

Cheney, Fraud, and CIA: Not Business As Usual

by Ray McGovern

This column was originally published in the Hartford Courant of Connecticut on June 27. Ray McGovern, a CIA analyst from 1964-90, regularly reported to the Vice President and senior policy-makers on the President's Daily Brief from 1981-85.

As though this were normal! I mean the repeated visits Vice President Dick Cheney made to the CIA before the war in Iraq. The visits were, in fact, unprecedented. During my 27-year career at the Central Intelligence Agency, no vice president ever came to us for a working visit. During the '80s, it was my privilege to brief Vice President George H.W. Bush and other very senior policy-makers every other morning. I went either to the Vice President's office or (on weekends) to his home. I am sure it never occurred to him to come to CIA headquarters.

The morning briefings gave us an excellent window on what was uppermost in the minds of those senior officials and helped us refine our tasks of collection and analysis. Thus, there was never any need for policy-makers to visit us. And the very thought of a Vice President dropping by to help us with our analysis is extraordinary. We preferred to do that work without the pressure that inevitably comes from policy-makers at the table.

Cheney got into the operational side of intelligence as well. Reports in late 2001 that Iraq had tried to acquire uranium from Niger, stirred such intense interest that his office let it be known he wanted them checked out. So, with the CIA as facilitator, a retired U.S. ambassador was dispatched to Niger in February 2002 to investigate. He found nothing to

substantiate the report and lots to call it into question. There the matter rested—until last Summer, after the Bush Administration made the decision for war in Iraq.

Cheney, in a speech on Aug. 26, 2002, claimed that Saddam Hussein had “resumed his effort to acquire nuclear weapons.” At the time, CIA analysts were involved in a knock-down, drag-out argument with the Pentagon on this very point. Most of the nuclear engineers at the CIA, and virtually all scientists at U.S. government laboratories and the International Atomic Energy Agency, found no reliable evidence that Iraq had restarted its nuclear weapons program.

Estimates Changed for Cheney

But the Vice President had spoken. Sad to say, those in charge of the draft National Intelligence Estimate took their cue and stated, falsely, that “most analysts assess Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.” Smoke was blown about aluminum tubes sought by Iraq that, it turns out, were for conventional weapons programs. The rest amounted to things like Hussein’s frequent meetings with nuclear scientists and Iraq’s foot-dragging in providing information to UN inspectors.

Not much heed was paid to the fact that Hussein’s son-in-law, who supervised Iraq’s nuclear program before he defected in 1995, had told interrogators that Iraq’s nuclear capability—save the blueprints—had been destroyed in 1991 at his order. (Documents given to the United States this week confirm that. The Iraqi scientists who provided them added that, even though the blueprints would have given Iraq a head start, no order was given to restart the program; and even had such an order been given, Iraq would still have been years away from producing a nuclear weapon.)

In sum, the evidence presented in last September’s intelligence estimate fell far short of what was required to support Cheney’s claim that Iraq was on the road to a nuclear weapon. Something scarier had to be produced, and quickly, if Congress was to be persuaded to authorize war. And so the decision was made to dust off the uranium-from-Niger canard.

The White House calculated—correctly—that before anyone would make an issue of the fact that this key piece of “intelligence” was based on a forgery, Congress would vote yes. The war could then be waged and won. In recent weeks, Administration officials have begun spreading the word that Cheney was never told the Iraq-Niger story was based on a forgery. I asked a senior official who recently served at the National Security Council if he thought that was possible. He pointed out that rigorous NSC procedures call for a very specific response to all Vice Presidential questions and added that “the fact that Cheney’s office had originally asked that the Iraq-Niger report be checked out makes it inconceivable that his office would not have been informed of the results.”

Did the President himself know that the information used to secure Congressional approval for war was based on a forgery? We don’t know. But which would be worse—that he knew or that he didn’t?