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Missing In Action: Truth

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (NYT) 777 words
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Another example is the abuse of intelligence from Hussein Kamel, a son-in-law of Saddam Hussein and head of Iraq's biological weapons program until his defection in 1995. Top British and American officials kept citing information from Mr. Kamel as evidence of a huge secret Iraqi program, even though Mr. Kamel had actually emphasized that Iraq had mostly given up its W.M.D. program in the early 1990's. Glen Rangwala, a British Iraq expert, says the transcript of Mr. Kamel's debriefing was leaked because insiders resented the way politicians were misleading the public. Copyright New York Times Company May 6, 2003 Full Text:
Captioned as: E-mail: nicholas@nytimes.com

When I raised the Mystery of the Missing W.M.D. recently, hawks fired barrages of reproachful e-mail at me. The gist was: "You *&#! Who cares if we never find weapons of mass destruction, because we've liberated the Iraqi people from a murderous tyrant."

But it does matter, enormously, for American credibility. After all, as Ari Fleischer said on April 10 about W.M.D.: "That is what this war was about."

I rejoice in the newfound freedoms in Iraq. But there are indications that the U.S. government souped up intelligence, leaned on spooks to change their conclusions and concealed contrary information to deceive people at home and around the world.

Let's fervently hope that tomorrow we find an Iraqi superdome filled with 500 tons of mustard gas and nerve gas, 25,000 liters of anthrax, 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin, 29,984 prohibited munitions capable of delivering chemical agents, several dozen Scud missiles, gas centrifuges to enrich uranium, 18 mobile biological warfare factories, long-range unmanned aerial vehicles to dispense anthrax, and proof of close ties with Al Qaeda. Those are the things that President Bush or his aides suggested Iraq might have, and I don't want to believe that top administration officials tried to win support for the war with a campaign of wholesale deceit.

Consider the now-disproved claims by President Bush and Colin Powell that Iraq tried to buy uranium from Niger so it could build nuclear weapons. As Seymour Hersh noted in

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The New Yorker, the claims were based on documents that had been forged so amateurishly that they should never have been taken seriously.

I'm told by a person involved in the Niger caper that more than a year ago the vice president's office asked for an investigation of the uranium deal, so a former U.S. ambassador to Africa was dispatched to Niger. In February 2002, according to someone present at the meetings, that envoy reported to the C.I.A. and State Department that the information was unequivocally wrong and that the documents had been forged.

The envoy reported, for example, that a Niger minister whose signature was on one of the documents had in fact been out of office for more than a decade. In addition, the Niger mining program was structured so that the uranium diversion had been impossible. The envoy's debunking of the forgery was passed around the administration and seemed to be accepted – except that President Bush and the State Department kept citing it anyway.

"It's disingenuous for the State Department people to say they were bamboozled because they knew about this for a year," one insider said.

Another example is the abuse of intelligence from Hussein Kamel, a son-in-law of Saddam Hussein and head of Iraq's biological weapons program until his defection in 1995. Top British and American officials kept citing information from Mr. Kamel as evidence of a huge secret Iraqi program, even though Mr. Kamel had actually emphasized that Iraq had mostly given up its W.M.D. program in the early 1990's. Glen Rangwala, a British Iraq expert, says the transcript of Mr. Kamel's debriefing was leaked because insiders resented the way politicians were misleading the public.

Patrick Lang, a former head of Middle Eastern affairs in the Defense Intelligence Agency, says that he hears from those still in the intelligence world that when experts wrote reports that were skeptical about Iraq's W.M.D., "they were encouraged to think it over again."

"In this administration, the pressure to get product 'right' is coming out of O.S.D. [the Office of the Secretary of Defense]," Mr. Lang said. He added that intelligence experts had cautioned that Iraqis would not necessarily line up to cheer U.S. troops and that the Shiite clergy could be a problem. "The guys who tried to tell them that came to understand that this advice was not welcome," he said.

"The intelligence that our officials was given regarding W.M.D. was either defective or manipulated," Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico noted. Another senator is even more blunt and, sadly, exactly right: "Intelligence was manipulated."

The C.I.A. was terribly damaged when William Casey, its director in the Reagan era, manipulated intelligence to exaggerate the Soviet threat in Central America to whip up support for Ronald Reagan's policies. Now something is again rotten in the state of Spookdom.

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