

FEATURE

Now They Tell Us

By Michael Massing

1.

In recent months, U.S. news organizations have rushed to expose the Bush administration's pre-war failings on Iraq. "Iraq's Arsenal Was Only on Paper," declared a recent headline in *The Washington Post*. "Pressure Rises for Probe of Prewar-Intelligence," said *The Wall Street Journal*. "So, What Went Wrong?" asked *Time*. In *The New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh described how the Pentagon set up its own intelligence unit, the Office of Special Plans, to sift for data to support the administration's claims about Iraq. And on "Truth, War and Consequences," a *Frontline* documentary that aired last October, a procession of intelligence analysts testified to the administration's use of what one of them called "faith-based intelligence."

Watching and reading all this, one is tempted to ask, where were you all before the war? Why didn't we learn more about these deceptions and concealments in the months when the administration was pressing its case for regime change—when, in short, it might have made a difference? Some maintain that the many analysts who've spoken out since the end of the war were mute before it. But that's not true. Beginning in the summer of 2002, the "intelligence community" was rent by bitter disputes over how Bush officials were using the data on Iraq. Many journalists knew about this, yet few chose to write about it.

Before the war, for instance, there was a loud debate among intelligence analysts over the information provided to the Pentagon by Iraqi opposition leader Ahmed Chalabi and defectors linked to him. Yet little of this seeped into the press. Not until September 29, 2003, for instance, did *The New York Times* get around to informing readers about the controversy over Chalabi and the defectors associated with him. In a front-page article headlined "Agency Belittles Information Given by Iraqi Defectors," Douglas Jehl reported that a study by the Defense Intelligence Agency had found that most of the information provided by defectors connected to Ahmed Chalabi "was of little or no value." Several defectors introduced to U.S. intelligence by the Iraqi National Congress, Jehl wrote, "invented or exaggerated their credentials as people with direct knowledge of the Iraqi government and its suspected unconventional weapons program."

Why, I wondered, had it taken the *Times* so long to report this? Around the time that Jehl's article appeared, I ran into a senior editor at the *Times* and asked him about it. Well, he said, some reporters at the paper had relied heavily on Chalabi as a source and so were not going to write too critically about him.

The editor did not name names, but he did not have to. The *Times*'s Judith Miller has been the subject of harsh criticism. *Slate*, *The Nation*, *Editor & Publisher*, the *American Journalism Review*, and the *Columbia Journalism Review* have all run articles accusing her of being too eager to accept official claims before the war and too eager to report the discovery of banned weapons after it.¹ Especially controversial has been Miller's alleged reliance on Chalabi and the defectors who were in touch with him. Last May, Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* wrote of an e-mail exchange between Miller and John

¹See Jack Shafer, "The *Times* Scoops That Melted," *Slate*, July 25, 2003; Russ Baker, "'Scoops' and Truth at the *Times*," *The Nation*, June 23, 2003; William E. Jackson Jr., "Miller's Latest Tale Questioned," *Editor & Publisher Online*, September 23, 2003, at www.editorandpublisher.com; Charles Layton, "Miller Brouhaha," *AJR*, August/September 2003; and John R. MacArthur, "The Lies We Bought," *CJR*, May/June 2003.

Burns, then the *Times* bureau chief in Baghdad, in which Burns rebuked Miller for writing an article about Chalabi without informing him. Miller replied that she had been covering Chalabi for about ten years and had “done most of the stories about him for our paper.” Chalabi, she added, “has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD to our paper.”

When asked about this, Miller said that the significance of her ties to Chalabi had been exaggerated. While she had met some defectors through him, she said, only one had resulted in a front-page story on WMD prior to the war. Her assertion that Chalabi had provided most of the *Times*’s front-page exclusives on WMD was, she said, part of “an angry e-mail exchange with a colleague.” In the heat of such exchanges, Miller said, “You say things that aren’t true. If you look at the record, you’ll see they aren’t true.”

This seems a peculiar admission. Yet on the broader issue of her ties to Chalabi, the record bears Miller out. Before the war, Miller wrote or co-wrote several front-page articles about Iraq’s WMD based on information from defectors; only one of them came via Chalabi. An examination of those stories, though, shows that they were open to serious question. The real problem was relying uncritically on defectors of any stripe, whether supplied by Chalabi or not.

This points to a larger problem. In the period before the war, U.S. journalists were far too reliant on sources sympathetic to the administration. Those with dissenting views—and there were more than a few—were shut out. Reflecting this, the coverage was highly deferential to the White House. This was especially apparent on the issue of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction—the heart of the President’s case for war. Despite abundant evidence of the administration’s brazen misuse of intelligence in this matter, the press repeatedly let officials get away with it. As journalists rush to chronicle the administration’s failings on Iraq, they should pay some attention to their own.

2.

On August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney gave a speech that was widely interpreted as signaling the administration’s intention to wage war on Iraq. There “is no doubt,” Cheney declared, that Saddam Hussein “has weapons of mass destruction” and is preparing to use them against the United States. Saddam, he said, not only had biological and chemical weapons but had “resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.” If allowed to continue on this course, he added, Saddam could subject his adversaries to “nuclear blackmail.” Accordingly, the United States had no choice but to take preemptive action against him.

The reference to nuclear weapons was especially telling. While Iraq was widely believed to have biological and chemical weapons, there was much more uncertainty regarding its nuclear program. In 1998, when U.N. inspectors left the country, it was generally agreed that Iraq’s nuclear program had been dismantled. The question was, what had happened in the four years since? In his speech, Cheney flatly stated that Iraq had resumed its quest for a bomb, but neither he nor any other Bush official offered any supporting evidence.

At the time of Cheney’s speech, *Times* reporters Judith Miller and Michael Gordon were investigating the state of Iraq’s arsenal. Both had reported on Iraq for many years and brought certain perspectives to the assignment. Gordon, the paper’s chief military correspondent, had after the Gulf War teamed up with retired general Bernard Trainor to write *The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (1995). A detailed account of the military’s conduct of the war, it strongly criticized the U.S. decision to leave Saddam in power. From his many years of reporting on intelligence matters, Gordon knew how shocked U.S. analysts had been after the Gulf War to find how far along Iraq had been in its effort to develop a nuclear weapon.

Miller, the coauthor of *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (1990) and *Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War* (2001), was intimately acquainted with Saddam Hussein's genius for deception. In February 1998, she (together with William Broad) had written a 4,900-word report about Iraq's secret program to produce bioweapons and its success in concealing them from the outside world. According to the story, many former weapons inspectors and other experts with whom Miller and Broad talked believed that Baghdad "is still hiding missiles and germ weapons, and the means to make both."

Later that year, Miller met one of the first defectors who gave her information—Khidhir Hamza, a scientist who, until the late 1980s, had been a senior official in Iraq's nuclear program. After fleeing Baghdad in 1994, Hamza had made his way to Washington, where in 1997 he went to work for the Institute for Science and International Security, a small think tank, which arranged for Miller and fellow *Times* reporter James Risen to interview him. The result was a front-page story relating Hamza's account of the "inner workings" of Saddam's push for a bomb prior to the Gulf War, and recounting Hamza's belief that Saddam retained the infrastructure to duplicate that effort.

While seeing Hamza, Miller told me, she also was in touch with Ahmed Chalabi, and in 2001 he arranged for her to visit Thailand to interview another defector, a civil engineer named Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri. The resulting front-page story related al-Haideri's claim to have personally renovated "secret facilities for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons." These facilities were said to exist "in underground wells, private villas and under Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad." Charles Duelfer, a former inspector, was quoted as saying that al-Haideri's account was consistent with other reports showing that Iraq had "not given up its desire" for WMD.

In 2002, Miller went to Turkey to interview yet another defector, Ahmed al-Shemri. A member of the Iraqi Officers Movement, another opposition group, al-Shemri (a pseudonym) claimed to have worked in Iraq's chemical weapons program, and he told Miller that Saddam had continued to produce VX and other chemical agents even while international inspectors were in Iraq. Iraq, he added, continued to store such agents at secret sites throughout the country.

By late summer of 2002, then, Miller had developed a circle of sources who claimed to have firsthand knowledge of Saddam's continued push for prohibited weapons. And as she and Gordon made the rounds of administration officials, they picked up a dramatic bit of information about Iraq's nuclear program. During the previous fourteen months, they were told, Iraq had tried to import thousands of high-strength aluminum tubes. The tubes had been intercepted, and specialists sent to examine them had concluded from their diameter, thickness, and other technical properties that they had only one possible use—as casings for rotors in centrifuges to enrich uranium, a key step in producing an atomic bomb.

This was dramatic news. If true, it would represent a rare piece of concrete evidence for Saddam's nuclear aspirations. And, on Sunday, September 8, 2002, the *Times* (then under the editorship of Howell Raines) led with the story, written by Miller and Gordon. "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts," the headline said. The lead was emphatic:

More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass destruction, Iraq has stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said today.

Gordon and Miller went on to cite the officials' claims about the aluminum tubes and their intended use in centrifuges to enrich uranium.

The article contained several caveats, noting, for instance, that Iraq "is not on the verge of fielding a nuclear weapon." Overall, though, the language was stark:

Mr. Hussein's dogged insistence on pursuing his nuclear ambitions, along with what defectors described in interviews as Iraq's push to improve and expand Baghdad's chemical and biological arsenals, have brought Iraq and the United States to the brink of war.

Administration "hard-liners," Gordon and Miller added, worried that "the first sign of a 'smoking gun' . . . may be a mushroom cloud." The piece concluded with a section on Iraq's chemical and biological weapons, relying heavily on the information supplied by Ahmed al-Shemri. "All of Iraq is one large storage facility," he was quoted as saying.

Gordon and Miller argue that the information about the aluminum tubes was not a leak. "The administration wasn't really ready to make its case publicly at the time," Gordon told me. "Somebody mentioned to me this tubes thing. It took a lot to check it out." Perhaps so, but administration officials were clearly delighted with the story. On that morning's talk shows, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice all referred to the information in the *Times* story. "It's now public," Cheney said on *Meet the Press*, that Saddam Hussein "has been seeking to acquire" the "kind of tubes" needed to build a centrifuge to produce highly enriched uranium, "which is what you have to have in order to build a bomb." On *CNN's Late Edition*, Rice said the tubes "are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs." She added: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud"—a phrase lifted directly from the *Times*.

In the days that followed, the story of the tubes received wide publicity. And, on September 12, 2002, President Bush himself, in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly, said that "Iraq has made several attempts to buy high-strength aluminum tubes used to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon"—evidence, he added, of its "continued appetite" for such a weapon. In the following months, the tubes would become a key prop in the administration's case for war, and the *Times* played a critical part in legitimizing it.

3.

From the start, however, the *Times* story raised doubts among many nuclear experts. One was David Albright. A physicist and former weapons inspector who directed the Institute for Science and International Security (the same group for which the defector Khidhir Hamza had worked), Albright favored a tough position on Iraq, believing Saddam to have WMD and advocating strict measures to contain him. In the summer of 2001, however, after the aluminum tubes were intercepted, he had been asked by an official to find out some information about them, and in doing so he had learned of the doubts many experts had about their suitability for use in centrifuges. Some specialists with ties to the U.S. Department of Energy and the International Atomic Energy Agency had concluded that the tubes were more likely destined for use in conventional artillery rockets, as Iraq itself had claimed. Officials at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research would later concur.

Reading the September 8 article, Albright felt it was important for the *Times* to take note of these dissenting views. In the past, he had worked frequently with Judith Miller; in fact, it was Albright who had arranged for her to interview Khidhir Hamza. Although he was unavailable when Miller tried to contact him for the September 8 story, he had several long conversations with her after it was published. He then described the doubts many centrifuge experts had about the administration's claims. And, on September 13, 2002, a follow-up story appeared. It was not, however, what Albright had expected. Six paragraphs into an article that summarized the White House's case against Iraq, Miller and Gordon noted that senior officials acknowledged "that there have been debates among intelligence experts about Iraq's intentions in trying to buy such tubes." But, they quickly noted, those officials insisted that "the dominant view" in the administration

was that the tubes were intended for use in centrifuges to enrich uranium. While some experts in the State and Energy Departments “had questioned whether Iraq might not be seeking the tubes for other purposes,” the article stated,

other, more senior, officials insisted last night that this was a minority view among intelligence experts and that the CIA had wide support, particularly among the government’s top technical experts and nuclear scientists. “This is a footnote, not a split,” a senior administration official said.

Yet Albright, having talked with a large number of those experts and scientists, knew that many did not support the CIA assessment. “Understanding the purpose of these tubes was very difficult,” he told me.

But hearing there’s a debate in the government was knowable by a journalist. That’s what I asked Judy to do—to alert people that there’s a debate, that there are competent people who disagreed with what the CIA was saying. I thought for sure she’d quote me or some people in the government who didn’t agree. It just wasn’t there.

The *Times*, he added,

made a decision to ice out the critics and insult them on top of it. People were bitter about that article—it says that the best scientists are with [the administration].

Miller rejects this. The article, she says, clearly stated that there was a debate about the tubes. As written, however, the piece gives far more attention and credence to officials who dismissed the dissenters, and the debate, as inconsequential—a “footnote.”

Frustrated, Albright began preparing his own report about the tubes. Seeking an outlet, he approached Joby Warrick of *The Washington Post*. In contrast to Miller and Gordon, Warrick had little experience covering national security matters; the environment was his beat. After the September 11 attacks, however, he was assigned to do investigative reporting related to the war on terrorism, and in the summer of 2002 he began looking into Iraq’s weapons programs. Calling around to officials and former inspectors, he quickly discovered that “nobody knew very much.” That, he told me, seemed particularly true of defectors. Francis Brooke, the Washington representative of the Iraqi National Congress, was constantly trying to give him information, but it never seemed to check out. “I became very frustrated at not being able to come up with anything solid showing that there were active weapons programs,” Warrick said.

Albright’s report about the aluminum tubes, however, seemed to offer an inside look at the debate within intelligence circles over Iraq’s nuclear program.² Drawing on it, Warrick wrote an article describing how the administration’s claims about the tubes were being challenged by “independent experts” who questioned whether they “were intended for a secret nuclear weapons program” or, as some believed, for use in conventional rockets. Warrick also noted reports that the Bush administration “is trying to quiet dissent among its own analysts over how to interpret the evidence.” It was one of the first public mentions of the administration’s possible misuse of the data on Iraq. Appearing on page A18, however, the story caused little stir.

²See “Aluminum Tubing Is an Indicator of an Iraqi Gas Centrifuge Program: But Is the Tubing Specifically for Centrifuges?” ISIS, updated October 9, 2002, at www.isis-online.org.

4.

Meanwhile, the tubes were drawing the notice of Knight Ridder's Washington bureau, which serves Knight Ridder's thirty-one newspapers in the U.S., including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Miami Herald*, and *The Detroit Free Press*. Almost alone among national news organizations, Knight Ridder had decided to take a hard look at the administration's justifications for war. As Washington bureau chief John Walcott recalled, in the late summer of 2002 "we began hearing from sources in the military, the intelligence community, and the foreign service of doubts about the arguments the administration was making." Much of the dissent came from career officers disturbed over the allegations being made by political appointees. "These people," he said, "were better informed about the details of the intelligence than the people higher up in the food chain, and they were deeply troubled by what they regarded as the administration's deliberate misrepresentation of intelligence, ranging from overstating the case to outright fabrication."

Walcott assigned two experienced reporters, Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, to talk with those sources. Drawing on them, Landay in early September 2002 filed a report for Knight Ridder that quoted senior U.S. officials with access to intelligence on Iraq as saying that "they have detected no alarming increase in the threat that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein poses to American security and Middle East stability." While it was well known that Iraq was "aggressively trying to rebuild" its weapons programs, Landay noted, "there is no new intelligence that indicates the Iraqis have made significant advances" in doing so.

In early October, Landay's curiosity was further aroused when the CIA released a declassified version of its new National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq. For the most part, the document blandly summarized the agency's longstanding findings regarding Iraq's ties to terrorists and its efforts to develop WMD. In a brief section on the aluminum tubes, however, it noted that, while the intelligence community as a whole believed the tubes were intended for use in centrifuges, some experts disagreed, believing they were intended for conventional weapons. This was a rare public acknowledgment of dissent within the intelligence agencies, and Landay, intrigued, began making more calls. He eventually reached a veteran of the U.S. uranium enrichment program. "He'd been given data on the tubes, and he said that this wasn't conclusive evidence," Landay recalled. In early October, Landay wrote about how the CIA report had "exposed a sharp dispute among U.S. intelligence experts" over Iraq's arsenal. One expert was quoted as saying he did not believe the tubes were intended for use in nuclear weapons because "their diameters were too small and the aluminum they were made from was too hard."

On October 8, 2002, Landay and Strobel, joined by bureau chief Walcott, filed a sharp account of the rising discontent among national security officers. "While President Bush marshals congressional and international support for invading Iraq," the article began, "a growing number of military officers, intelligence professionals and diplomats in his own government privately have deep misgivings about the administration's double-time march toward war." These officials, it continued,

charge that administration hawks have exaggerated evidence of the threat that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein poses—including distorting his links to the al-Qaida terrorist network.... They charge that the administration squelches dissenting views and that intelligence analysts are under intense pressure to produce reports supporting the White House's argument that Saddam poses such an immediate threat to the United States that pre-emptive military action is necessary.

As these reports show, there were many sources available to journalists interested in scrutinizing the administration's statements about Iraq. Unfortunately, however, Knight

Ridder has no newspaper in Washington, D.C., or New York, and its stories did not get the national attention they deserved. But in mid-October, other news organizations began to pick up on some of the same discontent Knight Ridder had documented. *The Washington Post*, the Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Guardian* of London all ran articles raising questions about the administration's case for war. On October 10, *The New York Times* ran a front-page account by Michael Gordon of the divisions within the administration "over what intelligence shows about Iraq's intentions and its willingness to ally itself with al-Qaeda." And on October 24, the *Times*, again on its front page, reported that top Pentagon officials had set up a special intelligence unit to search for data to support the case for war. Written by Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, the article cited the concerns of some intelligence analysts that civilian policymakers were politicizing the intelligence to fit their hawkish position. The view "among even some senior intelligence analysts" at the CIA, they wrote, "is that Mr. Hussein is contained and is unlikely to unleash weapons of mass destruction unless he is attacked."

The unit referred to here was the Office of Special Plans, the same group Seymour Hersh would write about after the war. As such reports show, its existence was widely known before the war. With many analysts prepared to discuss the competing claims over the intelligence on Iraq, the press was in a good position to educate the public on the administration's justifications for war. Yet for the most part, it never did so. A survey of the coverage in November, December, and January reveals relatively few articles about the debate inside the intelligence community. Those articles that did run tended to appear on the inside pages. Most investigative energy was directed at stories that supported, rather than challenged, the administration's case.

On December 12, for example, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page story by Barton Gellman contending that al-Qaeda had obtained a nerve agent from Iraq. Most of the evidence came from administration officials, and it was so shaky as to draw the attention of Michael Getler, the paper's ombudsman. In his weekly column, Getler wrote that the article had so many qualifiers and caveats that

the effect on the complaining readers, and on me, is to ask what, after all, is the use of this story that practically begs you not to put much credence in it? Why was it so prominently displayed, and why not wait until there was more certainty about the intelligence?

And why, he might have added, didn't the *Post* and other papers devote more time to pursuing the claims about the administration's manipulation of intelligence? Part of the explanation, no doubt, rests with the Bush administration's skill at controlling the flow of news. "Their management of information is far greater than that of any administration I've seen," Knight Ridder's John Walcott observed. "They've made it extremely difficult to do this kind of [investigative] work." That management could take both positive forms—rewarding sympathetic reporters with leaks, background interviews, and seats on official flights—and negative ones—freezing out reporters who didn't play along. In a city where access is all, few wanted to risk losing it.

Such sanctions were reinforced by the national political climate. With a popular president promoting war, Democrats in Congress were reluctant to criticize him. This deprived reporters of opposition voices to quote, and of hearings to cover. Many readers, meanwhile, were intolerant of articles critical of the President. Whenever *The Washington Post* ran such pieces, reporter Dana Priest recalls, "We got tons of hate mail and threats, calling our patriotism into question." Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and *The Weekly Standard*, among others, all stood ready to pounce on journalists who strayed,

branding them liberals or traitors—labels that could permanently damage a career. Gradually, journalists began to muzzle themselves.

David Albright experienced this firsthand when, during the fall, he often appeared as a commentator on TV. “I felt a lot of pressure” from journalists “to stick to the subject, which was Iraq’s bad behavior,” Albright says. And that, in turn, reflected pressure from the administration: “I always felt the administration was setting the agenda for what stories should be covered, and the news media bought into that, rather than take a critical look at the administration’s underlying reasons for war.” Once, on a cable news show, Albright said that he felt the inspections should continue, that the impasse over Iraq was not simply France’s fault; during the break, he recalls, the host “got really mad and chastised me.”

“The administration created a set of truths, then put up a wall to keep people within it,” Albright says. “On the other side of the wall were people saying they didn’t agree. The media were not aggressive enough in challenging this.”

5.

The press’s submissiveness was most apparent in its coverage of the inspections process. Responsibility for that process lay with two organizations: the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitored Iraq’s nuclear activities, and the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, which oversaw its biological and chemical programs. UNMOVIC, which was based in New York and headed by Hans Blix, got considerable coverage; the IAEA, which was based in Vienna and headed by Mohamed ElBaradei, got little.

“We were constantly frustrated,” Melissa Fleming, an IAEA spokesperson, told me. “The whole focus was on UNMOVIC, which was in New York.” According to IAEA staff members, the press gave far too much weight to what U.S. experts or administration officials said. Jacques Baute, the head of the IAEA’s Iraq inspection team, complained that the agency had a hard time getting its story out. And that story, he explained, was that by 1998 “it was pretty clear we had neutralized Iraq’s nuclear program. There was unanimity on that.”

The IAEA’s success in dismantling Iraq’s nuclear program was spelled out in the periodic reports it sent to the U.N. Security Council—reports that remained posted on its Web site. And, it was broadly agreed, any effort to restart that program after 1998 would have very likely been detected by the outside world. As the Carnegie Endowment noted in a recent report (“WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications”),

Iraq’s nuclear program had been dismantled by inspectors after the 1991 war, and these facilities—unlike chemical or biological ones—tend to be large, expensive, dependent on extensive imports, and very difficult to hide “in plain sight” under the cover of commercial (that is, dual-use) facilities.

These facts, it added, were “largely knowable” in the fall of 2002, when the debate over inspections was taking place.

Bush officials, however, were loudly proclaiming otherwise. “A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of [Saddam’s] compliance with U.N. resolutions,” Vice President Cheney declared in his August 26 speech. “On the contrary, there is a great danger it would provide false comfort that Saddam was somehow ‘back in his box.’”

Many journalists echoed this line. Seeking out former weapons inspectors for comment, they generally “gravitated to the most negative ones,” Jacques Baute said. An example was David Kay. According to the IAEA, his background in nuclear and

weapons matters was very limited—he has a Ph.D. in international affairs—and he spent no more than five weeks as an inspector in Iraq in 1991. This was far less time—and far longer ago—than was the case for many other inspectors.

Recently, Kay, after stepping down as the top U.S. weapons investigator in Iraq, said that he thought Iraq had largely abandoned the production of illicit weapons during the 1990s and that one key reason was the tough U.N. inspections. Before the war, however, Kay often declared his contempt for inspections to reporters—including Judith Miller. On September 18, 2002, for instance, in an article headlined “Verification Is Difficult at Best, Say the Experts, and Maybe Impossible,” Miller quoted a variety of officials and former inspectors about the nearly insurmountable obstacles inspectors would face if they returned to Iraq. David Kay, identified as “a former inspector who led the initial nuclear inspections in Iraq in the early 1990’s,” was quoted as saying of the inspectors that “their task is damn near a mission impossible.” Miller also cited Khidhir Hamza, the defector she had written about in 1998. Identified as having “led part of Iraq’s nuclear bomb program until he defected in 1994,” he was quoted as estimating that “Iraq was now at the ‘pilot plant’ stage of nuclear production and within two to three years of mass producing centrifuges to enrich uranium for a bomb.” Iraq, he added, “now excelled” in hiding nuclear and other unconventional weapons programs.

In fact, Hamza never produced any convincing sources for these statements. Contrary to Miller’s description, he had resigned from Iraq’s nuclear program in 1990 and had no firsthand knowledge of it after the Gulf War. After coming to the United States, he had gone to work for David Albright’s Institute for Science and International Security, but by 1999 his claims about Iraq’s weapons programs had become so inflated that Albright felt he could no longer work with him, and Hamza left the institute. The following year he came out with a book, *Saddam’s Bombmaker: The Terrifying Inside Story of the Iraqi Nuclear and Biological Weapons Agenda* (written with Jeff Stein), that, Albright says, “made many ridiculous claims.” In light of this, he adds, he was surprised to see that Judith Miller continued to rely on Hamza. “Judy should have known about this,” Albright says. “This is her area.”

“Hamza had no credibility at all,” one IAEA staff member told me. “Journalists who called us and asked for an assessment of these people—we’d certainly tell them.” Miller said she believed Hamza was a credible source because he was very useful to the administration. After the war, she noted, the administration sent him to Iraq to work on atomic energy matters. Yet the administration’s reliance on defectors like Hamza was itself highly controversial and deserving of scrutiny. Few journalists provided it, though. In the months leading up to the war, Hamza was a popular source for journalists and a frequent guest on TV news shows. (In fairness, it should be noted that Judith Miller, along with Julia Preston, wrote an article for the *Times* in late January that, based on a two-hour interview with Hans Blix, described his differences with the Bush administration over its “assertions about Iraqi cheating” and “the notion that time was running out for disarming Iraq through peaceful means.”)

In late November 2002, U.N. inspectors finally returned to Iraq. Shortly after, Iraq submitted to the U.N. a 12,000-page declaration stating it had no weapons of mass destruction. Iraq’s failure to account for large stocks of banned weapons uncovered prior to 1998 fed suspicions that it still had such weapons. Nonetheless, IAEA inspectors felt confident that they could get a reliable reading of the status of Iraq’s alleged nuclear program. They had more than a hundred sites they wanted to visit, based on interviews with defectors, data collected from previous inspections, satellite photos, and information provided by the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies. Over the summer, IAEA specialists had detected in satellite photos new construction at sites where nuclear activity had taken place in the past. Visiting them, however, inspectors found no suspicious activity. The inspectors also took samples from rivers, canals, and lakes, testing for the

presence of certain radioisotopes. None was found.

Finally, the inspectors investigated Iraq's attempted purchase of aluminum tubes. They examined rocket production and storage sites, studied tube samples, and interviewed key Iraqi personnel. From this they determined that the tubes were consistent with use in conventional rockets, as Iraq had maintained.

On January 9, 2003, Mohamed ElBaradei issued a preliminary report on the inspectors' work. "To date," it noted,

no new information of significance has emerged regarding Iraq's past nuclear programme (pre-1991) or with regard to Iraq activities during the period between 1991 and 1998. To date, no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities has been detected, although not all of the laboratory results of sample analysis are yet available.

On the aluminum tubes, ElBaradei reported that they

appear to be consistent with reverse engineering of rockets. While it would be possible to modify such tubes for the manufacture of centrifuges, they are not directly suitable for it.

In short, the IAEA, after weeks of intensive inspections, had found no sign whatever of any effort by Iraq to resume its nuclear program. Given the importance the administration had attached to this matter, this would have seemed news of the utmost significance. Yet it was largely ignored. The *Times*, which had so prominently displayed its initial story about the aluminum tubes, buried its main article about ElBaradei's statement on page A10. (The paper did briefly mention ElBaradei's conclusion about the tubes in a front-page story that focused mainly on Iraq's lack of cooperation with the inspectors.) One of the few papers to give his statement significant treatment was *The Washington Post*. Following up on his earlier article on the tubes, Joby Warrick incorporated the IAEA findings into a detailed analysis of the claims and counterclaims surrounding the tubes. The article cited weapons inspectors, scientists, and other experts, all of whom cast strong doubt on the administration's arguments.³

The IAEA, Melissa Fleming observed, "was inundated with calls, but they were less of an investigative nature than about what the inspectors were finding on a daily basis. In general reporters showed little interest in more complex subjects like the aluminum tubes." Mark Gwozdecky, the IAEA's top spokesperson, added: "Nobody wanted to challenge the President. Nobody wanted to believe inspections had anything of value to bring to the table. The press bought into that."

6.

The reception accorded Mohamed ElBaradei's statement contrasted sharply with that given Colin Powell's speech at the United Nations on February 5, 2003. The secretary of state gave a high-tech presentation of intercepted tapes, satellite photos, videos, and diagrams to demonstrate what he called "a policy of evasion and deception" by Iraq dating back to 1991. Iraq's arsenal, Powell asserted, included mobile laboratories to produce bioweapons, unmanned aerial vehicles to deliver them, and chemical munitions plants. On the nuclear issue, Powell said that "Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb. He is so determined that he has made repeated covert attempts to acquire high-specification aluminum tubes from 11 countries, even after inspections

³See also Bob Drogin and Maggie Farley, "After 2 Months, No Proof of Iraq Arms Programs," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 2003, for a thorough account of how U.N. inspectors were "unable to corroborate Bush administration claims" about Iraq's weapons.

resumed.” Powell also asserted the existence of a “sinister nexus” between Iraq and al-Qaeda, citing as evidence the activities of Ansar al-Islam, a militant Islamic group based in northeastern Iraq. The group, he said, operated a poison-making camp in the region and had strong links to Iraqi intelligence.

The speech, while viewed skeptically by most foreign governments, received high approval ratings in American polls—and rapturous reviews from the American press. On CNN, after General Amer al-Saadi, Saddam Hussein’s scientific adviser, appeared to offer a point-by-point rebuttal of Powell’s charges, anchor Paula Zahn brought on former State Department spokesman James Rubin to comment. Introducing Rubin, Zahn said, “You’ve got to understand that most Americans watching this were either probably laughing out loud or got sick to their stomach. Which was it for you?”

“Well, really, both,” Rubin replied. The American people “will believe everything they saw,” he said. “They have no reason to doubt any of [Powell’s] sources, any of the references to human sources, any of the pictures, or any of the intercepts.”

The next day’s *New York Times* carried three front-page articles on Powell’s speech, all of them glowing. His presentation took “the form of a nearly encyclopedic catalog that reached further than many had expected,” wrote Steven Weisman. According to Patrick Tyler, an “intelligence breakthrough” had made it possible for Powell “to set forth the first evidence of what he said was a well developed cell of Al Qaeda operating out of Baghdad.” The speech, he wrote, was “a more detailed and well-documented bill of particulars than many had expected.”

The Washington Post was no less positive. “Data on Efforts to Hide Arms Called ‘Strong Suit of Speech’ ” went one headline. “Agency Coordination Helps Yield Details on Al Qaeda ‘Associate’ ” went another. In an editorial titled “Irrefutable,” the paper asserted that, after Powell’s performance, “it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction.” The Op-Ed page ran four pieces about the speech—all of them full of praise. “An Old Trooper’s Smoking Gun,” stated the headline atop Jim Hoagland’s column. Even the normally skeptical Mary McGrory pitched in with a favorable assessment, headlined, “I’m Persuaded.”

Tucked inside each paper, however, were articles that questioned the quality of Powell’s evidence. In the *Times*, for instance, C.J. Chivers reported (on page A22) that Kurdish officials in northern Iraq were puzzled by Powell’s claims of a poison-making facility in the area. A few days later, after visiting the purported camp, he found it to be a “wholly unimpressive place” that lacked even plumbing. In the *Post*, Joby Warrick raised questions about Powell’s claims regarding the aluminum tubes. (This time, though, those questions were relegated to page A29). *Newsweek* accompanied its article on the speech with five boxes evaluating Powell’s key claims; each raised significant doubts. On his charge that Iraq had mobile biogerm labs, for instance, the magazine observed that experts believed such labs “would be all but unworkable” and that U.S. intelligence, “after years of looking for them, has never found even one.”

In the weeks following the speech, one journalist—Walter Pincus of *The Washington Post*—developed strong reservations about it. A longtime investigative reporter, Pincus went back and read the U.N. inspectors’ reports of 1998 and 1999, and he was struck to learn from them how much weaponry had been destroyed in Iraq before 1998. He also tracked down General Anthony Zinni, the former head of the U.S. Central Command, who described the hundreds of weapons sites the United States had destroyed in its 1998 bombing. All of this, Pincus recalled, “made me go back and read Powell’s speech closely. And you could see that it was all inferential. If you analyzed all the intercepted conversations he discussed, you could see that they really didn’t prove anything.”

By mid-March, Pincus felt he had enough material for an article questioning the administration’s claims on Iraq. His editors weren’t interested. It was only after the intervention of his colleague Bob Woodward, who was researching a book on the war and

who had developed similar doubts, that the editors agreed to run the piece—on page A 17. Despite the administration’s claims about Iraq’s WMD, it began, “U.S. intelligence agencies have been unable to give Congress or the Pentagon specific information about the amounts of banned weapons or where they are hidden. . . .” Noting the pressure intelligence analysts were feeling from the White House and Pentagon, Pincus wrote that senior officials, in making the case for war, “repeatedly have failed to mention the considerable amount of documented weapons destruction that took place in Iraq between 1991 and 1998.”

Two days later, Pincus, together with Dana Milbank, the *Post*’s White House correspondent, was back with an even more critical story. “As the Bush administration prepares to attack Iraq this week,” it began, “it is doing so on the basis of a number of allegations against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that have been challenged—and in some cases disproved—by the United Nations, European governments and even U.S. intelligence reports.” That story appeared on page A 13.⁴

The placement of these stories was no accident, Pincus says. “The front pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* are very important in shaping what other people think,” he told me. “They’re like writing a memo to the White House.” But the *Post*’s editors, he said, “went through a whole phase in which they didn’t put things on the front page that would make a difference.”

7.

The *Post* was not alone. The nearer the war drew, and the more determined the administration seemed to wage it, the less editors were willing to ask tough questions. The occasional critical stories that did appear were, like Pincus’s, tucked well out of sight.

The performance of the *Times* was especially deficient. While occasionally running articles that questioned administration claims, it more often deferred to them. (The *Times*’s editorial page was consistently much more skeptical.) Compared to other major papers, the *Times* placed more credence in defectors, expressed less confidence in inspectors, and paid less attention to dissenters. The September 8 story on the aluminum tubes was especially significant. Not only did it put the *Times*’s imprimatur on one of the administration’s chief claims, but it also established a position at the paper that apparently discouraged further investigation into this and related topics.

The reporters working on the story strongly disagree. That the tubes were intended for centrifuges “was the dominant view of the U.S. intelligence community,” Michael Gordon told me. “It looks like it’s the wrong view. But the story captured what was and still is the majority view of the intelligence community—whether right or wrong.” Not only the director of central intelligence but also the secretary of state decided to support it, Gordon said, adding,

Most of the intelligence agencies in the U.S. government thought that Iraq had something. Both Clinton and Bush officials thought this. So did Richard Butler, who had been head of UNSCOM and who wrote a book about Iraq called “The Greatest Threat.” So it was a widely shared assumption in and out of government. I don’t recall a whole lot of people challenging that.

Yet there were many people challenging the administration’s assertions. It’s revealing that Gordon encountered so few of them. On the aluminum tubes, David Albright, as noted above, made a special effort to alert Judith Miller to the dissent surrounding them, to no avail.

⁴See Harry Jaffe, “Why Doesn’t the *Post* Love Walter Pincus?” *The Washingtonian*, September 2003, and Ari Berman, “The Postwar *Post*,” *TheNation.com*, September 17, 2003.

Asked about this, Miller said that as an investigative reporter in the intelligence area, “my job isn’t to assess the government’s information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself. My job is to tell readers of *The New York Times* what the government thought about Iraq’s arsenal.” Many journalists would disagree with this; instead, they would consider offering an independent evaluation of official claims one of their chief responsibilities.

I asked Miller about her December 20, 2001, article about Saeed al-Haideri, the Chalabi-linked defector who claimed that Saddam Hussein had a network of hidden sites for producing and storing banned weapons—sites said to include the ground under Saddam Hussein Hospital. In a subsequent piece about the Bush administration’s use of defectors, Miller had stated that al-Haideri’s interviews with U.S. intelligence had “resulted in dozens of highly credible reports on Iraqi weapons-related activity and purchases.” Yet neither U.N. inspectors nor the Iraq Survey Group was able to confirm any of those reports. Al-Haideri, Miller acknowledges, “might have been totally wrong, but I believe he was acting in good faith, and it was the best we could do at the time.”

To this day, neither Miller nor the *Times* as a whole has reported on the failure to confirm al-Haideri’s claims. Miller says that while the paper hasn’t reported on al-Haideri’s specific allegations, it did do “fifteen stories on weapons not found in Iraq.” Yet, in view of the prominence the *Times* had given al-Haideri’s claims, its failure to follow up on them suggests a lack of interest in correcting reports that were later contradicted by the evidence. (By contrast, the BBC show *Panorama*, which in September 2002 had reported some of al-Haideri’s claims, noted pointedly in a follow-up program aired in November 2003 that the Iraq Survey Group had searched for but “found none of the laboratory facilities described by Mr. Haideri, including a bunker under a hospital.”)

Looking back at her coverage of Iraq’s weapons, Miller insists that the problem lies with the intelligence, not the reporting. “The fact that the United States so far hasn’t found WMD in Iraq is deeply disturbing. It raises real questions about how good our intelligence was. To beat up on the messenger is to miss the point.”

If nothing else, the Iraq saga should cause journalists to examine the breadth of their sources. “One question worth asking,” John Walcott of Knight Ridder says, “is whether we in journalism have become too reliant on high-level officials instead of cultivating less glamorous people in the bowels of the bureaucracy. “In the case of Iraq, he added, the political appointees “really closed ranks. So if you relied exclusively on traditional news sources—assistant secretaries and above—you would not have heard things we heard.” What Walcott calls “the blue collar” employees of the agencies—the working analysts or former analysts—were drawn on extensively by Knight Ridder, but by few others.

Since the end of the war, journalists have found no shortage of sources willing to criticize the administration. (Even Colin Powell, in a recent press conference, admitted that, contrary to his assertions at the United Nations, he had no “smoking gun” proof of a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.) *The Washington Post* has been especially aggressive in exposing the administration’s exaggerations of intelligence, its inadequate planning for postwar Iraq, and its failure to find weapons of mass destruction. Barton Gellman, who before the war worked so hard to ferret out Iraq’s ties to terrorists, has, since its conclusion, written many incisive articles about the administration’s intelligence failures.⁵

The contrast between the press’s feistiness since the end of the war and its meekness before it highlights one of the most entrenched and disturbing features of American journalism: its pack mentality. Editors and reporters don’t like to diverge too sharply

⁵See, especially, “Depiction of Threat Outgrew Supporting Evidence,” August 10, 2003, p. A1. Co-written with Walter Pincus, the article describes in impressive detail how the administration twisted the intelligence on the aluminum tubes.

from what everyone else is writing. When a president is popular and a consensus prevails, journalists shrink from challenging him. Even now, papers like the *Times* and the *Post* seem loath to give prominent play to stories that make the administration look too bad. Thus, stories about the increasing numbers of dead and wounded in Iraq—both American and Iraqi—are usually consigned to page 10 or 12, where they won't cause readers too much discomfort.