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BOOKSHELF

Inside the Inside Story

George Tenet's new book omits crucial facts and includes blatant fictions.

BY DOUGLAS J. FEITH

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Echoes of "slam dunk" so vex former Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet that he has written a book. Had he never blurted those words to the president, Mr. Tenet tells us, he might not have written it. He wants to explain what the words meant and how they had so little importance on that December 2002 day in the Oval Office. Along the way, he wants to explain the intelligence community's role in the lead-up to the Iraq war. His book does so, mainly through revelations he did not intend.

Anyone can make an honest mistake. But the problem with George Tenet is that he doesn't seem to care to get his facts straight. He is not meticulous. He is willing to make up stories that suit his purposes and to suppress information that does not.

On the very first page, he constructs an elaborate anecdote to show the pervasive and bad influence of the neoconservatives. The story is that Richard Perle, chairman of a Defense Department advisory board, was at the White House for an early-morning meeting on Sept. 12, 2001, even before Mr. Tenet arrived to brief the president. As Mr. Tenet was entering the West Wing, Mr. Perle, exiting, tells him: "Iraq has to pay a price for what happened yesterday. They bear responsibility." Note that Mr. Tenet puts the word "yesterday" within the quotation marks. He also describes where the two of them were standing as he thought: "Who has Richard Perle been meeting with in the White House so early in the morning on today of all days?" Note "today of all days."

Mr. Perle has recently reported, however, that he was not at the White House that day. He was in France. Mr. Tenet was asked on television this week about Mr. Perle's refutation. He said that he must have gotten his dates mixed up. *But the date is essential to the story.* In any event, Mr. Perle says that nothing like that exchange ever occurred.

The date, the physical descriptions, the quotation marks are all, in the words of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Mikado," "merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."

Another example: Mr. Tenet resents that the CIA was criticized for its work on Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, in particular, Iraq's relationship with al Qaeda. On this score he is especially angry at Vice President Dick Cheney, at Mr. Cheney's chief of staff, Scooter Libby, at Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and at me--I was the head of the Defense Department's policy organization. Mr. Tenet devotes a chapter to the matter of Iraq and al Qaeda, giving it the title: "No Authority, Direction or Control." The phrase implies that we argued that Saddam exercised such powers--authority, direction and control--over al Qaeda. We made no such argument.

Rather we said that the CIA's analysts were not giving serious, professional attention to information about ties between Iraq and al Qaeda. The CIA's assessments were incomplete, nonrigorous and shaped

around the dubious assumption that secular Iraqi Baathists would be unwilling to cooperate with al Qaeda religious fanatics, even when they shared strategic interests. This assumption was disproved when Baathists and jihadists became allies against us in the post-Saddam insurgency, but before the war it was the foundation of much CIA analysis.

Mr. Tenet's account of all this gives the reader no idea of the substance of our critique, which was that the CIA's analysts were suppressing information. They were not showing policy makers reports that justified concern about ties between Iraq and al Qaeda. Mr. Tenet does tell us that the CIA briefed Mr. Cheney on Iraq and al Qaeda in September 2002 and that the "briefing was a disaster" because "Libby and the vice president arrived with such detailed knowledge on people, sources, and timelines that the senior CIA analytic manager doing the briefing that day simply could not compete." He implies that there was improper bullying but then adds: "We weren't ready for this discussion."

This is an abject admission. He is talking about September 2002--a year after 9/11! This was the month that the president brought the Iraq threat before the United Nations General Assembly. This was several weeks *after* I took my staff to meet with Mr. Tenet and two-dozen or so CIA analysts to challenge the quality of the agency's work on Iraq and al Qaeda.

Mr. Tenet savages the staffer from my office who presented that critique, although elsewhere he sanctimoniously derides "despicable" political attacks on hard-working professionals. He misstates her credentials, which include 20 years of experience as a professional intelligence analyst. (He calls her a "naval reservist," which she was not.) He garbles the title of her briefing: It was not "Iraq and al-Qa'ida--Making the Case" but the perfectly neutral "Assessing the Relationship Between Iraq and al Qaida." Mr. Tenet puts in her mouth the haughty and foolish assertion that the al Qaeda-Iraq issue was "open and shut" and "no further analysis is required." I was there, and she didn't say anything even close to that. The whole point of her presentation was to urge further analysis.

Mr. Tenet hosted our briefing because my boss, Donald Rumsfeld, personally suggested he do so. Mr. Tenet knew that the agency's dismissive view of Iraq's relationship with al Qaeda was controversial--and of importance to the nation. So there was no excuse, weeks later, for senior CIA officials to be so thoroughly unready to brief Mr. Cheney on the subject. The September 2002 meeting was not a surprise bed-check, after all; it was a scheduled visit by the vice president.

Mr. Tenet writes that, two months later, his team was "ready for another visit by the vice president." But he fails to mention that in the meantime--on Oct. 7, 2002--he sent the Senate Intelligence Committee a letter about Iraq and al Qaeda that became the administration's most important public statement on the subject.

Why is this key statement omitted from Mr. Tenet's book? Well, it vindicated the earlier criticism of the CIA's analysts. Mr. Tenet's Oct. 7 letter made clear that the analysts had been understating the problem. The letter set out concerns about the al Qaeda-Iraq relationship more clearly than anything the CIA had published before. The Senate Intelligence Committee reviewed the entire arc of this controversy--the agency's first analyses, the sequence of meetings, the input from the White House and Pentagon--and concluded, in its unanimous June 2004 report: "The Committee found that this process--the policymakers' probing questions--actually improved the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) products." Mr. Tenet does not mention this Senate finding either.

I stress these omissions because Mr. Tenet is doing in his book just what my office had criticized the CIA for doing in its prewar analysis: omitting information that contradicts preconceived arguments. It's a form of cherry-picking, a charge that Mr. Tenet throws at others on several occasions.

Eventually, in a have-it-both-ways concession, Mr. Tenet explains that there actually was a "solid basis" for "concern" about the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda with respect to "safe haven, contacts and training." He winds up confirming the essence of what the CIA's critics had said--that there was worrisome information about Iraq's ties to al Qaeda that deserved to be presented to policy makers. But

he never admits that those critics were correct. He doesn't even acknowledge that they acted in good faith.

Fairness, evidently, was not Mr. Tenet's motivating impulse as an author. His book is defensive. It aims low--to settle scores. The prose is humdrum. Mr. Tenet includes no citations that would let the reader check the accuracy of his account. He offers no explanation of why we went to war in Iraq. So, is the book useless? No.

What it does offer is insight into Mr. Tenet. It allows you to hear the way he talked--fast, loose, blustery, emotional, imprecise, from the "gut." Mr. Tenet proudly refers to the guidance of his "gut" several times in the book--a strange boast from someone whose stock-in-trade should be accuracy and precision. "At the Center of the Storm" also allows you to see the way he reasoned--unimaginatively and inconsistently. And it gives a glimpse of how he operated: He picked sides; he played favorites. The people he liked got his attention and understanding, their judgments his approval; the people he disliked he treated harshly and smeared. His loyalty is to tribe rather than truth.

Mr. Tenet makes a peculiar claim of detachment, as if he had not been a top official in the Bush administration. He wants readers not to blame him for the president's decision to invade Iraq. He implies that he never supported it and never even heard it debated. Mr. Tenet writes: "In many cases, we were *not* aware of what our own government was trying to do. The one thing we were certain of was that our warnings were falling on deaf ears."

Mr. Tenet's point here builds on the book's much-publicized statements that the author never heard the president and his national-security team debate "the imminence of the Iraqi threat," whether or not it was "wise to go to war" or when the war should start. He paints a distorted picture here.

But even if it were true that he never heard any such debate and was seriously dissatisfied with the dialogue in the White House Situation Room, he had hundreds of opportunities to improve the discussion by asking questions or making comments. I sat with him in many of the meetings, and no one prevented him from talking. It is noteworthy that Mr. Tenet met with the president for an intelligence briefing six days every week for years. Why didn't he speak up if he thought that the president was dangerously wrong or inadequately informed?

One of Mr. Tenet's main arguments is that he was somehow disconnected from the decision to go to war. Under the circumstances, it seems odd that he would call his book "At the Center of the Storm." He should have called it "At the Periphery of the Storm" or maybe: "Was That a Storm That Just Went By?"

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