

NOT A QUESTION OF IF, BUT WHO, FORGED THE LETTER

As a number of you pointed out last night, Philip Giraldi says Suskind got the forged uranium document close, but no cigar.

An extremely reliable and well placed source in the intelligence community has informed me that Ron Suskind's revelation that the White House ordered the preparation of a forged letter linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda and also to attempts made to obtain yellowcake uranium is correct but that a number of details are wrong.

[snip]

My source also notes that Dick Cheney, who was behind the forgery, hated and mistrusted the Agency and would not have used it for such a sensitive assignment. Instead, he went to Doug Feith's Office of Special Plans and asked them to do the job. The Pentagon has its own false documents center, primarily used to produce fake papers for Delta Force and other special ops officers traveling under cover as businessmen. It was Feith's office that produced the letter and then surfaced it to the media in Iraq. Unlike the Agency, the Pentagon had no restrictions on it regarding the production of false information to mislead the public. Indeed, one might argue that Doug Feith's office specialized in such activity.

Now, I'm not at all surprised that Giraldi says Suskind got details wrong. The story always had a fundamental logical flaw (which Giraldi points out), which is that Cheney and CIA hate each other—and particularly hated each other in this

period, when OVP believed Tenet had forced DOJ to open the Plame investigation. Note, there is significant reason to believe that Tenet knew Cheney declassified CIA properties **over his objections**, so things were probably quite tense between CIA and OVP, just as OVP was handing over documents showing that Cheney was the one pushing to leak Plame's identity.

Also, as I pointed out here, Bob Woodward (well, consider the source) has said that Suskind's CIA sources have led him astray in the past. And, as I pointed out here, there is something surprisingly credible about Tenet's insistence that he always—up to and including late 2003—refused to endorse the Iraq-Al Qaeda claims. So there is reason to take Giraldi's post seriously.

But something still doesn't sit right with Giraldi's story, either. As Sara points out, Iyad Allawi was a CIA guy, not—at first—an OVP guy. (OVP's guy, Ahmad Chalabi, himself a fan of forgeries, discredited this one right away.) But that actually doesn't discredit the story entirely; Allawi was auditioning to be named Prime Minister in this period, and I can imagine he would do a great deal to win that prize. Here's Joe Conason on that point:

On Dec. 11, 2003 – three days before the Telegraph launched its "exclusive" on the Habbush memo – the Washington Post published an article by Dana Priest and Robin Wright headlined "Iraq Spy Service Planned by U.S. to Stem Attacks." Buried inside on Page A41, their story outlined the CIA's efforts to create a new Iraqi intelligence agency:

[snip]

So Allawi was at the CIA during the week before Coughlin got that wonderful scoop. That may not be proof of anything, either, but a picture is beginning to form.

That picture becomes sharper in the

months that followed Allawi's release of the Habbush forgery, when he suddenly returned to favor in Baghdad and eclipsed Chalabi, at least for a while. Five months later, in May 2004, the Iraqi Governing Council elected Allawi as his country's interim prime minister, reportedly under pressure from the American authorities.

So Allawi certainly had reason to plant the forgery, and Chalabi's debunking of it suggests the forgery may have been a prop in their rivalry. That still leaves the little issue of whether Tenet would cooperate with Dick Cheney during this period.

Just for shits and giggles, I looked at Tenet's book to see whether anything he admitted to during this period seemed to suggest he would cooperate with Dick Cheney to plant disinformation. And two things stick out. First, Tenet describes the struggle to get the Administration to agree to establish an Iraqi intelligence service.

In the midst of all this [dispute over de-Baathification], we started pushing for the establishment of a new Iraqi intelligence service. Any government intent on protecting people needs an organization to acquire information regarding internal security and external threats. That much seems obvious, but we ran into strong and immediate resistance to our suggestions on building such a service.

Thus, the acceptance of such an idea in December 2003 suggests the sharp decline of Iraq under Jerry Bremer may have put Tenet, however briefly, into a more central position in formulating the Administration's Iraq policy.

Tenet also describes being asked—after the forgery was planted—to try to persuade Allawi to

serve as Defense Minister.

I'd met Allawi a number of times before, in Washington and London. We didn't know each other well, but as DCI, I was a beneficiary of all the trust and goodwill that the CIA had built up over the years with him and the INA.

He goes on to describe what we already know—that when Allawi became Prime Minister in 2004, people thought it was a CIA plot. Of course Allawi became Prime Minister just as four things happened: the torture policy in the Administration increasingly put the CIA at legal risk, it became increasingly clear that CIA didn't cover for OVP in the Plame leak, with Woodward's publication of Plan of Attack and with it the "Slam Dunk" claim it became clear that the Administration had thrown Tenet under the bus, and, finally, Tenet's resignation.

But those are the things that happened six months after the planting of this forgery; back when it was planted, Tenet was in a reasonably strong position with NSC, if not with OVP. We know that Tenet was still trying to sustain the WMD myth in January 2004; what's to say that in fall 2003, he wasn't willing to use his position of influence to contribute CIA assets to bolstering that claim?

At this point, I'm not sure what confluence of bureaucratic in-fighting in the Administration concocted that letter—it could be any weird combination of contributions. But one thing seems clear. That letter was a US-backed forgery.