

Iraq on the Record

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Executive Summary

On March 19, 2003, U.S. forces began military operations in Iraq. Addressing the nation about the purpose of the war on the day the bombing began, President Bush stated: "The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder."

One year later, many doubts have been raised regarding the Administration's assertions about the threat posed by Iraq. Prior to the war in Iraq, the President and his advisors repeatedly claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that jeopardized the security of the United States. The failure to discover these weapons after the war has led to questions about whether the President and his advisors were candid in describing Iraq's threat...

Categories of Misleading Statements

The misleading statements by President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary [of Defense] Rumsfeld, Secretary [of State] Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice fall into four general categories: (1) statements suggesting that Iraq posed an urgent threat, (2) statements regarding Iraq's nuclear activities, (3) statements regarding Iraq's biological and chemical weapons capabilities, and (4) statements regarding Iraq's support of al Qaeda...

A. Statements that Iraq Posed an Urgent Threat

On February 5, 2004, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet categorically stated that the U.S. intelligence community "never said there was an 'imminent' threat." Yet this was not the impression conveyed by President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice in their public statements on Iraq. In 10 different appearances, these five officials made 11 statements claiming that Iraq posed an urgent threat.

For example:

- President Bush stated on October 2, 2002: "the Iraqi regime is a threat of unique urgency. . . [I]t has developed weapons of mass death."
- President Bush stated on November 20, 2002: "Today the world is . . . uniting to answer the unique and urgent threat posed by Iraq."

- Vice President Cheney stated on August 26, 2002: “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us...”
- On November 14, 2002, Secretary Rumsfeld stated:

Now, transport yourself forward a year, two years, or a week, or a month, and if Saddam Hussein were to take his weapons of mass destruction and transfer them, either use them himself, or transfer them to the Al-Qaeda, and somehow the Al-Qaeda were to engage in an attack on the United States, or an attack on U.S. forces overseas, with a weapon of mass destruction you’re not talking about 300, or 3,000 people potentially being killed, but 30,000, or 100,000 . . . human beings.

B. Statements about Iraq’s Nuclear Capabilities

In their potential for destruction and their ability to evoke horror, nuclear weapons are in a class by themselves...

For precisely this reason, the Administration’s statements about Iraq’s nuclear capabilities had a large impact on congressional and public perceptions about the threat posed by Iraq. Many members of Congress were more influenced by the Administration’s nuclear assertions than by any other piece of evidence. Rep. Waxman, for example, wrote to President Bush in June 2003 that in voting for the Iraq war resolution: “Like other members, I was particularly influenced by your views about Iraq’s nuclear intentions. Although chemical and biological weapons can inflict casualties, no threat is greater than the threat of nuclear weapons.” Numerous members of Congress stressed Iraq’s nuclear threat in their floor statements explaining their support of the resolution.

Despite the significance of the nuclear issue, President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Powell, Secretary Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Rice repeatedly misrepresented the nuclear threat posed by Iraq. The five officials made 49 separate public appearances in which they made misleading statements about Iraq’s nuclear threat. In these appearances, they made a total of 81 misleading statements regarding Iraq’s nuclear activities.

These misleading statements generally fall into one of three categories: (1) misleading statements about the status of Iraq’s nuclear program, (2) misleading statements about the purpose of aluminum tubes sought by Iraq, and (3) misleading statements about Iraq’s attempts to obtain uranium from Africa...

1. Claims about the Status of Iraq’s Nuclear Program

Prior to the war, there were significant divisions within the intelligence community about whether Iraq had resumed efforts to make nuclear weapons. In his speech on February 5,

2004, Mr. Tenet explained that there was not unanimity on whether Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear program and that these differences were described in the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) [of October 2002]: “let me be clear, where there were differences, the Estimate laid out the disputes clearly.” In particular, the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) concluded in the NIE that “[t]he activities we have detected do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what INR would consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons.” INR added: “Lacking persuasive evidence that Baghdad has launched a coherent effort to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program, INR is unwilling to speculate that such an effort began soon after the departure of UN inspectors.” The INR position was similar to the conclusions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which concluded that there was “no indication of resumed nuclear activities . . . nor any indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities.”

These doubts and qualifications, however, were not communicated to the public. Instead, the five Administration officials repeatedly made unequivocal comments about Iraq’s nuclear program. For example, President Bush said in October 2002 that “[t]he regime has the scientists and facilities to build nuclear weapons and is seeking the materials required to do so.” Several days later, President Bush asserted that Saddam Hussein “is moving ever closer to developing a nuclear weapon.”

Vice President Cheney made perhaps the single most egregious statement about Iraq’s nuclear capabilities, claiming: “we know he [Saddam] has been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons. And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.” He [Cheney] made this statement just three days before the war...

President Bush and others portrayed the threat of Saddam Hussein waging nuclear war against the United States or its allies as one of the most urgent reasons for preemptively attacking Iraq. Administration officials used evocative language and images. On the eve of congressional votes on the Iraq war resolution, for example, President Bush stated: “Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof — the smoking gun — that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.” ...

2. Claims about the Aluminum Tubes

In 2001 and 2002, shipments of aluminum tubes to Iraq were intercepted. This discovery led to an active debate within intelligence agencies about the intended use of the tubes.

Numerous experts believed the tubes were for conventional rockets rather than a nuclear development program. In his February 5, 2004, speech, Mr. Tenet explained that disagreement over the purpose of the aluminum tubes was “a debate laid out extensively in the estimate and one that experts still argue over.” The agency with the most technical expertise in this area, the Department of Energy, believed that the tubes likely were not part of a nuclear enrichment program, stating in the NIE that “the tubes probably are not part of the program.” The International Atomic Energy Agency agreed, concluding: “There

is no indication that Iraq has attempted to import aluminum tubes for use in centrifuge enrichment.”

In addition to dissent from the Energy Department and international inspectors, the State Department also expressed formal reservations...

These doubts about the use of the aluminum tubes were not conveyed by Administration officials, however. Instead, the aluminum tubes became one of the two principal pieces of information cited by the Administration to support the claim that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice made 10 misleading statements in 9 public appearances about the significance of the aluminum tubes...

3. Claims about Uranium from Africa

Another significant component of the Administration’s nuclear claims was the assertion that Iraq had sought to import uranium from Africa. As one of few new pieces of intelligence, this claim was repeated multiple times by Administration officials as proof that Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear weapons program. In total, the five Administration officials made misleading assertions about Iraq’s attempts to obtain uranium from Africa in 7 statements in 6 public appearances.

In his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, President Bush stated: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. . . Saddam Hussein has not credibly explained these activities. He clearly has much to hide.” Other officials echoed this statement. In a January 23, 2003, *New York Times* op-ed piece, Ms. Rice argued that Iraq had lied in its December 2002 declaration, noting: “the declaration fails to account for or explain Iraq’s efforts to get uranium from abroad.” In his opening remarks in his televised press conference on January 29, 2003, Secretary Rumsfeld stated, “[Saddam Hussein’s] regime . . . recently was discovered seeking significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

These claims that Iraq was seeking to import uranium were misleading. The documentary evidence behind the assertions was declared to be “not authentic” by the International Atomic Energy Agency. An envoy, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, was sent by the CIA to investigate the alleged purchase. Ambassador Wilson concluded that it was “highly doubtful that any such transaction had ever taken place,” and on his return, he provided detailed briefings to the CIA and to the State Department African Affairs Bureau...

C. Statements about Iraq’s Chemical and Biological Weapons Programs

President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice made misleading statements regarding Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons programs in 61 public appearances. In these appearances, the five officials made 84 different misleading statements. These statements addressed three general topics: (1)

Iraq's chemical and biological weapons, (2) Iraq's efforts to build unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and (3) Iraq's mobile biological laboratories.

1. Claims about Chemical and Biological Weapons

Prior to the war, there were questions within the intelligence community about whether Iraq in fact possessed stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons. Because Iraq previously had such stockpiles, had used them in the past, and had not adequately demonstrated that all previously produced stockpiles had been destroyed, the intelligence community made an assessment in the October [2002] NIE that it was likely that Iraq continued to possess them. Because intelligence agencies had no direct evidence of such stockpiles, however, the conclusions in the October NIE were cast in the context of an intelligence "estimate." The NIE began its sections on chemical and biological weapons with the phrases "we assess" and "we judge." The NIE concluded that Iraq "probably" had stockpiled chemicals and "probably" had genetically engineered biological agents. The NIE also included major qualifiers, such as: "We lack specific information on many key aspects of Iraq's WMD programs."

Other intelligence assessments specifically cited the uncertainty surrounding Iraq's possession of such stockpiles. In September 2002, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) issued a report that concluded: "There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons or where Iraq has— or will — establish its chemical warfare agent production facilities." The report also observed that "[a] substantial amount of Iraq's chemical warfare agents, precursors, munitions, and production equipment were destroyed between 1991 and 1998 as a result of Operation Desert Storm and UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission) actions." While the report assessed that Iraq "probably" retained some "CW agents," it warned that "we lack any direct information."

Despite these uncertainties among the intelligence officials, the five Administration officials made 45 misleading statements in 35 appearances about Iraq's possession of chemical or biological weapons. Often these statements were misleading because they projected certainty about their claims. Secretary Powell, for example, claimed, "there is no doubt in our mind that he still has chemical weapons stocks." Secretary Rumsfeld stated: "He has at this moment stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons." Vice President Cheney asserted: "We know they have biological and chemical weapons." And President Bush said bluntly, "he's got them." ...

2. Claims about Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Prior to the war, Administration officials raised the specter of Iraq using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to distribute chemical or biological weapons directly over the United States. Although there was agreement within the intelligence community that Iraq had a UAV program, there was a sharp split over whether these UAVs were designed to deliver chemical or biological weapons. The October NIE concluded that the UAV program was "probably" intended to deliver biological weapons. However, the government entity most

knowledgeable about UAVs and their potential applications, the Air Force's National Air and Space Intelligence Center, disagreed with this conclusion. According to the NIE, the U.S. Air Force "does not agree that Iraq is developing UAVs primarily intended to be delivery platforms for chemical and biological (CBW) agents." Instead, the Air Force experts asserted that "[t]he small size of Iraq's new UAV strongly suggests a primary role of reconnaissance."

The five Administration officials did not acknowledge these doubts in their public statements, however. Instead, they made misleading assertions regarding the purpose of the UAVs in 5 statements in 5 public appearances.

For example, on October 7, 2002, just days before the October 10 and October 11, 2002, congressional votes on the Iraqi war resolution, President Bush claimed that "Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons." He did not disclose that experts at the Air Force found such a use improbable. Instead, he highlighted the fear of Iraq's UAVs being used "for missions targeting the United States." Such statements had an impact on members of Congress. For example, Senator Bill Nelson voted for the Iraq war resolution "precisely because of the administration's UAV evidence." He explained:

I was told not only that [Hussein had weapons of mass destruction] and that he had the means to deliver them through unmanned aerial vehicles, but that he had the capability of transporting those UAVs outside of Iraq and threatening the homeland here in America, specifically by putting them on ships off the eastern seaboard. . . I thought there was an imminent threat.

In his address to the United Nations, Secretary Powell asserted: "UAVs are well suited for dispensing chemical and biological weapons. There is ample evidence that Iraq has dedicated much effort to developing and testing spray devices that could be adapted for UAVs." In making his presentation to the U.N., Secretary Powell showed a photo of an "illustrative" UAV, which he suggested was well suited for spraying chemical or biological weapons over the United States. This presentation affected members of Congress. Senator Dianne Feinstein stated that of the various pieces of evidence presented by Secretary Powell, "the most compelling to me was the unmanned aerial vehicle and the development of that with spray tanks. And he kind of laid down the fact that this could be in our country and there was a possibility that this might be used against the United States."

President Bush later highlighted Secretary Powell's presentation, claiming: "All the world has now seen the footage of an Iraqi Mirage aircraft with a fuel tank modified to spray biological agents over wide areas. . . A UAV launched from a vessel off the American coast could reach hundreds of miles inland." ...

3. Claims about Mobile Biological Laboratories

In April and early May 2003, military forces found mobile trailers in Iraq. Although intelligence experts disputed the purpose of the trailers, Administration officials repeatedly

asserted that they were mobile biological weapons laboratories. In total, President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice made 34 misleading statements about the trailers in 27 separate public appearances...

D. Statements about Iraq's Support of al Qaeda

Another key component of the case for going to war against Iraq was the claim that Iraq was supporting al Qaeda. As was the case with other featured claims, the al Qaeda claims were disputed by intelligence officials within the Administration. Yet President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice regularly failed to acknowledge these doubts or the weaknesses in the case linking Iraq and al Qaeda. They made 61 misleading statements about the strength of the Iraq-al Qaeda alliance in 52 public appearances.

Well before the war on Iraq, the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate made clear that the U.S. intelligence community had serious doubts about the threat of Iraq arming al Qaeda. In its section on "Confidence Levels for Selected Key Judgements in this Estimate," the NIE gave a "Low Confidence" rating to the notion of "Whether in desperation Saddam would share chemical or biological weapons with Al Qa'ida." The discussion of this possibility in the NIE contained highly qualified language: "Saddam, if sufficiently desperate, might decide that only an organization such as al-Qa'ida . . . could perpetuate the type of terrorist attack that he would hope to conduct." The NIE also reported that "Baghdad for now appears to be drawing a line short of conducting terrorist attacks with conventional or CBW against the United States, fearing that exposure of Iraqi involvement would provide Washington a stronger cause for making war."

...Despite the doubts of many intelligence analysts, the five Administration officials regularly asserted that there was a close relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda.

For example:

- In a November 7, 2002, speech, President Bush stated: Saddam Hussein is "a threat because he is dealing with Al Qaida. . . [A] true threat facing our country is that an Al Qaida-type network trained and armed by Saddam could attack America and not leave one fingerprint."
- In his January 28, 2003, State of the Union address, President Bush stated: "Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own."
- In his February 5, 2003, remarks to the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated: "what I want to bring to your attention today is the potentially much

more sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder. Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Usama bin Laden and his al-Qaida lieutenants.”

- In remarks on May 1, 2003, announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq, President Bush stated: “The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11, 2001 — and still goes on. . . [T]he liberation of Iraq . . . removed an ally of al Qaeda.”

Vice President Cheney’s statements on this topic repeatedly cited reports of a specific alleged Iraq–al Qaeda contact: a meeting between Mohammed Atta, one of the September 11 hijackers, and a senior Iraqi official in Prague a few months before September 11, 2001. For example, Vice President Cheney stated on September 14, 2003:

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, but we’ve never been able to develop anymore of that yet either in terms of confirming it or discrediting it. We just don’t know.

The Vice President’s assertions about this meeting omitted key information. He did not acknowledge that the CIA and FBI had concluded before the war in Iraq that “the meeting probably did not take place”; that Czech government officials had developed doubts regarding whether this meeting occurred; or that American records indicate that Mr. Atta was in Virginia Beach, Virginia, at the time of the purported meeting.

Assessments following the war further highlighted the tenuous nature of the Administration’s assertions about an Iraq-al Qaeda alliance. According to the *New York Times* [December 13, 2003], “Since American forces toppled the Hussein government and the United States gained access to captured Iraqi officials and Iraqi files, the C.I.A. has not yet uncovered evidence that has altered its prewar assessment concerning the [lack of] connections between Mr. Hussein and Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda...”

Conclusion

Because of the gravity of the subject and the President’s unique access to classified information, members of Congress and the public expect the President and his senior officials to take special care to be balanced and accurate in describing national security threats. It does not appear, however, that President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Powell, and National Security Advisor Rice met this standard in the case of Iraq. To the contrary, these five officials repeatedly made misleading statements about the threat posed by Iraq. In 125 separate appearances, they made 11 misleading statements about the urgency of Iraq’s threat, 81 misleading statements about Iraq’s nuclear activities, 84 misleading statements about Iraq’s chemical and biological capabilities, and 61 misleading statements about Iraq’s relationship with al Qaeda.