

The Path to War

Amid the smoking wreckage of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration took its policy goal of regime change in Iraq and began an 18-month campaign marked by miscalculation, bullying, and deception that would tarnish its credibility and turn the world's sympathy for the U.S. into fear and mistrust. From the coining of the phrase "axis of evil" in a D.C. Starbucks to repeated attempts to discredit the U.N. weapons inspectors, BRYAN BURROUGH, EVGENIA PERETZ, DAVID ROSE, and DAVID WISE unfold the saga of stunning blunders, desperate maneuvers, and dangerous arrogance, as seen by White House, Pentagon, C.I.A., and other insiders

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SECTION: SPECIAL REPORT; The Path to War; No. 525; Pg. 228

LENGTH: 22985 words

HIGHLIGHT: The Path to War; Special Report: The Rush to Invade Iraq-; The Ultimate Inside Account; By Bryan Burrough, Evgenia Peretz, David Rose, and David Wise

The centerpiece of the Bush administration's case for an invasion of Iraq, the presentation that laid out the key pieces of intelligence the U.S. government had gathered about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his purported links to al-Qaeda terrorists, was delivered by Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations on February 5, 2003. It was a historic speech, and yet it was one that Powell, who had argued against the war for months, was probably far from comfortable delivering.

On Wednesday, January 29, a week earlier, Powell appeared in the doorway between his seventh-floor office at the State Department and that of his chief of staff, Larry Wilkerson, and handed Wilkerson a 48-page dossier that had been sent over by the White House.

The document, which the White House intended that Powell use as the basis of his speech, was a laundry list of intelligence gathered by the government about Iraq's weapons programs. It had been cobbled together in Vice President Richard Cheney's office by a team led by Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, and John Hannah, the vice president's deputy assistant for national-security affairs—both well-known administration hawks. A few days earlier, Libby had presided over a meeting in the White House Situation Room in which he laid out the case against Iraq, producing what one administration official called a "Chinese menu" of material.

"Go out to C.I.A.," Powell instructed his staff chief, take whomever you need, and start work on the speech. By the next night Wilkerson, along with several staffers and a revolving group of C.I.A. analysts, was ensconced in a conference room down the hall from Director of Central Intelligence (D.C.I.) George Tenet's office at C.I.A. headquarters, in Langley, Virginia. The White House supplied 45 more pages on Iraq's links to terrorism and its human-rights violations.

By the end of the first day, though, Wilkerson and the others did something surprising: they threw out the White House dossier, now grown to more than 90 pages. They suspected much of it had originated with the Iraqi National Congress (I.N.C.) and its chief, Ahmad Chalabi, a smooth-talking Iraqi former banker, whose family had fled Iraq in 1958, when Chalabi was 13. The I.N.C., an exile group based in London, had been supplying U.S. intelligence with Iraqi defectors whose information had often proved suspect or fabricated. The problem with the I.N.C. was that its information came with an overt agenda. As the I.N.C.'s Washington adviser, Francis Brooke, admits, he urged the exile group to do what it could to make the case for war: "I told them, as their campaign manager, 'Go get me a terrorist and some W.M.D., because that's what the Bush administration is interested in.'" As for Iraq's links to al-Qaeda, Powell's staff was convinced that much of that material had been funneled directly to Cheney by a tiny, separate intelligence unit set up by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "We were so appalled at what had arrived from the White House," says one official.

Instead, the group turned to the C.I.A. analysts and started from scratch. That night, and every night for the next several days, Powell went to Langley to oversee the process. In Tenet's conference room, joined by the D.C.I. and at times by National-Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Scooter Libby, and C.I.A. deputy director John McLaughlin, the secretary of state demanded to know the sources and reliability of the information he had been given. For everyone involved, it was a tense and frustrating process. At one point, according to several witnesses, Powell tossed several documents in the air and snapped, "This is bullshit!"

The meetings stretched on for four more days and nights. Cheney's staff constantly pushed for certain intelligence on Iraq's alleged ties to terrorists to be included—information that Powell and his people angrily insisted was not reliable. Powell was keenly aware he was staking his credibility on the speech, and he wanted to include only solid information that could be verified. Cheney and his staff had insisted that their intelligence was, in fact, well documented. They told Powell not to worry. One morning a few days before the speech, Powell encountered Cheney in the hallway outside the Oval Office. "Your poll numbers are in the 70s," Cheney told him. "You can afford to lose a few points." At two o'clock in the morning, hours before Powell was to give his speech, a call came from the C.I.A. to the operations center of Powell's hotel suite at the Waldorf-Astoria. Powell had already turned in for the night, and Wilkerson picked up the phone. The message was clear enough: George Tenet, who was staying at another Manhattan hotel, wanted one last look at the text of the speech.

Tenet, the caller made plain, was worried that Powell's staff had cut too much about Saddam's supposed links to terrorists. Wilkerson was annoyed and baffled. Only a few hours before, Phil Mudd, the C.I.A.'s terrorism specialist, had come to the Waldorf, bearing a gift of Italian food. Then Barry Lowenkron, a senior Powell aide, had informed Mudd that they had tightened the terrorism part. Mudd read the section. "Looks fine," he said, and he left around midnight.

Now the director of central intelligence was fretting and asking to see the speech in the middle of the night. It should not have been a complete surprise; Tenet served at the pleasure of President George W. Bush, and for days the White House, and Cheney's staff in particular, had been trying to persuade Powell to link Iraq directly to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. They had pressed him repeatedly to include a widely discredited Czech intelligence

report that Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the 9/11 al-Qaeda terrorists, had met in Prague with an Iraqi intelligence officer. At the last rehearsal of the speech at C.I.A. headquarters, Powell had thrown out the Prague material as suspect and unverified.

Lowenkron tracked Mudd down, woke him up, and asked what the hell was going on. Was there a problem? Mudd acknowledged he had reported to Tenet that Powell's staff had tightened the terrorism section. Now it was clear why the C.I.A. chief was demanding to see the speech in the pre-dawn hours, and it was dispatched to his hotel. The next morning at the U.N., Powell insisted that Tenet sit to his right and just behind him. It was theater, a device to signal the world that Powell was relying on the C.I.A. to make his case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (W.M.D.), which were a threat to the U.S. In the well of the Security Council, Tenet sought to make light of the pre-dawn escapade. "I'm going to kill Phil Mudd for getting me out of bed," he said.

Cheney's office made one last-ditch effort to persuade Powell to link Saddam and al-Qaeda, and to slip the Prague story back into the speech. Only moments before Powell began speaking, Scooter Libby tried unsuccessfully to reach Wilkerson by phone. Powell's staff chief, by then inside the Security Council chamber, declined to take the call. "Scooter," said one State Department aide, "wasn't happy."

Powell, for all his carping, delivered a speech that was close to what the White House wanted, describing mobile biological-weapons labs, ties to al-Qaeda, and stockpiles of anthrax. Much of it later proved to be untrue. His legacy and the Bush administration's will be forever tarnished as a result. Yet the speech was only one of many low points in a series of historic blunders the U.S. made on its path to war. In 18 short months, from the morning after the 9/11 attacks to the dropping of the first bombs on Baghdad, George W. Bush presided over one of the most startling turnabouts in the history of world opinion. His administration took the unprecedented goodwill America enjoyed in September 2001 and squandered it by invading a country to replace a dictator who today seems not to have represented an imminent threat to the United States.

This article is an attempt to trace how it happened. It is-to be candid-incomplete. The White House and several key officials involved in the diplomatic and military preparations, including Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, declined to be interviewed. But many others agreed, including senior officials at the C.I.A., the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House. Some of the keenest observations about the evolution of the war effort come from top officials in the British government, whose pleas to stop a unilateral American invasion led the Bush administration to take its case for war to the United Nations.

When one talks with those involved in the lead-up to the Iraq war, one theme is repeated again and again. From the C.I.A. analysts who felt pressure to tailor their intelligence to fit the Bush administration's aims to diplomats who felt steamrolled by the White House's blinkered view that Saddam was hiding W.M.D., many officials felt nothing they said, no fact they could present, could possibly dissuade Bush from war.

II.

For a long time before American tanks dashed across the desert toward Baghdad, before Iraqi insurgents used car bombs and rocket-propelled grenades to kill young men and women from Kentucky and Texas and Arkansas, the invasion of Iraq was an idea. It took root after President George H. W. Bush's decision to end the 1991 Gulf War abruptly, to pull back the troops that were slaughtering Iraqi soldiers by the thousands, and to end the headlong rush north toward Baghdad.

During the 1990s the notion of toppling Saddam's regime was championed by a circle of neoconservative thinkers, led by Richard Perle, a former assistant secretary of defense for international-security policy under President Reagan, and Paul Wolfowitz, an undersecretary of defense for policy for George H. W. Bush.

The neoconservatives first gained notice for their hard-line views on dealing with the Soviet Union during George H. W. Bush's administration, in which Cheney served as secretary of defense. During the Clinton years, the neocons, quite a few of whom concerned themselves with hard-line defense policies for Israel, remained tied to one another and to Cheney through a number of right-wing think tanks and institutes. One of the most influential of them is the American Enterprise Institute (A.E.I.), whose alumni include Cheney, neoconservative godfather Irving Kristol, Perle, Newt Gingrich, and failed Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork.

In 1992, Wolfowitz's office drafted a document called the Defense Planning Guidance, which said that the U.S. might be faced with the question of whether to take military action to prevent the use or development of W.M.D.-a precursor to the so-called Bush Doctrine, supposedly formulated by the current president. In 1998, Perle and Wolfowitz, along with Donald Rumsfeld and 15 others, sent a much-talked-about letter to President Bill Clinton urging regime change in Iraq and a more aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East.

When Cheney became vice president, he remembered his neocon friends while making political appointments. In fact, the neocons' influence is so great in the current administration that it has led those unsympathetic to their hawkish views to talk about the existence of "a cabal." In addition to Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby, who had been one of Wolfowitz's top aides in the first Bush administration, became Cheney's chief of staff, his national-security adviser, and an adviser to Bush. William Luti had been a military adviser to Newt Gingrich before working on Cheney's staff and eventually shifting to the Pentagon as chief of Middle Eastern policy. Stephen J. Hadley, a former member of the George H. W. Bush administration, was made deputy to Condoleezza Rice. Douglas Feith, who had served as special counsel to Richard Perle when Perle was an assistant secretary of defense in the 1980s, was appointed undersecretary of defense for policy at the Pentagon, and David Wurmser, a close associate of Perle's, became Cheney's Middle East adviser.

As he entered the White House, Bush gave no signs of being the global adventurer he has since become. By all accounts, it was Cheney and Rumsfeld who brought about his transformation. The neoconservative world-view is summarized in *An End to Evil*, a recently published book co-written by Perle and former Bush speechwriter David Frum. Their dream, they write, is "a world at peace; a world governed by law; a world in which all peoples are free to find their own destinies." It is how the neoconservatives hope to reach this post-Cold War utopia, however, that

frightens many people. Perle and Frum believe such a world will be brought into being "by American armed might."

Among many neoconservatives, removing Saddam became a kind of panacea for all the Middle East's ills and a solution for dealing with the rise of Islamist terror and bringing democracy to Iraq and the Middle East. But, others were quick to point out, given the hatreds among the three main groups in Iraq—the Sunni Muslims, the Shiite Muslims, and the Kurds—there would be serious problems with managing the power vacuum that deposing Saddam would create. Even among Republican hawks, there were widely differing views about how to oust Saddam. In 2001, in the early months of the Bush administration, everyone had a plan. Colin Powell's State Department favored a program of international pressure in concert with the U.N. and its weapons inspectors; Wolfowitz and his fellow neocons all but sneered at Powell and his dovish tendencies, ridiculing the U.N. as the do-nothing pawn of Third World nobodies and Euro-peaceniks. The C.I.A. considered what some called the "magic bullet" plan, that is, an assassination or coup d'etat. The I.N.C. and Ahmad Chalabi floated their own plan, a partial invasion of southern Iraq that would supposedly lead to a popular revolution. At President Bush's first National Security Council (N.S.C.) meeting, on January 30, 2001, a decision was made to formulate a coherent Iraq strategy.

For months memos flew among the State Department, the Pentagon, the C.I.A., and the White House, but through a series of bruising meetings everyone stuck to his guns. The process swiftly became bogged down in bitter interagency disagreements. In such cases, it is the national-security adviser's job to forge a common line. This, say numerous officials, is something Condoleezza Rice was unwilling to do. "She has no opinions of her own," says an insider. "Her supreme concern is preserving her own relationship with the president. She's a chief of staff, not an advocate, until she's sure he knows what he wants to do." The result, this insider says, is "there's a tier missing in the foreign-policy wedding cake. A subject will get up to a certain level and then just stick until Bush decides."

At first the president seemed in no hurry to deal with Saddam. "Faced with a dilemma, he has this favorite phrase he uses all the time: Protect my flexibility," says the insider. Often, this person says, the president will ask by what date he needs to make a particular decision. "If, for the sake of argument, you say he needs to decide by November, he'll turn round and say, 'In that case, I'm not going to do it in May.'"

Powell spotted this weakness immediately and used it to his advantage, the neocons believe. "(Powell) is incredibly smart, the supreme courtier, brilliant tactically and strategically," a former White House official says. "Bush would be breathing fire about something in the days before an N.S.C. meeting; he would even be raising hell spontaneously in private meetings with ambassadors. And then Powell would say to Bush, 'Yes, I agree with you, this is terrible, but if we push it too vigorously it will upset our allies: let (the Department of) State handle this. We agree with you, but this isn't the way to do it.'" Again and again, Powell would win the argument.

It was, in the words of one former White House official, "a formula for gridlock." Which is just where the Bush administration's Iraq policy remained stuck when the World Trade Center fell. On the morning of September 11 seven members of Rumsfeld's neocon brain trust, officials

who would wield enormous influence over Iraq policy in the coming months, were busy on unrelated missions in Europe and the Middle East. The next morning, Wednesday the 12th, they gathered in a light rain on the tarmac at an airport in Frankfurt, Germany, and boarded an air-force refueling plane that had been sent to ferry them back to Washington.

"Just about the whole Defense Department policy shop concerned with issues linked to international terrorism ended up on that plane," says Douglas Feith, the 50-year-old undersecretary of defense for policy. A colleague of Perle's since the Reagan administration, he is a staunch supporter of Israel and a longtime opponent of a Palestinian state. "We stopped for a while at the Royal Air Force base at Mildenhall (in Suffolk, England), and (several of us) were standing round, discussing the fact that the president had already said things which implied we were at war. People forget what a big deal that was. If we were at war, who was the enemy? That's the basic level of the questions we started with. What would be our war aims?"

As the KC-135 Stratotanker headed across the Atlantic, the Pentagon people began debating what the new war meant. "It was just a tanker, cold, dark, and crowded," says William Luti, 50, who heads the Pentagon's Near Eastern and South Asian section. "But right there on the plane, we took out our laptops and sketched out our strategy; we sketched out for Secretary Rumsfeld where we thought we had to go, what it meant to get things on a war footing." Although no one had yet claimed responsibility for the attacks, Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network were prime suspects. Closing their havens by toppling the Taliban government of Afghanistan seemed the obvious first priority.

But to Feith, Luti, and their traveling companions, it also seemed that a war on terror could not end with Afghanistan. "Obviously we had Afghanistan in our minds straightaway," Luti says. "That was our immediate concern. But we also thought we had to learn about the terrorist networks, how they connected to the states."

That list of possibilities-states which might have unconventional weapons, and those which might be prepared to use them in support of terrorists-was not very long, and one nation loomed large in their deliberations. Iraq was not on the table as a matter of detailed military planning that day, but it was on the table as a concept.

Toward the end of the flight, the air-force plane flew over Manhattan, and the men from the Pentagon gazed at the site of the horror inflicted the previous day. Feith and Luti were still gathering their thoughts when the plane touched down at Andrews Air Force Base a few minutes after five that afternoon. On the tarmac, Feith flipped out his cell phone. His first message was from Rumsfeld's office: the president was due at the Pentagon at six. Scrambling through Washington rush-hour traffic, the group made it just in time to meet with Bush.

The president, accompanied by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, instructed the somber gathering to think in the broadest possible terms. "The president said that this was a war, and that it was the Pentagon's responsibility," Feith says. "He wanted it fought in the right spirit. People came away saying it was clear he wasn't talking about half-measures." Three days later, on Saturday, September 15, President Bush gathered his closest advisers at Camp David to discuss the shape of the coming war. Much of their discussion dealt with Afghanistan. But during a session that morning, according to Bob Woodward's 2002 book, *Bush at War*,

Wolfowitz advocated an attack on Iraq, perhaps even before an attack on Afghanistan. There was a 10 to 50 percent chance that Iraq had been involved in 9/11, he argued, concluding that Saddam's "brittle, oppressive regime" might succumb easily to an American attack-in contrast to the difficulties involved in prosecuting war in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Sitting across the table, Colin Powell was appalled. To attack Iraq without clear evidence of Saddam's involvement in September 11 would drive America's allies away, he argued. Much better to go after bin Laden's obvious state sponsor, the Taliban. If that went well, it would only enhance America's ability to oust Saddam later. In front of his advisers at Camp David, and in later interviews, Bush indicated that he supported Powell's argument. During the lunch break, the president sent a message to Wolfowitz and the other neocons, indicating that he did not wish to hear any more about Iraq that day. But, according to Richard Perle, Wolfowitz had planted a seed. Bush told Perle at Camp David that once Afghanistan had been dealt with, it would be Iraq's turn. By that Monday, Wolfowitz and his neocon colleagues were already busy studying ways to justify an eventual attack on Iraq. The next day, Tuesday, September 18, Perle convened a two-day meeting of the Defense Policy Board, a group that advises the Pentagon. (Perle has since resigned, first as chairman, amid charges of conflicts of interest because he was representing a company seeking Defense Department approval of a sale to two foreign companies, and then from the group altogether.) The board's meetings amount to a form of "organized brainstorming" with the defense secretary, his key lieutenants, and a group of well-informed outsiders, all of whom are cleared to have access to classified intelligence. The 30 members, appointed by the secretary of defense, have traditionally represented a broad spectrum of political beliefs. Under Rumsfeld, however, the board has taken a hard turn to the right, with several Democrats being ousted.

That morning the group gathered in the lobby of a hotel in downtown Washington. From there, one participant recalls, "we got into mini-buses and took off at about a zillion miles an hour. We had a full-blown police escort, motorcycle outriders, the works, and at the peak of the morning rush hour they had cleared the entire interstate across the 14th Street Bridge. It took almost no time at all to get to the Pentagon... When we got there, it was like a war zone. You could still smell the smoke."

They met in Rumsfeld's conference room. After a C.I.A. briefing on the 9/11 attacks, Perle introduced two guest speakers. The first was Bernard Lewis, professor emeritus at Princeton, a longtime associate of Cheney's and Wolfowitz's. Lewis told the meeting that America must respond to 9/11 with a show of strength: to do otherwise would be taken in the Islamic world as a sign of weakness-one it would be bound to exploit. At the same time, he said, America should support democratic reformers in the Middle East. "Such as," he said, turning to the second of Perle's guest speakers, "my friend here, Dr. Chalabi."

Chalabi's presence at the meeting represented a triumph for his long-standing Washington adviser, Francis Brooke, who had spent years forging a large network of sympathetic contacts for Chalabi, among journalists and on Capitol Hill. Several of those around the table already counted themselves strong I.N.C. supporters, including Perle, Gingrich, and Professor Lewis, along with the Pentagon neocons who drifted in and out of the meeting-Luti, Feith, and Wolfowitz. Yet, while Chalabi had attracted powerful support, there were reasons to keep him at a distance. In

particular, he had been convicted in 1992 of embezzling tens of millions of dollars from Petra Bank, Jordan's third-largest, which he had started. (Chalabi denies the charge.) He fled the country before he could be imprisoned. When it came to discussing who should replace Saddam, State Department and C.I.A. officials soon came to use a brutal abbreviation: "A.B.C.-anyone but Chalabi."

At the meeting Chalabi said that, although there was as yet no evidence linking Iraq to 9/11, failed states such as Saddam's were a breeding ground for terrorists, and Iraq, he told those at the meeting, possessed W.M.D.

During the later part of the second day, Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld listened carefully to the debate. "Rumsfeld was getting confirmation of his own instincts ... " Perle says. "He seemed neither surprised nor discomfited by the idea of taking action against Iraq."

In his new book, *Against All Enemies*, and in an interview with 60 Minutes' Lesley Stahl, Richard Clarke, the former counterterrorism coordinator for Presidents Clinton and Bush, tells of a far stronger impulse to go after Iraq among senior Bush-administration officials in the days after September 11. Rumsfeld began pushing for retaliatory attacks against Iraq almost immediately, Clarke recalled. "We all said, ' ... No, no. Al-Qaeda is in Afghanistan. We need to bomb Afghanistan.'" At one point, Clarke said, "the president dragged me into a room with a couple of other people, shut the door and said, 'I want you to find whether Iraq did this.' Now, he never said, 'Make it up,' but the entire conversation left me in absolutely no doubt that George Bush wanted me to come back with a report that said, 'Iraq did this.'"

Clarke said that, together with C.I.A. and F.B.I. experts, he wrote a report that found no connection. When he submitted it to the president, he said, "it got bounced by the national-security advisor, or deputy. It got bounced and sent back, saying, 'Wrong answer... Do it again.'" Clarke doesn't know if the president saw his report. "I don't think he sees memos that he doesn't-wouldn't like the answer."

On Thursday, September 20, Tony Blair arrived in Washington for a meeting at the White House. Until now, many assumed his and Bush's early talks had been limited to the coming war in Afghanistan. In fact, they also spoke of Iraq. At a dinner in the White House, attended also by Colin Powell, Condi Rice, and the British ambassador to the United States, Sir Christopher Meyer, Bush made clear that he was determined to topple Saddam. "Rumors were already flying that Bush would use 9/11 as a pretext to attack Iraq," Meyer remembers. "On the one hand, Blair came with a very strong message-don't get distracted; the priorities were al-Qaeda, Afghanistan, the Taliban. Bush said, 'I agree with you, Tony. We must deal with this first. But when we have dealt with Afghanistan, we must come back to Iraq.'" As C.I.A. agents on horseback rallied Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to a routing of Taliban troops that autumn, Wolfowitz, Perle, and their neocon colleagues kept their sights trained on Saddam. For them, the holy grail became anything that might link Iraq to the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda, or any other terrorist groups. Wolfowitz, for example, remained intrigued by a theory, advanced by Laurie Mylroie, a former Harvard professor and American Enterprise Institute fellow, that Saddam had been behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center-though the idea had been dismissed by most experts, including those at the F.B.I. and C.I.A. In the wake of 9/11, Wolfowitz dispatched Jim Woolsey, the C.I.A. director from 1993 to 1995, to London to look for evidence in British intelligence files

that might confirm her thesis.

Nothing came of Woolsey's trip, but that didn't stop right-wing pundits from aggressively trying to link Iraq to 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. The most controversial case involved the Czech intelligence report that Powell refused to include in his speech. The conservative New York Times columnist William Safire, for instance, seized on the report, terming it "the undisputed fact connecting Iraq's Saddam Hussein to the Sept. 11 attacks." Woolsey chimed in, too, citing the supposed Prague meeting in a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece in October 2001. Two and a half years later, the report has yet to be confirmed.

The advocates of regime change in Iraq realized that, for any American invasion to enlist support, both domestically and internationally, links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda needed to be proved. In October 2001, Doug Feith claims, he set up a small intelligence operation inside the Pentagon, the Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group. It was tasked to comb the vast existing databases of the C.I.A. and the Defense Intelligence Agency (D.I.A.) for evidence of links between Middle Eastern nations and Islamist terrorist networks, Feith says. Many media reports called this unit the Office of Special Plans and claimed that it had a far larger mandate and had been working for a year, but, according to Feith, this much bigger office was not established until August 2002, when the intelligence unit's work was already finished. The Office of Special Plans' job, he says, was policy planning for the war and its aftermath.

The Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group's first head was neocon David Wurmser, who wrote a 1999 book, *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein*, with an introduction by Perle. By the end of 2001, Wurmser was ready to make a presentation to Wolfowitz and other senior Pentagon officials in which he argued that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the loss of funding from the K.G.B., many of the most militant groups in the Middle East had begun to band together: the Palestine Liberation Organization; the Saudi Wahhabi fundamentalists, who had spawned al-Qaeda and bin Laden; Hezbollah; Saddam Hussein's Iraq; and the radicals in Iran. All, Wurmser argued, had shown themselves ready to lay aside their doctrinal differences to work together against the United States. The natural place to attack this consortium, Wurmser argued, was the nation with which war could most easily be justified: Iraq. "To claim that Iraq would be a distraction from al-Qaeda is meaningless," Wurmser said in his presentations. "It's like saying the D-day landings in Normandy were a distraction from the war in Sicily and North Africa."

Wurmser's ideas were, needless to say, controversial, and met with fierce resistance at the C.I.A. and elsewhere, where analysts could see little more than nominal links among the terror groups he cited. The view inside the C.I.A. was that Saddam's secular government would never have anything to do with religious fundamentalists who, after all, sought to topple secular regimes. In early 2002, Chris Carney, a D.I.A. reservist and a political-science professor at Penn State University, took over the Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group and unearthed old reports which suggested that Iraqi intelligence agents had worked with al-Qaeda for more than a decade. In August, Feith says, he twice took Carney to the C.I.A.'s headquarters to make presentations to Tenet and a few of his analysts. According to Feith, Tenet bought some of his findings, and with his blessing they later found their way into speeches by Bush and testimony by Tenet to Congress.

But the C.I.A. analysts' reception was chilly. They already knew the information and had weighed it in their intelligence reports. Most of it, they deemed, was not credible. Feith eventually put the information in a memorandum to the Senate Intelligence Committee. Although its contents were highly classified, they were leaked to *The Weekly Standard*, a journal closely associated with the neoconservatives. "If you don't understand how intelligence works," a Pentagon official told *The New York Times*, "you could look at this memo and say, 'Aha, there was an operational connection between Saddam and al-Qaeda.' But intelligence is about sorting what is credible from what isn't, and I think the best judgment about Iraq and al-Qaeda is that the jury is still out."

Feith and his staff insist that the special Pentagon intelligence unit never dealt directly with information supplied by Ahmad Chalabi's I.N.C., or debriefed any sources. However, much of the supposedly new intelligence which crossed the desks of Rumsfeld and Cheney originated with the I.N.C., a group the C.I.A. had long distrusted. In the fall of 2001, and for much of the next year, Chalabi's people produced a series of men and women termed "defectors" from Iraq, and they were accorded disproportionate influence. At least two, who were interviewed by the D.I.A. and whose information was taken very seriously by the Pentagon and vice president, brought with them hair-raising stories of Saddam's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. The most important, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haidari, claimed that Saddam had secret labs making biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons hidden in underground wells, under villas, and beneath the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad; to date, no trace of such facilities has been found.

Beginning that winter, however, this and other stories achieved wide currency in the media; several would find their way into speeches given by administration officials. Unfortunately the Defense Intelligence Agency has concluded that most of the information from Chalabi's defectors "was of little or no value... Several Iraqi defectors introduced to American intelligence" by the I.N.C. "invented or exaggerated their credentials as people with direct knowledge of the Iraqi government and its suspected unconventional weapons program." The fall of Kabul in November 2001 unleashed a torrent of press speculation over where America would strike next. Terrorist havens such as Yemen, Somalia, and Syria were all named as candidates. Iraq was mentioned as well, but by Christmas, with no clear indication from the White House where the War on Terror would go, much of the talk began to die down.

Inside the White House, however, the focus on Iraq sharpened as staff members prepared President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002. The president's top speechwriter, Michael Gerson, gave David Frum, a Canadian who would actually write the speech, pointed instructions: "Make the best case for war in Iraq," Gerson said, "but leave exit ramps."

Gerson and Frum pounded out much of the speech in a downtown-Washington Starbucks, which had become a drop-in center for their ideological allies from the neoconservative think tanks and the Pentagon. Looking for ways to categorize the states believed to be active supporters of terrorism, they first decided to term Iran, North Korea, and Iraq an "axis of hatred." By the final draft that had become "axis of evil."

"States like these," Bush said that night in January, "and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic."

Bush went on to suggest for the first time that his administration would, in certain circumstances, be prepared to launch pre-emptive wars: "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

As Paul Wolfowitz listened to Bush's words, a single thought ran through his head: This president really gets it.

The countdown to war had begun. In the beginning of February 2002, contingency planning for a second Gulf war began in earnest. The Pentagon, and the various military commands for which it is responsible, always keeps numerous basic war plans on its shelves, theoretical battle strategies against any nation which might conceivably become an enemy. The Iraq plan, code-named "1003 Victor," had been drawn up in the early 1990s, and it envisaged a war very similar to the Gulf conflict of 1991: a period of intense aerial bombardment, followed by a ground invasion on an enormous scale—in 1991, the coalition forces had numbered some 660,000 troops. Under Rumsfeld, the commands had spent the past year reviewing all their old plans and had already begun to consider how to tackle Iraq. This now ceased to be a theoretical exercise.

Some of the more hawkish voices—including several members of Richard Perle's Defense Policy Board—urged that the military be ready to invade as early as the coming fall. In the ensuing months, there would be fierce debate among Rumsfeld, his top civilian officials, and the military men over how a war with Iraq should be fought. Rumsfeld's inclination was to favor a lightweight approach, with the brunt to be borne by a relatively small deployment of special-forces troops, possibly as few as 75,000; the Department of Defense's Central Command (CentCom) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted something much heavier and more traditional.

As planning progressed, the American media's focus moved away from terror for a time and toward the Enron scandal and other domestic concerns. In the early months of 2002, only a handful of newspaper stories suggested Iraq might soon prove to be the next theater for war. Some administration hawks thought the White House was moving too slowly. More than a year after Bush and Condi Rice had made it clear to the N.S.C. that they wanted a plan to change Iraq's regime, gridlock inside the administration was worse than ever. Not for the first or last time, Colin Powell was sounding tough in public while doing all he could when safely behind closed doors to blunt the edges of Bush's bellicosity. Powell's follow-up to the State of the Union address came on February 12, in testimony before the Senate Budget Committee. There was no plan to start a war with Iran or North Korea, he promised, but "with respect to Iraq it has long been, for several years now, a policy of the United States government that regime change would be in the best interests of the region, the best interests of the Iraqi people. And we are looking into a variety of options that would bring that about."

Afterward, unnamed senior administration officials told *The New York Times*, "There (is) a

consensus within the Administration that he (Saddam) must be overthrown and that plans to do so are being drawn up. But there is no agreement as to how precisely that should be done or how long the United States should be prepared to wait for action."

The next day, the Times described Powell's tone as "unusually tough." Unbeknownst to reporters, even as he testified, Powell was engaged in a fierce struggle with Rumsfeld over what-if anything-to do about what the defense secretary claimed was a flagrant Iraqi breach of U.N. sanctions. Within days of the president's State of the Union address, says a senior U.S. arms-nonproliferation official, the intelligence community circulated a report saying that Iraq had found a way to modify trucks in order to make them strong enough to carry heavy weaponry such as tanks and artillery pieces.

Under sanctions imposed by the U.N. Security Council after the Gulf War in 1991, Iraq was expressly forbidden to own what the military calls "heavy-equipment transports." Such trucks, the intelligence report continued, could be used either to move tanks around the country swiftly in the event of war or to import them from a friendly third country such as Syria-which was already pumping Iraqi oil worth \$1 billion a year through a pipeline, itself illegal under the sanctions.

The dispute over what to do about the modified H.E.T.'s went to the top of both the Pentagon and the State Department and was conducted mainly through a bitter exchange of letters. "Rumsfeld was saying, 'We've got to stiffen this up,'" says an official who saw the correspondence, "and State was saying, 'Oh no we're not.' Rumsfeld was like, 'We're going to war with these fuckers and you're letting them get equipment that they're going to use to kill Americans?'"

The dispute highlighted the internal debates within the administration, as did the next formal step toward war. On February 16, after 13 months of interagency warfare, the N.S.C. at last ratified a quixotic National Security Policy Directive on Iraq, committing America both to examining ways of bringing about a C.I.A.-backed coup d'etat by a friendly general and to providing military support for a popular insurrection, along the lines of the strategy advocated by the I.N.C. In practical terms, the strategy of regime change had not moved an inch in months.

III.

The Bush administration spent much of the first half of 2002 analyzing intelligence about Iraq. Part of the effort was directed toward figuring out how Saddam would respond to an invasion, what his biological- and chemical-weapons capabilities actually were, and whether he would use them against American troops. It was the second half of the intelligence process, one that came personally to involve Dick Cheney and his staff, that has spawned controversy ever since. Beginning in early 2002, Cheney, sometimes accompanied by Scooter Libby, paid "approximately 10" visits to the C.I.A., a member of the vice president's staff says, in order to speak directly with analysts. Senior C.I.A. officials attended the sessions, according to the Cheney aide, who said they covered other topics as well as Iraq. The vice president defended his visits on Meet the Press in September 2003. "I ask a hell of a lot of questions," he said. "That's my job." To advise the president, Cheney added, he needed to "go into an arena where you can make the arguments about why you believe what you do based on the intelligence we've got."

But vice presidents do not usually drop in at Langley, and, given Cheney's strident public posture on the need for regime change, the message could hardly have been misunderstood by the analysts, who are, after all, in the business of interpreting events and drawing conclusions.

Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Kenneth Pollack, an intelligence analyst during the Clinton administration, recalled:

Throughout the spring and fall of 2002 and well into 2003 I received numerous complaints from friends and colleagues in the intelligence community, and from people in the policy community, about (how the Bush administration handled the intelligence). According to them, many Administration officials reacted strongly, negatively, and aggressively when presented with information or analyses that contradicted what they already believed about Iraq... Intelligence officers who presented analyses that were at odds with the pre-existing views of senior Administration officials were subject to barrages of questions and requests for additional information. They were asked to justify their work sentence by sentence... The Administration gave greatest credence to accounts that presented the most lurid picture of Iraqi activities. In many cases intelligence analysts were distrustful of those sources, or knew unequivocally that they were wrong. But when they said so, they were not heeded; instead, they were beset with further questions about their own sources. Mel Goodman, a C.I.A. analyst for 24 years and a frequent critic of the agency, said that Cheney "was holding forth on what he thought the situation was and why doesn't your intelligence support what we know is out there? They assumed he was referring to (Feith's) Pentagon intelligence unit that was producing stuff that was going right downtown and had much stronger claims about links between Saddam and al-Qaeda."

Goodman lectures at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, and C.I.A. analysts attend his classes. "I get into the issue of politicization," he says. "They don't say much during the question period, but afterwards people come up to me, D.I.A. and C.I.A. analysts who have had this pressure. I've gotten stories from D.I.A. people being called into a supervisor's office and told they might lose their job if they didn't revise a paper. 'This is not what the administration is looking for. You've got to find W.M.D.'s, which are out there.'"

A former C.I.A. analyst, talking about the politicization of intelligence, remarked, "They don't have to tell us to do that—we know what they want."

One incident illustrates how the analysts were influenced. The President's Daily Brief is a highly classified and tightly held C.I.A. document that goes to the president and only a handful of close aides. Under George W. Bush, Tenet delivers the P.D.B. every morning and personally briefs the president. What is less generally realized is that the vice president also has a P.D.B. briefer. According to a former C.I.A. official, "One briefer annoyed Cheney and he asked that she be replaced. He asked for a new briefer. That sent a chill through the whole process. It sent out the message to the analysts, 'Be careful with some of this stuff. Be careful what you say.'" The most authoritative—and surprising—acknowledgment of pressure on C.I.A. analysts comes from Richard J. Kerr, a retired senior agency official who was brought back by the C.I.A. to conduct a classified internal review of its pre-war intelligence on Iraq and how it was used by the White House. Kerr, a former deputy director of central intelligence and for a time acting director of the

agency, headed the Directorate of Intelligence for three years. Although loyal to his former agency, Kerr is known as a straight shooter who says what he thinks. In a series of interviews with *Vanity Fair*, he spoke freely of the pressure C.I.A. analysts felt.

"There was a lot of pressure, no question," says Kerr. "The White House, State, Defense, were raising questions, heavily on W.M.D. and the issue of terrorism. Why do you select this information rather than that? Why have you downplayed this particular thing? ... Sure, I heard that some of the analysts felt there was pressure. We heard about it from friends. There are always some people in the agency who will say, 'We've been pushed too hard.' Analysts will say, 'You're trying to politicize it.' There were people who felt there was too much pressure. Not that they were being asked to change their judgments, but they were being asked again and again to re-state their judgments-do another paper on this, repetitive pressures. Do it again."

Was it a case, then, of officials repeatedly asking for another paper until they got the answer they wanted? "There may have been some of that," Kerr concedes. The requests came from "primarily people outside asking for the same paper again and again. There was a lot of repetitive tasking. Some of the analysts felt this was unnecessary pressure." The repetitive requests, Kerr made clear, came from the C.I.A.'s "senior customers," including "the White House, the vice president, State, Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

But Kerr said that he considered questions directed at analysts "part of the process of intelligence. Policymakers should ask, 'Why do you come to this conclusion rather than that? Why do you use this source rather than that one?' I consider that part of the normal process. I assume policymakers are trying to make the strongest case they possibly can. You don't go to the public to support your policy position by saying, 'Gee, we're really uncertain about this.' You're trying to get people to support your program." Former D.C.I. Jim Woolsey agrees. "Policymakers if they don't like intelligence are always going to ask tough and sometimes hostile questions of the analysts," he said. "It's the D.C.I.'s job to protect them." Still, Kerr's confirmation of the "repetitive pressure" on C.I.A. analysts by the White House and the vice president is the most candid on-the-record comment by any insider since the controversy erupted over the pre-war intelligence on Iraq. However, despite the pressures, Kerr said, analysts' judgments were consistent over a long period of time, and reasonable, he thought, given the limited information available.

Kerr, who retired from the C.I.A. in 1992, began his internal review after receiving a call from the agency in February 2003, shortly before the war began. Rumsfeld had written to Tenet, suggesting the exercise. Kerr drove to Langley and conferred with Tenet. "I told him I wanted to put together a small team of retired C.I.A. people whom I knew, who were senior analysts and managers whom I had confidence in." Kerr recruited three people: Tom Wolfe, a former chief analyst for the Near East and South Asia office in the Intelligence Directorate; Becky Donegan, who had been a senior analyst on terrorism; and Aris Pappas, a former C.I.A. military analyst.

"The project was called 'Lessons Learned'-what can we learn from the in-telligence analysis and what can policymakers learn from their use of intelligence?" The four-person team met once a week at Langley during the war and on into May. In this first phase of the study they looked only at the "finished intelligence"-memos, estimates, and assessments that the C.I.A. had sent to the

White House, the N.S.C., State, the Pentagon, and other players.

Kerr turned in his report last June. "It was about 20 pages plus annexes-this was looking at a full range of finished intelligence... What were the judgments made on whether and how the Iraqis might use the weapons?" Kerr concluded that the C.I.A. had erred because when U.N. inspectors had left Iraq in 1998 the agency's sources of human intelligence dried up. "We had sources, human and technical, but we did not have the inspectors," Kerr says. "After the inspectors left, they did not have firsthand information, firsthand access to documents." Consequently, he said, there was "heavy reliance" by analysts on sources with less access to information. The C.I.A.'s intelligence out of Iraq became "more spotty and ambiguous."

As a result the C.I.A. based its pre-war estimates far too much on dated intelligence. "On W.M.D., there was no question in our mind that earlier information derived out of the Gulf War, and reporting from the inspectors-they (the Iraqis) could not prove they destroyed the chemical weapons. All this combined led to the judgment. We carried those judgments forward into the 2000 period and gave them weight, perhaps too much weight, that the programs were continuing."

Still, the Bush administration's zeal to believe the worst about Iraqi capabilities was clear from the start, many officials involved in analyzing intelligence say today. That Saddam had nuclear ambitions was the key allegation the White House used to bolster its case against the Iraqi dictator. In late August 2002, Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville, "Many of us are convinced that Saddam Hussein will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon ... and subject the United States and any other nation to nuclear blackmail. Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction." Later, in September, when President Bush addressed the United Nations, he cited the now infamous "aluminum tubes" in warning that Saddam could, with the right materials, have a nuclear weapon "within a year."

The White House was absolutely convinced that the tubes were to be used as part of Iraq's nuclear-weapons program. But many people with technical expertise on the subject thought they definitely were not. For Greg Thielmann, who headed the State Department's Office of Strategic Proliferation, the first harbinger of trouble came in the fall of 2001, when "Joe T.," a tall, thin C.I.A. analyst, arrived at Room 6526, a small conference room at the department, to discuss a shipment of the tubes, which had been delivered from China and intercepted in Jordan en route to Iraq. Saddam, the C.I.A. man argued, wanted the tubes for centrifuges that spin uranium at high speeds to enrich it for use in a nuclear weapon.

Thielmann, a veteran foreign-service officer, was in charge of monitoring nuclear proliferation for the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "I found the presentation to be unconvincing," Thielmann recalled. "He seemed far more a man on a mission than an objective analyst. He had something to sell." A scientist from the Department of Energy's (D.O.E.) Oak Ridge National Laboratory who attended the meeting also disputed Joe T.'s theory, and Thielmann's chief analyst on Iraqi weapons was equally skeptical.

But at the C.I.A., George Tenet was absolutely certain that the tubes were meant for centrifuges. D.O.E. is not the only agency that has experts on centrifuges, he huffed-the C.I.A. had its own

experts. Inside C.I.A. headquarters, however, other analysts believed Saddam wanted the tubes to modify artillery rockets like the Medusa 81s that Iraq had purchased from Italy in the 1980s. The dispute was vitally important because, if the tubes were really meant for centrifuge rotors, it was crucial evidence that Saddam was reconstituting his nuclear-bomb program. The Pentagon, with the help of the I.N.C., decided to make its own attempt to resolve the matter. In the summer of 2002, Wolfowitz convened a secret meeting in his office with Francis Brooke, the I.N.C. adviser, and Khidir Hamza, a former chief of Saddam's nuclear program, who had defected to America in 1994. Could the tubes be designed for use in centrifuges? Wolfowitz asked. Hamza looked at their specifications. He had never built a centrifuge, but he delivered his judgment anyway: Saddam was pursuing centrifuge research, and the tubes were adaptable. Wolfowitz circulated his conclusions to his administration allies. A few days later, the story of the "nuclear" tubes was leaked to The New York Times, where it landed on the front page.

The aluminum tubes were revisited in October 2002 when the C.I.A. assembled a 90-page National Intelligence Estimate (or N.I.E., the highest form of reporting by the U.S. intelligence community) on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The aluminum tubes, the N.I.E. concluded, were "compelling evidence that Saddam is reconstituting a uranium enrichment effort for Baghdad's nuclear weapons program." The document did note that the D.O.E.'s experts didn't think the tubes were meant for centrifuges, and the State Department didn't, either. State thought the tubes were for use in artillery rockets and, in addition, did not believe that Iraq was rebuilding a nuclear-weapons program.

In June 2003, David Kay, the former arms inspector, was sent by the C.I.A. and the Bush administration to find what proved to be nonexistent W.M.D. in Iraq. In an interview with Vanity Fair he said that the aluminum tubes illustrated the whole intelligence problem. "We set out to answer it by asking, Was there a centrifuge program?" said Kay. "Because if there wasn't, the tubes didn't matter. And what we discovered was an amazingly primitive nuclear program. And nothing that looked like a centrifuge program. Then we looked at the tubes, which it turns out were for reverse engineering of Italian rockets."

The mistaken characterization of the tubes is typical of the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate, the key document that the Bush administration used to make its case for war. The document was unusual in that it resulted from a request by Congress-N.I.E.'s are typically requisitioned by the president, his N.S.C. staff, the State Department, the Pentagon, or the director of central intelligence. But with Bush's request pending for a resolution authorizing war, Senator Bob Graham of Florida, the then chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, wrote Tenet to ask for the N.I.E.

The N.I.E. would be a rush job-estimates often take months to draft-and it was approved by Tenet after a single review meeting. Officials from the C.I.A. delivered it to Congress during the night of October 1. It would be available for senators and members of the House of Representatives to read under security safeguards at the offices of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees. The main thrust of the N.I.E. was that Saddam had chemical and biological weapons, including mobile labs in which to make them, and was building nukes. As usual, it included dissenting comments on its conclusions. For instance, the N.I.E. claimed Iraq was developing Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (U.A.V.'s) probably capable of spraying deadly

germs on targets; these drones could even reach the United States. But the air force dissented, saying the U.A.V.'s were most likely meant for reconnaissance. The 90-page, classified N.I.E. was deemed insufficient for a Congress deliberating on war or peace. Legislators needed to refer to a public document, one that the American people themselves could read in order to decide whether Saddam posed an imminent threat. Graham asked for such a document, called a White Paper, which the C.I.A. handed over several days later. The paper, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs," was a declassified, 25-page condensation of the N.I.E., and it included an even further distillation of dramatic "Key Judgments."

Unfortunately, the White Paper not only condensed but also distorted and manipulated the intelligence in the N.I.E. to paint an even worse threat. (See the sidebar on page 286 for a detailed comparison of the N.I.E. and the White Paper's "Key Judgments" by intelligence expert John Prados.) Cautious evaluations were converted into assertions of fact, and conclusions were revised, not merely abridged, in order to make the strongest possible case for war.

On October 7, six days after the N.I.E. was delivered to Congress, Bush flew to Cincinnati to deliver a major speech on Iraq. But one or two days earlier, something very peculiar had happened. George Tenet called Stephen Hadley, principal deputy to Condoleezza Rice, several times. Take a reference to Iraq's trying to acquire uranium from Niger out of the speech, Tenet advised. The report, it was later to be revealed, was based largely on crudely forged documents. The C.I.A. also sent over to Hadley two memos backing up Tenet's advice.

Only six days earlier, the bogus Niger report had been included in the N.I.E., the crown jewel of the intelligence community. Now the C.I.A. director was saying, "Take it out." Bush did not mention Niger in his Cincinnati speech, but he did say Iraq had tried to buy aluminum tubes for centrifuges "to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons." And he added, "We cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud."

A mushroom cloud! This was scary stuff.

In using the phrase, Bush was echoing Rice, who had first invoked a mushroom cloud on CNN a month earlier. She had used almost the same words in speaking with Wolf Blitzer: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

On the same day that the president was talking about a mushroom cloud, Tenet sent a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee suggesting even more strongly than in the N.I.E. that Iraq would probably not attack America with chemical or biological weapons, or give W.M.D. to terrorists, unless the U.S. invaded. It was a fairly bold move by the C.I.A. director, since his words did not at all fit the White House game plan. Or perhaps he was simply hedging his bets. On January 28, 2003, Bush delivered his State of the Union address, which included the infamous 16 words that were to become a major embarrassment for the White House: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

How did the bogus reference that had been deleted from the Cincinnati speech four months earlier manage to arise, phoenix-like, in the State of the Union address?

The original intelligence on the Niger-Iraq connection had been obtained not long after 9/11, when Italy delivered a report to the C.I.A. about the visit of an Iraqi official to Niger in February 1999 which suggested that his purpose was to buy enriched uranium. The report lacked details, but, in the fervor of collecting any evidence that might link Iraq with illegal weapons, it caught the attention of Cheney. Seeking confirmation, the vice president's office asked the C.I.A. to investigate, and it in turn asked former ambassador Joseph Wilson IV to travel to Niger. In Niger, Wilson spoke to the U.S. ambassador Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick, who knew of the report and believed she had already discredited it. Carlton Fulford, a four-star Marine general, had also visited Niger to check out the story, and had returned satisfied there was nothing to it. Once in Niger, Wilson discovered that any such deal was improbable, if not impossible. Had an official transaction been made, any memorandum indicating as much would have borne the signature of Nigerois officials. There are only two mines in Niger that produce uranium, and they are operated by the French nuclear company Cogema. Any changes in production or transportation would have to have been approved by the company. Even if someone wanted to sell enriched uranium to Iraq in secret, it would have been virtually impossible to do so without alerting the French, due to the tremendous cost of mining extra products. Wilson returned to Washington and filed his report, which was circulated. Because he had been told the vice president's office had made the original request for the report, Wilson assumed Cheney was informed of his findings: "There would have been a very specific answer provided ... to the very specific question that he asked," Wilson told Vanity Fair in January. Wilson was shocked when Bush cited the Africa-uranium story in his State of the Union speech. He tried to get to the bottom of how the assertion had been included, but to no avail. He told journalist Seymour Hersh, "I gave them months to correct the record ... but they kept on lying." Finally, Wilson went public with his information. At a conference in Washington, Wilson revealed what he had discovered in Niger to New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who got Wilson's permission to print his findings in a May 6 column. In a June 8 appearance on Meet the Press, Condoleezza Rice finally responded, "Maybe someone knew down in the bowels of the agency, but no one in our circles knew that there were doubts and suspicions that this might be a forgery."

Wilson contacted people he knew in the government-he will not name them-and threatened to correct the record if Rice would not. She didn't and he did, writing a July 6 op-ed piece in The New York Times called "What I Didn't Find in Africa," and talking with Washington Post reporters Richard Leiby and Walter Pincus for a piece that appeared the same day. To discuss the two articles Wilson went on Meet the Press.

As the uranium hit the fan, Tenet accepted the blame, saying that he was "responsible for the approval process in my agency." Yet he added that the C.I.A. had warned the National Security Council the intelligence was dubious. The White House continued to deny any responsibility. Rice told Face the Nation, "Had there been even a peep that the agency did not want that sentence in or that George Tenet did not want that sentence ... it would have been gone." The next day, Bush echoed this statement: "Subsequent to the speech, the C.I.A. had some doubts. But when they talked about the speech and when they looked at the speech, it was cleared." But the C.I.A. would not go down all alone. On July 22, Stephen Hadley admitted that he "should have recalled" the two memos from the C.I.A. alerting the White House to the questionability of the Niger intelligence. While both memos were addressed to Hadley (one was addressed to Rice

as well), Bush continued to express complete confidence in his national-security team. Hadley offered to resign, but the president refused.

Press Secretary Ari Fleischer by now had admitted, "This information should not have risen to the level of a presidential speech." And Rice conceded that "knowing what we know now we would not have put it in the president's speech."

Cheney's office claimed to have no knowledge of Wilson or his report: "The vice president doesn't know Joe Wilson and did not know about his trip until he read about it in the press," said the vice president's spokeswoman, Catherine Martin. Cheney's position was supported by Tenet, who said Wilson's trip was made on "the C.I.A.'s own initiative."

Yet behind the scenes the administration mounted a nasty counterattack on Wilson, leaking to at least six journalists that he had been assigned to the Niger investigation merely because his wife, Valerie Plame, was a C.I.A. officer. Only conservative columnist Robert Novak printed the leak, citing "two senior administration officials" as the source. Apparently, however, they didn't realize it is a federal crime for officials knowingly to reveal the identity of an undercover C.I.A. operative. A Justice Department investigation ensued; it produced no results for three months and didn't get much encouragement from President Bush, who told the press, "I don't know if we're going to find the senior administration official." But finally, on December 30, Attorney General John Ashcroft recused himself from the investigation, and a special prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald, was appointed. A grand jury was convened, and subpoenas to witnesses and for material have been issued. Reportedly, Karl Rove, Bush's chief political adviser, told the F.B.I. (which is also investigating) that he discussed and circulated damaging information about Plame after the Novak column was published. The White House denied Rove had leaked her name. Incredibly, he allegedly claimed that the press campaign was a legitimate way to counter what he called a politically motivated attack by Wilson. Wilson says he will reveal the name of the leaker in his book, *The Politics of Truth*, to be published this month. In the spring of 2002, talk in Washington of an Iraq war remained limited to behind-the-scenes discussions and a smattering of speculative newspaper articles. In London, however, talk of an American-led invasion was already widespread. Opposition was growing sharply, and loudly, in Parliament and in Tony Blair's Cabinet. Though few in Washington dwelled on its importance at the time, Blair's predicament would profoundly impact the Bush administration's war deliberations.

In April, Blair visited President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, where Blair made clear that he would back whatever America decided about Iraq. But, he said, any action against Saddam would need to proceed with the backing of the United Nations. Without U.N. support, Blair explained, there was little chance Parliament, much less the British public, would ever support an invasion. He said that U.N. weapons inspectors would need to return to Iraq and confirm the Bush administration's fears about Saddam's weapons programs before he would be in a position to support a war openly.

In Texas, Blair had discussed using the United Nations to force Saddam to re-admit weapons inspectors, with the sanction of war if he refused. The British prime minister did not yet understand that, in the era of George W. Bush, nothing was that simple. For the British government, dealing with the administration was a novel experience. "Usually, what the

national-security adviser told one was gospel," one senior British official says today. "What you got from Condi was 'Hmm, that's a good idea-we'll talk about that. Let's see what we can do.' This put much more of a burden on the diplomatic staff to find out what was going on, who was up and who was down. And what we saw, more and more, was that power in the government swirled around the vice president and the Department of Defense."

Blair, like many in the British media, may have assumed that his meeting with Bush in Crawford would soon be followed by an American-led diplomatic campaign at the United Nations, but nothing happened. Blair had not long been home when hawks in the Pentagon and in the vice president's office began to do all in their power to reverse both of the concessions Blair's staff thought he had secured: the commitments to go to the U.N. and to put pressure on Ariel Sharon to withdraw from the occupied territories and negotiate with Yasser Arafat.

"Our position, Bush's position, was that Saddam was an outlaw," says a senior official in Cheney's office. "We already had all the U.N. resolutions we needed to go to war. We didn't think we needed any more arguments to justify it, or its legality." The hawks' view, he says, was that by maintaining W.M.D. programs, whether or not the weapons were ready for use, Saddam was in clear breach of U.N. resolutions passed during the 1990s. All that remained was to issue an ultimatum and to attack when (as everyone assumed) he refused to comply. As Sir Christopher Meyer puts it, "They didn't see why they had to prove what they already knew."

Even then, in the middle of 2002, says the Cheney official, it was clear to the hawks that "taking the U.N. route" contained a potentially disastrous pitfall for them. To make the case for an international invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration would need to prove that Iraq was an "imminent" threat. The only way Hussein's regime could be considered an imminent threat was if the world could be shown it had the capability to launch a nuclear, biological, or chemical attack on a Western country.

"The imminence of the threat from Iraq's W.M.D. was never the real issue (for us)," says the Cheney aide. "W.M.D. were on our minds, but they weren't the key thing. What was really driving us was our overall view of terrorism, and the strategic conditions of the Middle East." As the weeks passed with no evidence of any move by the Bush administration to engage the United Nations, Blair began to come under pressure. Within his Cabinet, the idea of supporting an American attack on Iraq without the backing of the Security Council seemed almost unthinkable. At the Cabinet's first meeting after Blair's trip to Crawford in April, several ministers warned that the consequences would be dire. The attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, evidently told Blair that an invasion without U.N. support might break international law. Even with U.N. support, Goldsmith is said to have advised, Blair would need to demonstrate that the threat to British national security was real and imminent. That meant one thing: proving Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

With no word from Bush by the end of July, Blair decided to press once more for engagement with the U.N. When Blair wants to make a point about foreign policy, he has the habit of sending Bush crisp, personal memorandums. They are always couched in amiable terms: they begin with "Dear George" and are signed "Tony." In late July, Blair sent one of the most important of these missives by diplomatic pouch, stressing the need to make progress over Israel, and again urging

Bush to put Saddam's breaches of earlier resolutions before the U.N.

Blair followed up by sending his chief foreign-policy adviser, Sir David Manning (now ambassador to the U.S.), to Washington to meet with Condoleezza Rice. Unexpectedly, while the two were speaking, Bush called Rice into the Oval Office. Manning followed and met with the president for about 20 minutes. "Manning reiterated the U.N. message very strongly," says a senior British official. "He said, 'This is very important to us, your main ally.'" Manning, in fact, warned that if Bush did not go the U.N. route Blair's political position might become untenable.

This appeared to get Bush's attention. Several days after Manning's return to London, Bush and Blair spoke by telephone. It was a short call, about 15 minutes. According to a White House official who has studied the transcript of the phone call, "The way it read was that, come what may, Saddam was going to go; they said they were going forward, they were going to take out the regime, and they were doing the right thing. Blair did not need any convincing. There was no 'Come on, Tony, we've got to get you on board.' I remember reading it and then thinking, O.K., now I know what we're going to be doing for the next year." Before the call, this official says, he had the impression that the probability of invasion was high, but still below 100 percent. Afterward, he says, "it was a done deal."

Still, Blair repeatedly told both the media and his own Cabinet ministers that no decision had been made. Clare Short, then Blair's international-development secretary, kept a diary throughout this period. On July 26, she wrote, she raised her "simmering worry about Iraq" in a meeting with Blair. She wanted a debate on Iraq in the next Cabinet meeting, but he said it was unnecessary because "it would get hyped... He said nothing decided, and wouldn't be over summer."

Blair, in fact, kept his top ministers in the dark for weeks. As late as September 9, Short's diary recorded, "T(ony) B(lair) gave me assurances when I asked for Iraq to be discussed at Cabinet that no decision made and not imminent." Later that day, she learned from the chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, that Blair had asked to make 20,000 British troops available for deployment in the Gulf. Still, she believed her prime minister's assurances, but wrote that, if she had not, she would "almost certainly" have resigned from the government. At that juncture, her resignation would have dealt Blair a very damaging blow. By the beginning of August 2002, it was clear to many of Bush's top advisers that the president was committed to using any means necessary to remove Saddam from power. That, however, raised a host of new questions. Would the U.S. attack alone? Or with an international coalition, as Bush's father had? Or with a group of select allies? Above everything hovered the specter of the United Nations. Unless Bush secured U.N. approval, Blair was warning, the British could not join the war effort.

After months of Blair's hectoring, it was Colin Powell who finally forced the issue. On August 5, after dinner in the White House private dining room, Powell and the president adjourned to the president's residential office. There Powell impressed upon Bush that international support was crucial both to legitimize the war in the eyes of the world and to lay the groundwork for postwar reconstruction. Furthermore, polls were showing that a majority of Americans favored seeking U.N. approval. Reluctantly, Bush agreed. Powell left the meeting pleased. He felt that U.N. secretary-general Kofi Annan was a man he could work with; behind closed doors, he actually

called Annan "my man Kofi." Meanwhile, Blair was putting pressure on his own intelligence apparatus to come up with Iraqi W.M.D. In Britain, the equivalent of the C.I.A. is called M.I.6, and intelligence is channeled through a body known as the Joint Intelligence Committee (J.I.C.), which has always operated in splendid isolation from politicians. Blair proposed to ignore this convention and publish his own dossier on Iraq's W.M.D. based on secret intelligence. Blair's loyal but irascible communications chief, Alastair Campbell, and the staff of the Downing Street press office were to have a huge influence on this project.

Their reactions to the J.I.C.'s draft report on September 9 were very critical. "Needs much more weight, writing, detail," wrote special adviser Philip Bassett to Campbell, "and we need to find a way to get over this a) by having better intelligence material, b) by having more material (and better flagged-up), and c) more convincing material." On September 11 an e-mail went around the intelligence community. The anonymous author wrote, "No. 10 through the Chairman want the document to be as strong as possible within the bounds of available intelligence. This is therefore a last (!) call for any items of intelligence that agencies think can and should be included. Responses needed by 12.00 tomorrow."

The M.I.6 chief, Sir Richard Dearlove, called on Blair at Downing Street. He had the answer to the prime minister's prayers: a source inside Iraq saying Saddam had stocks of chemical and biological weapons which could be deployed within 45 minutes. There was no corroboration, and the source's contact with M.I.6 was not direct: his claim had been supplied via one of the I.N.C.'s rivals, the London-based Iraqi National Accord. There had been no attempt to run the claim by the acknowledged intelligence experts on W.M.D. "You just never do this," says one intelligence official. "It's Rule No. 1." Just once before that he knows of, the official adds, M.I.6 had passed raw, unanalyzed intelligence to a prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. On that occasion, British intelligence reacted with horror, and a memo went to all agencies saying this must never happen again.

However, the 45-minutes claim was mentioned in Blair's 50-page dossier four times and was stressed in an introduction written by Blair. When the government's W.M.D. experts saw it, they were appalled, but when they raised objections, they were told that M.I.6 had new information which refuted them, from a source so secret that they could be given no details.

The 45-minutes claim appeared in headlines around the globe. In the months to come, the dossier was cited time and again as the British and American governments argued their case through the media, to legislators, and at the United Nations. No one knew better than Tony Blair how much he had gambled on his belief that Saddam really did have W.M.D. In the late fall of 2002 a group of M.I.6 staff from Washington joined Sir Richard Dearlove for an evening meeting at Downing Street. As the participants were leaving, Blair shook Dearlove's hand. "My fate is in your hands, Richard," he said.

IV.

The United States has not been popular at the United Nations for a very long time. From his first months in office, in fact, George Bush and his neoconservative colleagues had made clear their administration had little use for the U.N., which Richard Perle called "the looming chatterbox on

the Hudson." (Actually, the U.N. is on Manhattan's East River.) The White House began honing its isolationism in March 2001 when it pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 document ratified by 54 countries to limit the emissions that cause global warming. That was followed by the declaration in May 2002 that Clinton's signature on the International Criminal Court (I.C.C.) treaty was now null and void. These agreements had flaws, to be sure, but little effort was made by Team Bush to overcome them, indicating the issue was more about an antipathy toward internationalism, and especially the United Nations, its leading incarnation.

"These actions," says the former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Richard Holbrooke, "stem from a philosophical difference more profound than any difference since 1920," the year the League of Nations was formed. "They did this because they believe that the weaker the U.N. is, the stronger the U.S. is." The Bush administration, in fact, almost gleefully thumbed its nose at the U.N.; Undersecretary of State John Bolton, who had spearheaded the effort to ditch the I.C.C. in the Hague, has remarked that "if the U.N. Secretariat building in New York lost ten stories it wouldn't make a bit of difference."

And so it was a momentous occasion when on September 12, 2002, President Bush rose to address the U.N. General Assembly. Despite his obvious ambivalence, the president managed to hit all the right notes. He announced that the U.S. would return to unesco (which it had left in 1984, citing poor management, corruption, and excessive spending). He singled out the plight of Palestinians. One by one, he enumerated the Security Council resolutions that Saddam had flouted, and called the U.N. "the world's most important multilateral body."

But Colin Powell, who used translator's headphones even for English speakers, reportedly grew nervous as the speech wore on: he had yet to hear a critical promise that had been the cause of much hand-wringing the night before. Had Cheney changed Bush's mind at the last minute? In fact, due to a glitch, the words never made it onto Bush's teleprompter. But the president, in a rare moment of felicitous improvisation, managed to say the magic words: "We will work with the U.N. Security Council for the necessary resolutions."

It was a critical statement-the first time Bush had acknowledged the legitimacy of the U.N.'s role in a possible war against Iraq. The audience was impressed and took him at his word. "It's not for us to mistrust the motives of a member state, certainly not a member state like the U.S.," says Shashi Tharoor, Annan's undersecretary-general for communications and public information. "So when the president made the statement, 'We've got all these resolutions, Iraq's been fiddling around for the last couple of years not allowing inspectors back in, they'll either comply or we'll act,' the secretary-general and officials here welcomed that as a way of getting Iraq back into compliance." For the moment, at least, the fate of Iraq was in the U.N.'s hands. Annan went to work immediately, urging leaders of the Arab League to press Saddam to reinstate the weapons inspectors in Iraq, and helping Iraqi representatives draft a reply to the U.N. Four days later, on September 16, Annan stood before the microphones at the U.N. and announced he had received a letter from Iraqi authorities that said Iraq would allow inspectors access "without conditions." Several blocks away at his suite in the Waldorf-Astoria, Powell read the text. In fact, it did not allow unconditional access, as Annan had said. Nowhere did it say "unfettered access," which was understood to mean "anytime, anyplace."

White House staffers flew into a rage. In their view Annan was giving Saddam the kind of wiggle room that would allow him to avert military action. Reportedly, later that night, Powell and Rice, in a conference call, chewed out Annan for taking matters into his own hands. The U.S. ambassador to the U.N., John Negroponte, was dispatched to talk to the French. "Did you know about this letter?" he demanded of French ambassador Jean-David Levitte. Levitte replied, yes, the French were fully aware of it. People at the White House were beside themselves. It was bad enough their plan was in the hands of "my man Kofi." Now it appeared the French were involved as well.

Relations between the U.N. leadership and the White House deteriorated in the following days as word of American military preparations seeped out. The Central Command timetable was already in place, and by September 21 the existence of a war plan that included targets for U.S. warplanes and missiles, the size of U.S. ground forces, and potential lines of attack was being leaked to the press. Bush's U.N. strategy was becoming clear: the goal was not to get Saddam to disarm through peaceful means, but rather to get a U.N. stamp of approval for American military action as quickly as possible. Indeed, Bush's speech before the General Assembly was soon seen by the delegates for what it was: a tell-'em-what-they-want-to-hear spiel even though you don't believe it.

In the following days, the administration worked steadily to undo what had just been done at the U.N. On September 19, Rumsfeld, speaking before the Senate Armed Services Committee, argued that the current inspection team was weak, and that "the more inspectors that are in there, the less likely something's going to happen." Bush, meanwhile, told reporters that, "if the United Nations Security Council won't deal with the problem, the United States and some of our friends will." This was not the kind of talk Kofi Annan or anyone at the U.N. wanted to hear, and it made the job of American diplomats at the U.N. far tougher. Their first order of business was negotiating a piece of paper, Resolution 1441, laying out the U.N.'s demands on Iraq. Among the many thorny questions to be dealt with was whether the U.N. would handle the matter in a single resolution—one that triggered war if Iraq's response was deemed unacceptable—or in two resolutions, one setting forth the demands, a second that could authorize an invasion if Iraq did not comply. The White House, impatient with the process from the outset, wanted a single resolution. The French emphatically wanted two.

Resolution 1441 was to be negotiated among the 15 member countries of the Security Council, five of which—the U.S., the U.K., France, Russia, and China—were permanent members with veto rights. The U.S. delegation was led by Negroponte, who as a former ambassador to Honduras had been at the center of the storm regarding support of the Nicaraguan contras. He had since earned a reputation as a patient negotiator with old-world civility. Representing Britain was Sir Jeremy Greenstock, a man whose eloquence the 15-member group found wondrous, if a tad grand.

On the French side was the charming Jean-David Levitte, the son of a Russian father and an Anglo-Dutch mother, who worked diligently behind the scenes and often made unbearable experiences bearable. "Levitte was entirely at ease with negotiating with Anglo-Saxons," says Greenstock, a close family friend. "Because of his upbringing and his broad diplomatic intelligence he hasn't got a problem with that. He hasn't got a drop of French blood in him."

Nevertheless, adds Greenstock, "you can't tell that from his diplomacy and his policies, because he is 100 percent passionately French."

It was clear that the Security Council's mission would be Kafka-esque. From the first draft of 1441, prepared chiefly by the U.S., it was evident that Bush was chomping at the bit to get the diplomatic stuff out of the way. The draft included demands so Draconian that Saddam could never accept them, thereby creating a trigger for war. It stated, for example, that the inspectors may be followed around by representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council, as well as military forces from those countries.

"It was so remote from reality," says Hans Blix, chief inspector of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (unmovic), who, along with the International Atomic Energy Agency's (I.A.E.A.) Mohamed ElBaradei, saw a first draft. "It was written by someone who didn't understand how (inspections) function." Seeing that it didn't stand a chance of getting adopted, the U.S. finally abandoned the draft. Returning to the drawing board, the U.S. and the U.K. hammered out a beefed-up inspection regimen with unimpeded, unconditional, unrestricted access to all buildings, including Saddam's palaces, as well as interviews with scientists. The rest of the Security Council would eventually agree. The sticking point was that the French wouldn't accept any resolution with a "hidden trigger," leading automatically to war without a second Security Council discussion. The U.S. wanted just the opposite: the explicit right to decide, alone, if and when an invasion would take place.

According to a French diplomat, the U.S. attempted various amateurish maneuvers. For example, they would have the French look at certain paragraphs that spoke to the issue of an automatic trigger; the French would insist on deletions, which the U.S. would appear to accept; then the deletions would pop up elsewhere in the text. "We didn't like it in paragraph four," a French diplomat says, recalling the mind-numbing dialogue. "We don't like it in paragraph two, either."

No one held it against Negroponte. Everyone understood that he had little room in which to move—an impression underlined by the White House enforcers seen hovering around the U.N. hallways and lounges. One was Elliott Abrams, a top official at the N.S.C. who had pleaded guilty in 1991 to withholding information from Congress about the Iran-contra scandal.

"The U.N. Security Council was under close watch by the White House, by Condoleezza, and also the Defense Department," says Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, Mexican ambassador to the U.N. at the time. A fiery, combative force of nature, he recalls that nearly every meeting was attended by different American notetakers who were never introduced. "We were constantly told that there were certain positions that could not be changed, because the Defense Department or the White House will not allow this to be changed."

Given the circumstances, Negroponte emerged as a sympathetic character. He started a running joke: "Sorry, guys, I have no more marbles in my pocket. I gave you what I got."

"We were always joking, 'How about your pockets, John? Look at your pockets,'" recalls Aguilar Zinser, who had been friendly with him since Negroponte's days as ambassador to Mexico. "And John would say, 'Sorry, I've got nothing in my pockets. I went to Washington, and I tried to bring

something in my pockets, but I couldn't ... ' We always got John to push back Washington and pressure for a little more."

The toughest spot was reserved for Greenstock, who was caught in a tug-of-war between England and America. An impeccably controlled gentleman now serving as Blair's envoy in Baghdad, Greenstock soberly recalls that the wrangling's being funneled to the top levels "made it more difficult when it came to how to plan new language, and it made it more difficult to give any humble advice to the Washington system on how tactics should be played." By November 8, Negroponte and Greenstock had helped the Security Council assemble a draft of Resolution 1441 that everyone could agree on, for the sole reason that it included language that each side could cling to in order to support its point. Satisfying the French, the resolution stated that the council would meet for a second time, following the report from the inspectors, to "consider the situation and need for full compliance." Satisfying the White House, it stated that 1441 was Iraq's "final opportunity." The resolution was a masterwork of obfuscation, leaving open the questions of the timetable and of how the council would judge Iraqi compliance.

Driving this point home, following the passage of the resolution, the ambassadors each made a statement clarifying their opposite reading of the document. In demanding two stages, the French asserted, the resolution validated the competence of the Security Council to handle this matter. Negroponte, meanwhile, in the same breath that he assured that the resolution contained "no hidden triggers" with respect to the use of force, stated that 1441 "does not constrain any member state from acting to defend itself against the threat posed by Iraq."

How could these assertions exist side by side? Because French ambassador Levitte conveyed to both Greenstock and Negroponte "with a wink and a nod," says one U.S. official, that the French understood this resolution was enough to give America and Britain legal cover for going it alone if they felt that the Iraqis had not complied to satisfaction. That, and that alone, was the only reason the U.S. agreed to 1441. On December 7, the Iraqis, in perfunctory accordance with the resolution, issued a 12,000-page document that purported to account for the state of its weapons programs. With top-secret gravity, the all-important document was taken by two strong, young U.N. staffers from Baghdad to Cyprus to Athens to Frankfurt to New York. The report was a mess, a truckload of paper that not only repeated unverified information from previous declarations, but also repeated it in several places. The U.S. angrily asserted that the report constituted a "material breach." But the Americans didn't push it as a *casus belli*, mainly because the British were determined to give the inspectors a chance to prove, once and for all, that Iraq was lying about its weaponry.

And there matters stood for several weeks as the White House built its case that Iraq was in "material breach," thereby justifying an invasion. But the U.S. effectively undermined its complaints by the issues it chose to make hay of. In particular, the State Department zeroed in on the fact that the Iraqi declaration failed to mention Iraq's attempts to acquire uranium from Niger. However, both the U.S. and British governments had refused to divulge any intelligence on the issue, something the I.A.E.A. had been asking for since September, when the Niger-uranium charges were first made, in Blair's dossier.

"We're begging the Brits and Americans for intelligence to help us do our job, thinking,

presumably, it's in their interest to give it to us, right? If we can uncover some good stuff, it helps make their case," recalls Mark Gwozdecky, a senior official at the I.A.E.A. "But it's not happening." Of course, the world would learn later that the Niger claims were fraudulent and, further, that the administration had suspected as much before December. The inspectors were the ones who could give the administration its *casus belli*; it made sense to be nice to them. Instead, the administration treated them like patsies for Iraq. Allegedly, as early as January 2002, Wolfowitz ordered a C.I.A. investigation into Hans Blix, the straight-shooting 75-year-old Swedish scientist, who'd been brought back from retirement by Annan to head up the new U.N. inspections regime. The hope was to establish that in Blix's tenure as head of the I.A.E.A., during the 90s, he was a pushover when it came to the Iraqis. However, when the C.I.A. report showed that Blix had been sufficiently tough on the Iraqis, Wolfowitz "hit the ceiling," according to a former State Department official. In October, at a State Department meeting, Wolfowitz mustered his best tough-guy act, taking it upon himself to inform the veteran inspector, "You do know they have weapons, don't you?" (Wolfowitz says he never ordered an investigation of Blix, and only asked questions about Blix's performance as the head of the I.A.E.A. During the October meeting, Wolfowitz says, he pressed Blix on whether he doubted the existence of the Iraqi W.M.D. program or whether he had begun with the conclusion of the UNSCOM inspectors that there were unaccounted-for programs or weapons. Wolfowitz says he recalls expressing surprise when, he alleges, Blix said he had no opinion.)

Not long thereafter, Cheney followed this up by telling the inspectors that if their findings didn't suit the administration "we are ready to discredit (you)." "It was brutal," recalls Blix, "and I don't think I would have ever put it in that form."

In January, as U.N. inspectors began scurrying around Iraq searching for forbidden weapons they were largely unable to find, the consequences of the White House's astonishing diplomatic ineptitude became painfully apparent. This occurred in the wake of a January 13 luncheon around the mahogany table in Condoleezza Rice's White House office. The meeting was called by the French; in attendance were Chirac's top adviser, Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, and Ambassador Levitte, who'd just left his post at the U.N. to become the French ambassador to the U.S. The French wanted to discuss their country's reservations about the war.

Gourdault-Montagne talked of the unrest that would no doubt erupt among Iraq's many ethnic groups, and he warned of increased terror. Rice pooh-poohed his every objection. "Everything was dismissed," says a French diplomat, recalling Rice's reaction. "'There is terror already in the world and the rest of the Arab world won't feel resentment. If it does, the leaders of the Arab world will support the administration.' ... Every good reason not to go to war was irrelevant." It was clear, says this diplomat, "that the decision to go to war was taken."

According to highly placed American insiders on both sides of the political aisle, Levitte made the U.S. an offer it should have accepted. Hoping to avoid an open breach between the two countries, he suggested to Rice that if America was determined to go to war it should not seek a second resolution, that Resolution 1441 arguably provided the White House with enough cover, and that France would keep quiet if the administration went ahead. The solution wasn't ideal, but it would allow France not to have to use its veto. It would maintain the unity of the Security Council, safeguard Franco-U.S. relations, and allow France to retain its "good cop" status in

Arab eyes. It seemed a win-win. (Levitte's spokesperson claims that this suggestion was put to Hadley, Rice's deputy, a few weeks later.) Afterward, the White House wrestled with the offer. Many argued that 1441 gave the U.S. sufficient cover to invade without the second resolution. Indeed, some believe there was ample precedent for doing so. In 1999 the U.S. and its nato allies initiated military operations in Kosovo without Security Council approval for the very reason that Russia had promised to veto. Then Madeleine Albright and Holbrooke had laid the diplomatic groundwork and cultivated allies—a key difference from Powell's approach. The problem, once again, was Tony Blair. Bush had already promised Blair he would seek a second resolution; Blair had said he had no chance to gain Parliament's support without it. Not surprisingly, when the White House sought Blair's opinion on the French overture, the British balked. According to Jeremy Greenstock, Blair smelled a trap.

"The French," Greenstock says today, "wanted us to be very clearly in the wrong, and we didn't accept that suggestion. There was an element of political trap in it. That we wouldn't even try to get political legitimacy would put us even more in the wrong, and the French more in the right."

In the end, hemmed in by Blair's political limitations, the U.S. felt it had no choice but to reject the French offer. Instead, it set its sights on securing a majority vote at the Security Council when the second resolution came up for a vote. At worst this would be a symbolic victory, since a veto by one Security Council permanent member is enough to kill a resolution but is not considered collegial. At best the second resolution could be used to strong-arm France into agreeing. What no one in the White House apparently expected was the angry response of French president Jacques Chirac to the January 13 Washington meeting.

The French government dug in its heels against the war—and the French, as is their habit, did not do so quietly. A week after the lunch in Rice's conference room, France's frustration exploded in a display of pique that has gone down in U.S. diplomatic circles as "the Day of Diplomatic Ambush." The messenger was the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, a six-foot-three silver-haired member of Chirac's inner circle, who is not noted for his reticence or tact.

It was January 20, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Powell had several speaking engagements, all of which he canceled to go to New York for a diplomatic roundtable on the Iraq question. Before a lunch at the French ambassador's residence on Park Avenue, de Villepin gathered a circle of reporters and announced in combative tones, "We will not associate ourselves with military intervention that is not supported by the international community... There's no point in choosing the worst possible solution—military intervention."

The White House was livid at de Villepin's attack. A major European nation's public opposition to the idea of an invasion, even stated by as flamboyant a figure as de Villepin, erected a flag under which dozens of other, more timid countries might rally. Powell, who had perhaps been encouraged by the earlier French offer, took it the worst. His deputy Richard Armitage would later recall to the Financial Times that Powell "was very unamused. When he's unamused, he gets pretty cold... He puts the eyes on you and there is no doubt when his jaws are jacked." But a member of the French delegation believed Powell was making them a scapegoat for his own defeat. "At that moment," says the diplomat, "Powell had lost his domestic battle. He knew there would be a war with or without the United Nations."

De Villepin's outburst was splashed across front pages on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than attempt to head off the gathering opposition by finding a way to placate the French, the Bush administration did what it does best: it counterattacked. In the wake of furious denunciations of the French by neoconservatives, America erupted in a frenzy of French-bashing. Three cafeterias at the House of Representatives changed their menus to read "freedom fries" rather than "French fries." In a memorable turn of phrase borrowed from *The Simpsons*, Jonah Goldberg, of the conservative *National Review*, likened the French to "cheese-eating surrender monkeys."

In a vain attempt to recapture civility, French ambassador Levitte met with a group from the Bush administration, equipped with a list of recent insults directed at the French. The group didn't get it and told him he was over-reacting, that "they are just jokes." Veterans of the U.N. could only shake their heads. "If you had any other president in office, had it been Clinton or Bush Sr. or even Reagan or Carter," says Richard Holbrooke, "any one of the other presidents since the end of the Vietnam War would have just picked up the phone and said to a French counterpart, 'Let's get this over with, because we can't afford this.'" But the White House, to the dismay of many in the diplomatic community, merely appeared energized by the whole spectacle. Rumsfeld eagerly jumped into the fray, deriding France and Germany as bastions of "Old Europe." Administration officials seemed almost exhilarated to be further driving a wedge into the European community that had France and Germany on one side, Spain and Britain on the other.

Bruce Jackson, a freelance envoy to the former Soviet bloc, enlisted the critical support of Vaclav Havel for the so-called Letter of Eight, a statement of solidarity with the U.S. signed by Britain, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Portugal, the Czech Republic, and Italy, which was published in *The Wall Street Journal*. (The White House denied involvement in the letter.) Significantly, the letter did not mention the word "war" and instead simply stated that "we must remain united in insisting that (Saddam's) regime is disarmed."

The administration reportedly liked the letter so much it put Jackson to work producing the so-called Vilnius Ten letter, in which 10 Eastern European countries professed their support for the American effort. It didn't seem to embarrass the administration that everyone in diplomatic circles knew the likes of Latvia and Estonia couldn't say no to America; their admission to NATO was to be decided by the Senate in three months.

French-bashing may have made the war's proponents feel good, but it cost them dearly. Had matters remained civil, Monday, January 27, might have gone down as the day the U.S. got the U.N. to sanction its war. It was then that Hans Blix delivered his first report on what the inspectors were finding in Iraq. While Blix acknowledged that no W.M.D. had been found, he did point out that Iraq had failed to account for undetermined quantities of the nerve agent VX and anthrax, and for 6,500 chemical bombs. Blix castigated Iraq for providing its army with missiles that violated U.N. restrictions and failing to let the inspectors use U-2 surveillance planes. "Iraq," he concluded, "appears not to have come to a genuine acceptance-not even today-of the disarmament which was demanded of it and which it needs to carry out to win the confidence of the world and live in peace." However strong Blix's message, it was all but lost in the din of diplomatic sniping. France's position had been strengthened when Germany, its chief

ally in Donald Rumsfeld's "Old Europe," was voted onto the Security Council, thereby ensuring one more vote against the war. German diplomats and their French counterparts argued that the inspections were making progress and only needed more time. Certainly, that case was defensible. But it was plain to see that something else was coming into play: the view among many European nations that America was out of control.

Even the Spanish, the administration's strongest ally after Britain, realized the Americans were shooting themselves in the foot. On a visit to Crawford, Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar implored Bush, "We need a lot of Powell, and not much of Rumsfeld." In the opinion of Inocencio Arias, the Spanish ambassador to the U.N., the administration's aggressive behavior merely made the French more determined to pry the rest of Europe away from American influence.

"I think the French and Germans were honest in believing that the inspections could work," Arias says today. "But at the same time, deep in the heart of the leaders of France and Germany was the idea that they resent the world becoming the domain of only one superpower."

By insisting on a second resolution, and then alienating the very countries they needed in order to get it, the U.S. had painted itself into a very tight corner.

It was now or never: the U.S. had one chance to persuade the world that Saddam really was an imminent threat. "Privately," says Jeremy Greenstock, "the French indicated that if we found W.M.D. in Saddam's hands, then their view would change." On February 5, Bush wheeled out his Big Gun: Colin Powell, the senior American official who retained credibility with the U.N. community. With George Tenet sitting behind him, as Powell had insisted, the secretary of state gave his speech, the most dramatic American presentation at the U.N. since Adlai Stevenson's during the Cuban missile crisis. For 75 minutes, he presented a long list of reasons to be afraid, very afraid. To illustrate Iraqi stockpiles of anthrax, he held up a vial. "This is just about the amount of a teaspoon-less than a teaspoonful of dry anthrax in an envelope shut down the United States Senate in the fall of 2001," he said.

Powell's bag of tricks was large, if not deep. He played scratchy recordings of intercepted conversations in Arabic: "forbidden ammo," "remove," "modified vehicle"-the scary words echoed throughout the chamber. They plainly revealed, Powell said, that the Iraqi government was attempting to thwart inspectors. "These are not assertions," he told the audience, "these are facts." The U.S. considered the speech a slam dunk. Indeed, the American press played it as a magnificent achievement.

Powell's recitation of Iraq's arsenal sounded frightening; despite his best efforts, he delivered the hard-line speech that the administration wanted. The C.I.A. had pushed to include a section on the supposed mobile biological-weapons labs. Not to worry, they assured him, there was not one but four sources. One source, though, was an Iraqi major known to be a liar, as Tenet later obliquely admitted to his chagrin in a speech at Georgetown University on February 5, 2004, one year to the day of Powell's U.N. address. As far back as May 2002 the Defense Intelligence Agency had issued a "fabrication notification," a warning to other intelligence agencies to steer clear of the man; somehow the C.I.A. never saw it.

In describing the mobile labs in his address to the U.N., Powell relied heavily on another C.I.A. source, a chemical engineer who claimed to be an eyewitness "who supervised one of these facilities. He actually was present during biological-agent production runs. He reported that ... production always began on Thursdays at midnight, because Iraq thought UNSCOM (the U.N. inspectors) would not inspect on the Muslim holy day, Thursday night through Friday."

What Powell didn't know was that the supposed eyewitness was in Germany, and the C.I.A. had not even interviewed him. According to a high-level intelligence source, there were a lot of unanswered questions about the "eyewitness" and his story: "The Germans never gave us access to him. Until very recently the Germans would not even take questions, and, even then, only a limited number. The source appeared at a refugee camp in Germany, and his brother is a senior I.N.C. official. His whole story of how he got out of Iraq and into Germany was inconsistent."

Even before the many errors in Powell's speech were revealed, the Germans and French and others sensed who had determined its contents. In private, they were scathingly condescending about the spectacle of Powell, whom they viewed as a true statesman, being manipulated like a marionette by the White House.

"Everyone felt uncomfortable," says a U.N. official, "to see a man saying these lies. You knew it was bullshit."

Many of the administration's friends were likewise unimpressed. Sir Christopher Meyer says, "I remember saying, 'I do hope he's got something really strong to say.' And, of course, he didn't." The battle lines were now drawn more clearly than at any point during the yearlong path to war: no concrete proof of Iraqi W.M.D., no U.N. backing. Powell insisted he had supplied such proof. But, just nine days later, on February 14, Hans Blix appeared once more before the Security Council, and his findings contradicted Powell's. The trucks that Powell had described as being used for chemical decontamination, Blix said, could just as easily have been used for "routine activity." He contradicted Powell's assertion that the Iraqis knew in advance when the inspectors would be arriving. Mohamed ElBaradei of the I.A.E.A. weighed in as well, insisting that, at least on the nuclear front, there was no evidence Saddam had any viable program. Further, Blix said that Iraq was finally taking steps toward real cooperation with the inspectors, allowing them to enter Iraqi presidential palaces, among other previously proscribed sites. Buttressed by Blix's remarks, the French wasted no time in portraying the White House as warmongers willing to distort the truth to get the invasion they so badly wanted. "War is always the sanction of failure," de Villepin told the Security Council after Blix's speech. "This message comes to you today from an old country, France, from a continent like mine, Europe, that has known wars, occupation, and barbarity." His oratorical flourish-and pointed barb at Rumsfeld-was greeted with applause, a rare occurrence at the U.N.

It was too much for Powell, who sat stone-faced in the audience. "Here is the report of Blix, seconded by the fact that de Villepin was getting so much applause," one diplomat remembers. "In the middle of it, Powell was looking at his paper, and then he just pushed it away." It was also painful for the White House's allies. The next day, in cities all across the globe, millions of demonstrators marched through the streets, protesting America's mad thirst for invasion. When

Ambassador Arias returned home to Spain on holiday, he barely got to see his daughters—they spent all their time at war protests. "My blood pressure shot up to the heavens," he recalls. The damage Blix caused to Powell's credibility would a few weeks later contribute to yet another aggressive counterattack from the White House—this time, astoundingly, aimed at the inspectors themselves, the only people in the world who were actually in a position to uncover the "material breach" that the U.S. badly needed to make its case for war. An assistant secretary of state, John Wolf, was dispatched to confront Blix in the Swede's U.N. office, where Wolf dramatically tossed a sheaf of surveillance photos on his desk and demanded to know why the inspectors had not cited the discovery of an Iraqi U.A.V. drone and a cluster bomb for the delivery of chemical weapons as Iraqi violations. Blix replied that the drone had not yet been declared illegal. As for the cluster bomb, it turned out to be old scrap. When Blix asked where Wolf had gotten the pictures, Wolf refused to say.

"I resented that," says Blix. "If the Security Council said, 'We heard about this and could the council get to see a picture of the drone, or of the bomb,' we would have done it immediately." (Wolf alleges that Blix was simply unhappy to be learning of the drone and bomb from the United States and not his own staff.) The attempts to vilify the inspectors were taken to the press. The London Times ran a column with the headline Blix should turn the smoking gun on his own head.

The White House was losing patience. On February 24, together with Britain and Spain, American diplomats proposed the long-awaited "second resolution" Tony Blair had been seeking. In it, the three allies declared that Iraq "has failed to take the final opportunity afforded it in Resolution 1441." For Tony Blair, the support for force in his own country didn't look good.

On February 26 a parliamentary debate and vote on a motion backing Blair's efforts in the U.N. to disarm Iraq produced one of the biggest rebellions by a government's own party members in British history. Though the motion passed, 122 Labour M.P.'s cast their votes against their leader. "The government's case on Iraq and W.M.D. just didn't seem to stack up," says the M.P. and former Blairite Cabinet minister Chris Smith.

That his chief ally, Blair, was holding on by a thread didn't stop Bush's provocative swagger. In a prime-time news conference, he said it was time for the U.N. to decide, once and for all, whether it would back a U.S.-led invasion. "No matter what the whip count is, we're calling for the vote," he said. "It's time for people to show their cards, to let the world know where they stand when it comes to Saddam."

In the next breath, however, the president vowed to go ahead with an invasion no matter what the Security Council voted. "We will act," he said, in words guaranteed to alienate Security Council members, "and we really do not need the United Nations' approval to do so." Brazen words aside, the president still wanted Security Council backing. American diplomats and their French counterparts launched intensive lobbying efforts to sway the other member nations. As a member of the permanent five, Russia was the most crucial target. Although Russian diplomats had echoed French calls to give the inspectors more time, Vladimir Putin's government hadn't yet openly opposed the war. In fact, many in the U.S. government thought Russia would ultimately back whatever the White House decided to do. Putin had proved a reliable ally before, going

along with the expansion of nato and the termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

According to members of the French delegation, American diplomats repeatedly warned them that the Russians "will let you down." "We were sending messages to Paris saying, 'Whoa, are you so sure of the Russians?'" recalls one French diplomat. "Because (in Washington) they seem to consider that one day or another Putin would come out and say he agreed with the American approach."

Chirac had met privately with Putin to persuade him to come to France's side. Putin, it turned out, was worried most about the war's effect on Russia's oil industry, which accounts for one-half of his country's exports. Throughout the run-up to the war, Russia had reportedly been receiving a flood of oil-contract offers from Iraq, all based on the condition that it oppose the war. For Russia to side with the U.S., Putin told American diplomats, it needed assurance that it would be "taken care of" financially. But the White House, confident of its "special partnership" with the Russian president, did very little to compensate Russia in terms of promising postwar contracts and making up for the \$8 billion Iraq owed the Russians. Instead, with the tin ear for diplomacy it had repeatedly displayed all through the U.N. process, the U.S. offered Putin what one insider called "peanuts."

On March 7, the U.S. paid the price for its arrogance. De Villepin, in France's most straightforward denunciation to the council to date, announced that "France will not allow a resolution to pass that authorizes the automatic use of force." Russia, irked at America's failure to address its concerns, quickly followed suit, as did China (which generally tucks in behind these two). It was at this point, faced by the open opposition of at least four Security Council nations, that the White House realized it had to do something that had previously been considered inconceivable: step up its lobbying of the six undecided members of the Security Council, the so-called U-6 nations. That group of diplomatic small fry consisted of Pakistan, Chile, Mexico, Cameroon, Guinea, and Angola, and they would soon come to be called by some British and U.S. officials "the Slippery Six." The U.S. had four votes for war on the Security Council: its own, Spain's, Britain's, and Bulgaria's. To secure the nine votes it needed for a majority, five of the six U-6 nations had to be swayed. "It's something they should have been doing behind the scenes from the beginning," says former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who suspects that the White House's unwillingness stemmed from its ambivalence at approaching the U.N. in the first place. Now, coming so late in the game, the American lobbying campaign appeared unseemly, like the hosts of a dinner party who suddenly realize that no one good is coming and they need to fill the room with B-listers. The French were appalled. "They had the impression that they had the nine votes on the Security Council," says a French diplomat. "They were extremely certain... It was so self-assured."

It may have been a little late, but the White House applied a full-court press. Bush and Blair repeatedly telephoned Chilean president Ricardo Lagos, pleading for his support. Cheney coozied up to Angola's president. Powell and Rice both played host to the Guinean foreign minister in Washington. The French were engaged in parallel efforts of their own. Historically, the 10 rotating Security Council members resent that they are often dictated to by the five permanent members. Now, as never before, they were sought after. But they knew they were being used as pawns in a political game of chicken.

"There were two sides, the French and the American," says Aguilar Zinser. "The French are saying, 'To hell with the U.S.' The Americans are saying, 'To hell with the rest of the world.' What we felt was, if France cannot find a compromise in order to reach an accommodation with the U.S., and the U.S. can't reach an accommodation with the other permanent members, then what is the permanent members' purpose for? It was created for you to agree upon things. And if you don't agree on things, you use your veto power. So why do you transfer this responsibility to us, the little guys?"

Munir Akram, the Pakistani ambassador, was equally annoyed. "We felt that the position we were being asked to take would serve no purpose," he says. "Some that might have been inclined to vote in favor would be spoiling the relationship with the other country with no result." He shrugs. "We are poor," he says, "but we are important. Pakistan doesn't respond very well to pressure."

The one vote the White House felt certain of was Mexico's. President Bush considered Mexican president Vicente Fox a strong ally, terming him "my good friend Vicente." Throughout the U.N. process, however, Fox had wavered; he needed the U.S., but anti-war sentiment ran strong in Mexico. Rather than stroke Fox, however, the White House got nasty, singling out Mexico's anti-war U.N. ambassador, Aguilar Zinser, for pointed criticism. They cast him as a mad nationalist, and, according to Aguilar Zinser, said that he was "a pain in the ass." Throughout the negotiations, Aguilar Zinser says, Powell actually tried to have him removed from his post. (A State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity, denies this.) Bush warned Fox personally that the ambassador could cost Mexico its dearest ally. The State Department invited to Washington several pro-war Mexican intellectuals who would later bash the ambassador to the press.

To Washington's dismay, Fox seemed reluctant to play ball. Irked, President Bush all but threatened him. "The U.S. said, 'Mexico has to be on my side, without any rewards,'" says Aguilar Zinser, "because it is not the rewards (that are at stake), it is the entire relationship." The U.S. played on a key fear shared by all of the Slippery Six: if their country was the only one that voted against the war, they would be diplomatically and economically punished. "It would have been quite difficult for Mexico to resist the pressure alone in Latin America," says one council diplomat. "To face the Emperor Bush: 'So you are the only one that is going to say no?'" In the second week of March, Mexico got that partner. Chilean officials indicated they would not back the war, due in part to yet another huge embarrassment that the White House brought upon itself. When it came to lobbying the Security Council members, it turned out the administration hadn't been satisfied with arm-twisting alone. It had resorted to espionage, bugging the offices of several U-6 nations. A British newspaper, *The Observer*, broke the story, reporting that the National Security Agency had mounted a surveillance "surge" aimed at undecided nations, and had urged Britain to follow suit. The N.S.A.'s purpose, as stated in an agency memo leaked to *The Observer*, was to gain "insights as to how the membership is reacting to the on-going debate RE: Iraq, plans to vote on any related resolutions, what related policies/ negotiating positions they may be considering, alliances/dependencies, etc-the whole gamut of information that could give US policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to US goals or to head off surprises."

While news of the bugging memo failed to shock many of the Security Council members, who assumed the U.S. and others had been monitoring the U.N. for years, Chile was enraged. The Chileans are especially sensitive to dirty tricks by American intelligence services, which they hold responsible for the overthrow of Chilean president Salvador Allende in 1973. Chile demanded an explanation from the White House on the U.N. bugging, but the White House refused to confirm or deny the report. (Juan Gabriel Valdes, the Chilean ambassador to the U.N., would pay for his outrage. A few months later, because of pressure from the Bush administration, he was replaced with a former university classmate of Condoleezza Rice's.)

Meanwhile, Annan pleaded with the Security Council nations for unity. Under pressure from Annan and several undecided nations, the British began drafting a compromise proposal. "The point," recalls Greenstock, "was to have one last throw against the background of the Security Council that really wanted to find a way out of the black cloud that was gathering, or was, in fact, much closer, inside the horizon." Beginning in the second week in March, the British ambassador worked round the clock to hammer out something that would make everyone happy, or, at least, happy enough. Based in part on a list of unresolved issues that Hans Blix was compiling, Greenstock's draft proposal laid out six tests Saddam would have to pass to avoid invasion. These included having Saddam himself go on television and admit that Iraq had had weapons of mass destruction.

Whether Iraq would go along was almost beside the point. With American troops pouring into the Gulf, the critical issue was the timing of the invasion. Several undecided countries argued that 45 days was a reasonable window to allow the inspectors to verify compliance with the tests. The U.S. demanded 7 days, 10 at the outside. U-6 members then compromised down to three weeks, but the U.S. wouldn't budge: the Central Command timetable dictated that major combat needed to start before the end of March, before the weather got too hot.

By March 11, the efforts to come up with a compromise proposal were rendered all but moot. The night before, Chirac had gone on television and announced "My position is that, regardless of the circumstances, France will vote 'no.'" The U.S. and Britain suddenly had a scapegoat. They blamed France-squarely-for the failure of diplomacy. British foreign secretary Jack Straw called Chirac's vow "extraordinary." President Bush said this proved that France would veto "anything that held Saddam to account."

Emboldened, the Pentagon began cranking up its rhetoric. Answering a reporter's question, Rumsfeld announced that the Defense Department was reviewing whether it would even need British participation. Tony Blair was stunned: after almost a year of supporting Bush-of staking his career on it-it appeared that it really wasn't necessary! Twice, Blair telephoned Bush, who lamely explained that Rumsfeld was "only trying to help."The White House began moving toward war. On March 17, a day after a meeting in the Azores with Blair and the Spanish prime minister, Bush reneged on his commitment to seek U.N. approval whatever the "whip count." All the bullying and braggadocio had failed. The emperor would have no votes (at least not enough). The U.S. and U.K. withdrew the second resolution and retreated to the claim that the earlier resolution, 1441, had provided them ample authorization for war. But their efforts to secure the second resolution had all but decimated this argument. "The mistake that we made," says a U.S.

official, "was that we should never have offered an additional resolution past 1441. On 1441, they gave us a wink and a nod. Our mistake was trying to drag them to be more explicit." Sir Christopher Meyer says, however, "At the time, 1441 looked like a triumph. In hindsight, it was a trap."

Blair was shattered. The day after the Azores summit, Robin Cook resigned from the Cabinet and delivered a devastating farewell speech to the House of Commons. In media interviews, he accused Blair of having offered a "false prospectus" for the war. Clare Short says that had she known Blair would deceive her once again she would have resigned then. As her diary records, he repeatedly promised her that Bush had agreed it would be the U.N., not the coalition, which would lead the reconstruction of Iraq. On March 18, Blair won a Commons vote for war. The number of Labour dissidents had risen from 122 in February to 139, but he managed-just-to carry a majority of his own party's backbenchers and was not forced to rely on the Tory opposition.

Still, a year later, Jeremy Greenstock says the effort to pass a second resolution was important, "in terms of the legitimacy that we got from 50 to 60 to 70 countries around the world." But, he adds, "we weren't persuasive enough and maybe still aren't persuasive enough with some parts of our public opinion to show that it was really necessary to have a war at that stage. I'm still equivocal about it myself." The U.S., though, has yet to realize that the diplomatic breakdown at the U.N. came from something more than a tactical miscalculation on its part. It stemmed from its basic attitude toward the very idea of the U.N. "They can't expect to have support from the I.A.E.A. or from the secretary-general when it just occurs to them, if they haven't supported it all along the way," says Madeleine Albright. "President Bush won a diplomatic victory when he got the inspectors back (into Iraq). But then he didn't allow them to really do their job, because there was some timetable that didn't suit the American administration... By undercutting somebody who had as good a reputation as Hans Blix, they robbed themselves of tools that I think would have later been useful."

To Richard Holbrooke, this anti-U.N. ideology prevented the U.S. from making what should have been a persuasive case for regime change. "I thought the case against Saddam was a very strong one," he says. "And if you cared about the United Nations, you had a man who had violated over a dozen Security Council resolutions. And if you cared about the U.N., you couldn't let him do that with impunity. Yet, they couldn't get people on board. Why is that? Because this administration is incapable of making the case I just made, because that would have suggested that the U.N. was important. So they threw away their strongest argument. If Bill Clinton or Al Gore had decided to do this-of course they would have done it differently, but if they had ever decided that we had to go to war, they would have used as Exhibit A the 15 resolutions that were being violated."

The administration's diplomatic ineptitude and arrogance had the most serious consequences. In the short term, it emboldened Turkey, from which the Pentagon planned to launch the northern prong of the Iraqi invasion, to reject the idea of basing troops in its territory, forcing the U.S. to invade Iraq from only one direction, the south. Undoubtedly, this cost American lives. The greater damage, however, was done to American credibility in the War on Terror. America needs the help of other nations to fight terrorism. Its behavior at the U.N. did little to inspire the trust of anyone, including its allies.

Multilateralism, Albright says, "is a way to maximize power, and if it's done right, it's a power magnifier, not a detraction. And I think especially with a problem like fighting terrorism with non-state actors and with so many countries involved-and terrorism obviously knows no borders-having more international support for fighting terrorism is a sine qua non. We isolated ourselves in the United Nations, and so we lost out on having a lot of public support, international support."

V.

President Bush's mood, darkened by the long weeks of wrangling at the U.N., improved markedly after the U.S. and Britain withdrew their second resolution, on Monday, March 17. After months of talk, war was coming, and he was ready. "It's a totally different mind-set when you go from a diplomatic process to a military operation; you have more control of the terms," a White House official told Time magazine the following week. "It's no mystery this President likes clarity."

American troops had been hunkered down in their tents in the Kuwaiti desert for weeks, and, in a teleconference on Tuesday, Bush gave their commanding general, Tommy Franks, the go-ahead to begin the invasion that Friday. Then, on Wednesday, came a surprising piece of intelligence from the C.I.A.-a reliable report that Saddam would be sleeping that night in a bunker near downtown Baghdad. Tenet and Rumsfeld urged the president to launch an air strike, effectively starting the war almost two days before they had planned. Everyone in Bush's conference room agreed. If they could kill Saddam now, it could mean saving thousands of American lives. General Franks said he needed to have the go-ahead by 7:15 p.m. E.S.T. As a result, at 7:12, George W. Bush said, "Let's go," and the war began. The invasion of Iraq was not a "cakewalk," as one administration partisan had so memorably promised, but it ended the way everyone knew it would. What almost no one expected was that the W.M.D. the White House had so confidently said it would find simply weren't there.

At least initially, Bush appeared unfazed. On the eve of a trip to Poland, on May 29, he declared, "We've found the weapons of mass destruction. You know, we found biological laboratories... For those who say we haven't found the banned manufacturing devices or banned weapons, they're wrong. We found them." But they hadn't. Maybe, the White House reasoned, American troops weren't looking in the right places.

On the weekend of June 8, David Kay, the former chief weapons inspector for the U.N., had taken his wife to Poplar Springs, a country inn and spa near Warrenton, Virginia, to celebrate his 62nd birthday when he got a call from Stuart Cohen, the vice-chairman of the C.I.A.'s National Intelligence Council, which had issued the controversial October 2002 N.I.E. Would Kay be willing to take over the search for W.M.D.? Tenet's office called on Monday, and Kay accepted the job. On Tuesday he was polygraphed, interviewed by a C.I.A. psychiatrist, and sworn in that afternoon by Tenet as his special adviser on Iraqi W.M.D.

Once Kay was in Iraq, it was almost immediately clear to him that what he was looking for wasn't there. Early in July he e-mailed the bad news to Tenet. "Every weekend I wrote a private

e-mail to the D.C.I. and the D.D.C.I. (McLaughlin), my unvarnished summary of where we were," Kay told Vanity Fair. "I wrote that it looks as though they did not produce weapons." At best, Kay speculated, Saddam's policy may have been "to produce actual weapons only close to the time you actually need them."

McLaughlin immediately telephoned Kay in Baghdad. "We have to be very careful how we handle this," the C.I.A. deputy director warned him. Kay tried. When he delivered his interim report to Congress on October 2, he was as upbeat as possible. But his bottom line was "we have not yet found stocks of weapons." When a reporter asked Kay if he had found any weapons of mass destruction, he replied, "I've barely found lunch."

By December, after months of scouring Iraq, Kay was ready to quit. Tenet urged him not to. "He asked that I not come back immediately," Kay recalls. "(He said), 'If you resign now it will appear like we don't know what we're doing and the wheels are coming off.' So I said, 'Fine, I'll wait.'" He lasted barely six more weeks, resigning on January 23. Five days later Kay made his now famous "We were almost all wrong" statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Kay's admission forced the White House to name a presidential commission to investigate the pre-war intelligence on Iraq. The C.I.A.'s effort to find W.M.D. in Iraq continued under Charles Duelfer, Kay's successor. The war's legacy won't be clear for years. Whatever good comes of it, it was at a steep price, both in American lives and the incalculable blow it caused to American credibility, both at home and abroad. Will a democratic Iraq emerge as a shining example of Western-style values in the heart of the Middle East? No one knows.

Today, almost everyone who advocated the invasion of Iraq is in some way disappointed. Finger-pointing abounds, at the British, at the French. Richard Perle and his neoconservatives got the war they wanted, and they are despised for it. Those who planned the war, meanwhile, are left to ponder whether anyone will believe America the next time it wants to strike a nation believed to be backing terror.

For the C.I.A., the failure to find stockpiles of W.M.D. was a public-relations nightmare. For weeks the agency seemed paralyzed about how to respond. It allowed Stuart Cohen to write an op-ed for The Washington Post and to appear on Nightline to defend the October 2002 N.I.E. It leaked defensive tidbits to a few selected reporters, then unleashed Tenet to try to explain the limits of intelligence to a friendly audience at Georgetown University.

By then the C.I.A. director had let it be known he planned to leave after the election. Tenet had presided over a series of intelligence disasters: the agency had failed to anticipate India's underground nuclear tests in 1998; a year later, based on C.I.A. target information, U.S. aircraft mistakenly bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three persons; the agency did not see 9/11 coming; and then it trumpeted its erroneous estimate on Iraq.

Not all of the C.I.A.'s problems were attributable to Tenet personally, but, as the captain of the ship, any other C.I.A. director would have long since been dismissed. But Tenet had built a close relationship with George W. Bush—one of his first acts as D.C.I. had been to name the agency's new headquarters building after the president's father. Besides, the controversy over the intelligence on Iraq provided job security for Tenet; no president is likely to fire his C.I.A.

director in an election year.

Republicans both in and outside Congress tended to place all the blame on the C.I.A. for the intelligence disaster, hoping to deflect criticism from the president. Democrats accused the White House of "cherry-picking" and hyping the intelligence it wanted, ignoring the caveats in the C.I.A.'s estimates in order to mislead the country into backing a war. In fact, there is truth to both arguments. The C.I.A.'s estimates were wrong in most respects, but the administration went far beyond what the C.I.A. had said, dropped the caveats, and used the intelligence to build the case for war. On March 9, 2004, Tenet told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he did not believe the administration had misrepresented intelligence to strengthen its case. But he also said that in at least three instances, including the president's reference in the 2003 State of the Union address to Iraq buying uranium in Africa, he had corrected Bush and Cheney for making misrepresentations of intelligence in their public speeches. Tenet said he also planned to correct Cheney for having referred to Douglas Feith's disputed memo about Iraq's connection to al-Qaeda as "your best source of information." Some former intelligence officials, however, go much further in blaming the administration for cooking the intelligence. Greg Thielmann, a former State Department expert on weapons proliferation, said he thought that "the American public was seriously misled. The administration twisted, distorted, and simplified intelligence in a way that led Americans to seriously misunderstand the nature of the Iraq threat. I'm not sure I can think of a worse act against the people in a democracy than a president distorting critical classified information."

Strong words, but whether the voters will care about how America went to war on flawed or exaggerated intelligence, now that Saddam Hussein has been captured and his regime destroyed, is an open question.

SUBJECT: MILITARY WEAPONS (90%); WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (90%); STATE DEPARTMENTS & FOREIGN SERVICES (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); TERRORISM (89%); WEAPONS INSPECTIONS (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (77%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (77%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (76%); US PRESIDENTS (73%); NATIONAL SECURITY (73%); HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS (72%); HUMAN RIGHTS (66%); President George W. Bush; September 11, 2001; Bush administration; Iraq; Saddam Hussein; weapons of mass destruction; war; Colin Powell; Vice President Dick Cheney; Condoleezza Rice; Andrew Card; George Tenet; Donald Rumsfeld; British prime minister Tony Blair; Ahmad Chalabi; Richard Perle; Pentagon; Paul Wolfowitz

COMPANY: STARBUCKS CORP (93%);

ORGANIZATION: UNITED NATIONS (94%); UNITED NATIONS (94%); DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (59%); DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (59%); AL-QAEDA (58%);

TICKER: STB (LSE) (93%); SBUX (NASDAQ) (93%);

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PERSON: DICK CHENEY (92%); CONDOLEEZZA RICE (59%); CONDOLEEZZA RICE (59%); GEORGE W BUSH (58%);

CITY: LONDON, ENGLAND (79%);

STATE: DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (93%); VIRGINIA, USA (79%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (98%); IRAQ (97%); UNITED KINGDOM (93%); AFGHANISTAN (79%); NORTH KOREA (79%); IRAN (79%); ENGLAND (79%);

LOAD-DATE: April 15, 2005

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; GATHERING THE TROOPS From left, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Vice President Dick Cheney, President Bush, National-Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, White House chief of staff Andrew Card, C.I.A. director George Tenet (seated), and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; COMMANDER IN CHIEF Bush's claim in the 2003 State of the Union address that Iraq tried to buy African uranium had already been discredited by a U.S. ambassador, a four- star Marine general, and an investigator for the C.I.A.; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; THE ENFORCER Dick Cheney paid "approximately 10" visits to the C.I.A. The message that he wanted more damning intelligence on Iraq could hardly have been misunderstood.; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; THE DIPLOMAT On the subject of Colin Powell's February 5, 2003, U.N. speech, Sir Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador, remembers saying, "I do hope he's got something really strong to say.' Of course, he didn't."; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; THE WARRIOR Donald Rumsfeld thought Powell was too dovish. An official recalls, "Rumsfeld was like, 'We're going to war ... and you're letting (Iraq) get equipment that (will) kill Americans?"; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ; THE COURTIER Condoleezza Rice "has no opinions of her own," says one insider. "Her supreme concern is preserving her own relationship with the president."; NIGEL PARRY; THE neocon Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz wanted to attack Iraq perhaps even before Afghanistan. There was a 10 to 50 percent chance that Iraq was involved in 9/11, he argued to Bush.; NIGEL PARRY; THE other NEOCON Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, says that a week after 9/11, "Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld (did not seem) discomfited by the idea of taking action against Iraq."; JONAS KARLSSON; THE ALLY British prime minister Tony Blair trumpeted intelligence that Iraq could launch a biological or chemical attack in 45 minutes. He said the source was so secret he couldn't give details.; NIGEL PARRY; THE advocate With close ties to Perle and Wolfowitz, Ahmad Chalabi supplied the U.S. with many fellow Iraqi exiles who had hair-raising stories of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. The Defense Intelligence Agency called the intelligence "of little or no value."; doug mills; WAR CRY President Bush gives his 2002 State of the Union address, in which he cited North Korea,

Iran, and Iraq as an "axis of evil." Vice President Cheney is at rear.; RAY STUBBLEBINE;
FEAR FACTOR Intelligence expert John Prados shows how the key judgments of the White
Paper, above, distort intelligence in the White Paper's body and in the classified National
Intelligence Estimate, which the White Paper summarized for Congress and the public.; TOXIC
SPEECH During Powell's February 5, 2003, U.N. speech he holds up a vial to illustrate the
threat of anthrax. He had thrown out much of the intelligence sent over by Cheney's office and
sought his own at the C.I.A. for the speech.; Page 241: From CPi. Page 243: From CPi.
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