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No Room To Spin

John Prados**December 19, 2005**

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Working a fish on the hook up at the lake can be fun. The fish darts and pulls, tries to dive deep or comes near the surface, fighting the hook and the fisherman's line. What's fun with a fish is embarrassing with our national leaders; squirming on the hook of their prewar manipulation of the Iraq intelligence.

Last week, speaking to Brit Hume of Fox News, President George W. Bush finally acknowledged that it never mattered what the intelligence said. When Hume asked if his decision to invade Iraq would have been the same "if the weapons had been out of the equation," the president answered, "Absolutely." Coming from the same man who declared, as U.S. troops crossed the border to start the war, that America's clear purpose was to rid Iraq of Saddam's "weapons of mass murder," this affirmation lifts the veil of Bush's real motives another little bit. Soon enough there will be nothing left to cloak the administration's blind ambition.

The prewar intelligence issue was—and remains—central to the entire edifice of Bush's not-so-excellent adventure. That is why administration officials carried out a smear campaign against critic Joe Wilson, leading to an obstruction of justice investigation that continues today. Paul Wolfowitz said before the war that allegations of Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction were the one justification for war that everyone in the Bush administration could agree upon, and the reason is simple: Without that smear of a country (note the similarity in tactics) there was no way to convince Americans of the necessity for war.

Bush has squirmed mightily to avoid his edifice tumbling down. First he begged for patience while the weapons were found. Then, when investigators found some balloon-blowing equipment, he extravagantly declared they had been found. When a full-blown technical survey of Iraq encountered nothing beyond buried prototype components, lab equipment and paper dreams, Bush made the same claim. His crony Dick Cheney chimed in about fanciful links between terrorists and Saddam's spy service. But the intelligence just isn't there to support Bush's prewar claims—and at the end of the day, those were Bush's claims, not those of the CIA or anyone else.

The videotapes are there, as are the transcripts, of the dozens of speeches, statements, interviews and offhand comments of the president and his men (and women) as they wove an intricate web of charges against Iraq.

Now Bush and his people are desperate to evade responsibility for the Iraq mess by making it out as an intelligence failure. No doubt the intelligence was flawed, and we have two official investigations to document that, but this is not the whole story—or even the most important part of it. Charges of intelligence failure beg the questions of the pressures put on the CIA to produce what was demanded, and of the way the limited observations of the intelligence reports were stretched into an extravagant series of administration claims. The weakening Bush defense is highlighted by the president's inability to head off the "Phase II" investigation by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which is to zero in on those very questions.

Bush has mounted a pre-emptive defense with the argument that every other intelligence service

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believed the same things about Saddam's weapons, and that Democrats had the same intelligence he did and also agreed. That line, too, has disintegrated. Extensive investigative reporting in the *Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere indicates the Germans disavowed their source whom Bush relied upon, and the French warned the U.S. against using forged documents alleging Iraqi purchases of uranium ore. Both the Italian prime minister and its intelligence chief have confirmed they tried to dissuade Bush and, again, warn of the forged documents. Meanwhile, the official weapons inspectors of the United Nations affirmed at the time that no evidence supported the Bush claims.

Democrats have widely rejected the claim that they had the same intelligence as Bush. And last week the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service issued a [report](#), backing up that claim with a bill of particulars.

But they have largely refrained from making the corollary point: Congressional opinions expressed before the war reflected the success of Bush's disinformation campaign, and he now relies on those very expressions in his defense.

With that defensive wall breached, the president retreated to his latest formulation. At a speech at the Woodrow Wilson Center on Dec. 14, President Bush asserted that "many" intelligence agencies believed what he did. Soon, the administration will only have the thin veil of scorn to hide behind. Both Bush and Cheney articulated this last-ditch position in late November: that it is irresponsible and reprehensible for anyone to assert they were misled about the Iraq intelligence. Quite the opposite.

George Bush and Dick Cheney and officials working for them acted irresponsibly in crafting a structure of deceit to justify war and in insisting upon the veracity of their claims; and reprehensibly in attempting to evade responsibility and now impugn those who question the original deception. At the Wilson Center, President Bush said, "I'm responsible for the decision to go into Iraq." That grudging step in the right direction—two and a half years late—should have been accompanied with the acknowledgement that he is also responsible for how that was done. The president has no more room for spin.