

AUGUST 2007 PDB: IRAN NOT DETERMINED TO GET NUKES

ThinkProgress reports Stephen Hadley's claim that George Bush only learned of the Iran intelligence—judging they have had no nuclear weapon program since 2003—"a few months ago."

QUESTION: Steve, what is the first time the president was given the inkling that something? I'm not clear on this. Was it months ago, when the first information started to become available to intelligence agencies? [...]

HADLEY: [W]hen was the president notified that there was new information available? We'll try and get you a precise answer. As I say, it was, in my recollection, is in the last few months. Whether that's October – August-September, we'll try and get you an answer for that.

TP is right: Bush almost certainly continued to war-monger against Iran after learning his war-mongering claims were not true. But I'm equally troubled by the timing of when Bush is purported to have learned this news.

As I noted yesterday, the NIE states that the key piece of intelligence—verifying that Iran had no active nuke program—dates to "mid-2007."

We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons. [my emphasis]

That suggests the most recent intelligence on Iran's nuke program (or lack thereof) dates to some time in June or July. Yet Stephen Hadley

claims Bush only learned of that intelligence "a few months" ago, August at the earliest, presumably a month or more after this piece of intelligence came in.

Now maybe the NIE is just being inexact; maybe some Cheney-loving analyst used such wormy language to allow the Administration to obscure precisely this issue.

But if not, it suggests one of three possibilities.

Perhaps Hadley is lying when he says Bush only learned of this a few months ago. While Bush has continued to war-monger in the last two months, his war-mongering was much worse earlier, such as around the Petraeus testimony. By claiming Bush has only known for two months, you put his knowledge after the time of the worst war-mongering.

Then there's the possibility that Bush was told about the intelligence but that he didn't really listen to it—sort of like the PDB he got on August 6, 2001 that said "Bin Laden determined to strike in US." Maybe his briefer read him that intelligence and Bush simply responded, "All right. You've covered your ass, now," and then went out to clear brush.

More troubling, though, is the possibility that intelligence came in in June or thereabouts. It was intelligence that clearly addressed an issue of great concern to the Vice President, at least, if not the President. Heck, perhaps the Vice President had even asked his morning briefer for an update—I hear he does that. In any case, this intelligence would have answered one of the most burning intelligence questions of the day.

But the intelligence did not make it to the President, at least not for another month or two.

It's just a possibility, this last scenario. But given what we know about the way Dick Cheney controls the information that makes it to George

Bush, given what we know about how intelligence that doesn't suit Cheney's fancy just disappears in this Administration, it's a real possibility.

It also raises one more possibility. While Bush continued to war-monger, the Administration seemed to move away from its plans to start a war with Iran "a few months" ago. If my third scenario is correct and Cheney or politicized briefers were trying to prevent this intelligence from getting to Bush, did the change in plans occur when someone—perhaps Bush, or perhaps Condi or Bob Gates—got the information? In other words, did someone scuttle Cheney's war plans simply by eliminating Bush's plausible deniability about Iran's nukes?

Update: Oh Jeebus. This looks precisely like the intelligence games that got us into Iraq. First, it's clear that the "mid-2007" intelligence consisted of intercepts of Iranian conversations about their nukes (or lack thereof):

Senior officials said the latest conclusions grew out of a stream of information, beginning with a set of Iranian drawings obtained in 2004 and ending with the intercepted calls between Iranian military commanders, that steadily chipped away at the earlier assessment.

In one intercept, a senior Iranian military official was specifically overheard complaining that the nuclear program had been shuttered years earlier, according to a source familiar with the intelligence.

And it appears clear that Bush's top advisors (read: Dick and Hadley) got the contents of the intercepts in July (therefore, a full month before, according to Hadley, Bush got them).

Several of those involved in preparing the new assessment said that when intelligence officials began briefing senior members of the Bush

administration on the intercepts, beginning in July, the policymakers expressed skepticism. [my emphasis]

And then, the war-mongers used precisely the same excuse to dismiss these intercepts that they used to dismiss doubts about the Iraqi aluminum tubes and mobile bioweapons labs: The intercepts that refuted Cheney's doubts, the war-mongers insisted, were just an elaborate ruse designed to hide an active WMD program.

Several of the president's top advisers suggested the intercepts were part of a clever Iranian deception campaign, the officials said.

Intelligence officers then spent months examining whether the new information was part of a well-orchestrated ruse. Their effort included "Red Team" exercises in which groups of intelligence officers tried to punch holes in the new evidence, substantially delaying publication of the NIE.

I'm glad that, this time, such games didn't work. But it's mighty troubling that they still appear to be possible.

Update: Now that Matt Yglesias has raised Kyl-Lieberman, here's another question about timing. Did Bush's knowledge of this Iran intell "a few months" ago precede the vote on Kyl-Lieberman, which took place on September 27 (right on the borderline, conveniently, of a "few months")? In other words, did Bush have the Senate all but authorize a war, knowing full well that there was no evidence to support the war?