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FROM THE MAGAZINE

NATION

# Who Lost the WMD?

As the weapons hunt intensifies, so does the finger pointing. A preview of the coming battle

By [MASSIMO CALABRESI AND TIMOTHY J. BURGER](#)



ERIC DRAPER/THE WHITE HOUSE/AP

**QUESTION TIME: Bush huddles with Bremer and Franks in Doha, Qatar**

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Sunday, Jun. 29, 2003  
Meeting last month at a sweltering U.S. base outside Doha, Qatar, with his top Iraq commanders, President Bush skipped quickly past the niceties and went straight to his chief political obsession:

Where are the weapons of mass destruction? Turning to his Baghdad proconsul, Paul Bremer, Bush asked, "Are you in charge of finding WMD?" Bremer said no, he was not. Bush then put the same question to his military commander, General Tommy Franks. But Franks said it wasn't his job either. A little exasperated, Bush asked, So who is in charge of finding WMD? After aides conferred for a moment, someone volunteered the name of Stephen Cambone, a little-known deputy to Donald Rumsfeld, back in Washington. Pause. "Who?" Bush asked.

It seems as if just about everyone has questions these days about the missing WMD. Did U.S. intelligence officials—or their civilian bosses—overstate the evidence of weapons before the war? And if some intelligence officials expressed skepticism about WMD, who ignored them? For the past several weeks, the usually lockstep Bush Administration has done its best to maintain a unified front in the face of these queries. Whenever asked, Administration officials have replied that the weapons will turn up eventually. But as the search drags on through its third largely futile month, the blame game in Washington has gone into high gear. And as Bush's allies and enemies alike on Capitol Hill begin to pick apart some 19 volumes of prewar intelligence and examine them one document at a time, the cohesive Bush team is starting to come apart. "This is a cloud hanging over their credibility, their word," Republican Senate Intelligence Committee member Chuck Hagel told abc News. Here are key questions Congress wants answered:

## What Was Cheney's Role?

THIS ISSUE

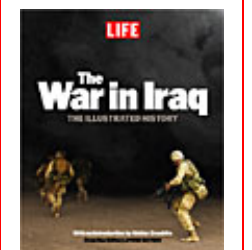


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**TIME LIFE**

Lawmakers who once saluted every Bush claim and command are beginning to express doubts. Two congressional panels are opening new rounds of investigations into the Administration's prewar claims about WMD. One of their immediate inquiries, sources tell Time, involves Vice President Dick Cheney's role in reviewing the intelligence before the bombing started. Cheney made repeated visits to the CIA in the prelude to the war, going over intelligence assessments with the analysts who produced them. Some Democrats say Cheney's visits may have amounted to pressure on the normally cautious agency. Cheney's defenders insist that his visits merely showed the importance of the issue and that an honest analyst wouldn't feel pressure to twist intelligence. The House intelligence committee (and possibly its Senate counterpart, sources say) plans to question the CIA analysts who briefed Cheney, and that could lead to calling Cheney's hard-line aides and perhaps the Veep himself to testify.

### **Is Powell Trying To Have It Both Ways?**

Secretary of State Colin Powell, who staked his reputation on his February declaration at the U.N. about Saddam Hussein's arms program, is also feeling the heat. Powell's aides fanned out after that performance to say the Secretary had gone to the CIA and scrubbed every piece of intelligence to make certain it was solid. But since then, little of Powell's presentation has been proved by evidence on the ground, and last week his aides were on the defensive over a memo from the State Department's intelligence bureau that questioned whether two Iraqi trailers discovered in April were mobile bioweapons labs, as Powell has asserted. Questionable intelligence that made it into Powell's February speech leaves him particularly vulnerable. Expect a push by Democrats, and perhaps some Republicans, to seek Powell's testimony too.

### **Will Tenet Be Left Holding the Bag?**

CIA Director George Tenet is faring a bit better. The House committee's top Democrat, Jane Harman, noted last week that "caveats and qualifiers" Tenet raised in prewar intelligence about Iraq's weapons were "rarely included" in Administration arguments for war. After the awkward Q&A in Doha, Bush put Tenet in charge of the WMD hunt. Tenet in turn hired a former U.N. weapons inspector, David Kay, to run the search, but Tenet and Kay have a lot of ground to make up fast. Tenet, sources say, recently conceded to the House panel that the CIA should have done more to warn that finding WMD could be a drawn-out process. Tenet got a reprieve last week when an Iraqi scientist who had hidden parts and documents for nuclear-weapons production in his backyard for 12 years came forward. Tenet's usually behind-the-scenes CIA suddenly became very public in trumpeting the importance of the discovery, if only to remind people how hard illicit weapons would be to find. But Tenet's hot zone isn't Baghdad; it's Capitol Hill. He canceled testimony before the Senate committee last week, citing a schedule conflict. If he doesn't find any weapons, he needs to find a way not to be blamed.

Bush officials believe that time and history are on their side. They argue that now that Saddam is gone, Americans don't care very much about finding WMD. They also say it is only a matter of time before more evidence of weapons materials and programs emerges. And when that occurs, they contend, all their opponents will look as silly as they did when they argued that the war was going badly in its second week. "The Dems are looking for

an issue, but I think they're making a mistake," says a senior Administration official.

Democrats do sense a possibly potent campaign theme, but they run the risk of appearing to politicize a sensitive national-security issue as they try to prove the Administration has a credibility gap. But Democrats are not alone in feeling as though they may have been sandbagged on the evidence before the war began. Sources say g.o.p. Senate Intelligence Committee members Olympia Snowe and Hagel have privately questioned the Administration's handling of prewar intelligence. The Republican-held House voted last week to order the CIA to report back on "lessons learned" from the buildup to war in Iraq. The House and Senate intelligence-committee leaders have agreed to coordinate their probes loosely to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. In a rare move, the House panel quietly voted on June 12 to grant all 435 Representatives access to the Iraq intelligence, although a Capitol Hill source said fewer than 10 members outside the committee had reviewed the material.


Administration officials have a further concern about where all these questions are leading. They fear that any problem with the prewar intelligence could undermine Bush's ability to continue his muscular campaign against terrorism overseas. The Administration has argued that to counter new kinds of threats posed by terrorists, rogue states and WMD, it has to be able to act pre-emptively. But pre-emption requires excellent intelligence, and the whole doctrine is undermined if the intelligence is wrong—or confected. "Intelligence takes on an even more important role than in the past because you can't wait until you see an enemy army massing anymore," says former Clinton Deputy National Security Adviser James Steinberg. But if WMD don't turn up and the Administration wants to act elsewhere, it may find that the enemy massing against it is public opinion at home.

From the Jul. 07, 2003 issue of TIME magazine

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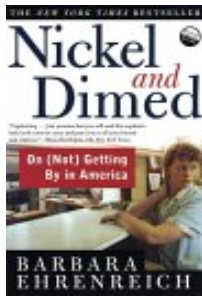
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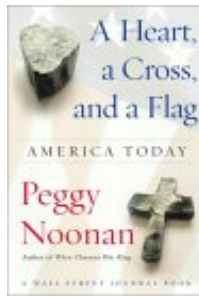
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