

Another Slice of Yellowcake

By

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There is a line, attributed to Karen Blixen in the film adapted from her writings, “Out of Africa,” in which she is made to say that when things got so bad that they were insupportable, she managed to do something a little worse so that she could cope with what she already faced. Adapting this to the current situation, it seems to me that when the Bush administration’s deceptions over the events leading to the war in Iraq are so alarming that that we must be at the bottom of the barrel, something else crops up that is even worse. As I have tried to put together the story of “yellowcake,” each time I think the story must be complete, a new element emerges that makes it one notch more disturbing. The following is another, and I hope, the last “slice of yellowcake.”

I

Toward the end of 2001, a rumor was circulating in Niamey, Niger that Iraq had approached the government of Niger to buy 500 tons of uranium oxide, familiarly known as “yellowcake,” a raw material of which roughly 5 tons is sufficient to make one nuclear weapon.

Who started the rumor is not yet known. The most benign (and I think the most likely) explanation is the sort of gossip one hears among bored or frustrated journalists in bars. I imagine one of them saying, “guess what I heard from Joe Smith, one of the engineers out at the uranium mine...” Sheppard’s Hotel in Cairo, the Grande Bretagne in Athens, the Phoenicia in Beirut and a dozen other press hangouts generated legendary gossip of this kind. Compared to Cairo, Athens and Beirut, boredom in Niamey must have been luxuriant.

The rumor was picked up by officers at the U.S. Embassy, whose major work in that otherwise not very significant post was focused on the mining and distribution of uranium. They reported the rumor to Washington and commented that it was false.

Cables like the one the embassy in Niamey sent on this story flood into Washington by the score every day. When I was in the Policy Planning Council, I used to get a stack of them half a foot high each morning, and, just as I managed to peruse one stack, in would come another. That flow of information is the lifeblood of the American government. Not all cables were available to all officials; some were restricted to small groups. But, being at the top of the information pyramid, the staff of Vice President Dick Cheney would have received the cable or cables from the ambassador in Niger and presumably other messages from the CIA station there. Since the cable or cables squelched the rumor, it would have been natural for the staff to have dropped it or them into “secure” trash, the “burn bag,” but for some reason that did not happen. Apparently,

someone in Cheney's office decided there might be something worth pursuing in the story. What that was we can infer.

Cheney and his chief of staff, Lewis Libby, had for several years before the 2000 election brought them into government sought a justification for an attack on Iraq to destroy the Baath regime. We know this because they and other members of the neoconservative cabal wrote extensively about their efforts. Prominent among these efforts was the "Project for the New American Century," in which they, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and others of their group were active. It must have struck someone in Cheney's office that the rumor might be useful and should be checked out. Cheney asked the CIA to investigate.

For reasons that are not yet clear, the CIA decided to use a "cut out." Rather than entrusting the mission to investigate the rumor either to its "station" in Niger or sending out one of its own men from Washington, it picked a retired State Department official, Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson 4th, and sent him in February 2002 at government expense to Niger. He has described his mission in an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times*.¹ In his account, four things stand out:

1. He did not believe the transaction could have taken place; as he pointed out, for many years, uranium has been mined by an international consortium (composed of French, Spanish, Japanese, German and Nigerian interests). Members of the consortium are closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure that no dangerous materials are diverted to unauthorized parties;

2. Niamey is a small place where the mouth of everyone in the foreign community is almost literally next to the ear of everyone else; secrecy is almost impossible. And, since what each did outside agreed boundaries would have affected the interests of others, they all had strong reason to keep informed. Similarly, since the government was in the business of selling uranium through the consortium, any diversion would have required connivance of its senior officials and probably even Niger's president. "In short, there's simply too much oversight over too small an industry for a sale to have transpired."

3. Ambassador Wilson was not shown any documents and appears not to have known if any then existed; it appears that none then did. And,

4. When Wilson made his report in the first days of March 2002 to the CIA and the Department of State, he was sure that it reached the office of the Vice President which had arranged his mission. He confirmed that at least three written reports were then in circulation. They were U.S. Ambassador Barbro Owens-Kirkpatrick's report, a separate report by the political officers of the embassy and a CIA commentary on his debriefing. Since everyone knew that the Vice President had arranged his mission, these also must have reached his office. Wilson presumed, although he says he was not told, that the gist of his report was shared, as is customary, through the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) or other channel with the British government.

At that point, as he said, Wilson “thought the Niger matter was settled and went back to my [private] life.” Little could he have guessed that this was only the beginning.

We now know, although it was not revealed until this month, that Wilson’s was not the only “mission to Niger.” General Carlton W. Fulford, Jr., USMC, then deputy commander of the U.S. European Command, was also sent there around February 24, 2002 and “came away convinced the country’s [uranium] stocks were secure.” His report was made to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a report on it was sent by the U.S. Embassy in Niamey to the usual recipients in Washington.²

II

In March 2002, we enter a blank period. It could not, however, have been a dormant period. There must have been a number of other actions, as yet undisclosed, between March and October 2002. Some time during that period, forged documents, purporting to show a transaction in uranium between Niger and Iraq, emerged to lend a new dimension to the story.

Who produced these documents we do not yet know. What we do know is that on January 2, 2001, the apartment of a member of the embassy of Niger in Rome was broken into. Whoever entered the apartment was looking for something specific, not jewels, silver or money, but stationary. Apparently, what he or they got was not sufficient and on January 31, a second, more thorough job was done on the embassy. Again, although an inexpensive watch and two rings were taken, perhaps as a cover, it was evident that the purpose was documents.³ While this appeared to be a more or less routine police matter, the Italian government issued a statement that “the Italian secret service was not involved, but the rest [of the story] is a ‘secret of state.’”⁴

What the relationship of the two robberies in Rome was with the documents that later turned up in Washington and London is still obscure. The date of the robbery is also puzzling. If the two events are as related as they appear to be, the planning for the events extended over a very long time – from January 2001 to the fall of 2002 -- and indicates that someone or some organization had the means to identify and rob a source of papers in Europe on a sensitive issue in Iraq involving Africa for ultimate use in Britain and America. No mean feat.

But, despite exhibiting the skill and resources for this extensive range of activities, whoever prepared the documents did so crudely. The letterhead on one was obviously copied from another, presumably genuine paper; the signature on another had been forged; and the official confirmation on one was attributed to a former minister who had been out of office a decade.⁵ Such amateurishness almost certainly means that at least the preparation of the documents was not the work of sophisticated intelligence organizations. The CIA, the British MI6, the Russian intelligence service or the Israeli Mossad would have done a far better job.

But, the documents did exhibit more than a casual level of knowledge. To put it personally, I have followed African affairs for years, have read a great deal on Africa and was from time to time the Policy Planning Council Member responsible for Africa, but I certainly would not have known enough to have produced them without some research. Moreover, whoever went to the trouble of producing the documents must have been highly motivated. That motive was obviously not to make money; it could only have been political. These considerations make it unlikely that they were the work of some crank. So what is worth investigating, a priori, is what sort of quasi-intelligence organizations exist in the middle ground between the highly professional agencies and the crank.

We now know that during this period two new quasi-intelligence organizations were created. Both were small, were made up of amateurs who had limited experience and technical skills but were committed ideologues. And both, apparently, were given a fairly free hand. They were the “Office of Special Plans” in the U.S. Department of Defense, established by Paul Wolfowitz and headed by the neoconservative Abram Shulsky, and a comparable group, established in the office of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Both organizations were set up when their sponsors found that the regular intelligence agencies, the CIA and DIA (the Defense Intelligence Agency) in America and Mossad in Israel, did not substantiate the policies Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz and Sharon wished to pursue.

We don't yet know much about Sharon's group, but we know that prior to establishing Shulsky's intelligence “shop,” the Vice President, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other senior officials put “intense pressure” on officers in the CIA, the FBI and the Energy Department “to produce reports which back the administration's line. In response, some are complying, some are resisting and some are choosing to remain silent.”⁶ Specifically, we now know that Vice President Cheney repeatedly went to the CIA headquarters to meet with analysts “to demand a more ‘forward-leaning’ interpretation of the threat posed by Saddam. When he was not there to make his influence felt, his chief of staff, Lewis ‘Scooter’ Libby was. Such hand-on involvement in the processing of intelligence data was unprecedented for a vice-president in recent times, and it put pressure on CIA officials to come up with the appropriate results...Another frequent visitor was Newt Gingrich, the former Republican party leader who resurfaced after September 11 as a Pentagon ‘consultant’ and member of its unpaid defence advisory board...In that guise he visited [the CIA headquarters at] Langley three times in the run-up to war, and according to accounts, the political veteran sought to browbeat analysts into toughening up their assessments of Saddam's menace.”⁷

Despite the pressure, the response was unsatisfactory to the administration; so Wolfowitz established the “Office of Special Plans” and instructed Abram Shulsky to find a justification which neither the CIA nor the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) had provided for the attack on Iraq. Shulsky went to work with a passion. More remarkably, he not only gathered together an ideologically-driven group but a group composed of many members who were not employed by the government and so were not subject to Congressional oversight.⁸ They were, to use the old Navy expression, “loose cannons.”

And they had direct access to the White House, bypassing the other intelligence organizations.

Professional intelligence officers were outraged. As Vincent Cannistraro, the former head of the CIA's office of counter-intelligence, said, the "flow of intelligence to the top levels of the administration had been deliberately skewed by hawks at the Pentagon." There was, he said, "a lot of unhappiness about it in intelligence, especially among analysts at the CIA."⁹

Their unhappiness did not arise because a rival bureaucracy had been created. The "intelligence community" was already made up of several groups. Rather it was that what Shulsky was doing violated the fundamental rule of their profession -- that analysis of information must be kept separate from the formulation of policy if it is to be reliable.¹⁰ Serving American intelligence officers could say or do little because of secrecy laws, but retired officers began to make their views heard. A number of men with long experience who had reached the top of their profession formed an organization, "Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity"¹¹ to warn the president that he was getting bad advice. In time, they also took their worries to the press. One of them discussed his worries with Reporter Robert Dreyfuss.

Dreyfuss identified¹² his unnamed source only as a "leading US government expert on the Middle East." What this person told him was that the secret group in Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's office was collaborating with Shulsky's group in Wolfowitz's office at the Pentagon. Indeed, he said, so close was the collaboration that Sharon's team "prepared intelligence reports on Iraq in English (not Hebrew) and forwarded them to the Office of Special Plans." The Israeli group, he said, was as separate from Mossad as Shulsky's group was from the CIA.

Mossad, he said, which "prides itself on extreme professionalism," certainly would not have turned out incompetently forged documents whereas "This secretive unit...may well have been the source of the forged documents..."

This report is, of course, unsubstantiated, indeed short of a serious Congressional investigation with the authority to subpoena Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and/or Shulsky, cannot be substantiated. However, in default of other obvious sources for the documents, it is a reasonable candidate for investigation.

III

Once the documents existed, they had to be put into play. Here the story gets even more complicated and obscure. Early reports credited the Italian intelligence service with acquiring them and passing them to MI6 in London which then passed them to Washington.¹³ That story seems implausible since Italy was not a member of the

uranium consortium and is not notable for its intelligence activities. But the Italian connection, once announced, stuck in an amended form. An unnamed journalist was said¹⁴ to have passed them to the U.S. Embassy in Rome which, in turn, passed them to Washington.

The route the documents took mattered because later, in his State of the Union speech on January 28, 2003, the President maintained that the American government got the information on yellowcake (and believed it) because it came from the highly regarded British intelligence service. If the source was simply a packet of unauthenticated papers passed by an unnamed journalist to someone in the American embassy in Rome, it would have been perceived as even more dubious than it turned out to be. At the least, it would have demanded due diligence.

Lack of due diligence became an issue in the days just before October 7, 2002 when President Bush was scheduled to make a speech in Cincinnati, Ohio on the supposed Iraqi nuclear threat. The timing was crucial: the speech was on the eve of a congressional vote authorizing war, and the president needed a decisive argument for his position. The people writing his speech wanted to use the yellowcake story as evidence that Iraq had re-launched its drive to acquire nuclear weapons. It was to be the first of many “smoking guns” so avidly sought in the months before the war. But was the story solid?

No it was not solid. The analysts at the CIA refused to authenticate it. So, in one of his rare brave and decisive moves, CIA Director Tenet “successfully intervened with White House officials to have a reference to Iraq seeking uranium from Niger removed...Tenet argued personally to White House officials, including deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley, that the allegation should not be used...”¹⁵ In that speech it was not, but it was later in the State of the Union speech.

After the CIA alerted the White House that it retained a copy of the memorandum prepared for the meeting, officials at the White House “discovered” it and another memo outlining the CIA’s objections.¹⁶ As *The Washington Post* commented, “The disclosures punctured claims made by Rice and others in the past two weeks. Rice and other officials had asserted that nobody in the White House knew of CIA objections.” Senator Bob Graham (D.Fla) commented that the disclosure “raises sharp new questions as to who at the White House engaged in a coverup.” Meanwhile, at the White House, Hadley said “There is always the likelihood we will find additional information.”

Despite having been alerted to the CIA doubts on the story, the president, the vice president, the head of the National Security Council, the secretary of defense and other senior government officials kept up a steady drum beat on television, in the press and in speeches alleging active Iraqi pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The administration efforts began to pay off: by November 2002, a Gallup poll showed 59% of Americans in favor of invasion and only 35% against. In a *Los Angeles Times* poll in December, 90% of Americans thought Saddam was “currently developing

weapons of mass destruction” while an ABC/*Washington Post* poll showed 81% thought Iraq posed a threat to America.¹⁷

During the last months of 2002 and the first two months of 2003, the United Nations weapons inspectors (UNMOVIC) carried out more than 400 raids on more than 300 suspected Iraqi sites, according to UNMOVIC director Hans Blix. Blix also said, “We note that access to sites has so far been without problems.”¹⁸ Yet the American government repeatedly deprecated the efforts of UNMOVIC and asserted that the Iraqis had so thoroughly penetrated it that it was incapable of making effective inspections. Despite repeated pledges to cooperate fully, the U.S. government turned down request after request from the UN weapons inspectors for information that might enable them better to perform their assigned tasks.¹⁹ That critical period, the six weeks from December 2002 to early February 2003, was when the American government was trying to persuade both the UN Security Council and the American public to go to war.²⁰

IV

The most important action of the American government during this critical period was the President’s major address to the public, the traditional “State of the Union” speech, on January 28, 2003. In that speech, despite knowing that the Niger-Iraq yellowcake story was at best doubtful and probably spurious and had been removed from an earlier speech of his at the request of the CIA, the president made it the proof in his case against Saddam Hussein.²¹ What Mr. Bush said was that “the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” These were the famous 16 words that justified the American attack on Iraq.

The words were curiously vague. Why was the source of the uranium identified only as the continent of Africa? Why was the critical information attributed to the British? Few outside of government then knew enough to ask such questions. Now we can.

We know, as I have stated above, that the same allegation, tied more specifically to Niger, had been removed from the speech the president gave in Cincinnati on October 7. Then, the CIA director had intervened with the second most senior officer of the National Security Council, warning him that the information was at best shaky and more likely spurious. Had the CIA subsequently confirmed it? No, no one has asserted that. And why were the British used as the source?

On the same day in September 2002 that CIA Director George Tenet gave a classified briefing to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Iraqi nuclear weapons, the British government made public a dossier – now derided in Britain as the first of two “dodgy dossiers” -- containing much of the information Tenet had told the senators in secret.²² We do not know what Tenet said, but the British document alleged that “Iraq had sought to buy ‘significant quantities of uranium’ from an unnamed African country ‘despite having no active civil nuclear power programme that could require it.’”²³

The Prime Minister said that “This document is based, in large part, on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC)...Its work, like the material it analyses, is largely secret. It is unprecedented for the Government to publish this kind of document.” As one British newspaper pointed out immediately, “Although the action may be unprecedented, much of the information [the document contained] was freely available on the internet.”²⁴

The British government did not share the information on which its dossier was based with the IAEA “despite its obligations under the mandatory UN Security Council resolution 1441 to do so.” Despite an attempt, after the fact, to suggest that the British had so-far-unidentified alternative sources of information not available to the CIA, those “in the know” are convinced that the British got the only information they had from the CIA. And the CIA had urged them not to rely upon it.²⁵

The British Foreign Office has now admitted that this was true. Those “in the know” were right. The British Government completely reversed its story, no longer saying that it had “separate intelligence” but rather the opposite -- that “in the case of uranium from Niger, we did not have UK-originated intelligence...”

Astonishingly, even that admission did not stop the British government from repeating the yellowcake story. The former armed forces minister in the Labor government, Peter Kilfoyle, commented that “It beggars belief that the Prime Minister still thinks this information is reliable.”²⁶

If this sequence of events was not known in the White House, senior officials of the National Security Council must have been on vacation. So, again, why the British connection?

As Reporter Walter Pincus was told,²⁷ “The early drafts of the [State of the Union] speech did not include Britain as the source of the information [but] A senior [White House] official denied that Britain was inserted in the final draft because the CIA and others in the U.S. intelligence community were concerned that the charge could not be supported.” Then, in surely one of the weakest known examples of “spin,” the “senior official” went on to say that “The British addition was made only ‘because they were the first to say it publicly in their September paper...’” In short, what we did not ourselves believe to be true and what we had told the British was untrustworthy could be used by the President of the United States in a major briefing for the American public just because the British said it.

The United States then ordered the withdrawal of the UN inspectors in UNMOVIC.²⁸ War quickly followed. And in its aftermath, despite having set up special, highly- trained investigation units in the U.S. army, no weapons of mass destruction were found in some 14,000 “suspect” sites. As Lt. Gen. James Conway, USMC, said,²⁹ “We’ve been to virtually every ammunition supply point between the Kuwaiti border and Baghdad, but they’re simply not there. We were simply wrong. Whether or not we’re

wrong at the national level [i.e. at the White House and Pentagon], I think still very much remains to be seen.”

Although President Bush, in his speech aboard the USN Aircraft Carrier Abraham Lincoln on May 1 said, “We’ve begun the search for hidden chemical and biological weapons, and already know of hundreds of sites that will be investigated,” *The Washington Post* reported that the principal investigative unit in the American force in Iraq, “The 75th Exploitation Task Force,” had been unable to find any weapons during a seven-weeks search and, as the president asserted the contrary, was packing up to leave.³⁰

However much the administration deprecated UNMOVIC in public, behind the scenes it admitted that they were crucial. In the words of one Pentagon official, “Once the [UN] inspectors were gone, it was like losing your G.P.S. guidance. We were reduced to dead reckoning.”³¹

But that reading of the value of the UN came far too late to affect the course of events. Indeed, it is likely that the president and his hawkish crew did not want the UN to succeed. The UN chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, accused the United States and Britain of determining to make war “well in advance” – we now know from the documents that he was right -- and of “fabricating evidence against Iraq to justify their campaign.”³² He was not alone in this judgment: another former member of the intelligence “community” with access to all the documentation, Gregory Thielmann, who was in charge of studies on the spread of weapons of mass destruction in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department, told *Newsweek* that his bureau “had concluded the documents were ‘garbage’” He flatly accused the Bush administration of lying about the alleged Iraqi threat to America.³³

Finally, the U.S. government turned over the documents to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). When they were examined by experts, IAEA Director Mohammed El Baradei reported to the UN Security Council in March 2003, that “Based on thorough analysis, the IAEA has concluded, with the concurrence of outside experts, that these documents – which form the basis for the reports of recent uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger – and in fact not authentic.” To put it bluntly, they were forgeries. Then, a chorus of excuses poured forth.

V

When the story became a scandal, denial was the first line of defense. National Security adviser Condoleezza Rice commented on “Meet the Press:” “Maybe someone knew down in the bowels of the [Central Intelligence] agency, but no one in our circles knew that there were doubts and suspicions that this might be a forgery.” Apparently, Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, her principal deputy, who had been warned by CIA Director Tenet four months before, was not “in our circles.”

Next an attempt was made to find another source for the allegation. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said on July 15, that there was “evidence” that an Iraqi

businessman had met with Niger officials to “expand business contacts.” An official of the National Security Council elaborated (turning the businessman into a team), saying rather cutely that “Their contacts in Niger didn’t think that meant they wanted to open a McDonald’s. They interpreted it to mean they wanted more uranium.”³⁴ I can find no substantiation of this.

The president himself said that “the CIA’s doubts about the charge – that Iraq sought to buy ‘yellowcake’ uranium ore in Africa – were ‘subsequent’ to the January 28 State of the Union speech in which he made the allegation.”³⁵ This was untrue. As I have shown, they were made four months earlier.

Recognizing that the best defense is a good offense, Bush went on the attack, saying on July 14, 2003, “...the speeches I have given were backed by good intelligence. And I am absolutely convinced today, like I was convinced when I gave the speeches, that Saddam Hussein developed a program of weapons of mass destruction, and that our country [that is, he meant, he³⁶] made the right decision.”³⁷

Various other defenses were tried:

Impugn the messenger: White House spokesman Ari Fleischer called Ambassador Wilson’s report “vague” and remarked that it was easy to account for his report of Niger’s denial since, “Well, typically nations don’t admit to going around nuclear nonproliferation.”³⁸

Refuse to discuss it: When asked about the issue, the president “brushed aside questions about the accuracy of a piece of evidence he used to justify war with Iraq...”³⁹ And the Senate took essentially the same approach.⁴⁰ It defeated a move to establish a bipartisan panel to review the use of intelligence in the build-up to the war. Senator James M. Inhofe (R-Okla) vigorously denounced attempts to examine the issue, calling the request for an investigation “nothing but an absurd, media-driven, diversionary tactic.”⁴¹ Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kansas) said the request was “simply politics and for political gain...I will not allow the [Senate Select Intelligence] Committee to be politicised.”⁴²

Change the subject: various other Iraqi offenses were brought up to justify action. Included among them was that Iraq had created mobile germ warfare laboratories. On May 30, 2003 in an interview with Polish television, Mr. Bush referred to two trailers {“mobile germ warfare laboratories”) captured in Iraq and stated that the United States had “found the weapons of mass destruction” it had been seeking.⁴³ This story was later put out on the C.I.A. website. Then, in an almost unprecedented action, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the U.S. Department of State, contradicted the remark of the president (which was echoed by the Secretary of State) and pointed out a more likely use of the trailers.⁴⁴ Its analysis proved correct: they were found not to be involved in germ warfare.⁴⁵

Among other alleged threats were special aircraft designed to disperse biological warfare materials.⁴⁶ On October 7, 2002, President Bush shocked the nation with the news that “We have also discovered through intelligence that Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons across broad areas... We are concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles] for missions targeting the United States.” “UAV” sounded impressive but turned out to be only modified flight trainers with a maximum range of 300 hundred miles. As Admiral Stephen Baker (Rtd.), an expert on Iraqi weapons, said, “It doesn’t make any sense to me if he [the president] meant United States territory.” A range of three hundred miles would not even get the planes to the Mediterranean, much less across the Atlantic. As two reporters for *The New Republic* commented, “This claim represented the height of absurdity.”⁴⁷

And, once again: President Bush quoted an International Atomic Energy Agency study showing that Saddam Husain was within a few months of having a nuclear weapon. “I don’t know what more evidence we need,” he said. The only problem was that there was no such report.⁴⁸

Patriotism – wrap the administration in the flag: Senator Ted Stevens (R. Alaska) said, “This isn’t Watergate... This is an attempt to smear the president of the United States.”⁴⁹

Belittle the issue: White House Spokesman Ari Fleischer came out with one of the most memorable comments of the year. After all, he said, the mistake was just “one single sentence” in the State of the Union address. Taken more generally, in dealing with all the talk about Iraqi threats, in the words of another administration official, “We were not lying. But it was just a matter of emphasis.”⁵⁰

Restate the rules: In a revealing interview with *Vanity Fair*, Paul Wolfowitz indicated that all of this was really not very important because the emphasis on weapons of mass destruction in the build-up to the war was made mainly for “bureaucratic reason... because it was the one reason everyone could agree on.”⁵¹

We didn’t know: Neither President Bush nor his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice “entirely” read the National Intelligence Estimate, produced by the six major intelligence agencies of the U.S. government at the request of Congress. A senior administration official who briefed reporters at the White House on July 18, 2003, commented that “I don’t think he sat down over a long weekend and read every word of it... The president of the United States is not a fact-checker.”⁵²

[He not only was not a fact checker; he was not a reader either. A month after this essay was disseminated, President Bush told Fox News interviewer Brit Hume (on Monday, September 22), that “From Day One” of his presidency, “I glance at the headlines just to kind of a flavor for what’s moving. I rarely read the stories, and get briefed by people who are probably read the news themselves. (exact quote).]

Blame someone else: Ms. Rice and others then pointed their fingers at CIA Director Tenet, who unbelievably said that he “never read the draft of the State of the Union speech that the White House sent him...”⁵³ (The administration obviously is not heavy with readers.) Ms. Rice told reporters on the president’s airplane as he flew to Uganda that “The C.I.A. cleared the speech in its entirety.”⁵⁴ And, if Tenet had any doubts about the speech, “he did not make them known.”⁵⁵

How about scorn? In a rare press conference at the Pentagon, the undersecretary of defense for policy, Douglas Feith, himself a leading neoconservative, referred to charges against the use of intelligence as a “goulash of inaccuracies” and “almost comical” critical reports.⁵⁶

The lawyer’s gambit: When scorn fell flat, as James Risen reported,⁵⁷ “Senior Bush administration officials today [July 14, 2003] adjusted their defense of President Bush’s claim in his State of the Union that Iraq tried to buy uranium from Africa, insisting that the phrasing [of the 16 words] was accurate even if some of the underlying evidence was unsubstantiated...[Meanwhile] Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said in separate appearances on Sunday television talk programs that the disputed sentence in Mr. Bush’s January speech was carefully hedged...”

“Carefully hedged!” For such a momentous result -- a war in which about 200 Americans would be killed, a thousand or more wounded, perhaps \$100 billion worth of damage done and tens of thousands of Iraqis killed -- is it proper, moral or even legal for the chief executive of the United States to skate along the sharp edge of deception of the public by “carefully hedging” the actual words that give a false impression?

In a remarkable statement which I imagine his lawyer would have advised him not to make, White House official Dan Bartlett unconsciously made a telling comment on the standards of truth in the White House: “We wouldn’t lead with something that we thought could be refuted.”⁵⁸

So, CIA Director Tenet on July 11, 2003 “was forced to take the blame for his agency’s failure properly to warn the White House that the claims about Niger were ‘highly dubious.’”⁵⁹ Or, as my friends in Chicago would have put it, he “took the dive.” (But, canny bureaucrat that he is, Tenet had already arranged that the CIA begin an internal review of the question.⁶⁰ If he went down with the ship, he would be sure that he was not alone.)

Tenet’s assumption of personal responsibility, carefully hedged as it was, was, as most people in Washington admitted, an honorable if not entirely voluntary gesture to attempt to get the president off the hot seat. Not all agreed. The Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Pat Roberts (R, Kansas), immediately questioned Mr. Tenet’s loyalty.⁶¹

Distance yourself from the charge: Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said he did not mention the alleged Iraq-Niger uranium deal in his now famous presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003 because he “‘did not think it was strong enough’ -- in fact he referred to it as “‘bullshit” -- even though President George Bush included it in his State of the Union address just a week before.”⁶²

As Maureen Dowd, in one of her pithy columns, wrote the White House has been turned into a “Waffle House.” She went on to compare Bush with Clinton: “Dissembling over peccadilloes is pathetic. Dissembling over pre-emptive strikes is pathological, given over 200 Americans dead and 1,000 wounded in Iraq, and untold numbers of dead Iraqis.”⁶³

On a more somber note, Paul Krugman put it bluntly:⁶⁴ “misrepresentation and deception are standard operating procedure for this administration, which – to an extent never before seen in U.S. history – systematically and brazenly distorts the facts.”

That is not the worst: the worst is that the public doesn’t seem to care. As Ellen Goodman remarked, “the real shame is not that we were conned but that, so far, we don’t mind.”⁶⁵ And we don’t choose to inform ourselves so we can perform our duties as citizens: that, in terms of the preservation of our republic is the civic equivalent of shirking military duty. As Ms. Goodman continued, the most recent *Washington Post-ABC* poll showed that an astonishing 24% of Americans even thought that the Iraqis had used chemical and biological weapons against American troops in the 2003 war and another 14% weren’t sure. They were totally misinformed or uninformed.

VI

What more could Karen Blixen have found to make all this worse? My late friend and dinner companion Graham Greene to the rescue! In “Greenland,” there is always something worse. In his novel, *The Human Factor*, after letting us learn that in the secret office of British intelligence, there was real espionage, he lets us find out that the wrong man pays the ultimate price for it. MI6 disposes of one of its own -- the wrong one of its own. So, finally, in an ending of which Graham would have approved, a highly respected British scientist, Dr. David Kelly, a “whistleblower” who sought to stop the slide into mendacity of his government, turned up dead on July 18, 2003.⁶⁶

As Greene ended his novel, then “the line went dead.”

© William R. Polk, July 20, 2003.

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POSTSCRIPT: My hope that this essay would recount the final "slice of the yellowcake scandal" was disappointed. Not only did the most senior officials of the American government keep repeating allegations that they must have known were incorrect, but some members of the White House staff "leaked" information that must have been intended either to discredit Ambassador Wilson, avenge the administration on him or divert the attention of the press from the essence of his report. The leak was made to the columnist Robert D. Novak apparently by one or several White House staff members. What Novak was told was that the wife of Ambassador Wilson, Ms. Valerie Plame, was a clandestine CIA officer and that she had arranged her husband's appointment. Revealing her name is a felony and an act of a kind described by President George H.W. Bush as a heinous form of treason. Presidential advisor Karl Rove, to the contrary, called Ms. Plame "fair game." Demands for an impartial inquiry have so far (October 23, 2003) been thwarted by Attorney John Ashcroft. Articles on these issues include: Walter Pincus and Mike Allen, "Probe Focuses on Month Before Leak to Reporters," *The Washington Post*, October 12; Dana Milbank, "Novak Leak Column Has Familiar Sound," *The Washington Post*, October 7; and Walter Pincus, "Bush Team Kept Airing Iraq Allegation," *The Washington Post*, August 8.

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