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Moby Feith

Call us Ishmael. Or rather, call us amazed -- at Senator Carl Levin's Ahab-like pursuit of Douglas Feith, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and one of the architects of U.S. anti-terror policy and the war in Iraq. This is one of those cases worth reporting not on the merits, but because the maniacal effort says more about the accuser than the accused.

Like any other public official, Mr. Feith is responsible for his decisions on Iraq. But just about every sentence in a 47-page report issued last week by the Michigan Democrat contains the word "Feith," and a striking feature of the Senator's attack is how personal it is. In Mr. Levin's telling, Mr. Feith is the Pentagon mastermind who cooked up false intelligence reports on Iraq and al Qaeda and then sold them to Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney and President Bush.



Carl Levin

These accusations have long since been discredited, but Mr. Levin has conveniently revived them 12 days before November 2. In doing so he had to ignore the conclusions of another report to which he also signed his name. The Senate Intelligence Committee, on which Mr. Levin serves, scrutinized the same set of events and issued a unanimous report in July completely exonerating Mr. Feith and his team.

We'll spare you most details of his "evidence," which are as arcane as the whale chapters that 11th-graders skip over in Melville's novel. But the broad point -- that Mr. Feith's team concocted intelligence -- is preposterous. Early in 2002 a career-service analyst working on Mr. Feith's staff of 1,500 came across some old intelligence reports from 1995-'96 pointing to an Iraq-al Qaeda connection. Post-9/11 the potential value of such reports was higher than ever, and the analyst questioned whether the CIA was giving the earlier intelligence the weight it deserved in its current assessments. The discovery eventually made its way up to Secretary Rumsfeld, who arranged for then-CIA Director George Tenet to be briefed. Mr. Tenet was intrigued enough to order an unusual followup meeting between his staff and Mr. Feith's.

For this sin, Mr. Levin accuses Mr. Feith's team of "developing their own alternative intelligence analysis" and of "advocacy." Our own view is that the intelligence community could use more critical thinking of this sort and that the Defense queries sound like useful consumer feedback. As the full Senate Intelligence Committee's report put it: "In some cases those [intelligence community analysts] interviewed stated that the questions had forced them to go back and review intelligence reporting,

and that during this exercise they came across information they had overlooked in initial readings."

We might also add that on the broader point of a possible Iraq-al Qaeda connection, the Levin report fails to mention the most authoritative unclassified document on the subject: Mr. Tenet's letter to Congress in October 2002, in which he laid out evidence of links "going back a decade." Mr. Levin also misrepresents the 9/11 Commission's report, which noted ties dating back to the mid-1990s, when Iraqis met with Osama bin Laden in Sudan.

Finally, the Levin report raises a new accusation: that Mr. Feith deceived Congress about intelligence on Iraq's pre-war links to al Qaeda. Mr. Levin's reasoning is too tortured to rebut here, but it's worth noting a fatal flaw in his logic. Mr. Feith's alleged deception took place at the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004. That is, the events occurred after the invasion of Iraq, when they could have had no influence on the decision to go to war.

John Kerry has mentioned Mr. Levin as a possible Secretary of Defense if he wins next week. Mr. Levin's partisan obsessions do not bode well for his ability to do such an important job.

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