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The case to invade Iraq on March 19, 2003 was based on an NIE that was prepared not to determine the truth, but rather to “justify” preemptive war, when there was nothing to preempt.

A *New York Times Magazine* [article](#) in July 2020 focused on then Secretary of State Powell and his U.N. speech of Feb. 5, 2003 and the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) upon which it is largely based. A lot of the detail in the article may have been new to many readers, but not to Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which had been established a month before.

[VIPS](#)

watched the speech, dissected it, and sent their

[verdict](#)

to President George W. Bush before close of business that same afternoon

We gave Powell a charitable grade of “C”, faulting him for, *inter alia*, not providing needed context and perspective. We should have flunked him outright.

Robert Draper’s article describes how, despite C.I.A.’s strong effort to please, the “case” the agency made for war on Iraq, using such evidence as there was on weapons of mass destruction, was deemed not alarmist enough for Vice President Dick Cheney and other administration hawks.

Specifically, the hawks were dissatisfied with the evidence-light, but-alarmist (term of art used was “leaning forward”) Pentagon and White House briefings by C.I.A. Deputy Director John McLaughlin in late Dec. 2002 on WMD in Iraq. The hawks started to look elsewhere, since not all senior officials (including Powell) appeared to be “with the program.”

Draper reports that Powell ordered Carl Ford, director of the widely respected State Department Intelligence Unit (INR), to review the bidding regarding biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Ford's analysts strongly disputed many of the key assertions from the usual suspects — particularly those coming from non-intelligence, war-friendly bureaucrats enlisted to support the war-lust proclivities of Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Powell's chief of staff, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, was also spending an inordinate amount of time batting away unsourced and dubious-sourced assertions from Cheneyites, so Powell finally told Wilkerson to start drafting from scratch.

Here's where it gets interesting; here is where a little history and inside-baseball intelligence experience comes in handy. Draper quotes Powell: "It was George Tenet who came to the rescue."

C.I.A. Director Tenet suggested basing a new draft on the National Intelligence Estimate of Oct. 1, 2002, ["Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction."](#) That had immense appeal to Tenet and others who had been co-opted into "leaning forward" to facilitate a Bush/Cheney war on Iraq. Indeed, one can assume it had appeal to most of those involved in Powell's speech preparation, given that the Security Council briefing was but a handful of days away.

I have been referring to that NIE, advisedly, as The Whore of Babylon, wrong on every major accusation about WMD in Iraq. I speak from experience at the C.I.A. as a former chair of National Intelligence Estimates. This one was prepared not to determine the truth, but rather to "justify" a preemptive war on Iraq, where there was nothing to preempt.

To their credit, State/INR analysts had expressed formal dissent from some of its main conclusions back in September 2002.

No, it is not possible that Powell could have been unaware of that. And it is not difficult to explain why Powell chose to spurn his own intelligence analysts, despite their relatively solid reputation. I will resist the temptation to guess at Powell's motivation, even though I have had some considerable experience with him. Back in the day, we used to spend a few minutes comparing notes before my one-on-one morning briefings of his boss, Defense Secretary

Casper Weinberger, with *The President's Daily Brief*.

I am not surprised, though, as Draper quotes Powell explaining his decision to stay in place as secretary of state and to do what he was told: “I knew I didn’t have any choice. He’s the President.” Draper adds that, “although Powell would not admit it, Bush’s request that he be the one to make the case against Hussein to the U.N. was enormously flattering. Cheney took a more direct approach: ‘The Vice President said to me: “You’re the most popular man in America. Do something with that popularity.’”

The All-Purpose NIE on Iraqi WMD



Tenet on left with Powell and U.N. ambassador John Negroponte at Security Council, Feb. 5, 2003. (Wikimedia)

Draper describes INR’s Director Ford as “heartsick” watching Powell on TV before the U.N. Security Council. Ford’s chagrin was widely shared among serious intelligence analysts — as well as by us alumni watching the prostitution of what had been our tell-it-like-it-is intelligence analysis profession. But there the National Intelligence Estimate was for plucking — an intelligence community-endorsed consensus already “on the books” — and with drafting time

running out.

Admittedly, this would be a far cry from starting “from scratch.” Rather, it became a case of “garbage in, garbage out.” Draper names the intelligence garbagemen: C.I.A. Director Tenet, his deputy McLaughlin, the chair of the NIE Robert Walpole, for example. They were out and out guilty of fixing the NIE in the first place and then its derivative that Powell briefed in open session to Security Council. No, these were not innocent mistakes. The intelligence was fraudulent from the get-go.

I am not making this up. Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity were able to see what was coming, and warned Bush on the afternoon of Powell’s speech to be wary of “those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.” VIPS followed up with two more [Memos](#) before the March 2003 U.S./UK attack on Iraq.

The leaked Downing Street Minutes, published by *The Times* of London on May 1, 2005, provided the “smoking gun.” The minutes, from a July 23, 2002 briefing of Prime Minister Tony Blair by the chief of British intelligence, just back from consultations with Tenet in Langley, showed that the White House had already decided to attack Iraq for regime change and that the *“intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy”*.
[Emphasis added.]

This and additional detail is covered in a [chapter](#) I wrote in 2005, for the book *Neo-CONNED Again!*, which I titled “Sham Dunk: Cooking Intelligence for the President.”

Sadly, not one of the many intelligence functionaries aware of what was going on went to the media or resigned. In contrast, before the attack on Iraq, three senior Foreign Service Officers, looking on from Athens, Ulaanbaatar, and Washington, summarily quit on principle — so clear had it become that the U.S. was embarked on a so-called “war of choice.”

“War of choice” is more formally known as “war of aggression” — defined at the post WWII Nuremberg Tribunal as “the supreme international crime differing from other war crimes only in

that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” (Think torture, for example, as part of that accumulation.)

Equally sad, none of the perpetrators of the crime have been held to account for this crime, nor even for torture and other accumulated evils. No one held to account. Col. Pat Lang and I addressed this issue in an [op-ed](#) in 2007; we argued that the U.S. could ill afford letting the Iraq War-liars off lightly, even if that meant taking a hard look back over previous years.

What is the inevitable result when no one is held to account?

Putting a coda on all this several years later, the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee announced on June 5, 2008 the bipartisan conclusions of a [five-year study](#) by his committee that the attack on Iraq was launched “under false pretenses.” He described the intelligence conjured up to “justify” war on Iraq as “uncorroborated, contradicted, or even non-existent.”

“Non-existent” intelligence?

Finally, for those who may continue to believe that Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice (of “mushroom cloud” fame”), for example, were mistaken, rather than lying about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, let me suggest watching this very short video.

Then, please ask yourself if Iraq could go from zero weapons of mass destruction before 9/11 to a formidable array of WMD a short year later.

NIEs: a Big Deal

Ever since the C.I.A. was established, the NIE has been the supreme genre of intelligence analysis and has included input from other intelligence agencies — in recent years, 17 of them. The NIE's record for accuracy is spotty. One completed in September 1962, for example, said the Soviets would never try to put missiles in Cuba, as the missiles were en route.

A thoroughly professional one on Iran in 2007, managed by a former director of State/INR, concluded unanimously “with high confidence” that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear weapon in late 2003. That one demonstrably played a huge role in thwarting Cheney/Bush planning for a strike on Iran in 2008, their last year in office. (Bush actually [says as much](#) in the part of his memoir that he wrote himself.)

It would be a mistake, however, to put the “Whore of Babylon” NIE of Oct. 1, 2002 about all those Iraqi WMD in the category of the unfortunate 1962 Estimate on Cuba. The conclusions in the Iraq Estimate were not mistaken, they were fraudulent. The conclusions were fixed to “justify” an unprovoked attack on Iraq.

Here's what happened and why it is relevant today. Throughout 2002, Tenet, who as director of Central Intelligence was in charge of the entire intelligence community as well as the C.I.A., had been deftly avoiding doing an Estimate on WMD in Iraq because he knew the evidence was paper-thin. As the public campaign to justify an attack on Iraq heated up in September 2002, the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Bob Graham (D-FL) asked Tenet to please prepare such an Estimate. The answer came back: Can't do; too busy.

Under pressure from Committee member Dick Durbin (D-IL) Graham called Tenet back and told him, in essence: No NIE, no vote to authorize war.

After informing the White House, Tenet got permission to go ahead and have an NIE prepared — with two conditions. It had to conform with the extreme accusations about Iraqi WMD that Cheney made during a speech at a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Nashville on Aug. 26, 2002; and the NIE had to be formally issued before the first week of October when the White House wanted a House and Senate vote to give Bush permission to make war.

No problem for Tenet, who found himself the ultimate beneficiary of former C.I.A. Director Robert Gates' finely tuned Geiger counter for careerists and corruptibility in selecting top

managers. The malleable managers promoted originally by Gates were happy to conjure up in record time a formal estimate written to the specifications of their frequent visitor: Vice President Cheney. This is the NIE on Iraq's weapons capability that Draper describes as having "been thrown together in less than three weeks" in September 2002.

Corrupt Holdovers: 'So Eager to Help'

James Clapper, whom President Barack Obama appointed director of National Intelligence overseeing the entire intelligence community, was in charge of satellite imagery analysis at the time, leading up to the attack on Iraq. Did he tell anyone that no WMD had been discovered in imagery — the primary source for such intelligence? Well, no. Rather, he was "[leaning forward](#)."

At the Carnegie Foundation in November 2018, Clapper was hawking his memoir *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths From a Life in Intelligence*.

In the book Clapper places the blame for the consequential fraud (he calls it "the failure") to find the (non-existent) WMD, in his words, "where it belongs — squarely on the shoulders of the administration members who were pushing a narrative of a rogue WMD program in Iraq and *on the intelligence officers, including me, who were so eager to help that we found what wasn't really there.*"

(Emphasis added) .

Clapper explained:

"... we heard that Vice President Cheney was pushing the Pentagon for intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and then the order came down [to Clapper as director of NIMA, the National Imagery and Mapping Agency] to *find* the WMD sites. We set to work, analyzing imagery to eventually identify, with varying degrees of confidence, more than 950 sites where we assessed there might be WMDs or a WMD connection. We drew on all of NIMA's skill sets ... and it was all wrong."

During the Q and A I [commented](#) on Clapper's eagerness to please whatever superiors he was working for at the time, and give them the information they lusted for to "justify" things like

war — to the point of finding “what wasn’t really there.”?

[Read more here.](#)