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Sidney Blumenthal: How Bush Rules

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The Hunt for WMD

FEBRUARY 5, 2004

BEFORE HE DEPARTED on his quest for Saddam Hussein's fabled weapons of mass destruction last June, David Kay, chief of the Iraq Survey Group, told friends that he expected promptly to locate the cause of the preemptive war. On January 28, Kay appeared before the Senate to testify that there were no WMDs. "It turns out that we were all wrong," he said. President Bush, he added helpfully, was misinformed by the whole intelligence community, which, like Kay, made assumptions that turned out to be false.

Within days, Bush declared that he would, after all, appoint a commission to investigate; significantly, it would report its findings only after the presidential election.

Kay's testimony was the catalyst for this U-turn, but only one of his claims is correct: that he was wrong. The truth is that much of the intelligence community did not fail but presented correct assessments and warnings that were overridden and suppressed. On virtually every single important claim made by the Bush administration in its case for war, there was serious dissension. Discordant views—not from individual analysts but from several intelligence agencies as a whole—were kept from the public as momentum was built for a congressional vote on the war resolution.

Precisely because of the qualms the administration encountered, it created a rogue intelligence operation, the Office of Special Plans, located within the Pentagon and under the control of neoconservatives. The OSP roamed outside the ordinary interagency process, stamping its approval on stories from Iraqi exiles that the other agencies dismissed as lacking credibility and feeding them to the president.

At the same time, constant pressure was applied to the intelligence agencies to force their compliance. In one case, a senior intelligence officer who refused to knuckle under was removed.

Bruce Hardcastle was a senior officer for the Middle East for the Defense Intelligence Agency. When Bush insisted that Saddam was actively and urgently engaged in a nuclear weapons program and had renewed

production of chemical weapons, the DIA reported otherwise. According to Patrick Lang, the former chief of counterterrorism and the Middle East at the DIA, Hardcastle “told [the Bush administration] that the way they were handling evidence was wrong.” The response was not simply to remove Hardcastle from his post: “They did away with his job,” Lang says. “They wanted only liaison officers . . . not a senior intelligence person who argued with them.”

When the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) submitted reports which did not support the administration’s case—saying, for example, that the aluminum tubes Saddam possessed were for conventional rocketry, not nuclear weapons (a report corroborated by Department of Energy analysts), or that mobile laboratories found in Iraq were not for WMDs, or that the story about Saddam seeking uranium in Niger was bogus, or that there was no link between Saddam and al Qaeda (a report backed by the CIA)—its analyses were shunted aside. Greg Thielman, chief of the INR at the time, told me: “Everyone in the intelligence community knew that the White House couldn’t care less about any information suggesting that there were no WMDs or that the U.N. inspectors were very effective.”

When the CIA debunked the tales about Niger uranium and the Saddam–al Qaeda connection, its reports were ignored and direct pressure applied. In October 2002, the White House inserted mention of the uranium into a speech Bush was to deliver, but the CIA objected, and it was excised. Three months later, it reappeared in his State of the Union address. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice claimed never to have seen the original CIA memo, and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, said he had forgotten about it.

Never before had any senior White House official physically intruded into CIA’s Langley headquarters to argue with midlevel managers and analysts about unfinished work. But twice Vice President Cheney and Lewis Libby, his chief of staff, came to offer their opinions. Patrick Lang told me: “They looked disapproving, questioned the reports, and left an impression of what you’re supposed to do. They would say: ‘you haven’t looked at the evidence.’ The answer would be, those reports [from Iraqi exiles] aren’t valid. The analysts would be told, you should look at this again.’ Finally, people gave up. You learn not to contradict them.”

The CIA had other visitors, too, according to Ray McGovern, former CIA chief for the Middle East. Newt Gingrich came, and Condi Rice, and, as for Cheney, “he likes the soup in the CIA cafeteria,” McGovern jokes.

Meanwhile, senior intelligence officers were kept in the dark about the OSP. “I didn’t know about its existence,” said Thielman. “They were cherry-picking intelligence and packaging it for Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld to take to the president. That’s the kind of rogue operation that peer review is intended to prevent.”

The CIA director, George Tenet, for his part, opted to become a political advocate for Bush’s brief rather than a protector of the intelligence community. On the eve of the congressional debate, in the space of only three weeks, the agency wrote a ninety-page national intelligence estimate justifying the administration’s position on WMDs and scrubbed of all dissent. Once the document was declassified after the invasion, it became known that it contained forty caveats—including fifteen uses of *probably*, all of which had been removed from the previously published version. Tenet further ingratiated himself by remaining silent about the OSP. “That’s totally unacceptable for a CIA director,” said Thielman.

On February 5, 2003, Colin Powell presented evidence of WMDs before the United Nations. Cheney and Libby had tried to inject material from Iraqi exiles and the OSP into his presentation, but Powell rejected most of it. Yet, for the most important speech of his career, he refused to allow the presence of any analysts from his own intelligence agency. “He didn’t have anyone from INR near him,” said Thielman. “Powell wanted to sell a rotten fish. He had decided there was no way to avoid war. His job was to go to war with as much legitimacy as we could scrape up.”

Powell ignored INR analysts’ comments on his speech. Almost every piece of evidence he unveiled turned out later to be false.

This week, when Bush announced he would appoint an investigative commission, Powell offered a limited mea culpa at a meeting at the *Washington Post*. He said that if only he had known the intelligence, he might not have supported an invasion. Thus he began to show carefully calibrated remorse, to distance himself from other members of the administration and especially Cheney. Powell also defended his U.N. speech, claiming “it reflected the best judgments of all of the intelligence agencies.”

Powell is sensitive to the slightest political winds, especially if they might affect his reputation. If he is a bellwether, will it soon be that every man must save himself?