

ADMINISTRATION

## What Bush Was Told About Iraq

By [Murray Waas](#), *National Journal*

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Two highly classified intelligence reports delivered directly to **President Bush** before the Iraq war cast doubt on key public assertions made by the president, **Vice President Cheney**, and other administration officials as justifications for invading Iraq and toppling **Saddam Hussein**, according to records and knowledgeable sources.

The first report, delivered to Bush in early October 2002, was a one-page summary of a National Intelligence Estimate that discussed whether Saddam's procurement of high-strength aluminum tubes was for the purpose of developing a nuclear weapon.

The president received highly classified intelligence reports containing information at odds with his justifications for going to war.

Among other things, the report stated that the Energy Department and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research believed that the tubes were "intended for conventional weapons," a view disagreeing with that of other intelligence agencies, including the CIA, which believed that the tubes were intended for a nuclear bomb.

The disclosure that Bush was informed of the DOE and State dissents is the first evidence that the president himself knew of the sharp debate within the government over the aluminum tubes during the time that he, Cheney, and other members of the Cabinet were citing the tubes as clear evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program. Neither the president nor the vice president told the public about the disagreement among the agencies.

When U.S. inspectors entered Iraq after the fall of Saddam's regime, they determined that Iraq's nuclear program had been dormant for more than a decade and that the aluminum tubes had been used only for artillery shells.

The second classified report, delivered to Bush in early January 2003, was also a summary of a National Intelligence Estimate, this one focusing on whether Saddam would launch an unprovoked attack on the United States, either directly, or indirectly by working with terrorists.

The report stated that U.S. intelligence agencies unanimously agreed that it was unlikely that Saddam would try to attack the United States -- except if "ongoing military operations risked the imminent demise of his regime" or if he intended to "extract revenge" for such an assault, according to records and sources.

The single dissent in the report again came from State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, known as INR, which believed that the Iraqi leader was "unlikely to conduct clandestine attacks against the U.S. homeland even if [his] regime's demise is imminent" as the result of a U.S. invasion.

On at least four earlier occasions, beginning in the spring of 2002, according to the same records and sources, the president was informed during his morning intelligence briefing that U.S. intelligence agencies believed it was unlikely that Saddam was an imminent threat to the United States.

However, in the months leading up to the war, Bush, Cheney, and Cabinet members repeatedly asserted that Saddam was likely to use chemical or biological weapons against the United States or to provide such weapons to Al Qaeda or another terrorist group.

The Bush administration used the potential threat from Saddam as a major rationale in making the case to go to war. The president cited the threat in an address to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, in an October 7, 2002, speech to the American people, and in his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003.

The one-page documents prepared for Bush are known as the "President's Summary" of the much longer and more detailed National Intelligence Estimates that combine the analysis and judgments of agencies throughout the intelligence community.

An NIE, according to the Web site of the National Intelligence Council -- the interagency group that coordinates the documents' production -- represents "the coordinated judgments of the Intelligence Community regarding the likely course of future events" and is written with the goal of providing "policy makers with the best, unvarnished, and unbiased information -- regardless of whether analytic judgments conform to U.S. policy." (The January 2003 NIE, for example, was titled "Nontraditional Threats to the U.S. Homeland Through 2007.")

As many as six to eight agencies, foremost among them the CIA, the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the INR, contribute to the drafting of an NIE. If any one of those intelligence agencies disagrees with the majority view on major conclusions, the NIE includes the dissenting view.

The one-page summary for the president allows intelligence agencies to emphasize what they believe to be the conclusions from the broader NIE that are the most important to communicate to the commander-in-chief.

The President's Summary is among the most highly classified papers in the government. References to the summaries are contained in footnotes in the so-called Robb-Silberman report -- officially, the report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction -- that was issued in March 2005 on the use of intelligence leading up to the war in Iraq. The White House has refused to declassify the summaries or to give them to congressional committees.

The summaries stated that both the Energy and State departments dissented on the aluminum tubes question. This is the first evidence that Bush was aware of the intense debate within the government during the time that he, Cheney, and members of the Cabinet were citing the procurement of the tubes as evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program.

In his address to the U.N. General Assembly on September 12, 2002, the president asserted, "Iraq has made several attempts to buy high-strength aluminum tubes used to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon."

On October 7, 2002, less than a week after Bush was given the summary, he said in a speech in Cincinnati: "Evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. **Saddam Hussein** held numerous meetings with Iraqi nuclear scientists, a group he calls his 'nuclear mujahedeen' -- his nuclear holy warriors.... Iraq has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and other equipment needed for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons."

On numerous other occasions, Cheney, then-National Security Adviser **Condoleezza Rice**, Defense Secretary **Donald Rumsfeld**, and then-U.N. Ambassador **John Negroponte** cited Iraq's procurement of aluminum tubes without disclosing that the intelligence community was split as to their end use. The fact that the president was informed of the dissents by Energy and State is also significant because Rice and other administration officials have said that Bush did not know about those dissenting views when he made claims about the purported uses for the tubes.

On July 11, 2003, aboard Air Force One during a presidential trip to Africa, Rice was asked about the National Intelligence Estimate and whether the president knew of the dissenting views among intelligence agencies regarding Iraq's procurement of the aluminum tubes.

Months earlier, disagreement existed within the administration over how to characterize the aluminum tubes in a speech that then-Secretary of State **Colin Powell** gave to the U.N. on February 5, 2003. Breaking ranks with others in the administration, Powell decided to refer to the internal debate among government agencies over Iraq's intended use of the tubes.

Asked about this by a reporter on Air Force One, Rice said: "I'm saying that when we put [Powell's speech] together... the secretary decided that he would caveat the aluminum tubes, which he did.... The secretary also has an intelligence arm that happened to hold that view."

Rice added, "Now, if there were any doubts about the underlying intelligence to that NIE, those doubts were not communicated to the president, to the vice president, or to me."

The one-page October 2002 President's Summary specifically told Bush that although "most agencies judge" that the use of the aluminum tubes was "related to a uranium enrichment effort... INR and DOE believe that the tubes more likely are intended for conventional weapons uses."

The lengthier NIE -- more than 90 pages -- contained significantly more detail describing the disagreement between the CIA and the Pentagon's DIA on one hand, which believed that the tubes were meant for centrifuges, and State's INR and the Energy Department, which believed that they were meant for artillery shells. Administration officials had said that the president would not have read the full-length paper. They also had said that many of the details of INR's dissent were contained in a special text box that was positioned far away from the main text of the report.

But the one-page summary, several senior government officials said in interviews, was written specifically for Bush, was handed to the president by then-CIA Director **George Tenet**, and was read in Tenet's presence.

In addition, Rice, Cheney, and dozens of other high-level Bush administration policy makers received a highly classified intelligence assessment, known as a Senior Executive Memorandum, on the aluminum tubes issue. Circulated on January 10, 2003, the memo was titled "Questions on Why Iraq Is Procuring Aluminum Tubes and What the IAEA Has Found to Date."

The paper included discussion regarding the fact that the INR, Energy, and the United Nations atomic energy watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, all believed that Iraq was using the aluminum tubes for conventional weapons programs.

The lengthier NIE also contained a note regarding the aluminum tubes disagreement:

"In INR's view, Iraq's efforts to acquire aluminum tubes is central to the argument that Baghdad is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program, but INR is not persuaded that the tubes in question are intended for use as centrifuge rotors. INR accepts the judgment of technical experts at the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) who have concluded that the tubes Iraq seeks to acquire are poorly suited for use in gas centrifuges to be used for uranium enrichment and finds unpersuasive the arguments advanced by others to make the case that they are intended for that purpose.

"INR considers it far more likely that the tubes are intended for another purpose, most likely the production of artillery rockets."

One week after Rice's comments aboard Air Force One, on July 18, 2003, the Bush administration

declassified some portions of the NIE, including the passage quoted above, regarding INR's dissent regarding the aluminum tubes.

But the Bush administration steadfastly continued to refuse to declassify the President's Summary of the NIE, which in the words of one senior official, is the "one document which illustrates what the president knew and when he knew it." The administration also refused to furnish copies of the paper to congressional intelligence committees.

That a summary was also prepared for Bush on the question of Saddam's intentions regarding an unprovoked attack on the United States is significant because the administration has claimed that the president was unaware of intelligence information that conflicted with his public statements and those of the vice president and members of his Cabinet on the justifications for attacking Iraq.

According to interviews and records, Bush personally read the one-page summary in Tenet's presence during the morning intelligence briefing, and the two spoke about it at some length. Sources familiar with the summary said it was highly significant that the president was informed that it was the unanimous conclusion of the intelligence agencies participating in the production of the January 2003 NIE that Saddam was unlikely to consider attacking the U.S. unless Iraq was attacked first.

Cheney received virtually the same intelligence information, according to the same records and interviews. The president's summaries have been shared with the vice president as a matter of course during the Bush presidency.

The conclusion among intelligence agencies that Saddam was unlikely to consider attacking the United States unless attacked first was also outlined in Senior Executive Intelligence Briefs, highly classified daily intelligence papers distributed to several hundred executive branch officials and to the congressional intelligence oversight committees.

During the second half of 2002, the president and vice president repeatedly cited the threat from Saddam in their public statements. "Simply stated, there is no doubt that **Saddam Hussein** now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us," Cheney declared on August 26, 2002, to the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

In his September 12 address to the U.N. General Assembly, Bush said: "With every step the Iraqi regime takes toward gaining and deploying the most terrible weapons, our own options to confront that regime will narrow. And if an emboldened regime were to supply these weapons to terrorist allies, then the attacks of September the 11th would be a prelude to far greater horrors."

In an October 7 address to the nation, Bush cited intelligence showing that Iraq had a fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons. "We're concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the United States," the president declared.

"We know that Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy -- the United States of America," he added. "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists. Alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints."

In his January 28, 2003, State of the Union address, the president once again warned the nation: "Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike? If this threat is permitted to fully and suddenly emerge, all actions, all words, and all recriminations would come too late. Trusting in the sanity and restraint of **Saddam Hussein** is not a strategy, and it is not an option."

In March 2003, as American, British, and other military forces prepared to invade Iraq, the president repeated the warnings during a summit in the Azores islands of Portugal and in a March 17 speech to the nation on the eve of the war. "The danger is clear: Using chemical, biological, or, one day, nuclear weapons obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country," Bush said in the March 17 speech. "The United States and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat. But we will do everything to defeat it."

Senior Bush administration officials say they had good reason to disbelieve the intelligence that was provided to them by the CIA, noting that the intelligence the agency had provided earlier regarding Iraq was flawed.

And more recently, a 511-page bipartisan report by the Senate Intelligence Committee on prewar intelligence regarding Iraq concluded: "Despite four decades of intelligence reporting on Iraq, there was little useful intelligence collected that helped analysis determine the Iraqi regime's possible links with Al Qaeda."

The White House declined to comment for this story. In a statement, **Frederick Jones**, a spokesman for the National Security Council said, "The president of the United States has talked about this matter directly, as have a myriad of other administration officials. At this juncture, we have nothing to add to that body of information."

The 9/11 commission concluded in its final report that no evidence existed of a "collaborative operational relationship" between Saddam and Al Qaeda, adding, "Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with Al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States."

-- [Previous coverage](#) of pre-war intelligence and the CIA leak investigation from Murray Waas.

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