

They Knew . . .

Despite the whitewash, we now know that the Bush administration was warned before the war that its Iraq claims were weak

By David Sirota and Christy Harvey

If desperation is ugly, then Washington, D.C. today is downright hideous. As the 9/11 Commission recently reported, there was “no credible evidence” of a collaborative relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda. Similarly, no weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq. With U.S. casualties mounting in an election year, the White House is grasping at straws to avoid being held accountable for its dishonesty.

The whitewash already has started: In July, Republicans on the Senate Intelligence Committee released a controversial report blaming the CIA for the mess. The panel conveniently refuses to evaluate what the White House did with the information it was given or how the White House set up its own special team of Pentagon political appointees (called the Office of Special Plans) to circumvent well-established intelligence channels. And Vice President Dick Cheney continues to say without a shred of proof that there is “overwhelming evidence” justifying the administration’s pre-war charges.

But as author Flannery O’Conner noted, “Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.” That means no matter how much defensive spin spews from the White House, the Bush administration cannot escape the documented fact that it was clearly warned before the war that its rationale for invading Iraq was weak.

Top administration officials repeatedly ignored warnings that their assertions about Iraq’s supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and connections to al Qaeda were overstated. In some cases, they were told their claims were wholly without merit, yet they went ahead and made them anyway. Even the Senate report admits that the White House “misrepresented” classified intelligence by eliminating references to contradictory assertions.

In short, they knew they were misleading America.

And they did not care.

They knew Iraq posed no nuclear threat

There is no doubt even though there was no proof of Iraq’s complicity, the White House was focused on Iraq within hours of the 9/11 attacks. As CBS News reported, “barely five hours after American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld was telling his aides to come up with plans for striking Iraq.” Former Bush counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke recounted vividly how, just after the attack, President Bush pressured him to find an Iraqi connection. In many ways, this was no surprise—as former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and another administration official confirmed, the White House was actually looking for a way to invade Iraq well before the terrorist attacks.

But such an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country required a public rationale. And so the Bush administration struck fear into the hearts of Americans about Saddam Hussein’s supposed WMD, starting with nuclear arms. In his first major address on the “Iraqi threat” in October 2002, President Bush invoked fiery images of mushroom clouds and mayhem, saying, “Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.”

Yet, before that speech, the White House had intelligence calling this assertion into question. A 1997 report by the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—the agency whose purpose is to prevent nuclear proliferation—stated there was no indication Iraq ever achieved nuclear capability or had any physical capacity for producing weapons-grade nuclear material in the near future.

In February 2001, the CIA delivered a report to the White House that said: “We do not have any direct evidence that Iraq has used the period since Desert Fox to reconstitute its weapons of mass destruction programs.” The report was so definitive that Secretary of State Colin Powell said in a subsequent press conference, Saddam Hussein “has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction.”

Ten months before the president’s speech, an intelligence review by CIA Director George Tenet contained not a single mention of an imminent nuclear threat—or capability—from Iraq. The CIA was backed up by Bush’s own State Department: Around the time Bush gave his speech, the department’s intelligence bureau said that evidence did not “add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what [we] consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquiring nuclear weapons.”

Nonetheless, the administration continued to push forward. In March 2003, Cheney went on national television days before the war and claimed Iraq “has reconstituted nuclear weapons.” He was echoed by State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, who told reporters of supposedly grave “concerns about Iraq’s potential nuclear programs.”

Even after the invasion, when troops failed to uncover any evidence of nuclear weapons, the White House refused to admit the truth. In July 2003, Condoleezza Rice told PBS’s Gwen Ifill that the administration’s nuclear assertions were “absolutely supportable.” That same month, White House spokesman Scott McClellan insisted: “There’s a lot of evidence showing that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.”

They knew the aluminum tubes were not for nuclear weapons

To back up claims that Iraq was actively trying to build nuclear weapons, the administration referred to Iraq’s importation of aluminum tubes, which Bush officials said were for enriching uranium. In December 2002, Powell said, “Iraq has tried to obtain high-strength aluminum tubes which can be used to enrich uranium in centrifuges for a nuclear weapons program.” Similarly, in his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush said Iraq “has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production.”

But, in October 2002, well before these and other administration officials made this claim, two key agencies told the White House exactly the opposite. The State Department affirmed reports from Energy Department experts who concluded those tubes were ill-suited for any kind of uranium enrichment. And according to memos released by the Senate Intelligence Committee, the State Department also warned Powell not to use the aluminum tubes hypothesis in the days before his February 2003 U.N. speech. He refused and used the aluminum tubes claim anyway.

The State Department’s warnings were soon validated by the IAEA. In March 2003, the agency’s director stated, “Iraq’s efforts to import these aluminum tubes were not likely to be related” to nuclear weapons deployment.

Yet, this evidence did not stop the White House either. Pretending the administration never received any warnings at all, Rice claimed in July 2003 that “the consensus view” in the intelligence community was that the tubes “were suitable for use in centrifuges to spin material for nuclear weapons.”

Today, experts agree the administration’s aluminum tube claims were wholly without merit.

They knew the Iraq-uranium claims were not supported

In one of the most famous statements about Iraq’s supposed nuclear arsenals, Bush said in his 2003 State of the Union address, “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” The careful phrasing of this statement highlights how dishonest it was. By attributing the claim to an

allied government, the White House made a powerful charge yet protected itself against any consequences should it be proved false. In fact, the president invoked the British because his own intelligence experts had earlier warned the White House not to make the claim at all.

In the fall of 2002, the CIA told administration officials not to include this uranium assertion in presidential speeches. Specifically, the agency sent two memos to the White House and Tenet personally called top national security officials imploring them not to use the claim. While the warnings forced the White House to remove a uranium reference from an October 2002 presidential address, they did not stop the charge from being included in the 2003 State of the Union.

Not surprisingly, evidence soon emerged that forced the White House to admit the deception. In March 2003, IAEA Director Mohammed El Baradei said there was no proof Iraq had nuclear weapons and added “documents which formed the basis for [the White House’s assertion] of recent uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger are in fact not authentic.” But when Cheney was asked about this a week later, he said, “Mr. El Baradei frankly is wrong.”

Bush and Rice both tried to blame the CIA for the failure, saying the assertion “was cleared by the intelligence services.” When the intelligence agency produced the memos it had sent to the White House on the subject, Rice didn’t miss a beat, telling *Meet The Press* “it is quite possible that I didn’t” read the memos at all—as if they were “optional” reading for the nation’s top national security official on the eve of war. At about this time, some high-level administration official or officials leaked to the press that Ambassador Joseph Wilson’s wife was an undercover CIA agent—a move widely seen as an attempt by the administration to punish Wilson for his July 6, 2003 *New York Times* op-ed that stated he had found no evidence of an Iraqi effort to purchase uranium from Niger.

In recent weeks, right-wing pundits have pointed to new evidence showing the Iraq uranium charge may have flirted with the truth at some point in the distant past. These White House hatchet men say the administration did not manipulate or cherry-pick intelligence. They also tout the recent British report (a.k.a. *The Butler Report*) as defending the president’s uranium claim. Yet, if the White House did not cherry-pick or manipulate intelligence, why did the president trumpet U.S. intelligence from a foreign government while ignoring explicit warnings not to do so from his own? The record shows U.S. intelligence officials explicitly warned the White House that “the Brits have exaggerated this issue.” Yet, the administration refused to listen. Even *The Butler Report* itself acknowledges the evidence is cloudy. As nonproliferation expert Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently pointed out, “The claim appears shaky at best—hardly the stuff that should make up presidential decisions.”

But now, instead of contrition, Republicans are insisting the White House’s uranium charge was accurate. Indeed, these apologists have no option but to try to distract public attention from the simple truth that not a shred of solid evidence exists to substantiate this key charge that fueled the push for war.

They knew there was no hard evidence of chemical or biological weapons

In September 2002, President Bush said Iraq “could launch a biological or chemical attack in as little as 45 minutes after the order is given.” The next month, he delivered a major speech to “outline the Iraqi threat,” just two days before a critical U.N. vote. In his address, he claimed without doubt that Iraq “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons.” He said that “Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons” and that the government was “concerned Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the United States.”

What he did not say was that the White House had been explicitly warned that these

assertions were unproved.

As the *Washington Post* later reported, Bush “ignored the fact that U.S. intelligence mistrusted the source” of the 45-minute claim and, therefore, omitted it from its intelligence estimates. And Bush ignored the fact that the Defense Intelligence Agency previously submitted a report to the administration finding “no reliable information” to prove Iraq was producing or stockpiling chemical weapons. According to *Newsweek*, the conclusion was similar to the findings of a 1998 government commission on WMD chaired by Rumsfeld.

Bush also neglected to point out that in early October 2002, the administration’s top military experts told the White House they “sharply disputed the notion that Iraq’s Unmanned Aerial Vehicles were being designed as attack weapons.” Specifically, the Air Force’s National Air and Space Intelligence Center correctly showed the drones in question were too heavy to be used to deploy chemical/biological-weapons spray devices.

Regardless, the chemical/biological weapons claims from the administration continued to escalate. Powell told the United Nations on February 5, 2003, “There can be no doubt that Saddam Hussein has biological weapons and the capability to rapidly produce more, many more.” As proof, he cited aerial images of a supposed decontamination vehicle circling a suspected weapons site.

According to newly released documents in the Senate Intelligence Committee report, Powell’s own top intelligence experts told him not to make such claims about the photographs. They said the vehicles were likely water trucks. He ignored their warnings.

On March 6, 2003, just weeks before the invasion, the president went further than Powell. He claimed, “Iraqi operatives continue to hide biological and chemical agents.”

To date, no chemical or biological weapons have been found in Iraq.

They knew Saddam and bin Laden were not collaborating

In the summer of 2002, *USA Today* reported White House lawyers had concluded that establishing an Iraq-al Qaeda link would provide the legal cover at the United Nations for the administration to attack Iraq. Such a connection, no doubt, also would provide political capital at home. And so, by the fall of 2002, the Iraq-al Qaeda drumbeat began.

It started on September 25, 2002, when Bush said, “you can’t distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam.” This was news even to members of Bush’s own political party who had access to classified intelligence. Just a month before, Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), who serves on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said, “Saddam is not in league with al Qaeda . . . I have not seen any intelligence that would lead me to connect Saddam Hussein to al Qaeda.

To no surprise, the day after Bush’s statement, *USA Today* reported several intelligence experts “expressed skepticism” about the claim, with a Pentagon official calling the president’s assertion an “exaggeration.” No matter, Bush ignored these concerns and that day described Saddam Hussein as “a man who loves to link up with al Qaeda.” Meanwhile, Rumsfeld held a press conference trumpeting “bulletproof” evidence of a connection—a sentiment echoed by Rice and White House spokesman Ari Fleischer. And while the *New York Times* noted, “the officials offered no details to back up the assertions,” Rumsfeld nonetheless insisted his claims were “accurate and not debatable.”

Within days, the accusations became more than just “debatable”; they were debunked. German Defense Minister Peter Stuck said the day after Rumsfeld’s press conference that his country “was not aware of any connection” between Iraq and al Qaeda’s efforts to acquire chemical weapons. *The Orlando Sentinel* reported that terrorism expert Peter Bergen—one of the few to actually interview Osama bin Laden—said the connection between Iraq and al Qaeda are minimal. In October 2002, Knight Ridder reported, “a growing number of military officers, intelligence professionals and diplo-

mats in [Bush's] own government privately have deep misgivings" about the Iraq-al Qaeda claims. The experts charged that administration hawks "exaggerated evidence." A senior U.S. official told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that intelligence analysts "contest the administration's suggestion of a major link between Iraq and al Qaeda."

While this evidence forced British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other allies to refrain from playing up an Iraq-al Qaeda connection, the Bush administration refused to be deterred by facts.

On November 1, 2002, President Bush claimed, "We know [Iraq has] got ties with al Qaeda." Four days later, Europe's top terrorism investigator Jean-Louis Bruguiere reported: "We have found no evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda. . . . If there were such links, we would have found them. But we have found no serious connections whatsoever." British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, whose country was helping build the case for war, admitted, "What I'm asked is if I've seen any evidence of [Iraq-al Qaeda connections]. And the answer is: 'I haven't.' "

Soon, an avalanche of evidence appeared indicating the White House was deliberately misleading America. In January 2003, intelligence officials told the *Los Angeles Times* that they were "puzzled by the administration's new push" to create the perception of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection and said the intelligence community has "discounted—if not dismissed—information believed to point to possible links between Iraq and al Qaeda." One intelligence official said, "There isn't a factual basis" for the administration's conspiracy theory about the so-called connection.

On the morning of February 5, 2003, the same day Powell delivered his U.N. speech, British intelligence leaked a comprehensive report finding no substantial links between Iraq and al Qaeda. The BBC reported that British intelligence officials maintained "any fledgling relationship [between Iraq and al Qaeda] foundered due to mistrust and incompatible ideologies." Powell, nonetheless, stood before the United Nations and claimed there was a "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda." A month later, Rice backed him up, saying al Qaeda "clearly has had links to the Iraqis." And in his March 17, 2003, speech on the eve of war, Bush justified the invasion by citing the fully discredited Iraq-al Qaeda link.

When the war commenced, the house of cards came down. In June 2003, the chairman of the U.N. group that monitors al Qaeda told reporters his team found no evidence linking the terrorist group to Iraq. In July 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* reported the bipartisan congressional report analyzing September 11 "undercut Bush administration claims before the war that Hussein had links to al Qaeda." Meanwhile, the *New York Times* reported, "Coalition forces have not brought to light any significant evidence demonstrating the bond between Iraq and al Qaeda." In August 2003, three former Bush administration officials came forward to admit pre-war evidence tying al Qaeda to Iraq "was tenuous, exaggerated, and often at odds with the conclusions of key intelligence agencies."

Yet, the White House insisted on maintaining the deception. In the fall of 2003, President Bush said, "There's no question that Saddam Hussein had al Qaeda ties." And Cheney claimed Iraq "had an established relationship to al Qaeda." When the media finally began demanding proof for all the allegations, Powell offered a glimmer of contrition. In January 2004, he conceded that there was no "smoking gun" to prove the claim. His admission was soon followed by a March 2004 Knight Ridder report that quoted administration officials conceding "there never was any evidence that Hussein's secular police state and Osama bin Laden's Islamic terror network were in league."

But Powell's statement was the exception, not the norm. The White House still refuses to acknowledge wrongdoing, and instead resorts to the classic two-step feint, citing sources but conveniently refusing to acknowledge those sources' critical faults.

For instance, Cheney began pointing reporters to an article in the right-wing *Weekly Standard* as the "best source" of evidence backing the Saddam-al Qaeda claim, even

though the Pentagon had previously discredited the story. Similarly, in June, the Republican's media spin machine came to the aid of the White House and promoted a *New York Times* article about a document showing failed efforts by bin Laden to work with Iraq in the mid-'90s against Saudi Arabia. Not surprisingly, the spinners did not mention the article's key finding—a Pentagon task force found that the document “described no formal alliance being reached between Mr. bin Laden and Iraqi intelligence.”

When the 9/11 Commission found “no credible evidence” of a collaborative relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda, the White House denials came as no surprise. Cheney defiantly claimed there was “overwhelming evidence” of a link, provided no evidence, and then berated the media and the commission for having the nerve to report the obvious. Bush did not feel the need to justify his distortions, saying after the report came out, “The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al Qaeda is because there was a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda.”

That was the perfect answer from an administration that never lets the factual record impinge on what it says to the American public.

They knew there was no Prague meeting

One of the key pillars of the Iraq-al Qaeda myth was a White House-backed story claiming 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta met with an Iraqi spy in April 2001. The tale originally came from a lone Czech informant who said he saw the terrorist in Prague at the time. White House hawks, eager to link al Qaeda with Saddam, did not wait to verify the story, and instead immediately used it to punch up arguments for a preemptive attack on Iraq. On November 14, 2001, Cheney claimed Atta was “in Prague in April of this year, as well as earlier.” On December 9, 2001, he went further, claiming without proof that the Atta meeting was “pretty well confirmed.”

Nine days later, the Czech government reported there was no evidence that Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague. Czech Police Chief Jiri Kolar said there were no documents showing Atta had been in Prague that entire year, and Czech officials told *Newsweek* that the uncorroborated witness who perpetuated the story should have been viewed with more skepticism.

By the spring of 2002, major news publications such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Time* were running stories calling the “Prague connection” an “embarrassing” mistake and stating that, according to European officials, the intelligence supporting the claim was “somewhere between ‘slim’ and ‘none’.” The stories also quoted administration officials and CIA and FBI analysts saying that on closer scrutiny, “there was no evidence Atta left or returned to the United State at the time he was supposed to be in Prague.” Even FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, a Bush political appointee, admitted in April 2002, “We ran down literally hundreds of thousands of leads and checked every record we could get our hands on, from flight reservations to car rentals to bank accounts,” but found nothing.

But that was not good enough for the administration, which instead of letting the story go, began trying to manipulate intelligence to turn fantasy into reality. In August 2002, when FBI case officers told Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz that there was no Atta meeting, *Newsweek* reported Wolfowitz “vigorously challenged them.” Wolfowitz wanted the FBI to endorse claims that Atta and the Iraqi spy had met. FBI counterterrorism chief Pat D’Amuro refused.

In September 2002, the CIA handed Cheney a classified intelligence assessment that cast specific, serious doubt on whether the Atta meeting ever occurred. Yet, that same month, Richard Perle, then chairman of the Bush's Defense Policy Board, said, “Muhammad Atta met [a secret collaborator of Saddam Hussein] prior to September 11. We have proof of that, and we are sure he wasn't just there for a holiday.” In the same breath, Perle openly admitted, “The meeting is one of the motives for an American attack on

Iraq.”

By the winter of 2002, even America’s allies were telling the administration to relent: In November, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said he had seen no evidence of a meeting in Prague between Atta and an Iraqi intelligence agent.

But it did not stop. In September 2003, on “Meet the Press,” Cheney dredged up the story again, saying, “With respect to 9/11, of course, we’ve had the story that’s been public out there. The Czechs alleged that Mohammed Atta, the lead attacker, met in Prague with a senior Iraqi intelligence official five months before the attack.” He provided no new evidence, opted not to mention that the Czechs long ago had withdrawn the allegations, and ignored new evidence that showed the story was likely untrue.

Even today, with all of the intelligence firmly against him, Cheney remains unrepentant. Asked in June about whether the meeting had occurred, he admitted, “That’s never been proven.” Then he added, “It’s never been refuted.” When CNBC’s Gloria Borger asked about his initial claim that the meeting was “pretty well confirmed,” Cheney snapped, “No, I never said that. I never said that. Absolutely not.”

His actual words in December 2001: “It’s been pretty well confirmed that [Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service.”

In other words, Cheney hit a new low. He resorted not only to lying about the story, but lying about lying about the story.

Conclusion: They knew they were misleading America

In his March 17, 2003 address preparing America for the Iraq invasion, President Bush stated unequivocally that there was an Iraq-al Qaeda nexus and that there was “no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.”

In the context of what we now know the White House knew at the time, Bush was deliberately dishonest. The intelligence community repeatedly told the White House there were many deep cracks in its case for war. The president’s willingness to ignore such warnings and make these unequivocal statements proves the administration was intentionally painting a black-and-white picture when it knew the facts merited only gray at best.

That has meant severe consequences for all Americans. Financially, U.S. taxpayers have shelled out more than \$166 billion for the Iraq war, and more will soon be needed. Geopolitically, our country is more isolated from allies than ever, with anti-Americanism on the rise throughout the globe.

And we are less secure. A recent U.S. Army War College report says “the invasion of Iraq was a diversion from the more narrow focus on defeating al Qaeda.” U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi put it this way: “The war in Iraq was useless, it caused more problems than it solved, and it brought in terrorism.”

These statements are borne out by the facts: The International Institute of Strategic Studies in London reports al Qaeda is now 18,000 strong, with many new recruits joining as a result of the war in Iraq. Not coincidentally, the White House recently said the American homeland faces an imminent threat of a terrorist attack from a still-active al Qaeda operation in Afghanistan. Yet, the administration actually moved special forces out of Afghanistan in 2002 to prepare for an invasion of Iraq. Because of this, we face the absurd situation whereby we have no more than 20,000 troops in Afghanistan hunting down those who directly threaten us, yet have 140,000 troops in Iraq—a country that was not a serious menace before invasion.

Of course, it is those troops who have it the worst. Our men and women in uniform are bogged down in a quagmire, forced to lay down life and limb for a lie.

To be sure, neoconservative pundits and Bush administration hawks will continue to blame anyone but the White House for these deceptions. They also will say intelligence gave a bit of credence to some of the pre-war claims, and that is certainly true.

But nothing can negate the clear proof that President Bush and other administration official officials vastly overstated the intelligence they were given. They engaged in a calculated and well-coordinated effort to turn a war of choice in Iraq into a perceived war of imminent necessity.

And we are all left paying the price.

David Sirota, who writes the "Truth & Consequences" column in In These Times, is director of strategic communications for the Center for American Progress. Christy Harvey is deputy director of strategic communications for the Center for American Progress.