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Intelligence Games

The Pentagon IG report shows we're not serious about reform.

By Andrew C. McCarthy

Well, we knew this was coming.

The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *International Herald Tribune* this morning all tout the long awaited report by the Pentagon's Inspector General on the Defense Department's handling of prewar intelligence on Iraq. Long awaited by Democratic Senators Carl Levin and Jay Rockefeller, anyway.

The report is part big "so what" and part perfect illustration that Congress loves to talk about intelligence reform but cares little about reformed intelligence.

As for "so what": The IG's report concludes that a Pentagon unit which scrubbed existing intelligence about Iraq's terror ties under the leadership of Doug Feith, then-Undersecretary for Policy, did not mislead Congress. It further finds that neither Feith nor any other Defense officials engaged in wrong-doing. Nevertheless, acting Inspector General Thomas F. Gimble huffs and puffs and contends that Feith's unit still behaved "inappropriately."

Why? Because it dared to question that which we now know for a fact was wrong: the Intelligence Community's assessments about Iraq, and, in particular, the conventional wisdom that secular Saddam and his Baathists would never collude with Islamic fundamentalists.

Let's leave aside the innumerable known connections between Saddam and Islamic terror—the harbored jihadists; the meetings between top al Qaeda and Iraqi intelligence officials; the \$300,000 cash pay-off to Ayman Zawahiri in 1998; the Iraqi intelligence operative who accompanied a jihadist to Pakistan in 1998 to explore the possibility of bombing American and British targets; the Clinton administration's 1998 bombing of a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory believed to be a WMD venture involving Iraq and al Qaeda; the Clinton administration's conviction that Iraq offered bin Laden safe-harbor; the presence of an Iraqi intelligence operative at a 2000 Kuala Lumpur meeting of terrorists later involved in the U.S.S. Cole and 9/11 attacks, etc., etc., etc.

Let's say, for argument's sake, that some or all of these things, and more, never really happened. How many more years does the Sunni resistance in Iraq—Baathists in confederation with jihadists—have to go on before Senator Levin & Co. give up that tired no-connection ghost?

You want to make believe it was only the Bush administration's March 2003 invasion that brought

these lovers together? Great. There's a desk waiting for you at Langley ... and probably on the next 9/11 Commission, too. Not to mention a bridge for sale in Brooklyn.

In any event, what was so "inappropriate"? The people who actually had to fight the war had the audacity to conduct their own independent assessment of what we now know beyond cavil was the Intelligence Community's appallingly sparse and shoddy work. Feith and his unit engaged in critical thinking (can't have that!), and allegedly failed to register their disagreements in a fashion consistent with Intelligence Community protocols (i.e., the governing standards under which, in just the last two decades, the IC has missed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of India as a nuclear power, etc.).

Happily, the Defense Department did not take the IG's diagnosis lying down. As the *Times* notes:

The Pentagon's rebuttal vehemently rejected the report's contention that there was "inappropriate" use of intelligence by Pentagon civilians and said the effort to identify links between Saddam Hussein's government and Al Qaeda was done at the direction of Mr. Wolfowitz, who was deputy defense secretary at the time. Describing the work as a "fresh, critical look" at intelligence agency conclusions about Al Qaeda and Iraq, the Pentagon rebuttal said, "It is somewhat difficult to understand how activities that admittedly were lawful and authorized (in this case by either the secretary of defense or the deputy secretary of defense) could nevertheless be characterized as 'inappropriate.'"

It's really not so difficult. The characterization happened because the Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz/Feith detractors who've agitated unceasingly over purported prewar intelligence manipulation either don't understand or don't care about how intelligence analysis is supposed to work—particularly if there are political points to be scored with a weary public during a difficult war.

The biggest problem with intelligence is its natural human tendency toward group think—it's why smart people can miss the big things with such regularity. It is not easy to question one's own beliefs constantly. It is not easy for a lumbering Leviathan of a bureaucracy to challenge its core assumptions dynamically.

Our competitive, two-party system, our government based on checks and balances—these are constructs designed to fight this proclivity toward echo-chamber. Senator Levin may drive Republicans crazy, but we want Democratic congressional leaders to be able to challenge a Republican administration, and vice versa. A criminal defendant may appear overwhelmingly guilty, but we want him to have zealous representation to assure ourselves that the prosecutor's case is air-tight. The Supreme Court is apt to do better when it has a Scalia and a Breyer, pushing each other to justify their rationales.

The Intelligence Community has never assimilated this healthy adversarial ethic. Thus, we are constantly burned by the unpredicted. Yet the IC's apologists want it immunized from criticism (especially when it is thoroughly politicized and reliably leaks to undermine a Republican administration) no matter how poorly it performs and no matter how much it gets wrong.

The best of the post 9/11 investigations, the Silberman-Robb "Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction," had this to say after thoroughly reviewing the IC's performance on Iraq:

The intelligence community needs to be pushed. It will not do its best unless it is pressed by

policy-makers—sometimes to the point of discomfort. Analysts must be pressed to explain how much they don't know; the collection agencies must be pressed to explain why they don't have better information on key topics. While policy-makers must be prepared to credit intelligence that doesn't fit their preferences, no important intelligence assessment should be accepted without sharp questioning that forces the community to explain exactly how it came to that assessment and what alternatives might also be true. This is not "politicization"; it is a necessary part of the intelligence process.

It is precisely the necessary part of the intelligence process which the Pentagon's civilian leadership under Feith, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld insisted on. It would have been the height of irresponsibility to do otherwise. After all, according to Robb-Silberman, the debacle attributable to our prewar ignorance about Iraq

was in large part the result of analytical shortcomings; intelligence analysts were too wedded to their assumptions about Saddam's intentions. But it was also a failure on the part of those who collect intelligence—CIA's and the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) spies, the National Security Agency's (NSA) eavesdroppers, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's (NGA) imagery experts. [Footnote omitted] In the end, those agencies collected precious little intelligence for the analysts to analyze, and much of what they did collect was either worthless or misleading. Finally, it was a failure to communicate effectively with policymakers; the Intelligence Community didn't adequately explain just how little good intelligence it had—or how much its assessments were driven by assumptions and inferences rather than concrete evidence.

That assessment homes in on Iraq's weapons program. But the criticism applies to Iraq across the board. We knew very little.

So the most perilous problem we face is thin, poorly analyzed intelligence driven by faulty assumptions. But still, after all we've been through, the IG's report and those seizing on it would have us believe that critiquing such intelligence, rather than swallowing it whole, is somehow "inappropriate."

Good luck preventing the next attack.

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