

CIA chief defends intelligence gathering

Tenet says analysts never claimed Iraq posed an imminent threat

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WASHINGTON - In his first public defense of prewar intelligence, CIA Director George Tenet said Thursday that U.S. analysts never claimed before the war that Iraq posed an imminent threat.

Tenet said that analysts had varying opinions on the state of Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs and that those differences were spelled out in a National Intelligence Estimate given to the White House in October 2002. That report summarized intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs.

Analysts "painted an objective assessment for our policy makers of a brutal dictator who was continuing his efforts to deceive and build programs that might constantly surprise us and threaten our interests," he said in a speech at Georgetown University.

"No one told us what to say or how to say it," Tenet said.

In the months before the war, Bush and his top aides repeatedly stressed the urgency of stopping Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In a speech to the United Nations on Sept. 12, 2002, Bush called Saddam's regime "a grave and gathering danger." The next day, he told reporters that Saddam was "a threat that we must deal with as quickly as possible."

In a speech in Ohio on Oct. 7, 2002, Bush said, "The danger is already significant, and it only grows worse with time."

Tenet said U.S. intelligence accurately reported that Saddam's regime posed a danger. Although no weapons of mass destruction have been uncovered in Iraq, he said, the search is not over.

"We are nowhere near 85 percent finished," he said in a direct rebuttal to statements made by his former chief adviser on Iraq's weapons, David Kay.

Debate over prewar intelligence

Since Kay resigned two weeks ago, his statements that Saddam's purported weapons did not exist at the time of the U.S. invasion have sparked an intense debate over the prewar intelligence the administration used to justify the war.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan said Bush still had "great confidence" in Tenet.

Bush repeated Thursday that "America confronted a gathering threat in Iraq. The dictatorship of Saddam Hussein was one of the most brutal, corrupt and dangerous regimes in the world. For years, the dictator funded terrorists and gave reward money for suicide bombings."

[Speaking in Charleston, S.C.](#), Bush said Saddam was today "sitting in a prison cell, and he will be sitting in a courtroom to answer for his crimes." But, he conceded, "as the chief weapons inspector has said, we have not yet found the weapons we thought were there." Bush added that inspectors had found possible evidence of weapons programs.

Tenet spoke shortly before the Senate Intelligence Committee was to begin a closed-door review of a draft report critical of prewar intelligence. His remarks also came a day before Bush was expected to name a commission to examine intelligence problems.

CIA estimates unproven

Tenet outlined the sources of the CIA's prewar estimates, saying they were based on years of U.N. weapons inspections. Once the inspectors left in the late 1990s, information was based mostly on informants — some of whom he acknowledged as suspect — and on technical intelligence.

He acknowledged that many of the agency's prewar estimates of weapons of mass destruction had not been borne

out so far. For example, U.S. analysts believed that Saddam's regime was trying to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program but have found no evidence of that, he said.

On chemical and biological weapons, Tenet said analysts believed that Saddam had ongoing programs and perhaps stockpiles and that inspectors had found no evidence of such ongoing programs. He asserted, however, that the weapons searching teams needed more time.

Two sources with high-level access to Saddam's regime told the CIA in the fall of 2002, shortly before the war, that production of biological and chemical weapons was ongoing, Tenet said.

Those sources "solidified and reinforced ... my own view of the danger posed by Saddam's regime," Tenet said, taking direct responsibility for what was passed on to Bush.

On a key point that is befuddling weapons inspectors, Tenet said he did not know whether it was possible that Saddam's officials had lied to him about what his regime had in the way of weapons.

The failure to find weapons of mass destruction is turning into a major political issue ahead of the presidential election, calling into question the justification for the war as U.S. casualties mount. Republicans in Congress have increasingly been blaming poor intelligence and Tenet, who was appointed by President Bill Clinton.

Democrats have said intelligence agencies deserved only part of the blame and have accused the White House of showcasing intelligence that bolstered the case for war while ignoring dissenting opinions.

Tenet admits shortcomings, lists successes

Even as he acknowledged some intelligence shortcomings in Iraq, Tenet listed other work that he said represented great successes. He credited U.S. intelligence on Iran and nuclear programs in Libya with recent decisions by those countries to cooperate with international arms inspectors.

Tenet agreed with Kay's comments that the United States did not have enough human spies in Iraq and acknowledged that the CIA had not penetrated Saddam's inner circle. But he said that it was strong elsewhere and that "a blanket indictment of our human intelligence around the world is dead wrong."

"We have spent the last seven years rebuilding our clandestine services," he said.

He credited CIA spies with the arrests of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the purported mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, and Asia's leading terror suspect, known as Hambali.

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