

# Powell's landmark February 2003 speech to the UN laying out the case for the Iraq war was based on fake intelligence

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Powell's Former Chief of Staff Lawrence Wilkerson Calls Pre-War Intelligence a 'Hoax on the American People'

Colin Powell's former Chief of Staff Lawrence Wilkerson makes the startling claim that much of Powell's landmark speech to the United Nations laying out the Bush Administration's case for the Iraq war was false.

"I participated in a hoax on the American people, the international community, and the United Nations Security Council," says Wilkerson, who helped prepare the address.

"I recall vividly the Secretary of State walking into my office," Wilkerson tells NOW. "He said: 'I wonder what will happen if we put half a million troops on the ground in Iraq and comb the country from one end to the other and don't find a single weapon of mass destruction?'" In fact, no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq.

An interview with Lawrence Wilkerson

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Mr. Wilkerson, thanks for doing this.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Thank you for having me.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** We now know that there was deep skepticism within the intelligence community about some of these pre-war claims than what's being expressed publicly at the time. Is it reasonable to think that the administration knew about this skepticism?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Six months ago I would have said "no." Since that time, however, there have been some revelations. Principally about Sheik Al Libbi's testimony and how it was obtained. And how there was a DIA, for example, Defense Intelligence Agency, dissent on that testimony, apparently I'm hearing now, around the time the testimony was actually given.

And even more to the point than Al Libbi, Curve Ball. And the revelations that have come out about Curve Ball. And in particular the German dissent from the integrity of CurveBall's testimony.

I can tell you that having been intimately involved in the preparation of Secretary Powell for

his five February 2003 presentation at the UN Security Council, neither of those dissents in any fashion or form were registered with me or the Secretary by the DCI, George Tenet, by the DDCI, John McLaughlin, or by any of their many analysts who were in the room with us for those five, six days and nights at the Central Intelligence Agency.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** And they didn't give you any inkling that-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Not a bit.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** — there was this debate about some of this information?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Not a bit. In fact it was presented in the firmest language possible that the mobile biological labs and the sketches we had drawn of them for the Secretary's presentation were based on the iron clad evidence of multiple sources.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Maybe they at the most senior level, like you, just didn't know?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I have to believe that. Otherwise I have to believe some rather nefarious things about some fairly highly placed people in the intelligence community and perhaps elsewhere.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** What do you think really did happen with regards to this- disconnect between what we now know about these profound questions about some of these key sources and the fact that somebody had these questions in real time?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Well, I've been a consumer, a user of intelligence at the tactical, operational and strategic level for close to 35, 36 years. And I've seen many errors in intelligence. And I know it's not a perfectible business. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

However, I am astonished at the failures of our intelligence community over the- last decade in particular. We failed to predict the demise of the Soviet Union. We failed to predict the Indian nuclear test in 1998.

We bombed a Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. We failed to detect the five year planning cycle of al Qaeda, the operatives who conducted 9/11. And we failed in terms of predicting Iraq's WMDs.

So we have a significant problem in this nation with our intelligence community. And, by the way, I don't think it's fixed in any way. Yet. This administration has really done nothing to fix it. And- so I- I'm familiar with intelligence failure.

However, this particular one seems to me to warrant a lot more investigation than it has to this point warranted. And I take in the recognition the Robb Silberman commission, the 9/11 commission and a host of other lesser- investigations that have attempted to look at this. And the phase two investigation now going on in the Congress, which I think as long as the Republicans control the Congress will not be a- an investigation that reveals very much. But I think we really need to take a hard look at how not just the intelligence failures I've enumerated occurred, but how this particular one did. Because it could turn out to be one of the worst in our history.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Your experience with evaluating intelligence- you understand from

your experience evaluating intelligence, this is tough stuff.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Very.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** It often is inconclusive. And you have to use powers of critical thinking to figure out what is the right thing to do.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** And you have to listen to dissent. You must. You can't squelch dissent. You can't put dissent in an obscure footnote on page 495 of an intelligence annex. You must listen to dissent.

You must- I- I today regret the fact that I didn't listen better to the Intelligence Bureau and the State Department. The- the Intelligence Bureau and the State Department at this time we were preparing Secretary Powell dissented on one key issue. And they essentially said there was no active nuclear program in Iraq.

And they were right. And the rest of the intelligence community was wrong. But the rest of the intelligence community did not take that dissent, massage it, compete it in the world of ideas in the intelligence community. It simply footnoted it and relegated it to that footnote. To that qualification, if you will.

INR was right. The rest of the intelligence community was wrong. Now INR was wrong about bio and chem. They said the same thing the rest of the intelligence community said. That he did have active bio and chem programs. But they were right about the most important weapons of mass destruction Saddam could have had, the one that backed up, for example, Dr. Rice and the Vice President and the others who talked about mushroom clouds. And I did not listen to INR. And the Secretary of State did not listen to INR. And as it turns out we should have.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** In the case if pre-war intelligence are we just talking about not listening to dissenting views?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I think that's a big part of it, but it's larger than that. A good friend of mine who was probably one of the most respected INR intelligence personnel that we had at the State Department and who indeed has gone on to join John Negroponte as one of his principle subordinates, once told me that what was missing was competition. And that struck me, because that's what we believe in in America.

You know business, education. Competition is an essential ingredient of what we do. There is no competition in the intelligence community. In other words leaders don't listen to various parts of the intelligence community debate one another.

Instead it's a conformist community. And the DCI and- at that time presided over the conformity. In other words, if- you had a dissenting view, that dissenting view might make it into a footnote. It might make it into a qualifying paragraph. But the intelligence community, speaking through the- director of Central Intelligence, was going to have a conformist view.

And that view was going to be collected from the community, but it was going to be a conformist view. And there's- it's absurd to think that the director for Central Intelligence, or now the National Director of Intelligence, is not influenced by the politics around- him or her.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Well, that's a key question here. Is it just a- an issue of there's a dominant view in the intelligence community and the competing views aren't heard? Or are you concerned that the view of the intelligence community that, for instance, Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, is in a sense being imposed from the top?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I think there's a certain amount of politicization of intelligence. I- don't think you can escape it because of human nature. Particularly if you have a DCI like George Tenet who is frequently in the presence of the President.

Then he is going to absorb during those meetings what the President wants. What the President is looking for. What the angle of attack the President has is. And he's going to search for intelligence that will support that angle of attack.

That's just the nature of human beings. So it's absurd for someone to say that the intelligence is not politicized at all. Of course it is. It has to be. It has to conform to the leader's wishes- to a certain extent. And what you need in this competitive community I've described is people who will stand up to power and tell truth to power. And say, "No, that's not right," to the Vice President of the United States, for example.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** We now know from published reports that Vice President Cheney and his right hand man, Lewis Libby, went over to the headquarters of the CIA about 10 times in late 2002 and early 2003. We don't know what was said. What do you think was going on?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Well, if the Vice President was exercising his right as one of the leaders of this country to go to one of its intelligence agencies and to- check on how they're doing and to make sure that they're doing their jobs properly and so forth, I find it difficult to believe that took 10 times. And as I've said, it's absurd to think that intelligence isn't somehow politicized at times.

It's equally absurd for the Vice President to assert that his trips out to the agency were not bringing undue influence on the agency. That's preposterous. Anytime a leader of his stature visits a single agency that many times, he is, by simply the virtue of his position, bringing undue influence on that agency.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** So you can imagine a scenario where the Vice President's over there kind of CIA?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I- could imagine that scenario easily.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** I've never met the Vice President. He's the kind of guy who could lean on somebody?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Absolutely. And be just as quiet and taciturn about it as- he- as he leaned on 'em. As he leaned on the Congress recently- in the- torture issue.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** We've been talking grand policy. The then director of the CIA, George Tenet, Vice President Cheney's deputy Libby, told you that the intelligence that was the basis of going to war was rock solid. Given what you now know, how does that make you feel?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** It makes me feel terrible. I've said in other places that it was-

constitutes the lowest point in my professional life. My participation in that presentation at the UN constitutes the lowest point in my professional life.

I participated in a hoax on the American people, the international community and the United Nations Security Council. How do you think that makes me feel? Thirty-one years in the United States Army and I more or less end my career with that kind of a blot on my record? That's not a very comforting thing.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** A hoax? That's quite a word.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Well, let's face it, it was. It was not a hoax that the Secretary in any way was complicit in. In fact he did his best- I watched him work. Two AM in the morning on the DCI and the Deputy DCI, John McLaughlin.

And to try and hone the presentation down to what was, in the DCI's own words, a slam dunk. Firm. Iron clad. We threw many things out. We threw the script that Scooter Libby had given the- Secretary of State. Forty-eight page script on WMD. We threw that out the first day.

And we turned to the National Intelligence estimate as part of the recommendation of George Tenet and my agreement with. But even that turned out to be, in its substantive parts- that is stockpiles of chemicals, biologicals and production capability that was hot and so forth, and an active nuclear program. The three most essential parts of that presentation turned out to be absolutely false.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** You've said that Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld managed to hijack the intelligence process. You've called it a cabal.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Decision-

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** And-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** — making process.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** The decision making process.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Right.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Well, let me get it right. You've said that Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld somehow managed to hijack the intelligence decision making process. You called it a cabal.

And said that it was done in a way that makes you think it was more akin to something you'd see in a dictatorship rather than a democracy. Now those are strong words. Why a cabal?

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Well, the two decisions that I had the most profound insights into and which I have spoken to are the decision to depart from the Geneva Conventions and to depart from international law with regard to treatment of detainees by the Armed Forces in particular. But by the entire US establishment, now including the CIA and contractors in general.

And the post-invasion Iraq- planning, which was as inept and incompetent as any planning I've witnessed in some 30-plus years in public service. Those two decisions were clearly- made in the statutory process, the legal process, in one way and made underneath that process in another way. And that's what I've labeled secret and cabal-like.

Now let me hasten to add that I've taught the national security decision making process in the nation's war colleges for six years. I'm a student of that process. I will teach it again- starting in January. This is no aberration. It's been done before. It was done with regard to the Bay of Pigs with John F. Kennedy. It was done with regard to Watergate with Richard Nixon. It was done with regard to Iran-Contra with Ronald Reagan.

It was done to a certain and rather lasting effect- with regard to Vietnam by Lyndon Johnson and others. So you- it's not anything new. And it's been done many times before. That is to say, decisions have been made elsewhere than in the Oval Office in other presidencies.

Normally nothing happens as long as the decision is effective, it's well executed and it produces success. It's when the decision produces failure that historians, politicians, Congressmen, American citizens want to know why. And in this case I think both decisions did produce failures and so they're going to want to know why. And- we're seeing some of the investigations and- looks into those decisions now to decide why they were failures.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** There's an argument that swashbuckling executives, Defense Secretary and the Vice President making executive decisions without involving the bureaucracy is very efficient, gets the-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Oh yes.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** -job done.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Oh yes.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** But you're saying that-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** This is the argument that's marshaled by presidents from Truman on. Although I will say that Truman and Eisenhower were probably the two least apartment to do this sort of thing.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** Well think about it. Involving, just for starters, the entire National Security Council on, for instance, evaluating the intelligence that- would help inform a decision to go to war in Iraq. And that's going to slow things down. They're going to be dissenting opinions. You're never going to get that war done.

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** You mean kind of like what our founding fathers- intended when they put the Constitution together? Checks and balances, dissent would be listened to and so forth and so on.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** You're thinking that-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Ferdinand Eberstadt was a bright man who participated in these debates that were roiling — I mean truly roiling around Truman and then around Eisenhower as we try to implement the National Security Council and tried to implement the other parameters of the act, including the formation of the Central Intelligence Agency. And other



putting together the National Defense, national military establishment and then turning it later in an amendment to the act into the Defense Department. Many debates occurred that are just like the debates we're having today.

And Ferdinand Eberstadt, remember now that the 1947 Act in part at least was passed to prohibit ever having another Franklin Roosevelt. The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution was also passed to prohibit having 12/16 years of one man. But I think any critic of Roosevelt would've said even people who, as my father used to say- "Roosevelt ah terrible man. Terrible man." They might've hated his policies but they never would've accused him of being anything other than brilliant.

Ferdinand Eberstadt now, remember that history. Ferdinand Eberstadt writes to Walter Lippmann and he write- he writes I believe in 1953 if I recall Walter Lippmann being- that columnist who didn't mind commenting on anything. And Ferdinand says to Lippmann, "I understand that this may be a more effective process, that a few men making a decision maybe a more effective process, a secretive process may be very efficient." But suppose we get a dumb man?

Suppose we get people who can't make good decisions as FDR was pretty good at. I'm worried and I would rather have the discussion and debate in the process we've designed than I would a dictate from a dumb strongman. And that dumb strongman is his felicitous phrase.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** You're worried that we not have come to that but that we're heading down this path of-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Oh I think it's come to that. I think we've had some decisions at this administration that were more or less dictates. We've had a decision that the Constitution as read by Alberto Gonzales, John Yoo and a few other very selected administration lawyers doesn't pertain the way it has pertained for 200-plus years. A very ahistorical reading of the Constitution.

And these people marshal such stellar lights as- Alexander Hamilton. They haven't even read Federalist Six. I'm sure they haven't. Where Alexander Hamilton lays down his markers about the dangers of a dictate-issuing chief executive. This is not the way America was intended to be run by its founders and it is not the interpretation of the Constitution that any of the founders as far as I read the Federalist Papers and other discussions about their views would have subscribed to. This is an interpretation of the constitution that is outlandish and as I said, clearly ahistorical.

**DAVID BRANCACCIO:** And if the system were shown to work that might be one thing. But- in the case of recent US for-

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Dictatorships work on occasion. You're right. Dictatorships do work but I- I'm like Ferdinand Eberstadt. I'd prefer to see the squabble of democracy to the efficiency of dictators.

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