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## How Powerful Can 16 Words Be?

By **CHRISTOPHER MARQUIS**

**W**ASHINGTON — Words matter. Even in Washington, with its nattering nabobs and chattering classes. They matter, even when it comes to a famously tongue-tied president.

Few speeches are as pored over as the State of the Union address. Delivered with all the pomp a no-nonsense capital can muster, it gives the president the chance to share his vision for the nation and the world. The best addresses go beyond bland budgeteering to become a rallying cry for a scattered people.

On Jan. 28, President Bush by most accounts gave a humdinger. He was telling the American people why they needed to fear Saddam Hussein and why he had to be replaced. It was a case for war: the most momentous and fearsome decision a president can make.

Mr. Bush portrayed the United States as under an imminent threat from Iraq. In 16 words, he passed along this chilling information: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

A nuclear Iraq? That carried so much freight with ordinary Americans. Concerns about biological or chemical weapons, the possibility of a Baghdad alliance with Al Qaeda — these worries paled when compared with the prospect that Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear program and might share weapons with terrorists.

"That was a very scary thing for the administration to be saying," said David Wise, an intelligence historian. "If it now turns out that was based on forged documents and bad intelligence, that's very disturbing."

The speech was followed eight days later by a detailed presentation at the United Nations by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell who omitted the uranium charge, which he had discounted



White House Photograph

The White House Web site features President Bush reviewing his State of the Union speeches, as one 2002 caption said, "line-by-line and word-by-word."

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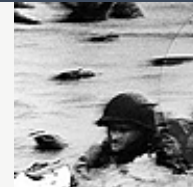


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as unreliable. The speeches worked. Public opposition to the war, never fierce, began to melt, polls show, and by mid-March, when hostilities began, more than 60 percent agreed that ousting Mr. Hussein was worth spilling American blood.

Today, those 16 words haunt the administration. They are the best-remembered flourish in a portrait of Iraq that today seems unrecognizable. They are a leading rationale for a war that has resulted in the death of 224 Americans. And they are either unsubstantiated or based on a lie.

"We did not go to war because of mustard gas or Scuds," said Joseph Cirincione, senior analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "We went to war because President Bush told the nation that Saddam had, or might already have, a nuclear bomb, and we could not afford to wait. Now it's obvious that's not true and there was no solid evidence it was true at the time."

"Would we have gone to war if the president hadn't uttered those 16 words?" he asked. "Clearly, the answer is yes." But, he added: "We wouldn't have gone to war without the nuclear threat. The president's case for war was centered on the nuclear threat."

Administration officials counter that they went to war for a host of reasons. Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, said that the president's warning about nuclear weapons was part of "a very broad case" against Iraq.

At root in the debate is how intelligence has been used. Administration officials say they are basing their judgments on sensitive, sometimes imperfect data. Critics charge that the administration has it backward. The White House was determined to go to war and selected intelligence that would bolster its plan.

"Instead of using intelligence as evidence on which to base a decision about policy, we used intelligence as the basis on which to justify a policy on which we had already settled," said Robin Cook, a British minister who resigned from the cabinet over the war.

Not since President Clinton urged his interrogators to define the word "is" have so many people in Washington debated a simple declaration by a president, which turned out to be anything but. Mr. Clinton was discussing his personal behavior, however indiscreet; Mr. Bush was talking about the security of the nation.

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