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The Bush Administration Owes the Public A Complete Accounting about Its Use of Intelligence on Iraq
By **REP. HENRY A. WAXMAN**

Tuesday, Aug. 19, 2003

Controversy is growing over President Bush's use of forged evidence in his State of the Union address. Indeed, the issue is fast becoming a whodunit. Who inserted the fabricated claim that Iraq was seeking uranium from an African country into the statements of the President and other Administration officials?

Currently, the White House is saying a speechwriter, not the butler, did it. But even a quick look at the record reveals that's just another fiction. With potentially grave national security implications at stake, it's essential we find out what really happened.

To rebuild the trust that has been lost, we need open congressional hearings and an independent commission to investigate.

Key Questions Remain Unanswered

I've been investigating the Niger hoax since March. From the beginning, I have asked whether this was a failure of our intelligence experts, or a knowing manipulation of intelligence by the White House. With each new revelation, it becomes more likely this is a case of deception, not incompetence.

The most recent revelation is this: National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's top deputy, Stephen Hadley, received written warnings about the Niger hoax from the CIA last October, but supposedly forgot that he had ever read them. This new admission contradicts several months' worth of White House statements.

The Idea That the Perpetrator Was a Speechwriter Is Not Plausible

As noted above, the current White House explanation is that a speechwriter was responsible. But that's not plausible.

Rather, the evidence reveals that, during the six crucial months between September 2002 and March 2003, there was a concerted campaign to promote the unsubstantiated uranium claim.

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The campaign began on September 24, 2002, when the White House officially embraced the British dossier asserting that Iraq sought uranium from Africa. In December, the State Department used the evidence as a cornerstone of the U.S. response to Iraq's arms declaration, stating in a widely publicized "fact sheet" that the Iraqi declaration "ignores efforts to procure uranium from Niger."

Then, in January 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz reiterated the claim. Indeed, in a January 23 *New York Times* op-ed, Ms. Rice cited it as the leading example of Iraqi duplicity.

Then, Mr. Hadley himself used the claim in a February 16, 2003 op-ed in the *Chicago Tribune*. As late as February 20 - just two weeks before U.N. inspectors revealed the evidence to be a fraud - U.S. officials continued to use it.

Clearly, this wasn't the work of a single speechwriter. Nor was it the work of CIA Director George Tenet, who repeatedly tried to debunk the uranium claim. So who was responsible? And how high does this reach into the upper atmosphere of the White House?

A Failure of Candor After the Forgery Was Disclosed

Events since March 7, when the International Atomic Energy Agency disclosed the forgery, have also been extremely disturbing.

It's apparent now that the White House has not been candid about what it knew about the Niger claim. For months, a wide cast of senior officials - including Ari Fleischer, Ms. Rice, and the President himself - have professed that no one in White House was told about the CIA's doubts. Given the latest developments, that explanation is demonstrably false.

There would seem to be just two remaining options: either there was a knowing attempt to mislead the public or there was a stupefying level of incompetence.

Ms. Rice has the most immediate questions to answer. On national television, she has repeatedly claimed that "no one in our circles knew," that "the intelligence community did not know at levels that got to us," and that if anyone knew "in the bowels" of the CIA, they never told the White House. She also said, "Had there been even a peep that the agency did not want that sentence in . . . it would have been gone."

We know now that what Ms. Rice has been saying is not true. Her deputy, Mr. Hadley, was called personally by the CIA Director, in an effort to discourage the President from using the uranium claim in an October speech. And multiple memos from the CIA to the White House - including one addressed to Ms. Rice herself - warned about the "weakness in the evidence."

What we don't know is why Ms. Rice said what she did. It would be astounding if she failed to investigate (or even to consult her own deputy). But the other choice is that she intended to deceive. Either way, it is difficult to understand how she can be expected to retain the

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trust of the public and the President.

President Bush also needs to be held accountable. We don't know what he knew before the State of the Union. But we do know that last month, he claimed that the CIA raised doubts about the uranium claim "subsequent to the speech." This assertion is just as false as the statements by Ms. Rice.

The Urgent Need For Hearings, and An Independent Commission

Our international credibility is at stake in this controversy, and blaming the speechwriter won't restore it. When we make decisions that put the lives of American soldiers at risk, we need to be absolutely sure that the threats are real and the integrity of the intelligence process is intact.

Again, only Congressional hearings, and an independent commission, can work to restore trust. Two questions must be answered: Who was behind the repeated efforts to insert the fabricated claim into the President's, and other Administration officials' statements? And why have Administration officials made contradictory and incomplete statements about what they knew, during the period since the fabrications were revealed?

If we do not address these questions, our failure will have serious repercussions for trust in our government, both domestically and internationally.

What Do You Think? Message Boards

Congressman Henry A. Waxman has represented the Los Angeles area of California since 1974. He is the Ranking Minority Member on the House Committee on Government Reform and a member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.



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