, Morell Tenet's former executive assistant is generally treated kindly, but Tenet puts Morell at the center of two key fiascos: he "coordinated the CIA review" of Secretary of State Colin Powell's infamous Feb. 5, 2003 address to the United Nations and he served as the regular CIA briefer to President George W. Bush.

Putting Access Before Honesty

So, Morell was there as Bush blew off early CIA warnings about the possibility of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden being "determined to strike in the US" and while Bush and his neoconservative inner circle were concocting intelligence to justify invading Iraq.

Tenet credits Morell with suggesting to analysts that they prepare a report on the terrorist threat, which became the *President's Daily Brief* that was handed to Bush on Aug. 6, 2001, at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. Bush brushed aside the warning with a reported comment to the CIA briefer, "all right, you've covered your ass," and went off fishing.

Though Tenet said Morell got along well with Bush, it appears the President didn't pay much heed to any CIA information coming from Morell, at least not anything that went against what Bush wanted to hear nor did Morell seem to risk offending the President by pushing these contrary points.

After the Aug. 6 *PDB* was delivered, Tenet wrote that he needed to follow it up, and did so with a trip to Crawford 11 days later, when Tenet remembers Bush driving him around in a pickup truck as Tenet made "small talk about the flora and fauna."

Morell also was the CIA briefer with Bush in Florida on the morning of 9/11 when news arrived about the attacks on New York City's Twin Towers. Later, Bush told Morell "that if we [the CIA] learned anything definitive about the attack, he wanted to be the first to know," Tenet wrote, adding:

"Wiry, youthful looking, and extremely bright, Mike speaks in staccato-like bursts that get to the bottom line very quickly. He and George Bush had hit it off almost immediately. In a crisis like this, Mike was the perfect guy for us to have by the commander-in-chief's side."

However, it appears Morell was not willing to risk his rapport with Bush by challenging the President's desire to pivot from retaliatory strikes against Afghanistan to a full-scale invasion of Iraq based on false and misleading intelligence.

Tenet also described Morell's role in organizing the review of the "intelligence" that went into Powell's speech, which let slip the dogs of war by presenting a thoroughly deceptive account of the Iraqi threat, what Powell later called a "blot" on his record.

Though the CIA embraced many of Powell's misleading assertions, Tenet recounted one exchange in which Morell stood up to John Hannah, an aide to Vice President Dick Cheney, regarding Iraq's alleged efforts to obtain yellowcake uranium from Niger.

"Hannah asked Mike Morell, who was coordinating the review of the speech for CIA, why the Niger uranium story wasn't in the latest draft," Tenet wrote. "'Because we don't believe it,' Mike told him. 'I thought you did,' Hannah said. After much wrangling and precious time lost in explaining our doubts, Hannah understood why we believed it was inappropriate for Colin to use the Niger material in his speech."

Despite that one pushback, the CIA analysts mostly bent to pressures coming from the White House for an alarmist treatment of allegations about the "weapons of mass destruction," which turned out not to be in Iraq.

Of the CIA's finished intelligence product, it was reportedly the *PDB* delivered by Morell that most exaggerated the danger.

Not Mistaken, Dishonest

It is sad to have to recall that this was not "erroneous," but rather fraudulent intelligence. Announcing on June 5, 2008, the bipartisan conclusions from a five-year study by the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sen. Jay Rockefeller described the intelligence conjured up to "justify" war on Iraq as "uncorroborated, contradicted, or even non-existent."

Rockefeller's comments call to mind what Tenet told his British counterpart, Sir Richard Dearlove, on July 20, 2002, after former Prime Minister Tony Blair sent Dearlove to the CIA to get the latest scoop on how the U.S. planned to "justify" the attack on Iraq.

According to the official British minutes of a cabinet-level planning session chaired by Blair on July 23, 2002, at 10 Downing Street, Tenet made clear to Dearlove that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" to bring "regime change" to Iraq.

Could it be that Tenet would let the British in on this dirty little secret and keep George W. Bush's personal briefer, Michael Morell, in the dark? Seems unlikely.

But even if Morell were not fully informed about the high-level scheme for war, would he have been with his prized relationship with the President the most appropriate senior official to "coordinate the CIA review" of Powell's speech?

The 'Sinister Nexus'

In the *Wall Street Journal* feature, reporter Gorman was assured of something else about Morell's role in preparing the intelligence on Iraq. According to Gorman, "His [Morell's] team didn't handle the analysis that erroneously concluded the Iraqi government had weapons of mass destruction." I guess that depends on your definition of "team."

But what about alleged ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the second bogus issue used to “justify” attacking Iraq? There Morell seemed to be on better ground, telling Gorman that his “team” had concluded that there had been earlier contacts between Iraqi intelligence and al-Qaeda, but there were no links to al-Qaeda operations at the time.

Still, Morell didn’t seem to have pressed this point very hard while coordinating the CIA’s review of Powell’s UN speech. If Morell had, one has to wonder why Powell was fed, and swallowed, the line about a “sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network?”

ABC’s Brian Ross shot down that canard just hours after Powell spoke. Citing a BBC report from London, Ross noted that British intelligence had concluded there was no evidence to support the theory that al-Qaeda and Iraq were working together.

Virtually all intelligence analysts with no axes to grind, after sifting through thousands of reports, had long since come to that same conclusion.

Did Secretary Powell have to learn about the Iraq/al-Qaeda disconnect from the BBC? Later, Powell was livid at having been led down the garden path by the likes of Tenet, Tenet’s pandering deputy John McLaughlin, and Morell, a Tenet protégé.

Tenet and McLaughlin were also co-liars-in-chief regarding those mobile biological weapons factories, a yarn spun by the infamous source called “Curveball.” In his memoir, Tenet doesn’t describe Morell’s role in promoting, or at least acquiescing in depicting, the charlatan “Curveball” as a reliable intelligence source for a key portion of Powell’s speech.

And, if you think it’s unfair to expect CIA bureaucrats to risk their careers by challenging the political desires of the White House, it’s worth noting the one major exception to the CIA’s sorry record during George W. Bush’s presidency and how honest CIA analysts helped prevent another unnecessary war.

After former chief of State Department intelligence Tom Fingar was put in charge of National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), a thoroughly professional NIE in late 2007 concluded unanimously and “with high confidence” that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear weapon in mid-2003.

President Bush’s own memoir leaves no doubt that this Estimate played a huge role in spiking White House plans for war on Iran. It’s a pity that the Estimate on Iran should be an exception to the rule.

Much to Be Humble About

Yet, in the *Wall Street Journal* feature, Michael Morell lectures Gorman on the basics and the limits of intelligence analysis.

“We end up having bits of information that have a multitude of possible explanations,” said Morell. “You’ve got to be really humble about the business we’re in.”

Well, yes indeed. The WSJ also ran a sidebar with a list of the following CIA failures and Morell's facile potions for cures:

–2001, Sept. 11 attacks: A failure of both intelligence collection and analysis. Lesson: A need to better penetrate U.S. adversaries.

–2003, Iraq weapons of mass destruction: Analysts erroneously concluded Iraq had WMDs. Lesson: Analysts must describe confidence levels in conclusions, consider alternate explanations.

–2009, Bombing of CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan: Doubts about the asset-turned-suicide-bomber didn't get to the right people. Lesson: Share information with the people who most need it.

Is this Morell fellow on the ball, or what?

Let's address these one by one:

–9/11 need not have happened if Tenet and his protégés simply shared the information needed by the FBI and others. See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Tenet Hide Key 9/11 Info?](#)" Or, Tenet and Morell might have risked their cozy relationship with Bush by challenging his casual dismissal of the existing multiple warnings.

–The WMD not in Iraq? How about promoting and rewarding honest analysts; no "fixing" allowed. Face down White House pressure. We used to do it all the time. We used to have career protection for doing it.

–On the tragedy at Khost? Well, how about some basic training in tradecraft, including rudimentary security precautions.

And speaking of rudimentary security precautions: Morell bragged to Gorman that he had recently flown to Kabul to brief Petraeus, carrying a blue briefing book emblazoned with the CIA seal and detailing the CIA's every critical program, organization and operation.

"It was the most highly classified guide that I've ever seen in my life" was Petraeus's wow-response.

The appropriate reaction, in my professional view, would have been to fire Morell on the spot for recklessness. He should know better. They down aircraft, blow up motorcades and shoot people in Afghanistan, you know. Is it really such a great idea to carry a briefing book with the CIA's most sensitive secrets into that environment?

Moreover, bragging about this cavalier approach to protecting sensitive documents sends shivers down the backs of foreign intelligence officers, adding to their reluctance to share delicate information with us.

Loosening Leashes on Dogs of War

There is ironic serendipity in the fact that the *WSJ* feature on Morell appeared on Aug. 26, exactly nine years after the fraudulent speech given by

Vice President Dick Cheney before the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville.

And just four days before the nation's bookstores host *In My Time*, Cheney's *apologia pro vita sua*. (The advance promotion includes his personal warning that the book will have "heads exploding" all over Washington.)

There are huge lessons in what happened and what did not happen immediately after Cheney's Aug. 26, 2002, thinly disguised call for an attack on Iraq, and how those who recognized the lies could not summon enough courage to try to stop the juggernaut toward war.

The Fawning Corporate Media and the cowering careerists at CIA were among the main culprits. But there were others who, if they have a conscience and are honest with themselves, may still be finding it difficult to look in the mirror nine years later.

In his August 2002 speech, Cheney launched the virulent propaganda campaign for an aggressive war against Iraq, telling the audience in Nashville:

"Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us."

This was no innocent mistake by the Vice President; it was a bald-faced lie, a falsehood that opened the gates to a hellish conflict that has ripped apart Iraq, bringing untold death and destruction.

Nine years later it is well worth recalling this lie on behalf of the 4,500 U.S. troops killed in Iraq, the many more wounded, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed, and the five million displaced from their homes.

Let it be widely understood that on Aug. 26, 2002, Dick Cheney set the meretricious terms of reference for war.

Hear No Evil, Speak No Truth

Sitting on the same stage that evening was former CENTCOM commander Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, who was being honored at the VFW convention. Zinni later said he was shocked to hear Cheney's depiction of intelligence (Iraq has WMD and is amassing them to use against us) that did not square with what he knew.

Although Zinni had retired two years before, his role as consultant had enabled him to stay up to date on key intelligence findings.

"There was no solid proof that Saddam had WMD. ... I heard a case being made to go to war," Zinni told *Meet the Press* **three and a half years later**.

Zinni is normally a straight shooter with a good bit of courage. And so, the question lingers: why did he not go public when he first heard Cheney's lie?

What seems operative here, I fear, is an all-too-familiar conundrum at senior levels where people have been conditioned not to rock the boat, not to risk

their standing within the Washington Establishment.

Almost always, the results are bad. I would bet a tidy sum that Zinni regrets having let his reaction be shaped, as it apparently was, by a misguided kind of professional courtesy and/or slavish adherence to classification restrictions.

After all, he was one of the very few credible senior officials who might have prevented a war of aggression, which the Nuremberg Tribunals after World War II branded the "supreme international crime."

Zinni was not the only one taken aback by Cheney's words. Then-CIA Director George Tenet said Cheney's speech took him completely by surprise.

In his memoir, Tenet wrote, "I had the impression that the president wasn't any more aware than we were of what his number-two was going to say to the VFW until he said it." But like Br'er Fox, Tenet didn't say nothing.

Tenet claims he didn't even check it all out with either Cheney or Bush after Cheney's speech. Yet, could Cheney's twisting of the data not have been anticipated? Indeed, weren't Tenet and his CIA in on the determination to make a case for war?

In a way, that conclusion is a no-brainer. As mentioned above, just five weeks before Cheney's speech, Tenet himself had explained to his British counterpart that the President had decided to make war on Iraq for regime change and "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

Cheney simply was unveiling the war rationale to the public. Several weeks later, when Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Bob Graham insisted on a National Intelligence Estimate before any vote in Congress, Tenet told his folks to prepare one that dovetailed with Cheney's unsupported rhetoric.

Sadly, my former colleagues did. And where was Michael Morell in this process? Clearly, he did nothing to destroy his career or put himself too much on the outs at the White House.

The Sales Job

When Bush's senior advisers came back to town after Labor Day 2002, the next five weeks were devoted to selling the war, a major "new product" that, as then-White House chief of staff Andy Card explained, one shouldn't introduce in the month of August.

Card, too, apparently had no idea that Cheney would jump the gun as "fixer-in-chief." At that point, the Tenets, McLaughlins and Morells of this world fell right into line.

After assuring themselves that Tenet was a reliable salesman, Cheney and then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld allowed him to play a supporting role in advertising bogus claims about aluminum tubes for uranium enrichment and mobile trailers for manufacturing biological warfare agents.

The hyped and bogus intelligence succeeded in scaring Congress into voting for war on Oct. 10 and 11, 2002.

In my view, it strains credulity to think that Michael Morell was unaware of the fraudulent nature of this campaign. Yet, like all too many others, he mostly kept quiet, and he got promoted. That's how it works in Washington these days.

This kind of malleability regarding twisting facts to support war has worked well for Petraeus, too.

Today, there is little chance Petraeus can be unaware of Morell's pedigree. Given Petraeus's own experience in climbing the career ladder, the general may even harbor an admiration for Morell's extraordinary willingness to please.

The two will make a fine pair for Official Washington, though not for those "quaint" folks who put a high premium on integrity.

As for Dick Cheney who was once given the well-deserved sobriquet "Vice President for Torture" in a *Washington Post* editorial, I just wish he would disappear so he would stop bringing out the worst in everyone.

I found my own feelings mirrored in a plaintive comment from a good friend who prays a lot. She said, "I keep praying for Dick Cheney, especially when he goes into the hospital. But he always comes out again."

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Note: I sent a draft of the above article to former colleagues, intelligence officers who served in CIA more recently than I and left after clocking many years at very senior levels. The comments I received from them turned out to be so germane and incisive that I include them below for those wanting a better feel for what really goes on.

The first is from a recently retired Senior Intelligence Service officer.

Ray:

You make a good case that Morell isn't going to be the objective, unpoliticized deputy that Petraeus is going to need. He may be what Petraeus wants, but not what he needs to do a good job.

You make the case that, like McLaughlin, he's going to give the veneer of an analyst's integrity to decision making without any of the burdens (integrity, nonpoliticization, tradecraft, etc.) that make the analyst imprimatur meaningful. Like McLaughlin, he seems eager to play handmaiden to a predetermined agenda.

In fact, the case you make, correctly, is that Morell is the quintessential intelligence community bureaucrat who has survived and prospered by subscribing to a particular worldview and steering clear of the alternatives declared off-limits by the U.S. right wing.

A couple of more specific comments:

–Your use of the word “loyalty”: Morell will be loyal to his boss i.e., he will not upset him the way McLaughlin was loyal to Tenet. That ignores, of course, that the deputy’s job is to protect his boss from himself and from his own biases.

McLaughlin’s “loyalty” to Tenet wound up screwing Tenet, and Morell’s “loyalty” to Petraeus is going to do the same. A man like Petraeus shows up with HUGE blind spots, and Morell rather than help him see into those blind spots almost certainly will reinforce them.

Your use of the word “loyalty” conveys that it’s a virus that will harm Petraeus. And that’s what it is.

The “winds blowing from the White House” requires a little elaboration. Just as Panetta was captured, so has this White House been via the person of CIA veteran John Brennan on site. Brennan, of course, is the fellow who could not get confirmed as director because of his well known past history, so he’s running things from the White House.

The number of Obama flip-flops on intelligence issues has been stunning. The “winds,” you might say, have been blowing from CIA’s own Tenet protégé Brennan.

I personally would say Morell, like McLaughlin, knows and accepts that the operations people and their rightwing allies in the Admin, at the Pentagon, and in the Congress (and there are many!) set the direction the wind blows; Morell will always urge his boss to tack accordingly.

In fact, the parallels with McLaughlin are strong, an analysis directorate fellow of modest capabilities, desperate for acceptance by the operations people and the rightwing downtown, jettisoning tradecraft and going with the flow.

The Gorman piece in the *WSJ* was disgraceful cooptation in action. The fact that she could list his many failures as “lessons learned” was amazing. It’s as if the rightwing were signaling to Petraeus not to judge Morell by his repeated failures and repeated inaction; judge him by our right-wing love for him.

On the many failures, I don’t have first-hand knowledge of Morell’s role in the historic intelligence cook-job of WMD and the fateful State of the Union lies about yellow cake; all I know is that Alan Foley was the designated representative in that coordination.

But your sourcing of Tenet on that is compelling, and I think your sanity-check on Morell’s performance is fair.

-Words like "wow-response" are also fair, and effective. The "wow" factor is used to shock and awe people to squeeze them into the tiny space in which conformity is expected and challenges rejected.

For me, particularly with a weak Administration with no policy bearings like this one, the problem is that operations are done for operations' sake sans policy, sans review.

I'm reading Joby Warrick's book, and his worship of targeters is somewhat jarring when there's no discussion of the number of innocent people killed and no discussion of why this is an "intelligence" vice military mission. We know why, but his readers don't making such worship rather cynical.

You're probably right that it "strains credulity" that Morell didn't know how fraudulent the whole National Intelligence Estimate on WMD in Iraq was. I just don't know, however, whether he was able intellectually to see what was going on.

He was so close to power and so close to their mindset and so eager to stay in their good graces that he may have believed all the horse manure.

Wrapped up as he was, he may not have fully appreciated the thing was especially because key elements of the intelligence community funneling info to him were also true-believers, as were those in charge of community analysis.

Who could ever have been giving Morell an alternative view? The most senior people were all true-believers. It was very much frowned upon to ask real questions.

So how could a man of Morell's background and capabilities ask them? If you preferred not to say outright that Morell was guilty of fraud, you could be somewhat more charitable and put it this way: He was surrounded by true-believers and didn't have the fortitude or candlepower, or even perceived space, to question the bogus intelligence he was involved in validating.

Not a good harbinger for the future.

The second comment (on the remarks above) is from Larry C Johnson, former CIA intelligence officer.

Your observations provide important context. The lies that paved the road to war in Iraq are being revived this week as part of the 10-year anniversary of 9/11.

We have not learned a damned thing. Meanwhile, Iraq remains a deadly place for the various Iraq factions and our actions have completely disrupted the balance of power in the Middle East. Of course, neither the media nor the majority of the pundits want to focus on that.

And a brief but important point made by first commenter in reaction:

And cranking up for Iran?

Comment from Mary McCarthy, former Senior Intelligence Service officer and White House official.

You asked if I knew Morell and what he is like. I do; you nailed it.

The only moment of discomfort is when you use Tenet as a compass point for the actual truth. Because, of course, Tenet often has his own version of the facts.