

PHASE II: FOUR YEARS LATER

It has taken the SSCI four years, but it is about to release the long-awaited second-to-last installment of Phase II of its investigation into Iraqi intelligence claims (the last one, which examines Dougie Feith's little intelligence shop, may be finished around the time his book comes out). This report catalogs Administration claims about Iraq's WMD and ties to Al Qaeda and analyzes whether the intelligence supported those claims. Greg Miller writes that the report will have mixed conclusions.

The long-delayed document catalogs dozens of prewar assertions by President Bush and other administration officials that proved to be wildly inaccurate about Iraq's alleged stockpiles of banned weapons and pursuit of nuclear arms.

But officials say the report reaches a mixed verdict on the key question of whether the White House misused intelligence to make the case for war.

The document criticizes White House officials for making assertions that failed to reflect disagreements or uncertainties in the underlying intelligence on Iraq, officials said. But the report acknowledges that many claims were consistent with intelligence assessments in circulation at the time.

Many of the conclusions will be predictable. The BW and CW claims were largely backed up by intelligence (though I'm anxious to see where Colin Powell got the catalog of amounts he cited in his UN speech—at least some of that information came from one of Judy's informants). But with nuclear claims, the Administration simply provided the most inflammatory judgment,

ignoring the caveats. And finally, the report Scooter and Shooter's claims that Iraq and Al Qaeda were in cahoots was made up out of thin air.

Prewar assertions about Iraq's nuclear program were more problematic because they were supported by some intelligence assessments but not others.

"They were substantiated," a congressional official said, "but didn't convey the disagreements within the intelligence community."

In August 2002, for example, Vice President Dick Cheney said in a speech that "Saddam [Hussein] has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons." But by that time, the State Department's intelligence bureau was challenging the assumption that Iraq's nuclear program had been reactivated.

White House suggestions that Iraq had ties to Al Qaeda were at odds with intelligence assessments that voiced skepticism about such a relationship.

I'll be curious about several things. First, to what degree did Republicans roll Jello Jay again, cherry-picking the defensible claims while ignoring the more ridiculous ones? For example, Miller cites Cheney's August 2002 VFW address, where Cheney said "they continue to pursue an aggressive nuclear weapons program." While DOE had already questioned the nuclear tube claim, it's likely Cheney hadn't seen those questions yet. And Tenet had not yet warned the White House against using the Niger claims.

But do they include Cheney's March 16, 2003 claim that,

And we believe [Saddam] has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons. I think Mr. ElBaradei frankly is wrong.

In an obvious attempt to resuscitate the nuke claims even after the key pieces of that claim had been debunked by the IAEA? Do they include this later claim in their catalog, issued after all of the central WMD claims had been debunked?

Also, to what degree does the SSCI rehash the clear warnings offered in October 2002 not to use the Niger claims? Do they finally reveal Condi's receipt of those warnings, or do they ignore it since the Niger claim was ultimately pulled from the speech they were vetting at the time?

Miller reports that it may be some time before we get to see the report, because Committee members get one more chance to make changes, plus it needs to be declassified (and remember—Cheney refused to declassify some perfectly non-sensitive things in the last SSCI report, so expect more of those games with this, particularly since the report slams Scooter and Shooter for their Al Qaeda-Iraq fantasy). Interestingly, the report may actually have relevance to the Democratic primary—Republicans are going to try to slam Hillary for her claims, as well.

Dissatisfied with the scope of the report, Republicans on the panel are expected to attach a section outlining their objections and calling attention to prewar claims by prominent Democrats, including Clinton.

Which might make Obama's attacks on Clinton for not even reading the NIE more pertinent.

Update: Grammar fixed per billinturkey.