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Some Iraq Analysts Felt Pressure From Cheney Visits

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Vice President Cheney and his most senior aide made multiple trips to the CIA over the past year to question analysts studying Iraq's weapons programs and alleged links to al Qaeda, creating an environment in which some analysts felt they were being pressured to make their assessments fit with the Bush administration's policy objectives, according to senior intelligence officials.

With Cheney taking the lead in the administration last August in advocating military action against Iraq by claiming it had weapons of mass destruction, the visits by the vice president and his chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, "sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here," one senior agency official said yesterday.

Other agency officials said they were not influenced by the visits from the vice president's office, and some said they welcomed them. But the disclosure of Cheney's unusual hands-on role comes on the heels of mounting concern from intelligence officials and members of Congress that the administration may have exaggerated intelligence it received about Iraq to build a case for war.

While visits to CIA headquarters by a vice president are not unprecedented, they are unusual, according to intelligence officials. The exact number of trips by Cheney to the CIA could not be learned, but one agency official described them as "multiple." They were taken in addition to Cheney's regular attendance at President Bush's morning intelligence briefings and the special briefings the vice president receives when he is at an undisclosed location for security reasons.

A spokeswoman for Cheney would not discuss the matter yesterday. "The vice president values the hard work of the intelligence community, but his office has a practice of declining to comment on the specifics of his intelligence briefings," said Cathie Martin, the vice president's public affairs director.

Concern over the administration's prewar claims about Iraq has been growing in Congress and among intelligence officials as a result of the failure to uncover any weapons of mass destruction two months after the collapse of the Iraqi government. Similar ferment is building in Britain, where Prime Minister Tony Blair is under pressure from within the Labor Party to explain whether British intelligence may have overstated the case of Iraq's covert weapons programs. Blair pledged yesterday to cooperate with a parliamentary probe of the government's use of intelligence material.

In a signal of administration concern over the controversy, two senior Pentagon officials yesterday held a news conference to challenge allegations that they pressured the CIA or other agencies to slant intelligence for political reasons. "I know of no pressure," said Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary for policy. "I know of nobody who pressured anybody."

Feith said a special Pentagon office to analyze intelligence in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks did not necessarily focus on Iraq but came up with "some interesting observations about the linkages between Iraq and al Qaeda."

Officials in the intelligence community and on Capitol Hill, however, have described the office as an alternative source of intelligence analysis that helped the administration make its case that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat.

Government sources said CIA analysts were not the only ones who felt pressure from their superiors to support public statements by Bush, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and others about the threat posed by Hussein.

Former and current intelligence officials said they felt a continual drumbeat, not only from Cheney and Libby, but also from Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, Feith, and less so from CIA Director George J. Tenet, to find information or write reports in a way that would help the administration make the case that going into Iraq was urgent.

"They were the browbeaters," said a former defense intelligence official who attended some of the meetings in which Wolfowitz and others pressed for a different approach to the assessments they were receiving. "In interagency meetings," he said, "Wolfowitz treated the analysts' work with contempt."

Others saw the intervention of senior officials as being more responsible. Libby, who helped prepare intelligence analysis for the vice president, made several trips to the CIA with National Security Council officials during preparations for Powell's Feb. 5

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presentation to the U.N. Security Council, officials said. He was described by one senior analyst as "an avid consumer of intelligence and the asker of many questions."

Such visits permitted Cheney and Libby to have direct exchanges with analysts, rather than asking questions of their daily briefers, who direct others to prepare responses that result in additional papers, senior administration sources said. Their goal was to have a free flow of information and not to intimidate the analysts, although some may well have misinterpreted questions as directives, said some sources sympathetic to their approach.

A senior defense official also defended Wolfowitz's questioning: "Does he ask hard questions? Absolutely. I don't think he was trying to get people to come up with answers that weren't true. He's looking for data and answers and he gets frustrated with a lack of answers and diligence and with things that can't be defended."

A major focus for Wolfowitz and others in the Pentagon was finding intelligence to prove a connection between Hussein and Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network.

On the day of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Wolfowitz told senior officials at the Pentagon that he believed Iraq might have been responsible. "I was scratching my head because everyone else thought of al Qaeda," said a former senior defense official who was in one such meeting. Over the following year, "we got taskers to review the link between al Qaeda and Iraq. There was a very aggressive search."

In the winter of 2001-02, officials who worked with Wolfowitz sent the Defense Intelligence Agency a message: Get hold of Laurie Mylroie's book, which claimed Hussein was behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and see if you can prove it, one former defense official said.

The DIA's Middle East analysts were familiar with the book, "Study of Revenge: The First World Trade Center Attack and Saddam Hussein's War Against America." But they and others in the U.S. intelligence community were convinced that radical Islamic fundamentalists, not Iraq, were involved. "The message was, why can't we prove this is right?" said the official.

Retired Vice Adm. Thomas R. Wilson, then director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, directed his Middle East analysts to go through the book again, check all the allegations and see if they could be substantiated, said one current and one former intelligence official familiar with the request. The staff was unable to make the link.

This recounting of the book incident was disputed by a defense official who, like many others interviewed, requested anonymity.

Rep. Porter J. Goss (R-Fla.), chairman of the House intelligence committee, said there is no indication that analysts at the DIA or CIA changed their analysis to fit what they perceived as the desire of the administration officials. Goss and other members of the intelligence oversight panels said they have received no whistle-blower complaints from the CIA or other intelligence agencies on the issue.

Tenet has asked four retired senior CIA analysts to review all the major prewar intelligence analyses of Hussein's weapons of mass destruction distributed to top policymakers before March 20, when the fighting began. They plan to compare what was written with postwar intelligence data.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner (R-Va.) reiterated his desire to hold hearings on the administration's handling of the intelligence on Iraq despite divisions among congressional Republicans over whether an investigation, including public hearings, is necessary. Cheney privately briefed GOP senators on the weapons intelligence Tuesday.

Warner is discussing a joint probe with intelligence committee Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.).

Staff writer Jim VandeHei contributed to this report.

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