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Article 1 of 6 in Opinion

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Editorial

Decoding Mr. Bush's Denials

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To avoid having to account for his administration's misleading statements before the war with Iraq, President Bush has tried denial, saying he did not skew the intelligence. He's tried to share the blame, claiming that Congress had the same intelligence he had, as well as President Bill Clinton. He's tried to pass the buck and blame the C.I.A. Lately, he's gone on the attack, accusing Democrats in Congress of aiding the terrorists.

Yesterday in Alaska, Mr. Bush trotted out the same tedious deflection on Iraq that he usually attempts when his back is against the wall: he claims that questioning his actions three years ago is a betrayal of the troops in battle today.

It all amounts to one energetic effort at avoidance. But like the W.M.D. reports that started the whole thing, the only problem is that none of it has been true.

Mr. Bush says everyone had the same intelligence he had - Mr. Clinton and his advisers, foreign governments, and members of Congress - and that all of them reached the same conclusions. The only part that is true is that Mr. Bush was working off the same intelligence Mr. Clinton had. But that is scary, not reassuring. The reports about Saddam Hussein's weapons were old, some more than 10 years old. Nothing was fresher than about five years, except reports that later proved to be fanciful.

Foreign intelligence services did not have full access to American intelligence. But some had dissenting opinions that were ignored or not shown to top American officials. Congress had nothing close to the president's access to intelligence. The National Intelligence Estimate presented to Congress a few days before the vote on war was sanitized to remove dissent and make conjecture seem like fact.

It's hard to imagine what Mr. Bush means when he says everyone reached the same conclusion. There was indeed a widespread belief that Iraq had chemical and biological weapons. But Mr. Clinton looked at the data and concluded that inspections and pressure were working - a view we now know was accurate. France, Russia and Germany said war was not justified. Even Britain admitted later that there had been no new evidence about Iraq, just new politics.

The administration had little company in saying that Iraq was actively trying to build a nuclear weapon. The evidence for this claim was a dubious report about an attempt in 1999 to buy uranium from Niger, later shown to be false, and the infamous aluminum tubes story. That was dismissed at the time by analysts with real expertise.

The Bush administration was also alone in making the absurd claim that Iraq was in league with Al Qaeda and somehow connected to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That was based on two false tales. One was the supposed trip to Prague by Mohamed Atta, a report that was disputed before the war and came from an unreliable drunk. The other was that Iraq trained Qaeda members in the use of chemical and biological weapons. Before the war, the Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that this was a deliberate fabrication by an informer.

Mr. Bush has said in recent days that the first phase of the Senate Intelligence Committee's investigation on Iraq found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence. That is true only in the very narrow way the Republicans on the committee insisted on defining pressure: as direct pressure from senior officials to change intelligence. Instead, the Bush administration made what it wanted to hear crystal clear and kept sending reports back to be redone until it got those answers.

Richard Kerr, a former deputy director of central intelligence, said in 2003 that there was "significant pressure on the intelligence community to find evidence that supported a connection" between Iraq and Al Qaeda. The C.I.A. ombudsman told the Senate Intelligence Committee that the administration's "hammering" on Iraq intelligence was harder than he had seen in his 32 years at the agency.

Mr. Bush and other administration officials say they faithfully reported what they had read. But Vice President Dick Cheney presented the Prague meeting as a fact when even the most supportive analysts considered it highly dubious. The administration has still not acknowledged that tales of Iraq coaching Al Qaeda on chemical warfare were considered false, even at the time they were circulated.

Mr. Cheney was not alone. Remember Condoleezza Rice's infamous "mushroom cloud" comment? And Secretary of State Colin Powell in January 2003, when the rich and powerful met in Davos, Switzerland, and he said, "Why is Iraq still trying to procure uranium and the special equipment needed to transform it into material for nuclear weapons?" Mr. Powell ought to have known the report on "special equipment" - the aluminum tubes - was false. And the uranium story was four years old.





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The president and his top advisers may very well have sincerely believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. But they did not allow the American people, or even Congress, to have the information necessary to make reasoned judgments of their own. It's obvious that the Bush administration misled Americans about Mr. Hussein's weapons and his terrorist connections. We need to know how that happened and why.

Mr. Bush said last Friday that he welcomed debate, even in a time of war, but that "it is deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how that war began." We agree, but it is Mr. Bush and his team who are rewriting history.

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