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Breakdown At The Iraq Lie Factory

Robert Dreyfuss**February 15, 2007**

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It was, President Bush must have been thinking, a heck of a lot easier five years ago. Back in 2002, the president had a smoothly running lie factory humming along in the Pentagon, producing reams of fake intelligence about Iraq, led by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith and his Office of Special Plans. Back then, he had a tightly knit cabal of neoconservatives, led by I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, based in Vice President Dick Cheney's office, to carry out a coordinated effort to distribute the lies to the media. And he had a chorus of yes-men in the Republican-controlled Congress ready to echo the party line.

In 2007, Bush stands nearly alone, and he never looked lonelier than during a bumbling, awkward news conference on the Iraq-Iran tangle Wednesday.

Feith is long gone, and last week his lie factory was exposed by the Pentagon's own inspector general, who told Congress that Feith had pretty much made up everything that his rogue intelligence unit manufactured. Libby is long gone, apparently about to be sentenced to jail for lying about Cheney's frantic effort to cover up the lie factory's work. And the congressional echo chamber is gone: In six weeks, the Democrats have held more than four dozen hearings to investigate the White House's catastrophic Middle East policy, and even Hillary Clinton is warning that Bush had better keep his hands off Iran, saying: "It would be a mistake of historical proportions if the administration thought that the 2002 resolution authorizing force against Iraq was a blank check for the use of force against Iran."

Without his Orwellian apparatus behind him, the president spent most of his hour-long news conference yesterday shrugging and smirking, jutting his jaw out with false bravado, joshing inappropriately with reporters asking deadly serious questions and stumbling over his words. It was painful to listen to him trying to justify the nonsensical claims that Iran and its paramilitary "Quds Force" are somehow responsible for the chaos in Iraq:

What we do know is that the Quds force was instrumental in providing these deadly IEDs to networks inside of Iraq. We know that. And we also know that the Quds force is a part of the Iranian government. That's a known. What we don't know is whether or not the head leaders of Iran ordered the Quds force to do what they did.

Pressed about what the "head leaders" are doing, he went on:

Either they knew or didn't know, and what matters is, is that they're there. What's worse, that the government knew or that the government didn't know? ... What's worse, them ordering it and it happening, or them not ordering it and it happening?

If that makes no sense to you, well, that's because the whole thing makes no sense. It's a farcical replay of Iraq 2002, when the White House demonized Saddam Hussein with fake intelligence,

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turning him into a menacing al-Qaida backer armed with weapons of mass destruction. This time, however, the lie factory has been dismantled. All by himself, the president is trying to turn Iran into a scary, al-Qaida-allied, nuke-wielding menace. But he's not fooling anyone. The potent "war president" of 2002-2003 is now an incoherent, mewling Wizard of Oz-like figure, and people are paying attention to the man behind the curtain.

Unlike 2002, when the White House fired salvo after salvo of fake intelligence about Iraq, today it can't even stage its lies properly. Like the incompetents who couldn't organize a two-car funeral, the remaining Iran war hawks in the administration held a briefing in Baghdad on Sunday to present alleged evidence that Iran is masterminding the insurgency in Iraq. But it was a comedy of errors that convinced no one. Twice, at least, the administration had earlier postponed or canceled the much-promoted event, designed to reveal the supposed secrets behind Iran's actions in Iraq. When it was finally held, it was not in Washington, but in Baghdad, with not a single White House official, no U.S. diplomat, no State Department official, no CIA official and no one from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Instead, a couple of anonymous military officers held a background-only briefing, barring cameras and tape recorders, to present some blurry photographs of bomb-looking things—and not a shred of evidence of Iranian government involvement.

It was as if Adlai Stevenson had gotten up at the United Nations during the missile crisis in Cuba and, rather than showing detailed U-2 photographs of missile emplacements, had simply said, "Ladies and gentleman, some Cuban guy we talked to said the Russians are putting missiles in Cuba."

According to *The Washington Times*, the effort to blame Iran was directly torpedoed by the U.S. intelligence community, through the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The ODNI, said the *Times*, "sought to play down the intelligence on Iranian involvement, fearing that the report will be used as a basis to launch an attack on Iran." Many earlier reports noted that both the State Department and the U.S. intelligence community were strongly opposed to any attempt to demonize Iran. There's nothing like a bureaucracy scorned to conduct passive-aggressive sabotage of misguided policies, and in this case the bureaucracy apparently succeeded. The dog-and-pony show on Iranian meddling in Iraq not only didn't scare anyone, it caused guffaws of laughter and ridicule.

And then there was the hilarious presidential press conference yesterday, to top it off.

There is, of course, no basis for arguing that the civil war in Iraq is caused by Iran. And there is no basis—"not supported by underlying intelligence," as the Pentagon I.G. said about Doug Feith's 2002 work—to argue that Iran is responsible for a significant part of American deaths in Iraq. Nearly all of the U.S. casualties in Iraq are caused by the secular-Baathist Sunni-led resistance and religious Sunni extremists fighting the occupation, and none of the forces allied with the resistance have ties to Iran. Even the anonymous briefers at the dog-and-camel show in Baghdad admitted that Iran is helping the Shiite militias, not the Sunnis; in other words, Iran is helping the self-same militias that are being trained and armed by the United States.

And the spurious claim that 170 Americans have died in attacks using Iranian-supplied super-IED's since 2004 can only mean one thing: that the Pentagon is counting the numbers of U.S. soldiers and Marines who died in April and August, 2004. That was when the United States waged two mini-wars against Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. It was the only time in the past four years when the United States suffered significant casualties fighting the Shiites—though the administration presented zero evidence that Sadr's Mahdi Army gets weapons from Iran, or needs to. But if they're counting as far back as 2004—and, according to the Pentagon, the super-IED's started showing up in 2004—then the whole issue is absurd, since what happened three years ago has little or no relevance to current conditions.

Those prone to believe, along with the president, that Iran is fomenting the violence in Iraq have already drunk deep of the neocon Kool-Aid. The rest of us can only shake our heads in wonder that the president thinks he can get away with this.

