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Report Cast Doubt on Iraq-Al Qaeda Connection

by Walter Pincus

In a nationally televised address last October in which he sought to rally congressional support for a resolution authorizing war against Iraq, President Bush declared that the government of Saddam Hussein posed an immediate threat to the United States by outlining what he said was evidence pointing to its ongoing ties with al Qaeda.

A still-classified national intelligence report circulating within the Bush administration at the time, however, portrayed a far less clear picture about the link between Iraq and al Qaeda than the one presented by the president, according to U.S. intelligence analysts and congressional sources who have read the report.

The National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, which represented the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community, contained cautionary language about Iraq's connections with al Qaeda and warnings about the reliability of conflicting reports by Iraqi defectors and captured al Qaeda members about the ties, the sources said.

"There has always been an internal argument within the intelligence community about the connections between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda," said a senior intelligence official, who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on condition of anonymity. "The NIE had alternative views."

Similar questions have been raised about Bush's statement in his State of the Union address last January that the British had reported Iraq was attempting to buy uranium in Africa, which the president used to back up his assertion that Iraq had a reconstituted nuclear weapons program. In that case, senior U.S. officials said, the CIA 10 months earlier sent a former senior American diplomat to visit Niger who reported that country's officials said they had not made any agreement to aid the sale of uranium to Iraq and indicated documents alleging that were forged. Details of that CIA Niger inquiry were not shared with the White House, although the agency succeeded in deleting that allegation from other administration statements.

Bush, in his speech in Cincinnati on Oct. 7, made his case that Iraq had ties with al Qaeda, by mentioning several items such as high-level contacts that "go back a decade." He said "we've learned" that Iraq trained al Qaeda members "in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases." Although the president offered essentially circumstantial evidence, his remarks contained none of the caveats about the reliability of this information as contained in the national intelligence document, sources said.

The presidential address crystallized the assertion that had been made by senior administration officials for months that the combination of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons and a terrorist organization, such as al Qaeda, committed to attacking the United States posed a grave and imminent threat. Within four days, the House and Senate overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution granting the president authority to go to war.

The handling of intelligence on Iraq's banned weapons programs and its links to al Qaeda has come under increased scrutiny on Capitol Hill, with some leading Democrats charging that the administration exaggerated the case against Hussein by publicizing intelligence that supported its policy and keeping contradictory information under wraps. The House intelligence committee opened a closed-door review into the matter last week; its Senate counterpart is planning similar hearings. The Senate Armed Services Committee is also investigating the issue.

Bush has defended his handling of intelligence before the war, calling his critics "revisionist historians."

"The intelligence services of many nations concluded that he had illegal weapons, and the regime refused to provide evidence they had been destroyed," Bush said in his weekly radio address yesterday. He vowed to search for "the true extent of Saddam Hussein's weapons programs, no matter how long it takes."

Questions about the reliability of the intelligence that Bush cited in his Cincinnati address were raised shortly after the speech by ranking Democrats on the Senate intelligence and armed services panel. They pressed the CIA to declassify more of the 90-page National Intelligence Estimate than a 28-page "white paper" on Iraq distributed on Capitol Hill on Oct. 4.

In one of the more notable statements made by the president, Bush said that "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists," and added: "Alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints."

Bush did not indicate that the consensus of U.S. intelligence analysts was that Hussein would launch a terrorist attack against the United States only if he thought he could not stop the United States from invading Iraq. The intelligence

report had said that the Iraqi president might decide to give chemical or biological agents to terrorists, such as al Qaeda, for use against the United States only as a "last chance to exact vengeance by taking a large number of victims with him." And it said this would be an "extreme step" by Hussein.

These conclusions in the report were contained in a letter CIA Director George J. Tenet sent to Sen. Bob Graham (D-Fla.), then the chairman of the Senate intelligence panel, the day of Bush's speech.

While Bush also spoke of Iraq and al Qaeda having had "high-level contacts that go back a decade," the president did not say -- as the classified intelligence report asserted -- that the contacts occurred in the early 1990s, when Osama bin Laden, the al Qaeda leader, was living in Sudan and his organization was in its infancy. At the time, the report said, bin Laden and Hussein were united primarily by their common hostility to the Saudi Arabian monarchy, according to sources. Bush also did not refer to the report's conclusion that those early contacts had not led to any known continuing high-level relationships between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda, the sources said.

The president said some al Qaeda leaders had fled Afghanistan to Iraq and referred to one "very senior al Qaeda leader who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year." It was a reference to Abu Mussab Zarqawi, a Jordanian. U.S. intelligence already had concluded that Zarqawi was not an al Qaeda member but the leader of an unaffiliated terrorist group who occasionally associated with al Qaeda adherents, the sources said.

As for Bush's claim that Iraq had trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and use of poisons and deadly gases, sources with knowledge of the classified intelligence estimate said the report's conclusion was that this had not been satisfactorily confirmed.

"We've learned," Bush said in his speech, "that Iraq has trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases." But the president did not mention that when national security adviser Condoleezza Rice had referred the previous month to such training, she had said the source was al Qaeda captives.

The CIA briefed congressional committees about the National Intelligence Estimate but did not deliver the classified version until the evening of Oct. 1, just before a Senate intelligence committee hearing the next day, congressional sources said. At that closed-door session, several senators raised questions about qualifying statements made in the report, which was circulated only among senior national security officials.

On Oct. 4, three days before the president's speech, at the urging of members of Congress, the CIA released its declassified excerpts from the intelligence report as a "white paper" on Iraq's weapons programs and al Qaeda links. The

members wanted a public document to which they could refer during floor debates on the Iraq war resolution.

The white paper did contain passages that hinted at the intelligence community's lack of certitude about Iraq's weapons programs and al Qaeda ties, but it omitted some qualifiers contained in the classified version. It also did not include qualifiers made at the Oct. 2 hearing by an unidentified senior intelligence official who, during his testimony, challenged some of the administration's public statements on Iraq.

"Senator Graham felt that they declassified only things that supported their position and left classified what did not support that policy," said Bob Filippone, Graham's deputy chief of staff. Graham, now a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, opposed the war resolution.

When the white paper appeared, Graham and Sen. Carl M. Levin (D-Mich.), an intelligence panel member and at that time chairman of the Armed Services Committee, asked to have additional portions of the intelligence estimate as well as portions of the testimony at the Oct. 2 hearing made public.

On the day of Bush's speech, Tenet sent a letter to Graham with some of the additional information. The letter drew attention because it seemed to contradict Bush's statements that Hussein would give weapons to al Qaeda.

Tenet released a statement on Oct. 8 that said, "There is no inconsistency between our view of Saddam's growing threat and the view as expressed by the president in his speech." He went on to say, however, that the chance that the Iraqi leader would turn weapons over to al Qaeda was "low, in part because it would constitute an admission that he possesses" weapons of mass destruction.

On Oct. 9, the CIA sent a letter to Graham and Levin informing them that no additional portions of the intelligence report would be made public.