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Author: Evan Thomas, Richard Wolffe and Michael Isikoff

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Byline: Evan Thomas, Richard Wolffe and Michael Isikoff

George Tenet, the director of Central Intelligence, was frustrated. For four days and nights last winter, some of the most astute intelligence analysts in the U.S. government sat around Tenet's conference-room table in his wood-paneled office in Langley, Va., trying to prove that Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat to America. The spooks were not having an easy time of it.

On Feb. 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell was scheduled to go to the United Nations and make the case that Saddam possessed an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. But the evidence was thin--sketchy and speculative, or uncorroborated, or just not credible. Finally, according to a government official who was there, Tenet leaned back in his chair and said, "Everyone thinks we're Tom Cruise. We're not. We can't look into every bedroom and listen to every conversation. Hell, we can't even listen to the new cell phones some of the terrorists are using."

Tenet was being truthful. Spying can help win wars (think of the Allies' cracking the Axis codes in World War II), but intelligence is more often an incomplete puzzle --(think of Pearl Harbor). Honest spies appreciate their own limitations. Their political masters, however, often prefer the Hollywood version. They want certainty and omniscience, not hedges and ambiguity. Bush administration officials wanted to be able to say, for certain, that Saddam Hussein possessed stockpiles of chem-bio weapons; that he could make a nuclear bomb inside a year; that he was conspiring with Al Qaeda to attack America.

And that is, by and large, what they did say. On close examination, some of the statements about Saddam and his WMD made by President George W. Bush and his top lieutenants in the months leading up to the Iraq war included qualifiers or nuances. But the effect--and the intent--was to convince most Americans that Saddam presented a clear and present danger and had to be removed by going to war.

No wonder, then, that many people are perplexed (or vexed) that U.S. forces in Iraq have been unable to find any WMD. Administration officials insist that eventually they will be able to prove that Saddam was working on

a dangerous weapons program. They say that two trailers found in northern Iraq are in fact mobile bioweapon labs, capable of brewing up enough anthrax in a weekend to snuff out a city. But some of Bush's top men are beginning to sound a little defensive or unsure, and congressional critics are starting to circle. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz caused a flap by telling Vanity Fair magazine that removing Saddam's WMD was a "bureaucratic" justification for going to war (Wolfowitz says that he was quoted out of context). A recently retired State Department intelligence analyst directly involved in assessing the Iraqi threat, Greg Thielmann, flatly told NEWSWEEK that inside the government, "there is a lot of sorrow and anger at the way intelligence was misused. You get a strong impression that the administration didn't think the public--would be enthusiastic about the idea of war if you attached all those qualifiers."

The prospect of a serious inquiry hung uneasily over a small dinner party of top intelligence officials, including Tenet, in Washington last week. The guests "were stressed and grumpy," reports a former CIA official who was present. "There was a lot of rolling of eyes and groans" about a coming wave of investigations. Tenet tried to reassure his dinner partners that the second-guessing was premature. "We'll be fine," he said. In an unusual move, the DCI two days later put out a public statement defending the CIA's

"integrity and objectivity." The job of the CIA director is, as the former agency official puts it, "to speak truth to power." The CIA is supposed to be an independent agency that doesn't blow in the political wind.

It is doubtful that congressional investigators or reporters will turn up evidence that anyone at the CIA or any other intelligence agency flat-out lied or invented evidence. More likely, interviews with some of the main players suggest, the facts will show that the agency was unable to tell the Bush administration what it wanted to hear. Tenet might have tried harder to keep the Bushies from leaping to unwarranted conclusions. In fact, in one case, he aggressively pushed evidence about an Iraqi nuclear program that was strongly challenged by nuclear-weapons experts elsewhere in the government. But the agency's failure was more elemental: the CIA was unable to penetrate Saddam's closed world and learn, with any real precision, his real capabilities and intentions.

That is truly disturbing news for the war on terror. If America has entered a new age of pre-emption--when it must strike first because it cannot afford to

find out later if terrorists possess nuclear or biological weapons--exact intelligence is critical. How will the United States take out a mad despot or a nuclear bomb hidden in a cave if the CIA can't say for sure where they are? And how will Bush be able to maintain support at home and abroad? The story of how U.S. intelligence tracked Iraq's WMD capability, pieced together by NEWSWEEK from interviews with top administration and intelligence officials, is not encouraging.

The case that Saddam possessed WMD was based, in large part, on assumptions, not hard evidence. If Saddam did not possess a forbidden arsenal, the reasoning went, why, then, would he put his country through the agony of becoming an international pariah and ultimately risk his regime? Was he just bluffing in some fundamentally stupid way? Earlier U.N. weapons inspectors projected that Saddam kept stores of anthrax and VX, but they had no proof. In recent years, the CIA detected some signs of Saddam's moving money around, building additions to suspected WMD sites, and buying chemicals and equipment abroad that could be used to make chem-bio weapons. But the spooks --lacked any reliable spies, or HUMINT (human intelligence), inside Iraq.

Then came the defectors. Former Iraqi officials fleeing the regime told of underground bunkers and labs hiding vast stores of chemical and biological weapons and nuclear materials. The CIA, at first, was skeptical. Defectors in search of safe haven sometimes stretch or invent the facts. The true believers in the Bush administration, on the other hand, embraced the defectors and credited their stories. Many of the defectors were sent to the Americans by Ahmed Chalabi, the politically ambitious and controversial Iraqi exile.

Chalabi's chief patron is Richard Perle, the former Reagan Defense Department official and charter member of the so-called neocons, the hard-liners who occupy many top jobs in the Bush national-security establishment.

The CIA was especially wary of Chalabi, whom they regarded as a con man (Chalabi has been convicted of bank fraud in Jordan; he denies the charges). But rather than accept the CIA's doubts, top officials in the Bush Defense Department set up their own team of intelligence analysts, a small but powerful shop now called the Office of Special Plans--and, half-jokingly,

by its members, "the Cabal."

The Cabal was eager to find a link between Saddam and Al Qaeda, especially proof that Saddam played a role in the 9-11 attacks. The hard-liners at Defense seized on a report that Muhammad Atta, the chief hijacker, met in Prague in early April 2001 with an Iraqi intelligence official. Only one problem with that story, the FBI pointed out. Atta was traveling at the time between Florida and Virginia Beach, Va. (The bureau had his rental car and hotel receipts.)

No matter. The Iraq hawks at Defense and in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney continued to push the idea that Saddam had both stockpiles of WMD and links to terrorists who could deliver those weapons to American cities.

Speeches and statements by Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Bush himself repeated these claims throughout the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003. One persistent theme: that Saddam was intent on building a nuke. On Oct. 7, for instance, Bush predicted in a speech in Cincinnati that Saddam could have "a nuclear weapon in less than a year."

The evidence sometimes cited to support Saddam's nuclear program was shaky, however. On the morning after Bush's State of the Union address in January, Greg Thielmann, who had recently resigned from the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR)--whose duties included tracking Iraq's WMD program--read the text in the newspaper. Bush had cited British intelligence reports that Saddam was trying to purchase "significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Thielmann was floored. "When I saw that, it really blew me away," Thielmann told NEWSWEEK. Thielmann knew about the source of the allegation. The CIA had come up with some documents purporting to show Saddam had attempted to buy up to 500 tons of uranium oxide from the African country of Niger. INR had concluded that the purchases were implausible--and made that point clear to Powell's office. As Thielmann read that the president had relied on these documents to report to the nation, he thought, "Not that stupid piece of garbage. My thought was, how did that get into the speech?" It later turned out that the documents were a forgery, and a crude one at that, peddled to the Italians by an entrepreneurial African diplomat. The Niger minister of Foreign Affairs

whose name was on the letterhead had been out of office for more than 10 years. The most cursory checks would have exposed the fraud.

The strongest evidence that Saddam was building a nuke was the fact that he was secretly importing aluminum tubes that could be used to help make enriched uranium. At least it seemed that way. In early September, just before Bush was scheduled to speak to the United Nations about the Iraqi threat, the story was leaked to Judith Miller and Michael Gordon of The New York Times, which put it on page one. That same Sunday (Sept. 8), Cheney and national-security adviser Condoleezza Rice went on the talk shows to confirm the story.

At the CIA, Tenet seems to have latched on to the tubes as a kind of smoking gun. He brought one of the tubes to a closed Senate hearing that same month. But from the beginning, other intelligence experts in the government had their doubts. After canvassing experts at the nation's nuclear labs, the Department of Energy concluded that the tubes were the wrong specification to be used in a centrifuge, the equipment used to enrich uranium. The State Department's INR concluded that the tubes were meant to be used for a multiple-rocket-launching system. (And Saddam was not secretly buying them; the purchase order was posted on the -- Internet.) In two reports to Powell, INR concluded there was no reliable evidence that Iraq had restarted a nuclear program at all. "These were not weaselly worded," said Thielmann. "They were as definitive as these things go." These dissents were duly recorded in a classified intelligence estimate. But they were largely dropped from the declassified version made available to the public. U.N. inspectors say they have found solid proof that Iraq bought the tubes to build small rockets, not nukes.

The real test of the government's case against Saddam came in the testimony by Secretary of State Powell delivered to the United Nations on Feb. 5. Powell, the administration's in-house moderate, was very wary of being set up for a fall by the administration hawks. Presented with a "script" by the White House national-security staff, Powell suspected that the hawks had been "cherry-picking," looking for any intel that supported their position and ignoring anything to the contrary.

Powell ordered his aides to check out every fact. And to make sure he would not be left hanging if the intel case against Saddam somehow

proved to be full of holes, he gently but firmly informed Tenet that the DCI should come up to New York--and take his place behind the secretary of State at the U.N. General Assembly. ("I don't think George looked too comfortable sitting there," said a former top official, chuckling, in 41's administration.)

For four days and nights, Powell and Tenet, top aides and top analysts and, from time to time, Rice, pored over the evidence--and discarded much of it. Out went suggestions linking Saddam to 9-11. The bogus Niger documents were dumped. Powell did keep a hedged endorsement of the aluminum tubes and contended that Saddam "harbored" Al Qaeda operatives. His most compelling offering to the United Nations was tape recordings (picked up by spy satellites) of Iraqi officials who appeared intent on hiding something from the U.N. arms inspectors. Just what they were hiding was never quite clear.

The almost round-the-clock vetting process in Tenet's conference room at the CIA was tense and difficult, according to several participants. The debate over whether to include the purported links between Al Qaeda and Saddam went on right up to the eve of Powell's speech.

Powell's presentation did not persuade the U.N. Security Council, but it did help convince many Americans that Saddam was a real threat. As the military began to gear up for an invasion, top planners at Central Command tried to get a fix from the CIA on WMD sites they could take out with bombs and missiles.

After much badgering, says an informed military source, the CIA allowed the CENTCOM planners to see what the agency had on WMD sites. "It was crap," said a CENTCOM planner. The sites were "mostly old friends," buildings bombed by the military back in the 1991 gulf war, another source said. The CIA had satellite photos of the buildings. "What was inside the structures was another matter," says the source. "We asked, 'Well, what agents are in these buildings? Be-cause we need to know.' And the answer was, 'We don't know'," the CENTCOM planner recalled.

When the military visited these sites after the war, they found nothing but rubble. No traces of WMD. Nor did Special Forces find any of the 20 or so Scud missiles, possibly tipped with chem-bio warheads, that were said by

the CIA to be lurking somewhere in the Western Desert. The search is not over. While CENTCOM is pulling out its initial teams of WMD hunters, the Pentagon has created a whole new program to search sites, looking for the elusive WMD. It is disheartening that the military was unable to secure Saddam's large nuclear-material storage site at Al Tuwaitha before the looters got there. Materials for a "dirty bomb" could have found their way by now into the hands of terrorists.

And so the searching--and guessing--goes on. So do the bureaucratic wars: last week one of the founders in the Cabal had his security clearance pulled--by enemies in the intelligence community, his associates suspected. The CIA has done a reasonably good job of tracking down Al Qaeda chieftains, capturing about half of them so far. Despite some reports of low morale (mostly from retired analysts), the agency is well funded and well aware of its central role in the war on terror. The spooks for the most part know the imprecise nature of their business. It would be healthier if politicians and policymakers did, too. A little realism would be a good thing, especially in an age of sneak attacks by both sides, when the margin for error is just about zero.

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