

PRESS BOX

Case Open

Why is the press avoiding the *Weekly Standard's* intelligence scoop?

By Jack Shafer

Everybody knows how the press loves to herd itself into a snarling pack to chase the story of the day. But less noticed is the press's propensity to half-close its lids, lick its paws, and contemplate its hairballs when confronted with events or revelations that contradict its prejudices.

The press experienced such a tabby moment this week following the publication of Stephen F. Hayes' cover story in the most recent *Weekly Standard* about alleged links between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. The Hayes piece, which went up on the Web Friday, quotes extensively from a classified Oct. 27, 2003, 16-page memo written by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith at the request of the Senate Intelligence Committee. The committee, which is investigating the administration's prewar intelligence claims, asked Feith to annotate his July 10 testimony, and his now-leaked memo indexes in 50 numbered points what the various alphabet intelligence agencies (CIA, FBI, DIA, NSA) had collected about a Saddam-Osama connection.

A classified memo by a top Pentagon official written at Senate committee request and containing information about scores of intelligence reports might spell news to you or me—whether you believe Saddam and Osama were collaborating or not. But except for exposure at other Murdoch media outlets (Fox News Channel, the *Australian*, the *New York Post*) and the conservative *Washington Times*, the story got no positive bounce. *Time* and *Newsweek* could have easily commented on some aspect of the story, which the Drudge Report promoted with a link on Saturday. But except for a dismissive one-paragraph mention in the Sunday *Washington Post* by Walter Pincus and a dismissive follow-up by Pincus in today's (Tuesday's) *Post* pegged to the news that the Justice Department will investigate the leak, the mainstream press has largely ignored Hayes' piece.

What's keeping the pack from tearing Hayes' story to shreds, from building on it or at least exploiting the secret document from which Hayes quotes? One possible explanation is that the mainstream press is too invested in its consensus finding that Saddam and Osama *never* teamed up and its almost theological view that Saddam and Osama *couldn't possibly have ever hooked up* because of secular/sacred differences. Holders of such rigid views tend to reject any new information that may disturb their cognitive equilibrium. Another explanation is that the national security press corps gave it a bye because they found nothing sufficiently new in the memo—and nothing that hadn't been trotted out previously in other guises by the Bush administration. In other words, old news ain't today's news. Another possible explanation is that the press has come to discount any information from the administration camp as “rumint,” a rumor-intelligence cocktail that should be avoided. (One willing victim of prewar rumint, the *New York Times's* Judith Miller, piped the allegations of Iraqi defectors into her paper for months and months before the war and suffered a nasty blow to her reputation as a conscientious reporter when her defectors turned out to be spewing crap.)

The Department of Defense evinced more critical interest in the leaked memo than most of the press with a Saturday, Nov. 15, press release, confirming the memo's authenticity but claiming—without naming Hayes or the *Weekly Standard*—that it had been misinterpreted: “The classified annex was not an analysis of the substantive issue of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaida, and it drew no conclusions.”

The DoD objection is a bit of a red herring. Except for the *Weekly Standard's* grandiose title “Case Closed” (it should have been titled “Case Open”), the Hayes piece

works assiduously (until its final paragraph, at least) not to oversell the memo. Hayes' ample quotations from the memo preserve much of the qualifying language that fudges any absolute case for the Saddam-Osama connection.

This doesn't prevent Pincus from letting his sources rip the memo. One anonymous "former senior intelligence officer" quoted by Pincus sniffs that the memo is not an intelligence product but "data points . . . among the millions of holdings of the intelligence agencies, many of which are simply not thought likely to be true."

Help me! Many a reporter has hitched a ride onto Page One with the leak of intelligence much rawer than the stuff in Feith's memo. You can bet the farm that if a mainstream publication had gotten the Feith memo first, it would have used it immediately—perhaps as a hook to re-examine the ongoing war between the Pentagon and CIA about how to interpret intelligence. Likewise, you'd be wise to bet your wife's farm that had a similar memo arguing *no Saddam-Osama connection* been leaked to the press, it would have generated 100 times the news interest as the Hayes story.

I write this not as a believer in the Saddam-Osama love child or as a non-believer. My mind remains open to argument and to data both raw and refined. Hayes' piece piques my curiosity, and it should pique yours. If it's true that Saddam and Osama's people danced together—if just for an evening or two—that undermines the liberal critique that Bush rashly folded Iraq into his "war on terror." And if it's true, isn't that a story? Or, conversely, if Feith's shards of information direct us to the conclusion that his people stacked the intel to justify a bogus war, isn't that a story, too? Where is the snooping, prying, nosy press that I've heard so much about?

Finally, the memo isn't Feith's best sales pitch for the Saddam-Osama connection, nor does Hayes present it as such. As the DoD press release explains, the memo is Feith's response to the Senate Intelligence Committee's request for a catalog of intelligence reports that supports his July 10 testimony, a catalog that will help the committee locate the original reports from the various intelligence agencies. Given the leaky nature of the intelligence committee—with the Democrats and Republicans aggressively venting sensitive information to the press for political advantage—I'd be disappointed if we don't see some of the meaty original reports in the coming months. For open minds, the case does remain open.

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Talking Points Memo

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By Josh Marshall

In an article today in *Slate*, Jack Shafer wonders why almost no media outlets outside the Murdoch media empire have picked up on Steve Hayes' story in the *Weekly Standard*. That's the story—"Case Closed"—about the Feith Memo and the alleged Saddam-al Qaida connection.

Among the possible explanations Shafer puts forward is the notion that the mainstream press is too invested in the idea that there were no connections at all between Saddam and al Qaida.

But, to me, that explanation doesn't even come close to passing muster. The big papers and cable networks have grabbed on to so many weak but sensationalistic Intel related stories about WMD and Iraq-al Qaida connections—even since the revelations about the Niger-uranium story—that I don't find that remotely credible.

A more probable answer—which I set forth in greater depth today in my column in *The Hill*—is that this information is not at all new.

If you've been following the intel wars you know that the group that put together this dossier started working in Doug Feith's office shortly after 9/11 and that they presented these findings—absent a few details subsequently culled from detainee interviews—at Langley in August 2002. The methods used by Feith's Pentagon analysis shop were widely panned and the consensus within the intel community was that the findings didn't pass the laugh test.

It is almost certain that the dossier—or rather the memo summarizing it—was leaked now because Feith and his ideological soul-mates at the Pentagon are profoundly on the defensive because of the WMD debacle and poor planning for post-war Iraq.

Indeed, *even within his group*, Feith's stock is close to its nadir—partly because of these sorts of mad-scientist shenanigans, but for other reasons too. The Senate intel investigation, of course, looms. And perhaps Sen. Roberts (R-Kans) won't be able to force all the blame on the CIA.

For all these reasons, they are trying to push back anywhere and everywhere they can.

So that's the main reason, I think, that people haven't picked up the story. No liberal media conspiracy. Sorry. Rather, the people who are following the intel story know that this is raw intelligence which the people in a position to know, and with access to all the information, say is either unreliable or doesn't amount to anything.

Part of the difficulty in reporting it out, I suspect, is that the memo includes, say, allegation X. On background people at the CIA might tell a reporter that the report is unreliable. But, because it's all classified, the reporter can't get the actual details which are that the report that Saddam and bin Laden were brothers separated at birth actually came from Ahmed Chalabi's aunt's maid's doorman who offered the scoop in exchange for getting bailed out of prison in Cairo where he'd gotten arrested for fencing gold crenellated TV sets smuggled in from Yemen.

In any case, presumably a different sets of facts, but you get the idea.

Also, having gotten burned so bad on the WMD mumbo-jumbo and earlier al Qaida Saddam stories, reporters are wary of these guys, especially since the hawkers of this stuff are just much better, much more effectively political than their opponents.

Having said all this, let's get it all out there. I agree with Andrew Sullivan when he says that it would be worthwhile to get out on the record which of the Feith-based claims are utterly without merit (most), which are shaky (some) and which may turn out to be true (a few).

(While we're at it, let's also do some decent reporting into the administration's strenuous and comical warping of the intel process and some decent investigations into the now-well-covered-up Valerie Plame story. *Note to Mike Allen*: get your source on the phone again. What happened to him?)

It seems clear that there *were* contacts between Iraq and al Qaida during the 1990s. Yet, in the shadowy world of intel and global nogoodnikism all sorts of people meet up now and then. Meetings, contacts in themselves don't necessarily amount to much. And all that we have been able to verify has been extremely limited—nothing to merit the claims of active collaboration the Iraq hawks made.

And when you consider that we now essentially *own* Iraq—the regime leaders, most all the government records that survive, and so forth—we shouldn't need to go on hints and allegations. We should know something close to the whole story. And from what we know now, there's not much of a story.