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The CIA and WMDs: The Damning Evidence

by Fulton Armstrong, reply by Thomas Powers

IN RESPONSE TO:
How They Got Their Bloody Way from the May 27, 2010 issue

The following letter, by a former US intelligence officer, was sent in response to Thomas Powers's review of Robert Jervis's Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War in the May 27 issue.

To the Editors:

Mr. Jervis's exoneration of the Bush administration for cooking the intelligence on Iraq's nonexistent WMDs—by blaming the intelligence community alone for the failure—is understandable. Jervis wasn't in the kitchen and, perhaps, doesn't know the pressure analysts feel when a vice-president and cabinet members ask the same question over and over—signaling "try again, try again." Nor, perhaps, does he know the power of an administration's flattery.

I was a member of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), as national intelligence officer (NIO) for Latin America, from 2000 to 2004. The NIC is the intelligence community's senior analytical group responsible for preparing National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), including the Iraq WMD NIE. At the time, it reported to the director of the CIA, George Tenet, in his "intelligence community hat" and was located at CIA headquarters. Although the NIC is an interagency body, the CIA has always dominated its staff and work.

The first congressional briefing I ever took part in as an NIO, along with my colleagues, included discussion of WMDs, and it started with fifteen minutes of paeans of praise by Jesse Helms, and other Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for our intelligence work. Several of the NIOs were praised for having embraced the findings of the Rumsfeld Commission, which pressed upon the Clinton administration a hyped analysis of the missile threat (and rationale for an accelerated "missile defense strategy"). The NIOs clearly knew what was going on in that room. Intelligence officers are all trained to remind the recipients of their reports that they are never to take sides in a policy debate. These NIOs, however, said nothing and were clearly happy with the praise by the Republican committee members.

The National Intelligence Estimate produced by these NIOs on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, with the participation of the CIA and other intelligence agencies, was not subjected to the customary "peer review" of the National Intelligence Council because, after delaying the project for months, the NIOs didn't have a spare hour for the discussion and debate that the council's review would have provided. But we knew what they were up to. During our closed-door council meetings, they would eagerly report their progress in dividing the fifteen coordinating agencies that had contributed to the NIE. They boasted how, after an obviously extensive search, they finally found an Energy Department employee willing to contradict his agency's consensus position that Iraq's missile tubes were not, as the administration and the NIOs asserted,

centrifuge tubes.

The NIOs who were preparing the NIE also boasted how they found an Air Force analyst to dissent from his service's position that Iraq's little unmanned surveillance planes could not be armed. They were happy that challenges to their and the administration's assumptions about Iraq's chemical weapons and biological weapons capabilities were minimal; after all, who's going to try to prove a negative?

The most back-patting, however, was reserved for their success in forcing the State Department's intelligence shop, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), to take a "footnote"—a dissent at the bottom of the page—on a lesser judgment in the paper rather than on the overarching judgment that Saddam Hussein had WMDs. One of the NIOs smiled when he reported that INR couldn't prove that Saddam did not have WMDs and that no one wanted to be seen as defending Saddam anyway. That was exactly the Bush administration's political strategy as well. Instead of allowing INR to develop an alternative analysis in the main text of the NIE—the proper form for a different view when the information is so obviously weak—the NIOs humiliated the only agency at the table, the State Department's INR, that dared to question the administration's preordained conclusions.

When we on the National Intelligence Council finally got a full read of the National Intelligence Estimate on WMDs, after its publication, a couple of us expressed grave reservations about the fatally weak evidence and the obsessively one-sided interpretation of what shreds of information it contained. (We were not told at the time that "Curveball" was a solitary source of obviously questionable credentials, nor that contradictory evidence was actually suppressed from the intelligence collection and dissemination process.) One colleague said it was clearly a paper written to provide a rationale for a predetermined policy decision to go to war. When I challenged the lack of evidence and the lack of alternative explanations, including forcing the questions raised by the INR into a lowly footnote, one of the WMD-promoting NIOs leaned forward and bellowed: "Who are you to question this paper? Even *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* agree with us." The irony was complete: previously respected reporters, spoon-fed by Bush administration officials, were now being used to provide cover for the NIOs' similar compromise in accepting the administration's view.

The National Intelligence Council and director of central intelligence, George Tenet, gave the NIOs concerned with WMDs big cash awards for producing the NIE, and seven years later and seventeen months into the Obama administration they remain in the same or equivalent jobs. The Bush administration left office, and its defenders still claim that the errors in the WMD debacle were innocent, just as the hyperventilation about "yellowcake" from Niger in a State of the Union address—cleared by a careerist in a CIA line office who worked closely with the administration and the NIC on WMD issues—was said to be innocent. Intelligence community spokesmen are rolled out to deny allegations of politicization, even though at least one of them, a former analyst who threatened to resign several times because of political pressures when he was working on Cuba, has witnessed it close up and paid a short-term career price for resisting it.

Covering up or ignoring the problem of politicization won't make it go away. US intelligence will continue to fail again and again until we resolve it.

Fulton Armstrong
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Thomas Powers *replies*:

Fulton Armstrong's important letter states as fact something Americans have been resisting for sixty years—that presidents tell the CIA not only what to do, but what to say. By Americans I do not mean only ordinary citizens puzzling over intelligence flaps every few years, but observers thought to be sophisticated, like professors, senators of long experience, foreign policy professionals, and reporters for serious newspapers. Armstrong describes the reality about as

plainly as I have ever seen it done in his letter explaining the source of error in the CIA's insistently wrong estimate of the progress of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its purported effort to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Armstrong's letter is in reply to the many-layered, nuanced, and above all forgiving analysis of that error by Robert Jervis, a professor of international politics at Columbia University. Jervis's case was made initially in a new book, *Why Intelligence Fails*, and then clarified in a letter to *The New York Review*, responding to my review of his book. In the beginning, Jervis says, he guessed that the agency's misreading was probably the result of pressure from the White House to pump up the Iraqi "threat" as a way of justifying war. But Jervis found no intelligence insider who would flatly tell him that was what happened. Later, he identified so many interesting complexities in the evidence that he was compelled to dismiss White House pressure as too simple an answer, leading him to conclude in the end that the error was honest. It goes without saying that this was the answer the White House and the CIA had both been maintaining all along—we did our best, nobody's perfect, everybody made the same mistake. We might call this the aw-shucks, gosh-darn explanation of weirdly wrong intelligence estimates.

Armstrong is having none of it. With polite good humor he forgives Jervis for making a naive mistake typical of outsiders but puts first things first—not the limitations of evidence but the naked fact of unambiguous White House intent. When a vice-president visits the CIA eight times to express his views, as Cheney did in the run-up to the Iraq war, he's not struggling with the higher geometry of intelligence analysis but turning up the heat in the kitchen. Cheney knew it and the agency analysts knew it. This is fundamental. If you can't get this right you can't get anything right.

Armstrong deals with the point in a sentence but it ought to be emphasized that a great deal more than a sentence supports this interpretation of what was going on. The literature on the history of the origins of the Iraq war is filled with instances of White House and Defense Department efforts to press their views on analysts, and in each instance the motive is the same—policymakers know what they want, and they are making sure the CIA knows what they want, and they are not going to let it alone until they get what they want.

As a former official of the CIA, Armstrong was required to submit his letter to the agency for clearance before publication, which was done. What Armstrong can say in this instance is thus limited to the text of his letter, as cleared. But other sources easily found on the Web make it clear that he has had an active career. Some years back he was identified during a Senate hearing as a CIA officer specializing in Latin America; more recently he has been identified in the press as a staff member of a Senate committee. He is fluent in both Spanish and Chinese, and worked for several years in Taiwan. Beginning in 2000 Armstrong was the CIA's national intelligence officer (NIO) for Latin America, and as such was a member of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), which writes official intelligence estimates, a process frequently more protracted, contentious, and laborious than might be suggested by the simple word "writes." But it ought to be remembered here that the special 2002 NIE on Iraqi WMDs was hastily written at the last minute when President Bush was pressing Congress for authority to go to war. Under usual circumstances Armstrong and other members of the NIC would have debated every detail of the estimate, a process sure to have highlighted the thinness and the fragility of the evidence, such as it was. In 2002, so far as we know, the NIC had no opportunity to weigh in on the final language before the estimate was published.

But Armstrong and other members of the NIC caught the drift easily enough, as he makes evident. It is not the details of the arguments over WMDs that explain what was happening but the tone of the office chatter as the various NIOs cobbled the estimate together. They were unmistakably delighted with their success in finding someone—indeed, anyone—to back scary claims that Saddam's Iraq was building unmanned aerial vehicles that could deliver chemical and biological agents, and that aluminum tubes purchased by Iraq were intended for use in centrifuges to separate fissionable uranium. Self-congratulation reached its apex when they

convinced the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) to limit its doubts about Iraqi WMDs to a "footnote," rather than insisting on incorporating a substantive dissent into the text of the estimate. Armstrong was present in the NIC office; he heard the NIOs on weapons matters crowing about their success; he knew they were hammering out the estimate they needed to help the White House justify war.

On paper the National Intelligence Council is a company of equals, including the different intelligence agencies of the US goverment; in reality in 2002 it was run by the CIA, and its paper was signed by the agency's director, George Tenet, who worked directly for the President. The estimate Tenet signed was tortured in argument and thinly supported by evidence, but it was just what the doctor ordered—an ominous piece of paper that few members of Congress were prepared to question. Armstrong's letter is only the most recent evidence that what went into the estimate was not left to chance.

The world of intelligence analysis is arcane, with its own vocabulary, body language, pecking order, and secret history. Few outside that world can readily understand what was signaled by the INR's agreement to accept a footnote, but all involved in the process knew that the State Department analysts had been given their marching orders, and backed out of the room in misery with heads hanging low. Who had the authority to tell them to cave? Armstrong does not pursue this awkward point, but there can be only one answer—it was the man who laid out the intelligence case before the UN a few months later, the secretary of state, Colin Powell. Was Powell second-guessing his experts, or bowing to higher authority? And what about the higher authority? What is the proper response to a president who has conspired to launch an unjustified and therefore illegal war against another country? The more clearly the matter is stated, the more troubling are its implications.

It is my guess that Armstrong must have thought long about the American way of doing intelligence, but his letter halts with "the problem of politicization." Tenet, like other CIA directors, always insisted that the agency "calls them as they see them"—a formulation that suggests it is the agency's duty to resist pressure, and that the agency is to blame when it caves. But this way of putting the matter ignores the power of presidents. Why are sophisticated observers—Robert Jervis is a good example, but far from alone—so reluctant to reach the obvious conclusion, that presidents who know what they want will turn up the heat until they get what they want?

Simple realism suggests the answer. Somebody got the Iraqi WMDs equation completely wrong and plunged the United States into a seven-year war, not over yet. But who shall we blame—intelligence analysts or the President? Consider the fighting weight of the two candidates: on the one hand is the bundle of organizations referred to as "the intelligence community"—many thousands of anonymous civil servants barred by law from telling what they know, and who, if fired, may have nowhere to take their skills. On the other hand is the president, champion and hero of roughly half the American population, given the benefit of the doubt by nearly all, backed by a national political party, with the immense publicity-generating apparatus of the White House under his immediate control. The one is usually innocent but defenseless. The other is deeply culpable but dangerous to challenge.

How dangerous? Reflect on Watergate for a moment. It is no longer a secret how the Bush White House pushed, cajoled, bullied, and deceived the United States into war with Iraq. But which leading national figure is pressing for a national commission with power of subpoena to dig out the facts and establish what happened and why? None that I can see. It's easier and safer to conclude that the anonymous analysts just got it wrong.