



DID BUSH LIE ABOUT IRAQ?

JUDITH MILLER

I took America to war in Iraq. It was all me.

OK, it was mostly me.

I had some help from a clueless President George W. Bush and his neoconservative puppet master, Vice President Dick Cheney. Senior White House fanatics spoon-fed reporters like me cherry-picked intelligence about Iraq's alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction so that America could invade Iraq and seize its oil.

None of this is true, but many Americans continue to believe it.

People died. It was a war. But President Bush didn't lie us into it.

The false narrative that he did is itself a lie and deserves to be, at last, retired.

There was no shortage of mistakes about Iraq, and some of the media's prewar WMD stories were wrong, including some of mine. But so is the enduring, pernicious accusation that the Bush administration fabricated WMD intelligence to take the country to war. Before the 2003 invasion, President Bush and other senior officials cited the intelligence community's incorrect conclusions about Saddam's WMD capabilities and, on occasion, went beyond them. But relying on the mistakes of others – completely understandable mistakes given Saddam's horrendous record – and making errors of judgment are not the same as lying.

American, European and arms-control experts, counterterrorism agents, and analysts who studied Iraq and briefed White House officials and journalists were the same people who gave me and my fellow reporters at the New York Times accurate information for years about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's growing threat to America. In fact, eight months before 9/11, the Times published a series of articles on that threat – a series for which the Times staff, including me, won a Pulitzer Prize.

The members of the intelligence community with whom I dealt were overwhelmingly reliable, hardworking and honest. But they were also human, and, in the aftermath of 9/11, they were very wary of ever again underestimating a terrorist threat.

There's an enduring myth that policy makers pressured intelligence analysts into altering their estimates to suit the Bush administration's push to war. Yet several thorough, bipartisan inquiries found no evidence of such pressure. What they reveal, instead, is that bad intelligence led to bad policy decisions.

The 2005 commission headed by former Democratic Sen. Charles Robb and Republican Judge Laurence Silberman called the intelligence community's estimates on Iraq "dead wrong." A year earlier, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence denounced such intelligence failures as the product of "group think," rooted in a fear of underestimating grave threats to national security in the wake of 9/11.

Will Tobey, a former deputy administrator for the National Nuclear Security Administration still fumes about the failure to see problems in the CIA's intelligence that supported Secretary of State Colin Powell's prewar speech at the United Nations about Iraq's WMD. Based partly on the CIA's assurances of strong evidence for each claim, Mr. Powell was persuaded that the case against Saddam was, in his words, "rock solid."

Why wouldn't he? Over the previous 15 years, none of the congressional committees routinely briefed on Iraq's WMD assessments expressed concern about bias or error. The decision to go to war in Iraq received broad support in Congress from both Republicans and Democrats -- and again for good reason. Even if the intelligence community overestimated Saddam Hussein's WMD capability, it didn't create it out of thin air. Saddam had used chemical weapons on his own people, killing thousands. He had invaded his neighbors, repeatedly.

No, President Bush did not take America into a war because he was strong-armed by a neoconservative cabal. As President Bush himself famously asserted, he was the "decider." And no, he didn't go to war for oil. If we wanted Saddam's oil, we could have bought it.

President's Bush decision to go to war was based on the information that he and his team relied on -- information that was collected by the world's top agents and analyzed by the world's top analysts, including the intelligence agencies of France, Germany and Russia, countries whose leaders did not support going to war. But they all agreed on one thing -- Saddam had and was continuing to develop WMD.

Our intelligence professionals, and those of major European countries, overestimated Saddam's capabilities. Mistakes like that filter through the system -- from the White House to Congress to journalists to the public. And those mistakes impact policy. But here's the key thing to remember -- they were mistakes...not lies.

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