

Less Central, More Intelligent?

How not to reform the CIA.

BY GARY SCHMITT

WHEN THE SENATE Intelligence Committee released its report on prewar assessments of Iraq's WMD programs and Iraq's ties to terrorism, it generated a host of front-page stories, news commentaries, and political debate—as it should have. Even in its heavily redacted form, the report is well worth reading, providing a rare and detailed depiction of a traditionally very closed intelligence bureaucracy. But the report is also worth reading because not all of its findings have been adequately reported or fully understood. What follow are four nuggets that analysts and the media have largely missed.

- First, the core conclusion of the report with respect to the intelligence community's assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs is *not* that those assessments were unreasonable. (The intelligence community, or IC, comprises the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security

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Agency, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.)



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At the time the IC drafted and coordinated the NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in September 2002, most of what the intelligence analysts actually "knew" about Iraq's weapons programs pre-dated the 1991 Gulf War, leaving them

with very little knowledge about the current state of those programs. Analysts knew that Iraq had active nuclear, chemical, biological, and delivery programs before 1991, and had previously lied to, and was still not forthcoming with, U.N. inspectors about those programs. The analysts also knew that the United Nations was not satisfied with Iraq's efforts to account for its destruction of all its pre-Gulf War weapons, precursors, and equipment. Additionally, the analysts knew that Iraq was trying to import dual-use materials and equipment and had rebuilt or was continuing to use facilities that had been associated with Iraq's pre-Gulf War weapons programs, and knew that WMD were likely within Iraq's technological capabilities.

As the report goes on to state, based on the above, the intelligence community made a "reasonable assessment" that "Iraq had retained its pre-Gulf War weapons and that Iraq was using dual-use materials and facilities to manufacture weapons." The mistake analysts made, then, was suggesting these were known facts, not reasoned inferences.

But this raises an important question: What if the intelligence community had presented its conclusions about Iraq's weapons programs as inferences and not facts? Would Congress

have voted differently about going to war? The answer is almost certainly no. Given Saddam's history, the slow but inevitable collapse of the sanctions regime against Iraq, and the recalibration after 9/11 of the security problems we faced, Congress would have seen a no vote as a high-stakes gamble.

The CIA can be faulted—as the report argues—for not having made more of an effort to develop first-hand human intelligence on what Iraq was up to. But no one should kid himself: Recruiting the kinds and number of sources that would have led the intelligence community to rethink its views was always a long shot. In the real world, unless we are attacked directly, the decision to go to war is almost always a judgment call—the kind we elect congressmen to make.

- Second, the report concludes that the Central Intelligence Agency was on the mark about the Iraq-al Qaeda relationship: some contacts, yes; more than that, probably not. Yet, as the report itself states, “Despite four decades of intelligence reporting on Iraq, there was little useful intelligence collected that helped analysts determine the Iraqi regime’s possible links to al Qaeda.” Indeed, the CIA “did not have a focused human intelligence collection strategy targeting Iraq’s links to terrorism until 2002. The CIA had no [redacted] sources on the ground in Iraq reporting specifically on terrorism.”

Sorry, but how does the committee conclude that the Agency got it right on “the connection” when, as they point out, there was no collection of any significance on this key issue? In this instance, the committee has adopted an analytic posture that looks like the very thing they just accused the intelligence community of with respect to Iraq’s WMD—dressing up inference and supposition as more fact than not. Given how little attention and assets the CIA dedicated to this issue, what is striking is not how little information there is on the ties between Iraq and al Qaeda, but how much there is—especially when it comes to the possible training of al Qaeda operatives by Iraq in bomb-making and chemical weapons.

- Third, news accounts of the report have duly noted that the committee “did not find any evidence that Administration officials attempted to coerce, influence or pressure analysts to change their judgments related to Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction

capabilities.” What has largely gone missing from these accounts is the report’s conclusion that “probing questions” on the part of administration officials with respect to the issue of Iraq’s ties to terrorism had, as the CIA analysts admitted, “actually improved the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) products.”

Contrary to the Washington conventional wisdom of recent months, tough questioning of intelligence analysts by administration officials is not the moral equivalent of the Dresden bombing. Probing questions are likely to make the intelligence product more thoughtful and useful to policymakers. As the committee report pointedly notes:

While analysts cannot dismiss a threat because at first glance it seems unreasonable or it cannot be corroborated by other credible reporting, policymakers have the ultimate responsibility for making decisions based on this same fragmentary, inconclusive reporting. If policymakers did not respond to analysts’ caveated judgments with pointed, probing questions, and did not require them to produce the most complete assessments possible, they would not be doing their jobs.

- Finally, the report concludes that the CIA and its director “abused” their “unique” positions within the intelligence community to the detriment of the intelligence provided senior policymakers. While, by law, the director of central intelligence is supposed to act as the head of both the CIA and the intelligence community as a whole, the committee found that “in many instances he only acted as head of the CIA.” Similarly, the CIA’s position as the central repository of all-source intelligence and as the agency that directly supports the director in his role as the president’s principal intelligence adviser allowed “CIA analysts and officials to provide the agency’s intelligence analysis to senior policymakers without having to explain dissenting views or defend their analysis from potential challenges from other

Intelligence Community agencies.” In short, centralized intelligence, instead of providing the most accurate and objective analysis to policymakers, “actually undermined” that goal.

This is a remarkable finding. Perhaps the most sacred cow in all of American intelligence is the idea that a *central* intelligence agency is an absolute necessity. Now, for the first time since the creation of the modern American defense establishment and the CIA in 1947, a government report has raised—if only implicitly—the question of whether this is true, at least when it comes to analysis.

Originally, there were two dominant reasons for a centralized effort. The first, to solve the so-called Pearl Harbor problem: Unless there were a central agency to analyze all incoming intelligence, the likelihood of being surprised, with all the consequences that portended in the nuclear age, would go way up. In this day of massive databanks and computer networks, this rationale is nowhere near as compelling. Why can’t all-source analysis be done by multiple centers or organizations?

The second, and more serious, reason for having a “central” intelligence agency is that it would be free of the biases and constraints associated with connection to a particular part of the government. Only a central intelligence agency supposedly could be independent enough to speak “truth to power.” But, as the Senate report makes clear, being independent of a particular department of government is no guarantee that an agency won’t develop a bureaucratic interest or stake in some view over time. And certainly, as the history of intelligence “surprises” since 1947 shows, speaking “truth” to power is not something presidents and policymakers should count on from this central intelligence agency. For this reason, “competitive analysis” (that is, the existence of competing centers of intelligence analysis) is a necessary, even if not sufficient, corrective.

Of course, one of the ironies of this

report's publication, along with previous and ongoing investigations into the intelligence effort prior to 9/11, is the call by many—including the leadership of the House Intelligence Committee and Brent Scowcroft, head of the president's Intelligence Advisory Board—to reform American intelligence by *increasing* the powers of the director of central intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency. Yet, as anyone reading the Senate's report should conclude, producing high-quality, accurate intelligence is a daunting task. It requires a far better job of collecting intelligence than at present we are doing, and it requires significantly improved analytic efforts. Even then, we shouldn't be surprised that we will be surprised. Our opponents know how to keep secrets and they know how to mislead. The one thing we should not do is make the job of intelligence more difficult by giving even more responsibility to people and institutions that have yet to reform themselves. ♦

The Conservative Case for Cheney

And why he won't be dumped.

BY STEPHEN MOORE & JEFFREY BELL

DUMP DICK CHENEY? It won't happen, and if it did, it would be a terrible idea. The president would be losing his most intelligent and experienced adviser. And conservatives would be losing one of our most consistent and effective champions, at home and abroad.

The 63-year-old Cheney became White House chief of staff to President Gerald Ford 29 years ago. In

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1988, when he was 47, he was elected House Minority Whip, only to accept appointment early the following year as Secretary of Defense.

In virtually every one of this remarkable succession of roles, Cheney has been on the right flank of his milieu. As Ford's deputy chief of staff, he was listening to obscure supply-siders like USC professor Arthur Laffer and was one of a minority of Ford advisers who fruitlessly pushed tax-rate reduction. (When Laffer drew his famous curve on the dinner napkin, Cheney, along with chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld, was the audience.)

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