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Who's Accountable?

By PAUL KRUGMAN

The Bush and Blair administrations are trying to silence critics — many of them current or former intelligence analysts — who say that they exaggerated the threat from Iraq. Last week a Blair official accused Britain's intelligence agencies of plotting against the government. (Tony Blair's government has since apologized for January's "dodgy dossier.") In this country, Colin Powell has declared that questions about the justification for war are "outrageous."

Yet dishonest salesmanship has been the hallmark of the Bush administration's approach to domestic policy. And it has become increasingly clear that the selling of the war with Iraq was no different.

For example, look at the way the administration rhetorically linked Saddam to Sept. 11. As The Associated Press put it: "The implication from Bush on down was that Saddam supported Osama bin Laden's network. Iraq and the Sept. 11 attacks frequently were mentioned in the same sentence, even though officials have no good evidence of such a link." Not only was there no good evidence: according to The New York Times, captured leaders of Al Qaeda explicitly told the C.I.A. that they had not been working with Saddam.

Or look at the affair of the infamous "germ warfare" trailers. I don't know whether those trailers were intended to produce bioweapons or merely to inflate balloons, as the Iraqis claim — a claim supported by a number of outside experts. (According to the newspaper The Observer, Britain sold Iraq a similar system back in 1987.) What is clear is that an initial report concluding that they were weapons labs was, as one analyst told The Times, "a rushed job and looks political." President Bush had no business declaring "we have found the weapons of mass destruction."

We can guess how Mr. Bush came to make that statement. The first teams of analysts told administration officials what they wanted to hear, doubts were brushed aside, and officials then made public pronouncements greatly overstating even what the analysts had said.

A similar process of cherry-picking, of choosing and exaggerating intelligence that suited the administration's preconceptions, unfolded over the issue of W.M.D.'s before the war. Most intelligence professionals believed that Saddam had some biological and chemical weapons, but they did not believe that these posed any imminent threat. According to the newspaper The Independent, a March 2002 report by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee found no evidence that Saddam posed a significantly greater threat than in 1991. But such conclusions weren't acceptable.

Last fall former U.S. intelligence officials began warning that official pronouncements were being based on "cooked intelligence." British intelligence officials were so concerned that, The Independent reports, they kept detailed records of the process. "A smoking gun may well exist over W.M.D., but it may not be to the government's liking," a source said.

But the Bush administration found scraps of intelligence suiting its agenda, and officials began making strong pronouncements. "Saddam Hussein recently authorized Iraqi field commanders to use chemical weapons — the very weapons the dictator tells us he

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does not have," Mr. Bush said on Feb. 8. On March 16 Dick Cheney declared, "We believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons."

It's now two months since Baghdad fell — and according to The A.P., military units searching for W.M.D.'s have run out of places to look.

One last point: the Bush administration's determination to see what it wanted to see led not just to a gross exaggeration of the threat Iraq posed, but to a severe underestimation of the problems of postwar occupation. When Gen. Eric Shinseki, the Army chief of staff, warned that occupying Iraq might require hundreds of thousands of soldiers for an extended period, Paul Wolfowitz said he was "wildly off the mark" — and the secretary of the Army may have been fired for backing up the general. Now a force of 150,000 is stretched thin, facing increasingly frequent guerrilla attacks, and a senior officer told The Washington Post that it might be two years before an Iraqi government takes over. The Independent reports that British military chiefs are resisting calls to send more forces, fearing being "sucked into a quagmire."

I'll tell you what's outrageous. It's not the fact that people are criticizing the administration; it's the fact that nobody is being held accountable for misleading the nation into war.

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