



CNN *Anderson Cooper 360*, April 6, 2007: Saddam & al Qaeda

John Roberts, CNN anchor:

ROBERTS: If the Gonzales affair opened up a credibility gap, it is merely a paper cut compared to the one over Iraq.

Today, a newly-classified report from the Pentagon's inspector general gives more ammunition to those who believe that the administration either deceived itself, the country, or both, into thinking that al Qaeda had close ties with Saddam Hussein.

Yet, listen to what Vice President Dick Cheney said just yesterday about al Qaeda in Iraq's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP, "THE RUSH LIMBAUGH SHOW")

RICHARD B. CHENEY, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: took up residence there before we ever launched into Iraq; organized the al Qaeda operations inside Iraq before we even arrived on the scene, and then, of course, led the charge for Iraq until we killed him last June.

This is al Qaeda operating in Iraq. And, as I say, they were present before we invaded Iraq.

Bin Laden, himself, has said, this is a central battle in the war on terror.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

ROBERTS: Yet, the I.G.'s report says interrogations of Saddam Hussein and two aides, along with captured Iraqi documents, confirm what the intelligence community believed prior to hostilities, that the Iraqi regime was not directly cooperating with al Qaeda.

It also slams former Defense Policy Chief Douglas Feith, who ran a kind of intelligence think tank within the Pentagon, for amping up the case against Iraq on al Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction, when the evidence did not support it.

Feith, who strongly disputes that allegation, has taken a beating on this, and not just lately. General Tommy Franks, who led Operation Iraqi Freedom, once said

that Feith had earned the reputation of being -- quote -- "the dumbest F'ing guy on the planet."

Kathleen Hicks worked under Douglas Feith. Currently, she is at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. CNN analyst and retired Brigadier General James "Spider" Marks dealt with his share of intelligence concerning WMD in Iraq. His job was securing them.

Good to see both of you.

KATHLEEN HICKS, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC INTERNATIONAL STUDIES: It's good to see you.

(CROSSTALK)

ROBERTS: Kathleen Hicks, you you worked under Doug Feith. Was he and did he cook the intelligence, prewar intelligence, on Iraq?

HICKS: Well, I don't think you could call the activity by the group within the Pentagon as cooking the books.

It's certainly appropriate for a consumer of intelligence to question that intelligence. But what is quite disconcerting about the I.G. report, and even in the response from the policy organization, is that there is no attempt by them to be responsible for the actions that they put forth.

In other words, you have a small group of people taking on the entire intelligence community, and, yet, there is no sense of responsibility about their activity.

ROBERTS: Spider Marks, intelligence -- and this is the realm that you operated in during Iraqi Freedom -- intelligence is supposed to shape the policy. Did you ever get a sense that, even from some corners, that the policy was driving the intelligence?

BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES "SPIDER" MARKS (RET.), CNN MILITARY ANALYST: Well, I need to tell you, John, that one of the things that was very troubling for me, as the senior intel guy on the ground, is that, in some cases I felt, because of some either suppositions from above or questions, that somebody had intelligence that I just didn't have. I didn't have the underlying premise on some of the questions.

And, so, I don't know if policy was trying to drive intelligence. And, clearly, intelligence drives operations and drives policy in this case. But, often, I felt like I was dealing with, in some cases, less than a full deck.

ROBERTS: Now, is it fair to say, Kathleen Hicks, that Douglas Feith's office in the Pentagon, the policy office, found a way around the normal channels to get that information into the White House?

HICKS: Absolutely. They were in a really enviable position, having a level of access that others could only hope to have.

And, again, that's -- there's nothing wrong with that. That's always going to happen. Certain people will have access. The problem is what you do with that access and how responsible you treat it.

ROBERTS: Spider Marks, should policy people be out there developing, analyzing intelligence?

MARKS: Well, they should be analyzing intelligence. They shouldn't be developing intelligence. You can't have -- you can't let 1,000 flowers bloom.

The intelligence community has to have the competition of ideas, and, once those ideas have had a -- an opportunity to be vetted, then they're open for discussion. The problem with somebody who is not in the I.C. directly is, you don't know what scrutiny that intelligence has gone through, much like it's gone through in the I.C., in the intelligence community.

(CROSSTALK)

MARKS: And that's kind of the challenge.

ROBERTS: Spider, how critical to going to war in Iraq was this issue of Saddam Hussein's ties to al Qaeda? Was it a central issue? Was it icing on the cake? What was it?

MARKS: John, it wasn't part of the ingredient, frankly, in my mind. Again, as the senior intel guy on the ground, I had a whole bunch of things to be concerned about, primarily the fourth largest military in the world. That was Saddam's. And how was that going to posture itself?

There were a number of other terrorist organizations in Iraq that we needed to care about, Ansar al-Islam, Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, Saddam Fedayeen, that we knew of. Al Qaeda was kind of lower on that list. And then certainly we needed to know how those -- those two elements, both the military and those terrorist organizations, might coalesce and come together.

ROBERTS: Kathleen, to this day, Vice President Cheney continues to say that al Qaeda had a significant presence in Iraq before the invasion. You heard what he told Rush Limbaugh.

Have you seen anything to corroborate that?

HICKS: No, I have not seen anything to corroborate that.

Again, today, there is certainly some connection, especially in al Anbar Province. But there is no indication, really, beyond what's already been reported, in terms of the Czech report of a meeting, a potential meeting in Prague, which has largely been discounted, that there was any connection between al Qaeda in Iraq and Saddam Hussein.

ROBERTS: And, Spider, can you understand, then, why the vice president keeps saying this, and saying it with such conviction? (CROSSTALK)

MARKS: No. No, John, I can't. Frankly, I can't.

Obviously, the concern at the time was a dirty bomb, and that toxic mix of WMD and terrorism. But I don't -- I didn't see that connection at that time, and four years ago.

ROBERTS: Right.

Well, we -- he has been saying it for four years. We expect he will say it for another two.

Spider Marks, Kathleen Hicks from CSIS, appreciate you coming in tonight.

MARKS: Thanks, John.

HICKS: Thank you.

ROBERTS: Good to talk -- good to talk with you.

(END VIDEOTAPE)