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Cheney v. Powell

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"I HAVE NOT SEEN smoking-gun, concrete evidence about the connection. But I think the possibility of such connections did exist, and it was prudent to consider them at the time that we did."

That was Secretary of State Colin Powell last Thursday. It was a curious comment, given that the administration had made an Iraq-al Qaeda connection an important, if ancillary, part of its case for war in Iraq. In fact, Powell himself had laid out some of the "concrete evidence" of the Iraq-al Qaeda connection himself in a presentation at the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003.

One week after this presentation, on February 12, 2003, Powell testified before the House International Relations Committee. He was asked by Rep. Howard Berman of California why containment of Saddam was no longer a viable option. Powell explained that potential threat of terrorists with WMD was not acceptable in a "post-9/11 environment."

What's more, Powell declared, the links are not speculative. "This is not hypothetical. The ricin that is bouncing around Europe now originated in Iraq. Now, not part of Iraq directly under Saddam Hussein's control, but his intelligence people know all about it. There's cooperation [between al Qaeda and Iraq] taking place in the manner I described last week. And I have no reason to step back from anything I said last week--this nexus between weapons of mass destruction, states that are developing them, and cooperation with non-state actors such as Osama bin Laden or some other nut case who might come along in due course. It's a risk that we strongly believe, the president strongly believes, and I think most members of the international community strongly believe we should not take any longer."

Moments later, Rep. Donald Payne, a Democrat from New Jersey, challenged Powell on the link between Iraq and al Qaeda. "I think Saddam Hussein is a bad person. I think that he should disarm. I think it would be good if he is out of power. But I think the more we co-link those two and make them one-in-the-same we do a disservice to the American people by giving them a false feeling of comfort as we go into Iraq."

Again, Powell was emphatic. "It's not that we are trying to find a connection between al Qaeda and Iraq. It's there. It's not something we're making up--it's there and we can't fail to take note of it or to talk about it or report it."

Vice President Dick **Cheney** was asked about Powell's recent comments in an interview last Friday with the **Rocky Mountain News**. He sidestepped a direct contradiction of Powell's words. "I'm not familiar with what he said yesterday," **Cheney** said. But the vice president was unequivocal about the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda.

Well, there are two issues here . . . two issues in terms of relationship. One is, was there a relationship between al Qaeda and Iraq, between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, or the al Qaeda and the Iraqi intelligence service? That's one category of issues. A separate question is, whether or not there was any relationship relative to 9/11. Those are two separate questions and people oftentimes confuse them.

On the separate issue, on the 9/11 question, we've never had confirmation one way or another. We did have reporting that was public, that came out shortly after the 9/11 attack, provided by the Czech government, suggesting there had been a meeting in Prague between Mohammed Atta, the lead hijacker, and a man named al-Ani (Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani), who was an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague, at the embassy there, in April of '01, prior to the 9/11 attacks. It has never been--we've never been able to collect any more information on that. That was the one that possibly tied the two together to 9/11.

On the general question, **Cheney** was clear.

I can give you a few quick for instances--one, the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. The main perpetrator was a man named Ramzi Yousef. He's now in prison in Colorado. His sidekick in the exercise was a man named Abdul Rahman Yasin . . . Ahman Rahman . . . Yasin is his last name anyway. I can't remember his earlier first names. He fled the United States after the attack, the 1993 attack, went to Iraq, and we know now based on documents that we've captured since we took Baghdad, that they put him on the payroll, gave him a monthly stipend and provided him with a house, sanctuary, in effect, in Iraq, in the aftermath of nine-ele . . . (sic) . . . the 93' attack on the World Trade Center.

The reporter followed up. "So you stand by the statements?"

Absolutely. Absolutely. And you can look at Zarkawi, (Abu Mussab) al-Zarkawi, who is still out there operating today, who was an al-Qaida associate, who was wounded in Afghanistan, took refuge in Baghdad, working out of Baghdad, worked with the Ansar al Islam group up in northeastern Iraq, that produced a so-called poison factory, a group that we hit when we went into Iraq. They were involved in trying to smuggle things, manufacture and smuggle things like ricin into Europe to attack various targets in Europe with. He also, Zarkawi, was responsible for the assassination of a man named Foley, who worked for A.I.D. in Amman, Jordan, an American assigned over there.

The links go back. We know for example from interrogating detainees in Guantanamo that al Qaida sent individuals to Baghdad to be trained in C.W. and B.W. technology, chemical and biological weapons technology. These are all matters that are there for anybody who wants to look at it. A lot of it has been declassified. More, I'm sure, will be declassified in the future, and my expectation would be as we get the time. We haven't really had the time yet to pore through all those records in Baghdad. We'll find ample evidence confirming the link--that is the connection, if you will, between al Qaida and the Iraqi intelligence services. They have worked together on a number of occasions.

Cheney's comments are consistent with Powell's compelling presentation about the connection between Iraq and al Qaeda at the United Nations Security Council and with Powell's congressional testimony a week later. They're not really consistent with what appears to be Powell's current view. What's the administration's view?

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