

ADMINISTRATION

Key Bush Intelligence Briefing Kept From Hill Panel

By [Murray Waas](#), special to *National Journal*

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Ten days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, **President Bush** was told in a highly classified briefing that the U.S. intelligence community had no evidence linking the Iraqi regime of **Saddam Hussein** to the attacks and that there was scant credible evidence that Iraq had any significant collaborative ties with Al Qaeda, according to government records and current and former officials with firsthand knowledge of the matter.

The information was provided to Bush on September 21, 2001 during the "President's Daily Brief," a 30- to 45-minute early-morning national security briefing. Information for PDBs has routinely been derived from electronic intercepts, human agents, and reports from foreign intelligence services, as well as more mundane sources such as news reports and public statements by foreign leaders.

The administration has refused to provide the Sept. 21 President's Daily Brief, even on a classified basis, and won't say anything more about it other than to acknowledge that it exists.

One of the more intriguing things that Bush was told during the briefing was that the few credible reports of contacts between Iraq and Al Qaeda involved attempts by **Saddam Hussein** to monitor the terrorist group. Saddam viewed Al Qaeda as well as other theocratic radical Islamist organizations as a potential threat to his secular regime. At one point, analysts believed, Saddam considered infiltrating the ranks of Al Qaeda with Iraqi nationals or even Iraqi intelligence operatives to learn more about its inner workings, according to records and sources.

The September 21, 2001, briefing was prepared at the request of the president, who was eager in the days following the terrorist attacks to learn all that he could about any possible connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Much of the contents of the September 21 PDB were later incorporated, albeit in a slightly different form, into a lengthier CIA analysis examining not only Al Qaeda's contacts with Iraq, but also Iraq's support for international terrorism. Although the CIA found scant evidence of collaboration between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the agency reported that it had long since established that Iraq had previously supported the notorious Abu Nidal terrorist organization, and had provided tens of millions of dollars and logistical support to Palestinian groups, including payments to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers.

The highly classified CIA assessment was distributed to President Bush, **Vice President Cheney**, the president's national security adviser and deputy national security adviser, the secretaries and undersecretaries of State and Defense, and various other senior Bush administration policy makers, according to government records.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has asked the White House for the CIA assessment, the PDB of September 21, 2001, and dozens of other PDBs as part of the committee's ongoing investigation into whether the Bush administration misrepresented intelligence information in the run-up to war with Iraq. The Bush administration has refused to turn over these documents.

Indeed, the existence of the September 21 PDB was not disclosed to the Intelligence Committee until the summer of 2004, according to congressional sources. Both Republicans and Democrats requested then that it be turned over. The administration has refused to provide it, even on a classified basis, and

won't say anything more about it other than to acknowledge that it exists.

On November 18, Sen. **Edward Kennedy**, D-Mass., said he planned to attach an amendment to the fiscal 2006 intelligence authorization bill that would require the Bush administration to give the Senate and House intelligence committees copies of PDBs for a three-year period. After Democrats and Republicans were unable to agree on language for the amendment, Kennedy said he would delay final action on the matter until Congress returns in December.

The conclusions drawn in the lengthier CIA assessment-which has also been denied to the committee-were strikingly similar to those provided to President Bush in the September 21 PDB, according to records and sources. In the four years since Bush received the briefing, according to highly placed government officials, little evidence has come to light to contradict the CIA's original conclusion that no collaborative relationship existed between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

"What the President was told on September 21," said one former high-level official, "was consistent with everything he has been told since-that the evidence was just not there."

In arguing their case for war with Iraq, the president and vice president said after the September 11 attacks that Al Qaeda and Iraq had significant ties, and they cited the possibility that Iraq might share chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons with Al Qaeda for a terrorist attack against the United States.

Democrats in Congress, as well as other critics of the Bush administration, charge that Bush and Cheney misrepresented and distorted intelligence information to bolster their case for war with Iraq. The president and vice president have insisted that they unknowingly relied on faulty and erroneous intelligence, provided mostly by the CIA.

The new information on the September 21 PDB and the subsequent CIA analysis bears on the question of what the CIA told the president and how the administration used that information as it made its case for war with Iraq.

The central rationale for going to war against Iraq, of course, was that **Saddam Hussein** had biological and chemical weapons, and that he was pursuing an aggressive program to build nuclear weapons. Despite those claims, no weapons were ever discovered after the war, either by United Nations inspectors or by U.S. military authorities.

Much of the blame for the incorrect information in statements made by the president and other senior administration officials regarding the weapons-of-mass-destruction issue has fallen on the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies.

In April 2004, the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded in a bipartisan report that the CIA's prewar assertion that Saddam's regime was "reconstituting its nuclear weapons program" and "has chemical and biological weapons" were "overstated, or were not supported by the underlying intelligence provided to the Committee."

The Bush administration has cited that report and similar findings by a presidential commission as evidence of massive CIA intelligence failures in assessing Iraq's unconventional-weapons capability.

Bush and Cheney have also recently answered their critics by ascribing partisan motivations to them and saying their criticism has the effect of undermining the war effort. In a speech on November 11, the president made his strongest comments to date on the subject: "Baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning America's will." Since then, he has adopted a different tone, and he said on his way home from Asia on November 21, "This is not an issue of who is a patriot or not."

In his own [speech](#) to the American Enterprise Institute yesterday, Cheney also changed tone, saying that "disagreement, argument, and debate are the essence of democracy" and the "sign of a healthy political system." He then added: "Any suggestion that prewar information was distorted, hyped, or fabricated by the leader of the nation is utterly false."

Although the Senate Intelligence Committee and the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, commonly known as the 9/11 commission, [pointed to](#) incorrect CIA assessments on the WMD issue, they both also said that, for the most part, the CIA and other agencies did indeed provide policy makers with accurate information regarding the lack of evidence of ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq.

But a comparison of public statements by the president, the vice president, and Secretary of Defense **Donald Rumsfeld** show that in the days just before a congressional vote authorizing war, they professed to have been given information from U.S. intelligence assessments showing evidence of an Iraq-Al Qaeda link.

"You can't distinguish between Al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror," President Bush said on September 25, 2002.

The next day, Rumsfeld said, "We have what we consider to be credible evidence that Al Qaeda leaders have sought contacts with Iraq who could help them acquire ... weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities."

The most explosive of allegations came from Cheney, who said that September 11 hijacker **Mohammed Atta**, the pilot of the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center, had met in Prague, in the Czech Republic, with a senior Iraqi intelligence agent, **Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani**, five months before the attacks. On December 9, 2001, Cheney said on NBC's Meet the Press: "[I]t's pretty well confirmed that [Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in [the Czech Republic] last April, several months before the attack."

Cheney continued to make the charge, even after he was briefed, according to government records and officials, that both the CIA and the FBI discounted the possibility of such a meeting.

Credit card and phone records appear to demonstrate that Atta was in Virginia Beach, Va., at the time of the alleged meeting, according to law enforcement and intelligence officials. Al-Ani, the Iraqi intelligence official with whom Atta was said to have met in Prague, was later taken into custody by U.S. authorities. He not only denied the report of the meeting with Atta, but said that he was not in Prague at the time of the supposed meeting, according to published reports.

In June 2004, the 9/11 commission concluded: "There have been reports that contacts between Iraq and Al Qaeda also occurred after bin Laden had returned to Afghanistan, but they do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship. Two senior bin Laden associates have adamantly denied that any ties existed between Al Qaeda and Iraq. We have no credible evidence that Iraq and Al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States."

Regarding the alleged meeting in Prague, the commission concluded: "We do not believe that such a meeting occurred."

Still, Cheney did not concede the point. "We have never been able to prove that there was a connection to 9/11," Cheney said after the commission announced it could not find significant links between Al Qaeda and Iraq. But the vice president again pointed out the existence of a Czech intelligence service report that Atta and the Iraqi agent had met in Prague. "That's never been proved. But it's never been disproved," Cheney said.

The following month, July 2004, the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded in its review of the CIA's prewar intelligence: "Despite four decades of intelligence reporting on Iraq, there was little useful intelligence collected that helped analysts determine the Iraqi regime's possible links to al-Qaeda."

One reason that Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld made statements that contradicted what they were told in CIA briefings might have been that they were receiving information from another source that purported to have evidence of Al Qaeda-Iraq ties. The information came from a covert intelligence unit set up shortly after the September 11 attacks by then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy **Douglas J. Feith**.

Feith was a protégé of, and intensely loyal to, Cheney, Rumsfeld, then-Deputy Defense Secretary **Paul**

D. Wolfowitz, and Cheney's then-chief of staff and national security adviser, **I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby**. The secretive unit was set up because Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Libby did not believe the CIA would be able to get to the bottom of the matter of Iraq-Al Qaeda ties. The four men shared a long-standing distrust of the CIA from their earlier positions in government, and felt that the agency had failed massively by not predicting the September 11 attacks.

At first, the Feith-directed unit primarily consisted of two men, former journalist **Michael Maloof** and **David Wurmser**, a veteran of neoconservative think tanks. They liked to refer to themselves as the "Iraqi intelligence cell" of the Pentagon. And they took pride in the fact that their office was in an out-of-the-way cipher-locked room, with "charts that rung the room from one end to the other" showing the "interconnections of various terrorist groups" with one another and, most important, with Iraq, Maloof recalled in an interview.

They also had the heady experience of briefing Rumsfeld twice, and Feith more frequently, Maloof said. The vice president's office also showed great interest in their work. On at least three occasions, Maloof said, **Samantha Ravich**, then-national security adviser for terrorism to Cheney, visited their windowless offices for a briefing.

But neither Maloof nor Wurmser had any experience or formal training in intelligence analysis. Maloof later lost his security clearance, for allegedly failing to disclose a relationship with a woman who is a foreigner, and after allegations that he leaked classified information to the press. Maloof said in the interview that he has done nothing wrong and was simply being punished for his controversial theories. Wurmser has since been named as Cheney's Middle East adviser.

In January 2002, Maloof and Wurmser were succeeded at the intelligence unit by two Naval Reserve officers. Intelligence analysis from the covert unit later served as the basis for many of the erroneous public statements made by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and others regarding the alleged ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda, according to former and current government officials. Intense debates still rage among longtime intelligence and foreign policy professionals as to whether those who cited the information believed it, or used it as propaganda. The unit has since been disbanded.

Earlier this month, on November 14, the Pentagon's inspector general announced an investigation into whether Feith and others associated with the covert intelligence unit engaged in "unauthorized, unlawful, or inappropriate intelligence activities." In a statement, Feith said he is "confident" that investigators will conclude that his "office worked properly and in fact improved the intelligence product by asking good questions."

The Senate Intelligence Committee has also been conducting its own probe of the Pentagon unit. But as was first disclosed by *The American Prospect* in an article by reporter **Laura Rozen**, that probe had been hampered by a lack of cooperation from Feith and the Pentagon.

Internal Pentagon records show not only that the small Pentagon unit had the ear of the highest officials in the government, but also that Rumsfeld and others considered the unit as a virtual alternative to intelligence analyses provided by the CIA.

On July 22, 2002, as the run-up to war with Iraq was underway, one of the Naval Reserve officers detailed to the unit sent Feith an e-mail saying that he had just heard that then-Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz wanted "the Iraqi intelligence cell ... to prepare an intel briefing on Iraq and links to al-Qaida for the SecDef" and that he was not to tell anyone about it.

After that briefing was delivered, Wolfowitz sent Feith and other officials a note saying: "This was an excellent briefing. The Secretary was very impressed. He asked us to think about possible next steps to see if we can illuminate the differences between us and CIA. The goal was not to produce a consensus product, but rather to scrub one another's arguments."

On September 16, 2002, two days before the CIA produced a major assessment of Iraq's ties to terrorism, the Naval Reserve officers conducted a briefing for Libby and **Stephen J. Hadley**, then the deputy national security adviser to President Bush.

In a memorandum to Wolfowitz, Feith wrote: "The briefing went very well and generated further interest from Mr. Hadley and Mr. Libby." Both men, the memo went on, requested follow-up material, most notably a "chronology of Atta's travels," a reference to the discredited allegation of an Atta-Iraqi meeting in Prague.

In their presentation, the naval reserve briefers excluded the fact that the FBI and CIA had developed evidence that the alleged meeting had never taken place, and that even the Czechs had disavowed it.

The Pentagon unit also routinely second-guessed the CIA's highly classified assessments. Regarding one report titled "Iraq and al-Qaeda: Interpreting a Murky Relationship," one of the Naval Reserve officers wrote: "The report provides evidence from numerous intelligence sources over the course of a decade on interactions between Iraq and al-Qaida. In this regard, the report is excellent. Then in its interpretation of this information, CIA attempts to discredit, dismiss, or downgrade much of this reporting, resulting in inconsistent conclusions in many instances. Therefore, the CIA report should be read for content only- and CIA's interpretation ought to be ignored."

This same antipathy toward the CIA led to the events that are the basis of Special Prosecutor **Patrick Fitzgerald's** investigation of the leak of CIA officer **Valerie Plame's** identity, according to several former and current senior officials.

Ironically, the Plame affair's origins had its roots in Cheney and Libby's interest in reports that **Saddam Hussein** had tried to purchase uranium yellowcake from Niger to build a nuclear weapon. After reading a Pentagon report on the matter in early February 2002, Cheney asked the CIA officer who provided him with a national security briefing each morning if he could find out about it.

Without Cheney's knowledge, his query led to the CIA-sanctioned trip to Niger by former Ambassador **Joseph Wilson**, Plame's husband, to investigate the allegations. Wilson reported back to the CIA that the allegations were most likely not true.

Despite that conclusion, President Bush, in his [State of the Union](#) address in 2003, included the Niger allegation in making the case to go to war with Iraq. In July 2003, after the war had begun, Wilson publicly charged that the Bush administration had "twisted" the intelligence information to make the case to go to war.

Libby and Deputy White House Chief of Staff **Karl Rove** told reporters that Wilson's had been sent to Niger on the recommendation of his wife, Plame. In the process, the leaks led to the unmasking of Plame, the appointment of Fitzgerald, the jailing of a New York Times reporter for 85 days, and a federal grand jury indictment of Libby for perjury and obstruction of justice for allegedly attempting to conceal his role in leaking Plame's name to the press.

The Plame affair was not so much a reflection of any personal animus toward Wilson or Plame, says one former senior administration official who knows most of the principals involved, but rather the direct result of long-standing antipathy toward the CIA by Cheney, Libby, and others involved. They viewed Wilson's outspoken criticism of the Bush administration as an indirect attack by the spy agency.

Those grievances were also perhaps illustrated by comments that Vice President Cheney himself wrote on one of Feith's reports detailing purported evidence of links between Al Qaeda and **Saddam Hussein**. In barely legible handwriting, Cheney wrote in the margin of the report:

"This is very good indeed ... Encouraging ... Not like the crap we are all so used to getting out of CIA."

-- *Murray Waas is a Washington-based writer and frequent contributor to National Journal. Several of his previous stories are [also available online](#).*

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