

How Tenet Betrayed the CIA on WMD in Iraq

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WASHINGTON, Aug 8 - Journalist Ron Suskind's revelation that Saddam Hussein's intelligence chief was a prewar intelligence source reporting to the British that Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) adds yet another dimension to the systematic effort by then Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director George Tenet to quash any evidence -- no matter how credible -- that conflicted with the George W. Bush administration's propaganda line that Saddam was actively pursuing a nuclear weapons programme.



George Tenet -- 'the Truth shall incarcerate you'

According to Suskind's new book, 'The Way of the World', Iraqi Director of Intelligence Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti had been passing on sensitive intelligence to the UK's MI6 intelligence service for more than a year before the U.S invasion. In early 2003, Suskind writes, Habbush told MI6 official Michael Shipster in Jordan that Saddam had ended his nuclear programme in 1991 and his biological weapons programme in 1996. Habbush explained to the British official that Saddam tried to maintain the impression that he did have such weapons in order to impress Iran.

Suskind writes that the head of MI6, Richard Dearlove, flew to Washington to present details of the Habbush report to Tenet, who then briefed National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Soon after that, the CIA informed the British that the Bush administration was not interested in keeping the Habbush channel open, according to Suskind's account.

Tenet has called the story of the Habbush prewar intelligence a "complete fabrication", claiming Habbush had "failed to persuade" the British that he had "anything new to offer by way of intelligence". His statement actually reinforces Suskind's account, however, by indicating that he had simply chosen not to believe Habbush. "There were many Iraqi officials who said both publicly and privately that Iraq had no WMD," said the statement, "but our foreign intelligence colleagues and we assessed that these individuals were parroting the Baath party line and trying to delay any coalition attack."

Contradicting Tenet's claim that the British did not take the Habbush report seriously, MI6 director Dearlove told Suskind he had asked Prime Minister Tony Blair why he had not acted on the intelligence from Habbush.

Another high-level U.S. source in the last months of the Saddam regime was Saddam's foreign minister Naji Sabri. Tyler Drumheller, the CIA's chief of clandestine operations for Europe from 2001 until 2005, recounts in his book 'On the Brink' that Sabri was passing on information to an official of a European government in early autumn 2002 indicating that hints of a WMD programme were essentially a "Potemkin village" used to impress foreign enemies.

Sidney Blumenthal wrote in Sep. 2007 that two former CIA officers who had worked on the Sabri case identified the foreign intermediary as being France and said he had been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by the CIA and French intelligence to provide documents on Saddam's WMDs.

Drumheller told '60 Minutes' that Sabri "told us that they had no active weapons of mass destruction program."

On Sep. 17, 2002, the CIA officer who had debriefed Sabri in New York, briefed CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin, according to Blumenthal's account. McLaughlin responded that Sabri's information was at odds with "our best source". That was a reference to 'Curveball', the Iraqi who claimed knowledge of an Iraqi mobile bio-weapons lab programme but was later found to be a professional liar.

The next day, Tenet briefed Bush on Sabri's intelligence, but Bush rejected it out of hand as "what Saddam wanted him to think".

French intelligence agents later tapped Sabri's telephone conversations and determined that he was telling the truth. But it was too late. One of Tenet's deputies told the CIA officers, "This isn't about intelligence. It's about regime change."

Yet another highly credible U.S. source on the WMD issue in Sep. 2002 was Saad Tawfik, an electrical engineer who had been identified by the CIA as a "key figure in Saddam Hussein's clandestine nuclear weapons programme". The story of the CIA's handling of his testimony is told in James Risen's 'State of War'.

In early Sep. 2002, Tawfik's sister, who lived in Cleveland, flew to Baghdad with a mission from the CIA to obtain details about Saddam's nuclear weapons from her brother. But when she returned in mid-September, the CIA didn't like the report from her conversations with the source.

Tawfik told his sister that Saddam's nuclear programme had been abandoned in 1991. When she told him the CIA wanted her to ask such questions as "how advanced is the centrifuge" and "where are the weapons factories", Tawfik was incredulous that the CIA didn't understand that there was no such programme.

Tawfik's was only one of thirty cases of former Iraqi WMD experts who reported through relatives that Saddam had long since abandoned his dreams of WMD, according to Risen.

Both the Sabri evidence and the evidence from Tawfik and other former Iraqi experts was available to the CIA during the work on the Oct. 2002 National Intelligence Estimates (NIE). But the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence kept all of that evidence out of the NIE process.

No report based on any of that evidence was ever circulated to State, Defence or the White House, according to Risen and Blumenthal.

The disappearance of all that credible evidence reflected a deliberate decision by Tenet. The White House Iraq Group had just rolled out its new campaign to create a political climate supporting war in early September, and Tenet knew what was expected of him. As an analyst who worked on the NIE told Bob Drogin of the Los Angeles Times, "The going-in assumption was that we were going to war, so this NIE was to be written with that in mind." That means Tenet's account of the CIA's role in the WMD issue in his 2007 memoirs completely ignored the credible evidence from Habbush, Sabri and the former Iraqi specialists that there was no active program, as well as his own role in suppressing it.

Tenet even brazenly claimed that a "very sensitive, highly placed source in Iraq" about whom "little has been publicly said" had "reported that production of chemical and biological weapons was taking place". The reporting from the source, continuing through the NIE and beyond, "gave those of us at the most senior level further confidence that our information about Saddam's WMD programmes was correct."

Tenet was clearly referring to the reporting coming from the Sabri debriefings, but his description of them was a prevarication. As Blumenthal reported, they had written a report on Sabri's intelligence spelling out his view that there was no active WMD programme, but they later discovered that it had been rewritten and given an entirely new preamble asserting that Saddam already possessed chemical and biological weapons and was "aggressively and covertly developing" nuclear weapons.

Tenet -- who was a political operator rather than an intelligence professional -- had betrayed the CIA's mission of providing objective analysis, instead choosing to serve the interests of the Bush administration in preparing the way for war. It is not difficult to imagine how he would have meekly carried out whatever was asked of him by the White House -- even forging a document and leaking it to the media, to buttress the administration's case for war.

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