

The Phony ‘Bad Intel’ Defense on Iraq

By [Ray McGovern](#)

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President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney receive an Oval Office briefing from CIA Director George Tenet. Also present is Chief of Staff Andy Card (on right). (White House photo)

Jeb Bush’s stumbling start to his presidential bid has refocused attention on Official Washington’s favorite excuse for the illegal, aggressive and disastrous war in Iraq – that it was just a case of “bad intelligence.” But that isn’t what the real history shows.

Presidential aspirant Jeb Bush this week may have [damaged his chances](#) by flubbing the answer to an entirely predictable question about his big brother’s decision to attack Iraq.

On Monday, Fox’s Megyn Kelly asked the former Florida governor: “Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion?” Jeb Bush answered, “I would’ve. And so would’ve Hillary Clinton, just to remind everybody, and so would’ve almost everybody who was confronted with the intelligence they got.”

Kelly: “You don’t think it was a mistake.”

Bush: “In retrospect, the intelligence that everyone saw — that the world saw, not just the United States — was faulty.”

After some backfilling and additional foundering on Tuesday and Wednesday, Bush apparently memorized the “correct” answer. So on Thursday, he proceeded to ask the question himself: “If we’re all supposed to answer hypothetical questions: Knowing what we now know, what would you have done? I would not have engaged. I would not have gone into Iraq.”

It is a safe bet that, by Thursday, Iraq War champion Paul Wolfowitz, now a senior adviser to Jeb Bush, had taken him to the woodshed, admonishing him along these lines: “Jeb, you remembered to emphasize the *mistaken* nature of pre-war intelligence; that’s the key point; that’s good. But then you need to say that if you knew how *mistaken* the intelligence was, you would *not* have attacked Iraq. Got it?”

It was then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz — together with his boss Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney and a string of neocon advisers — who exploited the tragedy of 9/11 to make war on Iraq, which they had been itching for since the 1990s. They tried mightily (and transparently) to link Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to the Sept. 11 attacks. Following their lead, the fawning corporate media played up this bum rap with such success that, before the attack on Iraq, polls showed that almost 70 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein played some kind of role in 9/11.

Not so, said honest intelligence analysts who, try as they might, could find no persuasive

evidence for Hussein's guilt other than the synthetic kind in Wolfowitz's purposively twisted imagination. Yet the pressure on the analysts to conform was intense. CIA's ombudsman commented publicly that never in his 32-year career with the agency had he encountered such "hammering" on CIA analysts to reconsider their judgments and state that there were operational ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

The pressure was reflected in pronouncements at the highest levels. A year after 9/11, President Bush was still saying, "You cannot distinguish between al-Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror." Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was more direct, claiming that the evidence tying Iraq to al-Qaeda was "bulletproof."

But Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to President George H.W. Bush and Chairman of George W. Bush's President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, supported honest analysts in CIA and elsewhere, stating publicly that evidence of any such connection was "scant."

There was the looming danger of a principled leak, or possibly even an insurrection of some kind on the part of those opposed to creating pretexts for war. And so the administration chose to focus first and foremost on "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD).

It would be an easier – and scarier – sell a claim that Iraq had chemical, biological and perhaps nuclear weapons and that the Iraqis could give them to "terrorists" for another attack on the "homeland" (introducing a term that both the Nazis and the Soviets used to good effect in whipping up nationalistic fervor in wartime).

Brimming with WMD

Unable to get honest intelligence analysts to go along with the carefully nurtured "noble lie" that Iraq played a role in 9/11, or even that operational ties existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the administration ordered up a separate but related genre of faux intelligence – WMD. This PR offensive was something of a challenge, for in the months before 9/11, Condoleezza Rice and then-Secretary of State Colin Powell had insisted publicly that Saddam Hussein posed no security threat. You don't remember?

On Feb. 24, 2001, Powell had said, "Saddam Hussein has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors."

And just six weeks before 9/11, Condoleezza Rice told CNN: "let's remember that his [Saddam's] country is divided, in effect. He does not control the northern part of his country. We are able to keep his arms from him. His military forces have not been rebuilt." Obliging, the compliant U.S. media pressed the delete button on those telling statements.

How many times have we heard that, after 9/11, "everything changed." Well, we were soon to observe a major attempt to apply this adage to Saddam's inventory of WMD that Rice and Powell had said did not exist. The world was being asked to believe that, almost immediately, hundreds of stealth WMD had wafted down like manna from the heavens for a soft landing on the sands of Iraq.

Just days after the Sept. 11 attacks, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld began promoting the notion that Iraq might have weapons of mass destruction and that "within a week, or a month, Saddam could give his WMD to al-Qaeda." This was an early articulation of the

bogus “conjunction of terrorism and WMD,” now immortalized in what is the most damning, first-hand, documentary evidence of U.S./U.K. collusion in launching a war of aggression on false pretenses and how it was to be “justified.”

This [evidence](#) was contained in the “Downing Street Memorandum,” written on July 23, 2002, though not published until May 1, 2005, by The London Times (discussed in more detail below). The goal was to systematically conflate Iraq’s supposed stockpiles of WMD with al-Qaeda and 9/11, as a kind of subliminal fear/revenge message to the American public.

It was not long before the agile Rice did a demi-pirouette of 180 degrees, claiming that Saddam had suddenly become “a danger in the region where the 9/11 threat emerged.” By the summer of 2002, the basic decision for war having been taken, something persuasive had to be conjured up to get Congress to authorize it. Weapons of mass deception, as one wag called them, together with warnings about “mushroom clouds” were just what the Doctor Rice ordered.

Sadly, CIA’s malleable director George Tenet followed orders to conjure up WMD in a deceitful National Intelligence Estimate issued on Oct. 1, 2002. The NIE’s main purpose was to deceive Congress into authorizing war on Iraq, which Congress did just ten days later.

Amid the media din about WMD, and with Rep. Barbara Lee, D-California, the sole exception, no legislator proved willing to risk being seen as “weak on terrorism” as the mid-term elections approached in November, the disinformation operation was – well, you might say a “cakewalk.” Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin satisfied President Bush they could fashion the evidence into a “slam dunk,” and then fed the cooked intelligence to Secretary of State Colin Powell to use at the U.N.

Riding High, Wolfowitz Slips

Basking in the glory of “Mission Accomplished” after Baghdad fell in April 2003, Wolfowitz succumbed to a brief bout of hubris-induced honesty. He openly admitted that the Bush administration had focused on weapons of mass destruction to justify war on Iraq “for bureaucratic reasons.” It was, he explained, “the one reason everyone could agree on” – meaning, of course, the one that could successfully sell the war to Congress and the American people.

As for the real reasons, Wolfowitz again let his guard drop at about the same time. When asked in May 2003 why North Korean WMD were being treated differently from those claimed to exist in Iraq, he responded, “Let’s look at it simply. ... [Iraq] swims on a sea of oil.”

Other usually circumspect senior officials have had unguarded moments of candor. In another moment of unusual frankness – this one before the war – Philip Zelikow, a member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 2001 to 2003, spilled the other key reason. Discounting any real danger to the U.S. from Iraq, Zelikow pointed rather to the threat he said Iraq posed to Israel as “the unstated threat.” It was a threat, he added, that dared not speak its name – because it was so politically sensitive.

Are you getting the picture why the Bush administration didn’t want to level with the American people who might have viewed the war very differently if the real motives and the

nagging doubts had been expressed frankly and bluntly?

The force with which CIA analysts were pressed to manufacture intelligence to serve the cause of war was unprecedented in CIA history and included personal visits by Vice President Cheney to make sure the intelligence analysts knew what was wanted. That many of my former colleagues in the Analysis Directorate took willing part in this unconscionable charade was hard to believe. But they did.

At about this time, an anonymous White House official – believed to be George W. Bush’s political adviser Karl Rove – reportedly boasted, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities.”

As exemplified by Jeb Bush’ memorized lines this past week, there continues to be a huge premium among disciples of Rovian historiography, to “create new reality,” blaming “mistaken intelligence” for the debacle in Iraq and the ensuing chaos throughout the region. The intelligence was wrong; but it was *not* mistaken; it was out-and-out fraud.

This had become so clear, yet so little known, that ten years ago this month I was finishing a draft for a chapter I called “Sham Dunk: Cooking Intelligence for the President” to appear in *Neo-CONNED Again! Hypocrisy, Lawlessness, and the Rape of Iraq*.

I was just finishing the draft when a *deus ex machina* arrived in the form of a major leak to the London Times of official minutes of a briefing of then British Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street on July 23, 2002, eight months before the war on Iraq, and three days after visiting CIA Director George Tenet to confirm for Blair exactly what Bush and Cheney were planning. The Downing Street document destroyed the argument, already being promoted in 2005 by those responsible for the fraud, that intelligence mistakes were to blame for the war in Iraq.

The Downing Street Memorandum

I would like to draw from the first couple of paragraphs of the chapter, since, sadly, they seem relevant today as the historical rewrite about “intelligence errors” is recurring now at the start of Campaign 2016. But first, here is the text of the most damaging part of the Downing Street Memo as “C” — Richard Dearlove, the head of British intelligence – reported on recent talks in Washington:

“There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime’s record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.”
(emphasis added)

Following is [the introduction](#) to my chapter:

“Let’s review. It was bad intelligence that forced an unwitting president to invade Iraq, right? The sad fact that so many Americans believe this myth is eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of the White House spin machine. The

intelligence was indeed bad — shaped that way by an administration determined to find a pretext to effect 'regime change' in Iraq.

"Senior administration officials — first and foremost Vice President Dick Cheney — played a strong role in ensuring that the intelligence analysis was corrupt enough to justify, ex post facto, the decision to make war on Iraq. It is not altogether clear how witting President George W. Bush was of all this, but there is strong evidence that he knew chapter and verse. Had he been mousetrapped into this 'preemptive' war, one would expect some heads to roll. None have. And where is it, after all, that the buck is supposed to stop?

"The intelligence-made-me-do-it myth has helped the Bush administration attenuate the acute embarrassment it experienced early last year [2004] when the casus belli became a casus belly laugh. When U.S. inspector David Kay, after a painstaking search to which almost a billion dollars and many lives were given, reported that there had been no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq since 1991, someone had to take the fall.

"Elected was CIA director George Tenet, the backslapping fellow from Queens always eager to do whatever might be necessary to play with the bigger kids. For those of you just in from Mars, the grave danger posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was what President Bush cited as the casus belli for invading Iraq. It was only after Kay had the courage to tell the truth publicly that Bush fell back on the default rationale for the war; namely, the need to export democracy, about which we are hearing so much lately.

"Not surprisingly, the usual suspects in the mainstream media that played cheerleader for the war are now helping the president (and the media) escape blame. Flawed intelligence that led the United States to invade Iraq was the fault of the US intelligence community, explained the Washington Times last July 10 [2004], after regime loyalist Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, released his committee's findings.

"Nine months later, after publication of similar findings by a commission handpicked by the president, the Washington Post's lead headline was 'Data on Iraqi Arms Flawed, Panel Says.' The date was, appropriately, April Fools Day, 2005. In a word, they are playing us for fools. The remarkable thing is that most folks don't seem able, or willing, to recognize that — or even to mind.

"On May 1, 2005, a highly sensitive document published by The Sunday Times of London provided the smoking gun showing that President Bush had decided to make war on Iraq long before the National Intelligence Estimate was produced to conjure up 'weapons of mass destruction' there and mislead Congress into granting authorization for war.

"The British document is classified 'SECRET AND STRICTLY PERSONAL — U.K. EYES ONLY.' And small wonder. It contains an official account of Prime Minister Tony Blair's meeting with top advisers on July 23, 2002, at which Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 (the U.K. equivalent to the CIA), simply 'C' in the written document, reported on talks he had just held in Washington with top U.S. officials. Blair has now acknowledged the authenticity of the document.

"As related in the document, Dearlove told Blair and the others that President Bush wanted to remove Saddam Hussein through military action, that this 'was seen as inevitable,' and that the attack would be 'justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.' He continued: '... but the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.'

"Dearlove tacked on yet another telling comment: 'There was little discussion

in Washington of the aftermath after military action.’ British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw concurred that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, but noted that finding justification would be challenging, for ‘the case was thin.’ Straw pointed out that Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea, or Iran.

“As head of MI6, Dearlove was CIA Director George Tenet’s British counterpart. We Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) have been saying since January 2003 that the two intelligence chiefs’ marching orders were to ‘fix’ the intelligence around the policy. It was a no-brainer.

“Seldom, however, does one acquire documentary evidence that this – the unforgivable sin in intelligence analysis – was used by the most senior U.S. government leaders as a way to ‘justify’ a prior decision for war. There is no word to describe our reaction to the fact that the two intelligence chiefs quietly acquiesced in the corruption of our profession on a matter of such consequence. ‘Outrage’ doesn’t even come close.”

Challenging Rumsfeld

A year later in Atlanta, I had an unusual chance to publicly challenge then Defense Secretary Rumsfeld – no stranger to the dissembling about WMD – about his earlier claims saying he knew where the WMD were in Iraq, and knew of ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda. My question grew into a mini-debate of four minutes, during which he lied, demonstrably, on both issues. As luck would have it, May 4, 2006 was a very slow news day, and our mini-debate took place in early afternoon, enabling serious journalists like Keith Olbermann to [perform](#) a “fact-check.”

Finally, on June 5, 2008, then-chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Jay Rockefeller made some remarkable comments that got sparse attention in U.S. media. Announcing the findings of a bipartisan report of a five-year study on misstatements on prewar intelligence on Iraq, Rockefeller said:

“In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.”

Anyone know what “non-existent” intelligence looks like?

What has become painfully clear since the trauma of 9/11 is that most of our fellow citizens have felt an overriding need to believe that administration leaders are telling them the truth and to ignore all evidence to the contrary. Many Americans seem impervious to data showing that it was the administration that misled the country into this unprovoked war and that the “intelligence” was conjured up well after the White House decided to effect “regime change” in Iraq (or introduce democracy, if you favor the default rationale) by force of arms.

I have been asking myself why so many Americans find it so painful to delve deeper. Why do they resist letting their judgment be influenced by the abundance of evidence, much of it documentary, exposing how little or no evidence there was to support what was a most consequential fraud? Perhaps it is because they know that responsible citizenship means asking what might seem to be “impertinent” questions, ferreting out plausible answers, and then, when necessary, holding people accountable, rectifying the situation, and ensuring it

does not happen again.

Resistance, however, remains strong. At work – in all of us to some degree – is the same convenient denial mechanism that immobilized so many otherwise conscientious German citizens during the 1930s, enabling Germany to launch its own unprovoked wars and curtail civil liberties at home. Taking action, or just finding one's voice, entails risk; denial is the more instinctive, easier course.

But it is too late for denial. We might take to heart Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning: "... there is such a thing as being too late. ... Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late.'"

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served for 27 years in CIA's Analysis Directorate, coming "out of retirement" when he saw his former profession being corrupted to "justify" a war of aggression. At that point he joined with others to create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) in an attempt to hold former colleagues accountable.

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