

DICK CHENEY, TORTURE, IRAQ, AND VALERIE PLAME

I've been reluctant to embrace suggestions that torture, Iraq, and Valerie Plame were all going to coalesce into one linked story. After all, it would be too easy for me, of all people, to argue these stories were linked. But I increasingly suspect they are.

First, let me pull together some data points.

Nancy Pelosi and Bob Graham are linking the non-briefings on torture with the Iraq NIE

Now that they are explicitly stating that CIA lied in its September briefings on torture, Nancy Pelosi and Bob Graham are also both linking those lies with the lies they were telling—at precisely the same time—in the Iraq NIE. Here's Pelosi:

Of all the briefings that I have received at this same time, earlier, they were misinforming the American people there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and it was an imminent threat to the United States. I, to the limit of what I could say to my caucus, told them, the intelligence does not support the imminent threat that this Administration is contending. Whether it's on the subject of what's happening in Iraq, whether it's on the subject of techniques used by the intelligence community on those they are interrogating, every step of the way, the Administration was misleading the Congress.

And that is the issue. And that is why we need a truth commission.

And here's Graham:

Yes, they're obligated to tell the full Intelligence Committee, not just the leadership. This was the same time within the same week, in fact, that the CIA was submitting its National Intelligence Estimate on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq which proves so erroneous that we went to war, have had thousands of persons killed and injured as a result of misinformation.

Now, it's quite possible Graham and Pelosi are tying these two lies together just to remind reporters how unreliable the CIA is. Perhaps they're doing it to remind reporters of how they got burned leading into the Iraq War, trusting the spin of the Administration.

But perhaps they're trying to say there's a direct connection, an explicit one, between the NIE and torture. We know Ibn Sheikh al-Libi's claims appeared in there. Did anything that came out of Abu Zubaydah's interrogation? Or Ramzi bin al-Shibh?

Did CIA not reveal they were torturing detainees to dodge any question about the accuracy of claims about Iraq intelligence?

The proposal to waterboard Muhammed Khudayr al-Dulaymi

Then there's not just the revelation, by Charles Duelfer, but the timing he describes of OVP proposals to waterboard Muhammed Khudayr al-Dulaymi, a Mukhabarat officer. He says Dick Cheney's office proposed waterboarding the officer in late April to May 2003.

At the end of April 2003, not long after the fall of Baghdad, U.S. forces captured an Iraqi who Bush White House officials suspected might provide information of a relationship between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime. Muhammed Khudayr al-Dulaymi was the head of the M-14 section of Mukhabarat, one of Saddam's secret police organizations.

His responsibilities included chemical weapons and contacts with terrorist groups.

[snip]

Duelfer says he heard from "some in Washington at very senior levels (not in the CIA)," who thought Khudayr's interrogation had been "too gentle" and suggested another route, one that they believed has proven effective elsewhere. "They asked if enhanced measures, such as waterboarding, should be used," Duelfer writes. "The executive authorities addressing those measures made clear that such techniques could legally be applied only to terrorism cases, and our debriefings were not as yet terrorism-related. The debriefings were just debriefings, even for this creature."

Duelfer will not disclose who in Washington had proposed the use of waterboarding, saying only: "The language I can use is what has been cleared." In fact, two senior U.S. intelligence officials at the time tell The Daily Beast that the suggestion to waterboard came from the Office of Vice President Cheney.

[snip]

"Everyone knew there would be more smiles in Washington if WMD stocks were found," Duelfer said in the interview. "My only obligation was to find the truth. It would be interesting if there was WMD in May 2003, but what was more interesting to me was looking at the entire regime through the slice of WMD."

But, Duelfer says, Khudayr in fact repeatedly denied knowing the location of WMD or links between Saddam's regime and al Qaeda and was not subjected to any enhanced interrogation. Duelfer says

the idea that he would have known of such links was "ludicrous".

Cheney's office was proposing the waterboarding of a Mukhabarat officer in April to May 2003. That's significant because Cheney wouldn't have had to work through the chain of command in the least to propose waterboarding this guy. He had a representative on the ground in Baghdad, closely involved in intelligence collection: Harold Rhode. (Those who know my work well will be smiling at this timing, but for now, I'll have to leave my treatment of Rhode and Kudhayr at that.)

Dougie Feith has said his DOD intell office helped formulate policy on detainees

As I reported last week, when asked specifically about how his little intelligence shop at DOD helped formulate policy, Feith described three ways:

- DoD response to the presence in Iraq of the al-Qaida affiliated Ansar al-Islam terrorist group.
- DoD response to the presence in Iraq of al-Qaida operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his CB W network.
- Helping to formulate requirements for the debriefings of al-Qaida fighters detained at Guantanamo and Bagram.

Granted, Khudayr was not held at Gitmo or Bagram, nor did he have ties (AFAIK) to Ansar al-Islam or Zarqawi.

But Harold Rhode—who at the time OVP suggested Khudayr be waterboarded was in Baghdad—was

Feith's deputy and tied to his intelligence shop. If Feith was involved in "formulating requirements for the debriefings of detainees" in Iraq at all, Rhode would have been the one on the scene to implement that policy.

Dick Cheney outed Valerie Plame because of Joe—but also because of pushback at CIA

There were two factors that led Dick Cheney and Scooter Libby—on the orders of George Bush—to target the Wilsons starting on June 9, 2003. The first was a series of articles—several of them written by Walter Pincus—describing doubts at CIA about Iraq intelligence.

On May 29, Pincus reported with Karen DeYoung, "US Hedges on Finding Iraqi Weapons." It included a statement from Paul Wolfowitz (Feith's boss) that revealed a difference of opinion over things like Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda.

Looking back at the spotlight the administration cast on the weapons issue in building its case for war, Wolfowitz said, "There was no oversell." But he acknowledged yesterday that there "had been a tendency to emphasize the WMD [weapons of mass destruction] issue" as the primary justification for war because of differences of opinion within the administration over the strength of other charges against the Iraqi government, including its alleged ties to al Qaeda.

On May 31, Pincus had a scathing AI article, "Tenet Defends Iraq Intelligence."

CIA Director George J. Tenet took the unusual step yesterday of publicly defending the agency's intelligence on Iraq's possession of chemical and biological weapons, amid growing criticism that the Bush administration exaggerated what it knew about Iraqi weapons programs to advance the case for

going to war.

The article revealed the three complaints to the CIA Ombud about politicized intelligence.

Three complaints have been filed with the CIA ombudsman about the administration's possible politicization of intelligence on Iraq, an intelligence official said. He would not describe the substance of the complaints.

One senior administration official said CIA analysts have complained they felt pressured by administration policymakers who questioned them before the war about their assessment of Iraq's arms programs.

It reported the first salvo from VIPS—the group of intelligence professional condemning the politicization of intelligence.

Tenet's statement came in response to the release on Thursday of a "memorandum" to President Bush posted on several Internet sites by a group of retired CIA and State Department intelligence analysts. The analysts said there is "growing mistrust and cynicism" among intelligence professionals over "intelligence cited by you and your chief advisers to justify the war against Iraq."

The group, which calls itself Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, said the failure to find weapons of mass destruction after six weeks of searching "suggests either that such weapons are simply not there or that those eventually found there will not be in sufficient quantity or capability to support your repeated claim that Iraq posed a grave threat to our country's security."

It targeted Feith's little intelligence shop and claims about ties to al Qaeda.

But opponents of the war – some from inside the government, others from outside – expressed concern that the administration failed to make its case about Iraq's weapons programs, as well as the country's alleged ties to al Qaeda. Opponents focused much of their criticism on a Pentagon intelligence analysis unit established last year by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, who was among the administration's most prominent advocates for invading Iraq.

And it repeated the reports of Cheney's (and Libby's) visits to CIA prior to the war.

A senior administration official said that during the run-up to the war, the CIA's Iraq analysts had been questioned by administration policymakers, including Cheney. But the official added, "There is nothing wrong with them sitting down with analysts and asking them questions about how they know this or that."

Over the past year, Cheney has made "multiple trips to the CIA on many different subjects, including several times on Iraq," Cathie Martin, a Cheney spokeswoman, confirmed yesterday.

Thus, the story brought together Cheney's personal involvement, false claims about WMD and al Qaeda, and Dougie Feith's role, as well as portraying a range of current and former intelligence officials directly attacking the politicization of intelligence.

A June 5 Pincus article, which evidence submitted at the Libby trial makes clear was a big deal within OVP, expands the report on pressure from Cheney and Libby.

Vice President Cheney and his most senior aide made multiple trips to the CIA over the past year to question analysts studying Iraq's weapons programs and alleged links to al Qaeda, creating an environment in which some analysts felt they were being pressured to make their assessments fit with the Bush administration's policy objectives, according to senior intelligence officials.

With Cheney taking the lead in the administration last August in advocating military action against Iraq by claiming it had weapons of mass destruction, the visits by the vice president and his chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, "sent signals, intended or otherwise, that a certain output was desired from here," one senior agency official said yesterday.

It also focused on Feith's shop.

In a signal of administration concern over the controversy, two senior Pentagon officials yesterday held a news conference to challenge allegations that they pressured the CIA or other agencies to slant intelligence for political reasons. "I know of no pressure," said Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary for policy. "I know of nobody who pressured anybody."

Feith said a special Pentagon office to analyze intelligence in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks did not necessarily focus on Iraq but came up with "some interesting observations about the linkages between Iraq and al Qaeda."

Officials in the intelligence community and on Capitol Hill, however, have described the office as an alternative

source of intelligence analysis that helped the administration make its case that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat.

On June 7, Pincus and Dana Priest reported discrepancies between what analysts concluded and what Bush and Cheney said publicly.

During the weeks last fall before critical votes in Congress and the United Nations on going to war in Iraq, senior administration officials, including President Bush, expressed certainty in public that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, even though U.S. intelligence agencies were reporting they had no direct evidence that such weapons existed.

In an example of the tenor of the administration's statements at the time, the president said in the Rose Garden on Sept. 26 that "the Iraqi regime possesses biological and chemical weapons. The Iraqi regime is building the facilities necessary to make more biological and chemical weapons."

But a Defense Intelligence Agency report on chemical weapons, widely distributed to administration policymakers around the time of the president's speech, stated there was "no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing or stockpiling chemical weapons or whether Iraq has or will establish its chemical agent production facilities."

On June 8, Condi Rice appeared on George Stephanopolous' show; he asked her extensively about the case for war and brought up Wilson's accusation from the Kristof article. The very next morning, after Bush told Libby he was concerned about the Kristof allegations, Libby and John Hannah and Dick Cheney started madly

collecting oppo research on Joe Wilson. By the end of the week, Cheney was trying to launder Valerie's identity through Robert Grenier's office so it would go into a Pincus article. So when, on June 12, Pincus reiterated Wilson's charges anew and not long after Spencer and friends repeated it, Cheney and Libby started leaking Plame's identity directly to Judy Miller.

When asked about these articles during his grand jury appearance a year later, incidentally, Scooter Libby still remembered them and their content.

The point is, it was never just Valerie and Joe. Dick Cheney outed Valerie Wilson because of a sense that a large number of intelligence professionals were about to reveal just how fraudulent the case for war had been, with a special focus on his own pressure of intelligence professionals and Dougie Feith's little intelligence shop.

And we know that Cheney's office was already trying to get out of that fix by torturing people. We don't know what was happening with Gitmo interrogations at this time, nor what questions the torturers were asking Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. But Duelfer's revelations make it clear that Cheney's office had already, frantically, been trying to torture some kind of validation for his claims for war out of both Iraqi and al Qaeda detainees.

Wilson's recent comments tying everything together

Which brings us to a piece Joe Wilson wrote several weeks ago, after Jonathan Landay reported that Cheney and Rummy had ordered torture to find ties between Iraq and al Qaeda. Wilson alluded to that report.

We have also learned that a principal reason for having tortured senior al Qaeda detainees was not, in fact, to defend the Homeland, but rather to build the case for war with Iraq based on

alleged ties between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Despite literally hundreds of waterboarding sessions, there was no evidence developed that such a link existed. But that did not stop Cheney. He and others in the Bush administration simply asserted a link even though they knew one did not exist.

And then tied all of these things together.

The disinformation campaign to manipulate public opinion in favor of the invasion, the torture program, and the illegal exposure of a clandestine CIA agent—my wife, Valerie Plame Wilson—were linked events. In their desperate effort to gather material to whip up public support, Cheney and others resorted to torture, well known in the intelligence craft to elicit inherently unreliable information. Cheney & Co. then pressured the CIA to put its stamp of approval on a series of falsehoods—26 of which were inserted into Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech before the United Nations Security Council. At the same time, Cheney was furiously attempting to suppress the true information that Saddam Hussein was not seeking yellowcake uranium in Niger. After I published the facts in an article in The New York Times in July 2003, Cheney tried to punish me and discredit the truth by directing the outing of a CIA operative who happened to be my wife.

Now, as I said, I still remain skeptical that it's all as neat as this. It may well be that Joe is pulling all these threads together because Dick Cheney is a secretive power hungry asshole to everyone, and the renewed focus on Cheney gives the Wilsons another opportunity to hit back at Cheney for outing Valerie.

But I'm struck by two things: the insistence on Pelosi's and Graham's part that the NIE lies have ties to the torture briefings. And the likelihood that Dick Cheney's guy in Iraq, Harold Rhode, may have suggested waterboarding an Iraqi to shore up the case for war.