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Correction to This Article

An April 6 article about briefings given to senior U.S. officials before the Iraq war by intelligence analysts in the office of then-Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith misstated the date that the Weekly Standard printed an article derived from those materials. It appeared in November 2003, not before the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Hussein's Prewar Ties To Al-Qaeda Discounted

Pentagon Report Says Contacts Were Limited

By R. Jeffrey Smith
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Captured Iraqi documents and intelligence interrogations of Saddam Hussein and two former aides "all confirmed" that Hussein's regime was not directly cooperating with al-Qaeda before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, according to a declassified Defense Department report released yesterday.

The declassified version of the report, by acting Inspector General Thomas F. Gimble, also contains new details about the intelligence community's prewar consensus that the Iraqi government and al-Qaeda figures had only limited contacts, and about its judgments that reports of deeper links were based on dubious or unconfirmed information. The report had been released in summary form in February.

The report's release came on the same day that Vice President Cheney, appearing on Rush Limbaugh's radio program, repeated his allegation that al-Qaeda was operating inside Iraq "before we ever launched" the war, under the direction of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the terrorist killed last June.

"This is al-Qaeda operating in Iraq," Cheney told Limbaugh's listeners about Zarqawi, who he said had "led the charge for Iraq." Cheney cited the alleged history to illustrate his argument that withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq would "play right into the hands of al-Qaeda."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl M. Levin (D-Mich.), who requested the report's declassification, said in a written statement that the complete text demonstrates more fully why the inspector general concluded that a key Pentagon office -- run by then-Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith -- had inappropriately written intelligence assessments before the March 2003 invasion

alleging connections between al-Qaeda and Iraq that the U.S. intelligence consensus disputed.

The report, in a passage previously marked secret, said Feith's office had asserted in a briefing given to Cheney's chief of staff in September 2002 that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda was "mature" and "symbiotic," marked by shared interests and evidenced by cooperation across 10 categories, including training, financing and logistics.

Instead, the report said, the CIA had concluded in June 2002 that there were few substantiated contacts between al-Qaeda operatives and Iraqi officials and had said that it lacked evidence of a long-term relationship like the ones Iraq had forged with other terrorist groups.

"Overall, the reporting provides no conclusive signs of cooperation on specific terrorist operations," that CIA report said, adding that discussions on the issue were "necessarily speculative."

The CIA had separately concluded that reports of Iraqi training on weapons of mass destruction were "episodic, sketchy, or not corroborated in other channels," the inspector general's report said. It quoted an August 2002 CIA report describing the relationship as more closely resembling "two organizations trying to feel out or exploit each other" rather than cooperating operationally.

The CIA was not alone, the defense report emphasized. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) had concluded that year that "available reporting is not firm enough to demonstrate an ongoing relationship" between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda, it said.

But the contrary conclusions reached by Feith's office -- and leaked to the conservative Weekly Standard magazine before the war -- were publicly praised by Cheney as the best source of information on the topic, a circumstance the Pentagon report cites in documenting the impact of what it described as "inappropriate" work.

Feith has vigorously defended his work, accusing Gimble of "giving bad advice based on incomplete fact-finding and poor logic," and charging that the acting inspector general has been "cheered on by the chairmen of the Senate intelligence and armed services committees." In January, Feith's successor at the Pentagon, Eric S. Edelman, wrote a 52-page rebuttal to the inspector general's report that disputed its analysis and its recommendations for Pentagon reform.

Cheney's public statements before and after the war about the risks posed by Iraq have closely tracked the briefing Feith's office presented to the vice president's then-chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby. That includes the briefing's depiction of an alleged 2001 meeting in Prague between an Iraqi intelligence official and one of the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackers as one of eight "Known Iraq-Al Qaida Contacts."

The defense report states that at the time, "the intelligence community disagreed with the briefing's assessment that the alleged meeting constituted a 'known contact' " -- a circumstance that the report said was known to Feith's office. But his office had bluntly concluded in a July 2002 critique of a CIA report on Iraq's relationship with al-Qaeda that the CIA's interpretation of the facts it cited "ought to be ignored."

The briefing to Libby was also presented with slight variations to then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, then-CIA Director George J. Tenet and then-deputy national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley. It was prepared in part by someone whom the defense report described as a "junior Naval Reservist" intelligence analyst detailed to Feith's office from the DIA. The person is not named in the report, but Edelman wrote that she was requested by Feith's office.

The briefing, a copy of which was declassified and released yesterday by Levin, goes so far as to state that "Fragmentary reporting points to possible Iraqi involvement not only in 9/11 but also in previous al Qaida attacks." That idea was dismissed in 2004 by a presidential commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks, noting that "no credible evidence" existed to support it.

When a senior intelligence analyst working for the government's counterterrorism task force obtained an early account of the conclusions by Feith's office -- titled "Iraq and al-Qaida: Making the Case" -- the analyst prepared a detailed rebuttal calling it of "no intelligence value" and taking issue with 15 of 26 key conclusions, the report states. The analyst's rebuttal was shared with intelligence officers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but evidently not with others.

Edelman complained in his own account of the incident that a senior Joint Chiefs analyst -- in responding to a suggestion by the DIA analyst that the "Making the Case" account be widely circulated -- told its author that "putting it out there would be playing into the hands of people" such as then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, and belittled the author for trying to support "some agenda of people in the building."

But the inspector general's report, in a footnote, commented that it is "noteworthy . . . that post-war debriefs of Sadaam Hussein, [former Iraqi foreign minister] Tariq Aziz, [former Iraqi intelligence minister Mani al-Rashid] al Tikriti, and [senior al-Qaeda operative Ibn al-Shaykh] al-Libi, as well as document exploitation by DIA all confirmed that the Intelligence Community was correct: Iraq and al-Qaida did not cooperate in all categories" alleged by Feith's office.

From these sources, the report added, "the terms the Intelligence Community used to describe the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida were validated, [namely] 'no conclusive signs,' and 'direct cooperation . . . has not been established.' "

Zarqawi, whom Cheney depicted yesterday as an agent of al-Qaeda in Iraq before the war, was not then an al-Qaeda member but was the leader of an unaffiliated terrorist group who occasionally associated with al-Qaeda adherents, according to several

intelligence analysts. He publicly allied himself with al-Qaeda in early 2004, after the U.S. invasion.

Staff writer Dafna Linzer and staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.