

Newsweek

A captured Qaeda commander who was a principal source for Bush administration claims that Osama bin Laden collaborated with Saddam Hussein's regime has changed his story, setting back White House efforts to shore up the credibility of its original case for the invasion of Iraq. The apparent recantation of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, a onetime member of bin Laden's inner circle, has never been publicly acknowledged. But U.S. intelligence officials tell NEWSWEEK that al-Libi was a crucial source for one of the more dramatic assertions made by President George W. Bush and his top aides: that Iraq had provided training in "poisons and deadly gases" for Al Qaeda. Al-Libi, who once ran one of bin Laden's biggest training camps, was captured in Pakistan in November 2001 and soon began talking to CIA interrogators. Although he never mentioned his name, Secretary of State Colin Powell prominently referred to al-Libi's claims in his February 2003 speech to the United Nations; he recounted how a "senior terrorist operative" said Qaeda leaders were frustrated by their inability to make chemical or biological agents in Afghanistan and turned for help to Iraq. Continuing to rely on al-Libi's version, Powell then told how a bin Laden operative seeking help in acquiring poisons and gases had forged a "successful" relationship with Iraqi officials in the late 1990s and that, as recently as December 2000, Iraq had offered "chemical or biological weapons training for two Al Qaeda associates."

But more recently, sources said, U.S. interrogators went back to al-

Libi with new evidence from other detainees that cast doubt on his claims. Al-Libi "subsequently recounted a different story," said one U.S. official. "It's not clear which version is correct. We are still sorting this out." Some officials now suspect that al-Libi, facing aggressive interrogation techniques, had previously said what U.S. officials wanted to hear. In any case, the cloud over his story explains why administration officials have made no mention of the "poisons and gases" claim for some time and did not more forcefully challenge the recent findings of the 9-11 Commission that Al Qaeda and Iraq had not forged a "collaborative relationship."

The debate, however, is far from over. Vice President Dick Cheney has sought to more vigorously defend the Iraq- Qaeda link, even reading to one TV interviewer from a U.S. intelligence report recounting a meeting between an Iraqi intel official and bin Laden on a farm in Sudan in the summer of 1996. (One possible problem: bin Laden had left Sudan for Afghanistan in May of that year.) Meanwhile, NEWSWEEK has learned, Pentagon officials are culling through captured Iraqi documents they say will provide hard evidence of multiple contacts between Iraqi officials and Qaeda members over a decade. Current plans call for a massive "document dump" before the election. But officials acknowledge ultimate proof may prove elusive. "It all depends on what your definition of a relationship is," said one.