

# The Bush Administration's Use of the Forged Iraq Nuclear Evidence

The evidence that Iraq sought to obtain uranium from an African country, Niger, played a major role in the case against Iraq. The evidence was a central component of the assertion that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons, the only true weapon of mass destruction. The evidence was used by the British in their dossier against Iraq, by the State Department in its response to Iraq's arms declaration, by the President in his State of the Union address, and by numerous senior Administration officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. There was only one problem with this evidence: as the International Atomic Energy Agency revealed on March 7, 2003, the evidence was forged.

This fact sheet describes how the forged nuclear evidence was used by U.S. and British officials and the tremendous coverage in the media it received.

September 2002

## The "British Dossier"

On September 24, 2002, British Prime Minister Tony Blair released an intelligence report on Iraq often referred to as the "British dossier." One of the major new claims in the dossier was the assertion that "As a result of the intelligence we judge that Iraq has . . . sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa, despite having no active civil nuclear power programme that could require it."<sup>1</sup>

The findings of the British dossier were embraced by the Bush Administration. At a press briefing on September 24, 2002, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said:

I think it's obvious to say that the United States has close relationships with intelligence communities around the world, particularly in the nations like Britain that are most allied with us. And we often work shoulder to shoulder to help prevent problems from becoming life-threatening and to share information. . . . In the case of this report, . . . we agree with their findings.

The release of the British dossier received widespread media coverage, with the claim that Iraq sought uranium from Africa being prominently featured on network news and the front pages of major newspapers. The following are some excerpts:

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<sup>1</sup> *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government*, 6 (Sept. 24, 2002).

- *NBC Nightly News* (Sept. 24, 2002): “[A] strong indictment today from British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He released a 50-page dossier that claims new evidence Saddam Hussein is trying to acquire nuclear weapons. . . . Among the dossier's charges . . . that Saddam has been trying to acquire uranium in Africa and is actively trying to build a nuclear bomb.”
- *CBS Evening News* (Sept. 24, 2002): “In his address to the British Parliament, Tony Blair unveiled a lengthy dossier of evidence against Saddam, including his attempts to buy uranium from Africa . . . . President Bush loved the speech. And why not? The intelligence that went into it was closely coordinated with the White House.”
- *New York Times* (Sept. 25, 2002): “The report contained what it said was intelligence information that Iraq was trying to acquire significant quantities of uranium from unspecified countries in Africa, despite having no civilian nuclear program. . . . The chief new elements in the report, experts said, appeared to be the British assessments that Iraq could so quickly launch a chemical or biological warhead and that it had sought to acquire uranium in Africa that could be used to make nuclear weapons.”
- *Washington Post* (Sept. 25, 2002): “Iraq could deploy nerve gas and anthrax weapons within 45 minutes of an order from President Saddam Hussein or his son, and it has been seeking to purchase uranium from Africa on the black market to build a nuclear bomb, according to a British intelligence dossier released today by Prime Minister Tony Blair.”

#### October 2002

### The Iraq War Resolution

On October 10, 2002, the House passed the resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq, and the Senate followed suit on October 11. In the weeks leading up to and after the vote on the resolution, over 180 members of Congress cited the threat of Iraqi nuclear capability as a reason for supporting the use of force in Iraq. Numerous members specifically cited the Iraq’s purported effort to obtain uranium from an African country in their floor statements during debate over the war resolution. For example:

- *Senator Olympia Snowe* (October 9, 2002): “As reported in the U.S. intelligence community document made public on October 4, 2002, he has been seeking to revamp and accelerate his nuclear weapons program. . . . This information is echoed in the September 24, 2002, intelligence dossier released by British Prime Minister Tony Blair – a critical voice and ally in our war on terrorism. . . . Tellingly, the report also documents Iraq’s attempts to buy large quantities of uranium from Africa, even though Iraq has no civil nuclear power program.”
- *Rep. David Dreier, Chair of the House Rules Committee* (Oct. 8, 2002): “Perhaps more frightening, we know that Iraq is actively seeking to reestablish its nuclear weapons program and has reportedly been seeking uranium to achieve that goal.”

December 2002

## The Iraqi Arms Declaration

On December 7, 2002, the Iraqi government submitted its arms declaration to the United Nations. In its response to the Iraqi declaration, the State Department highlighted the failure of Iraq to account for its attempts to procure uranium from Niger. According to the State Department, one of eight “key omissions and deceptions” in Iraq’s weapons declaration was that “[t]he Declaration ignores efforts to procure uranium from Niger.”<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. emphasis on the failure of Iraq to explain its efforts to obtain uranium from Africa was reflected in news coverage. Once again, the forged nuclear evidence was prominently featured on network news and the front pages of newspapers:

- *NBC Nightly News* (Dec. 19, 2002): “What could Iraq be hiding? The State Department says today, a long and dangerous list. . . . U.S. officials say that Iraq . . . attempted to buy uranium from Africa to produce nuclear weapons.”
- *New York Times* (Dec. 13, 2002): “American intelligence agencies have reached a preliminary conclusion that Iraq’s 12,000 page declaration of its weapons program fails to account for chemical and biological agents missing when inspectors left Iraq four years ago, American officials and United Nations diplomats said today. In addition, Iraq’s declaration on its nuclear program, they say, leaves open a host of questions. Among them is why Iraq was seeking to buy uranium in Africa in recent years.”
- *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 20, 2002): “Moving to support charges that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is building banned weapons, the Bush Administration for the first time released a list of its chief concerns. . . . The U.S. list notes . . . that Baghdad did not explain its effort to buy uranium from Niger.”

January 2003

## The State of the Union

In January, senior Administration officials continued to cite prominently the evidence that Iraq sought to obtain uranium from Africa. For example, on January 23, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled “Why We Know Iraq Is Lying” that relied heavily on the forged evidence. According to Dr. Rice:

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<sup>2</sup> United States Department of State, Fact Sheet, *Illustrative Examples of Omissions From the Iraqi Declaration to the United Nations Security Council* (Dec. 19, 2002).

Eleven weeks after the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed a resolution demanding – yet again – that Iraq disclose and disarm all its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs, it is appropriate to ask, “Has Saddam Hussein finally decided to voluntarily disarm?” Unfortunately, the answer is a clear and resounding no.”

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[I]nstead of full cooperation and transparency, Iraq has filed a false declaration to the United Nations that amounts to a 12,200 page lie. For example, the declaration fails to account for or explain Iraq’s efforts to get uranium from abroad.

Similarly, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told CNN on January 29: “[Saddam Hussein’s] regime has the design for a nuclear weapon, was working on several different methods of enriching uranium, and recently was discovered seeking significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

The most prominent use of the forged evidence occurred in the President’s State of the Union address on January 28. The President told Congress and the nation: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

## Other Uses of the Forged Evidence

U.S. officials continued to cite the forged nuclear evidence as part of the case against Iraq until virtually the day the IAEA revealed the evidence to be a forgery. For example, the Voice of America reported on February 20 that U.S. officials said that Iraq and Niger “signed a secret agreement to resume the shipments” of uranium. According to the report, U.S. officials also said that “Iraq and Niger signed an agreement in the summer of 2000 to resume shipments for an additional 500 tons of ‘yellowcake.’”<sup>3</sup> Further, Administration officials continued to make statements of support regarding the British dossier. For example, in his February 5, 2003, presentation to the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to the British dossier as a “fine paper” that describes Iraqi deception in “exquisite detail.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *U.S. Officials: Niger Signed Secret Deal to Resume Uranium Ore Shipments to Iraq*, VOA News (Feb. 20, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of State, *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council* (Feb. 5, 2003).