

[Return to: Opinions](#)

'Fixing' Iran Intelligence

John Prados**August 25, 2006**

*John Prados is a senior fellow with the [National Security Archive](#) in Washington. His forthcoming book is *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Ivan Dee Publisher).*

More and more it appears that the pattern of manipulation and misuse of intelligence that served the Bush administration in the drive to start a war with Iraq is being repeated today for its neighbor Iran.

Recently we reported on *TomPaine.com* one facet of the repetition—that Congress, not the president, has had to ask for National Intelligence Estimates that would shed light on a key foreign policy issue on the front burner in the Bush White House. The demand described there pertained to Iraq, but Congress has also pressed for an NIE on Iran, where many worry that the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which denies it, is secretly conducting a nuclear weapons development program.

Now that the Senate has called for the NIE, the first marker has gone down, in the form of a report released this week by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence chairman Peter Hoekstra. Disguised as a technical review of “gaps” in knowledge, the report tosses together speculations on the array of Iranian enrichment facilities, charges of its deceptions on these programs, notes on Iran’s missile development efforts with extraneous material—indications of an Iranian role in the Iraqi mess plus charges against Tehran on terrorism and support of Hezbollah in Lebanon—to conclude that “Iran is a serious security threat.”

Let’s take a moment to recall the Iraq prewar intelligence manipulation. The Bush administration asked the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community for data on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had private channels to Iraqi exiles feeding them alarmist fabrications. When the CIA’s reporting emerged as less dark than hoped for, Cheney and Rumsfeld, and their staffs, asked for new looks at the data. When revised analyses came out the same, the manipulators surfaced their exile fabrications and demanded evaluations of those. The fabricated material was also put before the public in the form of leaks to friendly media. Halfway through the process, intelligence officers were put on notice that their jobs were on the line when John R. Bolton, at the time undersecretary of state, started a vendetta against top analysts at both the State Department and the CIA. Meanwhile, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and others, made speeches and gave public declarations that asserted as fact elements of the data that intelligence analysts were being asked to assess. That effectively put out markers to the CIA as to what conclusions were permissible to Bush officials when the NIE was finally requested, as mentioned, by Senate Democrats in September 2002.

Now to Iran. Readers will be aware that charges and denials regarding the existence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, and its rate of progress, have been swirling for years. That has been especially true since late 2004, when the Iranian exile group National Council for Resistance in Iran publicly charged that the Iranian Ministry of Defense was operating a major secret nuclear site. The Iranian government has been in on-again, off-again negotiations with the Europeans on curtailing its alleged program, and has accepted inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, though with little enthusiasm. The Iranians have devoted a large effort to generating nuclear power for peaceful purposes and consider themselves as having a right to nuclear weapons, whether or not they are actually developing them.

The Bush administration has alternately refused to engage with Tehran on these issues, aligned

LATEST

- **'Fixing' Iran Intelligence** August 25, 2006
- **Real Threats To Black Wealth** August 25, 2006
- **Tempting Democrats: Your Letters** August 25, 2006
- **Race And The Right To Vote** August 24, 2006
- **Don't Bet Your Lungs On This** August 24, 2006

ARCHIVES

SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for our free daily dispatch.
[Privacy Policy](#)



ENRICH PUBLIC DISCOURSE,
Tax Free.
Give to [TomPaine.com](#).

itself with the European group of concern, pondered military strikes on Iran, or lately, sought United Nations sanctions against Tehran. Bush's diplomatic initiatives have extended to sending out a tag team of diplomats and nonproliferation experts who travel to any country that will listen and give an "intelligence" briefing designed to paint black hats on the Iranians. Despite all this activity there seems to be no current NIE on Iranian nuclear development. Late this May, five Democratic senators wrote President Bush asking that he request such a study.

What is it with this administration? Bush seems consistently to resist hearing what U.S. intelligence can tell him about the issues that are central to his own foreign policy. In the case of Iran, it seems that the White House is uncertain what it will learn from an intelligence estimate. The consensus among U.S. intelligence analysts--as reflected in annual threat reports to Congress and briefs on worldwide acquisition of technology for weapons of mass destruction--has waxed and waned. In 2001 the CIA was sure Iran had the intention of seeking weapons but conceded a limited capability. Over the next two years, during which the agency learned of Pakistani exports of nuclear technology to Iran, the view became more alarming. A report at the end of 2003 declaimed, "The United States remains convinced that Tehran has been pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons program." But CIA director George Tenet in February 2004 acknowledged that Tehran had admitted its covert nuclear activity and agreed to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), retreating to the posture that Tehran was "trying to preserve its WMD options." The CIA's technology acquisition report for 2004, actually released shortly before Porter Goss became the agency's director, posited only that Iran "may have" a clandestine nuclear weapons program. In fact, the initial IAEA inspections had weakened the WMD charge by finding no conclusive evidence of mass production of the highly enriched uranium necessary for nuclear weapons.

The analysts who draft NIEs were burned by the Iraq prewar estimate, which has been used to try and blame the war on the CIA. They are going to be doubly careful this time around, and the judgment that Iran's nuclear fuel cycle is being diverted to weapons is an inherently difficult one. Despite difficulties collecting intelligence in Iran, there is a lot more data for this case than for Iraq. A computer hard drive purloined from an Iranian official is reputed to be chock full of information. Director of National Intelligence John D. Negroponte's analysts also have the material gleaned from the breakup of the Pakistani nuclear smuggling network, plus what the U.S. has received from Russia, Iran's main nuclear supplier; the IAEA inspection data; that from exiles and spies; plus everything collected by satellites and drones. There is also an official today who is in charge of shaping collection on Iran, a "mission manager," S. Leslie Ireland, a longtime Iran hand among CIA analysts.

But the intelligence problem is the classic one of identifying how long it will take before a putative Iranian threat can be a serious one. Technical experts from the International Institute of Strategic Studies, as recently as last September, held it would be at least five years until Iran could enrich enough material for a single nuclear weapon. Public reporting of the intelligence community's own timeline agrees, expecting the emergence of a weapon sometime between 2010 and 2015. That's not much of an excuse for bombing Nantaz today, or Tehran for that matter. In February, Negroponte, in his own threat briefing, remarked "we assess that Iran seeks nuclear weapons," but hastened to add "We judge that Tehran probably does not yet have a nuclear weapon and probably has not yet produced or acquired the necessary fissile material."

Which brings us back to intelligence manipulation. The staff paper released by Hoekstra was not considered by the full committee, which took no vote on releasing it. Its lead author was Frederick H. Fleitz, who in 2002 was John Bolton's henchman in his attempted ambush of the intelligence analysts, and is now on the committee's majority staff. Fleitz's substantive expertise at CIA, it should be added, was in peacekeeping operations, not weapons of mass destruction. Hoekstra publicized this report unilaterally. That act sends the message that any NIE which takes a less alarming view will be deemed suspect.

All this should be read as fresh politicization of intelligence, the very "Boltonization" that crippled efforts to prevent war in Iraq. The fact that this act has been perpetrated by a congressional committee whose job it is to oversee U.S. intelligence is further evidence that intelligence oversight has become part of the problem, not the solution.