

How Cheney Cooked the Intelligence on Iran

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As I reported for Inter Press Service this week, Dick Cheney has been trying to pressure intelligence analysts who have not drunk the neocon kool-aid on Iran to go along with his line on the issues at stake in a National Intelligence Estimate on Iran that the White House has been holding up for more than a year. Think Progress immediately noted the parallel between the Cheney's effort to get an Iran NIE that is more to his liking and the way he pushed intelligence analysts to accept the fabrications the neocons were pushing in on Iraq in 2002.

The similarities between Cheney's efforts to cook the intelligence on Iraq and on Iran are worth noting, but so are the differences. Cheney may have had a bigger impact in shaping the intelligence estimate on Iran to fit the policy he is pursuing than was the case on Iraq in 2002.

The Washington Post reported in June 2003 that Cheney and his chief of staff Scooter Libby had visited CIA analysts several times in 2002 to get them to reexamine their skeptical analysis on the WMD issue. But equally important, the Post quoted a "senior agency official" as saying that speeches by Cheney in August 2002 charging Saddam with having a nuclear weapons program "sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here."

The effect was achieved despite the fact that the October 2002 NIE on Iraqi WMD was done very quickly, because it had been forced on the White House in September by the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Sen. Bob Graham. The White House had only just begun to roll out its propaganda campaign on the fictive Iraqi nuclear weapons program at that point.

Now flash forward to autumn 2006. Cheney had a draft NIE on Iraq that he didn't like. The intelligence community had already issued an NIE on Iran in spring 2005 that had concluded Iran's nuclear program would not progress to the point of having the capability to produce a nuclear weapon until sometime between 2010 and 2015. The new draft Iran estimate was still reportedly offering a similar analysis. Cheney wanted it to endorse the neocons' alarmist view that Iran could acquire the knowledge with which to make nuclear weapons much sooner than that.

Furthermore, Cheney needed an NIE that would support the policy of attacking Iran over its alleged role in Iraq and seizing supposed Iranian "Quds force" personnel there. He wanted it to endorse the charge that Iran is supplying armor-piercing weapons to Shiites in Iraq who were killing American troops. But the draft NIE didn't do that, according to former CIA analyst Philip Giraldi.

So part of Cheney's strategy was to keep sending the draft back for further work while he was creating a new political atmosphere on Iran's role in Iraq. He began in early 2007 to use the U.S. military command in Iraq to wage an intensive propaganda campaign on how the Iranians were supplying EFPs to anti-U.S. Shiite guerrillas through the Quds force. Ignoring intelligence available to the military that EFPs were being manufactured in machine shops in Iraq, Gen. Petraeus and his subordinates formulated a new narrative that would dominate media coverage and political discourse on the issue of Iran and Iraq.

That Iranian EFP narrative has now been repeated without any alternative view being reflected in the media for ten months. The complete dominance of that narrative in the society for so long has certainly had its effect on the NIE process. As a former CIA intelligence officer told me, "Look, most of the intelligence analysts are young guys with less than ten years of experience. A lot of them are willing to give the administration line on Iran the benefit of the doubt."

My sources suggest that the analysts ready to go along with the new narrative are now the majority. Nevertheless, some intelligence analysts on Iran are reportedly still refusing to say that there is concrete evidence to support the official line that the Iranian regime is exporting EFPs to Iraq. They are insisting on including their dissenting views on the issue in the NIE.

That is why the new Director of National Intelligence, Mike McConnell, under orders from Cheney, has refused to circulate the NIE until all dissenting views on the issue have been removed.

There has been no comparable administration propaganda campaign over Iran's nuclear program, so Cheney's tactics were more direct. Last April the chairman of the National Intelligence Council, Thomas Fingar, who presides over the NIEs, was made to go on National Public Radio and declare that the intelligence community was reevaluating whether its judgment on how soon Iran might produce a nuclear weapon needed to be revised. Fingar said the estimate "might change" and vowed that the analysts were "serious about reexamining old evidence". He even revealed the fact that the NIE on Iran was being delayed because of the reexamination.

Although he didn't say so explicitly, Fingar's statement left little doubt that the White House had forced the reexamination of the analysts' judgment on the Iranian nuclear program by holding the NIE hostage. How successful that hardball tactic has been in getting language more acceptable to Cheney is still not known, but there were still differences of view on the issue in the draft NIE as of last month, according to my sources.

These approaches to cooking the intelligence on Iran are even more nefarious than Cheney's direct approach on Iraq in 2002. They will certainly give Cheney language supporting his belligerent policy that he can leak to the press and use to keep Congress in line. Hopefully responsible officials with access to whatever dissenting views remain will leak those to anti-war Democrats,

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