
The Pentagon Muzzles the CIA

Devising bad intelligence to promote bad policy

ROBERT DREYFUSS | *December 16, 2002*

Even as it prepares for war against Iraq, the Pentagon is already engaged on a second front: its war against the Central Intelligence Agency. The Pentagon is bringing relentless pressure to bear on the agency to produce intelligence reports more supportive of war with Iraq, according to former CIA officials. Key officials of the Department of Defense are also producing their own unverified intelligence reports to justify war. Much of the questionable information comes from Iraqi exiles long regarded with suspicion by CIA professionals. A parallel, ad hoc intelligence operation, in the office of Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, collects the information from the exiles and scours other raw intelligence for useful tidbits to make the case for preemptive war. These morsels sometimes go directly to the president.

The war over intelligence is a critical part of a broader offensive by the party of war within the Bush administration against virtually the entire expert Middle East establishment in the United States -- including State Department, Pentagon and CIA area specialists and leading military officers. Inside the foreign-policy, defense and intelligence agencies, nearly the whole rank and file, along with many senior officials, are opposed to invading Iraq. But because the less than two dozen neoconservatives leading the war party have the support of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, they are able to marginalize that opposition.

Morale inside the U.S. national-security apparatus is said to be low, with career staffers feeling intimidated and pressured to justify the push for war. At the State Department, where Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts at diplomacy have thus far slowed the relentless pressure for war, a key bureau is chilled by the presence of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Elizabeth L. Cheney, the vice president's daughter, who is in charge of Middle East economic policy, including oil. "When [Near East Affairs] meets, there is no debate," says Parker Borg, who served in the State Department for 30 years as an ambassador and deputy chief of counterterrorism. "How vocal would you be about commenting on Middle East policy with the vice president's daughter there?" Undersecretary of State John Bolton is also part of the small pro-war faction.

And at the Pentagon, where a number of critical offices have been filled by hawkish neoconservatives whose commitment to war with Iraq goes back a decade, Middle East specialists and uniformed military officers alike are seeing their views ignored. "I've heard from people on the Middle East staff in the Pentagon," says Borg, referring to the staff under neocon Peter Rodman, the assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs. "The Middle East experts in those offices are as cut off from the policy side as people in the State Department are."

But the sharpest battle is over the CIA. "There is tremendous pressure on [the CIA] to come up with information to support policies that have already been adopted," says Vincent Cannistraro, a former senior CIA official and counterterrorism expert. What's unfolding is a campaign by well-placed hawks to undermine the CIA's ability to provide objective, unbiased intelligence to the White House.

Voice crackling over his cell phone, Jim Woolsey is trying hard to sound objective and analytical, but he is, well, gloating. The former CIA director has been one of the leaders of the get-Saddam Hussein faction for years, promoting a unilateral U.S. strike against Baghdad. Woolsey is not quite a private citizen, serving as an adviser to the CIA and as a member of the Defense Policy Board, which is chaired by the ringleader of the pro-war neocons, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle. Woolsey has also, at least once, served as unofficial liaison to the Iraqi National Congress (INC) and other Iraqi opposition groups.

What's got him excited is an Oct. 7 letter, recently declassified, from CIA Director George Tenet that put the CIA on record for the first time as saying that there have been "high-level contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda going back a decade"; that Iraq and Osama bin Laden's gang have "discussed safe haven"; that members of al-Qaeda have been present in Baghdad; and that Iraq has "provided training to al-Qaeda members in the areas of poisons and gases."

"The CIA has started saying things that the Defense Department has been saying all along, but up until that letter, I hadn't seen any evidence publicly that the CIA was acknowledging all these contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda," says Woolsey. "What I read the Tenet letter as saying is that they are starting to. The CIA has started to come around to point out some of the things that the Pentagon has been talking about."

Tenet's statement on Iraq and al-Qaeda was a significant departure from the consensus view among intelligence professionals. Since

September 11, many of them, inside government and out, have pooh-pooed the notion that Iraq has provided support to al-Qaeda, and they continue to do so. Daniel Benjamin, co-author, with Steven Simon, of *The Age of Sacred Terror*, was director of counterterrorism at the National Security Council (NSC) in the late 1990s, and he oversaw a comprehensive review of Iraq and terrorism that came up empty. "In 1998, we went through every piece of intelligence we could find to see if there was a link [between] al-Qaeda and Iraq," says Benjamin. "We came to the conclusion that our intelligence agencies had it right: There was no noteworthy relationship between al-Qaeda and Iraq. I know that for a fact. No other issue has been as closely scrutinized as this one." The State Department's annual review of state-sponsored terrorism hasn't mentioned any link, either.

A sign of how the Iraq-al-Qaeda issue is roiling the agency is how Tenet himself qualified the analysis. In his letter, addressed to Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Tenet wrote: "Our understanding of the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda is evolving and is based on sources of varying reliability." Benjamin, along with other analysts, points out that the CIA's letter seemed to strain to make the connection, noting that the phrase "sources of varying reliability" is "a way of saying that there isn't much evidence."

But if after failing to find links between Iraq and al-Qaeda for years the CIA is suddenly discovering a connection between the two, some analysts believe that it is Tenet, the CIA director, playing politics and arranging to tell the Pentagon what it wants to hear. "[The CIA] is giving Bush what he wanted on Iraq and al-Qaeda," says Melvin Goodman of the Center for International Policy, who is also a former CIA Soviet expert and a fierce critic of politicized intelligence. "Tenet is playing the game, to a certain extent." Goodman, who has maintained contacts inside the agency, says that the CIA's key intelligence analysts are upset with Tenet and concerned that he will frame their conclusions in a way that kowtows to the Pentagon's preconceived view. "There's a lot of anger and questions about whether Tenet will hold off this pressure," Goodman says. "[The CIA analysts are] worried, and they don't have a lot of confidence in him. But the analytical core is holding fast to the evidence, and the evidence doesn't show that link."

However, the intense pressure from the Pentagon seems to be having an effect. Tenet is, after all, a politician, not a CIA veteran. After serving as staff director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Tenet moved over to the CIA itself and was named to the director's job by President Clinton. But he took pains to ingratiate himself with the Bushes, *père et fils*. He quickly acted to name the CIA headquarters after former President Bush in 1998, organized a major intelligence conference at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University -- itself headed by Robert Gates, a former CIA director -- and personally briefed then-Texas Gov. Bush during the 2000 election campaign. Tenet's quiet politicking was enough to persuade Bush to keep him on at the CIA, and the director's recent actions signal that he doesn't intend to buck the drive toward war.

"It's demoralizing to a number of the analysts," says Cannistraro. "The analysts are human, and some of them are also ambitious. What you have to worry about is the 'chill factor.' If people are ignoring your intelligence, and the Pentagon and NSC keep telling you, 'What about this? What about this? Keep looking!' -- well, then you start focusing on one thing instead of the other thing, because you know that's what your political masters want to hear."

Spy vs. Spy

For more than a year, one of the main sources of Defense Department pressure on the CIA has been a unnamed, rump intelligence unit set up in Undersecretary Feith's policy shop at the department. Begun as a two-person group, it has since expanded to four and now five people, and was set up to provide Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Feith with data they can use to disparage, undermine and contradict the CIA's own analyses. Established just after September 11, the unit's main focus -- though not its only one -- has been on Iraq, especially Iraq's alleged links to al-Qaeda and Iraq's alleged intent to use its alleged nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

In a controversial Oct. 24 briefing at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld noted that a primary purpose of the unit was to provide him with ammunition that he could use to harass the CIA staffer who briefs him every morning. "In comes the briefer, and she walks through the daily brief and I ask questions," said Rumsfeld. "What I could do is say, 'Gee, what about this? Or what about that? Has somebody thought of this?'" Using powerful computers and having access to reams of intelligence factoids, Feith's team could create a steady stream of data bits that Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith himself could use to pick apart the CIA's conclusions, sending the CIA's collectors and analysts back to rewrite their reports.

The fact that the unit is overseen by Feith, an ideologically committed partisan who is pushing for war with Iraq, raises questions about its impartiality and its willingness to reach conclusions that might contradict the Pentagon leadership's stated policy intentions. "It's one thing to create a unit to provide an independent look, and it's another thing to go on a fishing expedition," says Benjamin, the former NSC official. "The fact that this unit has been there for more than a year suggests that it is a fishing expedition."

Informed sources say the person in charge of the unnamed unit is Abram Shulsky, another key member of the Perle-Wolfowitz war party. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) was elected to the Senate in 1976, he "brought with him some of [Sen. Henry M.] Jackson's most militantly neoconservative former aides, among them Elliott Abrams, Chester Finn, Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt," according to a 1986 account in *The Washington Post*. Perle was also a former Jackson aide, and Shulsky, Perle and many

kindred thinkers got jobs in President Reagan's Department of Defense in the 1980s. Shulsky also spent years at the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, a project of the National Strategy Information Center (NSIC), and at the RAND Corporation. At RAND, along with other fellow neocons, including I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby (now Cheney's chief of staff), Shulsky contributed a study called "From Containment to Global Leadership: America and the World after the Cold War." That study was a forerunner of the recent military strategy document released by the Pentagon suggesting that the United States act to preserve its global hegemony, even if it means preemptive war or preventive war making.

Roy Godson, the head of the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence and a colleague of Shulsky's for many years, has high hopes for the success of the Pentagon's Iraq intelligence unit, despite its small size when arrayed against the CIA's might. "It might turn out to be a David against Goliath," says Godson.

Dubious Intelligence

The Pentagon's war against the CIA relies heavily on intelligence from the Iraqi National Congress. But most Iraq hands with long experience in dealing with that country's tumultuous politics consider the INC's intelligence-gathering abilities to be nearly nil. Yet, Perle, Woolsey and the Pentagon's policy-makers increasingly use the INC as their primary source of information about Iraq's weapons programs, its relationship to terrorism and its internal political dynamics. "A lot of what is useful with respect to what's going on in Iraq is coming from defectors, and furthermore they are defectors who have often come through an organization, namely, the INC, that neither State nor the CIA likes very much," Woolsey told me.

Earlier this year, the State Department abruptly stopped funding an INC scheme to collect intelligence inside Iraq. "The INC could only account for \$2.5 million out of \$4.5 million they received for the program," says a State Department official. "I can't say that there was evidence of corruption or embezzlement, but \$2 million was unaccounted for." The more the INC began getting into intelligence work, the more the State Department grew uncomfortable funding the program. "The only reason they stopped paying for that program is that the State Department hates the INC," says a knowledgeable source. Shortly thereafter, the Pentagon picked up the tab. Now, whatever intelligence the INC collects goes straight to the Defense Department, according to spokesman Lt. Col. David Lapan. "The intelligence guys here get the information first and do the analysis," he says. Goodman, the former CIA analyst, concurs, saying, "The INC is in the Pentagon every day."

But the Pentagon's critics are appalled that intelligence provided by the INC might shape U.S. decisions about going to war against Baghdad. At the CIA and at the State Department, Ahmed Chalabi, the INC's leader, is viewed as the ineffectual head of a self-inflated and corrupt organization skilled at lobbying and public relations, but not much else. [See "Tinker, Banker, Neocon, Spy," tap, Nov. 18.] "The [INC's] intelligence isn't reliable at all," says Cannistraro. "Much of it is propaganda. Much of it is telling the Defense Department what they want to hear. And much of it is used to support Chalabi's own presidential ambitions. They make no distinction between intelligence and propaganda, using alleged informants and defectors who say what Chalabi wants them to say, [creating] cooked information that goes right into presidential and vice-presidential speeches."

Adds Cannistraro, "They're willing to twist information in order to serve that interest. They've opened up a channel at the Pentagon to collect intelligence from Iraqi exiles, using people off the books, contractors. It's getting pretty close to an Iran-Contra type of situation."

Manipulating the CIA is nothing new, of course. For decades, politicians annoyed that intelligence from the agency might work against policy goals have sought to bring pressure to bear on the CIA to alter its views or, failing that, to diminish the CIA's standing. During the Vietnam War, the Pentagon disparaged CIA analyses that cast into doubt the projected "light at the end of the tunnel." In the 1970s, then-CIA Director George H.W. Bush invited a so-called Team B group of neoconservative hawks to spin out a report accusing the CIA ("Team A") of consistently underestimating the Soviet threat. (Team B, it's worth noting, was created at the instigation of Albert Wohlstetter, the political godfather to Perle, Wolfowitz, et al.) That pressure continued, in other forms, during Ronald Reagan's military buildup in the 1980s. In the 1980s, too, then-CIA Director Bill Casey was notorious for constantly trying to politicize the CIA, repeatedly trying to influence the agency's reporting on Central America, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union.

The Uses of Endless War

The hostility by the hard-liners against what they see as the CIA's myopia on Iraq at least matches any of those earlier fights. Perle, who said recently that the CIA's analysis of Iraq "isn't worth the paper it's written on," adds that the CIA is afraid of rocking the ark in the Middle East. "The CIA is status-quo oriented," he told me. "They don't want to take risks. They don't like the INC because they only like to work with people they can control."

According to informed sources, Perle, who's currently based at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), has for the past several years sponsored the work of a former CIA clandestine operative, Reuel Marc Gerecht, helping him financially, lending him the use of his villa in France to write a book and getting him a fellowship at AEI. Gerecht, who spends much of his time living in Brussels, maintains close ties to the INC via its centers in London and Washington. According to a person familiar with the

