

**STATEMENT BY GEORGE J. TENET**  
**DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**  
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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Legitimate questions have arisen about how remarks on alleged Iraqi attempts to obtain uranium in Africa made it into the President's State of the Union speech. Let me be clear about several things right up front. First, CIA approved the President's State of the Union address before it was delivered. Second, I am responsible for the approval process in my Agency. And third, the President had every reason to believe that the text presented to him was sound. These 16 words should never have been included in the text written for the President.

For perspective, a little history is in order.

There was fragmentary intelligence gathered in late 2001 and early 2002 on the allegations of Saddam's efforts to obtain additional raw uranium from Africa, beyond the 550 metric tons already in Iraq. In an effort to inquire about certain reports involving Niger, CIA's counter-proliferation experts, on their own initiative, asked an individual with ties to the region to make a visit to see what he could learn. He reported back to us that one of the former Nigerien officials he met stated that he was unaware of any contract being signed between Niger and rogue states for the sale of uranium during his tenure in office. The same former official also said that in June 1999 a businessman approached him and insisted that the former official meet with an Iraqi delegation to discuss "expanding commercial relations" between Iraq and Niger. The former official interpreted the overture as an attempt to discuss uranium sales. The former officials also offered details regarding Niger's processes for monitoring and transporting uranium that suggested it would be very unlikely that material could be illicitly diverted. There was no mention in the report of forged documents -- or any suggestion of the existence of documents at all.

Because this report, in our view, did not resolve whether Iraq was or was not seeking uranium from abroad, it was given a normal and wide distribution, but we did not brief it to the President, Vice-President or other senior Administration officials. We also had to consider that the former Nigerien officials knew that what they were saying would reach the U.S. government and that this might have influenced what they said.

In the fall of 2002, my Deputy and I briefed hundreds of members of Congress on Iraq. We did not brief the uranium acquisition story.

Also in the fall of 2002, our British colleagues told us they were planning to publish an unclassified dossier that mentioned reports of Iraqi attempts to obtain uranium in Africa. Because we viewed the reporting on such acquisition attempts to be inconclusive, we expressed reservations about its inclusion but our colleagues said they were confident in their reports and left it in their document.

In September and October 2002 before Senate Committees, senior intelligence officials in response to questions told members of Congress that we differed with the British dossier on the reliability of the uranium reporting.

In October, the Intelligence Community (IC) produced a classified, 90 page National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's WMD programs. There is a lengthy section in which most agencies of the Intelligence Community judged that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. Let me emphasize, the NIE's Key Judgments cited six reasons for this assessment; the African uranium issue was not one of them.

But in the interest of completeness, the report contained three paragraphs that discuss Iraq's significant 550-metric ton uranium stockpile and how it could be diverted while under IAEA safeguard. These paragraphs also cited reports that Iraq began "vigorously trying to procure" more uranium from Niger and two other African countries, which would shorten the time Baghdad needed to produce nuclear weapons. The NIE states: "A foreign government service reported that as of early 2001, Niger planned to send several tons of pure "uranium" (probably yellowcake) to Iraq. As of early 2001, Niger and Iraq reportedly were still working out the arrangements for this deal, which could be for up to 500 tons of yellowcake." The Estimate also states: "We do not know the status of this arrangement." With regard to reports that Iraq had sought uranium from two other countries, the Estimate says: "We cannot confirm whether Iraq succeeded in acquiring uranium ore and/or yellowcake from these sources." Much later in the NIE text, in presenting an alternate view on another matter, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research included a sentence that states: "Finally, the claims of Iraqi pursuit of natural uranium in Africa are, in INR's assessment, highly dubious."

An unclassified CIA White Paper in October made no mention of the issue, again because it was not fundamental to the judgment that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program, and because we had questions about some of the reporting. For the same reasons, the subject was not included in many public speeches, Congressional testimony and the Secretary of State's United Nations presentation in early 2003.

The background above makes it even more troubling that the 16 words eventually made it into the State of the Union speech. This was a mistake.

Portions of the State of the Union speech draft came to the CIA for comment shortly before the speech was given. Various parts were shared with cognizant elements of the Agency for review. Although the documents related to the alleged Niger-Iraqi uranium deal had not yet been determined to be forgeries, officials who were reviewing the draft remarks on uranium raised several concerns about the fragmentary nature of the intelligence with National Security Council colleagues. Some of the language was changed. From what we know now, Agency officials in the end concurred that the text in the speech was factually correct -- i.e. that the British government report said that Iraq sought uranium from Africa. This should not have been the test for clearing a Presidential address. This did not rise to the level of certainty which should be required for Presidential speeches, and CIA should have ensured that it was removed.