

BUSH'S DIRECT AND CONSTANT KNOWLEDGE OF THE NIE INTELLIGENCE

Peter Baker and Dafna Linzer have an article that answers most of our questions on the genesis of the NIE. What they don't say—though their article shows—is that Bush was much more cognizant of the development of the NIE than he has let on. Not only did he keep the US people in the dark about the new intelligence on Iraq, he also kept our European allies in the dark (and, I wonder, perhaps even Condi?), even while he was demanding they impose more sanctions.

The article starts with the news that not just Dick this time, but Bush himself, has been meeting with analysts on Iran directly.

They call them "deep dives," special briefings for President Bush to meet with not just his advisers but also the analysts who study Iran in the bowels of the intelligence world. Starting last year, aides arranged a series of sessions for Bush to "get his hands dirty," in the White House vernacular for digging into intelligence to understand what is known and not known.

Those deep dives led directly to the discovery of the new Iran intell. As with Dick Cheney, when he claimed he never got an answer to his questions about uranium in Niger, Bush has been telling us no one informed him of the answer to questions he, himself, posed. Uh huh.

Then the article goes back to April 2007, when the Administration first started pushing back against the conclusion that Iran wasn't getting very far on its nukes program.

As analysts scrambled to finish by

April, they were reaching the conclusion that Iran was still a decade away from nuclear weapons, senior intelligence and administration officials said. For three years, the intelligence community had not obtained new information on Project 1-11, vexing administration officials who worried that a cold trail would lead to doubts about the reliability of the laptop's information.

Note, the laptop in question is the "Laptop of Death" that Linzer has been reporting on for years; I frankly think the reporting—and the laptop itself—is dubious. But I'll try to deal with that in a follow-up post.

Then in June, as the debate over the now completed NIE got more intense, Michael Hayden and NSA head Keith Alexander all of a sudden (?) threw resources at enemy number one.

CIA Director Michael V. Hayden and National Security Agency Director Keith B. Alexander responded by directing vast manpower and technology toward spying on Iranians who may have been involved in the warhead effort.

This is what led to the collection of the communication intercepts that verified that the Iranian program had been mothballed since 2003.

And then, as I expected, Bush received an August PDB that informed him of the new information.

McConnell told Bush about the new information in August during a daily intelligence briefing, but did not provide much detail or anything on paper, White House officials said.

Note the source: we still don't have McConnell's version of how much information he gave Bush. But it doesn't matter, because someone wants us to know that McConnell kept giving Bush

information, all while Bush was invoking World War III.

Bush periodically asked McConnell for updates. "The president and his advisers were regularly and continuously appraised on new information as we acquired it," an intelligence official said.

Let me just say—this news (that Bush was asking for updates) makes it pretty clear that the White House claim that McConnell wasn't providing any information is totally bogus. Not a surprise, but still.

Here's a detail I'm really fascinated by given the apparent ignorance of Jello Jay and Silvestre Reyes of the NIE when it came out on Monday.

Officials also informed House intelligence committee members and key Senate intelligence committee staff members in September, although they were circumspect. "They said, 'We've got new information. We want to make sure we get this thing as close to right as possible,' " said Rep. Peter Hoekstra (Mich.), the House panel's senior Republican.

Though I suspect this may be parsing: "House intelligence committee members," though no description whether that included all HPSCI members, or just those like Crazy Pete whom the Administration likes. And on the Senate side, they briefed "key Senate intelligence committee staff members," but not, apparently, Jello Jay or Kit Bond or anyone else. I wonder whether and how Jello Jay's staffers relayed the news to him.

The article then describes two murder boards that are as interesting for their attendees as their existence. In September, Hayden and Steven Kappes vetted the intelligence (suggesting this

was still heavily led by CIA), and in "late October or early November" Thomas Fingar (the guy Bolton hates so much) vetted it. And he would have been vetting it as debates about whether to declassify it raged.

Finally, here's the description of what happened in the last three weeks:

By mid-November, the agencies were ready to deliver their conclusions to the White House. Intelligence officials gave a preliminary briefing Nov. 15 in the Situation Room to Vice President Cheney, national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley and other senior officials.

Notice they don't mention Condi here—who was busy trying to persuade the Europeans to increase pressure on Iran. When did they tell Condi?

The process was climaxing just as Bush was convening a Middle East peace conference in Annapolis, a meeting designed at least in part to rally the region against Iran. No one told participants about the new information, but on the same day they were gathering in Annapolis on Nov. 27, the National Intelligence Board met to finalize the new NIE. McConnell and others briefed Bush and Cheney the next day. Even though intelligence officials planned to keep it from the public, Bush later that day passed it on to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Cheney told Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

So, this offers a different version than Sy Hersh got, and suggests Stephen Hadley was kinda sorta telling the truth when he said Bush was briefed on the 28th. It would also mean that Bush immediately briefed Olmert on the NIE, as soon as he himself was briefed on it. Apparently, Olmert and the Israelis did not take

the news well.

Had they known before the summit, a senior Israeli official said, "I'm not sure we would have shown up."

Which I guess explains the head fake with Khalilzad's resolution before the UN.

And as to informing our "allies," Bush did not, apparently, extend the same courtesy of an immediate briefing to Old Europe, who didn't find out until the day the NIE appeared.

On Monday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called counterparts in Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China, which have been negotiating a new set of sanctions against Iran. Foreign officials grouched about how it was handled.

Once again, I'm curious whether anyone bothered to tell Condi this NIE was going to poop on her parties in Europe and Annapolis; I suspect Bob Woodward will tell us in a book published 3 years from today that Condi learned the NIE was coming out well after Olmert did, perhaps as late as Sunday or Monday. In any case, the sleight has apparently pissed off even Sarkozy.

That irritated European allies. "The administration is going to pay a price for not allowing allies in on it at an earlier date," said Robert J. Einhorn, a former State Department nonproliferation official. "The French had carried the administration's water on this issue and really went out on a limb to get the European Union to adopt tough sanctions. And now the rug has been pulled out from under them."

Yup, Condi's in a remarkably similar position as Powell used to be.

One final detail. This article kind of confirms

(albeit in polite-speak) what Pat Lang informed us. Here's the polite version.

By last weekend, an intense discussion broke out about whether to keep it secret. "We knew it would leak, so honesty required that we get this out ahead, to prevent it from appearing to be cherry picking," said a top intelligence official. So McConnell reversed himself, and analysts scrambled over the weekend to draft a declassified version.

Note the code. "We knew it would leak, , so honesty required that we get this out ahead, to prevent it from appearing to be cherry picking." Translation: we knew Dick was going to actually cherry-pick, so we pre-empted his NIE leaks.

Here's how the same news appears when explain by someone with Lang's frankness:

The "jungle telegraph" in Washington is booming with news of the Iran NIE. I am told that the reason the conclusions of the NIE were released is that it was communicated to the White House that "intelligence career seniors were lined up to go to jail if necessary" if the document's gist were not given to the public. Translation? Someone in that group would have gone to the media "on the record" to disclose its contents.

Anyway, the article provides a whole bunch of details that will go unnoticed on a Saturday in which everyone is more interested in the disappearing torture tapes. A pity, though. Because it really reveals how much Bush was gaming who knew and who didn't know about this intelligence.